The semiotic guerrilla: Internet subcultures as political resistance in China

Jiang Chang¹*, Renyi He² and Hailong Ren³

¹School of Media and Communication, Shenzhen University, China.
²School of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China.
³School of Translation and Interpreting, Beijing Language and Culture University, China.

Received 29 September, 2021; Accepted 7 December, 2021

This paper adopts a critical discourse analysis in combination with in-depth interviews of 55 people to examine three representative cases of Internet subcultures created and practiced by Chinese netizens from 2009, in order to define the formats, strategies and tactics of these subcultures in relation to the broader mainstream political culture. The paper finds that the Chinese subculturists employ tactics of homophony and neologism made possible by the highly contextual Chinese language; the participants are aware of the appropriation of traditional Confucian ethics by the Party-state to legitimize its rule and devise targeted strategies of resistance accordingly; but their cynical attitude towards the dominant political culture prevents them from affecting real political change beyond mere defiance at the semiotic level.

Key words: State censorship, cultural resistance, subcultures, post-subcultures, Chinese Internet.

INTRODUCTION

The virtual ban in China on “offline” political activities, such as protests, demonstrations and unofficial assemblies, has made the Internet the main tool and scene of the resistance to the authoritarian Party-state by Chinese netizens in a variety of areas, including freedom of speech, gender equality, the one-child policy and autonomy over their own lifestyle (Gong and Yang, 2010; Qiu 2013). In response to this, the state has been tightening its grip on the Internet by shrinking the space of online expression and censoring potentially controversial content. This, however, has provoked further rebellion among Internet users (Cairns and Carlson, 2016; Creemers, 2017). As a result, the Chinese Internet as cultural space is turned into a complex of contradictions characterized by both activist resistance and firm government control (Yang, 2003).

With political expression and criticism of social injustice heavily suppressed, Chinese netizens have come to resort to a particular form of online resistance characterized by culture- and entertainment-based memes with political messages embedded in them. It is a postmodernist approach that re-creates existing content (language, imagery, video, etc.) in a way that is humorous or sarcastic (or egao, to use a popular Chinese slang) enough to stay out of the censors’ line of sight but still able to subtly convey dissent (Esarey and Xiao, 2011;

*Corresponding author. E-mail: criver@protonmail.ch.

Author(s) agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License
The post-subcultural theory within the Chinese context

Subculture has long been seen as separate from, or rebelling against, mainstream culture in a multitude of aspects, including values, beliefs, symbols and styles. It is often able to achieve a certain level of autonomy with its particular spaces and networks for meanings (Haenfler, 2010; Hodkinson, 2002; Williams, 2011). Best positioned to analyze this culture in the Internet age is post-subcultural theory. Born in the 1990s and coming into powerful force at the turn of the century, it is seen as the critique and correction of the classic subcultural theory championed by the Birmingham School, which emphasizes class as the central dimension of forming subcultures and considers subculture as a representation of class struggles. Influenced by postmodernism, post-subcultural theory rejects the CCCS-derived versions of subcultural theory for their inability to escape the traps of determinism and essentialism due to their over-emphasis on the class, race and gender attributes of cultural identity, which renders them incapable of dealing with the contemporary global subculture (Muggleton, 2000; Sweetman, 2013). To post-subcultural theorists, the cultural identity of youth, molded by new technological and cultural forces, especially globalization and the rise of the Internet, has become increasingly reflexive, fluid and fragmented. The distinctly political subculture in the traditional sense has evolved into a “style-based youth culture” (Bennett, 2004, 2011).

Under such theoretical guidance, scholars developed a number of conceptual frameworks to analyze specific cultural forms to replace the research paradigm of the Birmingham School or even the very concept of subculture. Maffesoli (1996, 98), for instance, uses the term “neo-tribe” to describe contemporary youth culture that is rather “a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favor appearance and form”. Similarly, Chaney (1996) further develops the concept of lifestyle, first proposed by Max Weber, by regarding lifestyle as a type of “creative project” based on acts of consumption. Also influential among post-subcultural scholars is the conceptualization of “scene” by Straw (1991) that renounces the traditional definition of subculture based on the fixity of class and community in favor of highlighting the constant evolution and often transient nature of collective youth activity. These conceptual frameworks, different as they are on the surface, share the same core theory that stresses the individuality and non-fixity of contemporary youth culture and youth collectivity which demand rigorous contextualized, ethnographic research.

Post-subcultural theory has been attacked from many angles since its conception, but the opponents have always stayed within the usual criticism of the various post-theories. Nevertheless, this paper believes in the value of post-subcultural theory in investigating China’s online subcultures, for two main reasons. Firstly, post-subcultural theory contextualizes subculture, or engages in what Jensen (2018) describes as a multidimensional, culture understanding of identities in cultural studies. China’s cultural traditions and political reality, vastly different from those in Western societies, make the country inhospitable to the essentialist framework of the Birmingham School. The clear lack of class factors in China’s cultural resistance is a telling example. Secondly, the stringent censorship of explicit political speech and radical expression in China has driven netizens to indirect forms of resistance, including jokes, wordplay, picture/video reediting, meme creation, etc. (Tsui, 2003), making this subculture highly stylized or aestheticized. In other words, the common language of the subcultural resistance is not straightforward political discourse, but politicized consumption activities built around symbols or images. Therefore, post-subcultural theory, with its...
emphasize on the constant evolving and often transient nature of symbols and its interpretations of the multi-ethnic and cross-class forms of affiliation (Mitchell 1996), can serve as a particularly effective tool in the effort to investigate the uniqueness of subcultural practices of Chinese netizens.

