

Surviving Online Censorship in China: Three Satirical Tactics and their Impact

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Abstract

What accounts for online satirical campaigns that survive censorship in China where the state has formidable power to censor and manipulate online communication? Through comparative case studies of three attempts to challenge the policies or malpractices of the Chinese state in 2009, this article explains how different satirical tactics can influence the outcomes of online activism. It argues that online satirical campaigns are most likely to survive when activists adopt the tactic of “parodic satire,” whereby activists mimic a specific practice of the state and skilfully transplant it to other contexts. Since the language used by the activists resembles that of the powerful, the tactic allows netizens to exaggerate the internal contradictions of the policies or practices concerned without creating an easily identifiable symbol of resistance in the process. This tactic not only increases the cost to the state of censoring critical messages, but also restrains activists from extending their criticisms of the original subject to other areas. As a result, it increases the chance for the activists to exert insistent pressure on the state.

Keywords: online satire; censorship; parody; irony; resistance; China

The internet has quickly become a popular platform for dissent for the grassroots in China. Although the Chinese state is famous for its immense investment in censoring communication in cyberspace, there is no doubt that online activism sometimes survives state censorship and exerts considerable pressure on the elites.¹ As Yongnian Zheng notes, without online activism, many policy changes would never have been initiated by the state.² Yet, while episodic direct confrontations between the state and activists attract considerable international interest, the more mundane and persistent online satirical campaigns (*egao* 恶搞) have received less systematic attention. With few exceptions, existing studies either see online satire as a politically unimportant literary trick performed by netizens for their own pleasure, or else focus on an overly generalized understanding of

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1 Yang, Guobin 2009.

2 Zheng 2008.

satire, without recognizing that there are critical differences between different forms of satirical expression.

Political satires are not just a form of humour. They have long been used by the grassroots as a safety valve of resistance in many authoritarian regimes where blatant criticism of the state may be censored and punished.³ Furthermore, a large body of literature in political science suggests that successful political satires can create a common cultural experience.⁴ Such an experience can significantly affect the audience's opinions and perceptions of policies, individuals or organizations, and subsequently undermine or enhance the basis of their legitimacy.⁵ Consequently, if a satirical campaign can survive state suppression, it may gradually generate considerable oppositional forces to the powerful.

Since the late 1990s, satire has quickly become an everyday practice in China because the popularization of the internet has allowed a large group of ordinary people to communicate with one another simultaneously to create and circulate satirical ideas in cyberspace.⁶ Satire has become a powerfully inclusive practice that can engage the audience with political issues in a humorous way, thereby attracting an audience that is otherwise apathetic about the issue.⁷ Of course, online satire is not a discrete form of communication and may be performed with little conscious effort.⁸ However, to the extent that it has become an everyday practice for Chinese netizens to collectively express political messages and shape public opinion in an authoritarian context, it is essentially, in Michel De Certeau's words, "tactical in character."⁹ To appreciate the significance of online satire one must look beyond its humorous content and see it as "a participatory activity involving multitudes of people interacting through digital networks," paying particular attention to its logic and outcomes.¹⁰

Given the rapid spread of online satire in China, a number of recent studies have examined the issue, but no consensus has emerged regarding its political impact. While some studies suggest that online satire "provides an alternative locus of power, permitting the transgressing of existing social and cultural hierarchies,"¹¹ others contend that it merely serves to reaffirm the powerless status of the satirist, and that its subversive power is negligible in comparison to the coercive power of the state.¹² One reason that there is no consensus on the issue is that much of the discussion focuses on an overly generalized understanding of satire without recognizing that there are critical differences between different forms of satirical expression. Satire is often defined as the ridicule of

3 Freedman 2009.

4 Young, Holbert and Jamieson 2014.

5 Hoffman and Young 2011; Rill and Cardiel 2014.

6 Tang and Bhattacharya 2011.

7 Freedman 2009, 164.

8 Griffin 1994, 4.

9 De Certeau 1984, xix.

10 Yang, Guobin, and Jiang 2015, 216.

11 Gong and Yang 2010, 3. For similar views, see also Qiang 2011, 52; Yang, Kenneth 2011.

12 Tang and Bhattacharya 2011; Tang and Yang 2011, 688.

a subject with the objective of pointing out its faults,¹³ or even more generally as “messages that include elements of parody or spoof.”¹⁴ Although these definitions are broad enough to encompass the manifold expressions that are considered to be *egao* in Chinese cyberspace, to be a useful concept, satire has to be defined in a more nuanced way.¹⁵

This article describes three prominent forms of online satire in China, namely ironic, parodic and hybrid. Although they all aim to expose the vices of their subject, they follow very different techniques of framing and ridicule to achieve this. Ironic satire ridicules the subject by creating symbols that are external and contradictory to it. Parodic satire, in contrast, mimics the language or logic of the subject and transplants it to a different context. Falling in between the two is hybrid satire, which features elements of both parodic and ironic satire in the process of ridicule. This article argues that parodic satire is more likely than the other two forms to survive state censorship and co-optation because it does not feature a readily recognizable symbol of resistance and can effectively restrain its participants from extending their criticisms of the original subject to other areas.

