

Politicizing Images: Censorship and Iconic Resistance in Chinese Cyberspace

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Abstract

The Chinese internet has received huge academic attention since almost the very beginning. Though there are various other approaches to this research field (e.g. Herold and Marolt, 2011, Lai and To, 2012, Ye et al., 2011, Golub and Lingley, 2008), the political approach to the Chinese internet has comprised a very important part, involving plenty of political theories such as democracy, civil society, public sphere (MacKinnon, 2010, Zhang, 2006, Sima, 2011, Tai, 2006, Yang, 2003a) and authoritarian deliberation (MacKinnon, 2011, Jiang, 2010, Kalathil and Boas, 2001). Internet censorship is a core theme of Chinese internet politics research, but scholars focus mainly on regulations, infrastructure (such as the Great Firewall, GFW) (Deibert, 2002, Qiu, 1999) and operation of internet censorship (Bamman et al., 2012, Thornton, 2010). Only a small group of scholars have touched on resistance against internet censorship (Clayton et al., 2006, Leberknight et al., 2012); for those who do emphasize internet resistance, they focus mainly on technological dimensions such as circumvention tools and hack activities (Hughes and Wacker, 2003). The symbolic dimension (such as euphemistic words and satirical images) has been rarely studied. This paper tries to fill this research gap. It approaches from the bottom-up and use case studies as the main research method. It firstly gives a general literature review on existing studies about Chinese internet censorship and resistance, and then explores the political possibilities of images as iconic resistance to internet censorship. It concludes by discussing the symbolic dimension of internet politics (particularly, the power and limitation of symbolic resistance) in Chinese cyberspace.

The Political Dimension of Chinese Internet

The political dimension of the Chinese internet has become a very important theme of Chinese internet studies, involving various political theories such as democracy, civil society, and public sphere. Many scholars agree that historically the internet has brought unprecedented freedom of speech to Chinese people (MacKinnon, 2010, Zhang, 2006) because in the pre-internet era information flow was largely controlled by the authorities and ordinary people left little, if any, institutional space to speak out. The internet functions as a new alternative channel for speaking truth: many serious social problems which are seldom touched on by traditional media are disclosed in cyberspace (Yang and Calhoun, 2007, Yang, 2009). It has also become a convenient method of social mobilization, which sometimes causes changes to social reality (Hand, 2006). Those who see the influence of the internet towards Chinese politics and society as positive, emphasize the power of the internet (Yang, 2009, Yang, 2011), with case studies of environmental activism (Sima, 2011), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Yang, 2005), anti-corruption movements (Zhou, 2009), rights advocacy, and dissident and activism (Tai, 2015). From this point of view, the internet functions as an important power, or represents an online civil society or a

virtual public sphere (Tai, 2006, Zheng, 2008, Yang, 2003b, Li, 2010, Jiang, 2011). The internet has greatly empowered the weak within the “battle” (Xiao, 2011) or “cat and mouse game” (Endeshaw, 2004, Thompson, n.d.) between the strong (the authorities) and the weak (e.g., dissidents) and the networking function of the internet is able to bring incremental changes to the Chinese society through “constructing loosely structured networks” (Shen et al., 2009), or enabling people to “dig the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s grave” (Kristof, 2005).

The internet may have a liberating potential for Chinese people, but the Chinese government is very smart in subverting the technological possibilities that the internet offers (Herold and de Seta, 2015), which becomes another heated topic. The Chinese government has used various methods to control the internet, including infrastructure of censorship (e.g., the GFW) (Deibert, 2002, Neumann, 2001, Winter and Crandall, 2012), regulations (Harwit and Clark, 2001, Taubman, 2002, Lacharite, 2002) and concrete punishment (Zheng, 2008). Bearing these facts in mind, some believe that the emancipatory potential of the Chinese internet is very limited (Abbott, 2001) and others argue that the internet does not automatically bring democracy to China but rather the role of the internet in China is “more likely to involve political evolution – not revolution” (MacKinnon, 2008). Metaphorical discourses such as “flying freely but in the cage” (Huang, 1999) and “dancing with shackles” (a phrase once used often to describe the situation of journalism in China) within Chinese internet studies reveal scepticism of the role of the internet in promoting democracy in China or leading to social change (Yang, 2012). Scholars also question the positive theories (e.g., of the public sphere) about the Chinese internet (Herold, 2011). The Chinese internet, argues Damm (2007), is “more a playground for leisure, socializing, and commerce than a hotbed of political activism” (p.290). However, as Yang and Liu (2014) argue, existing research mainly focuses on how Chinese netizens’ online behaviours are passively affected by internet censorship from a top-down perspective, whereas how Chinese netizens actively manage to bypass the restriction in their everyday online experience has been insufficiently touched upon.

