

THE IRONIC PERFORMANCES OF INTERNET COUNTER-NARRATIVES  
RESISTING REGIME CENSORSHIP IN CHINA

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to all those who experience sufferings in oppressive environment.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Tables .....	vii
List of Figures .....	viii
List of Abbreviations .....	ix
Abstract .....	x
Chapter One: Literature Review .....	1
Theoretical Background .....	1
Political Background of the Case .....	6
Contestation .....	12
Struggle in The Internet Space .....	16
The “River-Crabbed” Counter-Narrative .....	18
Chapter Two: Research Method .....	21
Conceptualization .....	21
Data Collection .....	23
Data Analysis .....	25
Chapter three: Findings .....	27
River Crab .....	28
Meaning .....	28
Storytelling .....	32
Connecting .....	34
Outside-Internet Performance .....	38
Grass Mud Horse (CaoNiMa) .....	39
Meaning .....	39
Storytelling .....	40
Connecting .....	45
Outside-Internet Performance .....	49
Commentaries .....	50

Green Dam Girl .....	52
Meaning .....	52
Storytelling .....	54
Connecting .....	62
Outside-Internet Performance .....	63
Chapter four: comparison .....	66
Structural Features .....	67
Cultural Underpinnings .....	68
Discursive Community .....	73
Cases of Different Interpretations .....	74
Comparison on Discursive Communities .....	76
Chapter five: discussion .....	81
Narrative Proxies .....	81
Interpreting in the Internet Environment .....	82
Performance, Text & Heteroglossia .....	84
Conclusion .....	86
Appendix .....	88
References .....	93

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
Table 1 Comparison of River Crab, Grass Mud Horse, and Green Dam Girl in different dimensions .....	80



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1 River Crab flag .....	29
Figure 2 Image of “River Crab” .....	30
Figure 3 Image of “River Crab” .....	30
Figure 4 Image of “RiverCrab” .....	31
Figure 5 Image of “Goddess of Harmony” (from text in picture). ....	32
Figure 6 “Note of Harmony” (2012) by Crazy Crab at Hexie Farm, China Digital Times) .....	36
Figure 7 “Walking the Plank” (2012) by Crazy Crab (Hexie Farm, China Digital Times) .....	38
Figure 8 A new Chinese word created by combining some parts of the characters of “Grass” (草), “Mud” (泥) and “Horse” (马). ....	40
Figure 9 Ink painting showing Grass Mud Horse eating River Crab .....	42
Figure 10 Titled: “Grass Mud Horse block Center” --- a homonym phrase for “Fuck your mother, Communist Party Central Committee” .....	44
Figure 11 No title. Text reads “Pig (homonym for “Wish”) you fortune” on the red garments that appear to be traditional Chinese underwear for women. ....	44
Figure 12 Grass Mud Horse’s Special River Crab Region Permanent Resident Identity Card .....	48
Figure 13 Wikipetan: moe anthropomorphism of Wikipedia .....	53
Figure 14 A common version of Green Dam Girl .....	55
Figure 15 Green Dam Girl & Garfield .....	56
Figure 16 Green Dam Girl and Grass Mud Horse .....	57
Figure 17 Green Dam Girl banning “H” (text: “I need to harmonize you!” on the flag; “harmony” on the boot.) .....	59
Figure 18 Green Dam Girl attacks XP Girl but is attacked by 360 Girl .....	62
Figure 19 Cosplaying Green Dam Girl and Wikitan .....	64
Figure 20 Green Dam Girl Cosplay in a comics festival named “Petit Fancy” Taiwan... ..	65

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Animation, Comics and Games .....	ACG
Chinese Communist Party .....	CCP
China Central Television .....	CCTV
The People's Republic of China .....	PRC
United States .....	US

## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE IRONIC PERFORMANCES OF INTERNET COUNTER-NARRATIVES RESISTING REGIME CENSORSHIP IN CHINA**

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There is a dominant narrative promoted by the People's Republic China (PRC) that advocates “Harmony.” This project examines the nature of this “harmony narrative” as the case background, and then explores and compares examples of the fragments of the counter-narrative to the institutional narrative of harmony promoted by the Chinese government, drawing on examples on the internet. The goal of this study is illuminate how a counter story gets developed with three particular narrative fragments, namely River Crab, Grass Mud Horse and Green Dam Girl, to challenge the legitimacy of the institutionalized narrative of “harmonious society.” This research helps us to understand more broadly how counter-narratives can be developed on the Internet when direct oppositional arguments to the governmental discourse are inhibited in traditional forms of communications under the current political context in China.

## **CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Background**

One of the important areas in the field of Conflict Resolution involves social injustice and institutions. An important figure in the field, Burton (1988), who is known for his concept of “Basic Human Needs,” proposes that social values and institutions serve to legitimize the role of elites and authority within the state, rather than to satisfy basic human needs for individuals. As these needs are universal, fundamental, and non-negotiable, individuals deprived of the satisfaction of these needs can resort to extreme behaviors such as violence. Similarly, another important figure in the field of Peace Studies, Galtung (1969), broadens our understanding of violence by including social injustice (by terming it “structural violence”) in addition to direct assault. Structural violence shows up as an unequal power affecting life chances for individuals in an unfair way, via uneven distribution of resources and power within the repressive structures.

Both Burton (1988) and Galtung (1969) emphasize the aspects of social institutions/structures being turned into the tools of elites. However, they have not given enough attention to the role of language and meaning in human life in general and particularly in the construction of institutions and other social structures. This also explains why their theories belong more to the theory of conflict analysis than to the theory of conflict resolution, as these theories do not provide a clear path to how positive

change can actually take place, due to their lack of focus on how the linguistic, meaning-making process help shape social reality.

This lack of attention to the discursive aspect of conflicts may have to do with the common criticism discourse studies generally face. That is, speeches are simply irrelevant as they are neither actions nor materials; as the old saying goes, “action speaks louder than words.” The assumption is that speech cannot change but merely reflect or represent reality. Yet, introducing the term social construction, Berger & Luckmann (1967) argue that definition of reality is constituted through social interaction, and common sense of knowledge is negotiated by people. According to the authors, institutionalization grows out of the habituation gained through mutual observation with subsequent mutual agreement on the “way of doing things.” Institutions come to represent as part of an objective reality, especially for those who were not involved in the original process of negotiation. Language serves as a reservoir in this sense-making, meaning-making and negotiation process, allowing meanings and experiences to be preserved and transmitted.

Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy (2004) also argue that institutions are products of the discursive activities that influence actions. They have developed a model which links actions, texts, discourse and institutions. According to the authors, certain actions, especially those that trigger sense-making or controversy of legitimacy, generate texts. Some of these texts, depending on different factors, get successfully embedded in the discourse. Discourse in turn produces institutions, which in turn constrain and enable actions, via the mechanism of reward or punishment. A cycle is thus formed. The authors

also speculate a number of variables in this discursive model of institutionalization. For instance, in the link of discourse producing institutions, they propose that, discourses which are 1) more coherent and structured, or 2) supported by broader discourses and not highly contested by competing discourses, are more likely to produce institutions than discourses that are not.

Roe's examination of narratives for policy analysis can be said being a case of exploring such a link between discourse and institution. As Roe (1994) states, many policy issues have become so uncertain and complex as to polarize society and paralyze decision-making. In these cases, the only things left for examination are the “different stories policymakers and their critics use to articulate and make sense of that uncertainty, complexity, and polarization.” If the narratives, for example, in the discourse of renewable energy policy, are conflicting, then the specific institution, such as the Department of Energy, may be rendered useless in this regard as policy cannot be made to solve the problem. Roe's solution to this paralyzed situation is to compare the dominant policy narratives with their counter stories or criticisms so as to generate a meta-narrative for decision-making. In one way, Roe's approach can be considered dialectical in the Hegelian sense, except that instead of “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” (Mueller, 1958), he adopts “story-counterstory-metanarrative” using narratives as his unit. While the term narratives and stories are often used interchangeably, Roe sees them as separate concepts. The main policy narratives typically conform the conventional definition of stories; that is, they have beginnings, middles and ends, or have premises and conclusion if in the form of arguments. Counter stories are those narratives that run

counter to the controversy's dominant policy narratives and also conform to the story format. He calls other narratives that do not conform to the story format “non-stories.” An example is critiques since they tell us what to be against without completing the argument as to what we should be for.

While Roe's primary concern is more practical than theoretical, yet to be addressed are the power dynamics between dominant narratives and counter narratives. Even though he puts in his endnote that counter-narratives are highly useful for policy evaluation (Roe, 1994), his focus is not on how counter-narratives can be brought up enough to challenge the dominant narrative, since the problem for Roe is to resolve the paralyzed decision-making situation with narrative analysis. To an extent, this non-issue of counter-narratives being brought up in the policy domain reflects the assumption of a narrative context in which individuals and groups are free to voice a counter narrative. By “free,” I refer to freedom of speech protected by laws and other societal institutions in general, rather than whether people are “free” from their internalization of political indoctrination.

Yet, looking at the role of counter-narratives in a political environment where speaking narratives against the institution is restricted by institution is particularly important. Like in the mentioned-above discursive model of institutionalization (Phillips et al., 2004), institutions affect action and, in doing so, also affect the generation of texts. In a context where an institution has a lot of power over its members' actions, it can suppress the generation of texts that challenge its existence by controlling its members' actions. Yet, such suppression would mean that dissenting voices could rarely get to be

embedded in the discourse leading to institutional changes. Understandably, a study of these dissenting materials is often more difficult in a restrictive context than in a relatively free-speaking one, as they would simply be less available publicly, for example, due to institutional censorship, or members under the control of the institution would be less willing to voice their criticisms for the fear of punishments. Nevertheless, depending on the condition of the institution, the restriction of dissenting narratives does not mean that they cannot be formed at all. Foucault (1982) proposed that in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, including the rules of exclusion. One of the rules of exclusion concerns what is prohibited. The three types of prohibition for discourse cover: 1) objects (what can be spoken of), 2) ritual (where and how one may speak), and 3) the privileged or exclusive right to speak of certain subjects (who may speak) (Foucault, 1982.) Yet, if there are rules, the other side of the coin means that there are ways to skirt these rules, to voice usually unallowable matters in a way that is tolerated in the discourse. This study suggests that the internet space in the current political context of China, while restricted but not completely enclosed, provides great opportunities for studying how counter narratives against the institutional narrative of the Chinese Communist Party can get developed, elaborated and performed, by making use of the internet space. But before I move on further, it is essential to understand this institutionalized “harmonious society” narrative that this counter narrative is against and the current political background of the case.



## **Political Background of the Case**

Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) founded the People's Republic in 1949, the medium of choice for expressing dissent was "dazibao" (big character posters). "Dazibao" consisted of large sheets of paper bearing political critiques that were displayed in public places (Brødsgaard, 1991). They were a popular way to express criticisms in the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956–57) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), periods that witnessed a lot of political struggles. One can criticize leaders using daizibao; for example, Deng Xiaoping, was accused of "taking the capitalist road" (Esarey & Qiang, 2008). Yet, "dazibao" was banned in 1980. This change reflects a transition of the CCP from a revolutionary party to a governing party, and accompanies official discourse by the party and especially new policy buzzwords or formulae known as "tifa" (Bandurski, 2011 & Schoenhals, 1995).

The PRC, especially recently stepped-down President Hu Jintao, has, in his term, launched and actively promoted the concept of "socialist harmonious society" as his "tifa." Yet, this "tifa" of "harmonious society" can be traced back to those put forward by President Deng Xiaoping. Considered a reformist whose political ideologies are widely considered at odds with Mao, President Deng has created the theory of constructing "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (often known as "Deng Xiaoping Theory"). In this opening speech to the 12th National Congress in September 1982, he pronounced:

"In implementing our modernization program, we must proceed from Chinese realities. Both in revolution and in construction, we should also learn from foreign countries and draw on their experience, but the mechanical application of foreign experience and the

copying of foreign models will get us nowhere. We have learnt many lessons in this respect. We must integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete realities of China, blaze a path of our own and build a socialism with Chinese characteristics --- that is the basic conclusion we have reached after reviewing our long history.” (Deng Xiaoping, 1994, pp.2-3)

Deng's theory focuses on pragmatism restores back the function of market economy. Cheung (2008) suggests that by introducing the vaguely defined term “Chinese Characteristics,” this new formulation provides the needed flexibility for the Chinese leadership to engage in market reform without compromising the socialist discourse on which CCP's legitimacy rested. The term “Chinese Characteristics” was used to silence the resistance from the conservatives within CCP who might accuse Deng 's reform of abandoning socialism, as the term suggests that there are alternate meanings of socialism than that in Western discourse (Cheung, 2008). In addition to internal resistance, this term also reminds one of cultural relativism and can also provide resistance to foreign intervention on how China should develop towards modernization. This discourse goes much further than the level of political slogans as Deng's ideas and theory have contributed significantly to China's actual economic reform (e.g. by opening its market to foreign investors) since late 70's.

Deng's successor Jiang Zemin similarly introduced the “tifa” of his generation of Chinese leaders, i.e. “Three Represents.” In his speech during his inspection tour in the Guangdong Province in 2000, Jiang pointed out,

“An important conclusion can be reached from reviewing our Party's history over the past 70-odd years; that is, the reason our Party enjoys the people's support is that throughout the historical periods of revolution, construction and reform, it has *always represented the development trend of China's advanced productive forces, the*

*orientation of China's advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.* With the formulation of the correct line, principles and policies, the Party has untiringly worked for the fundamental interests of the country and the people. Under the new conditions of historic significance, how our Party can better translate the Three Represents into action constitutes a major issue that all Party members, especially senior officials, must ponder deeply. [Italics added]"<sup>1</sup>

Like many official discourse in China nowadays, this narrative of “Three Represents” is ambiguous and abstract, and it can be taken to mean many different things. One interpretation of “Three Represents” is that it provides the ideological basis for Jiang's controversial call for qualified members of the various social strata that have emerged over the reform period—including private entrepreneurs—to be admitted to the Chinese Communist Party (Fewsmith, 2003).

Like his predecessor Jiang, President Hu Jintao presents the political doctrine of “building socialist harmonious society.” Hu and other leaders such as the premier Wen Jiabao (the Hu-Wen administration) have elaborated the concept of “constructing socialist harmonious society” at different occasions. One key occasion for the launching of this concept is at the Sixth Plenum of the 16th CPC Central Committee held in Beijing from October 8 to 11, 2006. The plenum adopted the "resolutions of the CPC Central Committee on major issues regarding the building of a harmonious socialist society."<sup>2</sup> Here is an except of the communiqué by People's Daily regarding plenum<sup>3</sup>:

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1 <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/66739/4521344.html>

2 <http://www.ce-desd.org/site/articles/cat.asp?iCat=1047&iChannel=2&nChannel=Articles>

3 [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200610/12/eng20061012\\_310923.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200610/12/eng20061012_310923.html). For more details of the resolutions regarding this meeting, please visit <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/183853.htm>. An English summary of the content of the plenum is available at the website of the embassy of the PRC in

“The plenum unanimously agreed that social harmony is the intrinsic nature of the socialism with Chinese characteristics and an important guarantee of the country's prosperity, the nation's rejuvenation and the people's happiness. The building of a harmonious socialist society is an important strategic task, which was put forward by the CPC under the guidance of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important thought of the "Three Represents" and with full implementation of the scientific concept of development. The task was brought forward on the basis of the overall plan of the socialist cause with Chinese characteristics and the comprehensive construction of a moderately prosperous society. To build a harmonious socialist society was the intrinsic demand of constructing a socialist modernized country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized and harmonious. It also embodied the common aspiration of the whole Party and people of all ethnic groups.”

