

Artists cash in on China's online sticker craze

December 5 2019, by Matthew Knight



Stickers like the mischievous 'Silly Piggy' and other quirky creatures are all the rage in China

When "Silly Piggy" appeared in China's popular WeChat social media app, the sticker became an instant hit, with people sending it more than 30 million times in its first month to express their feelings in text messages.

Stickers like the mischievous cartoon pig and other quirky creatures are all the rage in China, giving the artists behind them a way to make money and win fans—as long as they stay within the bounds of censorship.

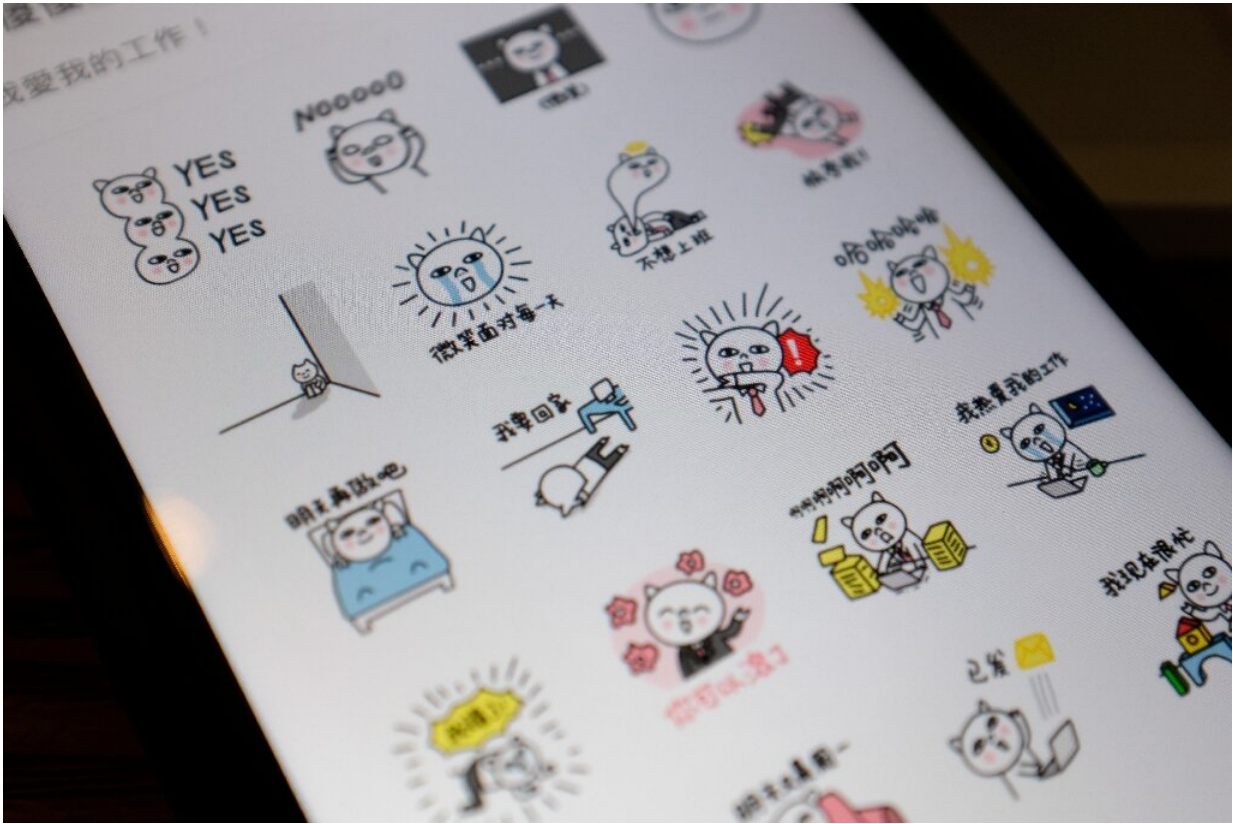
The creator of Silly Piggy, River Rui, was able to leave her office job with a design firm and set up as an independent artist thanks to the success of the character.

"Silly Piggy' is more like how I am in my little world, how I interact with my friends, it's that 'Silly Piggy' kind of style," Rui told AFP.

The pig has many moods: he types furiously at his desk as tears stream down his face. He lays flat on the office floor as his spirit leaves his body.

"Basically anyone who has done overtime will have the same feelings as him," said Rui as she doodled on a scrap of paper in a Shanghai cafe.

Unlike memes and animated GIFs popular outside China, instant messaging stickers are often original creations of local artists who can see their little characters enjoy spectacular popularity among the country's 847 million mobile internet users and spread offline through commercial licensing deals.



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"Friends feel proud of me when people they know share my stickers and they tell them 'I know the person who made those' and they feel proud. It's really flattering and makes me very happy," Rui said.

"It's like a dream."

Now more than two-thirds of her income comes from her cartoon pig, through licensing and selling merchandise online, including soft toys and keychains of Silly Piggy.

WeChat also allows people to send money to the artists directly via the

application.

Some, like Rui, have a loyal following.

Scores of excited fans queued up for Rui's autograph at a recent fan meeting in a fashionable Shanghai mall with a pop-up Silly Piggy merchandise stall.

"It's so cute and it reflects how young office workers feel inside," said 23-year-old fan Yang Hao.

"Even though it's grumbling it can still express that in a really lively and vivid way."



River Rui, the creator of Silly Piggy, was able to leave her office job and become an independent artist thanks to the character's success

Popular in Asia

Stickers are also popular in other parts of Asia.

In Japan, the LINE messaging service has launched 4.9 million sets of stickers, including officially-approved cartoon versions of famous characters from Harry Potter to Mickey Mouse.

South Korea's largest messaging app KakaoTalk introduced its first set of emoticons in November 2011 and now boasts 7,500 sets that generally cost 2,000 won (\$1.70) each.

WeChat stickers are subject to strict censorship—like all online content in the Communist-ruled country.

To be approved by the platform, stickers must not violate rules such as harming the nation's honour, disturbing social order or inciting unlawful assembly and protest, according to WeChat's regulations.

After people drew unflattering comparisons between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Winnie the Pooh, stickers of the popular portly bear became unavailable for download on WeChat.

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