Firstly, post-subcultural theory contextualizes subculture, or engages in what Jensen (2018) describes as a multidimensional, culture understanding of identities in cultural studies. China’s cultural traditions and political reality, vastly different from those in Western societies, make the country inhospitable to the essentialist framework of the Birmingham School. The clear lack of class factors in China’s cultural resistance is a telling example. The loose virtual community of subcultures is made up of disparate people with specific issues and causes, as opposed to a tight group solidified by lasting class interests. Furthermore, members of this community do not share the same cultural identity. This requires researchers to immerse themselves in specific temporal-spatial contexts to examine this group as insiders. Given that most of the studies on China that use CCCS frameworks have failed to reach insightful conclusions (Liu and Xie, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017), it is imperative that a new framework be developed that is informed by post-subcultural theory and rooted in Chinese conditions.

Secondly, the stringent censorship of explicit political speech and radical expression in China has driven netizens to indirect forms of resistance, including jokes, wordplay, picture/video reediting, meme creation, etc. (Tsui, 2003), making this subculture highly stylized or aestheticized. In other words, the common language of the subcultural resistance is not straightforward political discourse, but politicized consumption activities built around symbols or images. In some cases, the act of resistance by creating and consuming symbols bears more significance than the issue at hand (e.g. freedom of expression) and evolves into a universal online lifestyle, which may provide an opening for scholars to examine “the rest of life,” or, in the words of Hodkinson (2016, 638), “[h]ow participation in any particular cultural grouping connects to the range of other spaces, networks and affiliations of importance to participants.” Therefore, post-subcultural theory, with its emphasis on the constant evolving and often transient nature of symbols and its interpretations of the multi-ethnic and cross-class forms of affiliation (Bennett, 2000; Mitchell, 1996), can serve as a particularly effective tool in the effort to investigate the uniqueness of subcultural practices of Chinese netizens.

The existing literature has laid a firm foundation for this paper. The gender-based analysis by Wallis (2015) of three illustrative cases of gender-based production of subculture exposes the discursive collusion between the Internet subculture in China and patriarchy and misogyny, warns against the academic tendency to happily glorify any form of resistance and finally demonstrates the need to confront the flaws of online resistance within the framework of China’s post-socialist gender politics. Chen (2014) surveys the popularity of the North American rage comics among young Chinese on the Internet by mapping the ways in which the riotous humor has been able to cross cultural boundaries in China’s cyber space, and recognizes the political significance of this subculture for having created room for emotional and political catharsis despite the unlikelihood that it will ever lead to political reform. Research by Qiu (2013) on the feizhuli culture questions how articulations of female gender and sexuality relate to broader cultural politics in contemporary China and sheds light on the tensions between the so-called Chinese modernities and the different modernities reflected in certain forms of online subcultures and the gendered identities they construct. As illuminating as they are, the papers have mainly focused on individual cases without attempting to define the changing patterns of online resistant culture of Chinese netizens, youth or from other age groups, and have not taken the trouble to develop a native Chinese theory. Which is why this paper, building on the existing literature, sets out to answer three questions: One, are there general patterns to how the Internet subculture is formed? Second, how is this subculture politicized or depoliticized in its interaction with political structures, especially government censorship? Third, as the most important form of resistance in today’s China, what potential influence will the Internet subculture have on the country’s political culture?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The methodology of this paper takes a two-pronged approach. Firstly, a critical discourse analysis is applied to three representative cases of Internet-based resistance from 2009 to 2019: the “grass mud horse” phenomenon that started in 2008, the “toad worship” in 2014, and the Peppa Pig culture in 2017. These are chosen for several reasons. Firstly, these three have had a widespread influence on contemporary Chinese society and culture where the writers of the paper have had intensive, firsthand experience of these subcultures as regular users of the Chinese Internet during the past 10 years, and a review of existing literature shows that these three are more typical than other subcultures and have all been hot topics for global media coverage. For example, The New York Times have covered all these three cases with in-depth reporting and commentaries, attracting wide attention of Chinese politics observers to Chinese netizens’ creativities. Although naturally becoming the target of nationwide government crackdowns as of their inceptions, these three cultures have shown incredible staying power in the digital world. Their army of followers “hide” in different digital spaces, abiding their time to launch a quick “ambush” of subcultural signifying practices, before going in hiding again, leaving no trace to the censors. The “toad worship” subculture has even migrated to Facebook (blocked in China) as its new home with a large and growing fanbase. One Facebook fan group for “toad worshippers” where we recruit interviewees has over 7,000 active members, most of whom are Chinese nationals according to their names. Secondly, all three have taken a form of resistance to the mainstream political culture in China characterized by suppression of individual expression in the name of maintaining social stability, solidification of cultural stratification and order,
blurring of lines between the Party, the state and society, and exaltation of an ascetic, puritanical lifestyle (Hua and Nathan, 2015). In other words, on the symbolic, narrative and expressive levels, all three subcultures have set out to flaunt freedom of speech, break down cultural stratification, uncouple discursively the Party-state and society, and revel in secular (and sometimes vulgar) joy, albeit in ways that are mostly playful and sarcastic. Lastly, the three subcultures, however, differ from each other form a historical continuum. The “grass mud horse” is a forlorn strategy of confrontation that graphically denounces Internet censorship in an almost obsolete language, incurring therefore the harshest crackdowns; in contrast, the “toad worship” has developed a sophisticated system of symbols that employ subtle and clever wordplay in nuanced stories spread across a wide range of mediums (such as T-shirts, mugs and illicit fan art and publications), which can be seen as a sign of maturity of Chinese online subcultures but also blunts their political edginess; the Peppa Pig culture, finally, is more fully commercial, given its roots in pop culture (a British cartoon) and viral franchise (stickers, T-shirts, etc.) whose customers have almost given up direct political expression and chosen instead to dissolve political authority with linguistic and cultural pastiche. They represent the stages in the evolution of Chinese Internet subcultures: from the “grass mud horse” to the “toad worship” to then Peppa Pig, a clear line can be drawn towards post-subculture. This will be explained in detail.

