Global Media and Communication

Article

From *Steamed Bun* to *Grass Mud Horse*: *E Gao* as alternative political discourse on the Chinese Internet

Global Media and Communication
7(1) 33–51

DOI: 10.1177/1742766510397938
gmc.sagepub.com
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Bingchun Meng
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract
This article examines *e gao* (online spoofs) as a popular form of political expression which has recently emerged on the Chinese internet. I first introduce a cultural approach to internet-mediated political communication that emphasizes discursive integration and the mutual constitution of communicative activity and subjectivity. I then discuss how these two dimensions are configured in the specific media ecology in China with regard to the emergence of *e gao*. I will analyse the political implications of *e gao* through a close reading of the two most influential cases. Granted that these online spoofs neither qualify as rational debates aiming to achieve consensus nor have produced any visible policy consequences, but they constitute a significant component of civic culture that offers both political criticism and emotional bonding for all participants.

Keywords
alternative communication, China, *e gao*, internet, netizens, online spoof

The ostensible tensions between China's authoritarian regime and the rapid growth of decentralizing communication networks have provoked a great deal of scholarly interest in the last decade. Many researchers have been exploring whether the internet will have an impact on the democratization of China, and if so, what kind of impact that will be. This is certainly a question with no simple answer, as so many social, political and technological factors need to be taken into consideration. Some researchers focus on how the Chinese government has been shaping and controlling the usage of new technology, from

Corresponding author:
Bingchun Meng, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.
Email: b.meng@lse.ac.uk

policies aiming at the 'digital leap forward' (Hughes and Wacker, 2003; Qiu, 2004) to regulation of the infrastructure and the operation of internet censorship (Dai, 2000; Deibert, 2002; Tsui, 2003; Zhang, 2006). Others give more attention to the resistance potential of the internet in facilitating political discussion and deliberation, which in some cases have also led to political actions or change in government policies (Yang, 2003a, 2003b; Yu, 2006; Zhou, 2006).

In most of these studies, the internet is conceptualized either as an instrument that could help push forward economic growth or social and political change, or as a contested space where different forces compete for a stronger presence in vociferous conversations. What is less discussed is how the internet as a medium contributes to the formation of new discursive modes and communicative practices. That is to say, news websites, online forums, chat rooms and blogs do not simply extend offline communication into the virtual world, they also transform the ways in which political discussions are conducted. Such discussions may not always live up to the Habermasian ideal of rational deliberation, given the limited level of participation as well as the a-rational forms of expression often involved (Dahlgren, 2005). Nonetheless, I would argue, in contrast to most of the claims in the literature to date, that a better comprehension of the political implications of the Chinese internet requires a broader understanding of mediated political communication, which takes into account burgeoning new forms of expression in the digital environment.

This article examines *e gao* (online spoofs) as a popular form of political expression which has recently emerged on the Chinese internet. To put it simply, *e gao* generally includes all types of audio, visual or textual spoofs, which often take advantage of the transformative capability of digital technology as well as the distribution power of the internet. A good indication of the pervasiveness of this new practice is the hundreds and thousands of results one would get by typing *e gao* into any Chinese-language search engine. Indeed, according to a survey jointly conducted by *China Youth Daily* and Tencent.com,[1] by September 2006 only 1.8 per cent of the 6290 participants were unaware of this new term.

I will first introduce a cultural approach to internet-mediated political communication that emphasizes discursive integration (Baym, 2005) and the mutual constitution of communicative activity and subjectivity. The kind of communication people engage in and the ways in which such communication is conducted contribute to the construction of individuals as conscious subjects. On the other hand, as agents (re)configured in a networked digital environment, netizens are constantly generating new modes of communication, which then adds new layers of meaning to various discourses invoked. I then discuss how these two dimensions are configured in the specific media ecology in China with regard to the emergence of *e gao*. First, although the internet has greatly expanded the communication space for the average Chinese, the government's control mechanisms also evolve as the technology spreads. Facing censorship, *e gao* becomes an alternative means of conducting political discussions using entertainment discourses. Second, *e gao* has evolved in a post-communist China where there has been a long-term discrepancy between official and popular discourses. Enabled by the power of digital technology, *e gao* is a new practice that not only mediates between the two discursive universes, but also among citizens. I will analyse the political implications of *e gao*

through a close reading of the two most influential cases. Granted that these online spoofs neither qualify as rational debates aiming to achieve consensus nor have produced any visible policy consequences, but they constitute a significant component of civic culture that offers both political criticism and emotional bonding for all participants.

Mediated political engagement

From the very beginning, the diffusion of the internet in China has been scrutinized for its political implications. In their content analysis of academic research focusing on the Chinese internet, Kluver and Yang (2005) included 153 English-language articles published since the 1990s in journals of various disciplines. They found that 39 per cent (60 articles) of those articles centred on issues of democracy and human rights, second only to business-oriented studies of the Chinese internet (64 articles). This is consistent with findings from an earlier content analysis of newspaper articles, which concluded that political issues tend to be prominent in US coverage of China's internet (McMillan and Hwang, 2002). Such a focus is hardly surprising, given the great promise that the internet seems to hold in challenging the world's largest remaining authoritarian regime. The difficult task for academic researchers, then, is to not only recognize the myriad manifestations of the challenge but also give contextualized interpretation and assessment. In his book-length treatment of the dynamics between the internet and Chinese politics, Zheng (2007) argues that, although the Chinese state has been able to regulate information and communication technologies to an extent unimaginable elsewhere, the internet still serves as an important platform for politically subversive debates. Studies also reveal how activist groups have been using the internet to their advantage in communicating their agenda, expanding their membership base and mobilizing actions (Yang, 2003a, 2003b; Zhao, 2003; Zhou, 2006).

