



Narrative dissidence, spoof videos and alternative memory in China

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Abstract

This article explores a special type of trickster discourse, networked spoof videos and the ‘narrative dissidence’ embedded in their construction of an alternative memory in China. I start with a review of the relationship between memory and power, and the changes that the internet as a mnemonic system has brought to their configuration, before turning to memory policy in contemporary China and the challenges posed to this policy by active users on the internet. I argue that the control of memory in China is realized through the monopoly of the media and the language system. I argue that this constructive process negates the official version of memory, strips bare all falsities and pretensions, and signals an emergent model for the construction of memory and truth in China.

Keywords

alternative memory, China, memory, narrative dissidence, networked spoof videos

In 1986, Gerald Vizenor published the novel *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* based on his experience as a visiting professor at Tianjin University in 1982. Through the eyes of the trickster figure of *Griever*, we see one of the scenes that were commonplace at that time in China – crowds chanting slogans on the street:

Remember our national policies ... we strive to better our lives, death to cats and dogs, one child, death to criminals, one child, death to venereal diseases, one child, death to capitalist

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readers, one child, death to spiritual pollution, one child, no spitting, one child, no ice cream with barbarians, one child, no sex on the road, one child, no bright colours, one child, no decadent music, one child, no telephone directories, one child, the east is red. (Vizenor, 1987: 57)

These slogans, although incongruous and outrageous (or perhaps because of this), remind us of some of the policies in the 1980s and have formed part of our memory about the time: a government-sanctioned ideology dominated by empty rhetoric.

This article discusses the redressing of the 'inequality of memory', and with it the redressing of the imbalance of power, made possible by the accessibility and affordability of media technology. Adopting Vizenor's theory on 'trickster discourse' (Vizenor, 1990), I intend to focus my analysis on the 'narrative dissidence' (Vizenor, 1990: 279) embedded in spoof videos and their use for the construction of an alternative memory in China. In what follows, I start with an introduction to trickster discourse and narrative dissidence, then I review the literature on memory and power and the changes that internet as a mnemonic system has brought to their reconfiguration, before turning to the memory strategies of the Chinese government and the challenges posed by active users on the internet. I illustrate this with two well-circulated spoof videos, *Little Rabbit, Be Good* and *Grass-mud Horse*, as examples of how alternative memory is constructed by spoof videos.

Trickster discourse and narrative dissidence

According to Vizenor (1990), trickster discourse is first comic discourse that rejects the tragic narratives dominant in social science theories. Second, trickster discourses, whether oral or written, are tribal narratives, and thus are alternative discourses that counter the 'absolute fake' representation of tribal cultures 'consumed in social science monologues' (1990: 278). Third, these tribal narratives use language games to resist the 'hypotragic' stereotypes imposed on native tribal cultures (1990: 283). Vizenor uses the term 'narrative dissidence' to account for this form of resistance through language and discourse (1990: 279).

In Native American literature, trickster discourse counters the dominant narratives in western culture and social science theories. In this article I intend to show that, in China, trickster discourse helps to shift power relations between the state and society by putting the representation of everyday life in the hands of media users.

Memory, power and the internet

Memory and power

Mirek is the protagonist in *Lost Letters*, a novelette in *the Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. He is meticulous about keeping a record of everything he does. 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.' This is the justification of his idiosyncrasy of memory keeping (Kundera, 1983: 3). It is also a terse summary of the intersection between memory and power.

While memory, for Mirek, is a tool of protection against state power, for others memory is a means of control to gain and sustain power. As Connerton (1989: 1) wrote, ‘the control of a society’s memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power’. In a similar vein Le Goff argued that ‘to make themselves the master of memory and forgetfulness is one of the great preoccupations of the classes, groups and individuals who have dominated and continue to dominate historical society’ (cited in Zelizer, 1995: 228). Mary Douglas goes a step further to regard the ‘whole social order’ as ‘a mnemonic system’ (cited in Ci, 1994: 75).

An essential method of memory control is to doctor the archive. As Derrida proposes: ‘[T]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory’ (1996: 70). And, since ‘archivization produces as much as it records the event’ (1996: 17), political power can be conveniently attained through archive tweaking, by deciding ‘who’s in and who’s out’ in the archivization process (Greetham, 1999). This partly explains the impulse of government, east or west, democracy or autocracy, to censor the internet.

