

中國人民解放軍總政治部

政治部宣傳部

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Graphic Design Thesis, 2009

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Preface

2008 was the year before the wake of my thesis and China was the centre of attention on the global media stage. That year, international media frenetics indulged in a circus-like excursion, all eyes were insatiably riveted on the temporary open walls of China. A few significant events dominated the Western media world, namely the two earthquakes that struck the Sichuan province, the Beijing Olympics and the Tibetan unrest. However, another major controversial event also unfolded on the 10th of December and received surprisingly little media interest in the West. This event took place on the eve of the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where more than 300 scholars, journalists, freelance writers and activists in Mainland China, signed a document called Charter 08. 'It was conceived and written in conscious admiration of the founding of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, where, in January 1977, more than two hundred Czech and Slovak intellectuals formed a loose, informal, and open association of people...united by the will to strive individually and collectively for respect for human and civil rights in our country and throughout the world.'¹ Since then, the circulation of this document amongst many Western official online news websites and English language blogs, has resulted in increasing numbers of signatories, indicating its growing support. It is also gaining impetus amongst Chinese speaking networks, and it can be verified by the fact that Bulldog.cn² was shut down on the 9th of

¹ China's Charter 08, Translated from Chinese by Perry Link. source: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22210>

² Bulldog is a web2.0 site and a favourite home for

Jan 2009 by China's apprehensive regime. Charter 08 was quickly censored by the Chinese government, placing various suspected signatories under surveillance, and in some cases interrogating and threatening many of the manifesto's original signatories and attempting to delete any traces of it from the internet behind its great firewall.

This is one very recent example that depicts the current political, social and ideological context in which Chinese civil society is struggling against the thwarting measures enforced by a despotic government on the brink of demise. What Charter 08 demonstrates is the undeniable disenchantment and social unrest accumulated since the Student movements and consequently the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. Many other protests led by oppressed citizens including students, peasants, workers and intellectuals in an attempt to rebel have emerged in the past two decades resulting in various forms of grass-root rebellion. Suppression of political expression is not new to the Chinese leadership, however, since 1993 the advent of the internet has presented a major challenge in juggling openness for economic reform with control for political legitimacy.

When Deng Xiaoping began his policy of economic reform in 1979, China's doors opened to foreign trade and investments. To compete in the global market, the internet was introduced to integrate China in the emerging information age present in the West. In the early 1980's Deng's reformist vision was visualised by his metaphor "If

China's edgiest public intellectuals and counter-culture types.' Rebecca MacKinnon. source: <http://rconversation.blogs.com/rconversation/2009/01/bullogcn-goes-d.html>

you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in.”³ For the first time since the Communist revolution the ‘window’ of economic opportunity opened and millions were lifted out of poverty, nonetheless expected ‘flies’ came through that entrance. In today’s context, if the internet in China can be compared with the window, then the regime has been relatively successful at fly-swatting. ‘Fly-swatting’ or in the literal sense, the online strategies of control have evolved along three axes: social and political control, technological control and psychological control. The implementation and regulation of this is not only for the purpose of seeking to assert information sovereignty over cyber-territory, but to also use it as a tool of political censorship; a technological “quick fix” to problems that stem from larger social and political issues.

In the Western world, the value between participatory media and traditional forms of media has been continuously debated. In non-democratic countries participatory media, especially blogging, provides access to an alternative outlook into events and issues not covered by the mainstream or government-controlled institutionalised media. Regardless of the potential life threatening risks entailed, many dissidents, activists and citizens have courageously utilised this new medium to express their opinions. OpenNet Initiative 2005 cites that “China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet

³ Deng Xiaoping quoted in Rebecca MacKinnon, *Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China*. Published online: 9 August 2007

filtering in the world.”⁴ Despite this, online creative social actors are emerging and ensuing the formation of internet-mediated networks for dissidents, activists, intellectuals and other counter-culture activities. Furthermore in China’s volatile social climate, the dynamics of human innovation and creativity has risen from the ground up giving birth to new modes and flows of communication and evolving on a path of its own. One group of dissidents, namely the quasi-religious movement called Falun Gong reveal unprecedented media activism by benefiting from both internet-mediated networks and on-the-ground mobilisation. In this thesis I propose to investigate Falun Gong and other Chinese netizens’ groundbreaking political resistance against censorship and how it has influenced Chinese society. I also aim to redefine and problematise the notion of censorship. It should be seen as is a multi-faceted elastic process consisting of a multitude of relations of powers that oppose and diverge rather than a rigid unbending object. Drawing from Foucault’s rejection of the duality of freedom/repression, the meaning of this work is to avoid taking the ‘either/or’ binarism approach in this complex and prevalent topic. The focus will be not only how the role of censorship in China has been used as a negative debilitating impediment but how the presence of censorship has acted as a productive impetus to stylistic innovation, catalysing new modes of communication essential for the growth of human consciousness.