While Hu emphasized its consistency and continuity with the previous doctrines made by his predecessors, by mentioning Deng's “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” as well as Jiang's “Three Represents,” this new emphasis on social harmony and stability represents a clear break away from the era of political campaign and class struggle (Guo & Guo, 2008). Yet, like Deng, Hu makes great use of “Chineseness” and does so by grounding his theory on Chinese cultural history. In his speech to senior leaders in the party in 2005, he made explicit references to the historical philosophers such as Confucius, Mozi and Mencius (“Hu Jintao guanyu goujian shehuizhuyi hexie shehui jianghua quanwen (The Complete Text of Hu Jintao's Speech on the Establishment of a Harmonious Socialist Society),” 2005). Indeed, Hu's concept of “Harmonious Society” reminds one of Deng's “Xiao Kang Society,” a Confucian concept often translated as “Small Tranquility Society.” The term first appears from the classic

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the UK of the Great Britain and Northern Ireland (<http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/zyxw/t279526.htm>). A shorter summary can be found at Appendix A, which outlines: i) the six characteristics of a harmonious society, ii) the main objectives and tasks for building such a society, and iii) the principles observed (<http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/227029.htm>)

Book of Ode and refers to a state of society where people are moderately well off. In the Chapter of *the Conveyance of Rites (Li Yun)* in the *Book of Rites (Li Ji)*, Confucius contrasts Xiao Kang (Small Tranquility) Society with Da Tong (Grand Unity) Society. He states that in Da Tong Society, people put the public before private interests and not only care for one's own family but also others' families. In such a world, people strive to contribute rather than possess materials for the self. Everything is at peace. In contrast, in Xiao Kang society, everyone is thinking of one's own interests and loves one's own family only. Kings pass the kingdom to their own ancestors and build walls to protect oneself. Therefore, rites are needed as regulations to establish relationships and to encourage positive behaviors. Deng used the concept of “Xiao Kang Society” to support China's modernization and market reform. Against this background, Hu's concept of “Harmonious Society” can be read as greatly associated with “DaTong Society” as harmony is achieved in this vision of society, especially, he made explicit reference to the “Book of DaTong” by Kang Youwei, a famous scholar and reformer during late Qing dynasty (“Hu Jintao guanyu goujian shehuizhuyi hexie shehui jianghua quanwen (The Complete Text of Hu Jintao’s Speech on the Establishment of a Harmonious Socialist Society),” 2005). Thus, undoubtedly, these party leaders' “tifa” (policy formula), which are essentially official narratives, are “nested” in “narrative tissues” (Nelson, 2001) that is culturally grounded.

Yet, Hu's reference to Chinese tradition is not problem-free for the CCP, as after all harmony is a centerpiece greatly associated with Confucianism. Confucius was considered as an authoritarian and feudalist figure in the early years of the CCP. Even if

the harmony concept employed by the Hu-Wen administration is not the same as the Confucian one, how does this discourse on harmony fit with the Marxist vulgate, for harmony is often considered the antithesis to class struggle? Mahoney (2008) thinks that the harmony concept is consistent with the Marxist emphasis on struggle, since for Confucius, harmony is a harmonization or dialectical synthesis of contradictions. The Confucian dream of ideal society “Datong” is essentially the same as the Marxist utopia. He suggests that the CCP actually has a sophisticated understanding of materialist dialectics: the basic dialectical nature of harmony is consistent with Confucian dreams and Marxist struggles.

Another perspective is that Confucianism serves as a cultural resource for the CCP (e.g. for legitimation and fortifying national cohesion, etc). Billioud (2007) examined the relationship between Confucianism and traditional culture in the official discourse and pointed out that while the discursive references to Confucianism in the official discourse are fairly obvious, they are rarely explicit (e.g. officials rarely use the word “Ru,” which means Confucian, directly.) However, the concept of harmony is placed central, although Hu acknowledges the opposing notions of contradiction and class struggle. In his speech mentioned above (“Hu Jintao guanyu goujian shehuizhuyi hexie shehui jianghua quanwen,” “The Complete Text of Hu Jintao’s Speech on the Establishment of a Harmonious Socialist Society),” 2005), despite his references to Marxist theory, he gave the impression that the idea of contradiction comes down to describing concrete problems that can be resolved through the right policy. In other words, the Marxism is absorbed into the concept of harmony.

## **Contestation**

Still, another view on this is that the new harmony discourse is really about legalism, not about Confucian influence. As mentioned early in this paper, discourse has a great effect on institutional change (Phillips et al., 2004). For example, a writer whose political leaning is towards social democracy has denounced political practices that have historically claimed Confucian inspiration carry a fundamentally legalist spirit in reality (Qin, 2003, p.167). Choukroune & Garapon (2007) distinguish two kinds of laws, liberal or individualist laws (or rules) and disciplinary laws. The former is about protecting human rights, while the latter is about social control. The authors argue that hidden in all the interest surrounding the idea of socialist harmonious society is the question of who is responsible for defining this harmony. In the case of China, it is the government, not the people, who is controlling its definition. Thus, the narrative of building harmonious society is really about justifying laws created for social control rather than protecting human rights. For liberal laws, citizens must be able to exercise their “communicational liberty” and “to obey legal norms” by exercising their “discernment.” (Habermas & Rehg, 1998, pp.138-139). If the laws were liberal rather than disciplinary, Chinese citizens would be able to participate in the construction of the laws they are subjected to, rather than merely obey laws imposed on them by a small group of people in control. Thus, the discourse on harmony provides attempts to provide some soft power or legitimacy for control by the state, e.g. through silencing discord. In other words, this narrative of “Harmonious Society” is a silencing narrative which attempts to create a self-fulfilling loop: the narrative gets institutionalized to justify legal use of quieting

dissenting voices, which thus become unlikely to enter the discourse to dispute the institution itself, thus status quo remains.

One may ask why the CCP adopts this new shift in discourse. After all, the CCP has been ruling even without it before. It is because the challenge facing the CCP currently is not just feeding the hungry people, but addressing tremendous problems related to social injustice. The Hu-Wen administration face challenges such as protesting parents of thousands of children who died in poorly constructed buildings that were a result of corruption during the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake (Weaver, 2008) and the widening gap in income between rich and poor that even Premier Wen says must be reduced (Bristow, 2010). Such challenges are significantly different from those posed to Deng 30 years ago. Thus, the administration needs to think of a new rhetoric for the new challenges. The narrative of “Harmonious Society” can be handy not only internally to address the different domestic issues but can also be externally employed to cast the image of the rise of a peaceful China, in response to the narrative that China is an increasing threat to Western countries such as the US (Roy, 1996). As Guo & Guo (2008) suggested, while traditional culture and Confucian values can inspire current leaders, they are clearly not interested in building a modern utopia but rather in the cultural reconstruction through political framing. Framing involves the packaging of new ideas in such a way as to make reference to an existing polar communication frame, thus encouraging certain interpretations and discouraging others (Lakoff, Dean, & Hazen, 2005). The CCP aims to divert people's attention from the means and process (e.g.



locking up dissidents) to a noble end (i.e. social harmony), thus making opponents uncomfortable in raising opposition (Guo & Guo, 2008).

As a product of politics, the term harmony itself becomes further politicized. Openings like “in order to build harmonious society” become a common slogan many policies or programs adopt as a mission or overarching statement, even though they may be drastically different in terms of content or objectives. The usage of “harmony” becomes more commonly seen in the politic scene for legitimacy even in Special Administrative Regions like Hong Kong that are supposed to enjoy high degree of self-autonomy. For example, as a candidate for the Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 2012, Henry Tong responded to his opponent Chun-ying Leung's criticism on the Hong Kong government's earlier measures to alleviate poverty by saying that “differentiating society is not what [a leader] facilitating a harmonious society should do.” Another incident is related to the subtle use of the term for government control of the civil society. Allegedly, Tsang Tak-sing, the Secretary for Home Affairs of Hong Kong, commented to the senior administrators of YWCA about the lack of harmony in Tai O, a fishing town in Hong Kong. After Tsang's comment, the YWCA punished the involved social worker with relocation and warning letters (Lee, 2009). This triggered protests from the residents and investigation, as the involved social worker helped the Tai O residents to protest against the government about its lack of support in alleviating an earlier disaster. Thus, no matter what Tsang's intention was, his comment about disharmony was read politically.

This new official discourse is not without contestation among policymakers, party cadres and intellectual groups of various political persuasions in China itself (Zheng & Tok, 2007). For example, the left and the right are both trying to work the idea of “harmony” into their agenda and struggle over its interpretation. Such struggle is not unrelated to the contradiction and ambiguities of the official narrative itself, which covers almost all values many people hold, e.g. justice, democracy, stability and development, but fails to specify their content or prioritize them. It is crucial, however, to notice that both sides argue merely over what harmonious society should mean, not challenging whether it is a good idea or not. Most importantly, the contestation of the meaning of harmonious society is also not allowed within larger society, but only within the party itself, as government legitimacy is not allowed to be challenged in the public scene. The intolerance of such challenges is witnessed easily when political dissidents get arrested and jailed with titles of crimes related to disrupting social stability. For example, Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner, was given an 11-year jail sentence on spurious subversion charges as punishment for helping write Charter 08, which called for democratic reforms (“Honoring Liu Xiaobo,” 2010). Even if dissidents manage to leave China, ways to silence them by the government remain. For instance, although the blind Chinese human right lawyer, Chen Guangcheng, who exposed alleged abuses by the local ShanDong government forcing late-term abortions in order to achieve official family planning policy, has dramatically managed to seek refuge in the US embassy and finally found rescue in US, his relatives in China remain subjected to harassment and arrest (Mufson, Lynch, & Richburg, 2012).

## **Struggle in The Internet Space**

All these highlight the far-from-free speaking environment in China. On a scale of press freedom, China is ranked at 187<sup>th</sup> of 197 countries (tied with Burma) (Freedom House, 2012). On the other hand, while traditional media are more motivated to abide by orders from the government as to what to report, criticisms are more available on blogs as bloggers do not depend on reporting for a living (Esarey & Qiang, 2011). As the number of internet users in China was growing to 513 million at the end of 2011 (“China profile,” 2012), the government continues with a huge censorship effort, such as by employing approximately 20,000-50,000 internet police and an estimated 250,000-300,000 internet commentators called “50 cent party members”<sup>4</sup> (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2012). Questions arise as to what is censored, in what ways it is censored, and how netizens employ to escape the censorship. King et al. (2012) conducted automated textual analysis and found that the Chinese government relatively allows criticisms but tightly censors posts alluding to collective actions, criticisms of censors and pornography. Yet, how much of and how long some types of criticisms are allowed remains uncertain. Still in the memory of many living in China nowadays is the Hundred Flower Campaign in 1956, in which the CCP encouraged citizens to offer differing views and solutions to national policy (with the metaphor of hundreds of flowers blooming). Yet, Chairman Mao changed his mind shortly after and the campaign turned into crackdown against those who expressed prior criticisms. Thus, more findings of what is censored may be needed to see whether criticisms are truly allowed or temporarily so for whatever reasons.

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4        The internet commentators are dubbed “50 cent party members” because they are paid 50 cents in RMB for each posting favorable to the government (Bristow, 2008).

In addition, there are three main modes in which censorship takes place: 1) “the Great Firewall of China,” which prevents certain entire web sites from operating in the country; 2) “keyword blocking,” which stops a user from posting texts that contain banned words or phrases; 3) censors who read the post in person and remove those deemed objectionable (King et al., 2012). Other modes include the imposition of the installation of the censoring software “Greendarm Youth Escort.” As its name suggests, it supposedly protects the young minds from unclean materials such as pornography. Yet, news reported that the “unclean materials” screened include a large amount of politics-related content that has nothing to do with pornography<sup>5</sup>. The most recent measure is to require registration of accounts with real names of users (“New Rules Target Free Speech,” 2012). The necessity of all these measures reflects that netizens continuously find ways to escape them. Esarey and Qiang (2008) examine popular blogs and look at subtle strategies bloggers use to communicate political critiques to curious and often supportive readers. Strategies used include raising criticisms either being implicit in nature or being explicit but guarded (such as emphasis that readers should not take the bloggers' opinions too seriously), in addition to creating political satire and humorous adaptations of official media products, to avoid harsh repression. Against this background of hide and seek between the government censors and strategic netizens, this study focuses on how the counter narrative is formed, particularly regarding the use of different narrative fragments.

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5 See here for an example: <http://news.sina.com.hk/cgi-bin/nw/show.cgi/6/1/1/1177651/1.html>

## **The “River-Crabbed” Counter-Narrative**

Before moving on to this counter-narrative, it is important to state briefly the relevancy of narratives. Narratives, or stories, as a genre of discourse, typically have three key features (Elliott, 2005). Firstly, they are chronologic. A narrative involves a plot that provides an account of how one event followed another under a specific set of circumstances. Secondly, narratives are meaningful. A narrative consists of an evaluation component for establishing a point or the meaning of the story, although this evaluation may be implicit. Lastly, narratives are inherently social in that they are produced for a specific audience. The telling of a story itself requires a conversational space and stories can be seen as joint actions (Plummer, 1994: 20). People live their lives through stories (Winslade & Monk, 2008); netizens are no exception. However, unlike at work or at home where people tell each other stories in everyday interaction, people who are geographically dispersed and may have never interacted outside the cyberspace, can now do so using the internet as a platform.