Survival is of paramount importance to online activism because authoritarian regimes are generally hostile to collective protests.¹⁶ In addition to heavy-handed suppression, the Chinese state can leverage its media and human resources to circumscribe unfavourable online discussions by directly participating in them using a large group of paid commentators (the so-called “fifty cent party”) or incorporating key symbols of the resistance into state-controlled platforms, such as the *People’s Daily News Commentary* (*Renmin ribao renmin shipping* 人民日报人民时评). In doing so, they can redefine the meaning of such discussions.¹⁷ The combination of censorship and co-optation means that activist demands are rarely met in full in the short term. More often, the efficacy of an online satirical campaign hinges on its ability to survive suppression and generate continuous pressure on the powerful.

To illustrate the differences between the three forms of satire and their chances of survival, this article presents three incidents of internet activism in 2009. Each of them involves netizens challenging a specific practice or policy of the state, namely the campaign against internet pornography, the reform of 44 Chinese characters and the opaque investigation into the death of a petitioner. The first and last of these are already well-known examples of ironic and hybrid satire and they were either suppressed or appropriated by the state. The second case, in contrast, is a typical example of parodic satire which eventually prompted the state to retract, albeit reluctantly, its reform initiatives.

13 Kreuz and Roberts 1993, 100.

14 Li, Hongmei 2011, 71.

15 Yang and Jiang (2015) provide a useful classification in their recent study. However, it does not seek to explain the diverse outcomes of online satires.

16 Tarrow 1994; King, Pan and Roberts 2013.

17 Sullivan 2014.

The reason for limiting the selection of cases to incidents in 2009 is that this year marked a momentous intensification of the conflict between the state and netizens. While the Chinese state has aggressively monitored human expression on the internet for a long time, such oversight increased significantly in 2009 after a pro-democracy movement led by a group of highly regarded intellectuals released an online petition, Charter 08, calling for an end to the Chinese Communist Party's monopoly on political power.¹⁸ The increased censorship that resulted from this drove netizens to come up with more creative ways to publicize their dissent. The year 2009 has thus given students of online satire a wide range of cases to analyse. In fact, the three cases in this article were selected not only because they collectively encompass all three forms of satire as well as the full range of possible consequences of online activism, but also because they all survived for more than one month and generated numerous online posts and media reports.¹⁹ This allows observers to examine how the logic of different tactics shapes the dynamics between netizens and the state. To substantiate the claims set out here, I draw on Chinese books and articles as well as official documents and local news reports, which I supplement with interviews with key activists and government officials conducted during an 11-month period of fieldwork in Shanghai and Guangzhou in 2011 and 2012.

Three Forms of Satire in Chinese Cyberspace

Literacy scholars and political scientists have long sought to classify different forms of satire by their content or techniques. While many such categorizations are not readily applicable to China and online activism, this body of work as a whole clearly suggests that different forms of satire follow distinctive forms of logic to create ridicule. Drawing on insights from this literature as well as the fieldwork, this article outlines three prominent forms of satire in Chinese cyberspace, namely ironic, parodic and hybrid satire. The sharpest contrast is between ironic and parodic satire.²⁰ The former mocks a subject by creating or utilizing symbols that are completely or partially external to the subject itself to demonstrate its ironic nature; the latter mimics the target subject and exposes its absurdity by transplanting its language, institutional logic or practices to a different context, often with little or no modification.²¹ Falling in between these two types is hybrid satire, which presents symbols of resistance as well as elements that resemble some key characteristics of the subject.

As these definitions suggest, the most obvious distinction between the three forms of satire lies in the technique they use in ridiculing their subject. Ironic

18 Wines 2009.

19 This type of case selection is ideal for maximizing the inferential leverage of a small-n case study. Seawright and Gerring 2008.

20 For classifications that similarly emphasize the differences between parody and irony, see Booth 1974, 123; Kreuz and Roberts 1993, 100; Young 2015, 487.

21 Gong and Yang 2010, 4.

satire *creates* symbols and scenarios that convey a reality very different from that presented by the powerful.²² These counter-hegemonic symbols signify the satirist's dissatisfaction with the status quo in a humorous yet ironic manner, inviting the audience to reflect critically on the practices or language of those in power. A classic example is Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels*, in which Lemuel Gulliver, a fictional traveller, arrives in an unknown country that is ruled by horses. Through the reflections and fate of Gulliver, Swift scoffs at the shortcomings and degradations of human society. In an authoritarian regime where state censorship is severe, the creation of counter-hegemonic symbols often implies a skilful violation of official or social restrictions by means of storytelling, metaphor, imagery and plays on words.

Parodic satire, in contrast, *transplants* its subject's language, institutional logic or practices to a different context, and thus relies heavily on techniques of mimicry and recontextualization.²³ The absurdity of the subject becomes apparent when its key characteristics are imitated and extended to situations in which they are not commonly expected to exist. In other words, unlike ironic satire, what really makes parodic satire satirical is not what it creates, but what it preserves.²⁴ The Spanish novel *Don Quixote* is a case in point. Aimed at mocking the literary convention of chivalric romances, the novel on the one hand mimics the stylistic details and plots of the genre, and on the other hand transplants them to the ordinary world.

Finally, hybrid satire features symbols of resistance that share some key features of the subject. It usually starts off as either ironic or parodic satire, but as the campaign gains popularity, some of its elements become widely perceived as symbols of resistance, and are subsequently extracted and adopted by activists for other campaigns. In other words, hybrid satire *recombines* elements of previous satirical campaigns – which immediately gives the audience a sense of resistance – with key characteristics of the new subject. This is common in cyberspace because online activist campaigns, as with other social movements, are not completely isolated events. One successful campaign can inspire other activists to follow suit.