⁴ OpenNet Initiative source: <http://opennet.net/blog/2005/06/internet-filtering-china-2004-2005>

Ideology and Internet

In Mao's totalitarian era, the Leninist media model was adopted. The Chinese Communist party held the exclusive possession on state power and defines 'ideology' as what Karl Marx called the "*second side of the superstructure, namely the ideas and convictions that support the existence of the system*"⁵

In Marxist thought, totalitarianism is characterised by a totalist ideology, a single party committed to this ideology and the monopolistic control of mass communication.⁶ In China, the media functions like the loudspeakers of a revolutionary vanguard, bellowing out the supposed desires of the masses and maintaining party ideology to enforce social order. Propaganda and censorship in China is no secret, it routinely hides facts that are deemed unhealthy or unstable to public order, consciously promoting lies, and reporting nothing but happy news about the Communist party. To use the official metaphor, the Chinese media are not only the 'throat and tongue' of the party, but also its ears and eyes.⁷ From 1966 to 1976 during the Cultural Revolution, the control strategies had escalated to extreme measures, whereby anyone who slightly disagreed with Maoist thought was discriminated as a 'class enemy.' Institutionalised censorship in Maoist times was seamlessly embedded and invisible as his absolute power was used to mastermind a total vacuumed environment. The tightly sealed political arena where the invisible regime permeated to every corner however, became susceptible

5 Su Shaozhi, chapter 5: Chinese Communist Ideology and Media Control. *China's Media, Media's China*, By Chin-Chuan Lee. 1994. pg 76

6 T. B. (ed.), *A dictionary of Marxist thought* (oxford: blackwell 1983) pg. 478-79

7 Marlowe Hood, chapter 3: The use and abuse of mass media. *China's Media, Media's China*, By Chin-Chuan Lee. 1994. pg 39

when the lid of the country began to open up, and with that it saw China's transformation by the information revolution.

In the late 1980's the relationship between the state and society in PRC was significantly changed due to Deng Xiaopings' domestic reforms and 'opening up' policies to the outside world. Disillusionment and resentment as a result of Maoist political campaigns (Great Leap Forward, 1958 to 1961 and Cultural Revolution, 1966 to 1976) left China in a decade of a huge crisis of legitimacy. These reforms were implemented to boost the economy and obtain foreign economic resources, however, more importantly these reform measures were an attempt to maintain the symbolic and totalitarian legitimacy of the one party-state. The successors of the Communist Party schemed to loosen the basic system just enough to preserve it, recognising the importance of justice and the greater freedom of lifestyle. The party's initial intention was to address the decentralisation and marketisation of the economy in order to encourage speedy economic growth and lift the standard of living. Inadvertently due to alterations in the old Maoist structure, these changes began to evolve and the demand for greater prosperity and freedom, including that of information heightened.⁸

The development strategy of Information communication technologies (ICTs) in China in the 1990's was another step towards the nation-building legitimacy of Chinese leadership. 1994 was the year China connected to the World Wide Web and opened its gates to the new flood of customer-

8 Carol Lee Hamrin, chapter 4: China's Legitimacy Crisis: The Central Role of Information. *China's Media, Media's China*, By Chin-Chuan Lee. 1994. pg 4

based technologies that have allowed the internet to become such a popular means of communication. Digitalisation in a totalitarian state such as China carries along some apparent complications to its leaders. The paradox is that on one hand the party-state encourages the use of the internet to usher China onto the economic global stage, while trying to extend its pervasive regime of control to the new ambiguous territory of cyberspace on the other. With the rise of the internet, particularly weblogs as one example of participatory media or better known as read-write web or web 2.0, there has been many discussions on the emancipatory potential of this new media. In the West opinions of the democratisation of blogs vary between utopic and dystopic overtones. Geert Lovink for instance, a somewhat cynical Internet critic claims that blogs are of “counter-cultural folklore.”⁹ For the Chinese situation however, Rebecca MacKinnon, journalist and scholar on Chinese new media, believes blogs can potentially be a medium and tool, but should not be confused with being a cause of change.¹⁰ Utopian/dystopian statements aside, the internet opened a window of opportunity where for the first time Chinese citizens have had the possibility to participate in history telling, a right that had been so forcibly snatched away from them since the Communist Revolution. Another advantage the internet offers that no other media could, is a platform where Chinese netizens including activists and dissidents can network and voice social, cultural or political discords publicly. “*The*

