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What is This?

Subverting official language and discourse in China? Type river crab for harmony

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Abstract

While the promotion of 'harmony' (和谐) in Chinese official discourse is widely regarded as a feature of state propaganda and censorship, scarce attention has been paid to the reception and redeployment of such language among Chinese citizens. The often creative and ironic reappropriation of official language in everyday speech practices, both on the Internet and in conversations with peers, is an important aspect of Chinese language/politics and deserves careful examination. Much of the current work has regarded these discursive practices in terms of a resistance to 'harmonization' or, following a Bakhtinian reading, as 'carnival'. We argue that such approaches do not fully take into consideration actors' actual experience of consuming and producing such language play. Based on semi-structured interviews with Chinese university students conducted in 2009–11, this article shifts away from the dominant assumptions about the role of ironic reiterations of official language, in order to highlight how the presumed repoliticization of these linguistic practices also involves a depoliticization, reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of the relationships they negotiate.

Keywords

political discourse, *egao*, censorship, harmony (*hexie*), online resistance

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In post-reform China, standardized Party language remains an important aspect of the regime's propaganda, albeit incomparable to the 'linguistic engineering' of the Mao years.[1] During the Mao period, the Party's efforts to instil Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought entailed a thorough systematization of political language.[2] Language reached an unprecedented level of uniformity, visible in official written productions and political speech. As ideology was thought to yield 'action consequences',[3] Maoist rhetoric also pervaded everyday life.[4] In today's China, since the relative erosion of ideological uniformity, political language appears to be a less systematized set of ideas, articulating varied influences. Emphasis put on 'harmony' (和谐) and its reference to Confucianism illustrate these changes in the making of official discourse. This Chinese 'Newspeak' (提法)[5] relies on an interplay between positive processes – the diffusion of new slogans or terms endowed with new meanings – and negative practices, namely, the censorship work restricting the use of words at different levels, be it a priori or a posteriori.[6] Students of political slogans in China have emphasized the role of Party language 'in remolding the Chinese mind and facilitating ideological change',[7] thus depicting an image of individuals as passive and compliant recipients. Our analysis of the reappropriation of Party language by ordinary young people somewhat contradicts, or at least moderates, such representations. The famous homonymic transformation of harmony (*hexie* 和谐) into river crab (*hexie* 河蟹) offers a significant illustration of such a process.

The set phrase 'harmonious society' (和谐社会) has received considerable attention in scholarly debate since its emergence in 2005 under the former Chinese president Hu Jintao.[8] Under this slogan, Hu announced that Beijing needed to focus on 'further strengthening and improving management of the Internet, improving the standard of management of virtual society, and establishing mechanisms to guide online public opinion'.[9] In the everyday life of the younger online generation, Internet censorship is pervasive. It ranges from layers of blocks that have become collectively known as the Great Firewall to censorship at the level of words. Online community administrators are responsible for maintaining filtering systems that block certain sensitive words, but it is often unclear where the line between acceptable and unacceptable words is drawn.[10] Some characters are always censored, for example, most sites will permanently block words such as 'Falun gong' (法轮功), 'June 4th' (六四) and 'Jiangzemin' (江泽民).[11] Others are added or taken off in conjunction with the rise and fall of different issues on the agenda, political or otherwise. For example, during the Jasmine Revolutions in 2011, the word 'jasmine' (茉莉花) was blocked on SinaWeibo.[12] Around 2007, those on the receiving end of this 'harmonization' popularized a new linguistic form of negotiation to deal with censorship; the term 'being harmonized' (被和谐) indicates that someone has been censored online, by the processes just described.

Little attention has been paid to date to such instances of reception and redeployment of Party language among Chinese citizens. It is important to consider this reception and redeployment of slogans such as harmonious society as they are revealing of actors' relationships to imposed official discourse. In this article, we therefore explore some of the ways in which contemporary Chinese university youths have responded to online harmonization. After explaining our research design, we analyse informants' own thoughts and feelings about being harmonized, and we outline two principal ways in which informants have acted on these feelings. In some instances, harmonization leads

to resignation and compliance. In others, students have reacted creatively through forms of expression that have typically been understood as a mode of resistance. We pay particular attention to such expression in the form of humorous homonyms, as part of the satirical critique that has become known as *egao* (恶搞).

Although previous commentary on *egao* is varied and sophisticated, most scholarly analyses of this phenomenon have regarded it in terms of resistance and Bakhtinian 'carnival' in a 'free and unrestricted' quasi-separate space. Such approaches, we argue, need to be further nuanced by taking into consideration the actual experience of consuming and producing *egao*. We begin to do so by examining the experience of young Chinese who are not explicitly involved in online activism. Based on our interviews with those who deploy these tactics, we contend that their presumed repoliticization also involves a depoliticization, reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of the relationships they negotiate.

Being harmonized and resisting harmonization: Previous research and a new approach

In this article we pay particular attention to censorship at the level of words, and so we focus on the response found at the level of negotiating that particular form of harmonization. One response that has led to considerable excitement in the academic community is the ironic wordplay popularly called *egao*. *Egao* is a form of online culture that has grown popular and received international attention since 2006. It uses dark humour, irony and satire, often to mock and ridicule power holders. A significant part of this culture draws on puns and wordplay to simultaneously mock and escape the censorship regime. This practice has almost universally been understood as a form of resistance, contestation or subversion.[13]