Nonetheless, it might be problematic if we examine the internet in China only through the pre-formed lens of democratization. Empirically, this could lead to oversimplification of the very diverse activities taking place in Chinese cyberspace, many of which do not pursue any overt political agenda. Theoretically, the democratization framework entails a rather limited view both of politics and of the role of the media in political communication. Within this framework, politics is understood as being directly related to state power, which can be either challenged or reinforced by new communication technologies. The function of the internet, on the other hand, is perceived as being mainly instrumental – it provides information or a communication space that is not available through other media channels.

Based on a broader view of both politics and internet-mediated communication, I propose here a different approach to understanding the political implications of *e gao* practices on the Chinese internet. This approach builds upon two main premises. First, given the discursive integration of news and entertainment that we are already witnessing, it is important to acknowledge political engagement that goes beyond information acquisition and rational deliberation. Traditionally, scholars maintain a clear boundary between news and entertainment media. While the former are expected to inform and engage the public during democratic political processes, the latter is often viewed as merely providing amusement and distraction. This differentiation also leads to theses

which criticize the negative impact the media have had on civic engagement, including, among many other manifestations, the tabloidization of news, the fragmentation of audiences and the cultivation of the illusion of participation (see e.g. Freie, 1998; Gitlin, 1998; Postman, 1985; Putnam, 2000; Sustein, 2002). However, more recent scholarly works have noted not only the increasingly blurred distinction between the two genres (e.g. Rantanen, 2009), but also the implications of such conflation for political engagement (Couldry et al., 2007; Jones, 2006). As Carpini and Williams (2001: 161) point out, 'politics is built on deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are embedded in the seemingly non-political aspects of public and private life', therefore entertainment media can often provide important cultural resources that stimulate social and political debate. The UK-based empirical study by Couldry et al. (2007) of people's media diaries also reveals that mediated public connection, which is oriented towards issues requiring a common solution, goes far beyond news consumption and is sustained via many other forms of storytelling. In his argument for a cultural approach to mediated citizenship, Jones (2006) emphasizes that people employ a complex ensemble of media to make sense of political reality and scholars need to look beyond information acquisition in order to understand the integrative aspects of media usage. Recent studies of Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* (Baym, 2005), of the cartoon series *The Simpsons* (Gray, 2006), and of various other popular culture formats (Corner and Pels, 2003; Harold, 2004; van Zoonen, 2005) provide further empirical evidence of how politics and entertainment often converge in today's media landscape. Recognizing such discursive integration is important for our analysis here. On the surface *e gao* in China are just playful spoofs not intended to inform the public about serious political matters, yet both the encoding and the decoding of these spoofs involves a wide array of critiques of social political issues. I will offer a more detailed exploration of these critiques later in this article.

The second premise is that the internet and its users are mutually constitutive. The concept of 'mediation' is particularly helpful, as it foregrounds the interactive process between media and the specific environment in which this is adopted. As Silverstone (2005: 189) eloquently puts it, 'mediation is a fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded'. In studying the newly emerged phenomenon of *e gao* in Chinese cyberspace, we shall first examine the kind of context that gives rise to this practice and the extent to which it is due to various barriers to the 'ideal speech situation' that *e gao* emerged as an alternative format for political expression. On the other hand, it is equally important to examine how technological features of the internet contribute to the popularity of *e gao* and what this phenomenon indicates about the changing relationships between new media and their users. Using satire and parody to make social comments is, after all, an age-old practice, yet it is the diffusion of digital technologies that affords such activity new features. Spoofsters can now easily integrate multi-media materials from various sources and make direct changes to these, hence achieving more radical recontextualization and reinterpretation. The blurred boundary between author and audience indicates an unstable power relation between those who speak and those who listen. While *e gao* pieces make use of established artistic works, they themselves are also exposed to further spoofs in a continuing process of collective meaning making.[2] This confirms Poster's (1995: 13) observation that the internet 'seems to encourage the

proliferation of stories, local narratives without any totalizing gestures and it places senders and addressees in symmetrical relations'. For Poster, the new communication practice enabled by networked digital technology constitutes a postmodern subjectivity that is characterized by instability, multiplicity and diffusiveness (Poster, 1995, 2006). Under such circumstances, it will be less productive to try and locate a singular public sphere that fulfils the democratic function than to examine multiple communicative sites where heterogeneous expressions are constantly generated and circulated. As many have pointed out when critiquing the original Habermasian notion of the public sphere, the image of a unified rational space for political deliberation is not only inaccurate as a historical account (Curran, 1997; Schudson, 1992), but also unsustainable as a normative ideal (e.g. Benhabib, 1992; Dahlgren, 2005; Fraser, 1992). In fact, Mouffe (1999: 757) echoes the postmodernist view on multiple subjectivity when she argues for an agonistic plurality that is receptive to 'the multiplicity of voices that contemporary pluralist society encompass and to the complexity of their power structure'. Similar to Fraser's (1992) recognition of 'subaltern counter-publics', Mouffe also believes that a plurality of oppositional discourses is central to political participation.

