



Geopolitics

Drawing China: Negotiating Geopolitics in Online Communities

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Yuo dealings with China, but be still member of moi. Yuo have evropský interests in mind?

Ja, ja, of coursings.



Making wir fair trade, no dumping products?

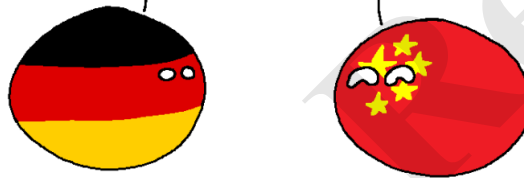
Weapons to Russia are ze no?

No comment.

No comment.

Yuo invest? Wõ market big.

Ok, zis is acceptable.



What doings with many products?

Sell cheap to lǎowài.

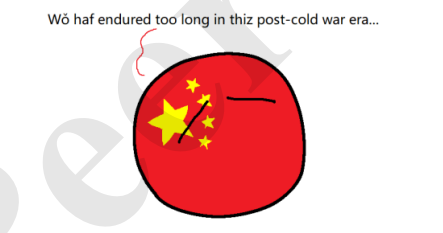
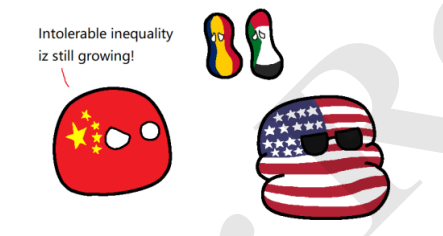
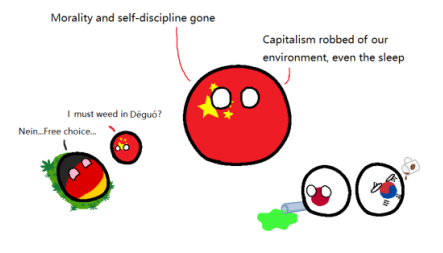


Zhé is not for killings.

Da, da!



Ich have good feeling about zis.



Drawing China: Negotiating Geopolitics in Online Communities

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Polandball comics are satirical depictions of countries in ball-form, produced and shared by internet users on various platforms. They reference geopolitical events, reflect but also challenge official discourses of nation-states. While the Polandball community is mainly located in North America and Europe, Chinese internet users also participate in the dissemination of geopolitical narratives. Considering these different geopolitical contexts and the popularity of Polandball comics across various online spaces we discuss how Chinese and non-Chinese community members portray China and its relations with other countries and organisations. We will do so with a discourse analysis for Chinese and non-Chinese Polandball communities, i.e., Tieba and Reddit. In addition, we adopt an autoethnographical approach with drawing as a method to gain a nuanced understanding of influence factors in the everyday creation of geopolitical narratives. We reveal the processes and obstacles in drawing pop cultural geopolitical content from a self-critical perspective. In doing so, we can offer a unique contribution to both, analyses of popular geopolitical discourses and drawing as a method for exploring simplified representations of geopolitics in online communities.

Introduction

Usually, what I like to do is just read a single headline and base my entire comic off of that and the stereotypes and in-jokes that I can place around that. (AaronC14 2023)

Academic work in general is pretty essential, I mean often you're reading those very dry, pretty boring academic books, but that someone's done a lot of damn work on and there's a lot of great information in there. (Joe Sacco in Holland and Dahlman 2017, 211)

These two cartoonists display quite contrary approaches to drawing geopolitical issues: superficial knowledge playing with exaggerations versus intense research of academic

sources. The former, AaronC14, is a prolific creator of Polandballs, web-comics where countries are represented in ball-form and interact with each other. What originated as a medium to ridicule each others' countries of origins and attached stereotypes among internet users developed into a whole genre spreading across online platforms. While Polandballs may not seem complex due to their simplified visuals compared to Joe Sacco's detailed works, knowledge of history, politics, foreign affairs, etc., is a must for creating and understanding them. It is also apparent that Polandball creators are self-aware of necessary simplifications to appeal to an interested but ultimately lay internet audience. Therefore, they enable a unique glimpse into everyday production and consumption of geopolitical imaginaries. We argue that looking at this peculiar form of non-elite satirical depictions of internal and foreign affairs of countries brings forth important insights for scholars of popular geopolitics. Even more so for narratives which are not as well-researched, e.g., Chinese popular discourses.

The rise of the People's Republic of China, hereinafter China, has been accompanied by a growing interest in not only the country's geopolitical situation and strategies, but also the narratives surrounding and produced by it, especially in online spaces (see Woon 2011; Liu, An, and Zhu 2015; An, Liu, and Zhu 2016). Visual material in Chinese cyberspace has been part of its digital culture at least since 1998, when photos of victims of Indonesia's anti-Chinese riot sparked backlash on Chinese online forums (Ong 2003, 84–86). Other examples are nationalist campaigns such as anti-Japanese protests in 2005 and a campaign against French retailer Carrefour in 2008 (Qiu 2015, 152–53). More recently, the extensive use of Biaoqing Bao (表情包), an umbrella term for emoticons, image macros, or GIFs which are “consisting of an image and—usually—a caption” (Blommaert, Lu, and Li 2021, 238), has reached various online spaces (see Yang 2018; Jiang and Vásquez 2020; Dong et al. 2022). Biaoqing

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4 Bao not only serve as an evocative mechanism of activism but also become important
5
6 for discursive identity construction (see Zhou and Miao 2016). In this context, online
7
8 images can be considered as “central to Chinese online nationalism and youth politics in
9
10 cyberspace” (Qiu 2015, 162).² Polandballs are situated among these visual forms of
11
12 user-generated and online disseminated narratives and have a pronounced geopolitical
13
14 perspective. Chinese netizens have engaged with the medium quickly after its
15
16 emergence on the internet, facilitating mutual referencing both domestically and
17
18 internationally as well as reaching mainstream media.³ As a globally shared everyday
19
20 representation of geopolitical discourses in various online communities, we argue that
21
22 Polandballs make it possible to cross the border between China and the rest of the world
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24 and juxtaposing the geopolitical practices of the state and its citizens.
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26

27
28 Accordingly, we have to consider the specific situation of a flourishing but
29
30 regulated internet space in China. The Chinese Internet (CI) is regarded as “the world’s
31
32 largest geolinguistic and national cyberspace” (Hong and Harwit 2020, 3). According to
33
34 data reports of the government-run China Internet Network Information Centre (2023),
35
36 the number of internet users in mainland China has reached nearly 1.08 billion in June
37
38 2023. However, due to the language barrier and internet regulation, especially the
39
40 regulatory policy on overseas internet access, CI users are relatively isolated from the
41
42 internet in the rest of the world (see Miao, Jiang, and Pang 2021). Content censorship is
43
44 another major part of regulation in the CI, whose broad impact on online content
45
46 creation (especially on online forums) will be referred to in the following sections.
47

