Bordering on the Unacceptable in China and Europe: ‘Cao Ni Ma’ and ‘Nique Ta Mère’


在那荒茫美丽马勒戈壁
有一群草泥马，
他们活泼又聪明，
他们调皮又灵敏，
他们自由自在生活在那草泥马戈壁，
他们顽强勇敢克服艰苦环境。

噢，卧槽的草泥马！
噢，狂槽的草泥马！
他们为了卧草不被吃掉打败了河蟹，
河蟹从此消失草泥马戈壁

There is a herd of Grass Mud Horses
In the wild and beautiful Ma Le Desert
They are lively and intelligent
They are fun-loving and nimble
They live freely in the Ma Le Desert
They are courageous, tenacious, and overcome the difficult environment
Oh lying down Grass Mud Horse
Oh running wild Grass Mud Horse
They defeated river crabs in order to protect their grass land
River crabs forever disappeared from Ma Le Desert 2

In 2009, a cute music video called ‘The Song of the Grass Mud Horse’ went viral on the Chinese Internet and became an instant hit. The video featured footage of charmingly ugly alpacas, accompanied by what appeared to be a sweet if trivially nonsensical tune sung by what sounded like a children’s choir. The above lyrics may seem innocent enough, but in their oral form they convey an array of dirty homonymous rudeness. The ‘Grass Mud Horse’ is phonetically equivalent to the rude explertive ‘fuck your mum’, and the ‘Ma Le Desert’ sounds like ‘your mum’s cunt’. Between these insults in the song are littered insults and lewd comments on a similar theme. What was going on? Why this rudeness?
In this chapter I explore the politics of the Grass Mud Horse as an example of bordering practices through language. The first section explains the political context of the figure as an example of a wider practice of Chinese political language-play known as egao culture. I further explore the significance of the Grass Mud Horse through reading it in relation to an instance of its French translation, ‘nique ta mère’, as expounded on by continental philosopher Jean Baudrillard in connection with the French riots in 2005. The second section outlines this case, Baudrillard’s deployment of ‘nique ta mère’, and some of the ways in which critical border studies literatures have drawn on his work. The third section discusses the two cases in conjunction, and asks what is at stake in our understanding of the exclusionary border practices exemplified by the calls ‘cao ni ma’ and ‘nique ta mère’. I argue that Baudrillard can help us read three particular characteristics of the borders involved with both the French and the Chinese translations of the insult. First, they are a violent and mocking counter-reaction to the mothering and banning bordering practices by the state. Second, they are part of and produced by the system, rather than arriving from some outside of that system. Third, they exemplify the virtualization of the bordering ban, symptomatic of the absence of society to itself. These points together indicate that the critical border studies approaches that draw on Baudrillard’s work developed in Europe can indeed be translated to the East Asian context (although, of course, this is never a case of simple or direct representation). Although there are traits specific to the Chinese translation, this reminds us of the problems of continuing to treat China as the ‘Other country’, on the other side of some border to understanding and translation. Finally, I suggest that these translations of the call ‘fuck your mum’ can provoke us to think differently about the potential and tactics for resistance to these virtual bordering practices.

Cao ni ma

In order to make any sense of the Grass Mud Horse song, we need to read it in the context of the struggle over exclusionary and banning bordering practices that are currently being played out in Chinese society, and specifically on the Chinese Internet. The borders concerned are the virtual walls that have become
collectively known as the Great Firewall of China (GFW), as described by in Yuan Horng Chu’s chapter in this volume. The protagonists of the conflict are the Chinese government censors of online content on the one hand and China’s young ‘netizens’ or online population (wangyou) on the other. The expletive ‘cao ni ma’ was a reaction to the widespread banning practices and micro-management of expression online that has accompanied the government’s attempt to build a ‘harmonious society’.

China has the world’s largest online population and Internet usage is steadily increasing. Some have commended the Internet as a liberating force, whereas others have noted instead how it has become a means for the Chinese government to control and manipulate public opinion. What is clear from earlier debates is that the Internet in China is quickly emerging as one of the most important spaces for negotiating the borders of the acceptable and unacceptable under the Chinese communist regime.

Various levels of censorship are a feature of most, if not all, cultures around the world, including in Europe and East Asia. As described by Yuan, it takes numerous forms in various parts of Chinese society, many of which can be recognized in other places as well. One censorship practice, that is particularly relevant to the example here of the Grass Mud Horse, is the micro-level content-control that consists in forbidding the use of specific words or Chinese characters on the Chinese Internet. The practice of placing a taboo on certain phrases or sounds has been shown to exist in many different times and places around the world. Most readers will be able to come up with words in their own language(s) that they stay away from because of their provocative or inappropriate connotations, either avoiding them completely or circumventing them with help of a euphemism. However, the formal institutionalization of this practice has arguably been particularly strong in Chinese history (Nordin, 2013). In its contemporary digital form in China, it most notably takes that shape of ISP-enforced blacklisting of specific words or phrases. As explained by Yuan, online censorship practices take place behind the GFW, where whole websites are shut down on a regular basis, individual blog posts are removed and specific accounts are blocked on Sina
Weibo, a popular microblogging website similar to Facebook or Twitter, in use by more than a third of China’s Internet users (Rapoza, 2011). Censorship software scans the Internet behind the GFW to block content that includes what at that particular point in time are considered inappropriate or sensitive words. On the popular search engine Baidu, for example, thousands of characters or combinations of characters are unsearchable, resulting only in an error message. Some words are permanently listed as sensitive and will always be blocked. These blocks pertain to areas that have long been restricted by the government, such as the spread of pornography, gambling, and publication of ‘counter revolutionary’ materials (Harwit, 2008: 95). In addition, some words are added to or removed from lists in reaction to current affairs. For example, as the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement went global in 2011, a long list of keywords containing the Chinese term for ‘occupy’ (zhanling 占领), followed by place names of provincial capitals, developed regions and symbolic local areas, were reportedly blocked on Sina Weibo (Hernandez, 2011). Although there are patterns to what may be considered a sensitive word and not, the issue of which precise words are blocked at a given point in time is not known to Internet users until the moment they try to post a word that is banned. As a consequence, the border between acceptable and unacceptable expression is unclear at any given moment (Breslin and Shen, 2010: 266). This uncertainty as to where one is located in relation to such a boundary is part of what makes the censorship so forceful – locating oneself close to the edge of the unacceptable typically results in a lot of hassle and potential danger, which makes more invasive self-censorship the easier option (Nordin and Richaud, 2012).

Nevertheless, if censorship blocks are pervasive in the lives of China’s online generation, so too are the creative ways in which the borders drawn by censorship are evaded and challenged. Indeed, many of these have clear parallels with past forms of evasion of government information control, and many have been present since the arrival of the Internet in China (see Lynch, 1999 and Chase and Mulvenon, 2002 for two early accounts; and Nordin, 2013 for a commentary on these continuities). A particular form of resistance to and evasion of censorship of interest to us here takes place at the micro-level of keyword
blocking. When an Internet user behind the GFW is blocked from posting something on a blog or website because the intended message includes a sensitive word, a widespread practice for getting around such a block is to replace the blocked character(s) with one(s) that look(s) entirely different but is/are pronounced in the same or almost the same way. By doing so, the pre-programmed software fails to recognize the ‘sensitivity’ of the message and lets the user post it. The ban has been breached.

This is where the Grass Mud Horse comes into the picture. With governmental attempts to ban both smut and foul language from the Internet, in order to create a healthy and harmonious online environment, the term ‘fuck your mum’ – cao ni ma - was unsurprisingly blocked behind the GFW. As explained above, the words for Grass Mud Horse sound almost exactly like this rude expletive, and so writing ‘Grass Mud Horse’ has become its equivalent, but with a subversively humorous twist. Although it is a way of getting through the sometimes-clumsy censorship regime, its popularity and significance has grown due to the way it simultaneously mocks the censorship. The Grass Mud Horse has become a symbol of resistance to the government’s banning censorship practices, reveling in the escape from censorship, and a symbolically giving the finger to the regime. Accordingly, one blogger from Tongji University, in a text published on ‘Big Dipper’ and translated by the China Digital Times, explains their understanding of the creature:

In the song, “Grass Mud Horse” was living freely in the beautiful Ma Le Desert. But their survival faces a crisis, because the arrival of river crabs destroyed the grasses they rely on to live. What should Grass Mud horses do?

Here, the conflict between two forces is very apparent. “Grass Mud Horse” originates from a dirty sentence, and its original meaning is quite offensive. But in this song, Grass Mud Horse became the representation of a charming and vulnerable animal and the singer gives them his/her sympathy. “Grass Mud Horse” is not an uncivilized word and is not officially banned, therefore it can be sung publicly. Although many people use “Grass Mud horse” as an alternative curse or just use it randomly, this word and its
deviant expression already generated a pattern of discourse and sub-culture. “Grass Mud Horse” represents such information and opinions which cannot be accepted by the mainstream discourse, and “the Song of the Grass Mud Horse” has become a metaphor of the power struggle over Internet expression (Blogger, 2009).

As this blogger indicates, the humorous sounding animal captured the attention of online spoofters, and soon it appeared in various jokes online, depicted at first as a zebra and then as an alpaca. Soon, the Internet was inundated with various spoofs including the Grass Mud Horse, in the form of songs, music videos, mockumentaries, images, and so on. The Grass Mud Horse has also migrated offline, and appears in artwork by artists such as Ai Weiwei (Estes, 2011) and Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung (Hung, 2011). Chinese entrepreneurs were also quick to commoditize the Grass Mud Horse, and it appears on bumper stickers, thermoses and stuffed alpaca toys, to name but a few examples.

What is more, the Grass Mud Horse was the most famous but not the only spoofing online animal – there is now a whole zoology of humorously homonymous creatures that populate the Chinese Internet behind the GFW. The archenemy of the Grass Mud Horse, for example, is the River Crab that appears in the song cited above. When said out loud, the River Crab (hexie) sounds almost exactly like the word for ‘harmony’ (hexie), and satirizes the online censorship that was ramped up in the efforts to ‘harmonize’ the Chinese Internet under the government policy of ‘harmonious society’ (hexie shehui) (Guo Jianning, 2006). Both the Grass Mud Horse and the River Crab appeared in a popular zodiac that appeared online in 2009 as a list of ten Mythical Creatures, a majority of which punned on curse words and genitalia. In this list, the Dafei chicken (dafeiji 达菲鸡) is described as a strange bird that likes exercise and sounds like slang for masturbation. The midge butterfly (yamiedie 雅蠛蝶) is described as a rare animal only found on the Tibetan plateau, and its name derives from Japanese for ‘stop it’ (yamete やめて), as Chinese netizens would recognize from imported pornography. The lucky journey cat (jibamao 吉跋猫) is said to live in a dark,
damp environment and to have flourished during the Zhengde Emperor's reign, and sounds like slang for 'pubic hair' (jibamao 鸡巴毛). Also on the list were the Franco-Croatian squid (fakeyou 法克鱿, which sounds like 'fuck you' in English language); the chrysanthemum silkworm (juhuacan 菊花蚕, which sounds like another insult which means something like 'bugger'); the Qianlie crab (qianliexie 潜烈蟹, which sounds like 'prostate'); the singing field goose (yindaoyan 吟稻雁, which sounds like 'vaginal infection'); the stretch-tailed whale (weishenjing 尾申鲸, sounding like 'menstrual pads'); the puremen (chuange 鹑鸽, deriving from the nickname of androgynous looking celebrity Li Yuchun) as well as the stork-cat ape (guanliyuan 鵺狸猿, which mocks the Baidu administrators who execute censorship on the site and who eventually deleted the entry of the Ten Mythical Creatures). As a cohort, these creatures provide an amusing example of the inter- and intra-linguistic translation that is discussed at greater length in other chapters of this volume. 3

The creatures are part of a wider spoofing culture that has become known as egao. Egao consists of characters e, meaning bad or evil, and gao, meaning to change or to deal with. Together, they have been translated as 'reckless doings' (Meng Bingchun, 2009: 52), 'evil jokes' (Li Hongmei, 2011: 71) or 'spoofing' (Lagerkvist, 2010: 150). This online culture uses humor and satire, often to mock power holders in potentially subversive ways, and has grown popular and received international attention since around 2006. This phenomenon has been interpreted as a form of ““hidden transcript” of unobtrusive dissent’ (Perry, 2007: 10), part of a ‘vigorous proliferation’ of popular expression that undermines state control (Link et al., 2001: 2; see also Meng Bingchun, 2011: 39).

Since its first appearance, the Grass Mud Horse has partly lost its impact through commoditization, but it also keeps evolving and morphing into new forms in the cat and mouse game of banning newly emerged terms only to have yet new terms invented. The Grass Mud Horse quickly evolved into variants with similar connotations, such as gun ni ma and gan ni ma, and new creatures emerge and vanish with bans on 'sensitive' terms and the tides of current affairs. A collection
of *egao* terms relating to the Grass Mud Horse and the GFW have been explained and translated to English by *China Digital Times* 'Grass Mud Horse Lexicon' (China Digital Space, 2012).

How, then, should we understand the bordering politics of this Grass Mud Horse? I will argue below that we may develop our understanding of it by drawing on the thought of Jean Baudrillard, and his reading of the insult's translation into French, ‘*nique ta mère*’. In the following section, I therefore outline the workings of this expletive in France, before returning to the Grass Mud Horse further below.

**Nique ta mère**

October and November 2005 was a time marked by civil unrest in France. Riots began with the burning of cars and public buildings on the night of 27 October in the eastern Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, after two teenage boys of North African origin were accidentally killed and one was injured from electrocution when they tried to hide from police that they thought were pursuing them. Unrest soon spread to other parts of France, and on the 8 November President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency. The state of emergency was extended to 3 months by Parliament on the 16 November, ending on 4 January 2006. This was the first time such a law was invoked on the French mainland. Nicolas Sarkozy, then interior minister and subsequent president of France, depicted rioters as a threat to France from its outside (especially North Africa), though others claimed a majority were French citizens. On 9 November Sarkozy issued an order to deport foreigners convicted of involvement in the riots from French national territory, including those who had a residency visa (BBC, 2005). On 20 November, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin announced tightened immigration controls linked to a requirement of integration into French society.

These developments are the focus of Jean Baudrillard’s article for French paper *Libération* on 18 November 2005, where he writes of those located at the periphery of society as products and analysts of its (border) problems (Baudrillard, 2005; 2006: 5, 6). To society’s attempt to assimilate and mother its others, they respond with the organizing slogan ‘*nique ta mère*’ (Baudrillard, 2005), which
translates as 'fuck your mum' (or, in Chinese, 'cao ni ma'). In the article he discusses the exclusionary bordering of French and European society and the response to it by 'the banlieue' in the form of riots. He understands the rioters as simultaneously products and analysts of the decay that permeates French and European society: 'the fissures of the banlieues are merely symptoms of the dissociation of a society at odds with itself' (Baudrillard, 2006: 5).