Locating political discourses on the Chinese internet

An understanding of *e gao* culture should start from an elaboration of the name itself. This word is so new it is not yet listed in any Chinese dictionaries. Some have traced *e gao* to the Japanese word 'kuso', which can mean 'damned', 'funny', 'nonsense', 'idiocy' or 'farces', depending on the context (Wu, 2007). The official English-language newspaper *China Daily* defines it this way: '*E gao* is a popular subculture that deconstructs serious themes to entertain people with comedy effects … the two characters 'e' meaning 'evil' and 'gao' meaning 'work' combine to describe a subculture that is characterized by humour, revelry, subversion, grass-root spontaneity, defiance of authority, mass participation and multi-media high-tech' (Huang, 2006). While this definition captures the main features of *e gao*, it indicates a certain uneasiness with the subversive aspect by trying to designate *e gao* as having a comic role. At first, *e gao* works were mostly pictures transformed in Photoshop, such as the famous *Little Fatty* (Xiao pang) series that inserts the face of a chubby teenage boy into many movie posters or news photos. Later on, video spoof became the major format for *e gao* online. By the end of 2006, two of the leading Chinese portal sites, sina.com and netease.com, had both come up with their own top-10 list of online video spoofs. These popular works utilize visual materials ranging from the black and white Soviet war film *Lenin in 1918* to the Hollywood blockbuster *Matrix*, and touch upon topics from media corruption in China to the war in Iraq.

In terms of artistic tradition, *e gao* is nothing ground-breaking. In literature, parody as a genre can be dated back to ancient Greece, where a *parodia* was a narrative poem imitating the style and prosody of epics 'but treat[ing] light, satirical or mock-heroic subjects' (Dentith, 2000: 10). In visual art, Dadaism, Surrealism and Situationism all used innovative techniques in an attempt to attribute new meaning to existing objects or artistic expression. A famous example is Marcel Duchamp's Dadaist painting entitled *LHOOQ*, which added a goatee and a moustache to Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. In contemporary pop

culture, culture jamming attempts to 'reverse and transgress the meaning of cultural codes' (Cammaerts, 2007) by disrupting mainstream cultural institutions and corporate advertising. Culture jammers question the political assumptions behind a highly commercialized culture by reconfiguring corporate logos, billboards, trademarks, product images, fashion statements, etc. (Cammaerts, 2007; Harold, 2004; Pickerel et al., 2002). *E gao* shares with all these predecessors an anti-establishment spirit and the technique of critiquing through parody. Yet it is the communication context of the Chinese internet that renders *e gao* practice politically significant in terms of challenging the dominant order at both structural and discursive levels. I will explicate these two aspects in the rest of this section.

The structural dimension mainly relates to how the internet as a communicative space is configured, which includes a wide range of legal, social, economic, cultural and technological arrangements (Dahlgren, 2000). For internet users in China, censorship has been an integral part of all these arrangements from the very beginning. Many earlier studies documented the tactics of Chinese censors (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Tsui, 2003; Zittrain and Edelman, 2003). In 2007, Cai Mingzhao, Vice Director of China's State Council Information Office,[3] reiterated that Chinese online media in all its forms must 'have a firm grasp of correct guidance, creating a favourable online opinion environment for the building of a harmonious society' (cited in MacKinnon, 2009). The Open Net Initiatives (2005) also found China's internet filtering system to be 'the most sophisticated in the world'.

In fact, the commonly used term 'Great Firewall' is far too simplistic to capture the essence of such a sophisticated system. For one thing, by clearly drawing an analogy with China's Great Wall, this metaphor refers only to one layer of the filtering mechanism that prevents Chinese netizens from accessing 'harmful' website hosted overseas (Tsui, 2007). In her recent study of how Chinese blog service providers (BSP) censor user-generated content, MacKinnon (2009) reveals another important layer of internet censorship targeting domestic websites hosted inside the Great Firewall. Not only does the extent of censorship by each BSP vary drastically, but the techniques used are also proven to be diverse, indicating a rather decentralized controlling mechanism. As Zhao (2008) points out, facing the challenge of the internet as a decentralizing medium, the Chinese Communist Party's response is 'the decentralization of control' (2008: 33). Key documents on internet regulation always emphasize that every individual and company is responsible for what is published on its part of the network (Tsui, 2003), resulting in a multi-layered, self-censoring structure. For individual users, the posting of politically sensitive content could lead to disciplinary actions ranging from the deleting of the post to physical arrest. The fact that there have never been any directives specifying exactly what kind of content is objectionable can actually make control more effective – since users are not sure where the boundary is, they could end up being more cautious than necessary in censoring themselves. The technological convergence in the new media environment has also turned internet service providers into content regulators. The dispersed responsibility system means that in order for these companies to maintain their business, they need to take precautions by closely monitoring content on their websites. Depending on how individual companies interpret regulatory directives and carry out this filtering, the end result is far less monolithic than the 'Great Firewall' image implies.

