Abstract
While the internet has been examined as a utilitarian space for social movements, it also acts as a cultural space for personal and community expression about important social issues. While examining the particularities of the memetic form – often catchy humor, simple imagery, and remixing – the author examines meme culture as a vehicle for political and social critique in the context of China’s stringent web censorship and propaganda. She looks at social change memes that have arisen around internet censorship and in support of the blind lawyer activist Chen Guangcheng. First, she considers these memes as visual and creative practices that sidestep the mechanics of internet censorship in China. She then argues for the role of internet memes in challenging hegemonic media environments, and maintains that these actions should be considered important political acts in and of themselves.

Keywords
Chen Guangcheng • China • Cute Cat Theory • grass mud horse • internet censorship • internet memes • propaganda

Introduction
Tucked away in the dark corners of China’s internet, deep in the Gobi Desert, there roams a fuzzy creature known as the cǎonímǎ (草泥马), the so-called grass mud horse. It is a gentle, noble beast, and it roughly resembles a llama, with a long, graceful neck and sturdy legs suitable for both fast running and carrying large burdens. Don’t ask me how it survives in such a hostile, desert environment – it is not especially adapted to the
Gobi Desert, aka *Màlè Gēbì*, but it certainly makes do, always with a wry grin and a friendly demeanor (see Figure 1).

A Chinese speaker would almost immediately know what is going on behind this odd fable: the grass mud horse and the land it dwells in are puns. As Mandarin is a tonal language with limited phonemes, puns are commonplace, especially puns that change meaning through tones. Cǎoní mà, written with one set of characters and tones, means ‘grass mud horse’. But càonī mà (操你妈), written with different characters and pronounced with slightly different tones, is the more familiar colloquial phrase roughly translated as ‘fuck your mother’. And *Ma’le Gebi* sounds like another Chinese phrase meaning ‘Your mother’s cunt’.

The grass mud horse cannot rest easily in the desert. It faces a mortal enemy, the dreaded héxiè (河蟹), or river crab. This pinching creature descends into the Gobi Desert and chases after grass mud horses, who must run for their lives. The hexie, of course, sounds similar to héxié (和谐), or ‘harmony’. ‘Harmony’ here references a 2006 Hu Jintao proposal to develop a ‘harmonious socialist society’ (Kahn, 2006). In the internet context, it meant further censorship under the Golden Shield Project, popularly known as the ‘Great Firewall’, a powerful censorship mechanism capable of filtering content from the outside world based on source and even keyword. Thus, the *hexie* are the crabby embodiment of a censored, ‘harmonious’ internet, the polar opposite of the fuzzy, freewheeling grass mud horse.

Together, the river crab and the grass mud horse are Chinese memes par excellence, well documented since at least 2009 (Li, 2011: 78). Like any good internet meme, countless remixes exist, as netizens engage in a

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**Figure 1** An illustration of the grass mud horse, represented as an alpaca llama. Reprinted with permission by Jason Li.
constant effort to outdo each other’s creativity. Any image of a llama can in fact become a grass mud horse, and, by extension, an outcry against China’s stringent censorship. There are grass mud horse plushies and cartoons and a fake McDonald's Happy Meal toy. Netizens even created a fake Chinese character, composed of the radicals for ‘grass’, ‘mud’, and ‘horse’, and they debated online on how best to pronounce it (see Figure 2).

The grass mud horse, like many internet memes, is a form of in-joke. At least until it became too famous, its friendly face and punny name meant it could slip past the scrutiny of internet censors, while inspiring hilarity amongst its users. It looks harmless in image form, but it’s an outcry against the very policies that forced it to become a secret symbol. As researcher Hongmei Li has argued (2011: 83), this irreverent humor is important as it temporarily suspends hierarchies and allows individuals to express an opinion about state policy without the consequences that might follow more direct critique of censorship.

These creatures are by no means the only memes in China. In a country with over 600 million internet users, there are countless memes, many of which center around cats and dogs, with cute animations and oddball language. Many are nationalistic, and most seem to have no overt political undertone. Indeed, the vast majority of youth internet activity in China is not explicitly political, and memes make up just one part of a larger repertoire of youth expression and identity formation online (Wang, 2013).