This paper does not give an end date to these cultures because even though their posts were deleted en masse by state authorities soon after they appeared, they have not only survived in various forms but managed to spread far and wide, even entering the vocabulary of ordinary people. Documentary data mainly comes from news reports, Weibo and WeChat posts, image and video memes created by social media users, popular video-streaming sites (e.g. bilibili.com). Unfortunately, government censors or platform host companies have deleted most of the content, which is why some data is also supplied by the 55 interviewees of this paper in addition to the content downloaded and saved by the writers of the paper over the past decade. In total, 220 pieces of documentary data (including text, imagery, video, etc.) are used in this research. By analyzing these typical cases, this paper tries to define the general patterns of the online resistant culture by Chinese netizens in order to build a conceptual framework with which to investigate the broader and more general patterns of subversive to online “harmony,” the struggle between the state and society, and revel in secular entertainment among Chinese web users in the 21st century.

SECONDLY, supplementing the critical discourse analysis are in-depth interviews conducted with 55 people who have been heavy users of online social media and active practitioners of the three cultures. This aims at charting the ways these netizens grapple with the censorship regime and negotiate with the mainstream political culture, with a focus on what these cultures, in particular structures and contexts, can bring about. The interviewees were selected as follows: The researchers, in their data collection stage, identified the uploaders of content in various Internet platforms, then sent out private messages to a number of them requesting an interview. Those who accepted were then asked to recommend other people for interview. In the end, 55 said yes. It needs to be pointed out that uploaders are not necessarily original creators. The anonymous and decentralized nature of online content production makes it difficult to trace back to the first creator of a certain text or narrative. In addition, since all three subcultures have been subjected to government purges, the initial versions of much content on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo may have “disappeared” soon after they appeared; and much of the content still visible on Facebook and Twitter has been “smuggled” out of the country by netizens. This is why we have sought uploaders instead of only creators for the interviews. Nevertheless, even though they were chosen as uploaders, all interviewees told us that they used to or were still actively producing and creating online material related to the three subcultures. It is, therefore, our belief that they fit the criteria for “active subculturists.” Because they lived in different parts of the world (8 outside China), not all interviews were conducted face-to-face. Specifically, 22 people, who live in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, London or New York, were interviewed in person during the period from September 2017 to December 2019, at 90-120 minutes per interview. The remaining 33 agreed to WeChat video calls at 60-90 minutes per interview. All of them are native Chinese speakers. All interviewees outside China used to be or currently are Chinese students overseas, who claim to become fans when they were in China as young adults, and have kept the affection ever since. 46 were under the age of 35. 40 were male; efforts were made to interview more women but failed, and this may confirm what Evans (2008) terms the “limits of gender in China.” All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion where we encouraged the interviewees to tell us their motivations in becoming part of this resistance, their ways of defying and negotiating with the censorship regime, and if and how this type of participatory cultural practice had changed their political and cultural views.

FINDINGS: PLAYING WITH CULTURAL TABOOS

The Grass Mud Horse: A Profanity Revolution

The grass mud horse is an Internet phenomenon born in 2009, when a blogger created an entry on Baidu Baike called “The Ten Holy Beasts of the Internet,” and gave the ten imaginary animals their accompanying information, including their appearance, behavior and background story. Of the ten beasts, the horse quickly became viral. It directly resembles the alpaca. It lives in malegebi (literally Ma-le Gobi Desert), eats wocao (fertile grass), and has a natural enemy—the hexie (river crab). A number of songs dedicated to the animal soon appeared, the most famous one using the opening theme of the Chinese version of The Smurfs set to new lyrics that recount the heroic story of the GMH defeating the river crab and took its home back. Music videos produced by Chinese fans were uploaded to streaming sites in and outside China, and many versions can still be found on YouTube.