Among the literature that engages more thoroughly with the phenomenon, resistance is typically understood as rooted in the oft-noted discrepancy between official Party-state language (which includes set phrases such as harmonious society) and an 'alternative political discourse'[14] or 'hidden transcript'[15] (which may include expressions such as being harmonized).[16] Meng Bingchun characterizes *egao* and its associated wordplay in terms of a 'virtual carnival',[17] which represents a 'collective attempt at resistance'.[18] In the few texts that have theorized the *egao* phenomenon, this particular line of thought has been remarkably dominant. The approach is based on Bakhtin's understanding of the carnival – a wild and grotesque time and space in medieval and renaissance Europe. One volume edited by David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt goes as far as to characterize Chinese cyberspace as a quasi-separate space of the carnivalesque.[19] To Bakhtin and a number of his followers, the carnival is an event in a time and space set apart from normal constraints, where rules are suspended.[20] It is a second life that is free and unrestricted, the antithesis of normal life.[21] In Herold and Marolt's volume, Li Hongmei reads the space of *egao* as carnival, a space that marks 'the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions',[22] where 'power relationships can be temporarily suspended'.[23] Tang Lijun and Syamantak Bhattacharya have similarly understood *egao* in terms of carnival, but simultaneously take it to reflect a 'widespread feeling of powerlessness, rather than offering the general public any political power', which nonetheless

'helps to push the symbolic power of satire to a higher level'.[24] They read in *egao* 'the potential to generate a chain of related satirical work, which can create a satire movement and subject power to sustained shame and ridicule'.[25] The analyses of *egao* that draw on Bakhtin thus also conceive of the phenomenon as a form of resistance to the 'official'[26] or 'established'[27] order. They repeatedly refer to George Orwell's claim that 'every joke is a tiny revolution'.[28]

Taken together, these studies of *egao* have contributed a wealth of examples of online wordplay, which has almost unanimously been rendered as a form of or attempt at resistance. These interpretations are based on various sources and examples, but predominantly draw on data from those who are highly pro-active in making elaborate spoofs,[29] or those who work very actively with online censorship.[30]

However, this type of wordplay is also deployed by ordinary young people in China on a less spectacular everyday basis. Being censored online, or being harmonized, has become a common experience of young Chinese – both those who claim an explicit interest in politics and are frequently engaged in online activity, and those who emphasize their indifference toward politics and do not seek to express political viewpoints online. Their deployment of wordplay is part of the *egao* phenomenon as well as the negotiation of meaning of the official terms from which they derive. Yet, the Bakhtinian reading of *egao* as carnival proves itself insufficient in light of the actual experience of these young people. Indeed, while carnival entails masked identities, the use of the Internet in China is characterized by the impossibility of anonymity. For university students who mostly live inside their campus, Internet access is provided by the establishment, thus rendering students' online activities traceable. Nonetheless, there are no prior studies that to our knowledge convey the way young people experience being harmonized online and negotiating harmonization at the level of language in such a non-anonymous context. This is the gap that we begin to fill by way of this article.

In academic literature that largely conveys *egao* as carnival and resistance, one commentator has remained decidedly sceptical. With regard to this phenomenon Johan Lagerkvist asks, 'Is it a *weapon of the weak*, or is it a rather feeble expression among well-heeled and largely apolitical urban youth?'[31] Lagerkvist is inclined towards the latter interpretation. He describes *egao* as '[p]ermeated with irony and an ambivalence that occasionally resembles, or indeed is, resistance', but is sceptical about this resistance because to him '[t]he crux of the matter is only what larger influence you have on politics, if that is at all desired, if your critique is too subtle'.[32] As such, we must not be satisfied with simply taking irony as intrinsically subversive or aligned with a radical politics.[33] Lagerkvist concludes:

> Instead of viewing the *egao* phenomenon as politically subversive, at least in the short term, it may make more sense to view it as the growth of an alternate civility, more indicative of social and generational change, building up ever more pressure against the political system – in the long term.[34]

Thus, from this perspective, it makes more sense to understand irony in China as a way for various societal groups to vent their anger in a non-revolutionary manner, at least in the shorter term. It is 'neither performed to be, nor perceived as, a direct threat against the Party-state'.[35]

In this article, we address Lagerkvist's query about the meaning and significance of *egao* wordplay, questioning the overwhelmingly common interpretation of *egao* as carnivalistic resistance. Lagerkvist's point that irony is not by definition a form of resistance is well taken. Nonetheless, this proves nothing about what it does mean, but simply leaves the question open. Do young people experience their online wordplay as free and unrestricted, marking the 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions' à la Bakhtin? Do they indicate that they understand the Internet as a space where rules are suspended? If not, does this necessarily mean that *egao* does not offer the general public any political power? Most commentary on *egao* sees in it both potential and limitations for politics, but how do those who engage in such wordplay on a daily basis perceive it?

Responding to being harmonized: A question of de- and repoliticization?

Although the question of politics and the political seems to underpin previous interpretations of *egao*, the implications of this question have been given surprisingly little explicit attention in these accounts. Tang and Bhattacharya juxtapose a feeling of powerlessness with the general public having any political power. Lagerkvist questions whether *egao* is a 'weapon of the weak' or a 'feeble expression among the well-heeled and largely apolitical urban youth'. However, just as it seems simplistic to read any form of laughter as a revolution, so too does it seem restrictive not to acknowledge anything but a mass movement as political.

Scholarship on the question of the distinction between politics and the political can provide some clarity here. This scholarship notes that modern political theory tends to treat politics as a kind of synonym for the state, its institutions and its activities. Thus, politics is taken to indicate a concern with deliberative social life mediated through institutions such as government, policy formation, and diplomacy. From this perspective, an issue is politicized when it moves from being outside the orbit of the state, and becomes a matter of public debate and decision. Correspondingly, an issue is depoliticized when it is considered to have moved into the private realm (and thus outside of the immediate *public* concern). The contrast between politics and the political suggests a wider view of this process. Instead of accepting the realm of politics as a given, this contrast suggests that there is a prior move to establish or select what counts as politics in the first place. In other words, politics and the non-political are not givens, but are constructed or created in some sense.[36] Jenny Edkins has described the political as being concerned with 'the establishment of that very social order which sets out a particular, historically specific account of what counts as politics and defines other areas of social life as not politics'.[37] If this perspective is adopted, the terms politicization and depoliticization take on an alternative meaning. From the perspective of the political, when established politics depoliticizes an issue it is, in effect, reinforcing a prior decision about what counts as politics in the first place. Therefore, from the perspective of the political, moves that simply label (and exclude) activities as 'not politics' are depoliticizing moves. They treat their object as the subject of formula or calculation – a decision on its status has already been made, and now the matter is merely one of implementation. Following the same logic, when an issue becomes incorporated in public policy and is a question of simple implementation, this is a depoliticizing move.[38] A politicizing move, by contrast, would

suggest a questioning of the accepted borders and categories of established politics. To repoliticize an issue in such a way would be 'to interrupt discourse, to challenge what have, through discursive practices, been constituted as normal, natural, and accepted ways of carrying on'.[39]