![Figure 2](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

Figure 2 A fictional Chinese character developed to celebrate the grass mud horse. It contains the Chinese radicals for ‘grass’, ‘mud’ and ‘horse’. Isaac Mao, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/.
The grass mud horse and river crab are what I call social change memes, internet memes that express a sentiment for changing a social or political issue. As I argue in this article, social change memes can be powerful in the context of an authoritarian state like China, which exerts control over all broadcast and internet media. In certain cases, internet memes like the grass mud horse menagerie have become a vehicle for evading censorship in an environment where both offline and online outlets for social and political expression are extremely limited.

Beyond the mechanics of bypassing censorship, I also want to argue for the value and role of these memes vis à vis contemporary Chinese propaganda and censorship strategy. Importantly, they provide a visual rupture in hegemonic state media and messaging by using the language of participatory creative media. As internet researcher Zeynep Tufekci (2014b) has noted, we should not underestimate the expressive, symbolic value of online actions:

The rise of online symbolic action – clicking on ‘Like’ or tweeting about a political subject – though long derided as ‘slacktivism,’ may well turn out to be one of the more potent impacts from digital tools in the long run, as widespread use of such semi-public symbolic micro-actions can slowly reshape how people make sense of their values and their politics.

Memes, as micro-actions of media remixing and sharing, are particularly important in a censored, propagandized state, which seeks first to isolate individuals who express opinions contrary to state interests, and then to deaden the sort of public debate that fosters a diverse sphere of opinion. With rich visual language and a culture of creative remix and communal participation, meme culture has provided an outlet for new forms of public conversation and community building. It reflects an important shift in orientation to state media. I will demonstrate this with a case study on memes relating to activist lawyer Chen Guangcheng, extrapolating more generally from there.

As I begin, I want to make clear the scope of this article. First, I am looking specifically at memes about topics that are heavily censored. There are many social change memes in China whose subject matter – like pollution or lunch for school children – does not rankle authorities’ concerns as greatly. These memes therefore run a lesser risk of censorship. Second, while it can be helpful to reflect on the role of social change memes in other political environments, this article focuses solely on a heavily censored state like China; freer media environments in places like the United States and Western Europe fall outside the scope.

To understand how internet memes function in social change in lower-freedom contexts like China, it is necessary to understand how memes and civic expression have intersected historically. Thus, I will start with that most expressive and participatory of internet media: cute cats.
Censoring the Cute Cats

With an active user population of over 600 million, China’s internet is just as rich with creative remixes of media as any other internet world I’ve seen, and it certainly has plenty of cats. Sites like Sina Weibo in fact encourage the use of imagery, with embeddable photo and video features and the ability to easily repost a message in a fashion similar to a retweet on Twitter or a share on Facebook. The site is popular amongst urban Chinese youth and is only one of many weibo, or microblogs, that have emerged on the Chinese web. Though these sites bear semblance to Twitter with a 140 character limit, this allows for nearly a paragraph or two of content in the Chinese language, where words can be as short as one or two characters. That memes have thrived in this environment should not be a surprise.

It is important to understand briefly the mechanics of Chinese internet censorship, which has a goal of allowing the internet to flourish for commerce and entertainment while deadening its usage for political organizing or expression (Fallows, 2008).

The Golden Shield Project, known popularly as the ‘Great Firewall’, ensures control of data in the country. However, it is just one part of a larger system of censorship, one that is decentralized, with a combination of coercion and self-censorship (Meng, 2011: 39). All Chinese social media platforms employ some form of keyword search algorithm that blocks terms deemed sensitive by the government. Furthermore, major platforms like Sina employ tens of thousands of human censors who monitor all content and fill in the gaps that the algorithms miss (Hui and Rajagopalan, 2013). Additionally, the government employs professional commentators to spread pro-government propaganda on social media platforms. These individuals are known popularly as the ‘Fifty Cent Party’ (wumaodang), because of the rumored 50 cents in Chinese currency that they receive for each comment they leave.

Anyone who crosses a line can expect to see their messages deleted or their entire account frozen. More egregious violations can lead to an account being deleted entirely or, in more extreme cases, an unpleasant visit from the police, popularly known as becha, or drinking tea. That the threshold is often unknowable is part of the strategy – with netizens uncertain as to how much they can speak out on a given topic, the government ensures a certain level of self-censorship.