The censorship on the Internet as described above has triggered dissenting voices through the Internet against the government's censorship itself. One such Internet narrative is related to the use of the internet phrase “河蟹” (pronounced as “he xie”) which literally means “River Crab” and shares the same pronunciation as “harmony.” The double entendre of “River Crab” is used as a verb to mean “harmonize” and often in a passive voice, e.g. “(something has been) River-Crabbed (harmonized)”, to mean “censored” or “silenced.” This reflects netizens resist the government’s crackdown on dissenting voices by using the material of the institutionalized “harmonious society”

narrative. Other use of “River Crab” includes using it as a character, most notably in a YouTube video titled “Grass Mud Horse’s Song.” This widely viewed video tells the story of “River Crab” being fought by “Grass Mud Horse.” “Grass Mud Horse” itself, unlike the phrase “River Crab” which actually has an established (literal) meaning, was not an established phrase but is a homophone for the swear phrase “fuck your mother.” “Grass Mud Horse” becomes popular and its dolls and other products are sold on the Internet. Tang & Yang (2011) examined what features of “Grass Mud Horse” make it a powerful symbol, e.g. its easily recognizable, adorable and innocent image. Similarly, Wang (2012) looks at its symbolic meaning and commoditization yet argues that the “freedom sought due to parody like ‘Grass Mud Horse’ is not necessarily political, but it is economic and cultural nonetheless.” Meng (2011) instead argues that “Grass Mud Horse” is a case of online spoofs as an emerging political expression in China. Yet, as mentioned above that people live their lives through telling stories (Winslade & Monk, 2008), the literature so far has not examined how, from a narrative perspective, “Grass Mud Horse” or “River Crab” serves as a narrative tissue or fragment (Nelson, 2001) for netizens to weave together to develop a counter-narrative. Indeed, when I explored the topic and conducted a search on YouTube with “River Crab” as a keyword, entries with the phrase “Green Dam Girl” also came up as a top result, in addition to “Grass Mud Horse.” This suggests that “Green Dam Girl,” personifying the Green Dam censorship software the CCP allegedly uses to protect youth from harmful materials, is also a narrative fragment that netizens use to weave counter stories with the fragment of “River Crab.” Yet, “Green Dam Girl” has not seemed to attract as much attention as “Grass Mud

Horse” has. This study aims to look at how “River Crab,” “Grass Mud Horse” and “Green Dam Girl” serve as narrative fragments that one can use to weave into counter-narratives, and analyze them in terms of their potential to be used as narrative fragments for counter-narrative development. To effect social change, the suppressed often needs to tell a good story in order to appeal to others for collective actions.

## **CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Conceptualization**

To study a counter-narrative and its fragments, it is important to look at what it is countering against, as a counter narrative is defined against its opposite. One such answer is that counter narratives are against “master narratives,” frequently used to refer to as the dominant cultural narratives. Yet, the definition of master narrative is not fully settled. For Nelson (2001), master narratives can be seen as “stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings.” They often consist of stock plots and readily recognizable character types, and people use them to make sense of their experience (Nisbett & Ross, 1980) as well as to justify what we do (MacIntyre, 2007). While master narratives are not necessarily harmful, they can become oppressive when they figure in one group's understanding towards the other in a morally degrading way and damage the latter's moral agency (Nelson, 2001). According to Nelson, counter stories are stories that set out to be against master narratives and to free a person's moral agency by resisting an oppressive identity and replacing it with one that commands respect. They target master narratives generated by an abusive power system to impose on a particular group an identity the system requires (Nelson, 2001, p.155). Counter stories offers three levels of resistance, namely 1) refusal – to deny that it applies to oneself and to tend one's own counter-story, perhaps without serious effort or any hope that others will adopt it; 2) repudiation – to use the self-understanding arising from a



counter-story to oppose others' applying the narrative to oneself, but the opposition is piecemeal; and 3) contestation – to oppose the master narrative with a counter-story both publicly and systematically (Nelson, 2001, pp.169-172).

Others have less clearly defined understandings of master narratives and counter narratives. For example, Bamberg (2004) claims that master narratives have two categories. The first one “frames' according to which course of events can easily be plotted simply because one's audience is taken to 'know' and accept these courses.” This definition can be seen as a similar one given by Nelson above. The second category is grand- or meta-narratives, as used by Lyotard (1984) to essentially mean an abstract idea to explain experiences comprehensively (as mentioned earlier, Roe (1994) attempts to develop meta-narrative to resolve the paralyzed situation with the dominant narrative and its counter-narrative, as mentioned earlier). Bamberg (2004) states that these two categories are not clear-cut, but are thoroughly interwoven; the everyday, more concrete master narratives of the first definition and the more abstract master narratives of the second definition are one another's fabric. In addition, as for the relation between master narratives and counter narratives, Bamberg also believes that since master narratives structure how the world is intelligible, instead of telling a simple counter story, speakers always remain somewhat complicit and work with the existent frame of dominant narratives so that the audience would not be lost. Certain aspects of dominant stories are therefore always left intact, while others are reshaped and reconfigured. This points to another an important question of how one can tell when the master or counter narratives manifest in real life rather than remain as abstract concepts. For example, in the setting of

interviewing, it is always not easy to tell whether the tale told by the speaker is dominant or resistant as they are intertwined. Jones (2004) argues that it depends on participants' orientations to tell a counter story or on explicit analyst's identification, rather than on the properties of its content. Alternatively, in her examination of TV talk shows, Squire (2004) argues that whether the story is dominant or resistant depends on who the “teller” is.

This discussion highlights the diverse ways in the conceptualization of the counter-narrative concept. In my case, the counter narrative I am examining is different from the counter narratives against dominant cultural narratives. The netizens who are using the counter narrative struggle not so much with the power of internalization from the cultural narrative of harmony (Andrews, 2004), but with the power of silencing through external punishment supported by the institutionalized narrative. The problem they face is not to pick which master narrative to be against, but rather to put together narrative fragments to make a counter-narrative that is clear enough to their target audience yet ambiguous enough to escape censorship and potential consequences. Thus, whether it is called “master narrative” or not, it is the institutionalized narrative of “Harmonious Society” which discursively legitimizes censorship that the counter-narrative to be examined is set against.

### **Data Collection**

Since the narrative space for the government is significantly more advantageous and the institutionalized narrative makes use of the dominant cultural narrative of harmony, the counter-narrative against the government is likely to be less coherent and

thus fragmented due to a power imbalance (Cobb, 1993). Therefore, in this research, I adopt Nelson's way of looking at a counter-story as the cluster of narrative fragments that oppressed group use to weave together (Nelson, 2001). This is why I have used the term “fragments,” in earlier sessions, for “River Crab,” “Green Dam Girl” and “Grass Mud Horse.” However, I do not intend to mean that they were previously in a whole piece together. Rather, I choose “fragments” to emphasize that these phrases are small narrative units, in a marginalized state, and can be put together to generate larger narratives. Since my goal is the counter narrative to the institutionalized narrative of “Harmonious Society,” the narrative fragment of “River Crab” mentioned above is my obvious choice for examination, not only due to its obvious double entendre nature but also due to the great attention it has received (Esarey & Qiang, 2011 and King et al., 2012). The other fragment that I will examine is “Grass Mud Horse,” since it is connected with the “River Crab” fragment as shown in the YouTube video titled “Grass Mud Horse's Song,” which enjoys high viewership<sup>6</sup>. In addition, the existence of studies conducted (e.g. Tang & Yang, 2011 and Wang, 2012) to examine it as a phenomenon speaks of its demonstrated success as a narrative fragment. Yet, one particular goal of this research is to look at these narrative fragments through a narrative lens and to help answer the broader question of what makes an appealing counter-story. Thus, in addition to River Crab and Grass Mud Horse, I will also look at the narrative fragment of “Green Dam Girl,” which also serves as narrative fragment for the counter-narrative but does not seem to attract as much attention as “Grass Mud Horse.”

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6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAJ4>

In this research, my data are entries on the Internet carrying key phrases such as “River Crab,” “Grass Mud Horse” and/or “Green Dam Girl.” Despite being the most popular search engine in China, Baidu is not used in this research, as it appears to be working with the Chinese government to censor politically sensitive materials (Stempel, 2011). Google is used to conduct the search for these three phrases in simplified and traditional Chinese characters. While it is not impossible to examine all the entries available on the internet for the scope of this study, at least the first 100 relevant entries are analyzed (e.g. irrelevant entries with the literal meaning of “River Crabs” are not examined) and until the point of data saturation is reached (where new themes, categories, or explanations stop emerging) (Marshall, 1996). Yet, since each entry on the internet may have embedded hyperlinks to other relevant entries or sites, “snowballing” is used to look closely at additional particular entries pertinent to my research question. “Snowballing” (Goodman, 1961) refers to a non-probability sampling method, with which researchers recruit future participants through the contacts of existing participants. In my case, an entry, rather than a participant, is a sample unit, thus the hyperlinks of entries become my “referees” for further entries. With “Snowballing” to help me understand the data in more depth, I also attempt to capture the diversity, by looking entries that contain videos, graphics, or pictures, in addition to those with written words.

### **Data Analysis**

As my research question is how counter narratives are told, presented and interpreted with these narrative fragments in the current repressive political context of China, my analysis concerns the performance of narratives, and the interactional and

institutional contexts in which narratives are produced, recounted and consumed (Mishler, 1995). Four categories of these entries emerge in my analysis with all these narrative fragments: namely, 1) **meaning**—entries that concern the explanation or exhibit the alternate or new meaning of these fragments; 2) **storytelling**—entries that use the fragments in the elaboration of stories; 3) **connecting**—entries that use the fragments to connect individuals; 4) **outside-internet performing**—entries that concern the use of these fragments in outside-internet performances. For Grass Mud Horse, an additional category also emerges, i.e., 5) **commentaries**—entries that explicitly comment on Grass Mud Horse.

### CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

With the exception of a few search results, such as Wikipedia, explaining in a straight-forward way the meaning of these narrative fragments (in the case of “Grass Mud Horse” and “Green Dam Girl”) or the alternate meaning of “River Crab,” the majority of the search entries involve some kind of ironic creation, often in the form of parodies, performances and consumption. For any creations that involve ambiguous or double meanings, my description or explanation will be ultimately my interpretation of meanings for a particular work. With that in mind, I provide as much data and translation as I can so that readers can see how I draw my and can draw their own interpretations. I will depict in this chapter what I have found for each narrative fragment, in the terms of meaning, storytelling, connecting and outside-internet performance and/or commentaries. While these categories emerge from the data naturally, I put them into one of these categories “artificially” in order to process the large amount of data in a meaningful way. That I present these findings in an order by no means implies that the performative process is linear or it is in this order in which these categories are practiced. For example, while in some storytelling meaning is established first for the audience to make sense of the story, meaning is often generated or further reinforced through storytelling. Rather, elements could reappear, be “recycled,” and be further developed in the performative process. Thus, these categories overlap and some entries can rest in several categories. In

addition, while I present these narrative fragments separately (in the order of River Crab, Grass Mud Horse and Green Dam Girl), they in fact “interact” in many of these entries.

## **River Crab**

### **Meaning**

The very first entries that showed up in my search refer to the meaning of River Crab as an Internet slang/meme rather than the long-established meaning of the actual scavenger animal. Sites such as the Chinese version of the Wikipedia<sup>7</sup> and the Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities in Hong Kong<sup>8</sup>, explain the new meaning of the phrase adopted through homophones referring to censorship by the Chinese government, with the background of President Hu Jintao’s political doctrine of “harmonious society.” The entries explain that while the purpose for using the homophones is to escape from the Internet censor, the phrase itself is also censored sometimes. Netizens add punctuations to the phrase and occasionally use the phrase “Aquatic Product” (an allusion to “River Crab”) as counter strategies to elude the censor. In addition to being a noun, the term “River Crab” now can also function as a verb meaning “to harmonize” (to silence).

Images have been created to strengthen the linkage between “River Crab” and the CCP or the censorship. For example, Figure 1 shows a red flag in which a River Crab with three watches has four smaller crabs on its right- an arrangement similar to that of

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[http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B2%B3%E8%9F%B9\\_%E2%E7%B6%B2%E8%B7%AF%E7%94%A8%E8%AA%9E%29](http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B2%B3%E8%9F%B9_%E2%E7%B6%B2%E8%B7%AF%E7%94%A8%E8%AA%9E%29)

8 <http://evchk.wikia.com/wiki/%E5%92%8C%E8%AB%A7>

the national flag of the People's Republic of China.<sup>9</sup> The River Crab wearing three watches makes an implicit reference to the political doctrine of President Hu Jintao's "Harmonious Society" (which sounds like "River Crab") and his predecessor Jiang Zemin's "Three represents" (which sounds like "three watches") (for more information on these political ideas, please refer to the literature review chapter.)



Figure 1 River Crab flag

While one may think that this picture does not necessarily imply that the creator thinks negatively of the censorship or the Chinese government, the following pictures convey more negative messages through the River Crab. The image of the scavenger animal shows up as maleficent and waving its scissor-like claws, as in Fig. 2, in which

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<sup>9</sup> <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2012/12/%E5%85%B1%E8%AF%86%E7%BD%91-%E6%AE%B7%E6%95%8F%E9%B8%BF%E7%BC%9A%E4%BA%94%E6%98%9F%E7%BA%A2%E6%97%97%E4%B8%8E%E5%9B%BD%E5%BE%BD%E6%BA%90%E6%B5%81%E8%80%83/>



“GFW” (short for Great Firewall, the Chinese government’s censoring program) is on the crab’s chest and the phrase “River Crab” is on the side.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Fig. 3 casts an image of a crab-like demolition machine implying that the government has destructed a lot to achieve “harmony”<sup>11</sup> while Fig. 4 clearly depicts a crab-like tank, reminiscent of the June 4th protests quieted by the Chinese government’s tanks<sup>12</sup>.



Figure 2 Image of “River Crab”



Figure 3 Image of “River Crab”

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<sup>10</sup> <http://picture.game.21cn.com/file/103,1442513,16343586,0,20,1.shtml>

<sup>11</sup> <http://picture.game.21cn.com/file/103,1442513,16343571,0,20,1.shtml>

<sup>12</sup> <http://picture.game.21cn.com/file/103,1442513,16343569,0,20,1.shtml>



Figure 4 Image of “RiverCrab”

Liu Liping (刘力平), a Guangdong member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China's top political advisory body, proposed to build a "Goddess of Harmony" (和谐女神像) at an important bridge linking Hong Kong, Zhuhai and Macau<sup>13</sup>. Netizens responded to this idea with their proposals for what such a statue would be like. An example of the designs is shown in Fig 5, in which a female figure upholds a huge red crab. Here, the color red refers to communism; thus, the message is that the goddess is upholding communist “harmony,” a Chinese achievement that should be known by the world. The unidentified author of this post “explained” that the official felt the need for a big statue of the harmony goddess to calm things down, in the wake of the Wukan protest that happened earlier in Guangdong<sup>14</sup>. Wukan protest is an

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<sup>13</sup> <http://shanghaiist.com/2012/01/15/goddess-of-harmony.php> . While the article uses “Goddess of Harmony” as the English translation of 和谐女神像, the Chinese name is literally the same as that of the Statue of Liberty, except Harmony in place of Liberty.

<sup>14</sup> <http://m.kanzhongguo.com/node/436838>

anti-corruption protest that began in September 2011 and escalated in December 2011, resulting in the expulsion of officials by villagers<sup>15</sup>.



Figure 5 Image of “Goddess of Harmony” (from text in picture).

### Storytelling

In addition to entries that explain the new meaning of the phrase and images built on and strengthening this new meaning, “River Crab” shows up in more elaborate storytelling as in videos, comics and texts, often parodied. In this parodied video (whose original version is Ronald Cheng’s hit love song “Rascal”<sup>16</sup>), new lyrics were put in place to protest the Hong Kong government’s proposed Copyright (Amendments) Bill, which prohibits unauthorized use of copyright materials in any medium without permission.

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15 for more, see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-17821844>

16 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWZT4cyCCqY>

Some see this bill as threatening freedom of speech, since it will negatively affect works of satire or parody on the Internet because there is no “fair-use exception.” This parodied video titled “River Crab,” pits the Hong Kong government’s River Crab against the city’s freedom of expression, with lyrics accompanied by images condemning the Hong Kong Chief Executive selling Hong Kong’s freedom to please the Chinese Communist Party.