In their discussion of the ‘politics of memory’, Lee and Yang (2007: 3) break down the relationship between memory and power into three dimensions: the contestation and negotiation over interpretations of historical experiences between official history and social memory; the appropriation of these interpretations for political action, critique and consent; and the formation of political subjects through remembering and forgetting. Pertinent to the discussion of spoof videos as memory are the first and third dimensions. These concern the presentation of alternative reality as opposed to sanctioned histories, and the active, bottom-up process of ‘meaning-making through time’ (Olick, 2007: 8) as opposed to the top-down definition of past experiences. This undermines memory control from the very start of the remembering process – archivization.

Memory and the internet

The internet can be regarded as a mnemonic system, an archive (Caygill, 1999; Prelinger, 2007), as a metaphor (the internet as an information aggregator), a form (internet archive) and a tool (the use of internet to store and share) in collecting and organizing past experiences. Robert Gehl (2009) discusses the contest between large media companies, entrepreneurs and users for the role of ‘the curator of display’. Burgess and Green (2009: 87–90) explore the implications of the idea of YouTube as an archive for the creation of cultural heritage, including its impact on the missions and practices of traditional cultural institutions. Alan McKee (2010) provides a case study for their theoretical discussion. He compares YouTube and the National Film and Sound Archive as resources for television historians interested in viewing old Australian television programmes. His findings show that YouTube prevails in reliability of cataloguing and retrieval of metadata, and serves as a better source for popular culture and popular histories, trivial ‘human interest’ material – births, marriages, and deaths, and ‘surprising pieces of rare ephemera’.

Memory in the offline world fades and disappears, but archive on the internet lives on. However, the ground-breaking nature of the internet as a mnemonic system does not simply lie in its ability to stand the test of time, but in its impact upon the classical tropes of memory. For one, digital technology, as represented by the internet, ‘with its capacity for order and storage, as well as its immediacy and interactivity, blurs the

boundaries between archival and living memory' (Hume, 2010). Memory becomes living experience.

The internet affords users an active tool to tell and share their first-hand experience, to mould, enrich, annotate and shape collective memory. Average media users with their everyday stories find themselves in the media landscape, writing and owning their own history, and bringing to light experiences that are unrecorded and deemed unworthy in history from the top. This is the first step towards the dissolution and subversion of the hierarchy associated with the archive, yet a big step towards redressing the 'inequality of memory' and, related to it, the inequality of power. As Derrida argues: 'Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation' (1996: 70).

In China, participation and access has allowed internet users to find out the undisclosed and contradict the distorted in the official version of reality and history. As Latham writes:

Among other things ... new media offer new ways for those in China with access to them to question official versions of 'reality,' to voice discontent, cynicism and skepticism and play subversively with news stories and reports of recent events. (2009: 38)

As I intend to show in this article, a popular form for voicing suspicion and for subversive play in China is spoof videos.

China's memory strategies

Memory and media are naturally related to each other. As van Dijck (2004) argues, both 'constitute intermediaries between individual and society, and between past and present'. A logical move to control memory is to rein in the media.

It is not news that China censors its media. Mao's regime was characterized by vertical control of communication, exemplified by a top-down media system that acted as a conduit carrying Communist Party thought to the masses. According to Tony Saich (2000: 221), it was 'a system of information control and censure with an intricate grading process regarding who is allowed to see which kinds of information'. In such a system, news media were regarded as the foremost mouthpiece of the party. All party news was carefully crafted and handed out by Xinhua News Agency or the *People's Daily* to project an image of solidarity, harmony and righteousness. Memory control was accomplished by overwhelming the citizenry in every aspect of daily life with official information and interpretations of reality (Kalathil, 2002).

The marketization process has given more editorial leeway to media, and the introduction to the internet has put a DIY memory tool in the hands ordinary users. However, many topics and areas are still off-limits.

Besides news media, there is a long-term practice of the CPC in which literature and art must serve a higher political purpose than merely to 'entertain'. Historically, the two central roles for literature and art are in 'educating the masses' and 'criticizing enemies', a practice dating back to before the CPC's takeover of national power in 1949 (Gao and Pugsley, 2008). As a result there have been a great number of cultural productions that

glorify the past and present of the ruling party, creating a new cross-medium genre called ‘the mainstream melody’ (主旋律, *zhuxuanlü*). Media products belonging to this genre range from novels, theatrical plays, music and opera, to movie and television drama (Barmé, 1999; Sun, 2007; Wu, 2006).

Apart from narrative, the other tool of memory control is linguistic monopoly. As Ci (1994: 69) suggests, ‘one of the most durable ways of removing values from public memory is to remove the linguistic medium that alone affords access to them’. The level of control of language in Mao’s time was meticulous and high-handed, as Ci writes, ‘The Maoist state, through its total control of education and the media, has all but monopolized the resources to shape the written and, to a barely lesser extent, the spoken word’ (1994: 71). The linguistic monopoly, coupled with Mao’s brand of anti-intellectualism, produced a unique language that is ‘ cliché-ridden, heavy-handedly political, intellectually crude, emotionally shallow, aggressively judgemental, blindly self-confident’ (1994: 72).