The biggest factor behind the horse’s viral fame on the Internet is its name. The three characters for “grass mud horse” in Mandarin Chinese sound very much like “fuck your mother.” Apart from this vile obscenity, malegebi (where it lives) and wocao (which it eats) also resemble nasty curses. Its nemesis the hexie sounds quite like “harmony/harmonious.” Given that the Party-state was propagandizing aggressively the concept of “harmonious society” borrowed from traditional Confucian ethics, and as a result relentlessly cracks down on speech deemed subversive to online “harmony,” the struggle between the GMH and the river crab serves as a metaphor for Internet users flouting China’s censorship regime. The other nine beasts are named in similar fashion, such as the fa ke you (fa ke squid, sounding like “fuck you” in English), and the ya mie die (ya mie butterfly, resembling the Japanese phrase “yamete,” meaning “please stop,” that is often heard in Japanese pornography). What sets the GMH apart is that the other 9 animals are pure exercises in vulgarity, but the horse is assigned a political narrative of defiance and resistance. These animals lasted on the
The strategy to appropriate core Confucian values, such as harmony and self-discipline, to legitimize state censorship began after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown to ply the Party leadership with an alternative to the bankrupt Communist ideology as a tool to control speech and thought; as a result, Confucianism has been playing a semi-religious role in the Party's state governance ever since (Billioud and Thoraval, 2008). Indeed, the current supreme leader Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the importance of “personal cultivation” (meaning the individual's obedience to order) in social harmony, exhorting Chinese citizens to follow the Confucian path of “first personal cultivation, then governing the world” (Chang and Ren, 2018). Against this backdrop, linguistic recreation that rips up classic language rules is often regarded as a sure sign of a debased character and an attempt at transgression, not to be protected as personal freedom of creation. This is what lies behind the regular campaigns by Internet authorities to “regulate” online language, attempting to curb and even stamp out the newest coinages. In July 2019, the Cyberspace Administration of China (the country’s main censoring body) reposted on its official website a politically charged op-ed that calls for stronger regulation of “Internet language as mass communication,” including Chinese-English hybrids and words containing images and symbols, on the grounds that “Internet language may bear such negative implications for security issues concerning language, culture and ideology that high vigilance is needed.” Thus, wordplay in the hands of the producers of the GMH subculture not only serves as an instrument to resist the censorship regime, but also constitutes an important source of politicized pleasure. Going beyond merely seeking political expression by getting around the filtering system with wordplay, the creators of the GMH are essentially trying to dismantle the sacred Chinese traditions of language and writing and to build a new discourse of resistance in their place. This invests in the GMH as a cultural ritual an impact and symbolic meaning that cannot be found in the “resistance by swearing” in the Western context. This is captured in one of the interviews: “The great power of the grass mud horse comes from the fact that it openly savages our cultural taboos. We have been taught since (Billioud and Thoraval, 2008). Indeed, the current regime.

Ironically, China’s Internet filtering system was designed to suppress “impropriety” (Benney 2014; Tang 2014), but it came to serve as the catalyst for a revolution in online language led by the grass mud horse. One interviewee who translated the creature and its narratives into French proclaimed, “We’re angry that we’re not allowed to say certain things, and we are resentful that some words, like harmony, are given new meanings by the censors we
disagree with … We are deprived of our birthright to use our mother tongue. Eventually this forced us to set our own rules of language." Since 2009, homonyms and swear words have become characteristics of the Chinese resistance, where Internet users have created one GMH-like symbol after another in a guerrilla war with the censors. The rules and tactics of engagement have become increasingly sophisticated and have culminated in the "toad worship" culture we are about to discuss in the next section.

**Blessed be the Toad: The politics of counter-idolization**

The second case is about the *moha* culture beginning in 2014. This newly coined Internet slang literally means "worshiping the toad," referring to Jiang Zemin who was the President of China 1993-2003 and the central figure of the so-called third generation of the Communist Party leadership. It is difficult to clearly state exactly when *moha* was born, but it is generally believed to have originated from the WeChat subscription account Seminar on the Selected Essays of Jiang launched in 2014 (later shut down by the government). Before it was taken down, the blog had published a great number of anecdotes, quotes and audio-visual clips of Jiang. This material, along with commentary, was presented in a mock academic or news style in order to avoid attracting the attention of the censors, and its stated mission was to praise Jiang’s abilities and accomplishments as a statesman.

*Moha* adopts the strategy of idolization in the form of praise, adulation and well-wishing for Jiang, which is an indirect way to vent dissatisfaction with his successors (especially Xi Jinping who came to power in 2012). But at the same time, this idolization is riddled with sarcasm and mockery. For instance, because Jiang in his big glasses speaks a number of foreign languages, including English, Russian and Spanish, and appears to get along well with the student leaders and Western values and ideas. In the video analyzed above, he proudly asks, "Which Western country haven’t I visited?" As mayor of Shanghai during the 1986 student protest movement, he met with the student leaders and
amazed them by reciting the Gettysburg Address in English in front of them, which worked to considerably diffuse the tension between the two sides. This episode made him a favorite of Deng Xiaoping and later served as a key factor in his being chosen as the supreme figure of the third generation of the Communist Party leadership (Zhao, 2010). The well-read, flamboyant Jiang seems human compared with all the other Communist leaders of China before and after him.

However, most interviewees did not draw a line from liking Jiang to hating on Xi but insisted that they liked the former mainly because of his “charisma.” One man professed his heartfelt fondness of Jiang, who to him was like “an old man who’s kind of smart, kind of funny, but who needs to be humored from time to time” as opposed to a national leader commanding respect from his subjects. Others, meanwhile, saw a deeper reason for their moha in its struggle for freedom of sarcastic speech in an oppressive country. In the words of one interviewee, “Moha makes me happiest when it creates this entire set of discourse that allows us to invent so many subtle and clever wordplays and expressions that bypass the filtering tools of censorship. After all, the authorities will never ban the character ha. This alone can ensure this culture a very long life among us."