The three forms of satire can also be distinguished by their potential scope of ridicule. Ironic satire generally encourages the audience to go beyond the boundaries of the original issue to consider its wider societal implications.²⁵ Since its satirical thrust derives largely from its skilful violation of social or official restrictions, the symbols it creates – which are external to the subject of ridicule – can be easily extended to challenge other restrictions. In contrast, the scope of parodic satire tends to be more focused on the original subject, because its main technique is mimicking. To a certain extent, the mockery involved in parodic satire is both

22 LaMarre, Landreville and Beam 2009, 216; Steinmüller 2016, 2.

23 Young, Holbert and Jamieson 2014.

24 Dentith 2000, 189.

25 Kreuz and Roberts 1993, 103.

Table 1: Three Types of Satire

	Ironic satire	Hybrid satire	Parodic satire
Commonly used techniques	Storytelling and metaphor	Recombination	Mimicry and re-contextualization
Potential scope of ridicule	Wide	Medium	Narrow
Examples	2009: Grass-mud horse (<i>Caonima</i> 草泥马) 2010: Ancient dove (<i>Guge</i> 古鸽) 2011: Rabbit Kuangkuang (<i>Xiao tuzi kuangkuang</i> 小兔子哐哐)	2009: “Being” something-ed 2014: “Toad Jiang” (<i>Jiang hama</i> 江蛤蟆)	2009: Creation of new Chinese characters 2010: My dad is Li Gang (<i>Wo ba shi Li Gang</i> 我爸是李刚) 2011: Whether or not you believe it, I believe it (<i>Zhiyu ni xin buxin, wo fanzheng xin le</i> 至于你信不信, 我反正信了)

Source:

The author’s classification.

Note:

Descriptions and explanations of the examples are available in an Appendix, available on the author’s personal website: <https://sites.google.com/site/siuyualee/home>.

time- and place-specific. To fully appreciate the satire, the audience needs to have some knowledge of the original issue that the satire intends to scorn.²⁶ Consequently, it is less likely that a parodic satirical campaign will “spill over” to other social problems. Finally, hybrid satire has a medium scope of ridicule: on the one hand, the symbols of resistance that it adopts from other campaigns can be passed on to a new campaign; on the other hand, it also features elements that overlap substantially with its subject, thus limiting its scope of ridicule. Table 1 summarizes the key differences between the three forms of satire.

Of course, in practice the distinctions between the three tactics are not absolute but are matters of degree. To classify a given online satirical campaign in an empirical setting, one should focus on the technique that is most consistently employed by the netizens in mocking the subject, because it guides the audience to recognize the contradictions that are at the heart of the mockery.²⁷ For example, the well-known “grass-mud horse” (*caonima* 草泥马) meme is an ironic satire, despite its sporadic attempts to mimic the state broadcaster CCTV, because the creation of mythical creatures (*shenshou* 神兽) was the netizens’ main endeavour. One will not be able to make sense of the satire without some knowledge of these mythical creatures.

Before comparing the chances of survival of the aforementioned forms of satire, it is important to articulate three widely accepted observations about Chinese

26 Booth 1974, 189; Knight 2004; Young, Holbert and Jamieson 2014.

27 Although most satires are “mixed” to some degree, they become hybrid satires only when both parodic and ironic satirical techniques are of similar importance in the ridicule.

online activism. First, despite the popularization of the internet, the Chinese state still enjoys immense power over the grassroots. As the sole regulator of Chinese cyberspace, the state can screen out messages and, in extreme cases, shut down or block entire websites when they directly threaten its core interests, and thus can remove messages that it deems inappropriate either automatically or manually, sometimes even before they have been published.²⁸ In other words, the state can, at least in theory, veto any changes initiated by netizens whenever it deems it necessary to do so.

Second, unlike the usual street protests, online activism in China is generally less dependent on the top-down leadership of specific individuals or organizations.²⁹ More often than not, activist campaigns are spontaneous responses of individual netizens to real world injustices.³⁰ Given its interactive and diffused nature, it is difficult for any individual activist to change the logic of a satirical campaign significantly once it becomes popular, even if alternative approaches would be more effective or more likely to survive state suppression. The overall direction of the campaign thus heavily depends on the initial structure and logic of the satire.

Finally, while the state potentially has the ability to suppress any opposition to its rule, it too is constrained by limited resources and manpower. In fact, according to some analysts, the Chinese state has already hired approximately 20,000–50,000 internet monitors to police and censor the cyberworld, as well as an estimated 250,000–300,000 “fifty cent party” members.³¹ Yet, despite such a huge investment, the creativity of netizens and the sophistication of links in cyberspace still suggest that heavy-handed suppression is not always the most feasible option for handling online activism.³² This is evident in a speech given in 2011 by the then head of the propaganda department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, Liu Yunshan 刘云山, in which he said that the Chinese state cannot completely control over 500,000,000 netizens, and was facing a “crisis in internet management” (*wangluo guanli weiji* 网络管理危机).³³ In deciding whether to combat the demands of activists, the state often needs to balance the perceived benefits of doing so against the costs of manipulation and suppression. Activist campaigns targeted only at certain individuals or organizations of the state are certainly less threatening to the survival of the state than those that question the fundamental legitimacy of the regime (such as Charter 08), or that have the potential to unite different opposition groups. By accepting the former’s demands, the state may be able to preserve its resources and in some cases even