The hardest test to this society, in Baudrillard's view, does not come from an outside threat, but consists in society's own absence. Under these conditions, moreover, society's borders, its periphery, become crucial to the point where 'soon' the only thing defining society will be 'the foreign bodies that haunt' it: 'those it has expelled, but who are now ejecting it from itself' (2006: 6). It is their (violent, negating) interpellation only that makes awareness of society possible. As disaffiliation turns to defiance of 'the West', writes Baudrillard:

Today it is precisely the "best" it has to offer — cars, schools, shopping centres — that are torched and ransacked. Even nursery schools: the very tools through which the car-burners were to be integrated and mothered. "Screw your mother" [Nique ta mère] might be their organizing slogan. And the more there are attempts to "mother" them, the more they will (2006: 7).

As an analyst of borders, Baudrillard's analysis here gives us three key points for contemplation of this case of European bordering, and the slogan 'nique ta mère'.

First, Baudrillard's analysis chimes well with critiques of integration put forward elsewhere in critical literatures concerned with borders. Attempts at integrating 'the others', from outside or at the borders of some imagined mainstream society, leads here to a violent counter-reaction at the border between posited us and them — city and banlieue, the French/European/Western and 'the rest', acceptable and unacceptable. The reaction to being excluded as one who needs to be integrated, as currently unacceptable, leads precisely to the excluded running with the logics imposed on them, becoming more 'unacceptable'. This is how
disaffiliation turns into defiance, where going on the offensive is the only way to ‘stop being humiliated, discarded or taken in hand’ (Baudrillard, 2006: 7).

Baudrillard writes: ‘I am not so sure that the rioters want to be reintegrated on these lines. Perhaps they consider the French way of life with the same condescension or indifference with which it views theirs’ (Baudrillard, 2006: 7). Thus, the more ‘we’ position ourselves as ‘their’ mothers, the more they will attempt matricide.

This violent counter-action emerges in relation to a problematic manner of managing difference, which a number of scholars have pointed to as a particular theorization of time and space in Western traditions of thought. This imagination involves a splitting of self from the other, in terms of spatial here/there, temporal now/then and moral good/bad. In anthropology, Johannes Fabian has argued that the discipline has continued to rely on a notion of ‘evolutionary Time’ in the wake of Darwin, an alignment of spatial difference in temporal sequence (Fabian, 1983: 11-12). He traces this thinking through functionalism, culturalism and structuralism, and in thinkers following Durkheim and Ernst Bloch. In International Relations, Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney have criticized the understanding of difference, where others need to be obliterated, reclaimed or assimilated (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004: 2-3; cf. Blaney and Inayatullah, 2010: 200). They trace this pattern of thought in modernization theory, and through the economic ethnographies of thinkers like Lafitau, Smith, Steuart and Ferguson, as well as Hegel and Marx. Along similar lines, Kimberly Hutchings has shown how a number of thinkers, from Kant, Hegel and Marx to Virilio and Agamben, ‘render world politics a unitary object for analysis and judgment by privileging a Eurocentric interpretation of the western trajectory of world-political time’ (Hutchings, 2008: 23). In geography, Doreen Massey has criticized the elements of thinking that enables this problematic division of time and space through Bergson and Deleuze, de Certeau, Althusser, Lacku and Derrida (Massey, 2005: 20-71).

These literatures – and many others with them – show that the integrating logic that Baudrillard criticizes in France represents a wider tendency in a European tradition of thought. It also shows that his concerns are shared by a number of European (and non-European) contemporary thinkers of time, space and
borders, whose work is also widely drawn upon in the emerging field of critical border studies.

Second, in Baudrillard’s analysis the rioters – who are excluded by this French bordering as unacceptable to the system – are products of the system, just like the ‘exceptional’ measures that are deployed to manage them. They did not just appear from some outside. It is the system that makes their being possible, and their rage. This is also Slavoj Zizek’s point in his analysis of the French riots, where violence and counter-violence generate one another in a vicious cycle (Zizek, 2005). It is also a point that appears in much of the thought on which critical border studies draws, for example in Jacques Derrida’s notion of auto-immunity where the west since 9/11 is ‘producing, reproducing, and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm’ (Derrida, 2003: 99).

Though by no means exclusive to Baudrillard’s thought, this pattern of systems producing that which comes to threaten them is a key point in a significant portion of his work elsewhere. On his reading, European democracy and consumer society is driven by a ‘perverse’ logic (2002 [2000]: 97, 207) where phenomena such as terrorism, fascism, violence and depression result from ‘an excess of organization, regulation and rationalization within a system’ (Baudrillard, 2002 [2000]: 97). On this understanding, European society suffers from an excess of surveillance and control, and in conjunction the emergence for no apparent reason of ‘internal pathologies … strange dysfunctions … unforeseeable, incurable accidents … anomalies’, which disrupt the system’s capacity for totality, perfection and reality invention (Baudrillard, 2002 [2000]: 97). What characterizes these anomalies in Baudrillard’s theorizing is that ‘they have not come from elsewhere, from “outside” or from afar, but are rather a product of the “over-protection” of the body – be it social or individual’ (Smith, 2010: 59). In this manner, ‘the system’s overcapacity to protect, normalise and integrate’ (Smith, 2010: 60) appears in various parts of society as natural immunity is replaced by artificial systems of immunity – like pre-programmed firewalls, to which we will return further below (Baudrillard, 2002 [2000]: 98).
Third, in Baudrillard’s analysis the excluded unacceptable also function to make visible the more serious danger of and to contemporary Europe. This danger does not come from the outside in the form of immigrants pouring across the border, but from French society’s (and indeed European society’s) own absence. All the talk of integration is merely a signal that there is nothing there to integrate into, it signals the very lack or absence of European or French values in the first place – so that all we can do is ‘try to palm them off on others’ (Baudrillard, 2006: 5). This absence is the more potent threat. The absence, the lack signaled by the rioters’ call ‘nique ta mère’, is also the key point that other scholars of critical border studies have drawn specifically from Baudrillard. It has become common in these literatures to analyze bordering practices in terms of a sovereign decision on the exception, particularly through drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben (1998; 2000). Commentators like Francois Debrix and Alexander D. Barder (2012) and Nick Vaughan-Williams (2010) have specifically drawn on Baudrillard to discuss the virtuality of this space of the exception.

To Debrix and Barder, it is the always possible actualization of exceptional measures at any time and place that gives the space of the ban its ‘forceful and violent capacity to shape the contours of a generalized space/order of exception’ (Debrix and Barder, 2012: 82). What they take from Baudrillard’s analysis of virtuality, moreover, is that what is also virtual about the space of exception is that ‘the exceptional or banning potential of this space may have already been realized in many other places not officially recognized, described, or sanctioned’ (Debrix and Barder, 2012: 82). The point of the state of exception is to draw attention to it as though its conditions were not the norm, or ‘as if it were not supposed to be real or actualized anywhere else’ (Debrix and Barder, 2012: 82, emphasis in original). The announcing of the exception as exception distracts our attention from the fact that ‘the exception may have already (virtually) become the rule’ (Debrix and Barder, 2012: 82).

Debrix and Barder draw on Vaughan-Williams’ work on a decisionist ontology of the border, where he elaborates on Baudrillard’s writing for similar purposes. In his analysis of Giorgio Agamben’s claim that ‘we are all virtually homines sacri’, he
takes this to imply a Baudrillardian sense of virtuality that simulates this new condition ‘throughout everyday life in such a way that potentially emplaces us all under conditions of considerable uncertainty’ (Vaughan-Williams, 2010: 1081, see also; Debrìx and Barder, 2012: 83). In Baudrillard’s order of the virtual, then, the decision of the exception does not necessarily happen literally in one given point in time and space, but ‘can be reread as a far more generalised and reiterative process in the attempt to simulate total security’ (Vaughan-Williams, 2010: 1081, see also; Debrìx and Barder, 2012: 83).

A key insight that Baudrillard has brought to critical border studies, then, is a sense of bordering that is virtualized and generalized, so that the exclusion or exception of the border may be actualized anytime, anywhere, for any of us. Critical border studies has highlighted the uncertainty or precariousness that this implies for all of us – including those who thought themselves safely French or European, part of the (m)othering ‘we’ rather than the (m)othered ‘they’.

**Bordering on the unacceptable in China and Europe**

From the analysis of the French deployment of ‘nique ta mère’, we can take a number of points that help us better understand the significance of ‘cao ni ma’. To begin, the politics of the Grass Mud Horse in China repeats the logics of the French and European bordering practices described by Baudrillard around the same time that the egao phenomenon first emerged. The Chinese regime is trying to integrate the troublesome or unacceptable youth into behavior it deems as acceptable and harmonious. Netizens are to be brought into the fold of acceptable communication by a combination of mothering educational ‘thought work’ (sixiang gongzuo) and banning of the undesirable and unacceptable. The GFW is set up as a banning virtual border, intended to keep disharmonious elements outside the Chinese Internet. The aim is to make the Chinese Internet a pure, healthy and compliant space of maternal guidance and good values, in the same way as rioters were to be integrated into French values by way of nursery schools and integration policies – or else, they were to be banned from this space.

This (m)othering border practice moreover leads to a counter-reaction at the
border between posited us and them, acceptable and unacceptable. Again, the reaction to being excluded as one who needs to be integrated, as currently unacceptable, leads precisely to the excluded running with the logics imposed on them, becoming more ‘unacceptable’, more foul-mouthed, more outrageous. As in the case of the French riots, disaffiliation turns into defiance, where going on the offensive is the only way to ‘stop being humiliated, discarded or taken in hand’ (Baudrillard, 2006: 7). It is clear that the foul-mouthed netizens of China do not want to be reintegrated on the lines drawn up by the PRC government censors. Instead, they curse at it and treat it with the same condescension with which it treats them. The more the government tries to position itself as a mothering parent, the more the netizens symbolically defile it. What is more, the reaction to being othered here is certainly not an attempt at becoming acceptable in order to facilitate integration (although this reaction can certainly also be observed, in China as in France). What the calls ‘nique ta mère’ and ‘cao ni ma’ indicate is instead an increased bordering and ejection of the acceptable from itself. As pointed out by Meng Bingchun, the jokes implicated in egao can only be understood if you have already grasped all the reference points. In this sense, the rude humor can be seen ‘as setting up inside and outside positions, which renders it politically potent’ (Gray, 2006: 105, cited in Meng Bingchun, 2011: 48). As may be expected, it is clear then that the reaction manifest in the Grass Mud Horse is not specific to France or Europe, but manifests also in the ‘Other country’ China (Chow, 1991). This evidence further strengthens recent claims that the problematic manner of imagining spatial difference as aligned in temporal sequence is as much part of a Chinese political practice and tradition of thought as it is part of a European heritage (Barabantseva, 2012; Nordin, 2012b; Callahan, 2008).

The same equivalence of Chinese and European bordering practices is also evident with regards to the second point drawn from Baudrillard above: in both cases, the unacceptable and excluded others have not just appeared from an outside, but are as much parts and products of the system as the ‘exceptional’ measures that are deployed to manage them. The emergence of the Grass Mud Horse and its cohort of obscene creatures is a direct effect of the online censorship at a word level.
This virtual potential furthermore takes a particular form in the Chinese case as the homonymous word play is made possible by the Chinese language in its interplay between oral and written character form. This is the case for all the characters of the egao zoology, but is perhaps particularly clear in the case of the River Crabs that form part of the Song of the Grass Mud Horse. The River Crabs directly appropriate the language of the censorship regime in translating its call to build a 'harmonious' society and virtual environment. In using the censorship regime's own language – where to 'harmonize' has come to mean to censor and delete online posts – the deployment of the River Crabs (homonymous with this 'harmony') is a deployment of the language of the ban against itself.

Finally, the Chinese case of the Grass Mud Horse can be productively read as the type of bordering that is described by Debrix and Barder and Vaughan-Williams. The banning bordering practice of the Chinese censorship regime is both decisionist and virtual. First of all, it clearly operates by way of decisionist banning and exclusion. Understanding the egao negotiation of borders through a decisionist ontology underlines the specificity of this bordering in relation to previous historical use of homonyms in China, which involved human deliberation and interpretation. In the era of the virtual, the bordering decision is pre-programmed and instantaneous, or what Vaughan-Williams following Brian Massumi has referred to as ‘flashes of ... sovereign power’, a particular form of pre-programmed decision making in the ‘space of a moment’ (Massumi, 2005: 6; Vaughan-Williams, 2007: 187-188). Though Vaughan-Williams’ discussion draws primarily on Derrida’s notion of autoimmunity, this notion parallels Baudrillard’s understanding of borders as a pre-programmed instantaneous operation (Nordin, 2012a: 199).

This analysis of bordering through flashes of sovereign power permits an understanding of virtual bans on the Chinese Internet as drawing borders in both time and space. Vaughan-Williams argues with Massumi for an understanding of related bordering practices as the temporal equivalent of a tautology: ‘[t]he time form of the decision that strikes like lightning is the foregone conclusion. When it arrives, it always seems to have preceded itself. Where there is a sign of it, it has
This form of decision is therefore a foregone conclusion ‘because it sidesteps or
effaces the blurriness of the present in favor of a perceived need to act on the
future without delay’, in the face of a threat of an indefinite future yet to come
(Vaughan-Williams, 2007: 188; Massumi, 2005: 4-5). In other words, it reflects a
politics that induces rather than responds to events:

[r]ather than acting in the present to avoid an occurrence in the future,
pre-emption brings the future into the present. It makes present the
future consequences of an eventuality that may or may not occur,
indifferent to its actual occurrence. The event’s consequences precede it,
as if it had already occurred (Massumi, 2005: 7-8, cited in Vaughan-
Williams, 2007: 188).

The censoring ban of the GFW operates through such a pre-programmed code,
which censors in flashes of sovereign power. Words are culled pre-emptively to
harmonize some not-yet-existing but possible future dissident deployment of a
once unthreatening expression. Thus, the PRC’s censorship regime acts as a
temporal bordering process: it pre-empts threats to the government’s version of
Chinese harmonious society that are created in the present-future, thus securing
time and the future as something that belongs to the state and not to foul-
mouthed netizens and Grass Mud Horses (c.f. Vaughan-Williams, 2007: 189).

The GFW also represents a spatial form of bordering in its intimate relation to
sovereignty, territory and governmental power. Indeed, Vaughan-Williams
draws on William Walters to refer to this spatial bordering as ‘firewalling’
(Walters, 2006). A key aim of some ‘layers’ of the GFW is still to keep non-
Chinese sites like Facebook, Google+ or CNN completely blocked out from the
Chinese Internet. In order to maintain a harmonious domestic space, the GFW
must seal that space off as a (virtual) geobody from the rest of the world. Again,
what Vaughan-Williams describes as ‘innovations in the ways sovereign power
attempts to secure the temporal and spatial borders of political community’ is
therefore translatable across to the Chinese case, and thus refers to something
less localized in time and space than may at first appear (Vaughan-Williams, 2007: 191).