48
49 Although community composition and online prosumption of Polandballs are still
50
51 Western-dominated, China has gradually become more visible with a fairly large
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53 fanbase (Liang, Liu, and Ouyang 2022, 1073). The focus on China helps to understand
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55 popular geopolitical discourses and their creation process in non-Western online
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4 communities. Our contribution is based on critically analysing comics, talking with
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6 creators, and applying an autoethnographic approach of drawing Polandballs ourselves.
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8 This brings attention to the processes involved in creating this unique format of popular
9
10 geopolitical satire.
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12
13 We will begin with situating Polandballs as a medium with the help of past and
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15 current critical geopolitical scholarship before introducing Polandball communities on
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17 two social media platforms, Tieba and Reddit, in more detail. Further, we will explore
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19 our approach of critically reading and drawing to set the ground for the following
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21 empirical sections of our work. There, we will conduct a critical discourse analysis of
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23 the presentation of China on both platforms, assisted by interviews with creators.
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25 Afterwards, we will showcase our autoethnographic engagement in drawing. Finally,
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27 we will discuss and summarise our findings and reflect on the utility of our
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29 methodological approach.
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31

32 33 **Categorisations and Communities of Polandballs**

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35 The study of comics as well as cartoons has been established in popular geopolitics
36
37 most prominently by Klaus Dodds and Jason Dittmer in numerous publications. As
38
39 other popular culture media, comics have been identified as suitable sites for studying
40
41 the “narratives and representations of world politics” (Dittmer and Dodds 2008, 443).
42
43 They are part of geopolitical cultures, reflect dominant discourses, and can enact
44
45 influence in discussions (Dodds 2010, 114–15). But how can we situate Polandballs
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47 among ‘conventional’ comics and cartoons which have been predominantly studied?
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49 We will briefly explore their appearance and rules to accomplish this.
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Structure, Themes, and Visuals

Structurally, Polandballs follow a left-to-right and top-to-bottom reading scheme and feature a sequence of panels or frames. They also make use of the so-called gutter, the space between panels or “the symbolic site of narrative development that must take place in order for the juxtaposed panels to make sense” (Dittmer 2010, 230). Beyond story-telling purposes, gutters often function as spaces where the punchline is set up. More than just leaving readers to fill in the blanks according to their own ideas as McCloud (1993, 68) suggests, gutters in political satire are crafted with specific intentions. Readers can still interpret Polandballs diversely, but for jokes to work, there is a desired understanding of what is displayed in the images and what is implied in the empty spaces in-between. The spatial arrangement of panels, characters, and speech sections adheres to comic conventions but is extended through the interactive section of comments, where others can share their opinions on the comic. Although not part of the comic per se, they add the possibility of affective responses. The direct and instant interaction of authors with the audience is certainly a unique characteristic in comparison to traditional cartoon or comic forms and demonstrates the social interactions in Polandball communities.

Thematically, Polandballs are often aimed to be political cartoons, to “poke fun at national stereotypes and the ‘international drama’ of their diplomatic relations” as the self-description on r/polandball⁴ states. This statement also conveys the primary purpose of Polandballs as form of entertainment or enjoyment rather than as drawings who carry influence in political discussions. Nevertheless, they comment on (geo)political circumstances and are “thought of as offering alternative discursive and subject positions and as including several different political perspectives, thus bringing opposite political views together” (Ridanpää 2009, 732). This diversity encompasses

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4 reproductions and provocations of hegemonic geopolitical discourses. While various
5
6 scholars observed this already in their analyses of single authors or sources, Polandballs
7
8 can be created by everyone, allowing access to everyday geopolitical imaginations.
9
10 Many adhere to “familiar visual metaphors” (Manzo 2012, 493) based on popular jokes
11
12 about nations, but the global appeal of Polandballs gives rise to diverging and subaltern
13
14 voices. They also play with superiority humour in twofold ways. On one side, jokes
15
16 about ‘others’ are very common. For instance, Russia has been the target of ridicule
17
18 especially since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. “In these ways humour defines groups
19
20 and necessarily, in the definition of Self, boundaries are drawn between Self and Other”
21
22 (Purcell, Brown, and Gokmen 2010, 377). While the Other is often constituted by non-
23
24 Western countries, the Self is also the butt of jokes. Polandball community members use
25
26 self-deprecating humour regarding their affiliated country. In various cases, this
27
28 certainly is enacted as a strategy to show the strength of admitting shortcomings or to
29
30 control the type of jokes made (Zajdman 1995, 338); yet, inferiority—often but not
31
32 always in the face of perceived superiority of others—is also used as social critique in
33
34 the tradition of caricatures, for example linking gun culture and school shootings in the
35
36 USA or the treatment of Roma by European countries.
37
38
39

40 Visually, Polandballs follow the theme of “amplification through simplification”
41
42 (McCloud 1993, 30) to the extreme: whole countries are represented by spheres
43
44 coloured in their national flag, facial features are restricted to eyes. This turns the
45
46 readers’ attention to the meanings and allows for quick understanding and ordering
47
48 processes if the necessary knowledge of current events or historical backgrounds is in
49
50 place. Indeed, little more visual cues are necessary to portray complicated geopolitical
51
52 disputes or a range of emotions. As is the case for political cartoons, condensation,
53
54 simplification, and exaggeration are part and parcel of Polandballs (Dodds 2010, 118;
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4 Robson 2019, 117). Naturally, this leads to generalisations and even discriminatory
5
6 portrayals. Community members are aware of this and accept it, cultivating a specific
7
8 humour if it does not result in blatant hateful content, which would be subjected to
9
10 platform guidelines. The development of particular jokes that receive repeated visual
11
12 representation is certainly an important element for community-building and
13
14 strengthens social cohesion (Dittmer 2013, 501).
15

16
17 This overview of structural, thematic, and visual features of Polandballs already
18
19 highlights their similarities but also their distinctive features compared to other comics
20
21 and cartoons. Another key difference is that Polandballs are not part of any commercial
22
23 editorialised medium. There is no copyright holder for Polandballs as a whole. They are
24
25 created by many different people without monetary reward in online communities.
26
27 While there is voluntary editorship, moderators are concerned with upholding rules of
28
29 visuality rather than content moderation. The moderators, themselves recruited from
30
31 community members, want to enforce a conform look and style, but as long as they
32
33 adhere to community and platform rules, Polandballs may depict whatever the author
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35 imagines. The communities where Polandballs are created and shared stretch across
36
37 various social media spaces. Through this rapid online dissemination, they become
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39 memes, quickly produced and widely disseminated on the internet.
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41

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43 Therefore, Polandballs combine features of comics and cartoons in the digital
44
45 online space, enabling participation with few boundaries. Rather than pushing
46
47 Polandballs into one category, we suggest understanding Polandballs inclusive of all
48
49 characteristics we laid out.⁵ They are an exemplary medium to study non-elite, everyday
50
51 representations of geopolitics and even more importantly, how audiences make sense of
52
53 geopolitical discourses (see Wellisch 2023). There is still a lack of studies on this
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55 perspective in critical geopolitics, even more so for non-Western contexts (see Dittmer
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and Dodds 2008; Dittmer and Gray 2010). Before we explore one of those contexts with the case study of a Chinese community, we will provide the background of two major platforms where those comics are spread.