9 Geert Lovink, Nihilism and the News, *Open (Cahier on Art and the Public Domain)* no.13. 2007. pg 37

10 Rebecca MacKinnon, *Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China*. Published online: 9 August 2007

*Internet is increasingly a way to let sunlight fall upon the actions of those in power —and providing an effective disinfectant in the process. The Internet can give a megaphone to activists and to dissidents who can make their case to the public, either on the record or anonymously or pseudonymously.*¹¹ The Falun Gong network in the physical realm refrain from any concrete structures and they are, at best, loosely organised. In cyberspace however, they are extremely proficient in assembling connections and have established dozens of websites that provide the leader's writings and a mode of communication for followers. During the protest outside the headquarters at Zhongnanhai in Beijing in 1999, electronic means of communication such as e-mail played a central role. Undoubtedly the group owes its continual existence to the internet, but the government has developed many sophisticated online technologies and strategies to crush its opponents reflecting their offline reality.

11 Jonathan Zittrain and John Palfrey, chapter 2: Internet Filtering: The Politics and Mechanisms of Control. *Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering*. Edited by Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, Jonathan Zittrain. MIT Press 2008. pg 50

Dimensions of Censorship

The topic of Censorship has always been a complicated one, and it has existed since the dawn of man. Why is censorship such a pervasive element in human history? Is there even such a thing as free speech at all? Or is it that every statement's coherence lies firmly within the 'interpretative community' that receives it? Each of us, perhaps, has even been subtly nurtured in the art of censorship. More unsettlingly, can censorship be a productive force? Similar to the ancient Greek perspective of censorship as a stimulant rather than a wicked strife, Michael Levine negotiates that censorship begins to take on a style that address' these limitations, commenting that censorship can be seen both "*as a debilitating impediment and [...] as an impetus to stylistic innovation.*" In 'Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality', Annette Kuhn aims to redefine and problematise the notion that censorship is always an issue of repression, arguing that we should take greater account of its productivity. She continues to discuss that it happens through the relationship of different censorious forces, deducing that it is 'a process, not an object.' "*...censorship is not reducible to a circumscribed and predefined set of institutions and institutional activities, but is produced with an array of constantly shifting discourse, practices and apparatuses. It cannot, there be regarded as either fixed or monolithic. [it...] is an ongoing process embodying complex and often contradictory relations of power.*"¹² The idea of censorship as structural necessity is also fundamental to the teaching of psychoanalysis. Perhaps it is consistent with certain behavioral traits in humans? The powerful operation of an internalised form of censorship is firmly

12 Kuhn, quoted in Helen Freshwater. Towards a redefinition of censorship in '*Censorship & cultural regulation in the modern age*'. By Beate Müller. 2003. pg 232

inscribed in the work of Freud and latterly Lacan. In theory, the internal censorship mechanism, is the suppressing of problematic and distressing areas of thought, memory, and experience. Freud maintained that repression was essential for the formation of subjectivity, proposing that the operations of repression and the beginning of self-awareness are simultaneous.¹³

With the development of digital technology, so too has censorship evolved. What does censorship mean today? The meaning of censorship has itself been interrogated and contested: while some critics have tried to keep in place a narrow modern definition (censorship as state power) in order to avoid confusing it with other perhaps less brutal kinds of constraints (say market censorship), others have argued that in the postmodern present, censorship has been displaced by less visible kinds of domination and control and that the word should be either redefined more broadly or abandoned. As mentioned earlier, Mao used his absolute power to mastermind an environment where censorship was effectively invisible and almost untraceable. Virtual censorship however knows none of this luxury, despite attempts at making censorship opaque, it is widely known that it exists. The example of the 'colour revolution' in Ukraine and Lebanon where online media and communication tools empowered activist¹⁴ is one that the Chinese regime certainly does not want to replicate.