It needs to be stressed here that the image of Jiang painted by the moha culture is not historically accurate. There is no evidence that he was ever more liberal as a political leader than Deng, Hu Jintao or Xi. In certain periods, Jiang is even remembered to have taken a hardline conservative position. This, however, has given the “worshippers” an opportunity to indulge in a special, powerful kind of pleasure by “retelling history.” Mainstream Confucians have long regarded history writing as one of their top priorities, taking great care to compile the so-called “official history” to lend legitimacy to the ruler. History, then, has always been political in China. The Communist Party is awfully attentive to how its own history gets written. Indeed, the field of Party Historiography, a distinctly Chinese branch of history research, is vital to the ideological work of the Party (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 1987). Its political significance comes from its official profiles of principal Party figures. Therefore, by artificially elevating the historical import of Jiang in both achievement and popularity over other leaders, the current supreme leader Xi in particular, moha essentially attempts to deconstruct the legitimacy and authority of the official Party history. Precisely for this reason, the Internet users have bestowed on Jiang as a (anti-)idol a persona the exact opposite of the stereotypical image of the stiff, austere CPC leader. Of course, subcultures that seek political expression by creating (anti)idols are nothing new, but the collective subconsciousness of moha can be truly understood only in the context of China’s cultural obsession with writing “official history.” A self-styled “crazy toad fan” put it this way, “What’s important is what people choose to believe. Is it the stuff printed in textbooks and newspapers that brooks no dissent, or our own conclusions through critical thinking … Toad fans are not stupid. Many people do it because they think it’s fun. But most of us really believe that Jiang is a different kind of leader. And this matters because we truly think so. It’s not forced on us."

**Peppa Pig: My Body is My Weapon**

The third case centers on the viral Peppa Pig phenomenon among Chinese Internet users. It is still evolving, so we name it the Peppa Pig culture as a working term.

*Peppa Pig* is a British animated television series for preschool children which originally aired on May 31, 2004 on Channel 5 in 5-minute episodes. The show revolves around Peppa, a girl pig, and her family and friends. Its Chinese version began broadcasting on the Children’s Channel of China Central Television in 2015, and was later available on iQiyi and other major video-streaming sites. It soon became the most popular foreign cartoon among urban Chinese children, and many young parents who watched the show with their children became Peppa Pig’s first adult fans.

Chinese viewers liked the show due initially to its high production value compared with the shoddy quality that plagues most domestic cartoons. Then, in November 2017, a Peppa Pig video created by a fan and dubbed in the Chongqing dialect was uploaded to Bilibili, a major Chinese video-streaming site for fans of anime, comics and video games. It quickly went viral and garnered one million views in no time. The Peppa Pig subculture of resistance was thus born. Within a few short months, a large number of clips of the show dubbed to different Chinese languages and dialects appeared on Bilibili. The striking incongruities of a typical English middle-class family speaking richly local Chinese dialects were highly amusing to people online who continued to create even more works based on the show.

In December 2017, an article was posted online and was quickly shared by bloggers. Titled “An Exposé on Peppa Pig—Slacking Her Life Away Doing Whatever She Wants Paid for by Her Rich Family of Corporate Executives,” the article offers a tongue-in-cheek interpretation of the signs and symbols of the cartoon before concluding, “Peppa Pig’s family belongs to the upper class.” For example, her grandparents live in a giant mansion with a private garden and own a yacht. Her mom who presumably grew up with all this wealth plays the violin and speaks French, a well-educated lady all around. The dad is probably no average Joe either and around. The dad is probably no average Joe either and the family even has a private doctor, too. For a simple rash, within 5 min of a call, the doctor will arrive at their door. This funny piece, still being shared today, apparently struck a chord with China’s netizens. It hit a
nerve sensitive to the reality of class and further fueled the online debate over the worsening inequality in China. One man captured the sentiment well: “This one time I needed something for my sore throat. And I waited 4 hours in line at the hospital for the meds ... I can’t deny that this article hit home. I know it’s a cartoon. It’s not real. And the article is intended as humor. But I guess it makes everyone realize that the wealth gap is not something we can avoid talking about.”

As culturally and socially significant this show has come to mean for Chinese people, the most rebellious element of the subculture is nevertheless the appeal of Peppa Pig tattoo stickers. Many people pasted them on their bodies and shared their pictures and videos on such popular short video platforms as Douyin and Kuaishou. It even gave birth to a widespread rhyming catchphrase: Get your Peppa Pig tatt, shout out to your frat (shehuiren). This seemingly innocuous act is one of meaningful resistance because tattoos and piercings are abhorrent to mainstream Chinese culture. No less an authority than The Analects declares that “Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety.” Chinese culture deems any act that damages one’s body profoundly disrespectful of one’s parents. Appropriating Confucianism as dominant discourse that justifies its control over public cultures, the government similarly frowns upon tattoos which are associated by most people with gangsters and members of the mafia. Tattoos on entertainers and soccer players are blurred on TV, so that their young fans will not think of doing the same (Quackenbush and Chen, 2018; Rick, 2018). The stickers are thus given multiple meanings: First, they are a symbolic tool to vent public anger at the injection of Confucianist norms by the state discourse into personal lives; second, they provide the opportunity to get a tattoo, have fun, wash it off, and go back to their normal life without any real danger, such as getting caught and disciplined at school; third, using the cute Peppa Pig in a tattoo intended to show defiance makes the mockery even more pronounced. Such a tactic of resistance by using the body as a weapon is clever, because it does not create true, lasting confrontation, but it is a measure of how the subculturists are sick and tired of the performative power of the state discourse over the Chinese body. This is illustrated by one interviewee who had used the sticker: “When you use cute things to express rage, it creates something incredibly powerful. When something as harmless as Peppa Pig becomes a symbol of resistance, it’s not difficult to understand that people have had it up to here with this oppressive society. If there were no Peppa Pig, there would be Peppa Cow, Peppa Sheep.”