Tieba and Reddit

For predominantly Western audiences, the social media network Reddit hosts community spaces in the form of subreddits for a great variety of themes. It states to have over 101 million active users in more than 100,000 subreddits (December 2024).⁶ Reddit has become a valuable source of information for researchers on various topics, not least for studying political discourses; politics-related communities, such as r/politics or r/worldnews have been widely covered in studies (Proferes et al. 2021, 7). On the Chinese Internet, Tieba (贴吧) is a bulletin board system (BBS) regarded as “one of the earliest and most active computer-mediated virtual communities in China” (Jin 2008, 32), and has shown its relevance in popular geopolitical studies focused on China (see Woon 2011; Lim 2016; Y. Wang 2023).⁷ Self-described as the world’s leading Chinese online community by its developer, CI giant Baidu, Tieba provides an instructive case study. Each subforum is called Ba (吧, Bar) and can be seen as a separate BBS.

On both platforms, Reddit and Tieba, dedicated communities for Polandballs exist. After their first appearance in 2009, Polandballs have spread worldwide and cross-linguistically, on Western (Reddit, Facebook, YouTube) and Chinese platforms (Tieba, Weibo, Lofter, Bilibili) alike. Among them, Tieba played a major role in the early establishment of Polandballs in China. The platform supports the search and creation of subfora for specialised topics through keywords and enables autonomy for its community members (see S. Zhang, Xu, and Li 2020). This has aided Baidu’s

popularity compared to other BBS at the time, such as Tianya (天涯论坛), and communities for “a broad range of topics and interest areas” (Baidu 2010, 37) could emerge. In August 2010, Polandballs first appeared on Tieba.⁸ At the time, they were seen as English comics from which Chinese netizens could learn about European history. The first Polandball creations by Chinese on Tieba are traced back to 2011 (Baidubaike 2023).⁹ Finally, Bolanqiuba of Tieba (波兰球吧) was founded in January 2012 and remains the largest Polandball community in China today (Baidubaike 2023). Bolanqiuba has close to 500,000 followers and more than 13,000 threads (January 2025). The subreddit r/polandball was created a year earlier and is with 687,000 members in the top one percent of all subreddits (January 2025) (Hagen 2017).¹⁰ There is a profound influence of r/polandball on Bolanqiuba. The threads of Bolanqiuba include a large number of translated comics from r/polandball, and Bolanqiuba’s ruleset on Polandball content creation deeply references r/polandball’s version.¹¹ Meanwhile, the notable difference between Bolanqiuba and r/polandball is their respective member composition. Contrary to the Western-dominated r/polandball, Bolanqiuba mainly consists of Chinese living in mainland China (Gateway_ 2019). This observation is not only based on the dominance of Simplified Chinese in the community, but also on a government-led information disclosure agenda (Cyberspace Administration of China 2022). Starting in April 2022, Tieba has been forcibly displaying users’ IP addresses at the bottom of their posts, complying with the new legal requirements. While there is no absolute guarantee that users in the CI are composed entirely of Chinese citizens, the mandatory disclosure of IP addresses facilitates identification. This certainly hints already at the influence the platform and government can have on online interaction.

Critically Reading and Drawing

With a considerable number of content and creators, r/polandball and Bolanqiuba provide large repositories for collecting data. To address the lack of studies of non-Western contexts, we concentrate on the Chinese community of Bolanqiuba. As a first step, we collected and structured comics featuring China and its sub-regions from 2022 until 2023. We limited the analysis to this period to have a recent overview but also because of practical constraints. On Bolanqiuba, there are 129 creators who have produced 235 comics. On r/polandball, the same time frame features 60 comics with China. According to IP addresses in the threads, all Polandballs on Bolanqiuba are highly likely to be posted by Chinese living in mainland China, but the possibility of community members using multiple accounts or VPN to modify the IP address cannot be ruled out. Then, we conducted a critical discourse analysis of the comics, questioning how the countries are portrayed and what underlying geopolitical assumptions can be identified. In the next step, we recruited interviewees by posting a public invitation on Bolanqiuba. We reached out to 14 creators who participated in semi-structured interviews from January to February 2024, including moderators of Bolanqiuba. For an average of 60 minutes, each interviewee was invited to talk about their hands-on process of creating comics featuring China, specifically those that were collected and created by them.¹²

However, we want to go beyond these established qualitative approaches. While interviews are certainly insightful, we argue that going through drawing processes ourselves illuminates the practice in more detail. Interviewees might not mention some of their experiences because they are deemed unimportant, such as the various drafts of comics which do not make a public appearance. Because we are both familiar with Polandballs since years, Simon as reader and Songmin as creator, we wanted to seize

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4 the opportunity to make first-hand experiences of the actual practice of generating
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6 geopolitical visuals. In our context, drawing is the manifestation of geopolitical
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8 imaginaries, which are embedded in an assemblage of influence factors reaching far
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10 beyond Polandball communities. For geographers, drawing as a method is nothing
11
12 unfamiliar; it has been used for maps, field notes, collaborative methods, and other
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14 purposes, yet analysing drawing itself is rather new. Particularly cultural and urban
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16 geographers have self-experimented with drawing methods, political geographers less
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18 so, with Fall (2020; 2021) being an exemption. We want to employ drawing to move
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20 beyond the discursive deconstruction of narratives to experience “the spatial context,
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22 elemental forces, materialities, intimate affects, and personal engagements that are
23
24 inevitably attached to comics stories” (Peterle 2021, 50). Polandballs are an ideal
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26 medium for this purpose, as their visual simplicity does not require great artistic skill.
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30 We embarked on this autoethnographic exploration from two different
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32 standpoints. While Songmin has years of experience and is one of the moderators of
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34 Bolanqiuba, Simon starts from scratch, despite reading Polandballs for years. Because
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36 of this, our individual contributions have slightly different foci: Songmin can adopt
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38 insider research and can utilise memories from past encounters. Simon relies on new
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40 experiences and joined the community only during the drawing process (see Butz and
41
42 Besio 2009). We both went through a geography university education in our respective
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44 countries (China and Germany), particularly political geography, which further informs
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46 our knowledge. Our mutual goal was to draw a comic featuring China. We decided to
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48 set up a small pre-structure of categories to track our thought and drawing processes
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50 while leaving space for narrative accounts (Chang 2008, 93).¹³ This assured an easier
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52 comparison of our recordings while maintaining individual freedoms in exploring. As
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4 time frame we selected each session which was dedicated to drawing Polandballs.
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6 Naturally, we noted down relevant thoughts occurring at other times as well.
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8 During the process, we had to reflect on our role as researcher-artists. Is our
9 content creation a deceptive move as researchers since we did not disclose our
10 background? We argue that this is not the case. We would most probably not have
11 created those comics without this paper, but we did so not only for the purpose of
12 research.¹⁴ As members of the communities, our goal was to create an entertaining
13 comic strip and to reflect on our processes. Still, analysing reactions to our comics
14 could be considered covert research; that is why we do not provide any direct quotations
15 or references in our analysis of comments (see Madge 2007). Similarly, all names of
16 interviewees are pseudonyms, and we refrain from directly providing links to the
17 comics from Bolanqiuba to protect identities. In the following, we will discuss the
18 presentation of China briefly for Reddit and in more detail for Bolanqiuba. This critical
19 analysis deconstructs the prevalent discourses in the communities and reveals the
20 context for our autoethnographic findings.
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36 37 **The Imagination of China** 38