This policy’s costs and benefits can be understood in the framework of the Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism, proposed in 2008 by internet theorist Ethan Zuckerman. The theory holds two basic assumptions. First, the original internet was made for sharing academic papers, scientific data, and the like. ‘Web 1.0’, as he calls it, was largely informational in scope. However, as the internet became a more popular medium, it exists now for the sharing of entertainment and amateur media that is often affective in scope: ‘The contemporary Internet was designed, in no small part, for the dissemination of cute pictures of cats’ (Zuckerman, 2013: 3).
In the best world for an authoritarian government, the populace ought to be sharing and creating cute cat pictures and other amateur content; it’s a classic form of distraction. Thus, the challenge an authoritarian government faces is that a platform that facilitates the rapid spread of cute cat images is a platform that also facilitates the rapid spread of activist messages. With targeted controls, they should be able to pinpoint activist messages while allowing others to flourish. Blanket censorship this is not; with such a crisp level of precision, censors can control the flow of information based on topic, easing up and tightening censorship depending on factors like time of year (Ng and Landry, 2013).

In Zuckerman’s theory, there is a difference between an activist message and a cute cat. But in China, at least around the most censored content, spreading a straightforward activist message is rarely effective, for the reasons outlined above. Thus, instead of referring to the travails of internet censorship, the multiple puns of the grass mud horse menagerie skirt around the topic. Even to a trained human censor, a picture of a llama or a crab could be subversive, or it could be a photo from the zoo. Deleting too many of the latter would cost political capital.

In this way, a number of Chinese activists have employed the best qualities of internet memes – rapid virality, irreverent humor, participatory culture – and transformed them into online actions. These puns and images slip past machine and human censors through coded verbal and visual language. In other words, in the face of stringent and targeted censorship, activists embed the activist message within the cute cat, within amateur media.

To illustrate this in practice, I present a case study with one of the most sensitive, censored topics in 2011 and 2012: the story of Chen Guangcheng. The examples I provide reflect my own independent research and writing, and the work of other journalists and researchers. Keeping in mind the inherent challenges of documenting a swiftly-moving and necessarily evasive form, I have done my best to compile an overview of the meme and its transformations.

Chen Guangcheng: The Selfie of Selfies

The blind lawyer and human rights activist Chen Guangcheng was already a leading light in activist circles by 2006, when he was arrested. He entered prison that year while the internet was nascent in the country, but by the time he was released, Chinese-bred social media sites like Sina Weibo and WeChat were already taking hold around the country.

After his release, he faced a new nightmare, as his wife and daughter were then held in illegal detention in their own home. But new technologies helped give them voice almost immediately: in a harrowing video smuggled from his home, he and his wife described the systematic attempts to prevent their communication with the outside world, with officials traveling 100
kilometers to detain his brother, who bought a SIM card for Chen’s phone. Chen was likely beaten for releasing that video (Branigan, 2011b).

Chen’s story makes for an effective case study because of the extreme online censorship and offline brutality designed to stamp out support. As with most dissidents in the country, the government engaged in a damnatio memoriae by sporadically censoring any mention of Chen’s name and related terms online (Hernandez, 2011). At the time of his detention, he was one of the most famous dissidents in China, and yet he was effectively rendered a non-person. Symptomatic of this strategy is how he was explained to Western journalists. When Guardian reporter Tania Branigan (2011b) called the local police office in early 2011 to inquire about Chen’s status, the officer replied, ‘We are not sure what you are talking about. We will get back to you.’

In October 2011, the anonymous Chinese comic artist Crazy Crab organized an online action, asking netizens to send in pictures of themselves wearing sunglasses so he could post them to a central website (Colwell, 2011; see Figure 3). He also encouraged netizens to post the pictures to their own social media accounts. These selfies, as they might be called today, served a dual purpose. First, they seemed innocuous enough to censors, who weren’t clued in to the sunglasses reference. Secondly, they showed scale for the in-group in a powerful way: as Crazy Crab reported in an email interview with me, over 600 persons shared their photos with him, and countless others participated online (Crazy Crab, 2012, personal communication).