The Peppa Pig culture has become characteristic of the online resistance that uses the body as a medium. Following the stickers, countless Peppa outfits and accessories were made and sold to meet the growing demand from Chinese urbanites. At the same time, however, they have not bothered to form any particular offline groups for real-life political causes. One interviewee argues, “People’s love of Peppa Pig is essentially still an act of consumption.” And another told us, “The main reason people like wearing Peppa Pig clothes is that she has a funny shape. She is a pig who looks like a blow dryer.” Seen this way, the Peppa Pig culture differs in nature from the other two discussed in this paper—it is more postmodern and more about emotional catharsis, a tool for its practitioners to tease the Party-state with. In other words, despite the Peppa fans’ disgruntlement with both the Chinese state and the ubiquitous Confucian creeds intruding on every aspect of their life, they are not interested in overthrowing them. This is because they are the beneficiaries of this society in whose stability they have a stake. The first and foremost reason behind their fondness of Peppa Pig lies in their pursuit of an individualized aesthetic pleasure, while political expression has never been their main aim.

None of this, however, prevented the Chinese government from launching a nationwide crackdown on all re-created Peppa Pig works in May 2018. The staunchly pro-government and nationalistic Chinese newspaper Global Times warns in its report on the purge that the shehuiren label runs counter to mainstream values, a bad influence on the young (Qin, 2018). This confirms what King et al. (2013) describe as the indiscriminate, thus least costly, approach the Chinese censors take in suppressing speech, deleting anything that could lead to activism offline regardless of its content. The arbitrariness of the crackdown also serves as a clear sign that the censorship regime is not cracking up despite the various cultures of resistance challenging it.

The Peppa Pig culture is in many ways the latest variation on the tradition of “limited resistance” by the highly consumerist Chinese megacity dweller in the Internet age. They usually repurpose imported foreign cultural creations by giving them new meanings in the Chinese context, so as to vent their frustration and anger through sarcasm or irony (Chang and Ren, 2016). In a way, this type of “resistance” essentially serves as the safety valve of society. This distinction was sharply drawn by an interviewee: “Peppa Pig cannot be even mentioned next to moha. They are vastly different in meaning, significance and definitely value.” This is a clear demonstration of the political resistance of Chinese online subcultures gradually deteriorates under the persistent pressure of state discourse.

DISCUSSION

This paper adopts the critical discourse analysis in combination with in-depth interviews as it examines the
three representative cases of online cultural resistance among Chinese netizens starting from 2009—the grass mud horse, moha, and Peppa Pig. These cases can hopefully help us define the characteristics of the online subcultural resistance in relation to the broader mainstream political culture in China.

To Chinese Internet subculturists, first of all, there is a clear “villain”: the suppression of speech and censorship perpetrated by the Communist Party. The Internet is first and foremost a tool for the subcultural practitioners to sidestep, taunt and even (partially) wreck the censorship regime. This explains the (inevitable) common tactics among these cultures of using prolific linguistic or semiotic weapons to take on the authorities where the rebels revel in the highly contextual and ideographic nature of the Chinese language by creating a copious amount of homonyms and neologisms that contribute to an ever growing pool of online cultural resources that seem harmless or gibberish to the uninitiated. These features of the Chinese language fundamentally shape the form of Chinese online resistance. Major western languages are inflectional, which rely on sentences formed with strict grammatical rules and on established words made up by letters from a finite alphabet. In contrast, Chinese is analytical, its words and phrases composed of characters that number in the thousands. Each character denotes a range of sometimes wildly different meanings, and can only be “pinned down” when it is used in combination with one or more others. As a result, Chinese is highly dependent on context without which there often can be no definitive interpretation. For example, “Tibet” is an established English word that keeps its meaning no matter what situation it is in, but in Chinese, the word is composed of two characters xi (西) and zang (藏). Xi by itself has a relatively stable meaning as “west/western,” while zang is a typical polyphonic and polysemic character that can mean either “conceal/hide” or “treasure/storage.” Only when these two characters come together with xi before zang can the word mean Tibet, an ethnic region in China troubled by a separatist movement. But when zang is joined by other characters, different meanings may emerge, such as guan cang (馆藏, literally “collections at a library”; the character is pronounced cang here). Because of this unique linguistic feature, it is extremely difficult to completely censor a character. The state may want to censor xi zang altogether to prevent people from discussing Tibetan independence, but neither xi nor zang can be scrubbed without wreaking havoc on the language—they are needed to combine with many other characters to function as other words. This creates ample discursive space for the subculturists who have managed to express themselves in a variety of ingenious ways, including abbreviations, hybrids and Latinizations, without raising red flags with the censors. Put in another way, the filters can remove a character or a word but never the contextual meaning behind it. This is why the numerous campaigns to “clean up the Internet” have never succeeded in eradicating “unwelcome” online language which has survived and prospered on abundant homophony in countless local languages and dialects. This ensures the longevity of these cultures, but as they spread wide, more and more “outsiders” join the ranks of cultural producers and consumers. Unlike the original members, these newcomers display weaker political interests and stronger preferences for personal pleasure, which in the long run will unavoidably deradicalize the resistance, turning it into just another generic pleasure-seeking culture.