While the above example is non-fictional, River Crab also appears in tale telling. For example, in this comic series “River Crab man,” a young man gains supernatural strength after being accidentally “bitten” by a River Crab and vows to fight for love and peace<sup>17</sup>. While it may seem to cast a positive image of River Crab, as the hero in the story is called “River Crab man,” the experience he encountered mirrors the social injustice problems of current China, such as corruption of government officials, doctors refusing patients who cannot afford the bills, and people’s avoidance of helping others to avoid troubles of their own. Having been a victim of these social problems, “River Crab man” decides to intervene and help others with this newly gained power, with the government officials and secretive police as the antagonists. This comic series is highly interactive, in that readers can put in their comments on the online comic strips. While it may be confusing as to why the protagonist, a positive figure, bears the name of River Crab, which has a negative character in the other ironic creations mentioned so far, the overall story plot makes it clear that the author, in the voice of the protagonist, opposes social control by corrupted and evil government officials. It thus appears as a dissenting narrative and the protagonist is named after the animal that bites him, probably just to be

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.u17.com/comic/8638.html>

consistent with the plot of the comic strip Spiderman, which this comic series seems to be based on. Alternatively, as long as one interprets the author's intention as making dissenting narrative, the minor inconsistencies in the story will get straightened out, as there are tons of logical fallacies in movies and dramas audiences usually disregard once they are "with" the story.

When it comes to textual entries, the dissenting narrative is voiced in many hidden, ironic ways. For example, this entry of "River Crab" in the Chinese version of "Uncyclopedia," a parodied version of Wikipedia, "explains" that "because the Central Party thought the term [River Crab] is not River-Crabbed enough and demanded the people to call it 'aquatic product,' in reference to the allegation that the term, 'River Crab,' itself also got censored" (after the censorship of the term "harmony" for which "River Crab" is a substitute)<sup>18</sup>. It continues to "explain," using negative homonyms of CCP and the central committee, that "River Crab" is a main diet policy by the CCP; when everyone eats River Crabs, the friction resulted from people choosing to eat different types of food would decrease. The text goes on, through the style of ~~deletion~~ and **ink-block** (readers have to highlight the words to read them on a computer screen), to tell the danger of the serious allergy caused by eating River Crabs "is not taken into consideration by these (~~retarded~~) wise leaders."

### **Connecting**

The narrative fragment "River Crab" also appears in titles and functions to connect people. In these entries, River Crab acts not so much as a character in the story

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<sup>18</sup> <http://cn.uncyclopedia.wikia.com/index.php?variant=zh-cn&title=%E6%B2%B3%E8%9F%B9>

telling itself, but rather as an indicator that the content of the entries is about making dissenting voices heard. For instance, this blog of “River Crab Society—listeners take speakers’ casual remark to heart” has a collection of articles of criticizing Chinese authority<sup>19</sup>. For example, one article reported that Beijing University interrogated those students who looked “exceptionally happy” on the day when Liu Xiao Bao, a Chinese human right activist, was awarded Nobel Peace Prize but unable to attend the ceremony in Oslo due to his sentence in jail by the Chinese government<sup>20</sup>. The author compared this to “face crime” in George Orwell’s novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four,” in which wearing an improper expression on the face was itself a punishable offense called face crime.

Another example further demonstrates the usage of the narrative fragment to gather collaborative efforts to record the process of the Chinese government’s crackdown activities. This Facebook page titled “Deleted Articles 河蟹档案” (the Chinese title literally means “River-Crabbed files”) serves as an archive and records the articles and files deleted by the Chinese government. Similarly, a cartoonist whose pseudonym is “Crazy Crab” has posted numerous political cartoons on his/her “Hexie Farm (蟹农场)” (Chinese literal meaning being “Crab Farm.”) Interestingly, unlike the cartoons or stories mentioned earlier, many of Crazy Crab’s cartoons do not cast River Crab as a character or mention the phrase “River Crab”; yet, the dissident narrative is a theme throughout these cartoons. I select two of them here, as they speak directly to the “harmony” theme. In figure 6 titled “the note of harmony,” a naked man, wearing nothing but a crown, is

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19 <http://moeublog.appspot.com/>

20 <http://moeublog.appspot.com/?p=66001>

blowing a trumpet and a music note comes out of the trumpet<sup>21</sup>. The end of the note is shaped like a knife with some bloodstains on its blade.



Figure 6 “Note of Harmony” (2012) by Crazy Crab at Hexie Farm, China Digital Times)

The cartoon comes with a text explanation:

“a naked king performing the 'Song of Harmony,' yet at end of the big note is the scythe of the grim reaper. The image of the king alludes to The Emperor's New Clothes (while also bringing to mind 'naked officials,' or corrupt officials whose family and wealth reside overseas). 'Harmony,' or 'harmonious,' is a key propaganda term employed by the current administration of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao to describe their governing philosophy. However, for many in China, the term has come to mean 'censored' or

21 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/08/hexie-farm-%E8%9F%B9%E5%86%9C%E5%9C%BA%E5%BC%Athe-note-of-harmony/>

'suppressed.'”

The intended message appears to be that along the note of harmony is bloodshed (e.g. killing, torture, brutality), as marked by the bloodstain on the scythe. There is “harm” hidden in the name of “harmony.”

Another cartoon, figure 7, shows a group of pirates standing on a plank connecting the ship with “harmony” written on it are threatening a man who is about to fall off from the other end of the plank<sup>22</sup>. Again, this cartoon comes with a small text giving the background and explanation:

Cartoonist Crazy Crab of Hexie Farm depicts disgraced former Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai walking the plank at the behest of his former Politburo colleagues, shown here as pirates. One leader, an ally of Bo’s, murmurs goodbye to him in a subtle and dissenting show of support. Bo’s mouth is sealed, indicating the coming trial for various crimes. The incoming President, Xi Jinping, who disappeared from public view for two weeks after suffering alleged back pain, is shown with knives in his back, a sign of a heated political struggle. The ship used to end Bo’s political career is called Harmony, which has appeared in previous Hexie Farm cartoons.

The irony here is that while Bo is tied up and weighted by some balls with “corruption” and “crime” etc. written on them, his former “comrades” who outcast him are robberies themselves as indicated by their pirate looks. The cartoonist portrays one of pirates, who looks like the Premier Wen Jiabao, as a liar, with his really long nose, in reference to the story of Pinocchio.

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22 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/09/hexie-farm-%E8%9F%B9%E5%86%9C%E5%9C%BA-walking-the-plank/#.UGk1mbgXC1M.twitter>



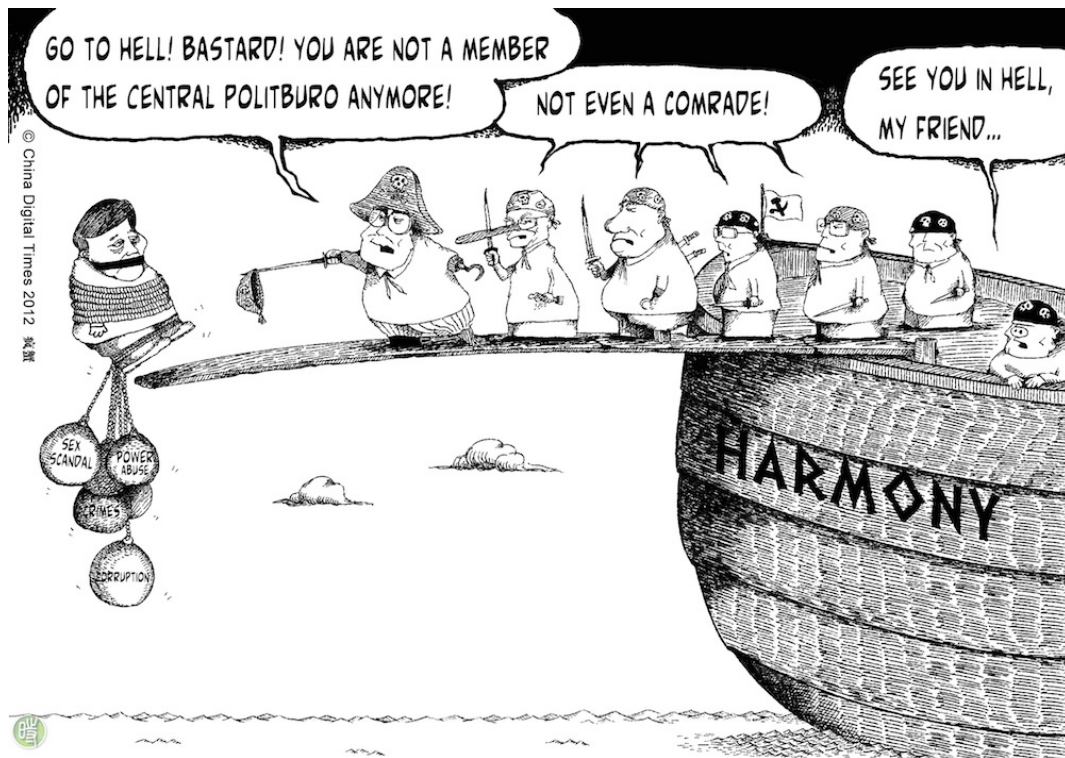


Figure 7 “Walking the Plank” (2012) by Crazy Crab (Hexie Farm, China Digital Times)

### Outside-Internet Performance

This alternate meaning of “River Crab” extends even to outside the Internet and to real protests. For example, activist artist Ai Wei Wei, who is known for his outspokenness against the government, just before his studio was to be demolished by the Shanghai city authority, organized what he called “River Crab Fest,” offering 10,000 crabs for the public to eat. This event on November 7, 2010 played with the irony that people protested against suppression of free speech through metaphorically devouring and, thus destroying, “harmony” (River Crab), and attracted people of all ages, despite a

warning by the government that individuals should not to attend. These outside-internet activities were reported, recorded and spread as texts on the Internet<sup>23</sup>.

There are other usages of River Crabs and related outside internet performances, but as they are also related to “Grass Mud Horse” as well, I will explore these entries in this following section.

## **Grass Mud Horse (CaoNiMa)**

### **Meaning**

Like for the narrative fragment “River Crab,” the first few entries are devoted to explain the hidden meanings of “Grass Mud Horse” as “a Chinese Internet meme widely used as a form of symbolic defiance of the widespread Internet censorship in China” (such as in Wikipedia<sup>24</sup>). Grass Mud Horse is the homonym for the Mandarin phrase “fuck your mother” (Cao Ni Ma). These entries also state that Grass Mud Horse is the top one among the so-called 10 mythical creatures created in an article on Baidu Baike (a very popular website in China) in early 2009 whose names form obscene puns.

Netizens assign a lot of different characteristics to Grass Mud Horse. In many entries, it takes the look of an alpaca. Emoticons have been established for the narrative fragment: ( · ㄣ · ) , ( · Y · ) & ( · ㄣ · ) , apart from a new Chinese word created for it by combining some pictorial parts of the words “Grass,” “Mud” and “Horse” (see Fig. 8).

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23 Examples include <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1LbOyZ3eX8> and [http://shanghaiist.com/2010/11/08/ai\\_weiweis\\_crab\\_fest\\_happens\\_after.php#photo-1](http://shanghaiist.com/2010/11/08/ai_weiweis_crab_fest_happens_after.php#photo-1)

24 <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%8D%89%E6%B3%A5%E9%A9%AC>



Figure 8 A new Chinese word created by combining some parts of the characters of “Grass” (草), “Mud” (泥) and “Horse” (马).

### Storytelling

Grass Mud Horse is often told in stories with “River Crab” as its antagonist.

Indeed, the very popular YouTube video, titled “Song of Grass Mud Horse,” has contributed much to the new alternative meaning of these two phrases<sup>25</sup>. In the video, the song uses the Chinese original theme song for the cartoon “the Smurfs” with new lyrics to tell the story of how Grass Mud Horses, being smart, lively, naughty and nimble, live freely on this dessert of Grass Mud Horse Gobi (homonym for “fuck your mother’s cunt”) and bravely overcome the tough environment. To keep their food (卧草, homonym for “I fuck”) from being eaten, they have defeated River Crab, which from now on has disappeared on the Grass Mud Horse Gobi desert. The parodied song ridicules the government’s banning of political criticisms in the name of protecting children from vulgarity, with the swearing homonyms in the children’s voice. The video has received a very large viewership and appears to be one of the very first works to pit “Grass Mud Horse” against “River Crab” as characters in a conflict plot.

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25 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAJ4>

Another video clip which also enjoys wide viewership takes the style of a real TV animal documentary format and may confuse many who have not heard the term before, if it is not for the warning in the beginning saying that the creature introduced is fictional<sup>26</sup>. It essentially tells a similar basic story of Grass Mud Horse mentioned earlier in the song but in a style of factual report and employs similar styles of a China Central Television (CCTV) show called “Animal World” (the title of the video is “Animal World: Grass Mud Horse”). It features scenes of an alpaca moving in nature and reports that since Grass Mud Horses’s habitat has been threatened by River Crab, the ethnic group called ChoNi (朝尼, a homonym for “fuck you”) who farm the horses are forced to switch to performing circumcisions instead for a living.

The story also takes the form of Chinese traditional ink paintings. These adorable paintings<sup>27</sup> tell the story of how Grass Mud Horse, although vegetarian, in order to protect the internet space, has to go “bloody” and eats up River Crabs when attacked (the first painting is shown in figure 9). Even when one Grass Mud Horse may fall when too “stuffed” with River Crabs, thousands of Grass Mud Horses would stand up. No matter how many River Crabs come and how they try to trap Grass Mud Horses, the latter will continue to fight for honor and justice in internet surfing.

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<sup>26</sup> [http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNDYzMDAwMDg0.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDYzMDAwMDg0.html)  
<sup>27</sup> <http://n1.81813.com/news/20090812/01/8y18bc2l3wj6qqo3,1.shtml>



**Figure 9 Ink painting showing Grass Mud Horse eating River Crab**

This new meaning of Grass Mud Horse is created, retold, popularized and consumed in an iterative way, through different productions of the basic story and new related products. Video games are created in which players, as the character of the horse, need to escape from crabs to get points (e.g. this iTunes game called “Strange Horse”<sup>28</sup>). While the narrative fragments “Grass Mud Horse” and “River Crab” are not mentioned in the game, the previously mentioned Song of Grass Mud Horse on YouTube is used as the background music for the game. Grass Mud Horse dolls in the form of alpacas are sold

28 <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/strange-horse/id318359124?mt=8>.

online on many websites such as eBay<sup>29</sup>. Products like the dolls are employed in furthering the production of meanings. The previously mentioned artist, Ai Wei Wei, has employed the theme of Grass Mud Horse in his work titled “Grass Mud Horse blocks Center”<sup>30</sup>. This picture (shown in figure 10) shows him bare, except with one Grass Mud Horse doll hiding his private parts in the middle, with the title reading “Grass Mud Horse blocks Center,” a homonym phrase for “Fuck your mother, Communist Party Central Committee.” The picture seems anything but sexual (at least to me), despite the nudity, which serves to ridicule the government’s ban on political materials as vulgar or pornographic. Indeed, in response to CCTV’s blurring of the genital of Michelangelo’s Statue of David, Chinese netizens later have appealed to others to “put clothes on famous paintings”<sup>31</sup>, with parodied pictures like figure 11.