In addition to producing a decisionist bordering in this way, the bordering that the Grass Mud Horse expresses is clearly virtual in the sense of Debrix and Barder’s and Vaughan-Williams’ use of Baudrillard’s term. The exceptional measure of ban and exclusion is virtual in the sense that it can always be actualized anywhere at any time, even with reference to such an apparently innocent creature as the Grass Mud Horse. In this sense of virtuality, these banning censorship practices amount to a set of bordering practices in straightforward parallel to those in France and other parts of Europe. They exemplify the type of decisionist bordering that appears to be directed by a state apparatus that tries to simulate complete security throughout everyday life. As argued by Debrix and Barder, it is the always possible actualization of exceptional measures at any time and place that gives the space of the ban its ‘forceful and violent capacity to shape the contours of a generalized space/order of exception’ (Debrix and Barder, 2012: 82). Again, the ‘exceptional or banning potential of this space may have already been realized in many other places not officially recognized, described, or sanctioned’ (Debrix and Barder, 2012: 82).

The uncertainty and insecurity involved in this virtual decisionist border is clearly expressed by Chinese online commentators. In an article for the Guardian Murong Xuecun, an author of sometimes filthy literature who pioneered China’s Internet publishing craze a decade ago, describes the effect of the virtual generalized border between acceptable and unacceptable in China’s violent censorship practice:

The scariest thing of all is not being silenced or being sent to prison; it is the sense of powerlessness and uncertainty about what comes next. There is no procedure, no standard, and not a single explanation. It’s as if you are walking into a minefield blindfolded. Not knowing where the mines are buried, you don’t know when you will be blasted to pieces (Murong Xuecun, 2013).
The point of drawing on Baudrillard’s notion of the virtual in previous critical border studies literatures has been to draw attention to the generalization and virtualization of this state of affairs. The announcing of the exception as exception distracts our attention from the fact that ‘the exception may have already (virtually) become the rule’ (Debrix and Barder, 2012: 82).

Following Baudrillard we also come to see how the Chinese version of the call ‘fuck your mum’, like the French version, also functions to make visible the more serious threat to the Chinese regime: its own absence to itself. The pervasiveness of calls for harmony and the regime’s efforts at harmonization merely signal that there is no harmony there in Chinese society into which the unacceptable can be integrated. They signal the very lack or absence of harmonious values in the first place, so that all the regime can do is ‘try to palm them off on others’ (Baudrillard, 2006: 5). It is now only the (violent, negating) interpellation by Grass Mud Horses that makes awareness of society possible. Today it is precisely the ‘best’ the Chinese regime has to offer that is mocked and defied. Even societal harmony – the very tool through which the netizens were to be integrated and mothered ‘Fuck your mother’ (Cao ni ma) might be their organizing slogan. And the more there are attempts to ‘mother’ them, the more they will.

In this way, if we accept Baudrillard’s notion of virtuality, then we see societies that are absent to themselves. It does not matter whether the system in question is French democracy, Chinese communism or something else (indeed, I have made a similar argument with regards to the Swedish model and the 2013 Husby riots, see Nordin, 2013). It is that which a system most proudly presents as ‘we’ that has disappeared in each case – French democracy, the Swedish model, or Chinese harmony. It is precisely in what the system holds to be the most ‘we’, right there in its pathetic emptiness, that the obscene battle cry is born. That is where there is a trace of challenge, via the absence of a subject that can represent a ‘we’ to integrate into. It is to this absence of French society that the rioters react with the insult ‘nique ta mère’. This absent society has gotten to a point of virtuality where, as Baudrillard points out, the only thing defining it will soon be the haunting of
those it has expelled, and who are now ejecting it from itself by telling it to go fuck its mum. The only trace of harmony in the Chinese harmonious society, are the Grass Mud Horse and River Crabs that ridicule it.

Conclusion

Together, the points I have argued in this chapter indicate a number of similarities between the French and Chinese translations of ‘fuck your mum’ as a particular marker of border negotiation. I have thus begun to indicate that the critical border studies approaches that draw on Baudrillard’s work developed in Europe can indeed be translated to the East Asian context. Of course, such translation is never a question of straightforward rendition or representation. It is not a question of ‘yes, it translates’ or ‘no, it does not translate’. Rather, each case will draw on such thinking differently and resonate with different aspects of a given term. Moreover, this chapter only provides a brief and tentative transposition of Baudrillard to the Chinese case, where his impact has been largely insignificant to date. Nonetheless, the brief sketch provided here can remind us of the problems of continuing to treat China as the ‘Other country’, on the other side of some boundary to understanding and translation. Perhaps it may also remind us that translatability was never evident or present within a purportedly given language in the first place. Having said this, I have also pointed to the distinctiveness of the spatiotemporal bordering involved in the Chinese call ‘cao ni ma’, based in the particularity of the relation between Chinese spoken language and script, and the workings of the GFW.

As I do not understand China to offer an Other understanding of time, space and borders that can somehow let us escape from the problems of European thought, I chose in this chapter not to turn to Chinese scholars for a reaction to Baudrillard’s analysis of borders, but drew instead on the young online generation that has yelled at the regime ‘fuck your mum’ (cao ni ma). This call has underlined the absence of these systems to themselves, the absence of anything there to integrate into. Against the background of this absence, the French rioters and Chinese netizens have reacted through precisely becoming more unacceptable – mocking, burning and shouting: ‘Fuck your mum’!
In both the French and the Chinese cases the question that other literatures on these phenomena return to, like moths to a flame, is what the real meaning and political potential of these forms of cursing resistance is. What do they reveal to us, really? Can they form the basis of a sustained political movement? What is it really that they want? If we take the virtual nature of these events seriously, we must rethink these questions, perhaps even discard them completely. It is precisely in reading or deploying ‘fuck your mum’/ ‘nique ta mère’ / ‘cao ni ma’ as an organizing slogan that I believe the Baudrillardian approach to and of the French rioters and the Chinese netizens have come further than many scholarly literatures to date. In looking in the typical academic manner to reveal something, much of our scholarly community has remained wedded to a sense of the real behind claims to states of exception. By contrast, the rioters and netizens seem to have come to the conclusion that the system that others and mothers them has become weightless, nothing but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, ‘that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference’ (Baudrillard, 1994 [1981]: 5-6). The French rioters and the Chinese Grass Mud Horses have shown us a different tactic and response to the banning bordering practices of their respective surroundings, that treat these surroundings as pure simulations. By interpellating the mothering regimes through obscene calls rather than rational analyses, the mothered others refuse to treat the purported system as self-same. If we accept Baudrillard’s notion of virtuality, we must also accept that no ‘unmasking’ of reality is possible or indeed needed. If we accept such a position, it seems as though revelations of ‘reality’ and ‘regimes of truth’ fail to hit the mark. Perhaps, the call ‘fuck your mum’ has both greater purchase and greater resonance in contemporary virtuality. And as Baudrillard might ask us, why should we regard this non-society with anything but condescension and indifference?

As Zizek noted at the time of the French riots, this revolt was ‘just an outburst with no pretense to any kind of positive vision’ (Zizek, 2005). Zizek laments this absence of a meaningful utopian vision as a ‘sad fact’ indicating our predicament.
'Perhaps', he writes, 'this is all we can do today, in our dark era: to render visible the failure of all attempts at redemption, the obscene travesty of every gesture of reconciling us with the violence we are forced to commit' (Zizek, 2005). Rather than cover over this uncomfortable conclusion, perhaps we should take a queue from the rioters and Grass Mud Horses. Perhaps, rather than trying to resist this predicament by unmasking it, we should reply to the mothers in ourselves and others by giving a finger and serving up our best insult.

Notes
1. I am grateful to Dan Öberg and Graham M. Smith for inspiring discussions and constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter. Special thanks to the book’s editors, Nick Vaughan-Williams and Joyce Liu, for helpful comments.
2. A version of the video can be seen on You Tube with English translation (skippybentley, 2009). There are a number of versions and translations of this song circulating online. This version is taken from Xiao Qiang’s Berkely site China Digital Times, which has been an important part of spreading the popularity of the Grassmud Horse to an English language audience (Xiao Qiang, 2009). The romanisation of the lyrics is as follows:

Zai na huangmang meili Male Gebi
You yi qun caonima,
Tamen huopo you congming,
Tamen tiaopi you lingmin,
Tamen ziyou zizai shanghuo za na caonima Gebi,
Tamen wanqiang yonggan kefu jianku huanjing.
Ou, wo cao de caonima,
Ou, kuang cao de caonima,
Tamen weile wocao bu bei chidao dabai le hexie,
Hexie congci xiaoshi caonima gebi.

3. A description of the original entry of the Ten Mythical Creatures exists in English on the blog Danwei, although they have been removed from Baidu (Martinsen, 2009). These and other egao homonyms are moreover listed and described in English in the China Digital Spaces’ Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon (China Digital Space, 2012). For academic commentary on the Ten Mythical Creatures,
see Li Hongmei (2011: 79) and Astrid Nordin (in press 2013).

**Bibliography**


Chow, R. (1991) ‘Violence in the Other Country: China as Crisis, Spectacle, and


Un-Innovative Censorship, Innovative Resistance: The Internet, Forbidden Words and the Humorous Homonyms of Egao


A slightly moderated version of this text appears as:

For citations, please refer to the published chapter.

One of the most important influences of globalisation in China has come in the form of the Internet. Today, China has the largest online population in the world and Internet usage is increasing steadily. Some have hailed the Internet as a force that liberates through the globalisation of information flows. Others have taken a more cautious view noting how the Internet is not only becoming a space for dissidence, but also for the government to control, surveil and manipulate public opinion at a time of increasingly harsh clamp-downs on popular dissidence in China. What is clear from earlier debates is that the Internet in China is quickly emerging as one of the most important spaces for negotiating globalisation, governance and resistance. This chapter examines some of the specific forms of control and resistance that have emerged in this process of negotiation. It contrasts the un-innovative censorship mechanisms deployed on the Chinese Internet with the innovative and creative forms of resistance that have come about as a way of simultaneously avoiding and criticising that censorship. There are numerous forms of resistance taking place on the Chinese Internet. So called "independent candidates" have run for election with the help of social media,
sometimes successfully so. When official media have refused to report on certain events, the Internet has become a way of sharing information refused by official channels, for example in the 2011 high-speed railway crash. The web has also become a space for petitioning government and supporting petitioners through complaints against official abuse. All these practices could be considered online resistance with some innovative aspects.

This chapter, however, examines one particular form of online resistance, what has become known as egao, and the specific part of it that builds on humorous wordplay. Egao consists of characters e, meaning bad or evil, and gao, meaning to change or to deal with. Together, they have been translated as "reckless doings" (Meng Bingchun, 2009: 52), "evil jokes" (Li Hongmei, 2011: 71) or "spoofing" (Lagerkvist, 2010: 150). It is a form of online culture that has grown popular and received international attention since around 2006.1 Egao uses dark humour, irony and satire, often to mock and ridicule power holders in potentially subversive ways. A significant part of this culture draws on puns and wordplay in the Chinese language to simultaneously criticize and escape the censorship regime.2

This form of online resistance is distinctive as a particularly Chinese form of resistance, making its innovation an especially interesting case. This chapter follows the introduction to this volume in taking innovation to indicate a creative process that makes changes to something already established, resulting in something distinctively new and particular. It is the traces of this creativity and the distinctively new that is explored in this chapter. Moreover, the focus here on egao culture highlights Chinese innovation beyond the country’s academic and political elites, especially that of the young "post-eighties" generation. It shows how the challenges and opportunities brought about by globalisation of

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1 The emergence in 2006 is most likely a result of internet control growing stronger in the years leading up to it.
2 I follow the vast majority of previous literatures on the egao phenomenon in referring to it as "resistance" (see for example Meng Bingchun, 2011; Li Hongmei, 2011; Tang Lijun and Yang Peidong, 2011). For a problematisation of this conceptualisation vis-à-vis the distinction of politics from the political, with special attention to the type of wordplay discussed here and the way it is perceived by young people in China, see Nordin and Richaud (2012).
information, and particularly the growth of the Chinese Internet, has urged a wave of creative and innovative resistance particular to this generation of young Chinese "netizens".

The argument is organised in two principal parts. The first part sketches an outline of censorship practices in Chinese history and compares these to current attempts at Internet control. It argues that the key principles according to which the government attempts to control the Chinese Internet at various levels are very similar to control of other media, and that what is particular about the technologies of Internet censorship has largely been imported, supported and/or copied. The relative success of the Chinese Internet censorship regime is achievable largely by copying and borrowing from abroad, most notably from the US and Japan. The second part contrasts the un-innovative government regime of Internet censorship with the innovative response to it that has emerged in the form of egao wordplay. It outlines one early example of egao wordplay, the Ten Mythical Creatures that appeared on the Chinese Internet in early 2009, and compares it to similar practices in Chinese history and abroad. Through this example it argues that the contemporary deployment of humorous homonyms online to simultaneously criticise and evade online censorship is innovative both in relation to similar practices in China's own past, and in relation to comparable ironic practices abroad. The chapter concludes with a note on the significance of the innovation concept for understanding Chinese online governance and resistance under globalisation.
Uninnovative censorship

An evaluation of the level of innovation in Chinese Internet control should start from an understanding of historical forms of censorship and information control, particularly in China's negotiation of global influences. In China, like in most other places, those with the might and interest to control flows of information have attempted to do so since ancient times. Chinese history (and, it should be said, that of most other empires) reads as a veritable smorgasbord of efforts at censorship. By censorship I mean efforts that have in one way or another aimed to make uncomfortable words and speech-acts disappear or stop them from appearing in the first place. Throughout Chinese history, such censorship has taken many forms at what I refer to as macro-, mid- and micro-levels. I discuss them here in turn.

Macro-level censorship in China

One level of control has been the macro-level control of infrastructure – the (attempted) removal of the "hardware" of communication, or whole genres of publication. One pre-modern historical example was the illegalisation of xiaobao, which by the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127 AD) had emerged as an alternative and unofficial source of political information to rival that of the dibao, a semi-official publication of imperial edicts, records, memorials and notices that can be traced to the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 42; Wilkinson, 2000: 537; Guan Shishen and Ding Junhui, 1987: 1-8; Fang Hanqi, 1981: 1-3).

Under China's last officially imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911 AD), the effort to control communication and enforce edicts against forbidden words was complicated by the introduction of new information technologies by global actors, most importantly perhaps the telegraph. One way that the telegraph was managed at the macro-level, particularly in its early days, was the simple removal and shutting down of the possibility to use it. Research by Zhou Yongming has shown that the pulling down of telegraph poles by locals, for example in 1865 on
the line between Shanghai and Wusong, was secretly orchestrated by government officials, in that particular case the district intendany (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 19). Local officials similarly incited locals to pull down poles in Fujian in 1875 (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 25). Other means of communication suffered the same treatment. An early railroad constructed in 1865 outside Xuanwumen in Beijing was dismantled by order of the Office of the Gendarmerie (Bujun tongling yamen) (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 20). Similarly, after an attempted coup against Empress Dowager Cixi in 1898, she tried to gain control over the distribution of information by issuing edicts prohibiting the publishing of newspapers (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 70). After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the nationalist Guomindang government continued to enforce strict media censorship, applying it also to the recently developed channels of radio and film (McAleavy, 1967: 274; For some accounts of such censorship at the time, see Hu Shi, 2001 [1929]: 133; China League for the Protection of Civil Rights, 2001 [1933]). However, with the victory of the communists and the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 came a previously unrivaled level of censorship. Indeed, strict censorship has been key to communist rule since its inception.