28 King, Pan and Roberts 2013.

29 Fu and Chau 2014, 325; Xu 2014.

30 Yang, Guobin 2009, 32.

31 King, Pan and Roberts 2013.

32 Qiang 2011.

33 www.bbc.com. 2011. “Zhongxuanbu zhang Liu Yunshan chengren guan bu liao wuyi wangmin” (Head of the propaganda department of the CCP Central Committee admits that he cannot manage five hundred million Chinese netizens), 8 September, <http://goo.gl/ahurDf>. Accessed 19 January 2016.

enhance its legitimacy. In short, online activist campaigns are more likely to survive and exert continuous pressure on the state when they can maximize the costs and minimize the necessity of suppression.

Against this backdrop, parodic satire gives activists the highest chance of survival of all the three types of satire. First, it is more difficult for the state to censor or co-opt, because it often directly employs the language of the powerful. Indiscriminate attempts (such as automated word filtering) to censor parodic satire may backfire on the original policy initiatives of the state. Of course, this does not mean that the state's censorship scheme is incapacitated entirely by parodic satire. Nevertheless, the tactic does impose a higher cost to the state in identifying and censoring satire. In contrast, ironic and hybrid satire both feature distinctive symbols of resistance in communicating their messages, and thus give the authorities explicit targets for suppression or manipulation.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, parodic satire usually has a focused target of ridicule. Its emphasis on the technique of mimicking, to a certain extent, serves as an implicit restraint on participants, preventing them from extending their criticisms of the original subject to other areas. This is important because past studies have shown that the Chinese state is a fragmented entity composed of competing local or organizational interests.³⁴ By having a limited scope of ridicule, parodic satire may pose less risk to actors who are not directly responsible for the issue. In some cases, it can take advantage of the fragmented state system and gain the support of some state actors, thereby increasing the chance of achieving its goals. In contrast, ironic satire and hybrid satire both contain elements that enable participants or other activists to extend the campaign beyond its original areas, making them more likely to elicit unanimous attacks from the state. As Dan Slater notes, authoritarian actors are likely to cooperate with one another when they perceive a common threat to their shared interests (such as regime stability, property and privilege).³⁵ Since state actors have access to immense resources and control mechanisms, whenever they are prompted to act collectively against activists, the activists' campaign will have far less chance of survival. However, a slight distinction can be made here between ironic satire and hybrid satire because, as mentioned, the former has a wider scope of ridicule. It is, therefore, possible that the latter will encounter less repressive responses from the state (such as co-optation instead of heavy-handed repression).

In summary, the three tactics of online satire each follow a different logic of resistance, which in turn shapes the interaction between activists and the powerful, contributing to different chances of survival for online campaigns. This argument is illustrated by the three case studies below. Each corresponds to one of the aforementioned tactics of satire, and shows the different responses of the state.

34 Lieberthal 1992; Mertha 2009.

35 Slater 2010, 13.

Finally, the article concludes by discussing some of the general implications for online activism and state–society relations in China.

Ironic satire: the anti-smut campaign and the grass-mud horse

Shortly after the launch of Charter 08, the ministries of Industry and Information Technology, Public Security, and Culture, together with four other state departments, launched a nationwide campaign on 5 January 2009 against “internet pornography and other forms of deviance” (*zhengzhi hulianwang disu zhifeng xingdong* 整治互联网低俗之风行动).³⁶ In practice, of course, not only were websites, blogs, forums and cellphone text messages featuring pornographic or obscene content removed, but also those that referred to political and other sensitive matters. As a result, by mid-February, it was reported that the state had already shut down more than 1,900 websites and 250 blogs, including *bullog.com* (*niubo wang* 牛博网), a widely read forum whose liberal-minded bloggers had written in detail about Charter 08.

The anti-smut campaign triggered a wave of resistance on the internet, mostly facilitated by a newly invented word – grass-mud horse. Ostensibly referring to a mythical creature, it was actually a code word for its near homophone in Chinese, the phrase “fuck your mother.” The intention to mock the state’s campaign against obscenity is clear. After the term was invented in January, netizens collectively expanded its popularity by creating catchy songs and fake nature documentaries on YouTube and other video-sharing sites.³⁷ In addition, they also invented other mythical creatures that sounded the same as Chinese profanities or sensitive words, creating an “ecosystem of the grass-mud horse.” The political dimension of this phenomenon as a vehicle for netizens’ discontent has been well documented in a number of recent studies.³⁸ However, as an example of ironic satire, the point to be highlighted here is the creation of new symbols and their impact on the result of the campaign. During the popularization of the grass-mud horse, netizens codified the meaning and usage of the word, allowing more people to join the play on language. A lengthy article published in early 2009 on the grass-mud horse on *Baidu Encyclopedia* (*baidu baike* 百度百科), the Chinese equivalent of Wikipedia, is believed to have been one of the main triggers of its popularity. Written in an encyclopaedic style, the article made it easy for netizens to grasp the meaning of the word. As such, the grass-mud horse – a skilful violation of the state’s prohibition of sharing vulgar information on the internet – served as a symbol of resistance, allowing netizens to express their objections to the state’s anti-smut campaign in a humorous manner.