This structural feature of the Chinese internet has profound implications for how people speak up via the network. Compared with the concentration of resources in traditional media outlets such as television or newspapers, the internet has created unprecedented opportunities for ordinary people to take part in media production and distribution. Bennett (2003) contends that new media has enabled not only the 'production of high quality content by ordinary people', but also 'the transmission of that content across borders and continents' (2003: 25). Compared with users in a democratic setting though, Chinese netizens face the additional barrier of a decentralized censorship scheme that combines coercive measures (e.g. deleting posts, arresting dissidents, etc.) with self-censorship. The cost of taking part in activities directly challenging the authority of the government or the Party can be very high for internet users in China. Under these circumstances, making fun of the establishment through online spoofs becomes a safer route of communication. Not unlike Marx and his contemporaries, who used the 'underground languages' of parody and irony to evade censorship in 19th-century Germany (Rose, 1978), *e gao* is a stylistic means of 'smuggling ideas past a censor' (1978: 81) for Chinese internet users. The control over political discussion and the difficulty of articulating a counter-hegemonic agenda in the Chinese context have only made it more important to explore political discourses in non-conventional formats.

At the discursive level, the internet enters into, as well as contributing to, the diversification of political discourses in contemporary China. When characterizing social and political change in post-communist China, many have pointed out the increasing tension between the state and society, which is largely reflected in the discrepancy between official and popular discourses (Esarey and Xiao, 2008; He, 2008; Link et al., 2001; Perry, 2007). As much as Party and government officials still exert supervision and censorship, there has been a 'vigorous proliferation' of popular forms of expression and communication that undermine state control (Link et al., 2001: 2). Or, to quote from Elizabeth Perry (2007: 10), China has 'witnessed the development of the 'hidden transcript' of unobtrusive dissent'. At one end of the spectrum, there is the ritualistic rhetoric of official ideology that promotes the superiority of socialism, the leadership of the Communist Party, the healthy development of the economy, the importance of political stability, and so on and so forth. On the other side of the discursive spectrum, however, popular discontent and grievance are manifested through a variety of channels, such as *shunkouliu* (rhythmic satirical sayings) (Link and Zhou, 2001), *menlian* (doorway couplets) (Thornton, 2002), SMS (Short Message Service) (He, 2008), or even body cultivation practices like *Falun Gong* (Thornton, 2002; Zhao, 2003). In this 'dualistic discourse universe' (He, 2008), the role of the internet goes beyond merely adding another channel to popular expression. The two distinctive features of the internet as a medium, namely interactivity and networking capacity, have made it feasible for citizens to counter official discourses as well as to interact among themselves in new ways.

For online spoofsters, the content output of both mainstream commercial media and state media is simultaneously the main resource for their creation and the main target of critique. Although popular discourses in non-digital format, such as *shunkouliu* or *menlian,* bear a similar co-dependent relationship with the official discourse universe, none of these directly appropriates official media content (video footages, soundtracks,

etc.) as *e gao* does. As Poster (2006) differentiates, in the analogue era one could only engage with printed texts by scribbling in the margin, while in the digital period it is very easy to make alterations to original texts and distribute the new version through digital networks. This indicates an important shift in terms of the relationship between author and reader or between storyteller and audience. The dichotomy is now rather fluid and changeable in the digital environment. *E gao* is average people's attempts to 'talk back' to those who previously monopolized communication resources by both political and economic means. In addition, online spoofs mediate between netizens themselves who form interpretive communities by accessing, discussing, distributing and revising *e gao* works. It is during what Dahlgren (2005: 149) would call the 'discursive interactional process' that internet users constitute public and online public spheres are further extended and pluralized.

In sum, the internet contributes to the formation of new political discourses in several ways. At the structural level, it provides an alternative space to traditional media, which is subjected to more centralized control. While such an alternative platform competes with traditional media in attracting attention as well as advertising revenue, it also develops an increasingly symbiotic relationship with traditional media in pushing forward the communicative frontier for Chinese users. For example in the high-profile Sun Zhigang case[4] and the Chong Qing 'nail house' story,[5] new media were effectively utilized in combination with traditional media to generate momentum for public engagement. But the internet is not just a tool of struggle. As Guobin Yang (2009) contends in his book detailing various forms of online activism in China, because contentious expressions are often mediated, media technologies themselves become stakes of contention rather than simply serving as instruments (2009: 84). New images, new genres, new styles, and new rituals are emerging as an integral part of the evolution of the internet. This is why we need to look beyond the traditional genres of political discourses when assessing the potential of new media.

In the following sections, I will present a close reading of the two most influential *e gao* cases in order to investigate the cultural politics of online spoofs: the contexts that contribute to their emergence; the social and political critique implicated in the texts; and the mediating role *e gao* plays between different discourse universes as well as among netizens.

A Bloody Case Over a Steamed Bun

In December 2005, veteran film director Chen Kaige released his latest blockbuster *Promise* (*Wu Ji*) after running a high-profile promotional campaign in various media outlets. Chen is among the so-called 'Fifth Generation' Chinese film directors who drew instant international attention with their early works. In 1993, Chen's film *Farewell My Concubine* won the Golden Palm award at the Cannes Film Festival, but his works in the last decade or so have not been very successful. *Promise* topped all the previous domestic blockbusters, with a budget of RMB 300 million ($37.5 million). All the media coverage before the premier aclaimed this movie as the great come-back of one of the best Chinese directors. The movie is an epic fantasy about love, destiny and revenge. Qing Cheng is a poor and starving orphaned girl who makes a promise to the Goddess

Manshen: in return for beauty and the admiration of every man, she will never have true love. Now a grown and beautiful princess, Qing Cheng regrets her promise. The film opens with Duke Wuhuan besieging the Kingdom, requesting Qing Cheng's hand. Coming to her rescue, General Guang Ming (meaning illumination) and Slave Kunlun both fall in love with her, but neither can have her because of her pre-determined fate. In the meantime, Wuhuan is trying to take revenge on Qing Cheng, who cheated him out of a steamed bun when they were little children. Wuhuan blames this traumatizing experience for turning him into a cold-blooded killer. The story ends in a dramatic fight, with Kunlun and Qing Cheng surviving Wuhuan's crazy vengeance and breaking the curse placed by the Goddess.