Also worth noting is that the disparate strategies of these cultures nevertheless all converge on a deeper level in challenging centuries-old Confucian traditions (beyond merely defying the specific policies and regimes in China today). As mentioned above, after the events of 1989 made the Communist leadership realize that Communism as a “semi-religion” to reaffirm and consolidate the legitimacy of one-party rule no longer worked, they resorted to Confucianism that has a much firmer base historically and culturally among the people and built an entire regime of governance that fuses economic reform and cultural conservatism. Therefore, the anti-Confucian acts and expressions of Chinese subculturists are not only a reaction to their traditional cultural heritage, but also a modern form of political resistance against authoritarianism. The interviewees clearly recognize the state’s manipulation and appropriation of the Confucianist discourse, one of whom said, “I feel there’s a close link between the government crackdown on speech and its aggressive promotion of traditional values... Maybe because freedom of speech is a modern value you can’t openly denounce, so the government must use other means to control it, like admonishing all of us to ‘follow the rules.’” More specifically, the grass mud horse is a deliberate exercise in vulgarity mocking the principles of decorum and order in the Chinese language. Moha fans go beyond their station as powerless subjects to attempt to “rewrite” mainstream history. And Peppa Pig rebels symbolically damage their body to scoff at antiquated Confucian dogma. These strategies clearly demonstrate a collective awareness among Chinese Internet users of the Party-state’s manipulation of Confucian ethics to legitimize its repressive policies. As one interviewee put it, “The most powerful word in the grass mud horse culture is actually hexie [harmony/river crab]. What is harmony? It’s a crab brandishing its claws and walking sideways, also meaning ‘being a bully’ in Chinese. A society that respects the value of each individual does not need harmony, but freedom.”

Lastly, as untenable as it is to call the three cases “history” in the strict sense, we are able to look back on this past decade and see a gradual decline in online resistance. If, compared with the barbed insolence of the grass mud horse, moha is already tame and covert, then
Peppa Pig can at most be charitably described as resistance in name only. This observation deserves a separate paper for a thorough exposition, but it is roughly due to the following reasons. This decade has seen the space of homophony- and neologism-based online resistance increasingly squeezed by the sophisticated filtering technology the Communist Party has developed and the exacting decrees of self-censorship it has issued to Internet companies (Economy 2018). In the meantime, the Chinese government has been actively encouraging the merging of IT corporations, which has resulted in a digital oligarchy that has made it much easier than ten years ago for state-capital collusion, effectively shrinking the virtual space for dissident cultural forms. Broadly speaking, even though China's online subcultures of resistance are incomparable and fascinating (provided that one speaks Chinese and understands the culture), current conditions make them unable or unwilling to exert meaningful influence on the dominant political culture.

Indeed, the interviews have revealed a lack of clear political ideals among the earnest fans of these cultures who have not shown any interest or motivation to form political entities in the real world. They have never developed a firm, coherent political position, or considered toppling the political establishment. Seeking emotional catharsis in specific contexts, the post-subcultural expressions through sarcasm, mockery or parody are quickly produced and disseminated in the window between the birth of a new technology, such as microblogging, collaborative encyclopedia, short video apps, etc., and the development of new filtering tools by the authorities to tame it, and after the purge, they continue to circulate as symbols and images across platforms and gradually deradicalize down to a generic online culture that is only moderately disobedient.

We have also discovered that there is a cynical attitude towards censorship and the Communist rule that drives these subcultural practitioners. The pleasure they derive from producing and consuming online subcultures is certainly political, yet it is a passive-aggressive, even escapist, kind of politics. This nihilistic inclination has given birth to a semiotic guerrilla that crops up here and there and can never be completely stamped out. "A single spark can start a prairie fire," (in the words of Mao Zedong), but more often the "sub" in China's Internet subculture is gradually watered down as more people join in. This may hint at a common pathway of evolution of online subcultures in authoritarian countries, if we can expand our research to include more countries with similar political contexts. Therefore, this research may enrich our understanding of subcultures in the digital age by theorizing the technocracies of the authoritarian political system, and the manners in which subcultural practitioners negotiate with the state censorship through highly contextualized, nonconfrontational tactics. But questions remain. Is this "fate" determined by China's cultural realities? Are there other unknown social factors at play here? This calls for further academic research.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

Bennett A (2000). Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place. London: Macmillan.
Bennett A (2004). Virtual subculture? Youth, identity and the internet. In: Bennett A and Kahn-Harris K (eds) After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture. Basingstoke: Palgrave pp. 162-178.
Bennett A (2011). The post-subcultural turn: Some reflections 10 years on. Journal of Youth Studies 14(5):493-617.
Benney J (2014). The aesthetics of Chinese microblogging: State and market control of Weibo. AsiaScapes: Digital Asia 1(3):169-200.
Billoud S, Thoraval J (2008). The contemporary revival of Confucianism: Anshen liming or the religious dimension of Confucianism. China Perspectives 3:88-106.
Cairns C, Carlson A (2016). Real-world islands in social media sea: Nationalism and censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku crisis. The China Quarterly 225:23-49.
Chaney D (1996). Lifestyles. London: Routledge.
Chang J, Ren H (2016). Empowerment through craziness: The German TV series Knaaslerfrauen and its female viewers in China. European Journal of Cultural Studies 19(6):565-582.
Chang J, Ren H (2018). The powerful image and the imagination of power: The 'new visual turn' of the CPC's propaganda strategy since its 18th National Congress in 2012. Asian Journal of Communication 28(1):1-19.
Chen S (2014). Baozou manhua (rage comics), internet humor and everyday life. Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies 28(5):690-708.
Creemers R (2017). Cyper China: Upgrading propaganda, public opinion work and social management for the twenty-first century. Journal of Contemporary China 26(203):85-100.
DeChaine DR (1997). Mapping subversion: Queercore music's playful discourse of resistance. Popular Music and Society 21(4):7-37.
Economy EC (2018). The great firewall of China: Xi Jinping's internet shutdown. The Guardian, 29 June. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/29/the-great-firewall-of-china-xi-jinpings-internet-shutdown.
Esarey A, Xiao Q (2011). Digital communication and political change in China. International Journal of Communications 5:298-319.
Evans H (2005). Sexed Exits. Sexuality, gender, identities, and the limits of gender. China Information 48(5):752-772.
Fishe M (2012). Explaining Ai Weiwei’s ‘Grass Mud Horse’ obsession. The Washington Post, 24 October. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2012/10/24/explaining-ai-weiweis-grass-mud-horse-obsession/?utm_term=.3a60546b04c5.
Gaur A (2000). Literacy and the Politics of Writing. Portland, Oregon: Intellect Books.
Gong H, Yang X (2010). Digitized parody: The politics of Egao in contemporary China. China Information 24(1):3-26.
Haenfler R (2010). Goths, Gamers and Grrrls: Deviance and Youth Subcultures. New York: Oxford University Press.
Hodkinson P (2002). Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture. Oxford: Berg.
Hodkinson P (2016). Youth cultures and the rest of life: Subcultures, post-subcultures and beyond. Journal of Youth Studies 19(5):629-645.
Hua S, Nathan AJ (eds) (2015). Chinese Political Culture: 1989-2000. New York: Routledge.
King G, Pan J, Roberts ME (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. American Political Science Review 107(2):326-343.
Jacobs K (2012). People's Pornography: Sex and Surveillance on the
Chinese Internet. Chicago: Intellect.