³⁶ Yi 2009.

³⁷ *China Digital Times*. 2013. “Grass-mud horse,” 19 January, https://meilizhongguo.biz/space/Grass-mud_horse. Accessed 18 July 2014.

³⁸ See, e.g., Link and Qiang 2013.

As mentioned, the mockery used in ironic satire tends to extend beyond its original target and thus will trigger a unanimous response from the state. This happened in the case of the grass-mud horse. The campaign hit a raw nerve when netizens produced an online video, “Song of the Grass-Mud Horse,” in which the grass-mud horses were said to go into battle with, and eventually defeat, the river crabs (*hexie* 河蟹), which represented the Chinese state. The video was regarded by many observers, and especially by foreign media such as *The New York Times*, as a direct challenge to the state’s authority. According to Oiwan Lam, an expert on Chinese internet censorship, as a result of the popularity of the video, forum and website managers were told by the Chinese censor team on 18 March 2009 that “the issue has been elevated to a political level,” and that “any content related to grass-mud horse should not be promoted and hyped.”³⁹ Then, on 23 March 2009, YouTube was blocked in China. Seven days later, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued a directive highlighting 31 categories of content prohibited online, including violence, pornography, and content which may “incite ethnic discrimination or undermine social stability.” Following this directive, most Chinese essays and blog postings about the grass-mud horse, including the entry on *Baidu Encyclopedia*, were removed from the internet after having been discovered by state censors.⁴⁰

Parodic satire: character reform and the creation of new characters

The second case was sparked by the Ministry of Education’s decision to reform Chinese characters. On 12 August 2009, the Ministry unveiled a list of standardized Chinese characters in common usage, including 44 that had been slightly revised, to solicit public opinion. Language officials claimed that they had spent eight years reviewing 8,300 commonly used Chinese characters, and found that 44 needed to be revised to make them consistent with the rules of the Song typeface, a standard font used in China.⁴¹ The revisions were mostly minor, including changes to the angles and length of the writing strokes (see Table 2).

Although officials at the Ministry of Education thought that they were just codifying some writing habits that were already widely accepted, and that these were “small changes [which] will not affect people’s lives much,” criticism of the proposal spread across the internet rapidly, and soon became expressed in the form of parodic satire. On 31 August 2009, a blogger who claimed to have mastered the “essence” of the state’s proposal mimicked the Ministry of Education’s practices and created three new characters. The meaning of the new characters can be understood without much explanation because they are

39 Global Voices Online. 2009. “China: goodbye grass mud horse,” 18 March, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/03/18/china-goodbye-grass-mud-horse/>. Accessed 19 January 2014.

40 Wu 2009. Entries on the grass-mud horse have reappeared in Chinese cyberspace since the suppression.

41 Chen, Siwu 2009.

Table 2: Examples of Character Revisions Proposed by the State

Original	Revised
琴 患 唇	

Source:

“44 ge hanzi zhengxing kaizheng minyi; shimin danxin yao huan shenfenzheng” (Reform of 44 characters coupled with public concerns regarding their identity card), *Chun Cheng wanbao*, 26 August 2009.

Note:

The revised area is circled.

merely combinations of existing ones.⁴² For example, the invented character 腦 (nan) was obviously a combination of the characters 腦 *nao* (brain) and 殘 *can* (handicap) to make up the word, or internet meme, “mentally challenged” (*nao-can* 腦殘). To make the character even more satirical, the blogger also mimicked the dictionary format – a genre of publication that has long been perceived by the public to be a part of the state’s propaganda machine⁴³ – and provided explanations for each of the invented characters. As for the character *nan*, it was defined as “extraordinary” in the sense of aesthetic and intellectual capacities.⁴⁴ This practice was soon followed by other netizens, with some transplanting the logic of the character reform to English characters (Table 3).⁴⁵ Influential bloggers collected interesting new characters, wrote essays summarizing methods of invention and invited their readers to create and share their own characters.⁴⁶ By doing so, their blogs served as platforms for communicating new ideas and dissatisfaction. As the movement continued to gain popularity, it began to spread outside cyberspace. For example, Yu Shaolei 余少镛, a popular columnist for the *Southern Metropolis Daily* (*Nanfang dushibao* 南方都市报), invented more than 100 Chinese characters – each accompanied by a quasi-archaeological explanation – in his columns. These articles were then widely circulated on the internet, echoing the booming grassroots online character-creation movement. As such, the campaign partially subverted the power of the state to manage language and allowed netizens to express their resistance to the state’s proposals.

Unlike the case of the grass-mud horse, what made the character-creation movement satirical was not the characters themselves but the transplantation of the logic of the state’s character reform to a new list of characters and meanings that were not recognized by the state. Consequently, although some netizens invented new characters to criticize issues other than the character reform, their

42 Interview with an internet activist, Guangzhou, May 2012.

43 Lee 2014.

44 Hua 2009.

45 Sina News. 2009. “Hanzi zhengxing jiujiing zheteng liaoshui?” (Who has been troubled by the character reform?), 10 September, <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2009-09-10/100118621143.shtml>. Accessed 18 January 2014.