Thus, when Lagerkvist evaluates *egao* according to what larger influence it has on politics, he appears to be referring to what we here call *politics* as opposed to *the political*. Tang and Bhattacharya similarly seem concerned with politics in the narrow sense when they judge the success of *egao* on its potential to 'create a satire movement'. These accounts, then, are in themselves depoliticizing (in Edkins's sense of the term), in dismissing *egao* as not political *unless* it can achieve some movement or influence with regard to politics (in the narrow sense).

In our interviews as well as in informal conversations, young Chinese people frequently mention their indifference to politics. In their view, politics refers to institutionalized politics and official language, as conveyed through political education classes[40] which, according to many, are boring or uninteresting. Such a conception of politics is rendered visible by their oft-made distinction between the social and the political, as some claim to be rather interested in social issues. On the basis of the purported 'disinterest' of Chinese youth in politics, should we conclude that their use of irony and satire in language is devoid of any political significance? In the Chinese context, politicization of ordinary citizens' practices – in the concept's most traditional sense, with regard to institutionalized politics – can hardly occur. The realm of politics remains largely constrained by the state, and actors seldom label their own practices as politically oriented. For such reasons, and with analyses of authoritarianism emphasizing popular political apathy and depoliticization,[41] we take Edkins's view of politicization (as a process unfolding in the realm of the political rather than in politics) to highlight actors' dissociation vis-à-vis institutionalized politics without denying their political significance. Accordingly, in what follows, we re-open the question of the political. Although some of China's young claim to be disinterested in politics, and despite some commentators calling them apolitical, can an opening to the political be read in the way youth negotiate online censorship?

Method and sources

Because we are interested in students' views and perceptions at the level of the political in the wider sense of the term, we seek to understand these experiences through the way they are conveyed at the level of language. Therefore, we make no claim about the way some subjects truly feel about being harmonized, but rather about the way language functions in the negotiation of censorship, and the way our informants *claim to feel* about their experience.

In the Introduction to Herold and Marolt's volume discussed earlier, the Internet is posited as a quasi-separate sphere and criticism is levied on studies that 'attempt to *locate* the Internet within offline society … which is less than helpful if the goal is to understand what is happening *in* online China'.[42] Although we do not claim that the online sphere is located in offline China, we nonetheless question the inside/outside distinction that Herold's separate spheres imply. In the interviews that form the basis of this article, we

found a great overlap between the lives that our young informants live online and offline. As we will show, the wordplay they deployed online often appeared in offline interaction with peers, and so we study them here as one linguistic field. Granted that censorship works differently on- and offline, yet the a priori separation of the two seems conducive to little but foregone conclusions.

This article is based on 41 semi-structured interviews with Chinese students from different universities in Beijing. The focus on harmonization emerged inductively, after a first series of 36 interviews was carried out between December 2009 and March 2010 as part of a qualitative investigation of the political attitudes and behaviours of Beijing university students. Of the original 36 respondents, 17 were contacted through student public discussion groups on the Douban website.[43] Some of the remaining 19 students were encountered during participant observation of student spare-time activities, others with the help of prior informants. Five complementary interviews were conducted in November and December 2011 with students who, according to a former respondent, had the experience that was relevant for this research.

Despite coming from a variety of backgrounds, the informants interviewed were not representative of Chinese people or society at large, nor should their experience be generalizable to other young Chinese people. Most immediately, our sample included only young people born between 1980 and 1993, who studied at universities in Beijing and thus belonged to a privileged class in China. Some 24 per cent were members of the CCP; 61 per cent were male, 39 per cent were female. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and all translations are our own.

Being harmonized and resisting harmonization: The experience of Chinese students

'Treating the symptoms, but not treating the cause' (治标不治本): Feelings about being harmonized online

Being harmonized online emerged as a common experience of informants. When asked about the interference of power in their daily lives, informants rarely described specific instances other than censorship impinging upon the way they expressed themselves on the Internet. For example, one student felt that it was hard to 'express oneself freely … like on the Internet' and recounted with a laugh how she was once 'harmonized' for posting the phrase harmonious society. Although this example shows that the informant connected being harmonized to freedom of expression per se, criticism from our informants focused on the excessive nature of contemporary censorship. The use of expressions such as *guo le* (过了), *guofen* (过分), *guoyan* (过严) or *zuo guo tou* (做过头), in which the character *guo* (过) refers to the transgression of a limit, indicates that censorship was not necessarily rejected as such, but became an object of criticism when perceived as excessive.

Whereas the acceptable limit of censorship remained abstract and elusive, what was regarded as illegitimate throughout informants' accounts was the absence of reasons for the impossibility of posting words that were censored at a given instance. For example, one student who was harmonized after posting some pictures by the artist Ai Weiwei

emphasized that these photographs were harmless. When another informant was asked about his experience of being harmonized as he was trying to post a comment on the movie *Avatar*, he told us, 'I felt anger, why doesn't it let me post?' In like manner, another student asserted, 'This censorship is unnecessary.'

To one informant, censorship was nonsensical or inexplicable:

> The first time I was harmonized, it was very unpleasant! Because of this nonsense! How can there be such a reason? Can there really be this sort of reasoning? That is to say, this bunch of people are unreasonable.