Actually, dimensions of internet resistance have been visited by only a few scholars, though they do not refer explicitly in their research to concepts such as “resistant” or “resistance.” They use specific terms such as digital activism (Leibold, 2011), anti-censorship (Leberknight et al., 2012), discursive struggles (Gleiss, 2015), or focus on resistant dimension of specific platforms (MacKinnon, 2008). Within a culture marked by severe censorship, whilst engaging in small and personal activities such as sending an email, sharing a photo, responding to an article on a blog, people can definitely be pushed to feel the political dimensions. The few researchers who have investigated netizens’ resistance against internet control mainly focus on a small group of people, such as pro-democracy activists who attempt to circumvent internet control policies or the dissidents who are tech-savvy (Deibert, 2002), and mainly focus on technological resistance (Nobori and Shinjo, 2014, Cao, 2015). But how Chinese netizens resist against internet censorship via symbolic means (such as euphemistic words and satirical images) has not been fully investigated.

Furthermore, a few scholars have recently touched upon the discursive dimension of Chinese internet politics (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015, Gleiss, 2015), seeing it from a specific resistant perspective remains rare in current scholarship. This paper will extend the discussion of discursive resistance to a

broader concept of symbolic resistance (including resistant discourses, texts and images), and try to view the resistant cyberculture within an anti-censorship framework. In general, this paper approaches from the bottom-up perspective and uses cases studies as the main research method. It focuses on the phenomenon of online images, investigates its political implication as a form of symbolic resistance, and tries to provide a new perspective with which to view internet censorship and symbolic politics in Chinese cyberspace.

Iconic Resistance to Internet Censorship

Chinese authorities have practiced various methods to control the internet since the very beginning, including not only legislative and institutional methods but also technological means (e.g., IP address blocking, DNS hijacking, website blocking and content filtering) (Fallows, 2008, Farrell, 2007, Dong, 2012, Yang and Liu, 2014). By building the Great Firewall (started in 1996) and other censorship infrastructure, the Chinese Government seems to have built a much sophisticated censorship system (OpenNet Initiative, 2009, Stevenson, 2007, Tai, 2015), which involves both machine and human censors. Machine censors mainly use keyword filtering technology to recognize sensitive texts, and human censors do what machine censors fail to do. Although the Chinese censors have tried to develop image-recognition technology, which was shown in the case of Green Dam Youth Escort when a research institute of the Minister Public Security engaged in developing such technologies (Faris et al., 2009), they have failed to do so, at least so far (MacKinnon, 2009). Since many “healthy” images are treated by automatic censors as “pornographic,” at the current stage, authorities are heavily dependent on human censors to monitor and filter sensitive images. Images have since been greatly utilized by Chinese netizens for anti-censorship purpose. There are three categories of such images in Chinese cyberspace.

Three categories of resistant images

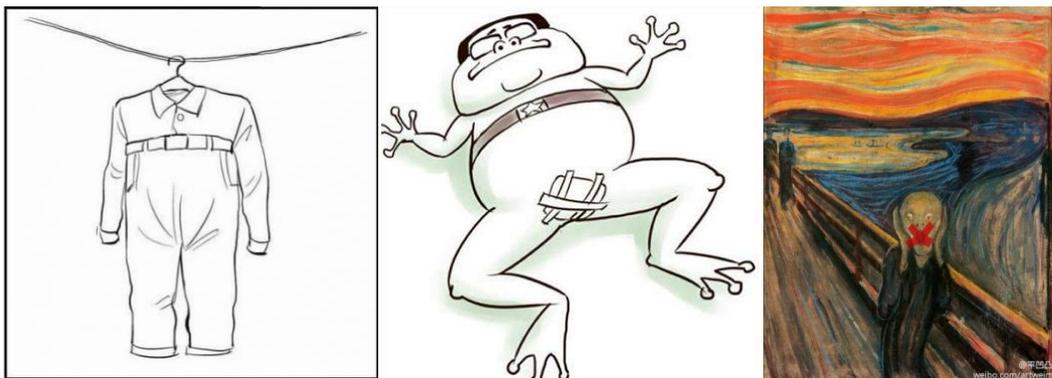
The first category is textual images. Textual images have been greatly seen in social networking sites such as Sina Weibo. Normally, Sina Weibo, like its Western counterpart Twitter, has a word limitation (strictly 140 Chinese characters) for each post. But Sina utilizes a technology of long micro-blogging (chang weibo) and this enables users to publish a long article in an image. Designers of this technology may not have realized that it could later be strategically used as a means of circumvention. By long micro-blogging, users are able to put politically sensitive information into a readable image which, however, is difficult for machine filtering crawlers to recognize. Although such sensitive images can be distinguished by human censors, the huge intensity of labour needed does not guarantee that every instance of these images will be monitored and filtered, and politically sensitive content can be spread to some degree. The second category is the creative usage of pictography. For example, in discussions of Tiananmen Incident, still a political taboo in present-day Mainland China, netizens use “占占人” (zhan zhan ren) to mean “a man in front of two tanks,” and thus to indicate the hero “tank man” in the June 4 Massacre.