46 See, e.g., “Zaozi bing bunan, dajia yiqi lai!” (Creating characters is easy. Everyone please try!), 25 October 2009, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5c6dde2f0100fu5f.html. Accessed 19 January 2014.

Table 3: Examples of English Character Revisions Proposed by Netizens

Original	Revised	Original	Revised
A	Ⓐ	H	Ⓕ
E	ⓔ	P	Ⓟ
O	⓪	Q	Ⓠ
V	Ⓥ	Z	Ⓩ

Source:

“Wangyou zichuang hanzi egao wenzi zhengxing feng jiaoyubu xiazheteng” (Netizens create new Chinese characters to mock the character reform of the Ministry of Education), *Sohu xinwen*, 2 September 2009, <http://news.sohu.com/20090902/n266379960.shtml>. Accessed on 18 January 2014.

criticisms were so diffused and drab that they did not attract much attention. In fact, the new characters were – as imitations of the state’s character reform programme – often defined in such a serious manner that they could only be considered humorous in the context of the character reform agenda. A key piece of evidence for this was that a student with no knowledge of the background of the satirical campaign reportedly believed that the characters made up by netizens actually existed in the language system and asked his/her Chinese teacher for their meanings. The teacher, who also had no idea about the campaign, went online to consult dictionaries, doing so until he/she finally realized that the characters had been created by activists.⁴⁷

The character-creation movement prompted the Ministry of Education to withdraw the character reform proposal at the end of the consultation period. Language officials were clearly not prepared to retract the proposal, as is evident by their attempt to proclaim that it had received support from the majority.⁴⁸ However, as informants suggested, the proposal is likely to be abandoned forever owing to fierce social resistance.⁴⁹ More importantly, while the Ministry of Education reluctantly aborted its plan, other state actors appeared to maintain an indifferent or even critical attitude towards it. State media such as the *Xinhua Net* (*Xinhua Wang* 新华网), for example, posted a commentary that described the character reform as a “meaningless endeavour,” suggesting that the Ministry of Education had not secured the unanimous support of major central state leaders.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, a major activist within the campaign who was interviewed for this study also revealed that he had been able to publish “new” characters and their “explanations” without any interference from the authorities.⁵¹

47 Chen, Xiaojin 2011.

48 Zhongguo xinwenwang. 2009. “Hanzi zhengrong hou keyou liyi guoxie?” (Who will benefit from the character reform?), 2 September, <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/news/2009/09-02/1846892.shtml>. Accessed 28 January 2014. This claim was made by a language official in his interview with Xinhua Net. After the claim led to widespread criticism from the public, the Ministry of Education complained that the media “misinterpreted” the data.

49 Li, Xiaoming 2009.

50 Xinhuanet.com. 2009. “Hanzi zhengxing shuyu zhuanjia xia manghuo” (Character reform is a meaningless endeavour of experts), 23 August, http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2009-08/23/content_11927038.htm. Accessed 28 January 2013.

51 Interview, internet activist.

Hybrid satire: official malpractices and the creative use of the passive voice

The final case illustrates the logic and consequences of hybrid satire. The controversy began when an official investigation reported that Li Guofu 李国福, a businessman in eastern Anhui province who had petitioned the central government over local abuses of power, had committed suicide in a local detention centre. Doubting the official account, netizens invented the term “being suicided” (*bei zisha* 被自杀) to expose the lack of transparency in the investigation.⁵² In traditional grammar rules, *bei* 被 is a preposition and therefore has to be used in conjunction with a range of verbs to signify a passive action (similar to “be” in English). Therefore, by placing the verb *zisha* 自杀 (suicide) after the character *bei*, the netizens subverted the meaning of the official explanation, and thereby expressed their disapproval of the local government.

The campaign for Li Guofu exhibited some key characteristics of parodic satire and in particular the use of transplantation, which in this case re-contextualized the keyword of the official explanation into a passive voice construction. In terms of impact, the satire, if viewed independently, can be considered a success. After attracting nationwide attention, the case of Li Guofu was quickly picked up by other media as well as by upper-level government officials. Consequently, Zhang Zhi'an 张治安, a former Party secretary in the Yingquan 颍泉 district, was sentenced to death (with a two-year reprieve) for retaliating against and framing an innocent person. It was also reported that the police had become more conscious of the need to disclose details surrounding deaths in their custody.⁵³

However, as the character *bei* became increasingly popular, it evolved into an independent symbol of resistance that depicted the authoritarian nature of the state, and was subsequently adopted by the grassroots to ridicule a wide range of social phenomena. For example, the phrase “being volunteered” (*bei ziyuan* 被自愿) was used to ridicule state actors who forced others to do something while alleging that they would do it voluntarily. Another example was that of unemployed college graduates and job seekers using the word “being found a job” (*bei jiuye* 被就业) to express their doubts about official employment statistics that boasted of the low unemployment rate. Through the character *bei*, the grassroots collectively expressed their frustration with the malpractices of the authorities, giving rise to the term “passive era” (*bei shidai* 被时代). As such, the *bei* satirical campaign fitted into the ideal type of hybrid satire: on the one hand, it featured a clear symbol of resistance that could be applied to multiple social issues, and on the other, it retained the key elements of the subject,

52 Xinhuanet.com. 2010. “Passive voice employed by ordinary Chinese to call for freedom,” 16 February, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/indepth/2010-02/16/c_13176690.htm. Accessed 19 January 2014.