Crazy Crab was inspired by the French street artist JR, whose Inside Out Project consisted of portraits in public spaces. Unable to do that safely in China, Crazy Crab enacted a portrait project that existed in the only way it could: on the public space made possible by social media. The meme took off; according to Crazy Crab, it spread in less than a week’s time from mainland China to Hong Kong, and finally to overseas Chinese and others living abroad. He collected these portraits on http://ichenguangcheng.blogspot.com; the sunglasses meme even took the form of a flash mob when citizens gathered in a nearby city and donned sunglasses in the public square (Branigan, 2012).

Although Chen Guangcheng memes and images existed before the sunglass meme action, memes about him thereafter became increasingly more diverse, mutating regularly to keep ahead of censors. Chen’s handsome, sunglassed face – instantly recognizable and easy to evoke and reproduce – appeared online in sketches and cartoons. It showed up on t-shirts, stickers and faux postage stamps, and perhaps even as a street art stencil.2 Activists rallied around hashtags like #FreeCGC and #CGC自由 (ziyou, meaning ‘freedom’). They came up with phrases like 要光要诚 (yao guang yao cheng) – ‘I seek light, I seek truth’ – referencing the two characters of Chen’s given name, which means ‘light and truth’.

The #FreeCGC hashtag grew in popularity and was therefore itself censored. As one of many sidestep strategies, the phrase was slapped onto cars and motorcycles with a picture of Chen designed to look like the Colonel from
Kentucky Fried Chicken. In China, KFC and its imitators are popular fast food chains, so the ‘Free CGC’ stickers looked like an offer for fried chicken. As with the meme in digital space, these offline memes became an in-joke for participants and supporters while allowing them to express themselves, and pictures of the cars and motorcycles online granted the phrase a second breath.

*Batman* star Christian Bale attempted to visit Chen in December 2011; visits like his had become a real-life meme of sorts, as netizens sporadically organized groups to provoke guards so that they could post about their experiences on Weibo (Wade, 2011). Bale, like everyone else, was immediately turned away, and a video released by CNN showed him being chased by a rotund man in a green coat (Jiang, 2011). It was a frightening glimpse into the daily travails of Chen’s life at the time.

Comic artist Remon Wang noticed that the rotund man with a peculiar face and green military jacket resembled a panda. He distributed a poster online of a fictitious film dubbed Batman vs Pandaman (Jiang, 2012). It launched scores of other memes that imagined Chen Guangcheng in a superhero movie, from highly illustrated images to more rough Photoshop cuts. Netizens also began inserting Pandaman into out-of-context photos, much like meme generators in the United States did with the police officer who was photographed pepper spraying students at UC Davis (Jardin, 2011). ‘Pandaman’ became so popular that Mr Chen, in a video released
on YouTube shortly after his escape, paid direct reference to the would-be villain and identified him by his real name (Lu, 2012).

Humor has always had the function of telling difficult truths. In the midst of the heartbreaking realities of Chen’s detention, these memes made the situation a little bit easier to handle. But in the context of the internet, this humor also ensured a participatory quality; anyone could join in and make a contribution to the creative dialogue. And in so doing, they showed to each other that they were not alone. In contrast to the official silence that the government attempted to enforce, these memes allowed a creative flourishing of Chen’s name.

By spring 2012, miraculously, Chen escaped from his detention. The narrative reads like a plot from a movie. Waiting for cover of night, he scaled the two meter wall surrounding his home and made his way through the woods over the course of a few days, reportedly passing through eight layers of defense. He met a friend, He Peirong, at a getaway car at a prearranged location, and they drove to Beijing, where he eventually made his way to the embassy (JM, 2012).

Censors increased their efforts, going so far as to censor words like ‘CNN’ and ‘pearl’ – a reference to the woman who helped Chen escape (Henochowicz, 2012). And yet, even in this communication environment, memes about him continued to slip through. Crazy Crab jumped in with a homage to a still from The Shawshank Redemption, a film about a wrongfully accused man who makes a dramatic prison break. In Crazy Crab’s comic, which circulated on Sina Weibo, bewildered guards in the form of Angry Birds pigs stare down the hole through which Shawshank’s protagonist escaped. Another creative netizen remixed the original movie poster into the ‘Dongshigu Redemption’, swapping in the name of the town in which Chen was held. There are even dark glasses Photoshopped onto Shawshank protagonist Andy Dufresne, cleverly referencing the activist’s signature shades.