The practice of censorship was thus regarded throughout the interviews as either being based on some incomprehensible reason or simply as having no reasonable basis at all.

Moreover, informants' experiences of harmonization entailed an emotional dimension conveyed by words connoting physical or psychological discomfort. Some students described their feelings of anger in the face of censorship. Some found the experience unpleasant or referred to their feelings in terms of pain.

At the same time, the informant mentioned earlier, who commented on the unpleasantness of his first experience of being harmonized, added that this behaviour on the part of the government was very comical. He found censorship ridiculous, since it could not eradicate the people's will to express themselves, and that censorship merely 'treated the symptoms, but not the cause'. Such references to harmonization as something funny were echoed by other students:

> It's mostly that it's a little funny. I might have had the feeling that it's a little bit absurd … even though we do not have free expression … but perhaps I wasn't particularly angry or whatever, but I felt that it was unbelievable.

Although explaining the students' feelings in the face of harmonization from a subjective viewpoint is beyond the scope of this article, we can nonetheless endeavour to interpret them in light of the context in which they are embedded. These feelings and perceptions arising from the experience of being harmonized can be attributed to the particular configuration in contemporary China, where the boundaries between what can and cannot be said are blurred by a growing space for expression. We could assume that in the eyes of university students who are not particularly involved in any form of activism, the scarcity of perceivable forms of control and direct coercion in everyday life renders any visible interference of power unexpected and even more salient. As they are experienced, constraints thus arouse disgruntlement, whether in the form of anger or feelings of bitterness. Moreover, in a context where educated youths have not only been kept at a distance from politics by the authoritarian regime but also seem to have both internalized and contributed to the stereotype that youth today are pragmatic and uninterested in political change,[44] being harmonized might appear somewhat inexplicable, or, in the students' own words, 'ridiculous' and 'absurd'. In their view, since expression online (and sometimes offline) will seemingly not have any influence on the political system, why should harmonization be so severe?

'I erased little by little': Disgruntled compliance with harmonization

A first form of reaction in the face of harmonization is disgruntled compliance, by which we mean that young people simply stop trying to write about sensitive issues or stop using sensitive words. While certain combinations of Chinese characters are known to be permanently forbidden, the list of 'sensitive words' was thought to be changeable and unpredictable. For instance, one informant told us that during the Jasmine Revolutions, in order to prevent activists from organizing gatherings, the characters for 'tomorrow' became a sensitive word. Therefore, informants sometimes attempted to identify and change or delete the words that prevented a particular post from crossing the technico-linguistic barrier of keyword censorship.

Although the sensitivity of some expressions is widely known, the uncertainty surrounding other words has induced young people to make repeated attempts at uploading a particular post. One informant explained that he sometimes had to make a few tests in order to determine which words prevented him from posting a message. The informant who was harmonized when trying to post on the film *Avatar* provided us with details of these trials:

> I wrote … a little comment, and … combined [several issues] together … China and demolition of houses and land requisition. I posted it, but the first time it couldn't be posted. Then I checked it once again and couldn't find any words that I thought were sensitive. Then I erased a lot of what looked like possibly sensitive words, erased or changed them, then finally, finally it was posted.

Another student described his exasperation when confronted by numerous, unknown sensitive keywords that are blocked at a given instance:

> For example we're chatting … chatting turns to the Xinhai Revolution, then there are keywords that you can't post, let me think, isn't … 'Li Dazhao'[45] a keyword? I change Li Dazhao into *pinyin*, then, posting it is still not possible, then let's think … isn't 'Xinhai' a keyword? Or is the character for 'Party' a keyword? Or is 'Sun Zhongshan' a keyword? Then after changing [these words], how come I still discover that I still can't post?! It's inexplicable. So, I don't know how many keywords there are in the end, and [in China] keywords are in fact often changing.

The same student then continued to explain the laborious process of trying to find what word was blocking the message he was trying to post. His tactic was to take a blocked article or message and erase one word at a time to find out which one(s) was/were the blocked keyword(s):

> For example, if a message couldn't be posted after erasing some sentences that meant the keyword was still in the text. I erased little by little [in order to find] this keyword. So, after having erased parts and managing to post it, apparently [the word] was 'freedom'. It was [because of] this one, this keyword, [that my message] couldn't be posted.

Circumventing what appears to be an excessive blocking of 'innocent' posts is a laborious, time-consuming process and a nuisance. One informant said that he 'spent such a

long time to send so little'. Another student who told us that he once had to write into *pinyin* several characters related to Tiananmen added, 'This is very annoying!' Despite or because of obstacles and the near impossibility of posting a comment, the painstaking procedure as described was sometimes thought to be 'not so necessary' or 'unnecessary', as were other ways such as breaching the Great Firewall by using virtual private networks or proxy servers.

Informants mostly gave what they called 'pragmatic reasons' to justify their compliance with censorship. Some informants told us that their response could be attributed to apathy, feeling tired or lazy. Some said that they did not have such a strong desire or a strong political consciousness to circumvent censorship, and that one eventually became accustomed to censorship. Another purported reason for apparent compliance was concerns about potential sanction. Given the aforementioned absence of anonymity online, having one's online activities discovered can result in an interview with the university's administration which sometimes also alerts the student's parents. While sanctions may not always carry severe consequences, they remain a form of social sanction – students who transgress norms are singled out and their online activities might be deemed improper given the social role expected of them by the university as well as their family. Perhaps more important than the fear of retaliation is the political indifference of peers, which informants described as apathetic and which also influenced their own behaviour. The expression *meibanfa* (没办法) was frequently used, meaning that there is nothing that can be done, or no way out, not specifically referring to censorship, but about changing authoritarian rule.

'We can only walk on the side-road': Circumvention of harmonization

If a first reaction to censorship is disgruntled compliance, a second form of reaction in the face of harmonization is to find ways of sidestepping the hurdles that stand in the way. Some informants used metaphors and humorous puns as an alternative:

> Because the government doesn't let us walk on this road. We can't write normal words, there are so many sensitive words that we can't write, we can only change them, turn them into other words. We don't have the main road, we only walk on the side-road.