Promise turned out to be a great disappointment, despite the heavy promotion. In addition to the negative reviews from both critics and audience, what upset Chen Kaige most was a 20-minute video spoof that became a huge hit on the Chinese internet soon after the movie's release. Titled *A Bloody Case Over a Steamed Bun* (*Steamed Bun* hereafter), the video was made by a 31-year-old sound engineer and freelancer named Hu Ge. Countless blogs and commercial websites provided links to or direct downloading of the short film. Hu Ge's name also became permanently associated with the popularization of online spoofs. Adopting the format of CCTV's famous programme, *China Legal Reports*, Hu turns the original fantasy into a story of criminal investigation. In the programme, a stone-faced anchorman reports the murder of Manager Wang of a recreation company. Hu Ge kept the names of the main characters and some sequences from Chen's movie, but gave everything a present-day spin, thus blurring the boundary between the past and the present, the imaginary and the real. To add to the comic effect of the spoof, he also integrated soundtracks from the Hollywood blockbuster, *Matrix,* a well-known revolutionary song called 'Ode to Red Plum Flower', and several popular love songs. The re-contextualization of these easily recognizable cultural elements creates new layers of meaning for the spoof video that produce a mixed effect of comic relief and criticism.

The primary target of Hu Ge's criticism is of course the movie itself. Hu told a reporter from *The Times* that he was so disappointed after seeing *The Promise* that he decided to have a little fun with the convoluted epic of a girl transformed into a princess (Macartney, 2006). As one of the elite who can command enormous resources for culture production, Chen Kaige was hoping to achieve both commercial success and critical acclaim with *Promise*. The cast features Hong Kong's heart-throb couple Nicholas Tse and Cecilia Cheung, Japanese celebrity Sanada Hiroyuki and Korean star Jang Dong Gun, all supposed to guarantee box office success across East Asia. Chen also tries to appeal to the Western audience through self-orientalization, with a visually slick mixture of costume drama, marshal arts display and exoticism. The end result of these efforts, however, only strikes the Chinese audience as pretentious and empty, failing to establish a connection with their feelings and concerns in the way that the short spoof video does succeed in doing.

The satire is also directed at the State broadcaster. When reporting on the murder case over a steamed bun, the anchorman of '*China Legal Report*' adopts the standardized tone and style that any Chinese audience could easily identify with the typical CCTV news reporting. The language used in revealing and commenting on the case also imitates the ideology-driven indoctrination that is common in CCTV programmes,

including references to a famous speech by Mao advocating 'internationalism spirit'. The supposedly serious reporting of the criminal investigation is also constantly interrupted by commercial breaks featuring products like hair gel, sneakers, sausage, calcium supplements, all of which are endorsed by characters from the movie. The juxtaposition of propagandistic language style and highly commercialized messages not only blurs the boundary between the official and the popular, but also captures the underlying logic of the state media rather well – political control and fully-fledged commercialization have been going hand in hand in the transformation of Chinese media in the last three decades, leaving very little space for grassroots voices.

References to prevailing social problems can also be detected in the playful text of *Steamed Bun.* The murder case turns out to be triggered by the row between Manager Wang of the nightclub and migrant sex worker Qing Cheng over the issue of an unpaid salary. Underground sex industries have been flourishing in post-communist China, despite occasional crackdowns by the public security agency. To name just a few factors that drive the demand side: ongoing commercialization and marketization have contributed to an increasingly consumerist attitude towards the exchange between sex and money; business people regularly treat government officials to 'recreational activities' in karaoke parlours and nightclubs in return for special favours; and the large number of migrant workers who leave their family behind in rural areas are often an obvious market for sex services in urban areas.

It is rather ironic that Qing Cheng, who was a princess in the original movie, is assigned the role of a prostitute in the spoof video. Meanwhile, back-pay for migrant workers is a prevalent social issue that tops the government's policy agenda. In 2004, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao made a commitment in his annual government work report to ensuring that migrant workers get paid on time and in full. But the problem is far from being resolved due to the lack of proper legislation and weak protection of migrant workers' rights in general. Yet another social conflict the spoof video refers to is that between city inspectors (*cheng guan*) and street vendors. General Guang Ming from the movie is now a 'little captain' of city inspectors who has made a name for himself by ruthlessly smashing the shopping stands of unlicensed peddlers. This storyline invokes a scene that urban dwellers in China often witness. Employed by Urban Administrative Bureaus at the municipal level, city inspectors are mainly responsible for the enforcement of urban management, including tackling low-level crime (Li, 2006). Ever since the agency was established 10 years ago, however, there has been strong criticism of their excessive use of force, particularly towards 'illegal' street vendors or migrant workers with no urban residential permit. In the *Steamed Bun* video, while the image shows General Guang Ming having a sword fight with rebels against the King, the voiceover of the anchorman states that the 'little captain' single-handedly destroyed the headquarters of unlicensed petty peddlers, who were all begging for mercy.