The struggle of the control and regulation of the internet is still in its preliminarily stages. Early

13 Freud, quoted in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. 1967. pg196

14 Rebecca MacKinnon, *Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China*. Published online: 9 August 2007

theorists thought that the internet would be a free domain where regulations and control would cease to exist. The theory hypothesised that the online actors didn't need to pay attention "*to the claims of sovereignty over their actions by traditional state based in real space.*"¹⁵ In reality, the implementation of power and control by the states didn't turn out to be so difficult after all. As a consequence the internet has become more of a 'balkanised' web rather than the World wide Web. Instead, countries have created their own version of the internet according to a regulation system based on a set of principles or ideologies. The result in China's cyber context parallels its offline reality—the dedication to the investment of online control. Correspondingly, the online strategies of control in China have evolved along three axes. The first is social and political control. For instance, arresting a cyber-dissident or the liability assigned to intermediaries so that affirmative filtering and surveillance takes place. The government is able to indirectly regulate the Internet by directly regulating intermediary actors like Internet service providers (ISP) and Internet content providers (ICP) which host online chatrooms and blogs to prevent the dispersal of politically sensitive online discussion. The good-old physical exercise of state power such as the jailing of a cyber-dissident, has the influential effect on internet usage without the need to obscure all the content on a certain subject. Arresting the most high profile cases will effectively act as a warning, sending the message to other citizens. Marlowe

15 Jonathan Zittrain and John Palfrey, chapter 2: Internet Filtering: The Politics and Mechanisms of Control. *Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering*. Edited by Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, Jonathan Zittrain. MIT Press 2008. pg 30

Hood uses a metaphor to describe the use and abuse of media power to maintain social order: *"Killing the chickens to scare the monkeys'- or, more often, to scare other chickens-is often carried out with little regard to guilt or innocence and even less regard as to whether the punishment fits the crime. Indeed, in some cases the sole purpose of taking human life is to make an editorial point."*¹⁶

The second is technological control. The filtering of keywords and blocking of Web sites are examples of this kind of control. According to Goldsmith and Wu (2006), the scale of human involvement in China's internal censorship system may be changing. The congressional-executive commission reported that the Chinese government funded research in software designed to identify the political viewpoint of information. *"It described a 'Falun Gong content examination system' that designated pro-Falun Gong information as 'black', anti-Falun Gong information as 'red', and articles dealing with Buddhism and health care as neutral' The system can be installed on personal computers, servers and at national gateways, so that as soon as a user tries to visit a web page that is pro-Falun Gong, the system can filter the page and immediately notify authorities. While the effectiveness of the Falun Gong content examination software is hard to verify, it is clear that China will continue to invest in ever-more automated internal control and filtering systems."*¹⁷ It is also very clear that Western companies play a big role in the supplying and developing of technological means that allow China to carry

16 Marlowe Hood, chapter 3: The use and abuse of mass media. *China's Media, Media's China*, By Chin-Chuan Lee. 1994. pg 54

17 Jack L. Goldsmith, Tim Wu. *Who Controls the Internet: Illusions of a Borderless World*. 2006. pg 97

out surveillance. Lets use this analogy: if the great firewall of China was built by the Chinese, then the bricks were built by Western companies such as Cisco Systems, Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Nortel Networks (Canada), Dupont and Daniel Data Systems (Israel).¹⁸

The final is psychological control. When the first two types of control are realised by netizens, the act of self-censorship eventuates. China's opaque system is deliberately applied to make it difficult for users to distinguish between an intentional block and a temporary network or server glitch consequently having the effect of the Panopticon. The perception that one is under surveillance, real or imagined, prompts the individual to police themselves ensuring conformist behaviour. Thus creating an economy in surveillance. *'For Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon was the perfect schema of utilitarian domination – a place where power was invisible, and yet everywhere present.'*¹⁹

Despite censorship used as a repressive strategy of online control in authoritarian regimes, there are also other sides of censorship helping to facilitate the innovation of social actors. All activities in the Internet-mediated networks take place in an environment of control. However the perpetual continuation of these activities regardless of the dangers, indicates both the limits of online control and the resistance and creativity of social actors. In 'Homers Contest' Nietzsche maintains that we have misread the 'strange institution' of ostracism in ancient Greece. We have associated it as a negative