As with previous censorship regimes, the PRC government removed whole genres of possible communication at the macro-level. With regards to the telegraph, it was from the beginning put under rigid macro-level government control. Thus, under communist rule, "it was simply impossible for anyone to use the telegraph to express political opinions publicly without official sanction" (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 132). This control, of course, was not restricted to the telegraph, but as under the Guomindang it extended to information on the screen, radio and the print press, albeit to a heightened degree. As one commentator notes:

With liberation, everything was changed, and news, as we understand the word, was banished overnight from the press, which from that time on had space only for messages from Communist leaders, resolutions of conferences, and statistics about the production of pig-iron (McAleavy, 1967: 330).
In later years, new means of communication, especially those that permit private international access such as satellite dishes and fax machines, have been controlled at the macro-level prohibiting private or unauthorised use (Shanor and Shanor, 1995: 26, 160).

Today, the Chinese censorship apparatus continues to control communication at the macro-level, and the Internet is no exception. The Internet came to China in 1994, and the Chinese blogosphere, an important space for popular expression and dissidence, grew exponentially in 2005 (MacKinnon, 2007: 34-5). 12 government agencies are involved in Internet censorship to varying degrees and in different capacities. In terms of infrastructure, all major networks are state-owned. The Telecommunication Regulations state that at least 51% of a joint venture in telecommunications infrastructure should be owned by a Chinese partner. What is more, all Chinese computer networks have to pass through Chinanet, the national public information network, to connect to the Internet. This makes it impossible to connect to the Internet independently (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 142-3). At the same time the PRC government has deployed stronger "removal" tactics at the macro-level. Most infamously, it has set up layers of blocks that have become collectively known as the Great Fire Wall (GFW). This "wall" works to block many sites based outside China from being accessed from within China (including Google+, Facebook, Twitter and other social media). Areas of China, such as the Xinjiang region, have also been cut off from the Internet during periods of unrest (Blanchard, 2009; AFP, 2011).

**Mid-level censorship in China**

Another level at which uncomfortable words have been made to disappear has been the mid-level control of services and the removal of specific publications. This has been executed for example through government co-optation of and interference in publishing services and the destruction or illegalisation of circulation of specific pieces. According to Endymion Wilkinson, banned books (*jinshu*) have been a feature of Chinese life since the Warring States period (475-
One infamous example is the 213 BC "burning of the books" by which the first emperor tried to eradicate oppositional expression (Ostergård Petersen, 1995). Another is the greatest single censorship movement, the "Literary Inquisition" of the Qianlong Emperor in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, when thousands of works were destroyed together with the blocks that were used to print them. These, and other less famous purges were accompanied by the persecution of many thousands of writers (Wilkinson, 2000: 274).

Where the complete removal of the infrastructure of new technologies turned out to be unsustainable under the Qing, and effective only for short periods if at all, a somewhat more successful way of removing unwanted expression took place at the mid-level. With regards to the telegraph, the Qing government after 1881 developed a model where the previously government-owned Imperial Telegraph Administration (ITA) was converted to a shareholder company, but remained a joint operation between government and enterprise, described as "commercial management under official supervision" (Youdian bianjisji, 1984: 64 cited in; Zhou Yongming, 2006: 71). This meant that if something was considered an emergency, the government could instruct the ITA to stop providing services to certain individuals or groups, such as receiving coded telegrams for the French during the Sino-Franco War (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 71). This mid-level control was also exercised through the attempt at removing specific publications from circulation. For example, after the Qing court failed in its attempt to remove all newspapers and allowed official newspapers to be published in both Beijing and the provinces after 1902, it still attempted to prohibit individual publications, such as the pro-revolutionary Su Bao in 1903 (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 117). Again, a way of enforcing the control of communication, and particularly its content, was the persecution of individuals who were caught using it as a means to spread ideas unfavourable to the rulers. For example, Jing Yuanshen, who at the time was chief (zhongban) of the Shanghai Telegraph Administration, led an appeal in a

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3 See An Pingqiu and Zhang Peiheng (1991) for an introduction to the issue of book banning that covers the Qin to Qing dynasties (221 BC-1911 AD) and includes a list of 4000 titles that the editors claim is exhaustive of books banned in the eras covered. A good discussion that also covers the PRC is found in Chan (1983).
1900 public telegram to the Zongli Yamen against Empress Dowager Cixi's attempt to dethrone Emperor Guangxu. Subsequent to the appeal he fled to Macau, then under Portuguese rule, where he was arrested and imprisoned for one and a half years after a request from the Qing court (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 59-60).

As in previous regimes, the PRC censors books, TV, films and music at the mid-level, and there are regular crack-downs on publishers and broadcasters that fail to live up to the expectations of self-censorship. There have been instances that repeat earlier book-burning forms of censorship (Thurston, 1984: 605). Although particularly intense purges have ignited in periods like the 1957 "anti-rightist" campaign and the Cultural Revolution from 1964, the destruction of unwanted works and the management through self-censorship has prevailed throughout the lifespan of the PRC. Throughout China’s news, information and entertainment industries businesses are allowed to operate on the condition that they build censorship into their business processes (MacKinnon, 2007: 35). In the words of the official news agency Xinhua: "the industry could otherwise become a mere money-making machine rather than something serving to improve the moral standards of people" (Xinhua, 1999; cited in Becker, 2000: 263).

Moreover, as under previous regimes, the PRC set up a mid-level "wall" of sorts to block information coming into China from outside. It strictly limited the number of books, films and other forms of communication that were allowed into China from other countries. On this logic, some argue that booksellers since the 1990s worry little about getting in trouble with authorities for selling works by authors that are condemned – censorship takes place at publishing houses and customs control, anything let through the barrier is safe to sell (Shanor and Shanor, 1995: 175). Another "wall" was built through jamming foreign broadcasts, such as the Voice of America, the BBC, Radio Free Asia, and broadcasters in Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere (Shanor and Shanor, 1995: 26, 160).

Again, the Internet follows the pattern of previous censorship. When it comes to services, a first level of control is established through the license system for
Internet service providers (ISPs). A series of regulations were issued in 2000-2001 outlining what services are permitted and not with regards to online news publishing, BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) and Internet cafés. There is a strict limit on who may publish news online, in effect limiting such possibilities to central and provincial-level news organizations (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 143). In the case of blog-hosting services and other companies operating online, building censorship into business processes includes the route of software tools (MacKinnon, 2007: 35). In order to avoid being shut down due to displaying inappropriate content, many web pages implement an increasing number of censorship technologies such as IP tracking and blocking. The use of monitors to screen BBS is also common, and webpages that tend to have heated political debates have often opted to close down on politically sensitive dates (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 151; Shen, 2007: 35). This self-censorship is pervasive (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 179; Pang Cuiming, 2008), and may reflect a resignation to or endorsement of government censorship practices (Lagerkvist, 2010: 146). From the mid-1990s the government has made several attempts at selective blocking of individual web pages or publications. One target of such attempted blockage were Western news sites perceived to be critical of China, such as the Time Magazine, the New York Times, or the Washington Post. Pages associated with anti-government propaganda were also targeted, as were sites promoting the independence of Tibet, Taiwan or other parts of China, or advocating religious practices not sanctioned by the government, such as those associated with the Falungong. To this list can also be added sites for pornography and gambling (Harwit, 2008: 98-9).

**Micro-level censorship in China**

Finally, I wish to pay special attention to a third level of censorship that is of particular importance to my argument here: the micro-level content-control that consists in forbidding the use of specific words or Chinese characters. The practice of placing a taboo on the writing or uttering of certain phrases or sounds has been observed in different parts of the world in various historical periods. Indeed, most readers will be able to think of words in their own language(s) that
are considered too provocative or inappropriate to utter, which means they are avoided completely or replaced by a euphemism.

However, the formal institutionalisation of this practice has been particularly strong in China. Most famously perhaps, it was long taboo to utter the name of one's seniors, like a father or grandfather, or to take the same name as an ancestor (Wilkinson, 2000: 86). B. J. Mansvelt Beck thus quotes Zheng Xuan's definition of character hui, usually translated as "taboo", in a commentary on the ancient texts Zhouli and Liji as: "the personal name of a deceased king" (cited in Beck, 1987: 75). It was forbidden to use the name of the (deceased) emperor, or homophones for that name. Under the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC) for example, it is said that the First Emperor's personal name zheng lead to the same-sounding or homonymous character zheng being forbidden. Furthermore, the character jing was used to replace chu when the latter was forbidden on account of the First Emperor's father, King Zhuang (Beck, 1987: 69).4

The practice of forbidding words was not, however, restricted to the names of emperors and the use of homonyms for sensitive words could also land one in trouble. Whole sets of homonyms have been sensitive topics in China for millennia, and the accompanying censorship practices have been known to academics in the Anglophone world for decades at least. As an example we may mention one 1935 article, which argues that literary persecution was especially cruel during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 AD) (Ku Chieh-Kang, 1938 [1935]: 254), and describes the effect it had on those at the time who expressed themselves in public debate:

under the circumstances they could do nothing but resort to veiled satire. This being the situation, their words and writings were spied on and scrutinized; if they did not use every care they suffered the severest punishments (Ku Chieh-Kang, 1938 [1935]: 254).

But, the author continues, although the Qing were the worst offenders, similar

4 There are several convenient listings of taboo characters of various periods (Wang Yankun, 2009).
practices of harsh censorship had taken place since the Qin (221-206 BC) and Han (202 BC – 220 AD), the first two dynasties of what is typically considered imperial China. The article goes on to list numerous death sentences during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), occasioned by the "homophonic nature of certain words employed" (1938 [1935]: 262).

There is still scholarly debate over what precise characters were forbidden during what precise period and according to what precise logic. However, it is clear that texts, even private letters, that violated such taboos risked destruction, and the authors of such pieces risked fines, demotion, imprisonment or death (Beck, 1987: 71; Ku Chieh-Kang, 1938 [1935]: 254-5; Durand, 1992). This debate, moreover, only goes to underline further the prevalent institutionalisation and importance of forbidding words as an intimate part of political and governmental power.

Similarly, a way in which the Qing rulers attempted to control information flows at the micro-level was through blocking specific words and categories of content. For example, when overseas Chinese in 1899 sent telegrams protesting the attempt by Empress Dowager Cixi to dethrone Emperor Guangxu, the ITA refused to accept these. In the following year, again, it was reported that Cixi's actions led to waves of telegrams of protest, after the first of which the STA was instructed by Beijing to cease the sending and receiving of telegrams with such protesting content. When efforts to send protests were directed via actors abroad, the ITA refused to deliver them within China. This practice of the ITA to instruct its local branches to block specific words or kinds of messages from being sent or received continued until the fall of the Qing (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 72).

Finally, the specific words and formulations that can be used in the various media has been strictly controlled at the micro-level of individual texts throughout the lifespan of the PRC. As in many other places, personal communications across national boundaries were also closely monitored and censored – for years, international calls were monitored and letters going to or coming from overseas were opened and scrutinised (Becker, 2000: 198). This control has also taken the
form of micro-managing the expressions used in texts – indeed, detailed scholarly accounts exist about the specifics of this micro-management, from Mao’s China until contemporary times (see Schoenhals, 1992: for an example of the former and Vuori, 2011: for an example of the former as well as the latter). Today, various levels of the PRC government regularly give directives of topics and specific expressions that are not to be "hyped" or even mentioned by regular media. Where one formulation is considered inappropriate, the directives may sometimes demand it be completely banned, sometimes suggest the appropriate formulation, or euphemism, that must be used in its place.5

On the micro-level, a form of Internet censorship that is of particular interest to the discussion here is the ISP-enforced blacklisting of specific words or phrases (Fallow, 2008). As indicated above, one form of Internet blockage happens behind the GFW, where individual blog posts are removed and specific accounts are blocked on Sina Weibo (a popular microblogging website similar to Facebook or Twitter, in use by more than a third of China’s Internet users. Rapoza, 2011), or whole websites are shut down on a regular basis. A key censorship mechanism at work on the Internet can be said to take the form of self-censorship by the owners or managers of webpages, in order not to be shut down. There is also most likely a government practice of directly deleting posts, but as Simon Shen points out, this is near impossible to prove unless admitted by the state or authors (Shen, 2007: 35).

Behind the GFW and throughout China, in the everyday life of the younger online generation, Internet censorship is pervasive. Censorship programmes scan the Internet for what at any particular point in time is considered inappropriate content, and can immediately delete a post that contains a designated "sensitive word". Search engines like Baidu block specific words as unsearchable, resulting only in an error message. Thousands of Chinese characters are believed to be subject to this form of censorship. Some characters are permanently placed on lists of censored words, whereas others are added or taken off in conjunction with the rise and fall of different issues on the (political) agenda. For example, in

5 A portion of these directives are regularly leaked and published by China Digital Times.
October 2011, as the "Occupy Wall Street" movement went global, it was reported that a long list of keywords containing the Chinese term for "occupy" (zhanling), followed by place names of provincial capitals, developed regions and symbolic local areas, were blocked on Sina Weibo (Hernandez, 2011). The level of specificity of censored words also varies. For example, China Digital Times reported that as of 10 April 2013 newly censored search terms on Sina Weibo included “Masanjia Women’s Labor Re-education Camp” (masanjia nuzi laojiaosuo) as well as various homonyms of the term “chairman” (zhuxi, meaning bamboo mat, pig Xi, pig mat, lord Xi and zhu mat respectively) (Henochowicz, 2013). It is often unclear where precisely the line between acceptable and unacceptable expression is drawn at any particular moment (Breslin and Shen, 2010: 266).

Moreover, this censorship is not confined to words, but also censors pictures. Most famously, the government has promoted a piece of content-control software for Windows called the Green Dam Youth Escort (lvba huaji huhang). The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) reportedly had plans to make its installation mandatory on all new computers from July 2009, but has since postponed such imposition indefinitely (China Digital Space, 2011). According to a 2009 MIIT directive, the purpose of the software was to build a healthy and harmonious online environment that does not poison young people's minds (Bristow, 2009).

**Contemporary Chinese Internet censorship: an un-innovative practice**

The above outline of historical and contemporary censorship practices can provide but a brief sketch of historical forms of Chinese censorship. Nonetheless, this brief historical survey has been able to point towards some consistent patterns and practices of China's censorship regime. Throughout these accounts, it is indeed hard to detect any innovative aspects of Chinese censorship of the Internet.

To begin with, the patterns of censorship are the same as in the past. As with the Qing practices of information control with regards to the telegraph, contemporary Chinese Internet control takes place at the levels of infrastructure, service and
contents (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 142), or what I have called the macro-, mid- and micro-levels. At all these levels, the regime has consistently attempted to remove uncomfortable words from circulation. At the macro-level, Chinese rulers have attempted to remove whole genres of publication, from the *xiaobao* of the Northern Song to the telegraph lines of the Qing to Internet-access in Xinjiang under president Hu Jintao. The tactic has been to make certain means of communication completely unavailable, or otherwise forced to direct through government-owned and controlled "hardware." At the mid-level the government has removed specific publications from access, from ancient Chinese book-burnings to the blocking of broadcasts like the BBC to the shutting down of critical blogs. One way of doing this has been through the control of services, where the self-censorship of publishers and broadcasters has been a requirement for operation. Finally, and most importantly for the discussion in the next section, the current Chinese government has maintained the ancient Chinese practice of censoring content at the micro-level of taboo topics and forbidden words. Throughout history and at all these levels of censorship, those who challenge the censorship and (intentionally or not) violate its complicated and often vague taboos have often paid a heavy price. With regards to historical precedent, what stands out about contemporary Chinese Internet censorship is thus its remarkable level of continuity with past practices against which the party-state often wishes to distinguish itself.