When censors caught on to the reference and blocked searches for the Chinese word for the film, users began posting quotes from the film in English. ‘Some birds aren’t meant to be caged’, went one that I found, ‘their feathers are just too bright.’ Messages like these were few, but they had managed to escape censorship. And finally, in his video message after his escape, Chen happened to be wearing a Nike jacket. ‘Just do it’, said one image, with a picture of him deftly avoiding escape like Air Jordan.

The memes and creativity around Chen can be seen as an intentional strategy to evade the active censorship of his name and likeness; as each one grew and got stamped out, another one emerged. The sunglasses meme proved particularly resilient. In his interview with me, Crazy Crab noted that when he launched the action, he had to take into consideration the participants’ safety and any attempts to erase their messages. The form of the sunglasses allowed participants to obscure their faces (at the time, registering a Sina Weibo account could be done anonymously), while making it difficult for censors to find and delete the subversive selfies amidst a sea of otherwise innocuous photos of people wearing sunglasses.
Further, while we cannot draw a direct causal relationship between cat videos, grass mud horses and the sunglasses meme, there is no doubt a correlation. The foundation for the creative actions in support of Chen – familiarity with digital tools, networks that would encourage remixing, and a cultural mindset to play with media and words – was already in place. Crazy Crab, Remon Wang and other artist-activists skillfully tapped into this foundation, thereby launching a variety of memes and metamemes that sidestepped multiple attempts at censorship.

Social Change Memes in a Propagandized, Censored Media Environment

After exploring how social change memes evade censorship, it is difficult to deny their power and beauty. But why are they compelling? I argue that these memes reflect an important form of social change, a broadening of the visual language of dissent through a key form of the creative vernacular of the internet.

Czech political activist Václav Havel’s foundational 1978 essay, ‘Power of the Powerless’ provides an instructive perspective when we consider these online symbolic actions in the context of a propaganda state. A successful propaganda campaign, he argues, has no holes or inconsistencies. In his essay, he explains why a greengrocer – an archetypal everyperson – living under an oppressive government puts a propaganda poster with an official slogan in his window. This poster does not contain a simple declaration of unquestioning obedience to the government. Rather, it says ‘Workers of the World Unite!’ – an essentially meaningless phrase. The sign reflects a symbolic, internal ceding of power to the state, and when everyone else does the same thing, they create what Havel (1992: 136) describes as a ‘world of appearances’.

Havel goes on to explain a thought exercise about the greengrocer, asking what it would mean if the grocer takes the poster down and ‘finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support’ (p. 146). This would be the most dangerous and profound act, and the reason the authorities must crack down is that through his actions the grocer has challenged the totalitarian media system. He has disrupted the single message of popular deference to the government and exposed the emperor as naked. This, in essence, is the power that powerless people can take back for themselves: freedom from internalized oppression.

In China today, the state promotes messages that serve its interests and censors those that do not, but it does so in a sophisticated, less unitary way. As Chinese propaganda historian Anne-Marie Brady noted in an interview with me: ‘The main model for the transformation of China’s propaganda work is the West’ and Western political media strategy, with a multimedia effort that varies depending on the audience (Mina, 2011). During the 90th anniversary celebrations of the Communist Party’s founding, for instance, I
documented everything from Party-friendly avatars for gamers to classic red and yellow banners for construction workers. Nevertheless, the propaganda still comes from a single agenda and purpose, with guidelines circulated weekly to media outlets (Xu, 2014). Indeed, for the most sensitive topics, the message rarely varies; censorship is often the preferred course of action. Furthermore, the state may also choose to spread disinformation through strategic newspaper editorials or internet comments.

Actions like that of the greengrocer break pluralistic ignorance, a state in which individuals in a society mistakenly think their beliefs are in the minority. In a digital age, Havel’s greengrocer might remix the poster instead of simply taking it down, or he might change his profile picture to reflect disagreement with government policies. These tiny actions would visually break the illusion of unitary opinion that propaganda attempts to generate. This is no small feat; the breaking of pluralistic ignorance is, in Tufekci’s (2014a) consideration, ‘perhaps [the internet’s] greatest contribution to social movements’.