39 40 *China as Antagonist* 41

42 In the 60 comics our corpus encompasses, the predominantly Western creators on
43 Reddit depict China often as antagonist, who has negative influence on others and must
44 be dealt with. This comes with little surprise, as for instance US-American discourses
45 have a history of alienating China (together with Russia) as part of a so-called yellow or
46 red peril, a threat to national interests and international security (see Turner 2014;
47 Ambrosio, Schram, and Heopfner 2020, 185). The rivalry between the USA and China
48 is a popular theme, especially around the issue of Taiwan. Various jokes utilise the
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4 changing recognition of Taiwan; one example is China selling the USA new sunglasses,
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6 which leads them to abandon Taiwan. While ridiculing the fickle and profit-oriented
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8 attitude of the USA adds a layer of self-criticism, China remains the culprit. The same
9
10 can be observed in Polandballs which look at territorial disputes in the South China Sea.
11
12 Here, China piling up sand in the middle of the ocean evolved almost into a running
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14 joke, repeated for other scenarios, where Chinese territorial claims solve other territorial
15
16 disputes, e.g., in the Mediterranean—or renamed West China—Sea between Greece and
17
18 Türkiye. Despite this tongue-in-cheek portrayal, China is clearly the aggressor in all
19
20 cases without achieving clear dominance. As the claimed land is depicted as
21
22 insignificant, the futility of the disputes is further emphasised.
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25 In few instances, China is portrayed as influential country. But this influence
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27 usually only extends to actors that are rarely featured on r/polandball and perceived as
28
29 less important on the global scale, e.g., BRICS or African countries. China is seen as
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31 challenger of Western nations that does not reach the same level, for instance in terms
32
33 of civil freedoms or military power. This geopolitical imagination is reflected by
34
35 China's minority policies. Creators from r/polandball paint China often as a 'time
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37 bomb' short of implosion. There are quite literal comparisons to that figure of speech,
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39 where artists refer to the dissolutions of Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union with explosions
40
41 of the ball-shaped characters into multiple smaller ones. On the other side, many
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43 creators depict China as handling the issue strong-armed. Especially the treatment of
44
45 Uyghurs is linked to Nazi concentration camps or slavery in the USA. As China 'learns'
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47 these methods, blame is not solely put on China for enacting these. Western countries
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49 are called out as well for past behaviour, see fig. 1. This attaches a notion of
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51 backwardness in an Orientalist manner to the representation of China.
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Jesus, your entire agricultural and textile system is so outdated and bizarre it's no surprise you suffer from starvation and low productivity!

I recommend adopting a more modern and *American* system!



ok!



Figure 1: Chinese Cotton (AaronC14 2022)

From this brief look into the portrayal of China, it is obvious that Polandballs on Reddit strongly focus on international relations, omitting any domestic issues. Since internal affairs are quite well covered by creators mostly for their own countries of origin, this could be simply explained by a lack of Chinese members. Consequently, the portrayal of China is one-sided but also used to satirically challenge proclaimed Western values. On Bolanqiuba, a more complex picture of China is drawn.

Positioning China

Polandballs featuring China on Bolanqiuba possess unique characteristics derived from the local context. We identify two major themes for understanding Chinese popular geopolitical discourses: the role of China in global geopolitics and views on internal affairs by its citizens. Starting with the former, China's global standing and its initiative are generally highlighted, while the humour and satire that characterises r/polandball are not prioritised. In the CI, a considerable part of Polandballs is engaged through an agenda of online nationalism (see Schneider 2024). The geopolitical imagination of a rising China is repeatedly constructed by referencing geopolitical contexts and events. China as portrayed as influential country, a dominant force with global influence, not an aggressor. The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the USA, frequently form an entity called 'Wuchang' (The Permanent Five in Chinese) in Polandballs. Creators from Bolanqiuba equate China with the other four countries as dominant actors in the global order, emphasising in particular their economic and military superiority. In one comic, China is straightforwardly captioned with "looks friendly, but everybody knows who this guy really is" which hints at the perception of China being an overpowering geopolitical actor. The flip side of the geopolitical imagination of great power diplomacy is the marginalisation of the United Nations, even though the UNSC is the branch with the greatest power and authority among UN organisations (Bosco 2009, 3). In another comic, see fig. 2., the UN, wearing a laurel crown, can only watch from outside while Wuchang are meeting, which implies that they are the actual decision-makers. China in the centre separates the three Western permanent members on the left from Russia on the right, putting it in a prominent and neutral position.

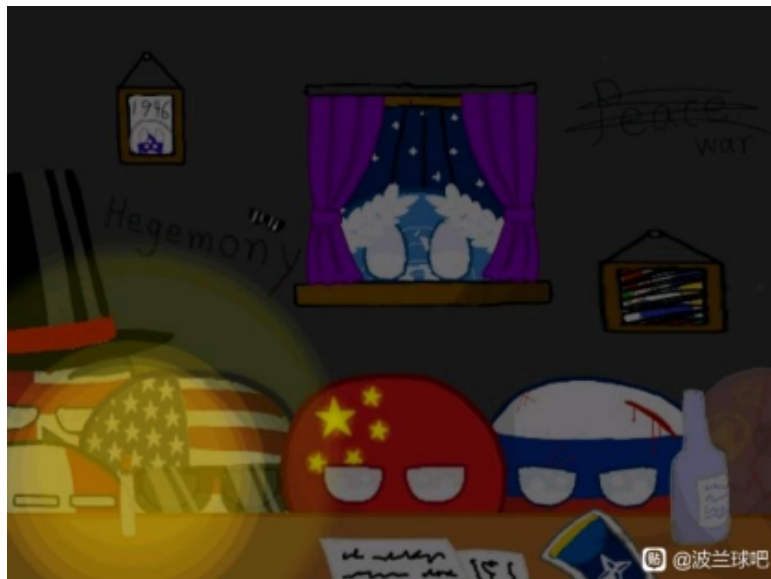


Figure 2: 五大常任理事国 (The five permanent members)

Through fictional scenarios that do not rely on specific external sources, Chinese creators repeatedly refer to China's permanent membership and veto right to exaggerate its ascendancy in comics. In practice, China is a supportive part of the current system instead of a challenger. China has emphasised the importance of the UN in its foreign policy until recently, especially the notions of sovereign equality and promotion of multipolarity (see Foot 2014; Breslin and Xiao 2023, 353). But China's UN and UNSC official statements and actual behaviour have received little attention and discussion in Polandballs, even though this is seen as the vantage point to describe its attitude toward the international order (Wuthnow 2012, 135).

China's positioning is also represented in various conflicts on Tieba, which become controversial assemblages mixed with historical memory and current geopolitical interests. The Russo-Ukrainian War has gained considerable coverage in the Chinese public as well as in Polandball comics since 2022. While China officially remains uninvolved and advocates for a non-violent solution, it consistently appears in

comics related to this conflict. Spatial proximity, current relations, but also the historical relations of China and Russia are possible reasons for that. In these comics, China is sometimes portrayed as an enthusiastic supporter of Russia's anti-Western nationalism, citing supportive comments on the CI and the collective memory of the Soviet Union. In contrast, Tsarist Russia's and the Soviet Union's disputes over territory with China were also mentioned in anti-Russian positions, showing suspicion and distrust of the neighbour (see Y. Wang 2023). In one comic, China angrily pushes a reborn Soviet Union back into its grave, even though it has mourned it just few seconds earlier. In all these comics, Russia's Soviet legacy is repeatedly featured, while China, as a socialist country in the post-Cold War world, has always had complex feelings about its former comrade.