Furthermore, we have seen that the ways in which the Internet is regulated in China is very similar to the way the PRC state has regulated services in other parts of Chinese society. To begin with, the type of content that the state attempts to censor is similar to that in other areas of Chinese societal politics. As Eric Harwit has argued:

> The national government had long put restrictions on such activities as the spread of pornography, gambling, and publication of 'counter revolutionary' materials. The policies the government adopted for the data network therefore mirrored the security concerns over traditional media and communications (Harwit, 2008: 95).
Furthermore, China's news, information and entertainment industries are allowed to operate on the condition that they build censorship into their business processes, a stance which has been repeated for online publication, often in the form of built-in censorship software. In this way, as Zhou Yongming states, "even though the Chinese policy makers have realized that the Internet could bring potential political changes to the regime, they do not regard it as fundamentally different from newspapers, radio, and TV" (2006: 138). The same holds for their censorship of the Internet in comparison to other media. I thus conclude with Zhou:

Besides the specific technological means used to control the Internet, the control mechanism used by the state is in essence no different from that which controls newspapers, journals, press, radios, television, and satellite TV. The control of the Internet is an integral part of a censorship system that functions to ensure that the power of the communist party is not challenged (2006: 145).

What, then, of this "besides" that marks "the specific technological means used to control the Internet" in the above passage? Could these specific means not represent an innovation by the party-state?

Any such proposition seems implausible if the origins of the censorship software are taken into consideration. The relative success of the Chinese Internet censorship regime is achievable largely by copying and borrowing from abroad. First of all, the censorship regime is possible because of the cooperation of domestic and foreign business (MacKinnon, 2007: 38-41). Software companies like Google, Yahoo and Microsoft began to cooperate with the Chinese governments' censorship fairly early on, to filter out sensitive information (Harwit, 2008: 100). According to a report by Human Rights Watch the routers of hardware companies such as Cisco, Nortel, Juniper and others have also been critical to the building of China's Internet infrastructure and censorship (Watch, 2006: 4, fn. 1). Moreover, key pieces of software that are promoted by the
government to create a harmonious online environment behind the great wall were developed outside China or accused of being copied from it. For example, the Green Dam Youth Escort mentioned above led to a court case where US software firm Cybersitter LLC, or Solid Oak Software, sued the Chinese government, two Chinese software firms and seven computer makers for illegally copying more than 3000 lines of its code. A Guardian article from the time quotes Gregory Fayer, a lawyer representing the US firm saying: "I don't think I have ever seen such clearcut stealing" (Branigan, 2010), and the suit refers to the incident as "one of the largest cases of software piracy in history" (Hachman, 2011). Cybersitter's suit also included Japanese manufacturers Sony and Toshiba, accused of distributing of the Green Dam software through computers sold in China, which again indicates the involvement of foreign companies in enabling the Chinese censorship regime.

To summarise, we can say that the introduction of the Internet and the accompanying globalisation of information flows has lead to certain change, evolution, development or even modernisation of the Chinese censorship regime, in that it has adopted new forms of censorship specific to the new digital and virtual form of communication. We cannot, however, speak of a significant Chinese innovation in this regard, since the new technologies have to a significant extent been imported or copied from abroad. Most importantly, what stands out about the Chinese regime of Internet control and online censorship is not newness. Rather, what is remarkable is its continuity with censorship of other contemporary forms of communication as well as with the practices of censorship and control by earlier Chinese regimes. Simply put, the contemporary regime of Internet control and censorship is an outstandingly un-innovative practice. Moreover, the extent to which censorship is (or was ever) effective is debatable (Whitfield, 1999: 138), and it is to this issue of evasion and resistance that I turn in the next section.

**Innovative resistance**

My argument in this chapter is that resistance to contemporary Internet censorship is significantly innovative, whereas government censorship is not.
Before I embark on making the former part of this argument, I want to make clear that it is not one of simple technological determinism. As Zhou Yongming has argued with reference to the introduction of the telegraph and the Internet in China: "it was human beings who used these technologies in creative ways and under special historical circumstances that have made modern Chinese politics more public, not the technologies alone" (2006: 9).

Of course, there are many ways in which people in China evade online censorship, some of which have clear parallels with past forms of evasion of government information control, and many of which have been well established since the early days of the Chinese Internet (for two early accounts, see Lynch, 1999; Chase and Mulvenon, 2002). For example, although the establishment by Qing authorities of the ITA was meant to force all telegrams to pass through Chinese-controlled landlines, it was relatively easy for the well-connected to send messages via foreign-owned undersea cables from Shanghai (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 71). In current parallel, the computer-savvy in today’s China use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and proxy servers located abroad to circumnavigate the GFW and access blocked sites located outside China (Harwit, 2008: 99). Similarly, when the ITA as described above refused to carry critical telegrams from abroad once they reached Chinese territory, these were nonetheless reported in newspapers, showing that critical groups and individuals found ways of getting around the censorship and the attempts to block out political information from Chinese space was often unsuccessful (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 72). This too has direct parallels in contemporary China, where political information about and criticism against issues from the 2011 high-speed train crash to the numerous contaminated milk scandals around the same time were leaked and escaped the attempts at total denial. People in China have used telephones, fax machines and satellite dishes with varying degrees of legality to "jump" the various barriers to communication set up by the government (Harwit, 2008: 99-100). Many studies of various forms of censorship throughout Chinese history point out the ultimate failure of governmental censorship regimes (Chan, 1983: 23; Wakeman Jr., 1998: 176; Chow, 2004).
As varied as the resistance to and evasion of Internet censorship is, it would be surprising if some of these practices were not un-innovative in repeating past forms of censorship evasion – indeed, some of the tactics used to circumvent government control in the past are bound to work today. However, I want to highlight in the remainder of this chapter a particular kind of contemporary online resistance to censorship at the micro-level that I argue is particularly innovative: the humorous homonyms of *egao*, and the example of the Ten Mythical Creatures.

A case of *egao* humorous homonyms: the Ten Mythical Creatures

In early 2009 a list of Ten Mythical Creatures appeared on *Baidu Baike*, a Chinese equivalent of Wikipedia that can be edited by its users. The page listed ten innocuous animals popular on the Chinese Internet. The first animal, which has become the most famous and received international attention in both academic writing and news media, was the grassmud horse (*caonima*). The characters for this animal are pronounced almost exactly the same as the common curse “fuck your mother” (*caonima*), but written with characters that look completely different. The grassmud horse is an example of a broader type of play with humorous homonyms that is part of *egao* culture and that has become hugely popular online since around 2006. The grassmud horse makes fun of the government’s censorship online, symbolically sticking up two fingers at the authorities. The grassmud horse was originally visually represented by a zebra, before taking on the comically ugly guise of an alpaca that has since become popularised and commercialised in online music videos, mockumentaries, T-shirts and toys. The grassmud horse is a good example of how creative netizens are in mocking and poking fun at the censorship regime. When pronounced it sounds like a rude insult, but who can seriously complain about a funny-looking fluffy alpaca? What is more, the homonymity of the grassmud horse simultaneously makes it function as a form of code that lets one evade online censorship. Because of this trait, if an online commentator is blocked by censorship software from writing the characters for the rude expletive “caonima”, he or she can replace the term with the similar sounding grassmud horse version of “caonima”. There are
numerous words that carry such a doubly mocking and evasive function on the Chinese Internet and a whole punning zoology has developed with the grassmud horse at its core.

In 2009 the grassmud horse was accompanied by nine other animals in the list of Mythical Creatures, most of which were puns on curse words and genitalia. There was the Dafei chicken (dafeiji), which sounds the same as slang for masturbation and is described as a strange bird that likes exercise. Another was the midge butterfly (yamiedie), described as a rare animal only found on the Tibetan plateau, and with a name derived from Japanese for “stop it” (yamete), familiar to Chinese netizens by way of imported pornography. A third was the lucky journey cat (jibamao), an animal that sounds like slang for “pubic hair” (jibamao) and is said to live in a dark, damp environment and to have flourished during the Zhengde Emperor’s reign. The list also included a chrysanthemum silkworm (juhuacan, which sounds like another insult which means something like “bugger”); the stretch-tailed whale (weishenjing, sounding like “menstrual pads”); the Qianlie crab (qianliexie, which sounds like “prostate”); the singing field goose (yindaoyan, which sounds like “vaginal infection”); the Franco-Croatian squid (fakeyou, which sounds like English “fuck you”); the puremen (change, which derives from the nickname of celebrity Li Yuchun who is famous for her androgynous appearance) and finally the stork-cat ape (guanliyuan, which pokes fun at the Baidu administrators that take part in the cat and mouse censorship practices on the site and who finally deleted the entry of the Ten Mythical Creatures).  

_Egao is innovative vis-à-vis parody and humour as resistance elsewhere_

Before going on to argue that this form of resistance by humorous homonyms is particularly innovative, it should be acknowledged that _egao_ also continues themes found in practices elsewhere. Most analysts of _egao_ culture understand it as parody, and emphasise its carnivalesque significance, a form that can be found

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6 The entry for the Ten Mythical Creatures has now been removed from Baidu, but a description of the original entry still exists in English on the blog Danwei (Martinsen, 2009), and these and other egao homonyms are collected and described in English in the China Digital Spaces’ Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon (China Digital Space, 2012). For academic commentary on the Ten Mythical Creatures, see Li Hongmei (2011: 79).
in many different cultures. For example, Meng Bingchun argues:

In terms of artistic tradition, *egao* is nothing ground-breaking. In literature, parody as a genre can be dated back to ancient Greece ... In visual art, Dadaism, Surrealism and Situationism all used innovative techniques in an attempt to attribute new meaning to existing objects or artistic expression.... In contemporary pop culture, culture jamming attempts to 'reverse and transgress the meaning of cultural codes' ... by disrupting mainstream cultural institutions and corporate advertising (Meng Bingchun, 2011: 37-8).

To Meng, *egao* continues the anti-establishment spirit and the technique of critiquing through parody that these cultural forms deployed. As such, Meng also notes how the term *egao* has been traced to the Japanese term *kuso*, meaning “damned”, “funny”, “nonsense”, “idiocy” or “farces”, terms that all emphasise the parodic side of *egao* (Meng Bingchun, 2011: 37).

Though sympathetic with Meng’s observation, I argue that there is also something significantly different about the particular Chinese form of parodic critique that is *egao*. This difference consists in the particular form of punnery that is made possible by the Chinese script and that is not possible in the alphabetic languages of the parodic forms of expression identified elsewhere. Although noted in passing by other authors, this aspect of *egao* has not been given due attention in academic analyses so far. As a consequence, although the creativity of *egao* is oft-noted, some of its profoundly innovative aspects have been underplayed. Vis-à-vis forms of parody elsewhere the humorous homonyms of *egao* that are expressed in the Ten Mythical Creatures are innovative in that they not only mock and critique, but also evade the censorship regime. In writing “grassmud horse” rather than “fuck your mother”, for example, you parody and mock the censorship regime, but you simultaneously evade its micro-level operation.

I am not claiming here that parody is new to *egao*. Nor am I claiming that evading
censorship through clever and creative tactics is something new. Indeed, one of the reasons why content-based censorship of the telegraph was not more successful was the widespread practice of coding messages. This made it very difficult for the ITA to screen messages for illicit content and block those considered unacceptable (Zhou Yongming, 2006: 72-3). Yet, the combination of humorous critique and evasion into one move seems new and different in relation to forms of parody elsewhere, and the particular form it takes is predicated on the possibility to write homonymous or near-homonymous words with completely different meanings in completely different characters, as seen in the Ten Mythical Creatures.

_Egao is innovative vis-à-vis earlier Chinese forms of satire and wordplay_

Of course, as in other parts of the world, parody and satire have also been a part of Chinese storytelling throughout history. Daria Berg has examined at length how the *Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan*, a traditional Chinese novel without known author, portrays provincial life in 17th-century China as a dystopian satire (Berg, 2002). A famous modern example is Lu Xun’s powerfully satirical short story *The True Story of Ah Q*. The 1930s and 1940s saw a wave of modern humorous satire in the work of the likes of Lao She and Qian Zhongshu (for an analysis of these two authors highlighting the aspect of satirical humour, see Mo Lijun, 2009). Johan Lagerkvist has also pointed to historian Wu Han as a precursor of egao. Wu Han used Ming dynasty characters ambiguously to mount a subtle critique of the 1940s Guomindang nationalist Party-state, and later used allegory to criticise the 1950s and 1960s Communist Party-state under Mao (Lagerkvist, 2010: 128). More recent examples include Gu Hua’s *A Small Town Called Hibiscus*, a satire of officialdom that was so sharp that a film based on the novel was held for weeks by censors before its release (Shanor and Shanor, 1995: 176).

Lagerkvist also identifies ironic avant-garde art in the 1980s as a fore-runner of egao (Lagerkvist, 2010: 151). He especially mentions Wang Keping’s 1978 wood sculpture *Idol* as an early attempt to deconstruct the personality-cult surrounding Mao (see also Jiang Jiehong, 2008: 54). The humorous art of the 1980s and 1990s
is also identified as a way of subtly critiquing recent history (see also Vine, 2008: 18). A parallel is furthermore detected by many commentators on *egao* in the posting of subversive "doorway couplets" (*menlian*) described by Patricia Thornton (Thornton, 2002: 662; see Lagerkvist, 2010: 155 for the connection to humorous homonyms online). To such examples of Chinese precedents to the parodic, satirical or ambiguous artistic form of *egao* we can add the literary practice of recycling textual fragments from one genre to another, such as letting non-fiction material appear in novels to produce ironic, humorous or subversive effects (for example Shang Wei, 2003: 193-4 documents this practice in the late Ming).