The same imagery was used by another informant who stated that 'everyone is taking another path'.

Rather than give up on trying to tread a forbidden path, these young people find ways of walking on a 'side-road'. Among the various means employed to avoid censorship, our informants mentioned the transcription of 'sensitive words' into *pinyin* or non-simplified Chinese characters, or the addition of symbols such as an asterisk between each character and/or component of these words. Another tactic mentioned, to which we now turn, was the reappropriation of Party-state language and creation of humorous homonyms. In particular, informants described how they made use of alternative words that in humorous ways expressed what they meant to say and that simultaneously mocked the Party-state and its efforts at harmonization. These words are the 'hidden transcript' of which other scholars have written.[46]

Some of these characters are chosen because of their homophony with 'sensitive words'. One of the most famous examples is river crab, which has become a substitute for the similarly pronounced harmony. In another combination, one informant adopted the pseudonym 'harmonious shoe trademark' (*hexiepai* 和鞋牌) on the Douban website. Other instances of these substitutions are the Great Cultural Revolution (文化大革命) changed into Mosquito Flower Hiccup Mandate (蚊花打嗝命), or the Communist Party (共产党) turned into Provide Shovel Party (供铲党). Beside the use of homonyms, some words or famous people's names are replaced by other terms. For example, carrot (胡萝卜) has become a sobriquet for Hu Jintao because of the character *hu* (胡). 35th May (五月三十五号) was sometimes used to refer to the utmost sensitive 4th June (六四).

Moreover, these linguistic practices are redeployed not only online but also in offline interaction with peers. The most common illustration of this phenomenon has been the numerous references to harmony in everyday language among young people. One instance of such use was described as follows:

A: In your opinion, this word, harmony, is not only an official expression?
B: In fact, in the beginning before the government used this word, this word was a good word. … Now when everyone says harmony, there's a little bit of a humorous, joking feeling [about it].
A: And when you use it?
B: Um, yes! (*laughter*)
A: How do you use it?
B: For instance, 'being harmonized'!

Another example of such offline deployment of online memes is the increasing use of our Party (我党), especially by non-Party members:

A: That is, the meeting that our Party recently held, to reinforce this reform of the cultural system.
B: I want to ask you something else, why do you say our Party?
A: Our Party? It's a mocking way of speaking. Our Party, sometimes you can say your Party (贵党) when you're with Party members. Non-Party members say 'your Party recently this and that', yes! (*laughter*). So when we non-Party members say it, we use it mockingly.

As in these quotes, informants described their and others' use of Party language as a form of mockery levelled at both censorship and the government.

What is clear from this section is that at least some young Chinese students make use of *egao*-style tactics to negotiate censorship and being harmonized. The fact that students described *egao* as a form of mockery may be revealing of how they disengage from *egao*'s potentially radical side. Such a radical deployment would be aimed at a broader level of politics, rather than the micro context in which their linguistic practices have direct roots – that is, their online expression and interaction with peers. Both the actors' social role implying limited capacities for action and, again, the complex and somewhat paradoxical interplay between (relative) openness and pervasive control specific to the

Chinese authoritarian context reduce the likelihood that some young Chinese would think of *egao* as more than mockery. Given the limited scope of these humorous forms of expression, should we conclude that no political significance derives from these ordinary deployments of *egao*?

Humorous homonyms: Repoliticizing or depoliticizing harmonious society?

Having examined the accounts given by informants, it is time to return to the scholarly claims about *egao* and its significance that were outlined at the outset of this article. How did our informants' own conceptions of their online wordplay compare to the significance assigned to it by scholarship? Did they conceive their use of these homonyms, and the larger *egao* culture of which it is part, as a form of carnivalistic resistance, as a mark of their apolitical status? Most importantly, recalling our distinction between politics and the political, should we understand this as a form of de- or repoliticization?

We found no indication that our informants viewed the Internet and its world of *egao* as a 'free and unrestricted' space.[47] On the contrary, in their accounts they singled out the sphere of online censorship as a stark example of government interference in their daily lives. Informants described their practices as a way to circumvent constraints, not abolish them. Furthermore, if the online world marks some change in 'normal' prohibitions, it is not perceived as one where 'all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions' are suspended.[48] It is precisely the absence of clear rules or reasons in online censorship that makes navigation frustrating and painful – and that enables the relatively smooth continuation of the offline hierarchy between authorities and informants to perpetuate online.

Moreover, this shows that informants did not conceptualize their online experience as a 'quasi-separate sphere'.[49] Their accounts show how online memes are also used in everyday speech offline. What is more, the restriction on expression online was not conveyed as 'the antithesis of normal life',[50] but rather as a continuation of the same by other means. Having said this, there is a nuance to this online–offline relationship. On some occasions, informants who claimed an interest in politics used the Internet to express themselves or share articles, and indicated that it was difficult to talk about what they considered to be politics with a majority of their offline peers who were thought to be apolitical or indifferent to politics. In such cases, the Internet could provide access to those with a similar interest in politics.

What about the claim that *egao* should be understood as a 'collective attempt at resistance'?[51] One informant explicitly rejected the idea that *egao* and its associated wordplay constituted a form of resistance:

> I feel that it doesn't count as resistance. Because, first, it [the government] really doesn't know, right? … for example, you oppose someone, then you have to let him know … [then it's] resistance, but our government also knows that everyone is opposing it, so this is not about resistance or non-resistance, the government still has the cheek to stay in power.

Thus, the 'hidden transcripts' do not count as resistance to this informant, precisely because of their hidden nature. This, then, echoes Lagerkvist's scepticism about 'what larger influence you have on politics … if your critique is too subtle'.[52] The laughter,

here, is not perceived as a 'revolution' (as it is to Orwell and those who cite him in these debates).