Similarly, “占占点” (zhan zhan dian) or “占点占” (zhan dian zhan) means “tanks crush people to death.” These Chinese phrases can hardly be recognized by machine censors (or even human censors) as

sensitive materials, thus gain the possibility of circulation in Chinese cyberspace. This case shows that, when it comes to issues of anti-censorship, images function successfully where words fail, or at least, are an important supplement to discursive expression.

The third category is metaphorical images. Take user-generated images of Jiang Zemin (previous president of PRC, in leadership 1993-2003) for example. Jiang was in office when the Tiananmen Incident took place, and many overseas dissidents believed that Jiang should be held responsible for this event. This is partially the reason why he received huge attention from overseas dissidents and became a subject of heated discussion in both domestic and international social media websites. As a retired leader who is now in his eighties, Jiang has been guessed to be in frail health by overseas media; periodical rumours exist and circulate in cyberspace. In 2011, a rumour appeared that Jiang had died of bladder cancer at Beijing Hospital 301. Both bladder cancer and Hospital 301 soon became sensitive words in Chinese cyberspace. And other relevant information was blocked in Chinese cyberspace. For instance, the word “jiang” (meaning “river” in Chinese) could not be posted during that sensitive period of time. Netizens used many euphemistic phrases to discuss this sensitive topic online, including “xianhuang” (or xiandi, deceased emperor), “naosiwang” (brain death, since Jiang was regarded as the head and brain of the party), “jiabeng” (death of the emperor), “jiahe” (ride crane, meaning to pass away), “xiqu” (go west, to pass away), “shangchuan” (aboard a ship, meaning to pass away), “yongchuibuxiu” (live forever, another euphemism for dying), or “guaile” (hanged, died). Images were creatively used as well. A very popular image depicting a uniform hanging on a line quickly became viral. The uniform is an ironic metaphor for Jiang, since he often dressed himself up with a high belt, while “hanging” in Chinese has the meaning of “die” (gua). So this image is a kind of esoteric expression of “Jiang has died” (also see Branigan, 2011). Another popular image is a toad-like person lying down with a bound up bladder, which indicates death due to bladder problems. Again, with some background knowledge, readers can understand the satirical meaning behind this caricature.

Image 1. Esoteric Images Containing Ironic Meanings (from left to right: a uniform hanging on a line; a toad-like person lying down with a bound up bladder; an amended version of Munch’s The Scream)



The use of metaphorical images to resist internet censorship is widely seen in other situations. For example, in order to show his or her concern about the 24th anniversary of the Tiananmen Incident, a netizen shared the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch’s well-known work *The Scream* (1893) with an

amendment of two pieces of red tape crossed over the agonized figure's mouth (see Pingaotulou, 2014). Since oblique messages with images can survive longer than those in text (Zuckerman, 2014), the usage of images does enable netizens to speak out and practice resistance to internet censorship.

Political cartoons in Chinese cyberspace

The political dimension of images in Chinese cyberspace can also be revealed by political cartoons. Because of internet technologies, many grassroots artists have become active in Chinese cyberspace, some of whom focus on very political issues and quite often utilize political satire in their cartoons, such as Li Xiaoguai, Wu Junyong, Rebel Pepper (Biantai Lajiao) and Crazy Crab (Fengxie). The first two authors survive in Chinese cyberspace, while the last two cartoonists are both banned.