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29 <http://www.ebay.com/itm/NEW-Alpaca-grass-mud-horse-10-Stuffed-Animal-Toy-Sandy-Beige-/280769689676>

30 [http://zawen.chinaaid.net/2012/12/blog-post\\_1586.html](http://zawen.chinaaid.net/2012/12/blog-post_1586.html)

31 <http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/thread-765420-1-1.html>



**Figure 10 Titled: “Grass Mud Horse block Center” --- a homonym phrase for “Fuck your mother, Communist Party Central Committee”**



**Figure 11 No title. Text reads “Pig (homonym for “Wish”) you fortune” on the red garments that appear to be traditional Chinese underwear for women.**

Recently, Grass Mud Horse even shows up in dance. With the popularity of the global hit dance song “Gangnam Style” by the Korean performer PSY, Ai Wei Wei made a parodied version of it called “Grass Mud Horse Style” and performed the dance with handcuffs, to signal his intended message of criticizing the Chinese government for locking up dissidents<sup>32</sup>.

In addition to visual works, tales, in the form of explanations for the new narrative fragment, are made about Grass Mud Horse, as it is a previously unknown phrase compared to “River Crab.” Very often, these tales are repetition or modification of the basic storyline of Grass Mud Horse fighting against River Crab, as populated by the YouTube video mentioned earlier. Yet, one other tale, much worth noting, tells that the phrase, “臥槽泥馬” (literally “Crouching Trough Mud Horse”, a homonym phrase for “I fuck your mother”) is an idiom from the Chinese classic “Stratagems of the Warring States”<sup>33</sup>. It explains that the idiom refers to people who are less than they appear to be or those incapable of what their position requires them to do. The “explanation” even comes with examples for how this idiom is used in sentences. In the next chapter, I will explore more on the role of interpretation for this case.

### **Connecting**

The website China Digital Times, which features Crazy Crab’s political cartoons mentioned previously, has also launched a vocabulary archive called “Grass-Mud Horse

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32 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LAefTzSwWY>

33 See <http://cy.kdd.cc/B/12R/>



Lexicon”<sup>34</sup>. This online glossary allows users to find the meaning for many new terms created by Chinese netizens in political discussions. As stated on the page explaining the lexicon, this vocabulary is not “censored” keywords (which have been documented elsewhere<sup>35</sup>), nor is it part of the “legitimizing discourse,” used by active defenders and supporters for the government<sup>36</sup>. Some of these words may occasionally be outright blocked or put on certain websites’ “sensitive lists”, “but in general they are popular daily lingo for Chinese netizens.” These narrative fragments or terms, which include these three studied in this research, are categorized in 17 subheadings for easy reference. For example, under the subheading of “the Great Firewall of China”, the new phrase, “chrysanthemum script”, is explained as such:

“菊花文 (jú huā wén): chrysanthemum script

Chrysanthemum script is a font that first began to be used on Tencent microblogs.

Besides the decorative effect, netizens use this font to make it harder for online censors to detect what they are writing.”

In other words, this lexicon bridges the gap between those who are unclear about what these new terms mean but are interested in finding out and those who know. The building of such lexicon depends on ongoing open source collaborative efforts with submissions from volunteers and translators who are on top of the netizens’ increasing vocabulary “that represent the netizens’ ‘resistance discourse.’”

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34 [http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-Mud\\_Horse\\_Lexicon](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon)

35 See <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/filtered-keywords/>

36 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2010/12/introducing-the-grass-mud-horse-lexicon/>

Similarly, the Grass Mud Horse festival that took place on the internet on July 1, 2012 calls for political group activities by connecting people with the narrative fragment “Grass Mud Horse.” In this online festival organized by the Cartoonist Crazy Crab to “celebrate” the anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, netizens submitted their photos or pictures of Grass Mud Horse or of other dissenting themes, through the use of Google+ and Twitter<sup>37</sup>.

An example of these graphic works is Grass Mud Horse’s identity card (see figure 12)<sup>38</sup>. The Internet group called “June Fourth New Generation” has created a “Special River Crab Region Permanent Resident Identity Card” for Grass Mud Horse. The new Chinese word mentioned previously combining some pictorial parts of the words “Grass,” “Mud” and “Horse” appears on the card. The card has an issue date of July 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, the date of the celebration for the anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong to China and also of protest against the government. This card, parodied in the format of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region permanent resident identity card, is one of the pictures submitted for the online protest initiated by cartoonist Crazy Crab, mentioned earlier, and participated in by netizens, in support of the one on the street. This “Special River Crab Region Permanent Resident Identity Card” tells that Cao Ni Ma Gobi was born on May 35, 1989, which refers to June 4<sup>th</sup> Massacre in 1989, a date considered as “unspeakable” by the CCP in the Chinese history. Its sex information reads a Cantonese word meaning “angry”, pictorially composed of two “men” (男) between a “woman”

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37 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/07/album-first-annual-grass-mud-horse-festival/>

38 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/07/album-first-annual-grass-mud-horse-festival/>

(女). The back of the card, marked with a red crab, comes with the explanation of Grass Mud Horse as a fictional character in the fight against “harmony (River Crab).”



Figure 12 Grass Mud Horse's Special River Crab Region Permanent Resident Identity Card

Worth noting is the connection between these entries around the theme of Grass Mud Horse. For example, the title in Ai Wei Wei's photo ("Grass Mud Horse blocks Center," a homonym phrase for "Fuck your mother, Communist Party Central Committee") reappears as the theme in the poster of this Grass Mud Horse festival<sup>39</sup>. The

<sup>39</sup> <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/07/album-first-annual-grass-mud-horse-festival/>

identity card submitted for the Grass Mud Horse festival on July 1, 2012 was in turn previously distributed in the on-street protest on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2009 in Hong Kong<sup>40</sup>.

### **Outside-Internet Performance**

In addition to Grass Mud Horse identity card used in on-street protests, the theme of Grass Mud Horse was also performed outside the Internet. For example, this YouTube video, titled “Citizens’ Action: Fu Zhou 4.16 + Grass Mud Horse fighting River Crab,” records a protest in Fu Zhou<sup>41</sup>. Protestors sung the well-known parodied song of Grass Mud Horse (parodied from the theme song of “the Smurfs”), as well as the National anthem of the People's Republic of China. While one may wonder why the national anthem was sung in a protest as it is typically associated with the oneness of the nation, one may also need to understand the background and content of the song in order to see the irony at play. The song, titled “March of the Volunteers,” with its aggressive melody, military tempo and war-encouraging lyrics, tells a story of Chinese people standing up to oppression, along with the communist theme. The English translation of the lyrics<sup>42</sup>:

“Arise! All those who don’t want to be slaves!  
Let our flesh and blood forge our new Great Wall!  
As the Chinese people have arrived at their most dangerous time,  
Every person is forced to expel his very last cry.  
Arise! Arise! Arise!  
Our million hearts beating as one,  
Brave the enemy’s fire, March on!  
Brave the enemy’s fire, March on!  
March on! March on! On!”)

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40 <http://evchk.wikia.com/wiki/%E8%8D%89%E6%B3%A5%E9%A6%AC>

41 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhzQupQH01w&list=PLFEC8CBE37841FDAA&index=3>

42 <http://www.nationalanthems.me/china-march-of-the-volunteers/>

Thus, taking the role of Grass Mud Horse to fight against “harmony,” the protestors reminded the police watching them of the CCP’s communist roots to fight against oppression, and “harmony” (River Crab) is such oppression. They protest/arise because “the Chinese people have arrived at their most dangerous time” and “Every person is forced to expel his very last cry.”

### **Commentaries**

Grass Mud Horse sparks commentaries on both sides regarding its popularity and usage, perhaps since it sounds like a swearing phrase. For example, in this piece titled “There should be immediate death penalty for ‘Grass Mud Horse’”<sup>43</sup>, the author states that given the rich culture of ancient China, netizens should give only names of aesthetic value to everything, rather than use homonyms of dirty words to attract viewership and profit. “Immediate death penalty” should be given to those “10 mythical creatures” such as “Grass Mud Horse” (meaning that they should be eliminated on the internet.) He or she further argues that, in order to build a harmonious and civilized Internet environment and to eliminate the Internet’s vulgar atmosphere, a long-term surveillance mechanism is needed. While this is more of a commentary of a phenomenon, another piece takes the style of factual report covering the appearance of “Grass Mud Horse” in a youth’s magazine and the uncertainty aroused among parents<sup>44</sup>. The author reports that a youth magazine, which introduces history and geography, features a section with a surfer surfing with an alpaca. In that section, “‘mythical creature’ Grass Mud Horse” is used in

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43 <http://news.xinmin.cn/rollnews/2009/03/30/1751957.html>

44 [http://kb.dsqq.cn/html/2010-12/14/content\\_58319.htm](http://kb.dsqq.cn/html/2010-12/14/content_58319.htm)

the description for the alpaca. According to the reporter, this shocked the parent and the teacher interviewed, as magazines like this should promote healthy thoughts.

The positive commentaries, on the other hand, take the form of analysis and look at the significance of Grass Mud Horse. For example, Cui, blogger and scholar, argued on her blog that “Grass Mud Horse” was born out of the government’s “Special Corrective Action Against Vulgarly on the Internet campaign” that disbanded many online discussion groups having nothing to do with vulgarity<sup>45</sup>. Examples include “Black Humor Group,” “Gun and Rose Group” and “Anti-simplified Characters Group.” For her, the question is not about whether or not things that people talk about are good, but about the consequence and the price of taking such freedom away with power. Doing so pushes those who were politically apathetic to the side of “Opposition” in order to defend their own life. She regards Grass Mud Horse as an ingenious homonym invention, with the subtext saying, “there is something I can’t say. You don’t let me say it and this I understand. You see? I am being cooperative, aren’t I? Of course, I myself also think I shouldn’t say such dirty words. I don’t need to go down to that level for you; even if you force me to, I won’t say them...Is that all right then? Therefore, what I said is “Grass Mud Horse”, not 'XXX.’” Cui thinks that Grass Mud Horse allows people to resist without being locked up.

Guo, professor at TsingHua University, similarly agrees with Cui’s analysis and further equates “Grass Mud Horse” to James Scott’s “weapon of the weak”<sup>46</sup>. Scott

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45 <http://www.hecaitou.com/blogs/hecaitou/archives/123756.aspx>

46 <http://www.cranth.cn/0903/00101.html>

(1990) posits that subordinate groups, not free to speak their minds in the presence of power, instead create a secret discourse that represents a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant --- what he calls the “hidden transcript.” Building upon this idea, Guo argues that those videos such as Grass Mud Horse’s song are the hidden scripts in the Internet age. Scott's insight is that, through hidden scripts, the subordinate group may create and maintain a social space that is itself an achievement of the resistance. Guo applies it to the case of Grass Mud Horse and argues that what matters is the process of protesting, as it is the process through which the space is created for expression.

## **Green Dam Girl**

### **Meaning**

According to different entries explaining the meaning of the phrase Green Dam Girl, the authors refer the phrase to the “moe” anthropomorphism of the Chinese censor software “Green Dam youth escort program,” which the Chinese government required computer users to install in 2009 <sup>47</sup>. Galbraith (2009) explains that Moeru (nominalized as moe 萌) is a simple Japanese verb meaning 'to bud or sprout,' and is homophonous with the verb 'to burn.' In the 1990s, the word “moe” appeared on the Japanese bulletin board website 2channel in discussion of young, cute and innocent anime girls, and a burning passion for them (Macias & Machiyama, 2004). Thus, the word “moe” is probably chosen due to its meaning of youth and being homophonous for “burning.” Given its origins, moe is often associated with a young, media-savvy generation of otaku,

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47 See examples from: <http://wiki.moegirl.org/%E7%BB%BF%E5%9D%9D%E5%A8%98>; <http://hanyu.iciba.com/wiki/460440.shtml>; <http://baike.baidu.com/view/2531732.htm>; <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%BB%BF%E5%9D%9D%E5%A8%98>

or hardcore fans of anime, manga and videogames. An example of moe anthropomorphism is that of Wikipedia in figure 13, Wikipetan, a combination of the Japanese word for Wikipedia and the friendly suffix for children, -tan<sup>48</sup>.



**Figure 13 Wikipetan: moe anthropomorphism of Wikipedia**

While the word “moe” (萌) also has similar original meaning in Chinese, to mean “to sprout”, there had been no established use of the word as to personification in the Chinese culture, preceding the online trend of moe anthropomorphism. Yet, with the influence of Japanese comic and animation culture, the word 萌 has also transformed to mean “cute” in Chinese, as in the fairly recent phrase “卖萌”(“to sell cuteness,” meaning to pretend/act to be cute<sup>49</sup>). Indeed, a Japanese online discussion group on animation

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48 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wikipetan\\_full\\_length.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wikipetan_full_length.svg)

49 <http://resources.echineselearning.com/dailybrief/dailybrief-chinese-1699.html>



noticed Green Dam Girl being moe anthropomorphism for the Chinese<sup>50</sup>. Like many moe characters created, such as that of Wikipedia above, which take the form of cute young girls or women, Green Dam Girl (绿坝娘) is no exception. Instead of the Japanese word “-tan”, the Chinese word 娘, which means “young lady” or “woman,” is used following the name of the thing to be personalized (Green Dam, 绿坝, in this case).

### **Storytelling**

Compared to River Crab and Grass Mud Horse, the story telling for Green Dam Girl partly lies in the elaborated character development. While there is no standardized version of the Green Dam Girl character, I will detail the version that appears most often in my search (also allegedly the earliest and most widely known) and employs a Japanese video game character as a blueprint <sup>51</sup> (see Figure 14<sup>52</sup>). In terms of appearance, her outfit entails a “River Crab” hat and an arm band “prefect” written on it, referencing that she is on her mission of “River-Crabbing” (suppression), as also indicated by her paint jar with the word “seal” written on it and her list of websites to be banned in her bag. She carries some bunnies with her, referencing the bunnies on the package of the Green Dam Youth Escort software.

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50 <http://www.itmedia.co.jp/news/articles/0906/15/news059.html>

51 <http://wiki.moegirl.org/%E7%BB%BF%E5%9D%9D%E5%A8%98>

52 [http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Green\\_Dam\\_Girl.jpg](http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Green_Dam_Girl.jpg)



**Figure 14 A common version of Green Dam Girl**

In addition to outfits and gear, personalities and characteristics have also been assigned to Green Dam Girl in these entries. The phrases “天然呆” (“born idiotic”) and “傲娇” (“arrogant and pampered”), both originate from the Japanese animation and comic culture, and are used to describe her personalities<sup>53</sup>. She is “arrogant and pampered,” as she is a rich girl worth 40 million RMB (in reference to that the Chinese government has spent 40 million RMB for the software). Being “born idiotic,” she is innocent and slow, referring to the ineffectiveness of the software, as those with the fairly good computer skills can manipulate and thus disable it.

In addition, she is also color-blind, hinting at the fact that the software indiscriminately also bans non-pornographic materials that happen to be yellow in color.