The same informant, like Lagerkvist, was of the view that *egao* is best understood as a way of venting anger, as opposed to offering the public any political power:[53]

> Because I feel that this, on the contrary, is a means of venting our feelings … for example, everyone is dissatisfied, as soon as a person is dissatisfied, through this sort of funny words … very humorous, very *egao* words, hey, suddenly everyone discusses their own painful life in a very happy way. There is nothing particularly mysterious … look if you say something particularly serious, you can say, everyone is Ah Q, ha!

In Lu Xun's 1921 novella *The True Story of Ah Q*, the tragicomic character is famous for his 'spiritual victories': when he falls victim to oppression, violence and ridicule, he comes up with elaborate ways of deluding himself into thinking he has 'won' or is superior to those who victimize him. He thus sees victory or pride in what is actually horrible defeat.

This 'Ah Q-esque venting' was understood as a good thing by some informants:

> Um, I think it [the function of *egao*] is very good. That is, let everyone have a way to give vent to their anger, that is, a way to vent one's grievances.

The same informant, however, continued on the topic, detecting in the venting not only anger and something good, but also the intelligence of the victims as well as sadness:

A: How do you view this sort of words that have a humorous dimension?
B: Um, this is China, the intelligence of Chinese netizens. That is, in such a bad environment as China, Chinese netizens can still bring their intelligence into full play, they can mock.
A: Only for the purpose of mocking?
B: Because this sort of mockery is a sort of black humour, … a sort of humour with a sad feeling … I feel that this is a [way of] venting, just like [on] today's [Sina]Weibo.

Another informant, who did not think that *egao* amounted to resistance, expressed some contempt for those who thought it did:

> Using the Communist Party's language for mockery … Resistance does not make any difference, it seems like a kind of superficial resistance. For example, there is a bit of the Ah Q feeling, similar to 'merely saying', but everyone is nonetheless following this direction, carrying out their own resistance. Because you really can't go change anything, so you make a few jokes, and then maybe [it has] a little effect.

Again, then, it is clear that several informants understand *egao* and its associated wordplay as unlikely to lead to a social movement that could cause a revolution or radical politics. In the last quote, however, a reference was again made to Ah Q, whose persona may be helpful in understanding the informants' views and the role of *egao* in a more sophisticated manner. Ah Q has been read in more ways than one, with different

understandings of his political significance. Gloria Davies has examined the dissonant voices raised about Lu Xun's work at the time of its publication.[54] She shows how Marxist dogmatists attacked the story of Ah Q, because to them 'the only kind of literature worth engaging in was what they referred to as "revolutionary literature" or literature that could fit unambiguously within the normative framework of Communist ideology', whereas Ah Q was 'unable to show the path towards a better future'.[55] Davies goes on to show, instead, how the 'heterogeneity of meanings generated by the text itself eluded attempts by Lu Xun's critics and defendants alike to utter the final word on Ah Q'.[56] Lu Xun refuses to 'provide some hope of redemption' for Ah Q. The story 'uplifts the reader', but provides no relief and no absolute positive value to revolution.[57]

Given the various accounts of *egao*, there seems to be good reason to understand these in a similar manner. Throughout this text, we have seen evidence of a range of feelings associated with *egao* and its associated wordplay: amusement, ridicule, anger, pride, contempt, sadness, and so on. *Egao*, like the river crabs, uplift, but offer no way out – they merely curse and snigger. These humorous homonyms even refuse to adapt one single meaning, but always oscillate – they are simultaneously harmony and river crab, vulgar and political. Ah Q, as a man without personal history or even a real name, 'produced an ineluctable desire on the part of his contemporary readers to give meaning to his existence, to invest in the name Ah Q a reality'.[58] The same treatment has befallen *egao*, with scholars grasping to understand its meaning, pin down its (potential) significance. Some seem to suggest the potential to influence politics, to contest the legitimacy, accountability or policy of the government as the yardstick against which *egao* should be measured. Others imply instead the potential to cultivate grass-roots communities, collective resistance, or collective empowerment as such a yardstick.

To Davies, the function of Ah Q, instead, was to establish a distance 'between the formidable influences of traditional society and the "easy" radical solutions sought', or '"making strange" what is commonly regarded as familiar and mundane'.[59] His significance, then, was not in the realm of politics, but in that of the political. Returning to such an approach can give us a different angle from which to examine *egao* and the question of its potential 'resistance'. Contrary to the accounts reported above, some informants did indicate that resistance was part of the meaning ascribed to these linguistic creations: 'there is this component'. One informant alluded to the type of view on political tactics implied in the understanding of *egao* wordplay as a form of Bakhtinian carnival:

> In this kind of expression we call postmodern, it actually also resembles a kind of deconstruction (*jiegou* 解构). This kind of thing, deconstruction [through mockery], is really to subvert (*dianfu* 颠覆) all former authority.

The term *jiegou* in this quote can mean to analyse, deconstruct or stir up dissent. *Dianfu* refers to subversion or overturning. When asked whether this meant that the regime had already been overturned, the same informant continued:

> I think that now … a youth like me … everyone must know in their heart that it can't be like before. Back then there was a very respectful attitude towards that kind of authority.

This informant thus indicates that this new form of mockery may indeed be a change in register of popular expression, perhaps analogous to what Meng would term an alternative political discourse,[60] or possibly Lagerkvist's alternate civility.[61] A shift between 'now' and 'before' is perceived, but the shift has taken place on a discursive level rather than in the realm of narrow politics. Scholars' seeming confusion and apparent dichotomization of positions perhaps, then, derive from the failure to distinguish politics from the political.