*Egao*, as form, is innovative vis-à-vis these Chinese ironic and satirical forms in the same way that it is so in relation to parody elsewhere – it combines critique and evasion of censorship in a way that prior forms did not. What is more, it is innovative in relation to similar puns and language play in Chinese history, because its articulation in the online context of *virtual* censorship makes for new forms of deployment. Meng has referred to *egao* as a new form of speech enabled by digital technology and communication networks (Meng Bingchun, 2011: 48). She moreover argues that "egao is distinct from other popular discourses in the analogue era in its direct appropriation of official media content" (Meng Bingchun, 2011: 48). Certainly, but I would also like to re-emphasise the efficiency of *egao* as a response to the censorship regime. The fluid adoption of online memes means that governmental censorship software is always playing catch-up with the evasion of its pre-programmed censorship, and even highly computer-literate human censors can struggle to keep up with innovative memes (or choose not to) (Garafola, 2010). Finally, this is not to say that *egao* is unequivocally "good" or that it will end Chinese online censorship. Like any language game, it includes certain subject positions and excludes others. That is to say, it is political. As such, it should be a welcome addition on the Chinese Internet.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has contrasted the un-innovative tools of the Chinese online censorship regime with the creative, humorous and innovative ways in which it is
being negotiated and resisted online. To some extent this discussion has been polemic – innovation is rarely if ever a question of either/or, presence/absence, but it is in the nature of the innovative/uninnovative to be neither one nor the other, yet simultaneously both. Indeed, the grounding in something already established can be said to be that which differentiates innovation from a pure invention of the completely new, the uninventable or impossible (Wortham, 2010: 77-8; Derrida, 2007). Nonetheless, discussing online censorship and resistance to it in terms of innovation can enable us to observe levels or degrees of innovation, where the former is marked by its low level of innovation and the latter stands out as distinctly innovative.

The wave of innovation discussed in this chapter is brought about by the globalisation of information and the government’s efforts to curb it. It can be said that globalisation, or increasing contact with and information flows from the outside world, has been met with censorship at various points in Chinese history. The current Internet censorship regime shows that this is certainly the case today. What is more, however, evidence of resistance to such censorship can be traced far back in Chinese history and may well be considered a force supportive of increasing globalisation and flows of information.

Furthermore, through this processes of Chinese innovation, competing Chinas are being innovated. On the one hand the regime is working for a sanitised and regulated China, on the other its netizens are responding to such sanitization with dirty humour and evasion. Where the regime is working increasingly hard for a censored version of China, netizens are innovating ways to slip through that censorship and to mockingly display its evasion. The cat and mouse game between the competing versions of China continues online, and has spread offline around the globe through redeployment of its Internet memes in offline art (Hung, 2011), through news reporting (Shang Qing, 2009) and through academic discussions like this one.

We have thus seen that the Chinese online censorship regime is marked by the continuation of censorship practices in other times and other media, rather than
by innovation and creativity. Where there has been change to the already
established censorship regime it has consisted largely in buying and copying
technologies invented elsewhere, as opposed to the indigenous innovation that
the regime has tried to promote in recent years. By contrast, what is clear from
previous scholarship and from the brief engagement with the Ten Mythical
Creatures here is that online resistance in the form of egao is marked by creativity
and innovation. Although parallels can be made to parody in other times and
places, as something already existing, egao culture has creatively transformed this
form into something distinctly new. It combines its mockery of authority and
censorship with the evasion thereof. In doing so, it is not only artistically creative,
it is also innovative in terms of form and function. The double function of egao
wordplay is arguably innovative and its particular form of punnery is definitely a
Chinese innovation, intimately tied to the potential inherent in Chinese language
and script. This distinguishes it as a form of “indigenous innovation” from the
copying, catching up or socialisation that one may otherwise have expected under
globalisation. A focus on innovation can therefore help us better understand the
real newness of egao as cultural form and as a tactic of resistance. It also helps us
see the extent to which Chinese netizens are innovative in their negotiation of
global influences, where the censorship regime is largely not.

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Abstract: While the promotion of ‘harmony’ (和谐) in Chinese official discourse is widely regarded as a feature of state propaganda and censorship, scarce attention has been paid to the reception and redeployment of such language among Chinese citizens. The often creative and ironic reappropriation of official language in everyday speech practices, both on the Internet and in conversations with peers, is an important aspect of Chinese language/politics and deserves careful examination. Much of the current work has regarded these discursive practices in terms of a resistance to ‘harmonization’ or, following a Bakhtinian reading, as ‘carnival’. We argue that such approaches do not fully take into consideration actors’ actual experience of consuming and producing such language play. Based on semi-structured interviews with Chinese university students conducted in 2009-2011, this article shifts away from the dominant assumptions about the role of ironic reiterations of official language, in order to highlight how the presumed repoliticization of these linguistic practices also involves a depoliticization, reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of the relationships they negotiate.

Keywords: political discourse, egao, censorship, harmony (hexie), online resistance

In post-reform China, standardized Party language remains an important aspect of the regime’s propaganda, albeit incomparable to the ‘linguistic engineering’ of the Mao years.¹ During the Mao period, the Party’s efforts to instil Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought entailed a thorough systematization of political language.² Language reached an unprecedented level of uniformity, visible in official written productions and political speech. As ideology was thought to
yield ‘action consequences’,3 Maoist rhetoric also pervaded everyday life.4 In today’s China, since the relative erosion of ideological uniformity, political language appears to be a less systematized set of ideas, articulating varied influences. Emphasis put on ‘harmony’ (和谐) and its reference to Confucianism illustrate these changes in the making of official discourse. This Chinese ‘Newspeak’ (提法)5 relies on an interplay between positive processes – the diffusion of new slogans or terms endowed with new meanings – and negative practices, namely, the censorship work restricting the use of words at different levels, be it a priori or a posteriori.6 Students of political slogans in China have emphasized the role of Party language ‘in remolding the Chinese mind and facilitating ideological change’,7 thus depicting an image of individuals as passive and compliant recipients. Our analysis of the re-appropriation of Party language by ordinary young people somewhat contradicts, or at least moderates, such representations. The famous homonymic transformation of harmony (hexie 和谐) into river crab (hexie 河蟹) offers a significant illustration of such a process.

The set phrase ‘harmonious society’ (和谐社会) has received considerable attention in scholarly debate since its emergence in 2005 under the former Chinese president Hu Jintao.8 Under this slogan, Hu announced that Beijing needed to focus on ‘further strengthening and improving management of the Internet, improving the standard of management of virtual society, and establishing mechanisms to guide online public opinion’.9 In the everyday life of the younger online generation, Internet censorship is pervasive. It ranges from layers of blocks that have become collectively known as the Great Firewall to censorship at the level of words. Online community administrators are responsible for maintaining filtering systems that block certain sensitive words, but it is often unclear where the line between acceptable and unacceptable words is drawn.10 Some characters are always censored, for example, most sites will permanently block words such as ‘Falun Gong’ (法轮功), ‘June 4th’ (六四) and ‘Jiangzemin’ (江泽民).11 Others are added or taken off in conjunction with the rise and fall of different issues on the agenda, political or otherwise. For example, during the Jasmine Revolutions in 2011, the word ‘jasmine’ (茉莉花) was blocked on SinaWeibo.12 Around 2007, those on the receiving end of this ‘harmonization’
popularized a new linguistic form of negotiation to deal with censorship; the term ‘being harmonized’ (被和谐) indicates that someone has been censored online, by the processes just described.

Little attention has been paid to date to such instances of reception and redeployment of Party language among Chinese citizens. It is important to consider this reception and redeployment of slogans such as harmonious society as they are revealing of actors’ relationships to imposed official discourse. In this article, we therefore explore some of the ways in which contemporary Chinese university youths have responded to online harmonization. After explaining our research design, we analyse informants’ own thoughts and feelings about being harmonized, and we outline two principal ways in which informants have acted on these feelings. In some instances, harmonization leads to resignation and compliance. In others, students have reacted creatively through forms of expression that have typically been understood as a mode of resistance. We pay particular attention to such expression in the form of humorous homonyms, as part of the satirical critique that has become known as egao (恶搞).

Although previous commentary on egao is varied and sophisticated, most scholarly analyses of this phenomenon have regarded it in terms of resistance and Bakhtinian ‘carnival’ in a ‘free and unrestricted’ quasi-separate space. Such approaches, we argue, need to be further nuanced by taking into consideration the actual experience of consuming and producing egao. We begin to do so by examining the experience of young Chinese who are not explicitly involved in online activism. Based on our interviews with those who deploy these tactics, we contend that their presumed repoliticization also involves a depoliticization, reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of the relationships they negotiate.

**Being harmonized and resisting harmonization: previous research and a new approach**

In this article we pay particular attention to censorship at the level of words, and so we focus on the response found at the level of negotiating that particular form of harmonization. One response that has led to considerable excitement in the academic community is the ironic wordplay popularly called egao. Egao is a form
of online culture that has grown popular and received international attention since 2006. It uses dark humour, irony and satire, often to mock and ridicule power holders. A significant part of this culture draws on puns and wordplay to simultaneously mock and escape the censorship regime. This practice has almost universally been understood as a form of resistance, contestation or subversion.  

Among the literature that engages more thoroughly with the phenomenon, resistance is typically understood as rooted in the oft-noted discrepancy between official Party-state language (which includes set phrases such as harmonious society) and an ‘alternative political discourse’ or ‘hidden transcript’ (which may include expressions such as being harmonized). Meng Bingchun characterizes egao and its associated wordplay in terms of a ‘virtual carnival’, which represents a ‘collective attempt at resistance’. In the few texts that have theorized the egao phenomenon, this particular line of thought has been remarkably dominant. The approach is based on Bakhtin’s understanding of the carnival – a wild and grotesque time and space in medieval and renaissance Europe. One volume edited by David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt goes as far as to characterize Chinese cyberspace as a quasi-separate space of the carnival-esque. 

To Bakhtin and a number of his followers, the carnival is an event in a time and space set apart from normal constraints, where rules are suspended. It is a second life that is free and unrestricted, the antithesis of normal life. In Herold and Marolt’s volume, Li Hongmei reads the space of egao as carnival, a space that marks ‘the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions’, where ‘power relationships can be temporarily suspended’. Tang Lijun and Syamantak Bhattacharya have similarly understood egao in terms of carnival, but simultaneously take it to reflect a ‘widespread feeling of powerlessness, rather than offering the general public any political power’, which nonetheless ‘helps to push the symbolic power of satire to a higher level’. They read in egao ‘the potential to generate a chain of related satirical work, which can create a satire movement and subject power to sustained shame and ridicule’. The analyses of egao that draw on Bakhtin thus also conceive of the phenomenon as a form of resistance to the ‘official’ or ‘established’ order. They repeatedly refer to George Orwell’s claim that ‘every joke is a tiny revolution’.

Taken together, these studies of egao have contributed a wealth of
examples of online wordplay, which has almost unanimously been rendered as a
form of or attempt at resistance. These interpretations are based on various
sources and examples, but predominantly draw on data from those who are highly
pro-active in making elaborate spoofs,\textsuperscript{29} or those who work very actively with
online censorship.\textsuperscript{30}

However, this type of wordplay is also deployed by ordinary young people in
China on a less spectacular everyday basis. Being censored online, or being
harmonized, has become a common experience of young Chinese – both those
who claim an explicit interest in politics and are frequently engaged in online
activity, and those who emphasize their indifference toward politics and do not
seek to express political viewpoints online. Their deployment of wordplay are part
of the egao phenomenon as well as the negotiation of meaning of the official
terms from which they derive. Yet, the Bakhtinian reading of egao as carnival
proves itself insufficient in light of the actual experience of these young people.
Indeed, while carnival entails masked identities, the use of the Internet in China is
categorized by the impossibility of anonymity. For university students who
mostly live inside their campus, Internet access is provided by the establishment,
thus rendering students’ online activities traceable. Nonetheless, there are no prior
studies that to our knowledge convey the way young people experience being
harmonized online and negotiating harmonization at the level of language in such
a non-anonymous context. This is the gap that we begin to fill by way of this
article.

In academic literature that largely conveys egao as carnival and resistance,
one commentator has remained decidedly sceptical. With regard to this
phenomenon Johan Lagerkvist asks, ‘Is it a \textit{weapon of the weak}, or is it a rather
feeble expression among well-heeled and largely apolitical urban youth?’\textsuperscript{31}
Lagerkvist is inclined towards the latter interpretation. He describes egao as
‘[p]ermeated with irony and an ambivalence that occasionally resembles, or
indeed is, resistance’, but is sceptical about this resistance because to him ‘[t]he
crux of the matter is only what larger influence you have on politics, if that is at all
desired, if your critique is too subtle’.\textsuperscript{32} As such, we must not be satisfied with
simply taking irony as intrinsically subversive or aligned with a radical politics.\textsuperscript{33}
Lagerkvist concludes:
Instead of viewing the *egao* phenomenon as politically subversive, at least in the short term, it may make more sense to view it as the growth of an alternate civility, more indicative of social and generational change, building up ever more pressure against the political system – in the long term.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus, from this perspective, it makes more sense to understand irony in China as a way for various societal groups to vent their anger in a non-revolutionary manner, at least in the shorter term. It is ‘neither performed to be, nor perceived as, a direct threat against the Party-state’.\textsuperscript{35}

In this article, we address Lagerkvist’s query about the meaning and significance of *egao* wordplay, questioning the overwhelmingly common interpretation of *egao* as carnivalistic resistance. Lagerkvist’s point that irony is not by definition a form of resistance is well taken. Nonetheless, this proves nothing about what it does mean, but simply leaves the question open. Do young people experience their online wordplay as free and unrestricted, marking the ‘suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions’ à la Bakhtin? Do they indicate that they understand the Internet as a space where rules are suspended? If not, does this necessarily mean that *egao* does not offer the general public any political power? Most commentary on *egao* sees in it both potential and limitations for politics, but how do those who engage in such wordplay on a daily basis perceive it?

Responding to being harmonized: a question of de- and repoliticization?

Although the question of politics and the political seems to underpin previous interpretations of *egao*, the implications of this question have been given surprisingly little explicit attention in these accounts. Tang and Bhattacharya juxtapose a feeling of powerlessness with the general public having any political power. Lagerkvist questions whether *egao* is a ‘weapon of the weak’ or a ‘feeble expression among the well-heeled and largely apolitical urban youth’. However, just as it seems simplistic to read any form of laughter as a revolution, so too does
it seem restrictive not to acknowledge anything but a mass movement as political.

Scholarship on the question of the distinction between politics and the political can provide some clarity here. This scholarship notes that modern political theory tends to treat politics as a kind of synonym for the state, its institutions and its activities. Thus, politics is taken to indicate a concern with deliberative social life mediated through institutions such as government, policy formation, and diplomacy. From this perspective, an issue is politicized when it moves from being outside the orbit of the state, and becomes a matter of public debate and decision. Correspondingly, an issue is depoliticized when it is considered to have moved into the private realm (and thus outside of the immediate public concern). The contrast between politics and the political suggests a wider view of this process. Instead of accepting the realm of politics as a given, this contrast suggests that there is a prior move to establish or select what counts as politics in the first place. In other words, politics and the non-political are not givens, but are constructed or created in some sense.\(^{36}\)

Jenny Edkins has described the political as being concerned with ‘the establishment of that very social order which sets out a particular, historically specific account of what counts as politics and defines other areas of social life as not politics’;\(^{37}\) If this perspective is adopted, the terms politicization and depoliticization take on an alternative meaning. From the perspective of the political, when established politics depoliticizes an issue it is, in effect, reinforcing a prior decision about what counts as politics in the first place. Therefore, from the perspective of the political, moves that simply label (and exclude) activities as ‘not politics’ are depoliticizing moves. They treat their object as the subject of formula or calculation – a decision on its status has already been made, and now the matter is merely one of implementation. Following the same logic, when an issue becomes incorporated in public policy and is a question of simple implementation, this is a depoliticizing move.\(^{38}\) A politicizing move, by contrast, would suggest a questioning of the accepted borders and categories of established politics. To repoliticize an issue in such a way would be ‘to interrupt discourse, to challenge what have, through discursive practices, been constituted as normal, natural, and accepted ways of carrying on’.\(^{39}\)

Thus, when Lagerkvist evaluates *egao* according to what larger influence it
has on politics, he appears to be referring to what we here call politics as opposed to the political. Tang and Bhattacharya similarly seem concerned with politics in the narrow sense when they judge the success of egao on its potential to ‘create a satire movement’. These accounts, then, are in themselves depoliticizing (in Edkins’s sense of the term), in dismissing egao as not political unless it can achieve some movement or influence with regard to politics (in the narrow sense).