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53      An example can be found at <http://hanyu.iciba.com/wiki/460440.shtml>

Since pornography is associated with the color yellow in Chinese culture, the pun here is that Green Dam Girl cannot discern the real “yellow” (cannot tell pornography from other materials). For instance, in figure 15, Green Dam Girl, with her River Crab Claw, is after Garfield, who says, “I am only Garfield cat!”<sup>54</sup> There is a yellow asterisk in her left eye, indicating that she has detected some yellow material (i.e. Garfield.) The text on the bottom of the picture writes, “discovered yellow picture; Green Dam Girl has come in time to strike and defended people’s healthy Internet environment.”



Figure 15 Green Dam Girl & Garfield

Along the same line, Green Dam Girl is very forgetful and has to wear her key around her neck (see Figure 14), in reference to the software not recognizing browsers

54 <http://idaiwan.pixnet.net/blog/post/28298014-%E4%B8%8B%E8%BC%89%E7%B6%A0%E5%A3%A9%E5%A8%98%E7%9A%84%E6%A1%8C%E5%B8%83%E5%92%8C%E7%BE%8E%E5%A5%B3%E5%9C%96%E7%89%87>

such as Google and Firefox. Being flat-chested, she bans all other women with a bigger chest from skimpy dressing. Her mantra is “whatever H is the most disgusting!”<sup>55</sup>. Here, “H” refers to the Japanese phrase “工口” (abbreviation for eroticism) due to the likeness in appearance with the first character (“H” turned 90 degree looks like “工”). For example, in Figure 16, the top says, “工口 banned,” with two Grass Mud Horses under<sup>56</sup>.



Figure 16 Green Dam Girl and Grass Mud Horse

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55 <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%BB%BF%E5%9D%9D%E5%A8%98#.E5.90.8D.E7.A8.B1>

56 <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/green-dam-girl-%E7%BB%BF%E5%9D%9D%E5%A8%98/photos/sort/low-score>

In another version of the Green Dam Girl below (Figure 17)<sup>57</sup>, she, again with her River Crab hat and prefect arm band, is sitting on a block with the H letter crossed out, the flag reads “I need to harmonize you!” and her boot reads “harmony” in Chinese. The pronoun (偶) used as “I” here is an internet meme for 我 (I or me) and is associated with coquetry<sup>58</sup>. Lastly, she also has the “hidden M property” meaning that she is masochistic<sup>59</sup>, as she is easy to be “pushed down.” The phrase “push down” is used in online game to mean “kill” or “beat down” and also used in sexual reference. Both connotations are used in this case, referring that Green Dam as software is weak and easy to push down, like masochistic Green Dam Girl when it comes to sex.

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<sup>57</sup> <http://idaiwan.pixnet.net/blog/post/28298014-%E4%B8%8B%E8%BC%89%E7%B6%A0%E5%A3%A9%E5%A8%98%E7%9A%84%E6%A1%8C%E5%B8%83%E5%92%8C%E7%BE%8E%E5%A5%B3%E5%9C%96%E7%89%87>

<sup>58</sup> <http://baike.baidu.com/view/3162.htm>

<sup>59</sup> <http://hanyu.iciba.com/wiki/460440.shtml>



Figure 17 Green Dam Girl banning “H” (text: “I need to harmonize you!” on the flag; “harmony” on the boot.)

The elaboration and development of Green Dam Girl as a character are also applied to song and text. There are several different songs devoted to Green Dam Girl, such as “Green Dam Girl RiverCrab your whole family” (based on a Japanese song called “Luka Luka Night Fever” with new lyrics in place<sup>60</sup>) and “Green Dam Girl’s song.”<sup>61</sup> The lyrics’ content of these songs, however, are fairly similar, as the story is told from the perspective of Green Dam Girl, emphasizing how righteous she is that despite the

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCKS1DP1tvo>

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsw23W019SA&list=PL80C254321C1D92B7&index=7>

arduous nature of her mission of harmonizing society. She is determined and works hard to fight against the creeps or otaku<sup>62</sup> men for the healthy thoughts of youths. While Green Dam Girl is the protagonist in most of these songs, it is clear, with lines such as “don’t give me candy as treats, lest rascals may come to push me and make me fall,” in which the creator of the lyrics takes the position of mocking rather than affirming the protagonist<sup>63</sup>.

While these songs are fairly short, the character of Green Dam Girl is further developed in this short online fiction<sup>64</sup>. This story, in which Green Dam Girl has come in the protagonist’s (an otaku guy) real life and turned into a love interest from an annoying little censorship software mascot, unfolds with a lot of sexual connotations and power dynamics. Particularly in Chapter 1, “My life with Green Dam Girl,” the protagonist has talked Green Dam Girl, a real-life presence for the Green Dam software on his computer, into being his maid by changing the scripts and settings of the Green Dam software on his computer. The maid outfit is a very common cosplay (i.e. costume play) theme in the Japanese comic culture. Green Dam Girl was initially snobbish towards the protagonist, due to her censoring power and arrogance; however, now seeing that the protagonist can actually control her through the keyboard, she is made to believe that the protagonist is

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62      Otaku refers to those with obsessive interests, particularly in anime and manga, often with the negative connotation that they lack social skills and stay home all the time

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<http://cn.uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/%E4%BC%AA%E5%9F%BA%E9%9F%B3%E4%B9%90%E7%BB%BF%E5%9D%9D%E5%A8%98>

64      <http://hi.baidu.com/wiloudfrave/item/d247b08095f75e5d26ebd91e>

her master (echoing her personality of being born idiotic). Thus, unwillingly, she gives him her underpants, which contains an encyclopedia of the latest pornography websites.

In addition to such textual narratives, there are numerous pictures of Green Dam Girl that suggest the use of sex to exhibit power dynamics. For example, in Figure 18, the right side of the comic strip shows that Green Dam Girl is checking the underpants of XP girl (a meofication of Window XP) against her wish, as she is asking 360 Girl (a meofication of 360 software products<sup>65</sup>) for help<sup>66</sup>. On the left side, 360 Girl is stripping off Green Dam Girl, saying, “Green Dam Girl, you rascal is not allowed to bully little XP!” with Green Dam Girl protesting, “Stupp...pid, I am a lady worth 400 thousands. Treating me like this...most annoying.” Indeed, many of the images of Green Dam Girl appear sexual, portraying her as a sexual object, either unwilling<sup>67</sup> or willing<sup>68</sup>.

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65 <http://www.360.cn/about/englishversion.html>

66 <http://www.gamebase.com.tw/forum/38033/topic/86446103/1>

67 An example can be found: <http://www.sz.js.cn/web/indexshow/jctw/318336.shtml>

68 An example can be found: <http://www.gsw.gov.cn/html/xinwenzhongxin/yulexinwen/33695.html>





Figure 18 Green Dam Girl attacks XP Girl but is attacked by 360 Girl

## Connecting

Like River Crab and Grass Mud Horse, Green Dam Girl also serves the functions to connect individuals. For instance, on this chat room titled “Post-80s’ comic counter-strike: Training Green Dam” (“post-80’s refers to those born after 1980), discussants talked about their opinions of Green Dam Girl, the censorship and their criticisms of the government (the term “training” here has sexual connotation and refers to sexual training to maximize pleasure.)<sup>69</sup> For example, one discussant wrote, “an even stronger feature has been forgotten: red scarf,” referring to that a red scarf is a common communist outfit item, particularly for the young ones. Another shared the information, with original link<sup>70</sup>, that the Green Dam filtering software actually contains pirated code stolen from

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.hecaitou.com/blogs/hecaitou/archives/133870.aspx>

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2348705,00.asp>

CyberSitter created by the U.S. software developer Solid Oak Software. Yet, another suggested that since there are now photos for the looks, he or she is expecting comics strips for it. Also, like any forum, it is about more than information sharing but also about interaction. For example, one forum member raised the question of why Green Dam Girl but not Grandpa Green (Grandpa Green is a phrase by Chinese blogger and writer Han Han to refer to the similar personification of the software) is discussed. Another answered that it is because being a Lolita can arouse people's drive to push her (referring to the software) down. Similarly, another chat forum posts one draft for the look of Green Dam Girl and invites others to comment<sup>71</sup>.

### **Outside-Internet Performance**

As the creation of Green Dam Girl is highly tied with the comics and animation culture, the idea of cosplay is also applied in this case. In Figure 19, someone dresses up as Green Dam Girl marked with her green outfit and holding a sign "seeking sugar daddy for 40 million (RMB)," standing next to another cosplayer of Wikitan (moe character of Wikipedia.)<sup>72</sup> While the context of the picture is unclear, the simplified characters on the sign seem to suggest that it was done in public in Mainland China. The performance cosplaying Green Dam Girl is witnessed in Mainland China (e.g. in a Game, Anime, and Comics carnival in Shanghai<sup>73</sup>) as well as in Taiwan (in a comic festival called "Petit Fancy,"<sup>74</sup> see Figure 20).

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71 <http://www.acfun.tv/a/ac33743>

72 [http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wikipet-tan\\_GreenDamGirl\\_20091005-DSCN0654M.jpg](http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wikipet-tan_GreenDamGirl_20091005-DSCN0654M.jpg)

73 [http://news.17173.com/content/2009-07-20/20090720093419987\\_2.shtml](http://news.17173.com/content/2009-07-20/20090720093419987_2.shtml)



Figure 19 Cosplaying Green Dam Girl and Wikitan



Figure 20 Green Dam Girl Cosplay in a comics festival named “Petit Fancy” Taiwan

## CHAPTER FOUR: COMPARISON

I have so far elaborated my findings for each of these narrative fragments in terms of their new/alternate meaning, their use in storytelling or elaboration of the counter narrative, how they serve to connect individuals, and their use in outside-internet performances (as well as commentaries, in the case of Grass Mud Horse.) In the following section, I attempt to connect these findings to several dimensions with which I compare these three narrative fragments. The reason that I choose three instead of merely one of these narrative fragments for this study is that comparison between them can enrich our understanding of the nuances at play in the counter-narrative telling, due to the particularity of each narrative fragment. These comparison dimensions include: 1) their **structural features**, 2) **cultural underpinnings**, 3) **instances of different interpretations**, and 4) **discursive communities**. These dimensions are highly connected to those four/five categories emerging from the findings (i.e., meaning, storytelling, connecting, outside-internet performances and/or commentaries). By looking at their structural features, one can see how new or alternate meanings are generated and how these fragments are used in storytelling. Understanding the cultural underpinnings allows us to see how these narrative fragments, compared to others, make sense in stories and manage to connect to the authors and audience. Finally, a glimpse at discursive community, partially informed by the outside-internet performance and the language used

in these entries, allows us to have an idea of who these narrative fragments are actually connecting. The issue of connection is also examined with instances of disconnection where interpretations are different from those in the counter-narrative sense.

## **Structural Features**

The first several dimensions I use for comparing them are some structural features, i.e. 1) whether these narrative fragments had already been previously established in the language before the new meaning emerged, 2) the literary trope involved, and 3) their grammatical functions. Among all these narrative fragments, only River Crab has widely established primary meaning as the scavenger animal, while the other two are new phrases altogether. Second, in term of the literary trope, both River Crab and Grass Mud Horse involve the use of homonyms. For the former, its homonym, “harmony,” is the goal/subject to be achieved in the master narrative of the Chinese government. For the latter, its homonym, “Fuck your mother,” exemplifies an instance of vulgarity and obscenity, which is the target/object to be combated in the master narrative. Unsurprisingly, as we have seen in the findings above, their positions flip in the dissenting narrative: Grass Mud Horse is to be celebrated while River Crab is to be combated. Green Dam Girl, on the other hand, involves no use of homonyms but rather directly calls on the name of the tool of criticism suppression and “does the damage” through personification.

Lastly, when it comes to grammar functions, River Crab is used diversely. It is used 1) as a noun due to its primary meaning being a noun (an animal) (e.g. “Grass Mud Horse will combat River Crab”); 2) as an adjective when the meaning is “harmonious”

(e.g. “very good, very River Crab”); and 3) as a verb, often in passive voice, to mean “to censor” (i.e. “to harmonize”) (e.g. “my post is River-Crabbed.”) Grass Mud Horse is used as a noun (horse is a noun) and as a verb phrase for swearing. None of the entries I found suggest that Green Dam Girl is used more than as a noun (the person is the noun.) This may not be surprising, as Green Dam Girl refers merely to the personalized character of the censor software Green Dam Youth Escort.

However, it is important to note from these structural features that all these three narrative fragments serve as noun --- an animal or a person. This may suggest that the homophonous choices of River Crab and Grass Mud Horse are not merely an “accident” -- such choices turn the abstract idea of harmony and obscenity concrete and the formation of characters allow storytelling, especially in the form of tales. In the case of Green Dam Girl, the character is formed through personification of the software instead of using homophones.

## **Cultural Underpinnings**

Although it is much easier with our hindsight to “explain” why these narrative fragments are popular on the Internet, to a certain extent, they have succeeded in being adopted by those who use them among many other possible choices, at least partially, due to their cultural fit within the users’ community. In the case of River Crab, consider another competing homonym of “harmony”: 禾鞋 (which literally means “Grain Shoe”). In one of my entry findings, “Grain Shoe” (禾鞋) is mentioned as a homonym for

“harmony” in Cantonese<sup>75</sup>. Compared to River Crab in Cantonese, Grain Shoes sounds much closer to “harmony.” Yet, “Grain Shoe,” “River Crab” and “harmony” all have the similar pronunciation (pinyin: HeXie) in Mandarin. Thus, one may ask why Grain Shoe has not become a popular homonym for “harmony” in Mandarin as River Crab has. One possible reason is perhaps the cultural connotation of River Crab in its established meaning. Culturally, since crabs walk sideways, they are considered as a symbol of a bully or a tyranny, who cares only about one’s way regardless of others, as in the Chinese phrase “héngxíngbàdào” (橫行霸道.) In addition, like in some other cultures, crabs are considered as a delicacy food item. Such combination seems to make River Crab a very workable narrative fragment to tell a dissenting story of a tyrannical government being eaten up. In contrast, Grain Shoes is not an established phrase and thus lacks the meanings like River Crab has. Another big plus is that, since River Crab is an established phrase and involves the economy, it makes the job to censor dissenting discourse bearing the phrase River Crab much harder due to its multiple meanings.

While there are often many homonyms for each individual word in Chinese language, it is much less the case for combination of words, such as the swearing phrase of “Fuck your mother.” While we have no way to know why the homophones of this particular phrase, among others, was “chosen,” it does not seem to be a surprise, since many Chinese swearing phrases achieve the effect of insults through the reference to sexual intercourse and to the targets’ family, especially their mother. This swearing phrase exemplifies this referring rule and is one of the most common swearing phrases.