18 Gudrun Wacker. *China and the internet. Politics of the digital leap forward.* 2003. pg 68

19 Joshua Kane. *The Panoptic Transition.* source: <http://www.21cmagazine.com/issue2/transition.html>

mechanism of exclusion and marginalisation rather than as a positive one of creating and stimulating geniuses and of de-monopolising power.²⁰ “*The original function of this strange institution, however, is not as a safety valve but as a stimulant: the pre-eminent individual is removed so that a new contest of powers can be awakened: a thought which is hostile to the ‘exclusivity’ of genius in the modern sense, but which assumes that there are always several geniuses’ to incite each other to action, just as they keep each other within certain limits, too. That is the kernel of the Hellenic idea of competition: it loathes a monopoly of predominance and fears the dangers of this, it desires, as protective measures against genius—a second genius.*”²¹ The fact that censorship is as much as a productive as a repressive technique of power seems quite disturbing and does not correlate to common opinion, especially because it seems to undermine any optimism in the possibility of free expression. Although China’s modern day authoritarian regime cannot be compared to the agonistic society of ancient Greece as the intention of State’s censorship is clearly to hinder, the irony is that by the presence of limitations, netizens understand new methods of circumvention enabling social actors to design and invent new systems to express themselves. The two sides are neck to neck, with every advancement made by the state enforcing tighter control, Chinese netizens develop another counter strategy to dodge the system in order to be heard. Thus the impetus continues, exacerbated by the need to express, as long as there is another side.

20 Ramona Naddaff. *Exiling the poets*. 2003. pg 5

21 Nietzsche quote in Naddaff. *Exiling the poets*. 2003. pg 5

Challenging Media Power

*“However desperate the situation and circumstances, do not despair. When there is everything to fear, be unafraid. When surrounded by dangers, fear none of them. When without resources, depend on resourcefulness. When surprised, take the enemy itself by surprise.” Sun Tzu, The Art of War.*²²

In 1998, my mother whom had immigrated to Australia in the late 80's, came home one day and announced that she was a Falun Gong practitioner. One year had passed and she seemed to glow with pride, and more importantly exuded a sense of healthy vitality and well-being-that is until she received a phone call from her father who lived in mainland China, threatening her of disownment if she continued practising.

On April 25, 1999, the world became aware of the quasi-religious sect Falun Gong. More than 10,000 of its followers from across China peacefully stood before the Chinese Communist headquarters at Zhongnanhai in Beijing to gain official recognition of the sect. What alarmed the regime was that the demonstrators included young and old, intellectuals and government officials, moreover, their ability to organise and mobilise inconspicuously under its highly secure radar, shooting fear and doubt right to their core. In a blaze of trepidation, China condemned the group as a Western, anti-Chinese force and an evil doomsday cult. Propaganda was disseminated nation-wide via conventional and new media channels. Denouncements continued while the group resisted with nation-wide counter propaganda campaigns that resulted in the incarceration and torture of many Falun Gong practitioners.

²² Sun Tzu, quoted in Guy Debord. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. 1998.

Three years later, another major event unfolded on March 5, 2002. In an unprecedented attempt to neutralise the states' propaganda, Falun Gong members hacked the eight-channed Changchun municipal cable television network in Northeast China. For almost an hour Falun Gong propaganda substituted state propaganda on the TV screens of an important Chinese provincial capital. They were successful in broadcasting two videos into more than 300,000 households. The first one 'glorified Falun Gong and celebrated its global legitimacy and popularity; the other exposed Chinese state brutality against the movement, turning state propaganda on its head.²³ The Falun Gong-produced video, deconstructed CCTV footage in great detail about the governments portrayal of the self-immolation of extremist practitioners in Tiananmen Square, arguing that the entire event was calculated by the state in an attempt to disrepute the movement. Global media coverage followed while the states taste for vengeance magnified.

Against the backdrop of China's collapsing ideology legitimacy, Falun Gong (Law Wheel Cultivation), also know as Falun Dafa (Great Law of the Wheel) was founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi. It provided an answer to the collective demoralisation caused by years of secular statism in a Communist spiritual vacuum. This unprecedented movement grew from a backlash of disenchantment due to the economic reform, capitalist modernity, moral decay and the ideological and identity crisis of the transitional times since 1989. Although this

23 Yuezhi Zhao. chapter 13: Falun Gong, Identity, and the Struggle over Meaning Inside and Outside China. *Contesting Media Power*. Alternative Media in a Networked World. By Nick Couldry, James Curran. 2003. pg 209

sect is primarily based on cultural traditions such as the practice of an ancient system of breathing exercises believed to channel and harmonise the qi (vital energy) circulating through the body, and the religious component grounded on Li's own eclectic integration of Buddhism, Daoism, classical folk religion and oriental mysticism,²⁴ it fundamentally upholds moral concepts, moral standards and rules of conduct. Castells describes 'resistance identities' in the 'Power of Identity', as "*generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society.*"²⁵ By this we can see the members of Falun Gong ensuing the construction of resistant identities. It resists in the terms of dominant institutions/ideologies, "*reversing the value judgement while reinforcing the boundary*".²⁶ This is seen in the opposition of the prevalence of neo-liberal policies and the whole value system underpinned by the pursuit of economic reform and modernisation. Opting for an apolitical escape, this self mediation provided a means to respond to individual and social concerns, by which in 1999 its popularity became wide spread nationally and internationally. Contrary to what the central government propagates, this resistance is an identity-based mobilisation rather than a political movement with the incentive to capture the state.