In our interviews as well as in informal conversations, young Chinese people frequently mention their indifference to politics. In their view, politics refers to institutionalized politics and official language, as conveyed through political education classes which according to many are boring or uninteresting. Such a conception of politics is rendered visible by their oft-made distinction between the social and the political, as some claim to be rather interested in social issues. On the basis of the purported ‘disinterest’ of Chinese youth in politics, should we conclude that their use of irony and satire in language is devoid of any political significance? In the Chinese context, politicization of ordinary citizens’ practices – in the concept’s most traditional sense, with regard to institutionalized politics – can hardly occur. The realm of politics remains largely constrained by the state, and actors seldom label their own practices as politically oriented. For such reasons, and with analyses of authoritarianism emphasizing popular political apathy and depoliticization, we take Edkins’s view of politicization (as a process unfolding in the realm of the political rather than in politics) to highlight actors’ dissociation vis-a-vis institutionalized politics without denying their political significance. Accordingly, in what follows, we re-open the question of the political. Although some of China’s young claim to be disinterested in politics, and despite some commentators calling them apolitical, can an opening to the political be read in the way youth negotiate online censorship?

Method and sources

Because we are interested in students’ views and perceptions at the level of the political in the wider sense of the term, we seek to understand these experiences
through the way they are conveyed at the level of language. Therefore, we make no claim about the way some subjects truly feel about being harmonized, but rather about the way language functions in the negotiation of censorship, and the way our informants claim to feel about their experience.

In the Introduction to Herold and Marolt’s volume discussed earlier, the Internet is posited as a quasi-separate sphere and criticism is levied on studies that ‘attempt to locate the Internet within offline society ... which is less than helpful if the goal is to understand what is happening in online China’. Although we do not claim that the online sphere is located in offline China, we nonetheless question the inside/outside distinction that Herold’s separate spheres imply. In the interviews that form the basis of this article, we found a great overlap between the lives that our young informants live online and offline. As we will show, the wordplay they deployed online often appeared in offline interaction with peers, and so we study them here as one linguistic field. Granted that censorship works differently on- and offline, yet the a priori separation of the two seems conducive to little but foregone conclusions.

This article is based on 41 semi-structured interviews with Chinese students from different universities in Beijing. The focus on harmonization emerged inductively, after a first series of 36 interviews was carried out between December 2009 and March 2010 as part of a qualitative investigation of the political attitudes and behaviours of Beijing university students. Of the original 36 respondents, 17 were contacted through student public discussion groups on the Douban website. Some of the remaining 19 students were encountered during participant observation of student spare-time activities, others with the help of prior informants. Five complementary interviews were conducted in November and December 2011 with students who, according to a former respondent, had the experience that was relevant for this research.

Despite coming from a variety of backgrounds, the informants interviewed were not representative of Chinese people or society at large, nor should their experience be generalizable to other young Chinese people. Most immediately, our sample included only young people born between 1980 and 1993, who studied at universities in Beijing and thus belonged to a privileged class in China. Some 24 per cent were members of the CCP; 61 per cent were male, 39 per cent
were female. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and all translations are our own.

**Being harmonized and resisting harmonization: The experience of Chinese students**

‘Treating the symptoms, but not treating the cause’ (治标不治本): feelings about being harmonized online

Being harmonized online emerged as a common experience of informants. When asked about the interference of power in their daily lives, informants rarely described specific instances other than censorship impinging upon the way they expressed themselves on the Internet. For example, one student felt that it was hard to ‘express oneself freely ... like on the Internet’ and recounted with a laugh how she was once ‘harmonized’ for posting the phrase harmonious society. Although this example shows that the informant connected being harmonized to freedom of expression per se, criticism from our informants focused on the excessive nature of contemporary censorship. The use of expressions such as *guo le* (过了), *guofen* (过分), *guoyan* (过严) or *zuo guo tou* (做过头), in which the character *guo* (过) refers to the transgression of a limit, indicates that censorship was not necessarily rejected as such, but became an object of criticism when perceived as excessive.

Whereas the acceptable limit of censorship remained abstract and elusive, what was regarded as illegitimate throughout informants’ accounts was the absence of reasons for the impossibility of posting words that were censored at a given instance. For example, one student who was harmonized after posting some pictures by the artist Ai Weiwei emphasized that these photographs were harmless. When another informant was asked about his experience of being harmonized as he was trying to post a comment on the movie *Avatar*, he told us, “I felt anger, why doesn’t it let me post?” In like manner, another student asserted “This censorship is unnecessary.”
To one informant, censorship was nonsensical or inexplicable:

The first time I was harmonized, it was very unpleasant! Because of this nonsense! How can there be such a reason? Can there really be this sort of reasoning? That is to say, this bunch of people are unreasonable.

The practice of censorship was thus regarded throughout the interviews as either being based on some incomprehensible reason or simply as having no reasonable basis at all.

Moreover, informants' experiences of harmonization entailed an emotional dimension conveyed by words connotating physical or psychological discomfort. Some students described their feelings of anger in the face of censorship. Some found the experience unpleasant or referred to their feelings in terms of pain.

At the same time, the informant mentioned earlier, who commented on the unpleasantness of his first experience of being harmonized, added that this behaviour on the part of the government was very comical. He found censorship ridiculous, since it could not eradicate the people's will to express themselves, and that censorship merely 'treated the symptoms, but not the cause'. Such references to harmonization as something funny were echoed by other students:

It's mostly that it's a little funny. I might have had the feeling that it's a little bit absurd ... even though we do not have free expression ... but perhaps I wasn't particularly angry or whatever, but I felt that it was unbelievable.

Although explaining the students' feelings in the face of harmonization from a subjective viewpoint is beyond the scope of this article, we can nonetheless endeavour to interpret them in light of the context in which they are embedded. These feelings and perceptions arising from the experience of being harmonized can be attributed to the particular configuration in contemporary China, where the boundaries between what can and cannot be said are blurred by a growing space for expression. We could assume that in the eyes of university students who are not particularly involved in any form of activism, the scarcity of perceivable
forms of control and direct coercion in everyday life renders any visible interference of power unexpected and even more salient. As they are experienced constraints thus arouse disgruntlement, whether in the form of anger or feelings of bitterness. Moreover, in a context where educated youths have not only been kept at a distance from politics by the authoritarian regime but also seem to have both internalized and contributed to the stereotype that youth today are pragmatic and uninterested in political change, being harmonized might appear somewhat inexplicable, or, in the students' own words, 'ridiculous' and 'absurd'. In their view, since expression online (and sometimes offline) will seemingly not have any influence on the political system, why should harmonization be so severe?

'I erased little by little': disgruntled compliance with harmonization

A first form of reaction in the face of harmonization is disgruntled compliance, by which we mean that young people simply stop trying to write about sensitive issues or stop using sensitive words. While certain combinations of Chinese characters are known to be permanently forbidden, the list of 'sensitive words' was thought to be changeable and unpredictable. For instance, one informant told us that during the Jasmine Revolutions, in order to prevent activists from organizing gatherings, the characters for 'tomorrow' became a sensitive word. Therefore, informants sometimes attempted to identify and change or delete the words that prevented a particular post from crossing the technico-linguistic barrier of keyword censorship.

Although the sensitivity of some expressions is widely known, the uncertainty surrounding other words has induced young people to make repeated attempts at uploading a particular post. One informant explained that he sometimes had to make a few tests in order to determine which words prevented him from posting a message. The informant who was harmonized when trying to post on the film Avatar provided us with details of these trials:

I wrote ... a little comment, and ... combined [several issues] together ... China and demolition of houses and land requisition. I posted it, but the
first time it couldn’t be posted. Then I checked it once again and couldn’t find any words that I thought were sensitive. Then I erased a lot of what looked like possibly sensitive words, erased or changed them, then finally, finally it was posted.

Another student described his exasperation when confronted by numerous, unknown sensitive keywords that are blocked at a given instance:

For example we’re chatting ... chatting turns to the Xinhai Revolution, then there are keywords that you can’t post, let me think, isn’t ... ‘Li Dazhao’ a keyword? I change Li Dazhao into pinyin, then, posting it is still not possible, then let’s think ... isn’t ‘Xinhai’ a keyword? Or is the character for ‘Party’ a keyword? Or is ‘Sun Zhongshan’ a keyword? Then after changing [these words], how come I still discover that I still can’t post?! It’s inexplicable. So, I don’t know how many keywords there are in the end, and [in China] keywords are in fact often changing.

The same student then continued to explain the laborious process of trying to find what word was blocking the message he was trying to post. His tactic was to take a blocked article or message and erase one word at a time to find out which one(s) was/were the blocked keyword(s):

For example, if a message couldn’t be posted after erasing some sentences that meant the keyword was still in the text. I erased little by little [in order to find] this keyword So, after having erased parts and managing to post it, apparently [the word] was ‘freedom’. It was [because of] this one, this keyword, [that my message] couldn’t be posted.

Circumventing what appears to be an excessive blocking of ‘innocent’ posts is a laborious, time-consuming process and a nuisance. One informant said that he ‘spent such a long time to send so little’. Another student who told us that he once had to write into pinyin several characters related to Tiananmen added, ‘This is very annoying!’ Despite or because of obstacles and the near impossibility of
posting a comment, the painstaking procedure as described was sometimes thought to be 'not so necessary' or 'unnecessary', as were other ways such as breaching the Great Firewall by using virtual private networks or proxy servers.

Informants mostly gave what they called 'pragmatic reasons' to justify their compliance with censorship. Some informants told us that their response could be attributed to apathy, feeling tired or lazy. Some said that they did not have such a strong desire or a strong political consciousness to circumvent censorship, and that one eventually became accustomed to censorship. Another purported reason for apparent compliance was concerns about potential sanction. Given the aforementioned absence of anonymity online, having one's online activities discovered can result in an interview with the university's administration which sometimes also alerts the student's parents. While sanctions may not always carry severe consequences, they remain a form of social sanction – students who transgress norms are singled out and their online activities might be deemed improper given the social role expected of them by the university as well as their family. Perhaps more important than the fear of retaliation is the political indifference of peers, which informants described as apathetic and which also influenced their own behavior. The expression meibanfa (没办法) was frequently used, meaning that there is nothing that can be done, or no way out, not specifically referring to censorship, but about changing authoritarian rule.

'Ve can only walk the side-road': circumvention of harmonization

If a first reaction to censorship is disgruntled compliance, a second form of reaction in the face of harmonization is to find ways of sidestepping the hurdles that stand in the way. Some informants used metaphors and humorous puns as an alternative:

Because the government doesn’t let us walk on this road. We can’t write normal words, there are so many sensitive words that we can’t write, we can only change them, turn them into other words. We don’t have the main road, we only walk on the side-road.
The same imagery was used by another informant who stated that ‘everyone is taking another path’.

Rather than give up on trying to tread a forbidden path, these young people find ways of walking on a ‘side-road’. Among the various means employed to avoid censorship, our informants mentioned the transcription of ‘sensitive words’ into pinyin or non-simplified Chinese characters, or the addition of symbols such as an asterisk between each character and/or component of these words. Another tactic mentioned, to which we now turn, was the re-appropriation of Party-state language and creation of humorous homonyms. In particular, informants described how they made use of alternative words that in humorous ways expressed what they meant to say and that simultaneously mocked the Party-state and its efforts at harmonization. These words are the ‘hidden transcript’ of which other scholars have written.46

Some of these characters are chosen because of their homophony with ‘sensitive words’. One of the most famous examples is river crab, which has become a substitute for the similarly pronounced harmony. In another combination, one informant adopted the pseudonym ‘harmonious shoe trademark’ (hexiepai 和鞋牌) on the Douban website. Other instances of these substitutions are the Great Cultural Revolution (文化大革命) changed into Mosquito Flower Hiccup Mandate (蚊花打嗝命), or the Communist Party (共产党) turned into Provide Shovel Party (供铲党). Besides the use of homonyms, some words or famous people’s names are replaced by other terms. For example, carrot (胡萝卜) has become a sobriquet for Hu Jintao because of the character hu (胡). 35th May (五月三十五号) was sometimes used to refer to the utmost sensitive 4th June (六四).

Moreover, these linguistic practices are redeployed not only online but also in offline interaction with peers. The most common illustration of this phenomenon has been the numerous references to harmony in everyday language among young people. One instance of such use was described as follows:

A: In your opinion, this word, harmony, is not only an official expression?
B: In fact, in the beginning before the government used this word, this
word was a good word... Now when everyone says harmony, there's a little bit of a humorous, joking feeling [about it].

A: And when you use it?
B: Um, yes! (*laughter*)
A: How do you use it?
B: For instance, 'being harmonized'!

Another example of such offline deployment of online memes is the increasing use of our Party (我党) especially by non-Party members.

A: That is, the meeting that our Party recently held, to reinforce this reform of the cultural system.
B: I want to ask you something else, why do you say our Party?
A: Our Party? It's a mocking way of speaking. Our Party, sometimes you can say your Party (贵党) when you're with Party members. Non-Party members say 'your Party recently this and that', yes! (*laughter*). So when we non-Party members say it, we use it mockingly.

As in these quotes, informants described their and others' use of Party language as a form of mockery levelled at both censorship and the government.

What is clear from this section is that at least some young Chinese students make use of *egao*-style tactics to negotiate censorship and being harmonized. The fact that students described *egao* as a form of mockery may be revealing of how they disengage from *egao*'s potentially radical side. Such a radical deployment would be aimed at a broader level of politics, rather than the micro context in which their linguistic practices have direct roots – that is, their online expression and interaction with peers. Both the actors' social role implying limited capacities for action and, again, the complex and somewhat paradoxical interplay between (relative) openness and pervasive control specific to the Chinese authoritarian context reduce the likelihood that some young Chinese would think of *egao* as more than mockery. Given the limited scope of these humorous forms of expression, should we conclude that no political significance derives from these ordinary deployments of *egao*?
Humorous homonyms: repoliticizing or depoliticizing harmonious society?

Having examined the accounts given by informants, it is time to return to the scholarly claims about egao and its significance that were outlined at the outset of this article. How did our informants’ own conceptions of their online wordplay compare to the significance assigned to it by scholarship? Did they conceive their use of these homonyms, and the larger egao culture of which it is part, as a form of carnivalistic resistance, as a mark of their apolitical status? Most importantly, recalling our distinction between politics and the political, should we understand this as a form of de- or re-politicization?