Political languages today, to a lesser extent, follow this pattern. Every few years a new set of terms and slogans are invented and propagated, incorporating and encompassing all experiences and narratives under its umbrella, enforcing a single version of history and reality, and pushing alternative stories to the margins.

This type of language is similar to what Michael McGee (1980) calls ‘ideograph’, that is, ‘a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal’, and guiding ‘behaviour and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable’ (1980: 15). According to McGee, ideographs function as ‘agents of political consciousness’ and ‘come to be as a part of the real lives of the people whose motives they articulate’ (1980: 7). Thus ideographs organize not only past experiences but also living memories.

However, in the current techno-social environment, the monopoly of the state over the media, as well as language, is collapsing. As in trickster discourses, language games such as double-meaning, parodies and wordplay are run-of-the-mill on the internet, ridiculing and stripping bare the absurdity and emptiness of the ideographs. As Latham (2009: 39) suggests: ‘Indeed the official account ended up supplying the quotations that became the subsequent focus of jokes and fun-making.’

Spoof videos, narrative dissidence and alternative memory

Spoof videos entered Chinese public life in early January 2006, when a video creator named Hu Ge posted online a video clip *The Murder Caused by a Steamed Bun*, satirizing eminent director Chen Kaige’s flop movie *The Promise* (*Wu Ji*). The video became an instant hit and a multitude of spoofs covering a wide range of topics soon followed (Li, 2009).

Spoof videos constitute a special trickster discourse in China. They entertain and amuse, ridicule and interrogate, tear holes and poke fun, advocate as well as subvert (Huang, 2006). Research on spoofs has shown that they can be used both as a form of political criticism and emotional bonding for participants (Meng, 2011) and a tool to propagate official government views (Gao and Pugsley, 2008). Below I use two cases to analyse the use of spoof videos as trickster narratives to counter the strategies of memory

control in China. The first case shows how spoofs provide a comic alternative narrative; the second demonstrates the dissolving of government ideographs.

Counter-narrative through trickster discourse: *Little Rabbit, Be Good*

‘This has been a truly meaningful year!’ This is the line with which *Little Rabbit, Be Good* concludes the story.¹ The video, a spoof in the form of a greeting card ushering in the Year of Rabbit in 2011, takes stock of and comments on what has happened in the previous year. It was passed around on Twitter, *Weibo* (the Chinese term for micro-blogging) and other social networks before being blocked online at the end of January 2011. The video shows no plot, no coherent narrative, with only a string of high-profile cases in China. Although in the form of a greeting card, the tone of the video is sober, even depressing, far from what we would expect in a New Year’s card.

The Year of Rabbit is around the corner, and fireworks are lighting up the sky. Kuang Kuang² opens up a gift – a cartoon book – and the tale unfolds. It all happens far in the future, in a beautiful forest. Little rabbits are playing and laughing, and a nursery rhyme is sung: ‘Little white rabbits, oh so white, your ears stand upright; you jump and bounce around, so sweet, carrots and greens you eat, greens you eat.’³ A truck passes by bearing an ad that reads, ‘Three Tiger milk – Good milk that gives rabbit moms peace of mind’. However, after drinking it little bunnies drop dead in groups. One of the adult rabbits tries to go into the cave of the tigers to petition and seek justice for the little rabbit victims, but is stopped at the gate, either side of which is decorated with big character posters. Put together the posters read, ‘Serve the rabbits, and build a harmonious forest.’

In the cave, a rally is convened in the name of the ‘harmonious forest’. The podium is lined with tigers – or leaders, with rabbits sitting in the audience being addressed. Suddenly a fire breaks out. Rabbits scream and are not allowed to run for their lives. A voice shouts out, ‘Stay where you are. Let the leaders go first.’ Against the cries of rabbits, a rhyme sounds, with the same melody as the last one but with different lyrics, ‘Little rabbit, be good, get out of the way, get out of the way fast, the leaders shall evacuate first’. The tigers jump into a car, leaving behind a cave full of rabbits crying for help.