Vilified and banned from China's real environment, this network has chosen resistance and the building of their resistant identity in the virtual environment as its platform of activity. Faithful in

24 Li, Hongzhi, *Falun Fajie*, pg 201

25 Manuel Castells. *Power of Identity*. 1997. pg 8

26 Ibid. pg 9

millions, the Falun gong network became one of the most efficient organisational forms as a result of major features that were advantageous due to the technological environment enabling flexibility, scalability and survivability.²⁷ Thus this decentralised multi-nodal organisation is one that functions not only as an internet-mediated network but also a physical grassroot network across real and virtual borders. The groups virtual and real, transnational and local dynamics, along side fixed group-exercise times and locations makes them extremely resilient and effective. The culmination of the online and offline channels of media, collective activities such as regular group-exercises sessions, annual international and regional experience-sharing conferences and the zealous mustering of each member as fighters of media activism renders this group a ground-breaking impetus challenging and undermining Chinese state media power. On the other side however, attacks from the official state campaign including jamming Falun Dafa World Radio, banning, blocking and hacking Falun Gong websites, furthermore arresting any individual caught displaying promotional Falun Gong signs or distributing leaflets are undeniable reminders of the formidable consequences entailed. *“The resulting onslaught of falun gong material has been overwhelming, every public space- from cyberspace to Tiananmen Square to the local shopping center and street corner, not to mention China’s media system-has become a site of struggle for representation. By late September 2002, Falun Gong had repeatedly hacked not only into China’s cable television networks in various cities but also into the Sinasat state satellite, disrupting CCTV programming and many*

27 Castells, *Informationalism, Networks, and the network society: A Theoretical Blueprint*.

other provincial television channels, and into Sina, China's most popular commercial web site. Never before has there been so sustained, pervasive and costly a challenge against a dominate media regime. Hundreds of activists have been arrested and jailed for distributing falun gong literature inside china and for media hacking."²⁸

Its flexible decentralised organisation and rivalling popularity however, is only a part of the story. What the government fears the most is Falun Gong's striking resembles to religious movements that had set in motion numerous insurgencies in China's past, some of which overthrew entire dynasties.²⁹ Chinese Millenarian movements were secret societies directly linked to all of the peasant revolutions in Chinese history. "In Chinese, 'revolution' in its original ancient sense is the mandate of heaven that a sovereign borrowed or accepted in order to usher in a new dynasty; the word carries a sense of the sacredness and justification associated with carrying out the will of heaven... When we examine the composition of the word, we find that *ge-ming* (revolution) is a verb-object combination. 'Ge' is the verb, meaning 'change, eliminate, revoke, strip'. As for 'ming', it means 'heavenly mandate, law, life'. Together, 'ge-ming' has the sense of 'social transformation' or 'taking a man's life'.³⁰ Thereby, we understand that the role of these societies provided a necessary balance as agents of continu-

28 Yuezhi Zhao. *chapter 13: Falun Gong, Identity, and the Struggle over Meaning Inside and Outside China. Contesting Media Power. Alternative Media in a Networked World.* By Nick Couldry, James Curran. 2003. pg 219

29 Maria Hsia Chang . *Falun Gong, The end of day.* 2004. pg 31

30 Liu Xiaobo. *That Holy Word "Revolution", Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China,* Second Edition 1994

ity by sustaining political and social opposition against the regime. The Yellow Turban, The White Lotus Society, The Eight Trigrams, The Taiping Rebellion, The Boxers are some examples of past millenarian movements that evoked great threat and even dethroned emperors, but the last millenarian movement that proved victorious in toppling the state was in fact the Communist Revolution of 1949. Considering China's long tradition of historic revolutions, the regime is more than sensitive to anything that bears semblance to old ghosts. This is succinctly described by the Economist in January of 2001, "*it takes a cult to know a cult.*"³¹