Beyond Russia, tensions with the USA have also garnered attention in Polandballs, especially since the Trump administration launched the 'trade war' with China in 2018. One illustrative example is a Chinese high-altitude balloon traversing Canadian and US-American airspace in early 2023. The balloon was eventually shot down. The Pentagon characterised it as surveillance balloon, while the Chinese government insisted that it was a civilian weather balloon which was blown off course. At least three Polandballs named *The Wandering Balloon* were created. The title was inspired by the science fiction film *The Wandering Earth 2* (流浪地球2) and became a widely used nickname for the incident in the CI. These comics share not only the title but almost the same picture of China. Instead of a diplomatic quarrel over the intent of the balloon and the legality of shooting it down, Chinese creators prefer to view the whole event as an unexpected victory for China. The US-American reaction is seen as aggressive and even hysterical, and becomes a contrast to the strong, confident, and calm China, which echoes official media narratives of national identity construction

1
2
3
4 during the trade war (see H. Wang and Ge 2020). In one of the comics China warns the
5
6 USA to not “make a fuss over a balloon, it’s childish”.

7
8 Whether Polandballs reference and simplify actual geopolitical events or
9
10 develop their own imaginary stories, the pride for China and its superiority repeats a
11
12 ‘state-led nationalism’ (see Zhao 2004). But a more exaggerated and idealised image of
13
14 China compared to actual diplomatic practice still shows the subtle distinctions between
15
16 Polandballs and official narratives. In a diverse and flexible way, these repetitions and
17
18 challenges are also presented in the internal view.

21 22 **Looking Inside China**

23
24 Geopolitical issues and internal matters are not two completely separate topics in
25
26 Polandballs. Juxtapositioning the internal affairs of China and other countries is a
27
28 common approach to feature different topics. Here again, USA-China tensions are
29
30 popular templates within the time frame of our analysis of Bolanqiuba. One topic is
31
32 comparing China’s public safety with gun control in the USA. In one comic, see fig. 3,
33
34 China and Japan set off fireworks to celebrate New Year, but the USA is terrified
35
36 because it mistakes the noise for gunfire. The comic was posted close to Chinese New
37
38 Year, during which fireworks are a common soundscape. China is praised for its strict
39
40 gun control and better public security, while the USA made headlines because of school
41
42 shootings during that time.
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Figure 3: guns everywhere!

However, a ‘dangerous USA’ is not an unchallenged argument for a superior China. For instance, everyday experiences are invoked to deconstruct this popular comparison. One comic by interviewee Yifeng juxtaposes school shootings in the USA and relaxed European students with stressed-out Chinese students and argues that this is based on personal experience:

Students are under a lot of pressure... Teachers spread anxiety and students have a heavy workload. The content about the USA (school shootings) is a simple joke. And compared with China, (the school life for) the British and French is easy, the class time is not so long, and the burden is not so heavy. (Yifeng)

The creator’s complaint deviates from China’s generally positive portrayal. References

1
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3
4 to personal life experiences are also used in comics that tend to feature only China.
5
6 Because of publishing rules on r/polandball, the subreddit predominantly features
7
8 geopolitical jokes between countries, which echoes the international system with states
9
10 as primary political units (Flint 2022, 104). Bolanqiuba's moderators allow more stories
11
12 about domestic social issues and personal lives. The extension to the everyday gives
13
14 Chinese creators the opportunity to use Polandballs as negotiation of daily experiences
15
16 as citizens. Many contradictions between everyday and state narratives have become
17
18 apparent regarding internal politics, e.g., during the Covid pandemic.
19
20

21 A series of strict local control measures made it difficult to travel during Chinese
22
23 New Year in 2022. Some comics retell these stories sorrowfully, without discussing the
24
25 pandemic along geopolitical narratives (see C. Zhang 2022). In one comic, an employee
26
27 expresses sadness for not being able to return home. Here, China as character in the
28
29 comic illustrates not only the impact of measures in one specific place for the creator,
30
31 but the story of the imagined collective situation of Chinese citizens. However, the
32
33 recognition of China's prowess in dealing with the pandemic by contrasting it with
34
35 other countries, e.g., India, remains a popular template, especially since the focus of the
36
37 pandemic has shifted away from China (see Heisbourg 2020). The ambivalent views are
38
39 particularly evident in comics about the scattered 'white paper' protests in China over
40
41 control measures in late 2022. In the annual Polandball collaborative map project
42
43 modelled after r/polandball, the protest was illustrated with two pieces of white paper
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45 attached to China, see fig. 4.
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Figure 4: Map of China

The numbers on the paper point to a widespread suspicion that the protesters are funded by foreign governments, similar to accusations during the 2014 Hong Kong protests (see Veneti, Karadimitriou, and Poulakidakos 2016):

The protest at the end of the pandemic, I needed to portray this, but didn't want to create a radical image to ruin the atmosphere of the comic. So, I pasted the white paper on Chinaball and added the metaphor of mocking the protests. The white paper on Chinaball instead of the provinceball suggested the widespread impact of the protest. (Haoyu)¹⁵

Fig. 4 is also notable for its reference to Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia. One salient fact is that while the minority policies have been a popular China-related topic on r/polandball, they have received little visible response in Bolanqiuba. For instance, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia are used to show the national impact of pandemic control measures instead of minority policies. The difference in foci also extends to the character's appearance. The Reddit community uses flags for minorities in China, which

are considered separatist symbols in the country. Although China has banned the design and use of sub-region flags since 1997, Chinese creators still try to give Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia some visual alternatives. In Bolanqiuba, they take the flags of their delegations at the National Games of China as appearances, which represent them as ethnic autonomous regions rather than specific minorities.

Thus, while some official discourses are reproduced in comics, others are challenged. The experiences of citizens in their daily encounters with the state, whether the education system from a student's perspective or measures during the pandemic, are represented by Polandballs in a corresponding light. Polandballs extend the political potential, not only as a visual form of geopolitical texts, but also as the representation of life stories (see Whitlock 2006; Dodds 2010; McNicol 2019).

In addition, a remarkable visual feature of China in Bolanqiuba points to how platforms and governments enact influence in drawing Polandballs. Comics, where the Chinese flag is fully depicted, like fig. 2 and 4 are the exception. As seen in fig. 3 and in the vast majority of comics we collected, the stars in the national flag of China have always been obscured or removed by the authors. In these comics, China has a unique appearance—a pure red ball called the 'Big Tomato'. It has even become a meta-joke of China in Polandballs.¹⁶ Chinese creators want to avoid that comics are detected as China-related and the subsequent danger of censorship.