53 For example, in December 2009, when Xing Kun, who was suspected of theft, was said to have committed suicide in a local police station in Yunnan province, the police invited reporters to the police station to explain the details of the incident.

which constrained its scope of ridicule to the malpractice of the state actors concerned.

In contrast to the case of the grass-mud horse, activists this time did not encounter severe state suppression. Instead, the new usage of *bei* was widely reported by state media such as the *People's Daily*, and the character was later even included in a state-run poll of buzzwords, the *Chinese Inventory* (*hanyu pandidian* 汉语盘点), in which it was selected as the “domestic character of the year” (*guonei niandu hanzi* 国内年度汉字). Yet, contrary to what some may have expected, such widespread acceptance of the character in the state media was not followed by any significant changes in state practices. In fact, a closer examination of the state’s treatment of the character suggests that it was an attempt to incorporate the character into the wider state propaganda scheme. By incorporating the character into official media and publications, the state in effect participated in shaping its meaning and usage.

Consider the example of the *Chinese Inventory* poll. The State Language Commission (*Guojia yuyan wenzi gongzuo weiyuanhui* 国家语言文字工作委员会) retained the power to interpret the meaning of the winning character by providing an official “explanation” (*jieshuo* 解说) alongside the announcement of the result. The explanation was then widely quoted by bloggers and the print media, thus giving the state considerable influence over the meaning of popular linguistic resources. In terms of the character *bei* itself, while the explanation acknowledged that the character reflects the public’s desires for civil rights and responsibilities in name as well as in reality, the examples that the organizer provided to illustrate the usage of the character were mostly directed towards issues in the economic and social sectors, for which the central government is not directly responsible. In other words, the state used the platform to nullify the potential threat of the character.

The propagandistic nature of the poll becomes even clearer if we also examine the other “domestic characters of the year.” Table 4 lists all the winning characters from 2008 to 2012 as well as the official explanations that were provided, most of which are clearly favourable to the state’s political agenda. For example, in 2012 when the character “dream” (*meng* 梦) was chosen, the official statement explained that this was because the Chinese nation had realized a series of “great power dreams” (*qiangguomeng* 强国梦).⁵⁴ In some cases, the organizers even turned a character that would otherwise imply a policy failure of the state into a propagandist statement. The domestic character of 2010, “inflation” (*zhang* 涨) is a case in point. In 2010, China’s inflation rate accelerated at its fastest pace in 25 months. Rising prices were associated with intensified social tension and protests in many areas. According to an annual survey of social

54 Disagreeing with the official explanation, one netizen commented that the character was selected simply because everything in China is just a dream. See Mingpao.com. 2012. “‘Meng’ ying nianduzi; wangyou chao duijiliao” (“Dream” is selected as the character of the year; netizens mock the result), 21 December, <http://goo.gl/pZLaoH>. Accessed 28 July 2014.

Table 4: Character of the Year (Domestic), 2008–2012

Year	Character	Meaning	Official Explanation
2008	和 <i>he</i>	Harmony	The character <i>he</i> is a sketch of China in 2008. The Chinese people collectively experienced and withstood the challenges of snowstorms and earthquakes, reflecting a “harmony of hearts.” During the Beijing Olympics, the people of China and the people of the world chorused a peaceful song, “You and me” (<i>Wo he ni</i> 我和你), showing a harmony between natives and foreigners. Then, in the Financial Tsunami, <u>the Chinese government spent a huge sum of money to fight the crisis with European and American countries. This is the best illustration of “harmony.”</u> Among all the elements required for success, harmony between people worldwide is the most crucial.
2009	被 <i>bei</i>	Passivity	The character, pronounced as “bei,” refers to “passivity” when it is used as a preposition. Inspired by new words such as “being suicide” and “being got a job,” a large number of new words that shared the “bei-[verb]” structure were created in 2009, such as “being donated,” “being got a pay rise,” “being felt happy,” “being infected with HIV.” Their popularity reflects the people’s desire for civil rights.
2010	涨 <i>zhang</i>	To inflate	Originally used to refer to rising water levels, it now implies inflation. In <i>Hanyu pandian</i> 2007, this character was voted domestic character of the year and it remained popular this year. “Not only does the price of pork rise, but the prices of a whole spectrum of other goods such as garlic and ginger rise too. The prices are so high that people in Shenzhen needed to shop in Hong Kong.” <u>The government is doing everything to control inflation. Inflation in some areas is under control, and prices are beginng to fall.</u> The biggest wish of the people is that their salaries rise, too.
2011	控 <i>kong</i>	To control	<u>When there is inflation there is control, and a need for control. The government works hard to control the prices of property and other goods. And the people hope that the government can succeed in completing this task.</u> Meanwhile, a range of <i>kongs</i> that were invented to signify a feeling of deep affection towards a thing, or a person, are being controlled. In 2011, the character <i>kong</i> became widely popular, reflecting a more lighthearted atmosphere and colourful linguistic landscape.
2012	梦 <i>meng</i>	Dream	<u>Good fortune has come to our country and it cannot be stopped. Our dreams for the Olympics, aviation, aircraft carriers, Nobel prizes and a GDP that surpasses France and catches up with Britain have all been realized. The great power dream (<i>qiang guo meng</i> 强国梦) belongs to the state and every Chinese person.</u> The people want a more reliable social security system, better medical services, a higher quality of living and a fairer social environment. <u>China is a country with abundant resources. The key to the “China dream” is realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.</u>

Source:

Reports on the Language Situation in China (Zhongguo yuyan shenghuo zhuangkuang baogao 中国语言生活状况报告), published by the Commercial Press from 2007 to 2013.