31 The Economist. source: http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_QRGSDP

New Modes of Communication

“Without visual limits there can be no, or almost no, mental imagery; without a certain blindness, no tenable appearance” Paul Virilio³²

While the members of Falun Gong execute their counter strategies with on-the-ground mobilisation, other Chinese netizens opt for the innovative use of linguistic measures and unexpected visual metaphors to elude programmed mechanisms of surveillance. The internet in China is riddled with ‘virtual cops’ literally patrolling and hunting for words and phrases that are deemed inflammatory or sensitive. (refer to 1) According to the bilingual and independent news website, ‘Chinadigitaltimes.net’, these male or female cyber cops will show up every half hour on the websites and readers can click on them to report any ‘illegal information’ they see. The malleability of the Chinese (Han) language lends itself to social actors, facilitating the innovation of commentary on the frustration of political censorship without being detected by these virtual cops. As the Han language is a tonal language reliant on its complex system of phonology, one word can mean something else when pronounced with a different emphasis. *“Each Han dialect varies in its tonal system and pronunciations. Taking Mandarin is an example, in each of its base syllables four tones are used to convey a variety of meaning.... The four tones in mandarin are described by Wang (1973) as ‘rising, falling, level and dipping.”*³³ In light of this, ingenious homonyms are often adopted replacing ‘subversive’ content

32 Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*. 1996. pg 4

33 Bertha Pérez, T. L. McCarty, Lucille J. Watahomigie, Maria E. Torres-Guzman. *Sociocultural Contexts of Language and Literacy*. 2004. pg 182

with seemingly absurd and unrelated words. The result may come across as shocking, childish and humorous, but that is exactly the intention. This groundbreaking non-technical approach to bypass filtration not only makes a mockery of the regimes ridiculous system but also renders censorship transparent and visible and, furthermore, fallible. The regime has invested millions in research, advanced technology and elaborate systems in the whole project of censorship and yet a simple gust of resourcefulness collapsed the entire wall, even if it's for just a moment in history. It is oxymoronic that most the successful up-to-date strategy to evade sophisticated filters require no extra technology, moreover in the attempt to be absolutely thorough, the regime neglected to foresee the most fundamental component of the Chinese language. Wang Xiaofeng, a journalist and blogger said *"when people have emotions or feelings they want to express, they need a space or channel, It is like a water flow — if you block one direction, it flows to other directions, or overflows. There's got to be an outlet."*³⁴

Ray Harryhausen, the filmmaker, said that it is the disappearance of censorship that has gradually sterilised cinematographers' and viewers' imagination.³⁵ The 'River Crab' parody is a brilliant example that exemplifies the imagination of the people. (refer to 2) The depiction of this metaphor is as rich in visual as much as political significance. In doublespeak, 'harmonisation' alludes to censor-

34 Michael Wines, A Dirty Pun Tweaks China's Online Censors, New York Times March 11, 2009 source: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html?_r=2

35 Paul Virilio, *The Art of th Motor*. 1996. pg 3

ship in China. The word for harmony, harmonized, or harmonious in Chinese can also mean 'river crab' if pronounced with different tonal emphasis. The three bourgeois-looking watches on its body is a visual pun signifying the 'Three represents', a socio-political ideology to modernise (and capitalise) China coined by former General Secretary Jiang Zemin.³⁶ Thus the 'animalification'³⁷ of censorship as an awkward crustacean, preposterously donned with three luxury watches has crawled under the radar of the entire system simultaneously undermining and parading around the joke of the nation. Beneath the exterior shell of this benign symbol lies the hidden spirit of resilience, resistance and change. Free expression may appear to be in exile in one way, but in many other ways are merely being channelled to a new flow.

The follow up of the 'River Crab' is the 'Grass-Mud Horse' (Cao Ni Ma) and is nothing less than a phenomenon that has challenged the status quo, spreading across the Chinese online sphere like wild fire. This pun when pronounced slightly different sounds like 'fuck your mother'. Re-appropriation has been adopted in countless ways; a Youtube children's song about this mythical creature has been viewed by nearly 1.4 million viewers,

36 General Secretary Jiang Zemin's speech At the meeting celebrating the 80th anniversary of the founding of the CPC on July 1, 200. "...our Party always represents the orientation of China's advanced culture means that its theory, line, program, principles, policies and all its work must embody the requisites for guiding the development of a national, scientific, and popular socialist culture geared to the needs of modernization..... for China's economic development and social progress." International Department Central Committee of CPC, source: <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/policy/3represents.htm>