The misfortunes of the rabbits do not end there. Back in their homes, bulldozers are demolishing everything under their tracks, including a television showing a tiger extending condolences to rabbits for their tragic loss, while the latter hold a board reading ‘Thank You Brother Tiger’. A rabbit sets herself on fire on the rooftop of her house and falls down to the ground. Rabbits are in tears. Those who rise to protest are clubbed and taken away. Over images of the debris, a song is sung: ‘Little rabbit, be good, demolish the houses, demolish them fast, new ones shall be put up.’

While running away from home, one of the rabbits is hit by a car. The tiger behind the wheel comes out of the car and announce, unapologetically, ‘My dad is Tiger Gang’. The same melody rings, and a song is sung, this time in a tearful voice, ‘Little rabbit, be good, get off the road, get off the road fast; Gang’s son is driving in this direction’. On the same road, an old rabbit is being held and tossed towards a passing car, and gets killed immediately. The rabbit song is sung again, ‘Little rabbit. Be good. Listen! Be good. Be

Table 1. Allusions to real-life events in China.

The tale of <i>Little rabbit, be good</i>	Real life events in China
Three Tiger milk	Sanlu (Three Deer) milk and tainted-milk scandal
Serve the rabbits	Serve the people
Harmonious forest	Harmonious society
Rabbit petitioner	Petitioners
Fire in the cave of tigers	Karamay fire in 1994
Violence in forced demolition in rabbit land	Violence in forced demolition in China
Rabbit on fire in protest	Tang Fuzhen, and others protesting with self-immolation
My dad is Tiger Gang	My dad is Li Gang
Old rabbit tossed toward a car	Qian Yunhui incident

careful not to say whatever you want.’ A voice threatens, ‘Or you should watch out for accidents.’

Towards the end of the video, rabbits begin to bite tigers, giving vivid visual expression to an old Chinese saying: Pushed too hard, rabbits also bite. ‘This has been truly a meaningful year’, Kuang Kuang closes the book, and is summoned by his mom to make dumplings, a New Year routine in China. The video concludes with the nursery rhyme from the beginning of the video, ‘Little white rabbits, oh so white, your ears stand upright ...’

Despite the disclaimer at the beginning of the video that it is an adult fairy tale and should not be interpreted otherwise, its reference to real-life events is apparent (see Table 1).⁴ These are notorious cases the discussion and disclosure of which the government has tried but failed to suppress and, if possible, the memory of which it has tried to erase.

‘My dad is Tiger Gang’ is a spoof of ‘My dad is Li Gang’, the line of Li Qingming, whose father is a local police chief. He killed a girl on campus in a drunk-driving accident and tried to flee the scene. His line has become a catchphrase for the mockery of corruption. Internet users have conducted contests to integrate the line into sentences and classical style Chinese poetry. In an obvious parody of a famous line of Mao poems, one user writes, ‘it’s all in the past, talk about heroes, my father is Li Gang’.⁵

Another high-profile case referenced in the video is the Qian Yunhui incident. Qian was head of a village in Zhejiang Province who had petitioned to various levels of government for the loss of village land to a provincial industrial project. He was killed in a traffic accident near his home. But few could accept the verdict of his death as a pure accident. Analyses of video footage released by the police have been posted online by internet users, who also self-organized and conducted private investigations into the case. Even the open trial and sentencing of the driver at the beginning of 2011 did not resolve the doubts of the public.⁶ The case highlights the credibility deficit of the government and draws attention to the nastiness of illegal land seizures, and related forced relocation, which is also mentioned in the video. These tragedies, though staged on a daily basis in China, only make headline news in their extreme forms. A case in point is Tang Fuzhen,⁷ who burned herself with gasoline on her rooftop in protest against a forced



Figure 1. Serve the rabbits, build a harmonious forest

Source: Screenshot from *Little Rabbit, Be Good*

demolition. The burning rabbit falling down from her rooftop is a memorial to Tang, and other victims that would not be included in the sanctioned memory of the state.

If these cases find their place in the video because they were recent happenings in the past year, others that happened long ago are still relevant for the video because of the sentiments they have raised and sustained. ‘Three Tiger milk’ is an obvious allusion to tainted baby-milk scandal represented by Sanlu (literally Three Deer) milk that erupted in 2008. The scandal still haunts China’s dairy products sector and food administrative agencies,⁸ and constantly pops up to remind people of food safety problems in China.