I draw Chinaball all red because I am afraid of being censored. I have encountered cases of comics using the complete national flag being deleted. I see that many people in Tieba deal with censorship in this way. (Yifeng)

Others complain that it makes the comics "ugly" (Wenjing and Sijie). China is advancing cyber-sovereignty in the digital realm, including direct intervention in communication practices through censorship (Schneider 2024, 168). In the case of the

Big Tomato, self-censorship is explained by creators not only with internet regulation policies, but also Tieba's "habitual errors in AI censorship" (Xiaodan), because the daily regulation of online discourses is widely outsourced to private internet corporations (Schneider 2024, 173). Similar concerns extend to other aspects of publishing Polandballs, where creators tend not to mention words that might be blocked in titles and comments, such as 'China'. Meanwhile, censorship on the CI is seen as a porous procedure, and the purpose of controlling how the Chinese national flag is drawn remains opaque, as quite a few comics with the full flag have been successfully posted (Roberts 2018, 2). But concerns about censorship interference have still succeeded in impacting the creators' output.

This is a situation that happens to everyone, and I have nothing to say about this censorship system. If we are unable to portray domestic stuff, then we'll portray foreign stuff. (Jialing)

The Big Tomato demonstrates a simple and instructive form of resistance by providing a generally recognised and relatively safe signifier for China. From satirical stories criticising social inequality to online nationalist actions celebrating National Day, it increases the ability of Polandballs to represent more China-related topics in CI cyberspace. Similar circumventions have been observed by Tong (2009) for the Chinese press.

However, the Big Tomato also reveals a gap in the collection on which this study is based—comics that might have been deleted or abandoned before posting due to (self-)censorship. Beyond this heavily restrictive intervention, looking only at the final products which achieved public appearance does not draw a complete picture of the everyday negotiations when creating geopolitical comics. Hence, we now want to

turn to the process of comic creation with autoethnographic accounts. Simon will start with his vignette, followed by Songmin.

Drawing China

Spheres of Interest

The first time I took up a pen to scribble Polandballs was in a hospital waiting room on the Greek island Kefalonia, where I accompanied a friend during our vacation and started drawing to make use of the spare time. I tried myself on facial expressions and the Greek flag. I was certain that it had a cross and a white-blue stripe pattern, but was the cross blue or white? With what colour did the stripes start? It was not that easy to draw a country flag from memory despite spotting it regularly during the trip. At this point, Songmin and I already had the idea for this paper, but only several months later did I engage again in drawing. This time, it was a serious attempt to create a whole comic strip and to reflect on my thought processes to better understand how this unique format of geopolitical satire takes up form. I already knew now that I would have to look up flag designs.¹⁷

One major difficulty even before drawing was choosing a topic about China. Initially, I applied the approach mentioned in the introductory quote to our article and simply looked up recent news. But I did not want to create yet another comic around Taiwan, disputes in the South China Sea, or the treatment of minorities in China. On the other side, I did not feel informed enough to approach internal Chinese issues, fearing that I would misrepresent them. Thus, my attention was caught by the visit of German chancellor Olaf Scholz to China, accompanied by several CEOs of major German companies in April 2024. I crafted an anti-capitalist punchline and although the comic featured remarks on Chinese politics its main message was a critique of Germany.

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4 However, the rather simple three-panel story, ‘fell flat’ with one moderator on
5
6 r/polandball and my submission was rejected. While my artwork was lauded, the comic
7
8 was deemed not entertaining on its own, requiring knowledge of specific events.
9
10 Although discouraged by the decision, I had to agree.¹⁸
11

12 Comprehensibility comes first. Thus, I started again with the question of what to
13
14 draw and quickly decided to stay with the general theme. Reading another newspaper
15
16 article citing the criticism of think tanks who missed a European perspective by Scholz,
17
18 I developed a new punchline. Because Xi Jinping made no commitments to Scholz’
19
20 calls for fair trade relations as well as pushing Russia to end the war in Ukraine, the
21
22 investments and deals still made by German companies epitomised national priorities. I
23
24 satirised the economic-driven bilateral relations through implying that China exactly
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26 does what Germany half-heartedly wanted to prevent to the dislike of other European
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28 countries, see fig. 5.
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Yuo dealings with China, but be still member of moi. Yuo have evropský interests in mind?

Ja, ja, of coursings.



Making wir fair trade, no dumping products?

Weapons to Russia are ze no?

No comment.

No comment.

Yuo invest? Wō market big.

Ok, zis is acceptable.



What doings with many products?

Sell cheap to lǎowài.



Zhé is not for killings.

Da, da!



Ich have good feeling about zis.

Figure 5: Spheres of Interest

During the creative process, I repeatedly negotiated geopolitical representations. The first issue was drawing China. On r/polandball, Asian characters are usually depicted with slant eyes, reflecting the tradition of racialised portrayals in Western popular media. I rejected this approach and made no difference between ocular features. Ironically, without these eyes, China feels somewhat ‘off’ in Polandballs, reflecting the power of hegemonic drawing practices. Next, as the eyes are the prime feature to convey emotions, I pondered whether to portray China as malignant or ignorant (similar for Germany as intentional or naive). The eyes in panels three and four illustrate that I chose the latter, as I wanted to refrain from making China a simple villain; especially after it did not explicitly promise to behave otherwise in panel two.

Further, in my first version of the comic, Russia did not have any injuries. Hinting at the ongoing war, I initially only gave Ukraine these features. This challenged my perceptions of Polandballs. What exactly do they represent? I interpreted Polandballs as simplified rendition of the geo-body which reflects the constructive nature of nations (Winichakul 1996, 69–70). Russia has faced discursive as well as material consequences for its actions, which take their toll on the geo-body.¹⁹ The final panel illustrates that drawing can be a mixture of personal background, acquired knowledge, and practical constraints. Asking myself what countries to select to be angry at Germany, I built on opinion surveys of European countries regarding China and on those I have a personal relation with while limiting myself to countries with simple-to-draw flags. This time, my comic was approved on r/polandball and I published it soon thereafter in the community. We will come to the reactions to the comic after engaging with Songmin’s experiences.

It's Time!

I created my first Polandball comic due to my strong interest in the dispute between mainland China and Hong Kong over baby formula in 2013. When Simon and I decided to embark on an autoethnography about Polandballs, I realised that I never critically examined this long standing presumption activity. Therefore, by recording and reflecting on the process of drawing and the outcomes, I reveal habits and geopolitical imaginaries that have long been latent in my mind.