Social change memes like the grass mud horse and Batman vs Pandaman represent a rift in the singular media environment, but so do many other media forms, like blog posts and simple status updates. I believe one reason memes resonate specifically is that they turn the tools and methods of state propaganda against itself. As scholar Guobin Yang has noted (2009), it is against a ‘culture of official-centricity that the internet culture of humor and play assumes special significance’. Hu Jintao’s use of the phrase ‘Harmonious Socialist Society’ employs stern-faced euphemism to articulate a guiding policy that led to an increase in human rights abuses under his leadership. The grass mud horse and river crab menagerie reflect a similar deftness with language, with the absurdity and humor operating contra the famously humorless visages of the Politburo. Even the popularity of the grass mud horse song can be seen as a riposte to monotonous Party music, historically blared on the radio and in public spaces and more recently played during state television broadcasts.

Similarly, the illegal detention of Chen Guangcheng and censorship of his name were designed to simultaneously cultivate fear amongst activists and sympathizers, and render Chen invisible to the general public. Consider Chen’s horrifying account of how his mother was treated at the hands of their captors:

My old mother was seized by the arm and pushed to the ground by a party member on her birthday. Her faces [sic] faced the sky, and her head struck the door of the east room. She burst into tears. She accused that the beaters could beat her simply because they were young. They shamelessly replied, ‘we are young and we could beat you, but you simply couldn’t defeat us!’ (Lu, 2012)

It’s no accident, then, that Remon Wang’s comic of Batman vs Pandaman took off: amidst terrifying, disempowering stories of Chen’s suffering, this
funny meme painted him as a superhero in his own right, while his captor was transformed into a harmless panda. Likewise, in the face of the extreme censorship around Chen’s name, Crazy Crab’s strategy of employing the selfie – an expression of the human face – was a direct response to attempts to erase Chen’s face and name from public memory.

Further, these memes reflect a fundamental shift in how citizens orient to the media environment they have inherited. Speaking specifically to internet media in the Chinese context, scholar Bingchun Meng (2011: 40) noted that the ability to make alterations to media and share those alterations ‘indicates an important shift in terms of the relationship between author and reader or between storyteller and audience. The dichotomy is now rather fluid and changeable in the digital environment’. This has substantial implications for persons living in a hegemonic, heavily propagandized media environment: where once state media could largely only be consumed, they can now be remixed and changed publicly, and with a potentially wide community.

For participants, the messages are no longer taken for granted or quietly critiqued but can instead be challenged with regularity through internet meme culture, blogs and other citizen media. In this milieu, social change memes function as dissident art and culture – from protest theater to graffiti – have always done in offline space: by providing a creative outlet for individual and small community expression around issues that matter most to them. What is new is how the culture and structure of the internet and the very low barrier to participation have facilitated memes’ rapid spread to newer and broader communities.

This expression, as researchers Lijun Tang and Peidong Yang (2011: 687) have argued, releases existing sentiments while opening ‘a space for a whole new set of resistance discourses to emerge and flourish’. Indeed, part of Crazy Crab’s intent in harnessing this communal, creative energy was to provoke a conversation:

Even if there are people who didn’t send pictures because of fear [of reprisal], a type of inner experience is also a part of the activity. The treatment [of Chen] is unjust and fearful. I believe they cannot forever remain silent. (2012, personal correspondence)

This notion of speaking out against state silence is a critical insight because it reflects a transformative change. In the case of severely-censored topics like Chen Guangcheng, memes make the difference between no mention of him and hundreds of messages about him, between fearful silence and raucous laughter. And for individuals, these memes may have marked their very first act of speaking out – and realizing, in doing so, that there are others who feel the same way.

Three Years Later: Divining the Future of Social Change on the Chinese Web

Much of the research I share above comes from 2011 and 2012, when China saw rapid growth in the usage of social media; 2011 in particular reflected
the rise of Sina Weibo as a leading social media platform in China, but it was also the year that saw a severe crackdown on human rights. Sparked by concerns that the events of the Arab Spring might inspire a so-called ‘Jasmine Revolution’ on the home front, the government grew increasingly nervous (Branigan, 2011a).