Rebel Pepper is the screen name for Wang Liming, a Chinese political cartoonist who began his satirical drawings on heated socio-political affairs in 2006. His ironic yet esoteric drawings have gained him a high profile on domestic social networking websites such as Tencent Weibo and Sina Weibo. His accounts on the latter sites had, respectively, 550,000 and 340,000 followers before they were blocked by the authorities. In August 2014, his Chinese social networking accounts became inaccessible, including relevant search results about him on Baidu.com and even his e-shop at Taobao.com. He declared his being blocked by the Chinese authorities on his Twitter account (see remonwangxt, 2014). Later, Strong China Forum (an official background BBS for cyber nationalists, hosted by People's Daily Online) published an article to fustigate Rebel Pepper and fiercely criticize his attachment to Japan and Japanese culture – describing him as a traitor (see Zhangyan, 2014).

The differences between Rebel Pepper's way of speaking and drawing within and outside of the wall are very interesting. He was physically located in Japan when the block happened. After this, he was reportedly to decide that he would throw away the esoteric way of drawing since it could not avoid being on the blacklist. On Twitter, he has since published every original post in traditional Chinese (which is still in use particularly in Taiwan and Hong Kong). Taking into consideration his Mainland Chinese background (where simplified Chinese is used), this activity, as a political statement, shows his discursive resistance towards internet censorship. He builds a connection with other overseas dissidents, by re-tweeting content from the dissidents who also use Twitter, as well as by giving symbolic support to them when needed. The narrative style of his posts, as often seen in other overseas dissidents, is full of irony and black humour. For example, after the Charlie Hebdo shooting, he said this on his Twitter – “Nowadays, the worst thing for a satirical cartoonist who mocks Tu Gong (indigenous communists, a mockery of the CCP) is being put into jail; while in France, mocking religious issues may be shot to death. Thanks again for the mercy of Guidang (your party, the CCP).” [My translation] (Original text refers to remonwangxt, 2015). Similar to other overseas Chinese dissidents, he focuses mainly domestic topics (particularly those sensitive on domestic social networking sites); if non-domestic topics are touched on, they are often referenced back to China.

Crazy Crab is another political cartoonist who is also banned within the GFW. Crazy Crab is a screen name, and his real name is not publically available. Unlike Rebel Pepper, whose real identity is known to

the public (and the authorities as well), anonymity has greatly protected Crazy Crab. But since everything relevant to this screen name is blocked within the GFW, like Rebel Pepper, Crazy Crab has had to shift his active platform to the overseas social networking sites such as Twitter (which he joined in December 2009). According to publically available information, Crazy Crab is an editorial cartoonist for China Digital Times (a U.S.-based, bilingual news website focusing mainly on Chinese internet issues) where he has also sold T-shirts, mugs, bags, among others, with political cartoon images he has drawn. He is the author of Hexie Farm, a personal blog hosted overseas (on a wordpress.com server), where almost all his politically satirical cartoons can be accessed. Inspired by George Orwell's 1945 novel Animal Farm, Crazy Crab constructs the ridiculous Hexie Farm (meaning, Crab Farm or Harmonious Farm) within his cartoons and describes the everyday life of a group of animals (pigs in particular), which obviously mocks the present-day regime under the control of the CCP, and the CCP per se. His resistant attitudes can be clearly revealed in an interview that he hopes to "make change" via his drawings, and to "spread some question marks in the censorship system" (see Crazy Crab, 2014).

Compared with Li Xiaoguai and Wu Junyong, Rebel Pepper and Crazy Crab have more relationships with people (e.g., dissidents) and ideas (e.g., human rights, democracy, and freedom) that the CCP dislikes. They also build a strong social relationship with other dissidents and Western media pro-dissidents. For example, Crazy Crab publishes his works not only on his social networking websites (Twitter, Google+, etc.) but also on China Digital Times, Isunaffairs, Trouw, Cartoon Movement, Public Radio International, Radio France Internationale, Trend, and China Rights Forum. This is the main reason why these publications are banned in Chinese cyberspace. Although the criticism in Li and Wu's cartoons may also be very satirical, metaphorical and esoteric, they can survive in Chinese cyberspace because (like most critics within the GFW) they strategically design their images, and pitch their euphemistic criticism at a degree which the authorities can tolerate. By contrast, political cartoonists such as Rebel Pepper and Crazy Crab who have relatively high-profile are easily censored in Chinese cyberspace – the censors only have to add their names onto the blacklist. But the method of using images to resist censorship cannot be entirely blocked online, since the censorship machine cannot classify every image that contains something sensitive.