The first challenge was the topic. Although the comic was about China, neither my nationality nor my experience made this process any easier. The complexity of China made its simplification into Polandballs difficult. What should be represented as a ball-formed China? The opinions of different social groups, party documents, government spokespersons' speeches, or my own thoughts as a citizen? The analysis of the comics in Bolanqiuba provided me with a clearer understanding of the distribution of topics about China. Initially, I wanted to deconstruct the narrative of China's superiority by exaggerating Wuchang, but I quickly realised that it was not easy to place China in the centre of the story and create humour, because of the lingering discourses around national humiliation (see Callahan 2006). Instead, I focused on Western discourses featuring China as potential threat in future conflict scenarios, such as the 'New Cold War'. On the CI, there is an almost opposite viewpoint of China as the 'last fortress of late capitalism.'²⁰ Here, China is a state-capitalist machine and an effective maintainer rather than destroyer of the global economic system. I believed that this perspective had great potential because it has been interpreted in diverse ways among Chinese. Nationalists see it as a sign of China's economic development and greater ability to influence the world, while left-wing netizens see it as deplorable that China has lost the ability and will to lead the world communist revolution. I also anticipated

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2
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4 that the comic would provoke more interesting reactions on r/polandball because the
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6 image of China as a 'hostile communist' is still very popular there. Therefore, I crafted
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8 the comic 'It's Time!', see fig. 6.²¹
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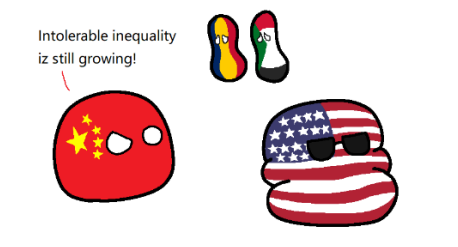


Figure 6: It's Time

Everyday geopolitical negotiations are revealed in the choices and considerations during drawing. To introduce the background, which comprises panels one to three of the comic, I depict a crisis-ridden social landscape of late capitalism, including the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine as well as Israel and Palestine. China's official stance on both is to call for a ceasefire and negotiate a solution, providing the basis for China to take a stance against war in the comic. I did not want to depict either side of the conflict as having an advantage, because I believed doing so could make my comic more acceptable to a wider audience. I used Germany smoking cannabis, Japan dumping nuclear wastewater, and South Korea drinking coffee to depict the collapse of social order, environmental degradation, and the 'ends of sleep' (see Crary 2013). Unlike the reference to China's official stance in panel one, these contents are cited from popular viewpoints on the CI. Additionally, with China, Japan, and South Korea all appearing in panel two, I chose not to use slant eyes for these countries, which is my tiny resistance against the conventions of Polandballs. In panel three, I wanted to depict income inequality, but since Polandballs are more about countries, this content was replaced with the gap between so-called developed and developing countries. I used the spindle-shaped Chad and Sudan to represent famine, contrasting them with an obese USA, a popular stereotype in Polandballs. Because the background reflects China's negative attitude towards these phenomena, I avoided the fact that some of them also exist in China (such as overtime work and environmental degradation).

In panels four and five the plot turns to China's response and the preparation leading up to the final punchline. I initially considered some MacGuffins with communist elements, but they did not integrate well with the punchline. So, I just used one or two panels of speech with phrases like 'post-cold war' and 'late capitalism' to

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2
3
4 emphasise China's socialist identity. The punchline, panel six, depicts China as an
5
6 enthusiastic advocate of globalisation and mercantilism. I decided to keep it simple with
7
8 banners, flags, and megaphone, as hours of continuous drawing left me feeling
9
10 exhausted. I contrasted the dialogue with what happened previously, highlighting
11
12 China's strong interest in economic growth. Additionally, I used North Korea, usually
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14 portrayed as radical and eager to use force, to emphasise the misunderstanding
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16 generated in the turning section that China intended to be a disruptive force, adding a
17
18 humorous touch. I posted the comic on both r/polandball and Bolanqiuba.
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22 ***Researcher-Artists and their Audience***

24
25 During our comic creation processes, we both noticed that the most time-consuming
26
27 aspect of our work was researching possible scenarios. Our skimming through various
28
29 news reports, videos, and existing Polandballs clearly shows how interconnected the
30
31 comics are in popular geopolitical discourses. Further, despite going through years of
32
33 university education in related issues, creating comics does not necessarily become
34
35 easier. Not every geopolitical issue can be worked into a humorous sequence of comic
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37 panels. We also experienced practical constraints. For Simon, the lack of drawing skills
38
39 limited what he was able to portray. Songmin's accounts show that even seasoned
40
41 creators can get fatigued by hours of drawing. Both factors contribute to succumbing to
42
43 simplifications, which influences how geopolitical narratives shape up. Moreover, our
44
45 autoethnographic approach illuminated what usually remains unnoticed if popular
46
47 geopolitical content is analysed: the process and various versions we went through
48
49 before the final release. We both redrew and rewrote our comics repeatedly, accounting
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51 for spontaneous ideas or new information. This emphasises the everyday, individual
52
53 negotiation of geopolitical imaginations that takes place behind the scenes.
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Beyond our own negotiations, the comics were also very much influenced by others. Songmin considered the audience's expectation when selectively depicting viewpoints. Simon had to redo his comic because it was rejected at first. Additionally, we both profited from each other's feedback. As we published our manifested geopolitical imaginations on both communities, it quickly became obvious that the audience made their own sense of our creations. Simon's comic reached over 95,000 views and 25 comments on Reddit. Besides being welcomed to the community, his comic triggered a discussion about future world conflicts. One commenter mentioned that some Chinese netizens would very much like to ally with Germany in case of a global conflict. Others joined in and discussed the military capabilities of Germany and China. This is an unexpected departure from the main message, a criticism of German foreign policy. The reaction on Bolanqiuba to Simon's comic was even harsher, as it was quickly deleted after Songmin tried to post it there on his behalf.

The same happened to Songmin's comic. Our missing self-censorship of the Chinese flag can be one explanation for the swift removal. But even after self-censoring and reposting, Songmin's comic was blocked within one day. Among the few responses recorded in the short time, Bolanqiuba's commenters articulated familiarity with the discussion of China's role in Songmin's comic. One commenter agreed with the expectation that China would gain greater geopolitical advantage through economic growth, while another mocked it as a nationalist conceit. On Reddit, the 24 comments the comic received were more diverse. Nearly half of them were about depictions of South and North Korea, Japan, and Israel although those countries are only featured on the sidelines. Beyond that, commenters were sceptical about China's economic growth, citing its great costs (such as heavy labour) and the perception that China is not a safe place for investments.

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4 For both comics, audience responses partly digressed considerably from the
5
6 narratives we set up. Some commenters discussed the outlined critique but went into
7
8 other related or unrelated geopolitical issues. Again, this demonstrates the
9
10 interconnectedness of online popular geopolitical discourses, where community
11
12 members share their opinions and perceptions framed by personal experiences. Overall,
13
14 similar to the divergent portrayals of China between Reddit and Tieba, we can observe
15
16 different discussions of comics. Although Songmin's comic references many
17
18 geopolitical events, its discursive contextualisation appears to be too local. The Chinese
19
20 audience recognised and engaged with the narrative whereas Western commenters
21
22 focused on side characters and scepticism regarding China's national economy.
23
24 Nevertheless, both cases illustrate that our comics stimulated discussions about
25
26 geopolitical issues, which emphasises the necessity of critically reflecting this
27
28 methodological approach.
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30

31 Did we reproduce problematic popular geopolitical content? We both tried to
32
33 abstain from too offensive stereotyping (China as peril of the West or as global
34
35 powerhouse) and rejected racialised depictions (slant eyes). But we still adhered to the
36
37 general logics of Polandballs, the essentialisation of nation-states, the focus on conflicts,
38
39 the stereotypical portrayals. Simon embedded a Eurocentric perspective in the comic,
40
41 utilising the themes of cheap mass production and geopolitical antagonism for the PRC.
42
43 Songmin selected African countries as representatives of impoverishment and North
44
45 Korea as belligerent and dangerous. Although we did so as context for our criticism of
46
47 Germany and China respectively, it was difficult to escape simplifications, since the
48
49 comics work best if they instrumentalise these. Community moderators, including
50
51 Songmin, usually only enforce content removals of blatant discrimination and hatred.
52
53 Allowing simplifications, stereotypes, and essentialisations is seen as non-elite
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openness, which wants to grant artistic freedom to creators. But as our drawing processes revealed, the geopolitical discourses on Polandballs still reinforce some discourses over others.