The posters outside the tiger cave are a parody of two major political slogans of the Party. ‘Serve the rabbits’ matches ‘Serve the people’, the title of Mao’s talk in 1944⁹ that became a household slogan in China. The line still decorates Xinhua Gate, the entrance to Zhongnanhai Lake, the residence of top leaders (see Figures 1 and 2). ‘Harmonious forest’ is a clear reference to the ‘harmonious society’ initiative that was launched in 2007 and has dominated political discourse and organized past and present experiences ever since.¹⁰

Most spoof videos feature a few popular catchphrases from cyberspace. For this video it is ‘Let the leaders go first’. Few in the young generation know its origin. It was an order to the children in the 1994 Karamay fire that killed 288 school children among a total of 325 deaths. The children were told to stay still while the leaders were evacuated. Reports on the fire were censored because of concerns over stability.¹¹ However, with the accessibility of the internet, ‘Let the leaders go first’ has found its way into the internet vernacular. The fire in the video can be read as a memorial to the Karamay fire, as well as the fires in 2010, the biggest of which was the Shanghai fire. It killed at least 58 people, most of them pensioners.¹² The allusion to the fire and the catchphrase is also a ridiculing of the current ‘leaders first’ practice and the mentality of the government.



Figure 2. Serve the people.

Source: <http://iask.sina.com.cn/b/10558967.html>

In an interview, the director of the video, Wang Bo, who goes by the internet pseudonym Pi San, says that his purpose in making the video was venting and fun (*Wall Street Journal*, 2011). However, the video serves more purposes than just venting. By bringing a story of frustration with oppression online and to numerous computer screens, the ‘adult fairy tale’ makes it possible for users to (re)experience past and unfolding dark moments, for which sanctioned official memory will have no place.¹³ Once shared, these moments, together with personal sentiments about them, go into the collective memory of viewers of the video. The propagation of this memory finds a much more receptive audience than official history, because the ‘fairy tale’ is real-life experience in many places, for many people. It is a memory that is lived rather than imposed, sanctioned by ordinary people rather than by the state. It is also a bonding force for viewers, maybe not a force for revolt, but for doubt and definition. As a user comments, ‘we are all rabbit people’ in front of power (cited in Custer, 2011).

Little Rabbit, Be Good takes some dark moments in our society to remember. It is just one version of memory. Others may choose to remember jolly moments, glamorous occasions, or purely quotidian happenings. The video expresses the attitude of its creators towards the events it covers and thus serves as a comment on them. However, what matters here is not the comments and attitude, but the very act of recording and archiving. As Jiaoshou, another spoof creator, proposes, ‘Spoof videos are a record of social reality. In many years’ time, when we look back, we will know [through spoof videos] what are the hot issues on the internet as well as in our society’ (Jiaoshou, 2010).

Together, these user-created, user-archived memories subvert the official definition and interpretation of our life experiences, bring life and colour to our common history, enrich and define our collective memory and identity. In the time of *Lost Letters*, Mirek may claim victory for the first battle in ‘the struggle of man against power’ (Kundera, 1983: 3).

Grass-mud Horse and the subversion of ideographs

If *Little Rabbit, Be Good* foregrounds the futility of the state efforts with regard to forced forgetting, *Grass-mud Horse* disarms and subverts government attempts to frame and define social reality with its 'ideographs' (McGee, 1980).

'Grass-mud horse', which sounds like 'mother fucker' (*cao ni ma*), a common curse in China, is an imaginary creature that features in a series of spoof videos, the first of which appeared online in early 2009 as a way to get around, and poke fun at, the government initiative 'Rectify vulgar content on the internet', which later expanded into a campaign to purge popular culture of the 'three vulgarities' (salacious, mindless and tasteless content) (Cui, 2009; *The Economist*, 2010; Wasserstrom, 2010). In the name of 'anti-vulgarity', many websites were closed down, information censored, online groups arbitrarily disbanded (Cui, 2009). The video, *The Song of the Grass-mud Horse*,¹⁴ spoofs the theme song of the Chinese version of *The Smurfs*,¹⁵ introduced into China in early 1980s, and tells a story about the war between the grass-mud horse and the river crab, a homonym for 'harmony', a propaganda catchword. The grass-mud horses have been living freely in the beautiful Ma Le desert, but their survival faces a crisis, because river crabs arrive and are destroying the grassland on which they graze. The grass-mud horses choose to fight for their life, as the song goes:

There is a herd of grass-mud horses
 In the wild and beautiful Ma Le desert
 They are lively and intelligent
 They are fun-loving and nimble
 They live freely in the Ma Le desert
 They are courageous, tenacious, and overcome the difficult environment
 Oh lying down grass-mud horse
 Oh running wild grass-mud horse
 They defeated river crabs in order to protect their grassland
 River crabs forever disappeared from Ma Le desert. (cited in Xiao, 2009)

In the video, the grass-mud horse takes the image of an alpaca, is depicted as a charming, vulnerable yet brave animal. The story, coupled with a nostalgic melody, gives the dirty pun an endearing image. The video went viral and generated a cluster of spoofs in the form of photos and videos, poetry and artwork (China Digital Times, n.d.; see Figure 3). The block on the videos did not prevent the image becoming widely popular. Within weeks the 'grass-mud horse' became the de facto mascot of netizens in China. Grass-mud horse dolls were sold in stores on and offline (Wines, 2009).