We found no indication that our informants viewed the Internet and its world of egao as a ‘free and unrestricted’ space. On the contrary, in their accounts they singled out the sphere of online censorship as a stark example of government interference in their daily lives. Informants described their practices as a way to circumvent constraints, not abolish them. Furthermore, if the online world marks some change in ‘normal’ prohibitions, it is not perceived as one where ‘all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions’ are suspended. It is precisely the absence of clear rules or reasons in online censorship that makes navigation frustrating and painful – and that enables the relatively smooth continuation of the offline hierarchy between authorities and informants to perpetuate online.

Moreover, this shows that informants did not conceptualize their online experience as a ‘quasi-separate sphere’. Their accounts show how online memes are also used in everyday speech offline. What is more, the restriction on expression online was not conveyed as ‘the antithesis of normal life’, but rather as a continuation of the same by other means. Having said this, there is a nuance to this online–offline relationship. On some occasions, informants who claimed an interest in politics used the Internet to express themselves or share articles, and indicated that it was difficult to talk about what they considered to be politics with a majority of their offline peers, who were thought to be apolitical or indifferent to politics. In such cases, the Internet could provide access to those with a similar interest in politics.
What about the claim that *egao* should be understood as a 'collective attempt at resistance'?\textsuperscript{51} One informant explicitly rejected the idea that *egao* and its associated wordplay constituted a form of resistance:

I feel that it doesn't count as resistance. Because, first, it [the government] really doesn't know, right? ... for example, you oppose someone, then you have to let him know ... [then it’s] resistance, but our government also knows that everyone is opposing it, so this is not about resistance or non-resistance, the government still has the cheek to stay in power.

Thus, the 'hidden transcripts' do not count as resistance to this informant, precisely because of their hidden nature. This, then, echoes Lagerkvist's scepticism about 'what larger influence you have on politics ... if your critique is too subtle'.\textsuperscript{52} The laughter, here, is not perceived as a 'revolution' (as it is to Orwell and those who cite him in these debates).

The same informant, like Lagerkvist, was of the view that *egao* is best understood as a way of venting anger, as opposed to offering the public any political power: \textsuperscript{53}

Because I feel that this, on the contrary, is a means of venting our feelings ... for example, everyone is dissatisfied, as soon as a person is dissatisfied, through this sort of funny words ... very humorous, very *egao* words, hey, suddenly everyone discusses their own painful life in a very happy way. There is nothing particularly mysterious ... look if you say something particularly serious, you can say, everyone is Ah Q, ha!

In Lu Xun's 1921 novella *The True Story of Ah Q*, the tragicomic character is famous for his 'spiritual victories': when he falls victim to oppression, violence and ridicule, he comes up with elaborate ways of deluding himself into thinking he has 'won' or is superior to those who victimize him. He thus sees victory or pride in what is actually horrible defeat.

This 'Ah Q-esque venting' was understood as a good thing by some informants:
Um, I think it [the function of *egao*] is very good. That is, let everyone have a way to give vent to their anger, that is, a way to vent one's grievances.

The same informant, however, continued on the topic, detecting in the venting not only anger and something good, but also the intelligence of the victims as well as sadness:

A: How do you view this sort of words that have a humorous dimension?
B: Um, this is China, the intelligence of Chinese netizens. That is, in such a bad environment as China, Chinese netizens can still bring their intelligence into full play, they can mock.
A: Only for the purpose of mocking?
B: Because this sort of mockery is a sort of black humour, ... a sort of humour with a sad feeling ... I feel that this is a [way of] venting, just like [on] today's [Sina]Weibo.

Another informant, who did not think that *egao* amounted to resistance, expressed some contempt for those who thought it did:

Using the Communist Party's language for mockery.... Resistance does not make any difference, it seems like a kind of superficial resistance. For example, there is a bit of the Ah Q feeling, similar to 'merely saying,' but everyone is nonetheless following this direction, carrying out their own resistance. Because you really can't go change anything, so you make a few jokes, and then maybe [it has] a little effect.

Again, then, it is clear that several informants understand *egao* and its associated wordplay as unlikely to lead to a social movement that could cause a revolution or radical politics. In the last quote, however, a reference was again made to Ah Q, whose persona may be helpful in understanding the informants' views and the role of *egao* in a more sophisticated manner. Ah Q has been read in more ways than one, with different understandings of his political significance. Gloria Davies
has examined the dissonant voices raised about Lu Xun's work at the time of its publication. She shows how Marxist dogmatists attacked the story of Ah Q, because to them 'the only kind of literature worth engaging in was what they referred to as "revolutionary literature" or literature that could fit unambiguously within the normative framework of Communist ideology', whereas Ah Q was 'unable to show the path towards a better future'. Davies goes on to show, instead, how the 'heterogeneity of meanings generated by the text itself eluded attempts by Lu Xun's critics and defendants alike to utter the final word on Ah Q'. Lu Xun refuses to 'provide some hope of redemption' for Ah Q. The story 'uplifts the reader', but provides no relief and no absolute positive value to revolution.

Given the various accounts of egao, there seems to be good reason to understand these in a similar manner. Throughout this text, we have seen evidence of a range of feelings associated with egao and its associated wordplay: amusement, ridicule, anger, pride, contempt, sadness, and so on. Egao like the river crabs uplifts, but offers no way out – they merely curse and snigger. These humorous homonyms even refuse to adapt one single meaning, but always oscillate – they are simultaneously harmony and river crab, vulgar and political. Ah Q, as a man without personal history or even a real name, 'produced an ineluctable desire on the part of his contemporary readers to give meaning to his existence, to invest in the name Ah Q a reality'. The same treatment has befallen egao, with scholars grasping to understand its meaning, pin down its (potential) significance. Some seem to suggest the potential to influence politics, to contest the legitimacy, accountability or policy of the government as the yardstick against which egao should be measured. Others imply instead the potential to cultivate grass-roots communities, collective resistance, or collective empowerment as such a yardstick.

To Davies, the function of Ah Q, instead, was to establish a distance 'between the formidable influences of traditional society and the "easy" radical solutions sought', or "making strange" what is commonly regarded as familiar and mundane. His significance, then, was not in the realm of politics, but in that of the political. Returning to such an approach can give us a different angle from which to examine egao and the question of its potential 'resistance'. Contrary to the accounts reported above, some informants did indicate that resistance was
part of the meaning ascribed to these linguistic creations: ‘there is this component’. One informant alluded to the type of view on political tactics implied in the understanding of egao wordplay as a form of Bakhtinian carnival:

In this kind of expression we call postmodern, it actually also resembles a kind of deconstruction (jiégòu 解构). This kind of thing, deconstruction [through mockery], is really to subvert (diān fù 颠覆) all former authority.

The term jiégòu in this quote can mean to analyse, deconstruct or stir up dissent. Dianfu refers to subversion or overturning. When asked whether this meant that the regime had already been overturned, the same informant continued:

I think that now ... a youth like me ... everyone must know in their heart that it can’t be like before. Back then there was a very respectful attitude towards that kind of authority.

This informant thus indicates that this new form of mockery may indeed be a change in register of popular expression, perhaps analogous to what Meng would term an alternative political discourse,60 or possibly Lagerkvist’s alternate civility.61 A shift between ‘now’ and ‘before’ is perceived, but the shift has taken place on a discursive level rather than in the realm of narrow politics. Scholars’ seeming confusion and apparent dichotomization of positions perhaps, then, derive from the failure to distinguish politics from the political.

The words that China’s young use are indeed not intended to, or perceived as, a challenge to the Party-state’s politics. In that sense, neither subjective nor objective dimensions of what may traditionally be termed politicization emerge in informants’ accounts of egao.62 That is, most informants did not consider themselves to be involved in politics, nor is their expression commonly considered to be political in the narrow sense. However, what ‘traditional’ scholars call politicization is closer to depoliticization in Edkins’s terminology. Making cartoons about river crabs and tag-names such as ‘harmonious shoe trademark’ are not interventions in the realm of politics (in the narrow sense); it
is not politicization in the traditional sense. Perhaps, however, politicization in the case of *egao* takes a different shape in bringing the political back in. This Edkinsian repoliticization has roots in the process through which students negotiate the meanings of the official terms from which their wordplay borrows. As outlined at the outset of this article, repoliticization can be described as a disruption of the dominant discourse, a ‘challenge’ to ‘what have, through discursive practices, been constituted as normal, natural, and accepted ways of carrying on’.

Through repeatedly using expressions such as being harmonized, river crab society, and indeed harmonious shoes, the meaning of the official harmonious society discourse is hollowed out or disrupted, rather than contested head-on. Returning again to Ah Q and our critical informant, the point is not necessarily to resist or not resist, but to ‘make strange’.

The ‘strangeness’ or undecidability of *egao* has roots both in the discrepant meanings assigned by actors to their linguistic practices and in the very nature of the political itself. The boundaries of what is, to paraphrase Edkins, ‘not politics’ remain unstable and fluid, due to the permanent re-negotiation of meanings. The way the young Chinese students in our study described censorship shows how they downplay the authoritarian aspect underlying this practice. What is originally an infringement by authoritarian power is reduced to something funny. *Egao*, then, is simultaneously laughing at censorship and laughing it off.

Concurrently, while informants, as we have shown, do not always endeavour to circumvent censorship, to simply stay with labelling this absence of efforts against the authoritarian power as compliance would obscure the complexity of the students’ attitudes toward harmonization. Indeed, their reflexive gaze on their own resignation, along with their decidedly mixed feelings about being harmonized (described as simultaneously painful and funny) reveals the intricacy of these practices. Thus, *egao* is perhaps best understood beyond the resistance/not resistance dichotomy of politics. Instead, we can productively examine it through the question of the political, where its multiple meanings – at the levels of words, feelings and purported significance – lead to instances of openness where impossible decisions have to be made with regard their use and interpretation.
Conclusion

We then return to one of our initial questions: what do these ordinary uses of egao tell us about China’s youth’s relationships to official language? Although our informants did not uniformly define their linguistic practices as resistance, their creative ways of negotiating official language convey a sense of self-conscious dissociation from the CCP’s propaganda messages and repressive practices. However, although hidden transcripts may be precedents of open conflict in some cases, we must not ignore ‘the extent to which hegemony may be tacit and resistance often partial and self-defeating. It can lead as easily to the reproduction of domination as to revolution.’\(^64\) Although we observed little total, passive acceptance of official discourse or censorship, egao does not result in or aim for its abolition. Instead, it can create the conditions for its perpetuation. Moreover, if this linguistic creativity enables the circumvention of constraints, sensitive words simultaneously remain silenced as such. In spite of the actors’ alternative discourse, their powerlessness still resides in the impossibility of naming, as they remain subjected to the rules of ‘authorized language’\(^65\). If they do not speak the language of power, young Chinese students are confined to their own meaning-making, typing river crab for harmony or 35th May for 4th June. Finally, the political does not simply emerge ‘at the moment of structural failure, i.e. the failure of politics-as-state’\(^66\). Politics and the political do not ‘endlessly replace each other.’\(^67\) Rather, they stand next to one another in a particular configuration where dissatisfaction is expressed, but without genuine dialogue with power holders in the realm of traditional politics.

In this context, this article has aimed to moderate the general equation of egao as a straightforward form of resistance to authoritarian power, by focusing on the claims of Chinese students who in their everyday online and offline practices humorously re-appropriate Party language. Given the common description of this segment of society as apolitical, our findings may be unsurprising to some. Moreover, an examination of egao in the language use of activists is likely to yield a different set of findings. Nonetheless, studies of ordinary deployments of egao are needed to complement understandings of its more spectacular use. What is at stake here is less whether these practices are
labelled resistance or not, and more the reassertion of political negotiations in the broader sense of such practices, where other commentators have seen burgeoning or potential revolutionary politics, or where this social group is largely viewed as apolitical.

To a large extent, we have built our interpretation of *egao* on the basis of our informants' claims. Relaying their online practices in the face of censorship has shown these to be varied, complex and imbued with different significance at different instances. We have argued that with regard to politics, in the narrow sense of government practice, the use of this mocking wordplay may be perceived as a form of depoliticization – it is typically not understood as, or intended to be, a challenge to Party politics. In the realm of the political, however, its ambiguous and multiple meanings can lead to repoliticization, in that it marks, at times at least, a radical undecidability. We have not found evidence, in the accounts of our informants, to support the interpretation of the Internet or *egao* practices as a quasi-separate sphere of non-hierarchical Bakhtinian carnival. Nonetheless, we may detect in these practices a new way of negotiating official language, what may be considered a new civility or alternative political discourse. As such, it becomes a sphere for instances of repoliticization. Having said this, repoliticization is not stable, but *egao* too is repeatedly depoliticized, for example, by being designated as unimportant or as meaning one thing only (only revolution, only apolitical escapism, only a potential to become a proper political movement). It should therefore be clear that the point of this article is not to designate to *egao* another correct meaning, but rather to point out the undecidability of this meaning-making process. The point, precisely, is to re-open the question of *egao* as potentially political even if it does not lead to a revolutionary politics.

**References**


Notes

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3 Ibid., 21.
4 Hua Li, Doing things right with Communist Party language: An analysis of Yu Hua’s exploitation of Mao-era rhetoric, China Information 26(1), 2012: 87-104.
11 Ibid., 63.
12 Buckley, China President calls for more Internet oversight.
14 Bingshun Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse: E Gao as alternative political discourse on the Chinese Internet, Global Media and Communication 7(1), 2011: 39.
17 Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 45 and 46.
21 Ibid., 12.
implemented significant censorship mechanisms that have eye[...]

51. Ibid., 72. See also Tang and Bhattacharya, Power and resistance, 2.4.

52. For example, Hongmei Li, Parody and resistance on the Chinese Internet; Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse; Tang and Yang, Symbolic power and the Internet; and Xiao, The battle for the Chinese Internet.

53. Pang, Self-censorship and the rise of cyber-collectives.


55. Ibid., 146.

56. Ibid., 156.

57. Ibid., 158.

58. Ibid., 159.

59. This distinction is commonly made by thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, Ernesto Laclau, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Claude LeFort, and Alain Badiou, to name but a few. For a discussion and critique of the distinction between politics and the political, with reference to these and other thinkers, see Inna Viriasova, *Politics and the political: Correlation and the question of the unpolitical*, *Peninsula: A Journal of Relational Politics* 1(1), 2011, http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/peninsula/article/view/687, accessed 10 July 2013 or Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back in*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.


61. Ibid., 11.

62. Ibid., 12.


66. Douban is the largest Chinese site for books, music reviews and films. It is also a venue for discussion of various social issues, and has implemented significant censorship mechanisms that have led to some controversy; http://www.douban.com.


68. This refers to Li Dazhao, co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party.

69. Perry, *Studying Chinese politics*, 10; Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 39.


74. Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 44.

75. Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy*, 146.

76. Cf. ibid., 159; Tang and Bhattacharya, Power and resistance.


78. Ibid., 59 and 63.

79. Ibid., 60.

80. Ibid., 69.

81. Ibid., 73.

82. Ibid., 70, 71, and 76.

83. Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 39.

84. Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy*, 158.

63 Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*, 12.
66 Viriasova, Politics and the political.
67 Ibid.
68 Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy*, 158.
69 Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 39.