Indeed, this challenges our self-identification as critical geographers, who are usually resting comfortable on the analytical end. Our multiple identities—researcher, artist, community member, community moderator, reader—make it even more difficult. As much as we would prefer otherwise, joking about geopolitical issues is a lot easier embedded in existing hegemonic discourses. There are also rare possibilities to go beyond the classical formula of Polandballs and to craft ‘meta’ comics. The community rules state that comics criticising the format of Polandballs are not allowed, except on special occasions, such as the celebrations of the 13th anniversary of r/polandball. Therefore, although the community enables and fosters the production of geopolitical comics from an everyday, non-elite perspective, there are hegemonic discourses and self-imposed rules which shape representations.

Conclusion

Polandball comics are not confined to the communities on Tieba and Reddit, although those are influential reference sites. Government actors and state-owned media use Polandballs as well, such as the Russian Embassy in China²² and the People's Daily²³. Further, from Polandball video games to Polandball graffiti on the streets of Kyiv²⁴ to Polandball plushies sold on the Chinese e-commerce platform Taobao, Polandballs are no longer just user-generated online content. The comics transcended their original format and materialise in various virtual and urban spaces as well as the homes of fans who buy Polandball merchandise. This makes a critical discussion of the representations at the starting points, i.e., Bolanqiuba and r/polandball, all the more valuable.

Through our critical reading of hegemonic discourses in Polandball comics we highlighted how online communities depict China. Chinese creators exhibit greater complexity of representations. The UN and UNSC are the embodiment of China's superiority, Russia a controversial former comrade, and the USA a hysterical rival. The official narratives of national identity construction are rarely satirised and even repeated, simplified, and exaggerated. Additionally, China in Polandballs is a collective image of Chinese citizens and the creators express their everyday negotiations with official domestic discourses. Lastly, self-censoring the Chinese flag as Big Tomato is both a sign of systemic restrictions on drawing China and an available alternative of portraying China in various topics that might be politically sensitive or controversial. This analysis certainly influenced our own approach to drawing. Simon abstained from making China a threatening villain with limited influence common on Reddit and Songmin tried to deconstruct Chinese nationalist narrative observable on Bolanqiuba.

Our autoethnographic approach explored the process of popular geopolitical content creation and highlighted issues that would be difficult to ascertain by other methods. We encountered systemic obstacles, i.e., rejection and removal of the comics, and reflected on what has not been drawn. Further, we examined in more detail what exactly Polandballs represent. Audience responses to our comics demonstrate that everyday geopolitical discourses in online communities are diverse and interconnected. Polandball comics serve as stimuli for those discussions and become part of a specific geopolitical online culture across platforms with Bolanqiuba and r/polandball as two of the most influential communities. The unique approach of crafting those comics ourselves brings forth the invisible processes and obstacles that influence non-elite content creation and achieves a nuanced understanding of drawing as popular geopolitical practice.

Data Availability

A list of all comics analysed can be made available upon request.

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39 ¹ Simon and Songmin are considered joint first authors.
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41 ² In addition to large-scale online activism, Chinese communication and cultural studies offer
42 analyses on the strategic use of memes in social media to discuss foreign political leaders
43 and how grassroots digital art can serve the 'Wolf warrior' diplomacy (see B. Zhang,
44 Gearhart, and Perlmutter 2022; Sun and Li 2024).
45

46 ³ One example is a Polandball comic, which depicted international support for China during the
47 Covid pandemic. Chinese netizens adapted it to represent the global pandemic, leading to
48 coverage by Chinese media, see <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/3xdRenf7Gdo>.
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51 ⁴ <https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball/>
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53 ⁵ As communities mostly refer to them as comics, we will do so as well throughout the paper.
54 Countryballs is another term which is occasionally used.
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56 ⁶ <https://redditinc.com/>
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- ⁷ Tieba is also known as Baidu Post or Post Bar. Tieba is often referred to as China's Reddit, although Tieba was founded earlier. Despite declining popularity in favour of other social media platforms, e.g. WeChat, it remains a key platform to understand what we study here.
- ⁸ <https://tieba.baidu.com/p/874816003>: This thread is believed to be the earliest Chinese content on Polandballs according to a community-internal investigation.
- ⁹ <https://tieba.baidu.com/p/2018705437>: This is a series of comics about Chinese history. The original thread has been removed by the platform, and this is one of the reposted copies in 2012.
- ¹⁰ There is also a subreddit dedicated to the Chinese community (r/polandballchinese), but it only has few hundred members.
- ¹¹ See for Reddit DickRhino (2023), for Bolanqiuba 炽热的铁锭 (2023).
- ¹² Our work was split accordingly: Simon looked through Reddit, Songmin gathered data from Bolanqiuba and conducted the interviews. On Bolanqiuba, comics were manually searched for one by one to determine whether they contained China, as Chinese creators tend not to include any searchable text in their posts—an issue discussed in the next section. On Reddit, the search words 'China', 'Chinese', and 'PRC' were used. While not exhaustive, this provides an adequate overview of representations.
- ¹³ Our categories covered (1) thinking process (inspiration, theme, background), (2) drawing process (software, approach, method, procedure), (3) reflection process (reasons for choice, changes), and (4) interruptions (voluntary, involuntary).
- ¹⁴ This is supported by the fact that Songmin has created comics for years and Simon has thought of doing so for a time. In fact, Simon published another comic later.
- ¹⁵ Interviewees referred to characters in comics with the suffix -ball, which is not allowed on r/polandball but tolerated on Bolanqiuba, as long as the countries address each other without suffix in the comics.
- ¹⁶ As comics about China themselves are already humorous, joking about the inability to depict China accurately constitutes "humour about humour" (Attardo 2020, 26).
- ¹⁷ I drew on a tablet with a pen on the built-in software Paint (Microsoft 2024), as I was unsatisfied with my drawing skills with a mouse.
- ¹⁸ The approval process can be ambiguous since single moderators decide. Additionally, the process seems to have higher standards than general submissions on the subreddit.
- ¹⁹ Another reason for doing so is avoiding the implication that Russia attacked Ukraine after receiving material from China, rather than during the conflict.

²⁰ Unlike the term initially proposed by Werner Sombart (1902), ‘late capitalism’ in the popular interpretation on the CI is an umbrella term for today’s various global crises.

²¹ I used two drawing programs, SAI (Systemax 2024) and Paint (Microsoft 2024).

²² <https://weibo.com/2503806417/MfpLHjD14>

²³ <https://weibo.com/2803301701/L0Q5i97nC>

²⁴ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/110052296@N07/11225659743/>