The words that China's young use are indeed not intended to be, or perceived as, a challenge to the Party-state's politics. In that sense, neither subjective nor objective dimensions of what may traditionally be termed politicization emerge in informants' accounts of *egao*.[62] That is, most informants did not consider themselves to be involved in politics, nor is their expression commonly considered to be political in the narrow sense. However, what 'traditional' scholars call politicization is closer to depoliticization in Edkins's terminology. Making cartoons about river crabs and tag-names such as 'harmonious shoe trademark' are not interventions in the realm of politics (in the narrow sense); it is not politicization in the traditional sense. Perhaps, however, politicization in the case of *egao* takes a different shape in bringing the political back in. This Edkinsian repoliticization has roots in the process through which students negotiate the meanings of the official terms from which their wordplay borrows. As outlined at the outset of this article, repoliticization can be described as a disruption of the dominant discourse, a 'challenge' to 'what have, through discursive practices, been constituted as normal, natural, and accepted ways of carrying on'.[63] Through repeatedly using expressions such as being harmonized, river crab society, and indeed harmonious shoes, the meaning of the official harmonious society discourse is hollowed out or disrupted, rather than contested head-on. Returning again to Ah Q and our critical informant, the point is not necessarily to resist or not resist, but to 'make strange'.

The 'strangeness' or undecidability of *egao* has roots both in the discrepant meanings assigned by actors to their linguistic practices and in the very nature of the political itself. The boundaries of what is, to paraphrase Edkins, 'not politics' remain unstable and fluid, due to the permanent renegotiation of meanings. The way the young Chinese students in our study described censorship shows how they downplay the authoritarian aspect underlying this practice. What is originally an infringement by authoritarian power is reduced to something funny. *Egao*, then, is simultaneously laughing at censorship and laughing it off.

Concurrently, while informants, as we have shown, do not always endeavour to circumvent censorship, to simply stay with labelling this absence of efforts against the authoritarian power as compliance would obscure the complexity of the students' attitudes toward harmonization. Indeed, their reflexive gaze on their own resignation, along with their decidedly mixed feelings about being harmonized (described as simultaneously painful and funny) reveals the intricacy of these practices. Thus, *egao* is perhaps best understood beyond the resistance/not resistance dichotomy of politics. Instead, we can productively examine it through the question of the political, where its multiple meanings – at the levels of words, feelings and purported significance – lead to instances of openness where impossible decisions have to be made with regard to their use and interpretation.

Conclusion

We then return to one of our initial questions: what do these ordinary uses of *egao* tell us about China's youth's relationships to official language? Although our informants did not uniformly define their linguistic practices as resistance, their creative ways of negotiating official language convey a sense of self-conscious dissociation from the CCP's propaganda messages and repressive practices. However, although hidden transcripts may be precedents of open conflict in some cases, we must not ignore 'the extent to which hegemony may be tacit and resistance often partial and self-defeating. It can lead as easily to the reproduction of domination as to revolution.'[64] Although we observed little total, passive acceptance of official discourse or censorship, *egao* does not result in or aim for its abolition. Instead, it can create the conditions for its perpetuation. Moreover, if this linguistic creativity enables the circumvention of constraints, sensitive words simultaneously remain silenced as such. In spite of the actors' alternative discourse, their powerlessness still resides in the impossibility of *naming*, as they remain subjected to the rules of 'authorized language'.[65] If they do not speak the language of power, young Chinese students are confined to their own meaning-making, typing river crab for harmony or 35th May for 4th June. Finally, the political does not simply emerge 'at the moment of structural failure, i.e. the failure of politics-as-state'.[66] Politics and the political do not 'endlessly replace each other'.[67] Rather, they stand next to one another in a particular configuration where dissatisfaction is expressed, but without genuine dialogue with power holders in the realm of traditional politics.

In this context, this article has aimed to moderate the general equation of *egao* as a straightforward form of resistance to authoritarian power, by focusing on the claims of Chinese students who in their everyday online and offline practices humorously re-appropriate Party language. Given the common description of this segment of society as apolitical, our findings may be unsurprising to some. Moreover, an examination of *egao* in the language use of activists is likely to yield a different set of findings. Nonetheless, studies of ordinary deployments of *egao* are needed to complement understandings of its more spectacular use. What is at stake here is less whether these practices are labelled resistance or not, and more the reassertion of political negotiations in the broader sense of such practices, where other commentators have seen burgeoning or potential revolutionary politics, or where this social group is largely viewed as apolitical.

To a large extent, we have built our interpretation of *egao* on the basis of our informants' claims. Relaying their online practices in the face of censorship has shown these to be varied, complex and imbued with different significance at different instances. We have argued that with regard to politics, in the narrow sense of government practice, the use of this mocking wordplay may be perceived as a form of depoliticization – it is typically not understood as, or intended to be, a challenge to Party politics. In the realm of the political, however, its ambiguous and multiple meanings can lead to repoliticization, in that it marks, at times at least, a radical undecidability. We have not found evidence, in the accounts of our informants, to support the interpretation of the Internet or *egao* practices as a quasi-separate sphere of non-hierarchical Bakhtinian carnival. Nonetheless, we may detect in these practices a new way of negotiating official language, what may be considered a new civility[68] or alternative political discourse.[69] As such, it becomes a

sphere for instances of repoliticization. Having said this, repoliticization is not stable, but *egao* too is repeatedly depoliticized, for example, by being designated as unimportant or as meaning one thing only (only revolution, only apolitical escapism, only a potential to become a proper political movement). It should therefore be clear that the point of this article is not to designate to *egao* another correct meaning, but rather to point out the undecidability of this meaning-making process. The point, precisely, is to reopen the question of *egao* as potentially political even if it does not lead to a revolutionary politics.