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75 <http://evchk.wikia.com/wiki/%E5%92%8C%E8%AB%A7>



Like River Crab, Grass Mud Horse also has a potential “competitor.” Fa Ke You (法克鱿), which has the literal meaning of “French-Croatian Squid,” is the number two on the top ten Baidu mythical creatures mentioned earlier which are all homonyms of obscenity (Grass Mud Horse is the number 1). Fa Ke You (法克鱿) is the mere homonym of “Fuck you” in English. Yet, while both Grass Mud Horse and French-Croatian Squid are not established phrases, the former has higher cultural resonance, as the latter involves a foreign language. In addition, compared to squid, horse is a fairly positive symbol in Chinese culture. In Chinese New Year, people put up lucky sayings on the wall. Sayings that involve horse include “Success when the Horse arrives” (to describe everything goes smoothly and success is achieved at the start) and “Energetic like Dragon and Horse” (Dragon has very positive meaning in Chinese culture.) In contrast, Squid has the alternate name of “Dark Thief” (乌贼) due to its discharge of ink during escape. Since the dissenting narrative is to oppose the ban of obscenity, Grass Mud Horse imparting positive meanings to a swearing phrase then lends itself a useful fragment for a counter narrative.

Compared to River Crab and Grass Mud Horse, Grass Dam Girl probably contains the richest cultural complexity and calls for more elaboration in terms of culture. As in many other cultures, personification is nothing new in Chinese culture. Yet, as raised by a discussant in a blog page about Grass Dam Girl, why does Green Dam Girl but not Grandpa Green become popular? Or Green Dam Uncle, as an image is also

created for him<sup>76</sup>? Questions like this are raised since in the Chinese patriarchal culture, powerful figures are often referred to as Grandpa X, since Grandpa has the most control over others in a family. “Grandpa” extends beyond the domestic realm to refer to political officials or other powerful people in the public realm. And it is not a term that is “old-fashioned,” as the Chinese media refer to some very popular actresses as Grandpa X to stress how powerful they have become. Grandpa Green, or at least Uncle Green Dam, should thus, in theory, attain more cultural resonance than Green Dam Girl does, as the software is an authoritarian tool used to control ordinary people. Obviously, the subculture of Animation, Comics and Games (ACG), especially the practice of “moe” anthropomorphism, is heavily at play here, as evidenced in the drawing of Green Dam Girl in the form of young girl (a common form of “moeification”) and the language used in the characterization of hers (e.g. “born idiotic” is not a common phrase used in Chinese).

To understand the ACG culture in China, it may be useful to first look at the ACG culture in Japan, where the practice of “moe” anthropomorphism originates and develops. According to Galbraith (Quote), who conducted his study on moe in Japan from 2004 to 2009, he argued that moe is a word to describe a euphoric response to fantasy characters or their representations. In practice, that means “both love and a mild sexual arousal felt for fantasy characters.” He explains the image of young girls is often used in moeification since they can endlessly “sprout” new forms and fantasies (moe means “to sprout” and is a homophone for “passion.”) As Galbraith (2009) puts it, “the passive, emotional (coded

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76 <http://group.mtime.com/shushu/discussion/879479/>

as feminine) desire to care is juxtaposed with an aggressive, physical (coded as masculine) desire to mate. Both purity and perversion are expressed in extremes.” In other words, on one hand, a child-like girl is to be nurtured; on the other, she is a woman in a form to be desired. Also, as the author notes, to produce such “pure” fantasy, narratives and context are removed (e.g. Dejiko, a cute little cat girl with absolutely no story). In the absence of the narrative connecting moments of pleasure, the purity of the moe character can coexist with perverse sex acts. Thus, with moe characters, men can experience love outside the confines of manhood (defined by work which in turn defines masculine excellence). In the case of women, in order to experience love outside the confines of womanhood (defined by childbirth), their moe characters are homosexual beautiful young boys, who exhibit the same bi-qualities of purity and perversity.

Like many cultural practices, used differently when put in another cultural and historical context, the moeification of Green Dam Software in China seems to be a bit different from Galbraith’s observation about Japan. Rather than decontextualizing and removing narrative from the character, all the features and personalities are given to Green Dam Girl to tell a counter story. Unlike a cat-eared girl with no story, Green Dam Girl, is “color-blinded,” wears her River Crab hat and prefect armband, and claims her worth of 40 million RMB for a reason—i.e., to generate a story through the character. From the entries of discussion about Green Dam Girl, there is not much to suggest the desire “to nurture” a moe young girl character as in the case of Japanese male AGC fans. Rather, if moeification is about fantasy; it is fantasy blended with politics and sex in our case, particularly indicated by the numerous sexual clues referring to power dynamics

(e.g. “M (masochistic) property” and “to push down”). Compared to a male image of the software, its personification into a young girl appears to be a more ironic material against the official narrative of protecting youth from pornography, with a sexual and young image of the software as a political tool. This choice of moefication, however, does not come without drawbacks: it requires the audience to have at least heard of or even had some background knowledge of moefication, in order to make sense of what the author is intending. This leads to another important dimension of discursive community where these narrative fragments “make sense.”

### **Discursive Community**

Another dimension to compare is the discursive community in which the meaning of these three narrative fragments is shared in relation to the counter narrative. In general for all these narrative fragments, the existence of discursive communities could be demonstrated by the fact that commentators would recognize those who do not share with the counter narrative interpretation, by calling them out as “50 cents Party,”<sup>77</sup> as comments in some of the entries show (e.g. in this YouTube video of Ai Wei Wei doing the “Grass Mud Horse Style” dance<sup>78</sup>, or of Green Dam Girl<sup>79</sup>).

Yet, the “problem” is that, other than “50 cents Party”, there are also others with a general Chinese cultural and language background not interpreting or using the alternate or newly created meaning of these ambiguous terms in their ironic usage. Building a

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<sup>77</sup> Name-calling for internet commentators paid 50 cents in RMB for each posting favorable to the government (Bristow, 2008)

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MqTBT2ZZ2Q>

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCKS1DP1tvo>

theory on irony, Hutcheon (1994) argues that “Irony is always (whatever else it might be) a modality of perception— or, better, of attribution— of both meaning and evaluative attitude.” She posits that due to the infinite variations and combinations possible, irony is both relatively rare and in need of markers or signals. Thus, there is no such thing as an irony signal in itself. The process of interpretation is an intentional act, based on information provided by immediate context and by textual markers. For Hutcheon, a successful “marker” will always depend on a discursive community to first recognize it and then to activate an ironic interpretation in a particular shared context. Therefore, discursive communities make communicating in an ironic mode possible, rather than the opposite (i.e. ironic communication forms communities.) The existence of discursive communities could be best illustrated when meanings are not shared with those “outsiders.”

### **Cases of Different Interpretations**

In the case of River Crab, one of the entries I found is an article by a website selling gifts and handicrafts<sup>80</sup>. In the article, Mrs. Liu (presumably the interviewee), “explains” to the author why she has this “River Crab” handicraft for Chinese New Year. Her answer is that River Crab is homophonous for harmony, and, besides, she wishes for fortune coming with no obstacles, like a crab walking sideways. In other words, while the article employs such homophonous use of River Crab for harmony, absent or unevoked is the counter narrative against government censorship in the article --- at least for both the author and Mrs. Liu, and likely for any readers not exposed to any texts about the usage

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80 <http://info.gift.hc360.com/2010/02/020910108228.shtml>

of River Crab in the counter narrative sense. This suggests that they are simply not in the same discursive community as those who would interpret the narrative fragment in the counter narrative sense, rather than that they are “wrong,” as one would expect that if they were in that community, they would try to avoid such “innocent” use of the narrative fragment. In addition, If I were not in this discursive community and merely go by name, I might have considered Crazy Crab's River Crab Farm as similar to this website promoting the sales of River Crabs. While appearing to potentially be using the phrase ironically by introducing what River Crab culture is about and its tie to the CCP, the website is merely using the phrase as a pun, rather than in an ironic sense of the counter narrative<sup>81</sup>.

In the case of Grass Mud Horse, some of my entries point to an incident of a “misinterpretation” of the narrative fragment<sup>82</sup>. In the section on “Questions from Readers, Answers from Experts” from Chinese newspaper Jie Fang Daily (Jie Fang means liberation), an “expert” who is a doctorate from Social and Public Administration School of East China University of Science and Technology, answers the meaning of “卧槽” (literally meaning “Crouch Trough”, homophonous for “I fuck”)<sup>83</sup>. The “expert” refers to the playful story of “卧槽泥馬” (literally “Crouching Trough Mud Horse,” a homonym phrase for “I fuck your mother”) and answers that it is an idiom from the Chinese classic “Stratagems of the Warring States” (mentioned in the previous chapter),

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81 <http://www.cnhexie.org/hxwhShow.Asp?id=37>

82 An example can be found at <http://cul.sohu.com/20090306/n262643308.shtml>

83 [http://epaper.jfdaily.com/jfdaily/html/2009-02/23/node\\_11.htm](http://epaper.jfdaily.com/jfdaily/html/2009-02/23/node_11.htm)

referring to those incapable of what their position requires them to do. The “expert’s” sloppiness of not verifying the source surprised many who know about the homonyms. It is also ironic since the incident also suggests that the “expert” fits perfectly with the made-up definition of “Crouching Trough Mud Horse”: someone incapable of what his/her position requires. In short, the “expert” misses the markers put in place, including the use of homophones, and the ironist’s intention to mock.

“Misunderstanding” also happens to Green Dam Girl. The Chinese newspaper, Yang Cheng Evening News, reported on the popularity of Green Dam Girl, claiming that the creation of the character demonstrates the animators’ love for the censor software Green Dam<sup>84</sup>. Accompanying this claim are pictures of the popular version of Green Dam Girl, a cosplay picture of the character, a short comic strip of Green Dam Girl. The subversive meanings of such markers as Green Dam Girl’s River Crab hat and her claim of self-worth of 40 million RMB are completely not mentioned by the author in the article.

### **Comparison on Discursive Communities**

All these cases point to the existence of discursive communities where members will have a counter-narrative interpretation with these narrative fragments as markers. While it is difficult to assess who these people are in the communities given the elusive nature of the Internet, clues are in the entries for who these people may be. In the case of River Crab, even though the use of Internet in China is associated with the young generation, quite some number of participants who appear to be over fifty years old

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84 [http://www.ycwb.com/news/2009-08/24/content\\_2229485.htm](http://www.ycwb.com/news/2009-08/24/content_2229485.htm)

showed up in the River Crab banquet by Ai Wei Wei as shown in the video. This may have something to do with the fact that the use of homophone is common in the Chinese-speaking world and River Crab is not an entirely new phrase. In addition, the discursive community that understands the meaning of River Crab in the counter narrative sense spans across the Chinese speaking regions, as one of the entries suggests that it is from Malaysia. This article appears to be authored by a university student, saying that the invasion of a big red River Crab has come a long way and attacked the University of Malaya<sup>85</sup>. This seems to highlight that as long as the counter narrative using River Crab can make it through the censor to the Internet and stay long enough to be known, the alternate meaning can be understood beyond borders within Mandarin-speaking cultures.

For Grass Mud Horse, Cui, in her article mentioned in the previous chapter, suggests that sufficient background information is necessary for the interpretation of the narrative fragment in the counter narrative sense. She has forwarded the video “Grass Mud Horse’s Song” to her friends and found that very few of them know what the video is about and why she sent it to them, because she has not explained the background to them. The reporter in another entry also mentions that the parodied documentary featuring Grass Mud Horse using alpacas' video shots, may have led some to believe that Grass Mud Horse is a real animal, if the audience misses or does not understand the markers that have a shared base on the internet<sup>86</sup>. The unfamiliarity of the alpaca in China may also make such parodies more believable, leaving some audiences wondering how

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85 <http://kaillery.blogspot.com/2011/04/crab-invasion.html>

86 [http://news.ifeng.com/society/4/200902/0211\\_346\\_1006552.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/society/4/200902/0211_346_1006552.shtml)



come this foreign creature bears such funny name that “happens” to sound like a swearing phrase in the national language. These “confusions” suggest that the discursive community in which Grass Mud Horse will provoke a counter-narrative interpretation is a young generation who frequently uses the Internet and would know about the meanings of these markers with established meanings on the Internet. For example, one such marker in the parodied documentary is the “host's” name “quail dove.” The phrase literally refers to a kind of birds, but is homophonous of “Spring Bro,” the nickname of a young female pop singer who has been the subject in many other parodies, due to her androgynous appearance. Thus, the creator of the video assumes an audience who would at least be familiar with terms used in popular culture and internet memes. While older generation are probably able to pick up the alternative meanings given the appropriate references and context, one can suspect that the generators and promoters for these narrative fragments are probably younger, savvy in technology, or at least aware of nicknames of current pop singers. Perhaps, there is no accident that the lexicon built by the China Digital Times in Berkeley, CA, which explains the meanings of many of these terms, is named after Grass Mud Horse, since knowing these terms, like Grass Mud Horse, requires other texts for understanding.

Finally, the language used to describe Green Dam Girl is those used commonly in the community interested in Japanese subculture of ACG. For example, numerous phrases like “born idiotic,” “H” and “M property”, unfamiliar jargon to many outside this subcultural community, are used for describing the character. These phrases are used not only by the creators but also by the audience. For example, in one of the YouTube video

of Green Dam Girl, someone also comments that the video is very “electric-waved”<sup>87</sup>--- which is another term to describe a “moe” property with its own background story.<sup>88</sup> The chat room titled “Post-80s’ comic counter-strike: Training Green Dam” (“post-80’s refers to those born after 1980) also suggests that this discursive community discussing Green Dam Girl is probably of an even younger generation, compared to River Crab and Grass Mud Horse. Among all three narrative fragments, the discursive community for Green Dam Girl is probably the narrowest, as the language used involves a lot of Japanese and ACG subculture and is likely to be unclear to those outside the community.

Yet, with the comparatively broader discursive communities, the narrative fragments “River Crab” and “Grass Mud Horse” also come with more diversity in meaning, as they are used by some to refer to pornography or erotic texts. In other words, while many use the terms to refer to suppression of voices, some impart them with the meaning of pornography. While suppression of voice is the primary concern in the counter narrative, pornography is the target in the government’s “mind cleansing” narrative of harmonious society. Thus, branching off from the counter narrative, those concerned with the freedom of pornography impart the meaning of “pornography” to “harmony,” to its substitute “River Crab” or even to their opposite “Grass Mud Horse.” Of course, these different usages are not mutually exclusive: one can use River Crab to mean suppression in one occasion and pornography in another.

The comparison in this section is summarized in Table 1 below.

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87 [http://www.youtube.com/all\\_comments?threaded=1&v=hsw23W019SA](http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?threaded=1&v=hsw23W019SA)

88 To have a glimpse of the size of such vocabulary for the moe properties, please take a look of this webpage at <http://wiki.komica.org/wiki3/?%E8%90%8C%E5%B1%AC%E6%80%A7>.