By mixing together images from a highly commercialized costume drama with the typical discursive style of the official news media, while making constant reference to contemporary social problems, Hu Ge successfully creates a comic yet subversive text that ridicules the establishment. On the homepage of his personal blog, Hu Ge posted the following statement:

> I am an amateur in video production, which is simply a hobby of mine. These videos are just for expressing some of my personal comments on various issues and for entertaining my family and friends. From now on all my videos will be of this style. If you don't like it, then just don't watch. But please do continue to support me if you like them. My videos, first of all, are not at the expense of any state resource; secondly I do not make a profit by selling any tickets, and I never impose them on any unwilling audience. (http://blog.sina.com.cn/huge, accessed 10 February 2009)

Three main points emerge from this statement: first, Hu Ge intentionally chose the satirical style to make comments on social issues; second, he expects a certain degree of audience participation by calling for the sharing and support of his work; and third, Hu Ge clearly differentiates his production from the mainstream state-sanctioned media production that not only takes up much more resources but also is imposed upon an 'unwilling audience'.

Tens of thousands of netizens have not only participated in appreciating and disseminating this *e gao* piece, some have also taken an active role in recreating and enriching the meaning of Hu's work. Soon after the *Steamed Bun* became popular on the internet, the enraged director Chen Kaige threatened to sue Hu for destroying the integrity of his copyrighted work, saying that Hu was not 'authorized' to make changes to his movie (Macartney, 2006). Chen's attempt to use copyright law as a means of suppressing criticism provoked strong reactions from Chinese netizens. Wang Xiaofeng (2006), a famous blogger and music critic, posted several pieces on his blog praising Hu Ge as a 'people's artist' and accusing Chen Kaige of being 'shameless'. An eight-minute video titled *The Trouble over a Steamed Bun* soon appeared online, offering a satirical narrative of the incident. The video adopted a similar parodic style, putting together clips from Hu's *Steamed Bun*, Hong Kong comedy movies, and popular television shows to comment on the confrontation between Chen and Hu. Other related *e gao* works include a song called 'Three Treasures of Luck – A 'Steamed Bun' Version' (*jixiang sanbao mantou ban*), which borrowed the tune of a popular song 'Three Treasures of Luck', but with lyrics that again made fun of the disputes over *Steamed Bun*. The lawsuit was later dropped by the director, partly due to the strong reaction from netizens, but Hu Ge has since been viewed as almost a cyber hero who represents the power of grassroots voices.

Grass Mud Horse

While the *Steamed Bun* incident can be traced to one initiator, the *Grass Mud Horse* story developed in a typically rhizomatic fashion, which is characterized, according to Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) conceptualization, by non-linear connectivity and heterogeneity. In a sense, this more recent *e gao* case embodies even better the way the internet has enabled decentralized yet effective communication that challenges the hegemonic order. Not only did *Grass Mud Horse* appear on the Chinese internet spontaneously – nobody knows who coined the term first, but this imaginary animal also triggered more diverse *e gao* practices than just video spoofs, resulting in a multitude of new modes of expression.

The beginning of 2009 saw another wave of tightened internet control in China. On 5 January, the Ministry of Public Security, together with six other government agencies,[6]

announced the latest campaign against 'low and vulgar practices on the Internet'. The China Internet Illegal Information Reporting Centre, under the Internet Society of China, simultaneously released a list of websites containing 'large amounts of low and vulgar content that violates social morality and damages the physical and mental health of youth' (see CIIRC website at http://net.china.com.cn/qzl/txt/2009-01/08/content_2677688.htm). For Chinese internet users, this sort of cleansing campaign, which is often launched in the name of protecting vulnerable youth, is not new. What is different this time is that all the top five most popular websites, Sina, Sohu, Tencent, Baidu and Netease, were named as providing vulgar content in certain sectors of their sites and were forced to issue a public apology. Google China also published a statement on their official blog vowing to 'build a green web'. In addition, popular social networking sites such as Xiaonei and Douban, none of which are commonly perceived as 'unhealthy' sites, were required to 'clean up' their content as well. By mid-February, more than 1900 websites and 250 blogs had been shut down – only some were overtly pornographic sites, the rest were platforms where political and other sensitive issues were discussed. Xiao Qiang, an adjunct professor at the University of California Berkeley and long-time observer of Chinese internet censorship, called the 2009 campaign 'the most vicious crackdown in years' (Wines, 2009). While CCTV backed the government effort by reporting on their prime time evening news that the cleansing campaign was 'widely acclaimed by the masses' (http://news.cctv.com/special/zhengzhidisuzhifeng/01/index.shtml), protesting voices soon began to surge onto the internet, among which stories about a *Grass Mud Horse* drew the widest attention.

First, an encyclopaedia entry on *Grass Mud Horse* appeared in the Chinese counterpart of Wikipedia, *Baidu Baike*, introducing this supposedly rare species of horse that looks similar to an alpaca. In Chinese, the name is pronounced *cao ni ma*, which sounds very much like the profane phrase meaning 'f*** your mother', except with different tones and completely different written characters. According to the original *Baidu* article, the *Grass Mud Horse* lives in Mahler Gebi (resembling another dirty word along the same lines) Desert. Some variants of the animal are known as *wo cao ni ma* (resembling 'I f*** your mother'), which can only eat *wo cao* (meaning 'fertile grass', but also sounds like 'I f***'), while another variant, called *kuang cao ni ma* (resembling 'f*** your mother crazily'), is referred to as the king of *Grass Mud Horses*. The biggest enemy that the *Grass Mud Horse* faces is the River Crab (pronounced '*he xie*', which resembles the pronunciation of 'harmony' or 'harmonious'). Since the Chinese Communist Party began to promote the ideal of the 'harmonious society' with the hope of reducing social tensions and conflicts, 'being harmonized' has become a euphemism often used by netizens to refer to the act of censorship. It is quite obvious that the dirty pun of *Grass Mud Horse* represents the average internet users' anger and frustration at censorship, and with the help of digital technology this unique form of expression is evolving into a collective attempt at resistance.