In February 2011, rumors spread that protesters should organize around the public space near McDonald’s on Wangfujing Street, blocks from Tiananmen Square. But any hint of public organizing was quickly shut down. I witnessed much of this shutdown, which included an increased presence of plainclothes police and the development of a construction site that prevented any substantive public gathering. More ominously, the government questioned and detained hundreds of activists, and they disappeared dozens. That same year, microblogs took off as a leading platform for celebrities, public intellectuals, government officials and corporations. Facing sophisticated and targeted censorship of the most sensitive topics, activists turned to memes as a means of advocating for dissidents like Chen Guangcheng.

As of early 2014, the time this article is written, social change memes in China face an uncertain future, and by the time this article is published, China’s internet landscape will no doubt have changed. On Sina Weibo, I recently saw the grass mud horse as one of many official smileys and emoji that can be embedded into a message. One could argue that it has been co-opted by Sina, defanged of its original, subversive purpose and transformed into a simple puerile pun. Of greater concern are stricter rules around viral content. Shortly after instituting a real name registration policy for microblogs, the government enacted increasingly tighter controls, including visible arrests of high-profile figures. Usage of Sina Weibo dropped by 70 percent, and Chinese internet users are migrating to more one-to-one messaging systems like Tencent’s Weixin (known as WeChat in English) (Moore, 2014). These networks allow for sharing media and remixes, but only to tight, small social groups rather than potentially millions of followers.

However, this dramatic shift in Weibo’s fortunes does not mean that creative internet expression as a whole is in danger. With regard to social change memes, the culture of creation and remix has already begun, and the Chinese web consists of many more social media platforms than Weibo. The platform itself is not the point: China has a long history of social media platforms rising and falling, from BBSes to Fanfou (Parker, 2014). While the virality of online media has been severely curtailed, the hole in the propaganda wall has already been pierced, and the networks of support have already formed. As of early 2014, I have even seen social change memes and other messages about social and political issues being disseminated on Weixin within my social circles. As I have argued, creating these memes already reflects an important form of social change.

Where memes fit into the larger contexts of Chinese social movements and systemic change is a topic worth researching further. Crazy Crab has expressed optimism. As he noted in an interview:
I hope that netizens, when clicking the mouse, come closer to actual practice and by sending a picture, they come to support [Chen] Guangcheng. [I want to let] every participant (including those who didn’t send a picture) experience this mental process. I hope everyone can think, ‘Why do we have fear? What is happening to China? Why? And what should we do?’

We must remember, however, that Crazy Crab continues to be anonymous; I have never met him and am not even sure where he lives in China. The danger he and other activists face is real, and there are no signs that the danger has abated.

Seen from the level of the individual and small communities, memes have great power and beauty. In China, we must understand social change memes as a form of citizen media, a small reclamation of power contra state media. They challenge official state media through remix and humor and draw on the norms of a broader internet meme culture to spread an alternative while encouraging others to participate and join the community. In response to censorship and erasure, they create voice and visibility; in response to terrifying human rights abuses, they create laughter and community; in response to droll Party euphemism, they create irreverent puns and fuzzy creatures. In the face of systematic dehumanization and unitary state messaging, they are a basic declaration of humanity composed of creative, idiosyncratic media. In the vast expanse of the digital Gobi Desert, they are a glimmer of hope, joy, humor and community.

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Notes

1. For the sake of explaining the puns, I have used the diacritical marks of pinyin Romanization to do so. However, as they do not generally have meaning to non-speakers of Mandarin, throughout this article I will only use standard pinyin and Chinese characters.
2. I have been unable to verify if the stencil I saw was Photoshop or was genuinely an image from somewhere in China.
3. Appropriately, the essay was first distributed in samizdat, a technique for disguising and coding dissident material.
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In 2009, An was the first artist commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum to develop an art project for Twitter for their groundbreaking 1stfans program, the museum world’s first socially networked membership and art series. Featured in a 2011 cover story on social media art for *ARTNews*, her work has been exhibited internationally, in venues like 4A Contemporary Art in Sydney, Hun Gallery in Seoul, Fei Gallery in Shanghai, the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art and others.

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