Note:

Explanations favourable to the state are underlined. A longer list of the characters since 2006 (when the campaign was first organized) is available in the Appendix on the author’s personal website: <https://sites.google.com/site/siuyaulee/home>.

attitudes published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, inflation topped the list of social problems in 2010, up from fifth place in 2009.⁵⁵ It was against this background that the character *zhang* was selected as the domestic character of the year. In explaining the result, the organizers emphasized that “the government is doing everything to control inflation,” and that “inflation in some areas is under control.” All these decisions suggest that the widespread use of *bei* in the state media was largely an attempt by the state to manipulate the meaning and usage of the character.

Conclusion

The three cases discussed above vividly illustrate how the tactics of satire can shape the chances of survival of online satirical campaigns. Although each case possesses distinctive features, they all point to a common lesson: successful online activism in China is rarely a dramatic story of confrontation in which activists, through mobilization of the grassroots, force the state to accept their demands. More often than not, activists need to pursue their goals through the subtle interplay between different actors. To be more specific, these case studies suggest that online activists are more likely to exert continuous pressure on the state when they can increase the cost of state censorship by skilfully mimicking and re-contextualizing the practices of the state on the one hand, and reduce the possibility of collective state action by containing the scope of their criticism on the other. As such, the account presented here concurs with that of previous studies on grassroots resistance in terms of the extent to which it emphasizes the importance of borrowing the language or practices of the powerful.⁵⁶ However, it differs in terms of how such a technique can be used to advance the interests of activists. While previous studies suggest that activists can borrow the language and promises of the central state to legitimize their claims against subordinate state actors, this account of parodic satire illustrates how the activists can attack what they borrow through re-contextualization.

The politics of online activism presented here have notable implications that reach beyond the field of China studies. To date, the literature on institutional change in the disciplines of political science and sociology generally sees the practice of mimicking existing institutions as a form of “positive feedback” that can reinforce the status quo through reproducing the logic of the institutions concerned. Without necessarily rejecting this conclusion, this article suggests that mimicry – when combined with strategic re-contextualization – can also be a weapon used by the weak to promote changes in institutions controlled by the powerful. This finding is important because mimicry of the powerful is a widespread phenomenon in many authoritarian regimes. Recent studies have already documented the application of the technique in the cultural and healthcare

55 Orlik 2011.

56 O'Brien and Li 2006.

sectors in China, but its relationship to institutional change has not yet been systematically examined.⁵⁷ While this article is intended to describe the conceptual differences between different tactics of satire, future research may generalize the findings further by conducting a comprehensive survey regarding the outcomes of online satirical campaigns and analysing them in terms of the satirical tactics adopted.

Of course, the three cases of satire presented in this article differ not just in their tactics but also in the issues involved. Censorship policies and official malpractices are conventionally perceived as being more politically controversial than language management, and thus might be censored more easily. Yet, it is unlikely that subject matter alone determined the campaigns' chances of survival; otherwise, they would have been censored soon after or before their launch. The fact that the three campaigns all survived for more than a month suggests that suppression by the state was at least partly a result of the subsequent development of the campaigns, which was in turn shaped by their satirical tactics. This finding echoes earlier research which demonstrates that the logic of mobilization matters more in shaping survival probability than the subject of criticisms.⁵⁸ Empirical research will thus benefit from a deeper understanding of the conceptual differences between satirical tactics.

Despite the fact that online satire is the major form of online activism in China, some may still suggest that it is just a politically unimportant literary trick performed by netizens for their own pleasure. For sure, it would be wrong to assume that online satire alone can result in dramatic political and social change. However, it would be equally erroneous to ignore its political relevance completely. By shaping their audience's perceptions of specific issues, satires can create or grow a group of dissenters who are committed to undertaking further actions to challenge the power of the state. It is therefore not surprising that historically, political satire has been the subject of discipline and censorship in authoritarian regimes.⁵⁹ Such suppression would be unnecessary if they imposed no significant threat to powerful interests. In this sense, the persistent struggles described in this article between online satirists and state actors may say more about the need for a systematic account on the subject than about the futility of online satire and activism.

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57 Cho 2011; Lee 2014.

58 King, Pan and Roberts 2013.

59 See Kinservik 2002; Collins 1996.

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摘要: 为何某些讽刺政府官员或政策的网络群众运动能避开中国严密的网络审查? 透过比较三个针对政府的讽刺运动, 本文厘清不同网络讽刺手法的分别, 并指出“戏仿式讽刺”最有可能在网络审查下生存。戏仿者往往只是把其讽刺对象(即政府)的语言或做法有技巧地复制到其他语境以凸显其矛盾之处, 过程中不会产生一个明显的反抗符号。此策略不但增加政府网络审查的成本, 同时亦防止其他参与戏仿者把运动的批判范围不断扩大, 因而较其他讽刺手法更能提高运动对政府持续施压的机会。

关键词: 网络讽刺; 网络审查; 戏仿; 反讽; 抗争

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