As the phrase spreads, it has triggered more and more *e gao* practices that are shared, distributed and celebrated by millions of people. On *Baidu Baike*, a new entry was created for the so-called '10 mythical creatures', among which the *Grass Mud Horse* tops the list. Other fabricated animals include the *Fa Ke You* (literally French-Croatian Squid, phonetically resembles 'f*** you'), the *Guan Li Yuan* (literally Stork-Fox Ape,

phonetically resembles 'Administrator', referring to those who monitor websites and discussion forums), etc. All of these appear to be just unusual names for some rare species, yet all have 'low and vulgar' or even obscene connotations. Satirical video spoofs are popping up. A YouTube children's song about the *Grass Mud Horse* drew nearly 1.4 million viewers (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAJ4&feature=related). In the music video, children sing in sweet and innocent voices about how these perseverant horses finally beat the river crabs and become the ultimate survivor in the Mahler Gebi Desert. A grass mud horse cartoon has logged a quarter of a million more views (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2Fl3q5gZNc). A nature documentary on the horse's living habits that parodies the CCTV series *Animal World* attracted 180,000 more hits (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j21lJSwnqj8&NR=1).

The spoof even inspired a new business venture. In March 2009, a toy manufacturer in Guang Zhou produced their first batch of 150 *Grass Mud Horse* soft toys with official birth certificates, issued by the Mahler Gebi Mystical Creatures Bureau. The toys come in brown and white, named Mahler and Gebi respectively, and sell for 40 Yuan (about $6) each. To accompany these, a user's and feeding manual have been created, which include information such as 'in order to raise the animal well, only feed grass, never let them drink *San Lu* milk' (Fan, 2009). This obviously refers to the earlier scandal of *San Lu* milk powder that caused the death and serious health problems of many infants across China. The marketing of these toys is solely internet-based. Several websites have been created, not only to sell the alpaca-like stuffed animals, but also to publicize all kinds of follow-up stories using Mahler and Gebi as the main characters.[7]

Nobody would have anticipated that a campaign that was supposed to clean up 'low and vulgar' content on the internet would end up giving birth to a foul-named animal that symbolizes discontent with censorship. Within two months, the dirty pun of the *Grass Mud Horse* had developed into a virtual carnival that drew wide participation in a variety of formats, from fake encyclopaedia entries to video spoofs and the creation of new toys and comic stripes. Thanks to the distributional power and interactivity of digital technologies, commentaries of different styles from various sources were feeding each other to generate further momentum for collective resistance against censorship. After *The New York Times* reported on the *Grass Mud Horse* incident in March 2009 (Wines, 2009), an administrative order from the Chinese government started to appear on major online forums warning site monitors as well as average users not to promote anything related to the 'horse' and the 'crab' anymore, because the whole issue had been 'elevated to a political level' (Lam, 2009). This is typical of how censorship is conducted in the Chinese media – there is no clearly documented guidelines, but the unidentified voice behind the 'administrative orders' responds to current affairs in a swift manner and the orders get circulated even more effectively nowadays in the digital media environment. Far from clearing away the dirty phrase though, the new order only prompted more innovative strategies to spread the word, for example a new Chinese character was created which combines components from 'grass', 'mud' and 'horse', and narratives of the legends of the horse continued to proliferate on the Chinese internet. In the process, the internet serves as more than an instrument for disseminating information, it plays the key role of mediating the connection among Chinese internet users so as to main the shared concern of a public issue and the dispersed participation of a public debate.