The spread of the videos is interpreted as a victory for the users against censors and the grass-mud horse has become an 'icon of resistance to censorship' (Xiao Qiang, cited in Wines, 2009) and 'a metaphor of the power struggle over internet expression' (Anonymous blogger, cited in Xiao, 2009).¹⁶ However, I would propose that the

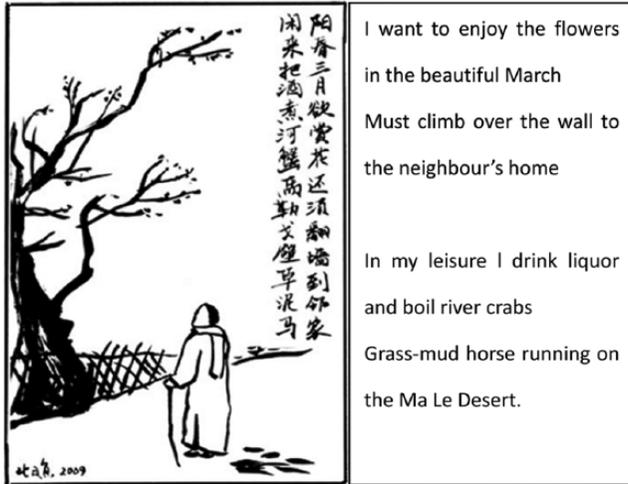


Figure 3. A classic poem on the grass-mud horse and river crab

Source: <http://www.bimuyu.com/blog/archives/72319649.shtml>

grass-mud horse and its derivatives serve a bigger purpose. I argue that by creating an alternative ‘interpretative repertoire’ (Edley, cited in Umlauf, 2006) and pattern of discourse that counters, undercuts and subverts the official rhetoric, the latter is rendered pale and powerless.

As already mentioned, the grass-mud horse was a collective response to the government censorship of ‘vulgar’ content, carried out in the name of socialist morality and social ‘harmony’. It has a rebellious undertone but, as Zhu Dake (2010) put it, ‘carries enough linguistic warmth to keep censors at bay’. The highly offensive obscenity carrying an innocuous linguistic shell spread online unchecked. By going to such an extreme while complying with ‘anti-vulgarity’ rules, the videos expose the futility of the attempts to control language, and the inadequacies of a highly sophisticated censorship mechanism. As Cui Weiping, a professor from Beijing Film Academy, writes:

Its underlying tone is: I know you do not allow me to say certain things.... I am completely cooperative.... Of course I think it inappropriate to utter these obscene words.... I want to keep my decency and dignity.... So, I say ‘Grass Mud Horse’, not fxxx your mom. What is ‘Grass Mud Horse’? It always works hard in harsh conditions ... it is from the vast grassland. I like it. I love it. This whole thing is ... out of your jurisdiction. (Cui, 2009)¹⁷

This is *scornful compliance*, compliance that shows both intellectual and moral superiority over rule-makers and enforcers. The obscene referent carries with it a refined signification – the frustration with censorship and demeaning of popular culture. The videos, however, do not stop there. They points to the linguistic means of ideological and memory control – government rhetoric or ideographs (McGee, 1980) that dominate the definition of our experiences and shape our interpretation of social reality. The target is *harmony*, which is given the negative image of the river crab in the videos. It is depicted

as evil, clumsy and bullying, yet incompetent and doomed to lose. It is a harmony ‘policed with overt rigour’ (Barmé, 2010), a far cry from the branding of the ‘harmonious society’ by the government as people-first, inclusive, prosperous and peaceful (*People’s Daily*, 2007). With the river crab, a very different meaning is attached to the grand ideograph in whose name most government initiatives, political and economic, social as well as cultural, are rolled out, and under whose banner alternative stories, minority positions are pushed to the periphery, ignored. The videos, and their derivatives, strip bare the emptiness and pretensions of the ideographs and put an ‘interpretative repertoire’ (Edley, cited in Umlauf, 2006) in the hands of ordinary users.