**Table 1 Comparison of River Crab, Grass Mud Horse, and Green Dam Girl in different dimensions**

	Meaning					
			Storytelling			
				Connecting & Outside-internet Performances (& Commentaries)		
	Previously Established Phrase or New	Use of Homonym	Function	Cultural underpinnings	Discursive community	Instances for different interpretations from counter discourse
River Crab	Previously established	Yes, homophonous for “harmony”	As a noun, verb, or adjective	In Chinese culture, crabs can symbolize bullies, as they walk sideways, in addition to being a delicacy food	Broadest: older generation showed up in public events; entries as far as from Malaysia; simplest to understand as it is in the existing language; the term can also be used to mean pornography	Crab handicraft for Chinese New Year
Grass Mud Horse	New	Yes, homophonous for “fuck your mother”	As a clause (swearing phrase) or noun	In Chinese culture, horse is fairly positive; & “Fuck your mother” is a typical swearing phrase	Narrower than River Crab as the phrase is new and alpaca is unfamiliar, but broader than Green Dam Girl; the term can also be used to mean pornography	“Expert” in news column thought the story of the phrase “Couching Trough Mud Horse” as real
Green Dam Girl	New	No	Noun	Japanese subculture of anime, comics, and videogames (ACG) is influential	Narrowest, as exhibited in the language used in subculture of ACG	Love for the software

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Narrative Proxies

The question put at the front is: how are dissenting voices made in the face of the Chinese government's discursive control through the use of internet? A look at how these three phrases, namely River Crab, Grass Mud Horse and Green Dam Girl, are used suggests that they serve as narrative fragments with which dissenters build their counter stories to escape from the censor. Netizens use them to build the figurative “ladder of escape” (an image by artist Joan Miró) to circumvent the Great Fire Wall (Miro, 2011). Specifically, these fragments are narrative proxies, providing an alternate route to criticisms with the lack of an open channel, with River Crab as proxy to the government, Grass Mud Horse to netizens, and Green Dam Girl to the censor. These narrative proxies serve as characters in storytelling, by allowing agency and intention attribution. When serving as subjects in stories, these characters could be attributed good or bad intentions, such as River Crab's bad intention to “harmonize” and to drive Grass Mud Horse to extinction, or Grass Mud Horse's intention to fight for freedom. Casted as objects, for example, River Crab to be eaten by Grass Mud Horse or those at Ai Wei Wei's River Crab banquet, agency is imparted to the subject. Green Dam Girl, proxy to the censor, is in turn “sexualized” in storytelling by netizens to fight against the government “sexualizing” political materials (i.e., by categorizing them as pornography to be

censored.) In short, these characters serve as narrative proxies for storytelling. Through these proxy characters of the self (Grass Mud Horse) and to the other (River Crab and Green Dam Girl), netizens can similarly author their own stories, in response to the version by the government.

## **Interpreting in the Internet Environment**

As the Great Fire Wall atomizes people, the counter narrative, through a proxy route, connects them as it is told and gets populated (or “viral”). These narrative proxies matter, or rather become materialized, not so much because a few individuals create stories but because the number of those who share them can grow very quickly. The Chinese government appears to understand such narrative and symbolic power, as demonstrated in their response, by pressuring service providers to punish those who use tactics to avoid censorship such as use of homonyms (Wines, 2012) and to ban the sale of Grass Mud Horse dolls<sup>89</sup>.

Yet, with the ambiguity involved in these proxies, how could interpretation as intended by the creators be made possible? Cases discussed in the previous chapter such as an “expert” misses the intended meaning of the irony in the case of Grass Mud Horse highlight the importance of the interpretation process. According to Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, meaning is mediated through the codes to the author and reader by other texts (Kristeva, 1980). Thus, one can say that different interpretations take place because the interpreters involved have not been exposed to those texts that others coming up with

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<sup>89</sup> An example is the banning of Grass Mud Horse dolls on TaoBao, one of the largest online sales platform in China, [http://www.chinagfw.org/2009/04/blog-post\\_4547.html](http://www.chinagfw.org/2009/04/blog-post_4547.html)

counter-narrative interpretations have been exposed to. Indeed, as an interpreter, I was not exposed to many of the cultural texts in the 'moe' subculture; therefore it took me more time and effort to understand the nuances at play in the storytelling of Green Dam Girl than of the other two narrative proxies.

Alternatively, we can apply Linda Hutcheon's theory on irony and the concept of discursive community in it<sup>90</sup>. Hutcheon (1994) defines irony as a “semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings” with an evaluative edge. There are many functions of irony, with varying degrees of such edge, ranging from reinforcing and complicating (minimal affective charge) to assailing and aggregative (maximal affective charge). The narrative proxies in our case serve the “oppositional” function of irony by being transgressive and subversive, rather than just being “ludic.” She emphasizes that the existence of a discursive community makes irony possible rather than the other way around (i.e. irony creates community). These different interpretations happen because the interpreters do not share the same discursive community as the author; the interpreters miss the markers and the author's intention of using irony to dissent. This explains well especially why the “expert” in the case of Grass Mud Horse thought the story of the origin of the phrase was authentic, as he or she missed the markers in place to signal the ironist's intention.

While these theories can help us explain the process of interpretation for these narrative proxies, more is needed to explain how such discursive communities could

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<sup>90</sup> While many of the data in our case can be considered parodic, some of them do not involve imitation, which is an important component for parody (e.g. the Ink Painting of Grass Mud Horse eating River Crab). See Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1984) as an example.

grow so fast, when very few shared their meanings, codes, and texts. Both theories rest on the assumptions that interpreters primarily work with the texts they have been previously exposed to or with their prior experiences with the shared community. This may be true for many art forms, such as operas or paintings in museums, where experiences with other texts become necessary to interpret intended meanings. Nevertheless, audience on the internet, even if not exposed to previously relevant texts, can play a more active role in “decoding” much more easily with the search function, especially with the relevant hypertexts embedded, like those in the Wikipedia entries. The reader can immediately access hyperlinks, usually by a mouse click or by touching the screen. Since the birth of these narrative fragments is on the Internet, one can find out about them online easily and do the subsequent reading of the references. Internet users afford to not get the irony right away, unlike in a play or in face-to-face social interaction. They can pause and look things up easily on the Internet when things do not make sense. The convenience of the internet greatly facilitates this process of seeking out the relevant texts and hence agency in the interpretative process, especially when these narrative proxies are “spiced” with humor; when one knows that a certain text is supposed to be funny but does not completely “get it,” one is compelled to find out even for those who may consider themselves “apolitical.”

### **Performance, Text & Heteroglossia**

We can also move the lens from interpretation to performance. These narrative proxies can be seen as a case of James Scott's argument of “politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to

shield the identity of the actors,” like Cui's commentary on Grass Mud Horse mentioned in the previous chapter (Scott, 1990). Yet, rather than being “hidden” transcript, the narrative fragments in our case exist in open, public domain. Thus, instead of being hidden practice like peasants secretly giving the dominate landlords less grain, our case is closer to Scott’s use of Bakhtin's example of carnival (M. Bakhtin, 2009), which is a public, privileged site of anti-hegemonic discourse. In many societies, carnival is the only time during the year when the lower classes were permitted to gather in unprecedented numbers behind masks and make threatening gestures toward those who ruled in daily life. However, unlike carnival, where these double-meaning, subversive performances are gone once the carnival is over, the stories told with these narrative proxies in this study remain or become texts on the Internet. Meanings, stories, connection sites, and even outside-internet performances, such as the protest using the Grass Mud Horse's song, are captured as texts (in the form of words, pictures or videos). Through the Internet, such texts allow these performances to reach to a much broader audience than those who participate in the moment as in a carnival, which may only take place once a year. The preservation of counter-narrative performances as texts allows their embedment in the public discourse, as in the model mentioned in the beginning by Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy (2004). While many of the entries containing the narrative proxies are 'informal' texts, such as posts in blogs and Wikipedia pages, they are also formally compiled in texts, such as *China Digital Times*' “Grass Mud Horse Lexicon.” Such glossary evidences that these proxies are enabling discursive resources for dissenting voices and exemplifies Bakhtin's (1982) idea of “heteroglossia”—the existence of multiple voices within the



same language/linguistic mode. Dissenters use these tools to make more 'cacophonous' the discourse on 'harmony' that is more like a state-directed solo than a symphony, in a political atmosphere of silence. While there is little indication in the data itself to suggest that its embedment in the Internet discourse has led to institutional change in Phillips et al's model, Hannah Arendt reminds us of the power of humor: "To remain in authority requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter."

## **Conclusion**

Of course, how far narrative fragments, after being embedded in the Internet discourse, will lead to actual institutional change is hard to say. On one hand, the government has responded with the use of these narrative proxies and others alike with either direct censorship or pressure on the service providers to do the censoring, as we see TaoBao's banning of "vulgar" homophones. On the other hand, a minority of officials such as Wang Yang, who served as the Communist Party Chief of Guangdong until early this year, encouraged provincial leaders to make use of online criticisms for cautious introspection, and deepen their online interaction with netizens to institutionalize the direction of development<sup>91</sup>. While there are sporadic cases that local officials were brought down after specific information of their corruption activities was exposed online, these changes remain limited to the local and lower level of government. Criticisms to the central government, who control the most of the censorship, are "disappeared", especially those challenging its governance legitimacy in an outright way.

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<sup>91</sup> See <http://www.danwei.com/wang-yang-says-public-officials-should-use-online-criticism-to-help-govern-more-responsibly/>

Homophones as narrative proxy devices are not risk-free, even if they are not simply banned. Homophone usage is a counter discursive strategy fairly unique in languages such as Chinese with the abundance of different tones and the possibility of words with similar sounds. The approximation in pronunciation allows proxies and double speaking, as evidenced in *River Crab* and *Grass Mud Horse*. Yet, there is always counter-counter-strategy. For example, throughout Chinese history, usage of the characters of emperors' title needs to be avoided (such taboo is called *Bi Hui* 避讳) and the taboo could extend to even homophones of their title. Such taboo of unspeakable words exists in new form on the Internet, a hundred years after the monarchy was over in China. It remains to be seen how the Chinese government responds to these discursive challenges in a longer term, especially with the new change in leadership, and how people counter-respond to them with their ingenuity in a continuously changing environment.

## APPENDIX

(<http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/227029.htm>):

### *i) “**Harmonious Society***

*Six Main Characteristics of a Harmonious Society:*

- 1. Democracy and the rule of law,*
- 2. fairness and justice,*
- 3. integrity and fraternity,*
- 4. vitality,*
- 5. stability and order,*
- 6. and harmony between man and nature.*

### *ii) **The Main Objectives and Tasks for Building a Harmonious Socialist Society by 2020:***

*-- The socialist democratic and legal system must be further improved; the fundamental principle of administering the country according to the law must be generally implemented; people's rights and interests shall enjoy concrete respect and be guaranteed. To achieve this, we shall develop a socialist democracy and fully integrate the leadership of the Party with the people's position as masters of the country and thus administer the country according to the rule of law; we shall enable the broad masses of people to participate in economic, political, cultural and social management; we shall constantly improve the legal system, ensure judicial justice and safeguard judicial*

*authority so as to concretely respect and protect people's economic, political, cultural and social rights and interests and protect human rights and property rights.*

*-- The widening gap between urban and rural development and between different regions shall be gradually reversed; a reasonable and orderly income distribution pattern will take shape in general; household wealth shall increase universally, thus enabling people to lead more affluent lives; employment rates will be relatively high and a social security system covering both urban and rural residents shall be established in general. To achieve this, we shall reverse the unbalanced development between urban and rural areas and between different regions; we should reduce the proportion of high and low income groups and increase the proportion of the middle income group so as to enable the "diversified" income distribution pattern to take shape. The distribution order that ensures equal opportunities and an equitable distribution process will surely make the distribution result more reasonable; and the per capita income level of all members of society will be improved. We shall achieve full employment through economic restructuring and innovation of systems and basically set up the social security system covering both urban and rural residents.*

*-- Basic public service systems shall be further improved and the government will attain relatively significant improvements in administrative and service levels. To achieve this, the government's public finance system shall be further improved and the division of the administrative power and financial power of governments at all levels shall become more reasonable. Urban and rural residents shall gradually enjoy equal basic public services. And the quality of the public products such as education, medicare, employment and social security shall realize marked progress. The change of government functions in line with the requirements of the socialist market economy shall make great progress. The government's economic regulation, market supervision, social management and public services should be more responsive to the growing material and cultural needs of the people.*

*-- The ideological and moral qualities, scientific and cultural qualities and health status of the whole nation will be improved markedly and further progress will be made in fostering a sound moral atmosphere and harmonious interpersonal relationships. To achieve this, we shall filter socialist core values into the minds of people and help them reach a wide agreement on moral standards such as patriotism, devotion, honesty and friendliness. We shall popularize 9-year compulsory education so as to increase the physical and mental health of the people and create a social atmosphere of one for all and all for one.*

*-- Creativity of society as a whole will be enhanced markedly and an innovation-based nation will be established in general; public administration system will be further improved and social order made sound. To achieve this, we shall ensure that the whole society becomes more united and harmonious; we shall deliver more perfect mechanisms for fair competition, further improve the modern property rights so as to give full play to the creativity of the whole society. On the basis of integrating social management resources we shall set up a complementary network to ensure a clear division of government and market and a reasonable division of responsibilities between governments at higher and grassroots levels so as to better meet the needs of social restructuring and constantly enhance the people's sense of convenience and security.*

*-- Resources will be used more efficiently and the ecological environment will be improved visibly. To achieve this objective, we shall speed up our pace to change patterns of economic growth and reduce our overall consumption level of energy and other resources; we shall focus on addressing the environmental and ecological problems which endanger people's health and affect sustainable development, thus enabling people to have clean water, fresh air and safe, healthy food; we shall make new progress in building a resource conserving and environmentally friendly society.iii) **The Principles Observed in Building a Harmonious Socialist Society:***

*-- Putting people first. We must always put the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people as both the starting point and objective of the work of the Party and state to satisfy their ever-increasing material and cultural demands. We shall insist that development should be for the people and by the people and its benefit should be shared among the people.*

*-- Development in a scientific way. We shall work to strike a proper balance between urban and rural development, development among regions, economic and social development, development of man and nature, and domestic development and opening wider to the outside world. We shall change our growth mode, promote energy-efficient development to realize comprehensive, balanced, and sustainable economic and social development.*

*-- In-depth reform and opening up. We shall continue in the direction of reform to develop the socialist market economy. In order to meet the requirements for economic and social development, we shall promote economic, political, cultural and social restructuring and innovation. We shall open wider to the outside world, make the reform decisions more scientific and the reform measures more coordinate so as to establish more dynamic, more efficient and more open systems and mechanisms.*

*-- Democracy and the rule of law. We should build socialist democracy and implement the fundamental principle of administering the country according to law. We shall build a socialist country under the rule of law, enhance the legal awareness of the whole society*

*and promote the legalization and standardization of national economy, politics, culture and social life so as to gradually constitute the social justice guaranteeing system and to promote social justice.*

*-- Properly handling the relationships between reform, development and stability. We should take into full consideration the momentum of reform, the speed of development and the responses of the general public. We shall maintain the stability and unification of the society so as to ensure that people should live and work in peace and contentment.*

*-- The participation of the whole society under the leadership of the Party. We shall follow a scientific and democratic path of administration in accordance with laws, and unite all forces available so as to create a harmonious society where everyone shares the responsibilities as well as achievements.”*

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Yu Pik Chau grew up in Hong Kong, China and received her Bachelor of Arts from University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada in 2004. She was employed as a research assistant for 6 years working on a wide range of topics within Social Sciences.