The political power of images

Within the GFW, netizens (including ordinary netizens and specialists such as Li Xiaoguai and Wu Junyong) tend to apply much euphemistic and indirect means (including images) to challenge the censors. This kind of resistance, on the one hand, is too tiny to be worthy of further controlling steps for the authorities, on the other hand, in a collective sense, it makes grand internet governance less effective (if not completely futile), and makes it less possible to control people's daily lives in cyberspace. While outside the GFW, resistance is more likely to be direct and straightforward, as revealed in the cases of Rebel Pepper and Crazy Crab. Though these dissident resisters are more likely to be censored in Chinese cyberspace, they may gain high-profile outside the GFW.

Most resistant images in Chinese cyberspace have utilized rhetorical means such as satire and parody and they easily become viral once published. Internet satire and parody functions as “the weapon of the weak” (a phrase in Scott, 1985) and has the potential to generate a chain of related satirical work which can create a satire movement and subject power to sustained shame and ridicule (Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011). The political influence of such resistant images is cast beyond internet censorship issues and on to broad socio-political issues. Although the authorities try to wipe this annoying content from Chinese cyberspace, these images find their way, circulating either underground or in overseas media outlets, as political memes. An emergent dialogue centred on image and remix, as Zuckerman finds (2014), may prove to be a rewarding public sphere, but it is likely to be a very different space for expression than those postulated by theorists like Habermas – this group of users focus more on emotional expression and mobilization than rational discussion or deliberation. The political power of images can be seen particularly in online activism. There are enough cases that environmentalist activities, pro-democracy movements, and feminist activities have greatly utilized images as a powerful tool. A recent case happened in Hong Kong in 2014, in which protesters used the image of an umbrella as a symbol, not only to challenge the Beijing authorities but also to emotionally mobilize more people to participate in their pro-democracy movement. Besides discourses and texts, images help to add an important dimension to the political power of symbolic resistance in Chinese cyberspace.

Internet Politics: A Symbolic Dimension

Internet politics can also be understood through a binary opposition: hard politics and soft politics. Internet technologies seems to have helped extend or challenge the meaning of “hard” politics (which can be roughly described by a cluster of adjectives such as traditional, grand, serious, formal, bureaucratic, institutional and top-down) to a much more “soft” politics (which may be described by another cluster of adjectives such as individual, micro, symbolic, informal, everyday and bottom-up). Soft politics focuses more on power relationships between individuals and institutions, and on political implications of ordinary people’s banal activities (such as consuming and entertainment) and identity politics. Though discourses, texts, images, audios and videos, or various symbols, played important roles in the practice of hard politics before the internet era, they have become an even more important part of soft politics in cyberspace. However, soft politics cannot be understood only as expressive. As discussed in the previous section, images can actually function as a powerful tool for some social movements. Activities of soft politics may instrumentally empower the ordinary netizens and cultivate a new kind of political identity. This soft dimension of politics should be fully recognized particularly in the Chinese internet context (a space often under serious government scrutiny).

We should also bear in mind that although there are various forms of resistance in Chinese cyberspace, most of the time compliance, rather than resistance, is a wise choice for ordinary netizens. The commonly occurring self-censorship well indicates how compliance may be practiced. As discussed in this paper, lots of satirical images are actually products of self-censorship as well – the users cannot speak something straightforwardly and thus have to apply euphemisms in their expressions. Resistance and compliance are actually two sides of the same coin. Albeit, I focus more on the relationship between

compliance and resistance, particularly on compliance as resistance, such as cases of overt compliance with simultaneous covert resistance, strategic silence and similar strategies, in Scott's sense (1985, Scott, 1990). Sometimes, it is the other way around: resistance may sometimes be read as compliance. In a general sense, without the capability to make significant socio-political changes as occurs in large-scale movement of bottom-up rebellion, resistance or politics in a symbolic and everyday sense, seems to be very "trivialized" and "insignificant." However, this fact may not be able to devalue the political significance of everyday symbolic resistance. Internet politics in Chinese cyberspace emphasize micro and symbolic resistance, but it at the same time, share some general themes with traditional, institutional politics. Almost all bottom-up resistance against censorship can be categorized as a struggle by citizens for "freedom of speech." Moreover, many cases of internet resistance (e.g., networked grassroots resistance) in present-day China can be traced back to political issues and problems in the real society, such as food safety, air pollution, polarization between the rich and the poor, corruption, and human rights, on which a close eye is kept by the authorities (from different levels within the power system). This means that internet politics does not merely mean expressive politics, it can definitely refer to real and hard politics (also see Zhao, 2007). Of course, I do not plan to overstate the influences of symbolic resistance, and symbolic politics in general; in the contrary, the influences should be analyzed objectively in specific cases and in specific contexts. The political meaning of iconic resistance in Chinese cyberspace has to be understood in this theoretical sense.

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