Although derived from a completely different context, Bakhtin's (1984) theorization of medieval carnivals sheds light on our understanding of *e gao* on the Chinese internet. Two fundamental aspects of carnival festivities are particularly relevant. First, carnival constituted a second life for people living in the Middle Ages, a life that was 'organized on the basis of laughter' (Bakhtin, 1984: 8) and opposed the official life organized by the Church. Bakhtin points out that during carnival 'there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life' (1984: 9). In a society where government control of public life is rigid, the internet enables a digital version of medieval marketplaces, where different kinds of interactivity and new modes of bonding are generated. In their rhizomatic participation of *e gao* activities, Chinese netizens form an alternative imagined community that defies the official order. Second, the temporary defiance of hierarchies and norms gives rise to new types of speech that are characterized by 'abusive language', 'insulting words or expressions' and 'profanities and oaths', all of which are speech patterns excluded from the official discourse (Bakhtin, 1984: 16). The case of the *Grass Mud Horse* vividly illustrates the power of foul language in ridiculing and resisting official attempts to control content on the internet. While the ruling elites are making every effort to regulate speech online, Chinese netizens have found a discursive style that combines humour, satire, vulgarity and a-rationality. Such a new form of speech not only exposes the absurdity and unsustainability of hierarchical control, but also effectively provides a channel for transgression and subversion for those who are at the lower end of the power structure.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore the political implications of online spoofs, based on a broader understanding of both politics and internet-mediated political communication. Studies set in a Western democratic context have noted the profoundly complex role that non-factual media content has played in the organization of public life (Baym, 2005; Cammaerts, 2007; Carpini and Williams, 2001; Couldry et al., 2007; Dahlgren, 2005; Jones, 2006). Drawing insights from this research, but also bearing in mind the specific Chinese context, I have argued that in order to locate political discourses on the Chinese internet, we need to go beyond rational, informational content directly linked to policy deliberation or political mobilization in a conventional sense. *E gao* provides a good example of the conjunction between the cultural and the political through a discursive mode that integrates elements of entertainment, politics and popular culture. Although *e gao* activities may appear to be rather incoherent or even chaotic, they represent innovative strategies for articulating social critique and fostering societal dialogue in a heavily controlled speech environment. As Thornton (2002) points out, 'political opportunity structures' differ widely across the political spectrum; dissenters in repressive authoritarian regimes face much more limited resources for disseminating their views than dissenters in a democratic environment (2002: 663). Granted that participants in *e gao* do not form a coherent dissenting group due to their dispersed practices, but they do face similar structural constraints when trying to engage in political discussions, hence a shared

appreciation of spoofing tactics. The playful and often a-rational texts of *e gao* are partially born out of the difficulty of conducting serious rational debate on the Chinese internet. Meanwhile, the comic effect produced by these spoofs can have political connotations as it satirizes those who possess the power to define the parameters of appropriate forms of speech.

As a new form of speech, enabled by digital technology and communication networks, *e gao* is distinct from other popular discourses in the analogue era in its *direct* appropriation of official media content. *E gao* plays an important mediating role between different discourse universes, as well as among average internet users. Discourses of the establishment, be they from mainstream commercial media or government propaganda, supply spoofsters with vocabularies and targets for critique. The analysis of both the *Steamed Bun* and the *Grass Mud Horse* cases demonstrates the intricate intertextuality of *e gao*, which draws upon other types of communication genres, discourses and individual texts. In order to comprehend the jokes implicated in *e gao*, one needs to first grasp all the reference points. It is in this sense that comedy can be viewed 'as setting up inside and outside positions, which renders it politically potent' (Gray, 2006: 105). The participation in and sharing of *e gao* activities cultivates decentralized grassroots communities where a sense of belonging is constructed through a common understanding of jokes and satire. Interactivity in the digital environment further increases such emotional bonding among netizens, as average users can easily make a contribution to any *e gao* text and enrich its meaning. This resembles what Bakhtin emphasizes about the participatory nature of medieval carnivals: 'carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people' (Bakhtin, 1984: 7). Not necessarily leading to organized political actions, such participation can be deemed political in the sense of maintaining a general orientation toward issues that go beyond private life and invoke common concerns.

As much as the *e gao* phenomenon is deeply embedded in the specific social-political context of China, it also brings to light important aspects of internet-mediated political communication. For one thing, it points to the inadequacy of studies of the online public sphere that only look at rational discourses. As Dahlgren (1995: 86) puts it, 'any model of communication which tries to eliminate the a-rational, in the end risks becoming irrational'. After all, politics is as much about contention and emotion as about consensus and rationality. In addition, as discussed throughout this article, *e gao* shares an artistic tradition with parody and satire, as well as an anti-establishment spirit with medieval carnivals, but digital technology and networks certainly bring new dimensions to this phenomenon. The dynamic and diverse activities involved in Chinese netizens' *e gao* practices highlight the importance of detecting new modes of communication while acknowledging historical connections, which is always crucial for our understanding of new media.

Acknowledgements

The author wants to thank Professor Robin Mansell of the London School of Economics and Political Science, Professor Guobin Yang of the Barnard College, and the two reviewers for their helpful comments.

Notes

1. Tencent is a leading operator in the Internet community in China. Its instant messaging service platform, 'QQ', is the most popular online chat software in China.
2. For example, Hu Ge, the most prominent spoofster who made a name for himself with the video *A Bloody Case Over a Steamed Bun*, later saw his *e gao* pieces spoofed by others.
3. The State Council Information Office is the government body whose 'Internet Management Division' is in charge of censoring online content.
4. Sun Zhigang died on March 20, 2003 in a detention centre in Guangzhou after being beaten by the police. He had been taken into custody three days earlier because he failed to show a temporary residence permit when the police asked him for it. After a metropolis newspaper reported on the news of his death, Chinese internet users filled online forums and chat rooms with debates and protests, which is believed to have eventually contributed to the abolishment of the Custody and Repatriation system.
5. A nail house refers to those families who refuse to relocate without receiving proper compensation from developers. In 2007 a nail house in Chong Qing became famous after a blogger named Zhou Shuguang (Zola) reported on the incident, which was then picked up by both mainstream Chinese media as well as Western newspapers such as *The New York Times*.
6. These are the Information Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television and the General Administration of Press and Publication.
7. For example, this is the Taiwanese site for the toys: http://www.maleandgebi.tw/; this one is for customers in Malysia: http://mymaleandgebi.blogspot.com/; and this site specializes in publishing original comics using Mahler and Ge Bi as main characters: http://blogtd.net/category/abc/

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Biographical note

Bingchun Meng is Lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science.