This alternative interpretive repertoire does not start with the grass-mud horse, and has not ended with it. Before it, there had been other ‘hidden scripts’ (Zhu, 2010) that afforded counter-official interpretations. For example, doing push-ups was used to allude to official cover-ups, censorship and murkiness (Latham, 2009), as was ‘playing hide and seek’ (Zhu, 2010). In the current social-political setting, these language games, these forms of linguistic play have become the ‘memes for the masses’ (Zhu, 2010). Grass-mud horse has become a rallying force for these forms of play. Under its name, a collaborative lexicon of user-created terms in China is compiled.¹⁸

Spoof videos’ regime of truth

A question that naturally follows the proposition of spoof videos as alternative memory concerns the authenticity of this memory. Is it truthful? If positive, how is truth produced in spoof videos?

When asked about the question of truth in spoof videos, Jiaoshou, one of the most famous amateur video creator, said:

Compared with formal, routine stories from official channels, stories in spoof videos have more life in them and travel with a bigger momentum, and what seems absurd is that they are closer to the truth of things. (Jiaoshou, 2010)

This sense of absurdity is a result of the dramatic change in the ‘regime of truth’, from a paradigm of official sanction and expert domination to one where ‘various actors... are involved in a dispersed and widespread creative construction of truth’ (Jones, 2009: 129).

Foucault argues that truth is ‘an ensemble of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and functioning of statements’ (Morris and Patton, 1979: 47). Thus the ‘regime of truth’ in a society entails:

the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Morris and Patton, 1979: 46)

Taking American political culture as a point of entry, Jeffrey Jones (2009) argues that satire has revealed the extent to which mainstream news has moved away from a ‘journalism-centred’ regime of truth to a gut-centred regime of ‘truthiness’, where truth claims are based on gut-feeling and wishful thinking, ‘not reality “as is”, but reality as “must

be” (2009: 139). In this culture, to quote Denny Crane in an episode of *Boston Legal* called *Shock and Oww!*, ‘There are no facts anymore, Kiddo. Only good or bad fiction’ (Kelley, 2006). Jones gives special emphasis to the role of satirists in the new regime of truth, whose importance lies not in giving authoritative voices to truth, or creating ‘believable fictions’, but in countering truthiness ‘on its own terms’ through redactional practices (2009: 139).

Spoof creators are such satirists in China. As was reviewed in China’s memory policy, the traditional communicative relationship in China is one of domination and hierarchy. In that didactical culture, truth is handed out, to be accepted without hesitation and reservation. To borrow Stephen Colbert’s satirical remarks on his new book, *I Am America*:

It’s not just some collection of reasoned arguments supported by facts. That’s the coward’s way out. This book is Truth – my truth. I deliver my Truth hot and hard. Fast and Furious. So either accept it without hesitation or get out of the way. (Colbert and Brumm, 2007: viii)

Truth in spoof videos, however, comes with ‘a veil of gaiety’ (Lin, 1935: 224) because, as Lin Yutang cautioned, ‘Truth naked is not a sight for the eye of the Bishop!’ (1935: 224). This ‘veil of gaiety’ is not only to avoid antagonizing bishops (censors) and keep them at arm’s length, but also to appeal to commoners (internet users). If Jiaoshou is right in asserting that there is more truth in spoof videos than official stories, this truth is attained in very different ways from its official counterparts. In most cases, this truth is not based on authoritative sources of information or first-hand experience, as video spoofers, like textual bloggers, rely mostly on second-hand information. Rather, it starts with the negation of the established. Not with ‘what it is’, but ‘what it is not’. What paves the way for the negation is not only the renewed sense of agency enabled by advances in information technology but, more importantly, the ‘seeds of doubt, cynicism, indifference, and confusion that affect the citizenry’s relationship to public life and social thought’ sowed by elites (Jones, 2009: 133).

However, negation by itself does not produce truth. Like knowledge, truth is also produced between links, in networks. The internet is such a network. Singer’s (2007) model for truth production in blogging serves as an interpretative framework for networked spoof videos. According to Singer, truth in blogs emerges from ‘shared, collective knowledge’ (2007: 85). More specifically, the blogger’s truth is created collectively by offering a space ‘for all comers to post what they know or think; to receive a hearing; and to have their ideas publicly debated, modified, and expanded or refuted’ (2007: 85). Thus it is a horizontal rather than hierarchical regime of truth. A model of truth production in which ‘information is not vetted before its dissemination but instead through the process of disseminating multiple views: truth, in this view, is the result of discourse rather than a prerequisite to it’ (2007: 85). In Jones’ words, it is in ‘reformulation’ that truth is produced (2009: 141).

Each spoof video offers an alternative view of reality, a different collection of experiences from official history. It is shared online and invites endorsements as well as challenges and debates. Wrong information gets sifted out, extreme views tempered, new knowledge produced. Networked spoof videos become a cultural forum where truth emerges from within. This truth, balanced and checked, may be closer to the true nature of things.