37 *Animalification* - representation of an abstract quality in animal form.

a cartoon boosting a quarter million more views, a nature documentary on its habits,³⁸ even as far as Grass Mud Horse currency, poems, t-shirts and emblematic logos. (refer to 3) An obscenity or an act of courage? Whatever one calls it, these have become 'weapons of the weak' and are essentially a grassroots form of political parody by younger netizens who have become infuriated with the restrictions. If censorship is 'animalified' as a River Crab, then the Grass-Mud Horse anthropomorphises the people and their efforts of their bitter sweet struggle. Thus the competition between the River Crab and the Grass-Mud Horse proceeds, manifesting in a multitude of modes and flows. Cui Weiping, a Beijing Film Academy professor and social critic, wrote in her own blog "*I am singing a cute children's song - I AM A GRASS MUD HORSE! Even though it is heard by the entire world, you can't say I've broken the law*"³⁹ It is common knowledge that human beings, as for all living organisms, the ability to communicate is the indispensable condition of the being in the world, that is, of survival. The domino effect of the River Crab and Grass Mud Horse occurrence does not only reveal the necessity to communicate collectively, but it is also a triumphant display of the creative imagination under the weight of grave perils.

38 Michael Wines, A Dirty Pun Tweaks China's Online Censors, New York Times March 11, 2009 source: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html?_r=2 . links to watch grass mud horse videos: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKx1aenJK08> and more : <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/grass-mud-horse/>

39 Ibid



1. Virtual cops



2. River Crab mash ups and examples of other re-appropriations



3. Grass Mud Horse re-appropriations

In conclusion, the internet as a form of participatory media, has facilitated new windows of opportunity acting as a tool of change. Though China's online reality is increasingly resembling the offline reality, the fluid nature of virtual world lends itself to generations of oppressed people, enabling flexibility, scalability and survivability. Despite the great repercussions that lie ominously ahead, netizens of China are continuously defying real and virtual barriers. This communication channel has empowered social actors by offering them a personal megaphone allowing the possibility to create equilibrium with the official loudspeakers of state. When one thinks of the China's modern political history, the notion of institutionalised censorship is negatively associated with a tyrannical despotic regime. The idea of censorship can be compared to the very nature of the internet, it is not a definitive group of actions or an immutable constant, but rather fluid with many fluctuating guises that help to catalyse politics, culture and society. Nietzsche argued that in the Hellenic culture, the strange institution of ostracism was not as a safety measure but of a stimulant, to encourage each other to action, just as much as they kept each other within boundaries. When certain frames closed, many others open, and new contests of powers can be awakened. And so it seems that censorship in Chinese society has played both the role of a productive impetus as much as paralysing obstruction.

The quasi-religious sect Falun Gong have challenged the state media power by manoeuvring between real and virtual, transnational and local dimensions, ensuring resilience and effectiveness. This decentralised multi-nodal movement has demonstrated groundbreaking resistance in the struggle for media representation via technical and

physical interventions supported by internet-mediated networks. In the face of injustice, Falun Gong hacked into a significant government broadcasting organ and replaced state propaganda with counter propaganda. This victory, however small, illustrates the power to circumvent oppressive forces, simultaneously reinventing modes of communication, exploiting censorship rather than being victims of the exploited.

If we are to understand that it is the disappearance of the censorship that has led to the sterilisation of the imagination, then visual metaphors like the River Crab and Grass Mud Horse phenomenon are the epitome of imagination flourishing. Underpinned by frustration, the netizens' journey of resistance is a mash up of powerful linguistic and visual puns subsequently generating a formidable weapon—a secret code. These mash-ups, born from the inventive minds of Chinese bloggers have travelled through time and space inspiring new modes and flows of expression. The beauty of this story is, even if governmental software, filtering systems and surveillance mechanisms advance in evolution, as long as China continues to speak Chinese, homonyms will always be at their loyal service.

We should perceive the interplay of the dimensions of censorship as a process constantly being tested and re-negotiated. The examples mentioned above are attestations to the possibility to challenge and bend the boundaries (with consequences) of restrictions. That is why I believe there is no reason to perceive these acts of resistance as futile, in spite of how minor these triumphs may seem in the long run, but rather as incitements paving the way for a potentially better future. To believe in such nihilism would mean the denial of our imagination

and self; the very nature of being human. In the absence of certain freedoms, originality, innovation and creative energy has prevailed. To paraphrase professor Peter Yu: The question is no longer how the internet will affect China. It is how China will affect the internet.



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