Notes

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2. Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968.
3. Ibid., 21.
4. Hua Li, Doing things right with Communist Party language: An analysis of Yu Hua's exploitation of Mao-era rhetoric, *China Information* 26(1), 2012: 87–104.
5. Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 100.
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7. Xing Lu, An ideological/cultural analysis of political slogans in communist China, *Discourse & Society* 10(4), 1999: 488.
8. Hu Jintao guanyu goujian shehuizhuyi hexie shehui jianghua quanwen (Full text of Hu Jintao's speech on building a socialist harmonious society), 26 June 2005, http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/news/899546.htm, accessed 10 July 2013.
9. Hu Jintao cited in Chris Buckley, China President calls for more Internet oversight, 19 February 2011, http://reuters.com/article/2011/02/19/us-china-politics-internet-idUS-TRE71I2Y720110219, accessed 10 July 2013.
10. Cuiming Pang, Self-censorship and the rise of cyber-collectives: An anthropological study of a Chinese online community, *Intercultural Communication Studies* 17(3), 2008: 59, 65.
11. Ibid., 63.
12. Buckley, China President calls for more Internet oversight.
13. Larry Diamond, Liberation technology, *Journal of Democracy* 21(3), 2010: 74; Nigel Inkster, China in cyberspace, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 52(4), 2010: 60; Lijun Tang and Syamantak Bhattacharya, Power and resistance: A case study of satire on the Internet, *Sociological Research Online* 16(2), 2011: 7.2, http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/2/11.html,

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14. Bingchun Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse: E Gao as alternative political discourse on the Chinese Internet, *Global Media and Communication* 7(1), 2011: 39.

15. Elizabeth J. Perry, Studying Chinese politics: Farewell to revolution?, *The China Journal*, no. 57, 2007: 10; Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 39; and Ashley Esarey and Qiang Xiao, Political expression in the Chinese blogosphere: Below the radar, *Asian Survey* 48(5), 2008: 752.

16. Scholars have discussed this discrepancy in various contexts; see Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz (eds), *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001; Zhou He, SMS in China: A major carrier of the nonofficial discourse universe, *The Information Society: An International Journal* 24(3), 2008: 182–90; Esarey and Xiao, Political expression in the Chinese blogosphere, 752–72; and Patricia M. Thornton, Framing dissent in contemporary China: Irony, ambiguity and metonymy, *The China Quarterly*, no. 171, 2002: 661–81.

17. Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 45 and 46.

18. Ibid., 44. For a comparative account which explores the issue of resistance in *egao* with emphasis on the virtual rather than the carnival, see Astrid Nordin, Bordering on the unacceptable in China and Europe: '*Cao ni ma*' and '*nique ta mère*', in Joyce C. H. Liu and Nick Vaughan-Williams (eds) *European-East Asian Borders in Translation*, London: Routledge, forthcoming 2014.

19. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt (eds) *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011.

20. Bakhtin cited in David Kurt Herold, Noise, spectacle, politics: Carnival in Chinese cyberspace, in Herold and Marolt, *Online Society in China*, 11 and 12.

21. Ibid., 12.

22. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, 10, cited in Hongmei Li, Parody and resistance on the Chinese Internet, in Herold and Marolt (eds) *Online Society in China*, 72.

23. Ibid., 72.

24. Tang and Bhattacharya, Power and resistance.

25. Ibid.

26. Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 46.

27. Hongmei Li, Parody and resistance on the Chinese Internet, 71.

28. Ibid., 72. See also Tang and Bhattacharya, Power and resistance, 2.4.

29. For example, Hongmei Li, Parody and resistance on the Chinese Internet; Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse; Tang and Yang, Symbolic power and the Internet; and Xiao, The battle for the Chinese Internet.

30. Pang, Self-censorship and the rise of cyber-collectives.

31. Johan Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society*, New York: Peter Lang, 2010, 151.

32. Ibid., 146.

33. Ibid., 156.

34. Ibid., 158.

35. Ibid., 159.

36. This distinction is commonly made by thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, Ernesto Laclau, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Claude Lefort, and Alain Badiou, to name but a few. For a discussion and critique of the distinction between politics and the political, with reference to these and other thinkers, see Inna Viriasova, Politics and the political: Correlation and the question of the unpolitical, *Peninsula: A Journal of Relational Politics* 1(1), 2011, http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/peninsula/article/view/687, accessed 10 July 2013, or Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back in*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

37. Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*, 2.

38. Ibid., 11.

39. Ibid., 12.

40. Wu Guoguang, Pouxi guojia, toushi quanli: Shilun Zhongguo zhengzhi yanjiu zai Zhongguo de chuangjian he fazhan (Studies of Chinese politics in China), *Modern China Studies*, no. 103, 2008: 35–51.

41. Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, 202.

42. Herold, Noise, spectacle, politics, 8.

43. Douban is the largest Chinese website for books, music reviews and films. It is also a venue for discussion of various social issues, and has implemented significant censorship mechanisms that have led to some controversy; http://www.douban.com.

44. Some informants referred to the pragmatism of young Chinese people, cf. Stanley Rosen, The victory of materialism: Aspirations to join China's urban moneyed classes and the commercialization of education, *The China Journal*, no. 51, 2004: 27–51.

45. This refers to Li Dazhao, co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party.

46. Perry, Studying Chinese politics, 10; Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 39.

47. Herold, Noise, spectacle, politics, 11, 12.

48. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10; Li, Parody and resistance on the Chinese Internet, 72.

49. Herold and Marolt, *Online Society in China*.

50. Herold, Noise, spectacle, politics, 12.

51. Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 44.

52. Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy*, 146.

53. Cf. ibid., 159; Tang and Bhattacharya, Power and resistance.

54. Gloria Davies, The problematic modernity of *Ah Q*, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 13, 1991: 57–76.

55. Ibid., 59 and 63.

56. Ibid., 60.

57. Ibid., 69.

58. Ibid., 73.

59. Ibid., 70, 71, and 76.

60. Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 39.

61. Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy*, 158.

62. For this view on politicization, see Jacques Lagroye, *La Politisation*, Paris: Belin, 2003.

63. Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*, 12.

64. Susan Gal, Language and the 'Arts of Resistance', *Cultural Anthropology* 10(3), 1995: 420.

65. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, 107.

66. Viriasova, Politics and the political.

67. Ibid.

68. Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy*, 158.

69. Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse, 39.

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