It is in the spirit of this understanding that I conclude this section with a Latin adage, *In iocus illic est verum*: In jest, there is truth.

Conclusion

This article sets out to explore the use of spoof videos as a special trickster discourse to create alternative memories and subvert the state-sanctioned version of reality and history. As Richard Sewall asserts: ‘Without a recognition of the truth of comedy, tragedy becomes bleak and intolerable’ (cited in Vizenor, 1990: 283). I have argued that there is truth in trickster discourse and have proposed a new regime of truth featuring collective production and horizontal connection. Fast-forward 30 years; if Griever, the American Monkey King, came to China, he would hear a familiar style of language, though mostly on the street and on the internet, rendering the government talk pale and powerless. Although spoofs remain a form of ‘narrative dissidence’, they help foster a dynamic civic culture that is needed for further political participation.

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Notes

1. The video was initially available at Tudou.com before it was censored in China. YouTube has the video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wr0BkayM_o.
2. Kuang Kuang is a little boy featuring in a series of funny cartoon videos created by a Beijing-based group called Hutoon Animation who also call themselves as Kuang-er (唾人类, literally *the humankind of Kuang*). Their videos are generally innocuous. Though the video *Little Rabbit, Be Good* is blocked, the website of the group is still functioning at <http://www.kuanger.com/site/>.
3. ‘Little White Rabbits’ is a nursery rhyme that has been passed on for generations. It is not clear who wrote it or when it was written, but literally every child in China can sing it! The original is in Chinese and the translation is mine.
4. The disclaimer reads: (1) This film may make people uncomfortable, and children are forbidden to watch it. (2) This film is meant as an adult fairy tale, and has no connection to real life. (3) This film is only meant to be shared during the 2011 New Year’s (Spring Festival) Greetings period, so please don’t pass it around after that. The original is in Chinese. The translation is by C. Custer, who posts the video with translation and analysis at <http://china-geeks.org/2011/01/little-rabbit-be-good-a-subversive-new-years-video-card/>
5. *The New York Times* has a report on the case (www.nytimes.com/2011/01/31/world/asia/31china.html?_r=1). A detailed introduction to the case and a collection of user-created content based on the case is available at Baidu.com (<http://baike.baidu.com/view/4534118.htm>).
6. *The New York Times* has a report on the incident (www.nytimes.com/2010/12/29/world/asia/29china.html). More detailed information on Qian and the incident is available in Chinese at Baidu Baike (<http://baike.baidu.com/view/4976117.htm>); in English at Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qian_Yunhui).
7. More information about Tang and the incident is available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tang_Fu-zhen_self-immolation_incident

8. According to the Chinese Health Ministry, by 17 September 2007 more than 6200 babies had fallen ill, mostly developing kidney stones, because of the tainted milk they drank. And most of the sick babies were from low- and medium-income families, because they could not afford expensive imported baby formula. As a result of lax enforcement and local corruption, a lot of the contaminated milk was not destroyed and is still used in some dairy products. *Time Magazine* has a report about the scandal (www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1841535,00.html).
9. The English translation of the talk is available at: http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_19.htm
10. An interpretation the term is offered by the *People's Daily* (<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90002/92169/92211/6274603.html>).
11. In an interview, Yang Weiguang, the head of CCTV, recollected the gagging of the fire story. A translation of the interview is available at China Digital Times (<http://goo.gl/dkBz1>).
12. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Shanghai_fire
13. Official memory is reserved for magnificent moments like the Shanghai World Expo and the Guangzhou Asian Games and, in rare cases, for natural disasters such as earthquakes and landslides, for which the government is not to blame. The top 10 domestic news events chosen by Xinhua News Agency include the Shanghai World Expo; the economic pact between the mainland and Taiwan; the 10-year national education plan; the 30th anniversary of Shenzhen special economic zone; earthquakes and mudslides; the development agenda for 2011–15; the Guangzhou Asian Games; supercomputer Tianhe-1A; grain output growth; and monetary policy shift. For more information see: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-12/30/c_13669812_10.htm
14. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKx1aenJK08>
15. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwsxdNkqxNE&NR=1>
16. Xiao Qiang has a collection of Chinese blog entries on the grass-mud horse phenomenon translated and posted on China Digital Times with original links. However, a majority of these links no longer work. Censorship is a plausible explanation.
17. Original in Chinese, translation from China Digital Times (<http://goo.gl/dTrnq>).
18. See: http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon

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