Li H (2011) Parody and resistance on the Chinese internet. In: Herold DK and Marolt P (eds) Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalizing the Online Carnival. London: Routledge pp. 71-88.

Li Y (2019). Learning China's forbidden history, so they can censor it. The New York Times, 2 January. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/02/business/china-internet-censor.html.

Liu L, Xie A (2017). Muddling through school life: An ethnographic study of the subculture of 'deviant' students in China. International Studies in Sociology of Education 26(2):1-20.

MacKinnon R (2008). Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China. Public Choice 134(1-2): 31-64.

Maffesoli M (1996). The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society. London: Sage.

Martinez TA (1997). Popular culture as oppositional culture: Rap as resistance. Sociological Perspective 40(2): 265-286.

Meng (2013). From steamed bun to grass mud horse: Egao as alternative political discourse on the Chinese internet. Global Media and Communication 7(1): 33-51.

Mitchell T (1996). Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop and Rap in Europe and Oceania. London: Leicester University Press.

Morozov E (2011). The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom. New York: Public Affairs.

Muggleton D (2000). Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style. Oxford: Berg.

Peng Q (2018). Moha culture: Toad worship regarding a former president of China. Henry Jenkins’ personal blog, 19 September. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2018/9/19/moha-culture-toad-worship-regarding-a-former-president-of-china-part-one.

Qin A (2015). Ridicule turns to affection as Chinese social media embraces Jiang Zemin. The New York Times, 20 October. http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/20/jiang-zemin-china-toad-xi-jinpings/.

Qin A (2018). Peppa Pig, unlikely rebel icon, faces purge in China. The New York Times, 1 May. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/world/asia/peppa-pig-china-censors.html.

Qiu Z (2013). Cuteness as a subtle strategy: Urban female youth and the online feizhuliu culture in contemporary China Cultural Studies 27(2):225-241.

Quackenbush C, Chen AH (2018). Tasteless, vulgar and obscene: China just banned hip-hop culture and tattoos from television. Time, 22 January. http://time.com/5120601/china-hip-hop-ban-tattoos-television/.

Rick A (2018). China just banned tattoos on their soccer players, and it could cost them. Forbes, 27 March. https://www.forbes.com/sites/augustrick/2018/03/27/china-just-banned-tattoos-on-its-soccer-players-and-it-could-cost-them/#367134277db2.

Straw W (1991). Systems of articulation, logics of change: Communities and scenes in popular music. Cultural Studies 5(3):368-388.

Sweetman P (2013). Structure, agency, subculture: The CCCS, Resistance through Rituals, and ‘post-subcultural’ studies. Sociological Research Online 18(4):22.

Tang H (2014). Political satire in the Chinese blogosphere: The case of Wang Xiaofeng. Sociology Study 4(12):1016-1041.

Tang L (2013). The politics of files: Mocking news in Chinese cyberspace. Chinese Journal of Communication 6(4):482-496.

Tang L, Yang P (2011). Symbolic power and the internet: The power of a ‘horse’. Media, Culture and Society 33(5):675-691.

Tsi L (2003). The panopticon as the antithesis of a space freedom: Control and regulation of the internet in China. China Information 17(2):65-81.

Wallis C (2015). Gender and China’s online censorship protest culture. Feminist Media Studies 15(2):223-238.

Weigelin-Schwiedrzik S (1987). Party historiography in the People’s Republic of China. The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs 17:77-94.

Williams P (2011). Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wines M (2009). A dirty pun tweaks China’s online censors. The New York Times, 11 March. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html.

Yang G (2003). The internet and the rise of a transnational Chinese cultural sphere. Media, Culture and Society 25(4):469-490.

Yang G (2009). The Power of the Internet In: China: Citizen Activism Online. New York: Columbia University Press.

Zhang H, Zhao JS, Ren L, Zhao R (2017). Subculture, gang involvement, and delinquency: A study of incarcerated youth in China. Justice Quarterly 34(6):952-977.

Zhu T, Phipps D, Pridden A, Crandall JR, Wallach DS (2013). The velocity of censorship: High-fidelity detection of microblog post deletions. Proceedings of the 22nd USENIX Security Symposium: pp. 227-240.

Notes:

Here are the links to some recent NYT reports: “A Dirty Pun Tweaks China’s Online Censors,” https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html;

“Ridicule Turns to Affection as Chinese Social Media Embraces Jiang Zemin,” https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20151021/c2/sino-jiang/en-uv/;

“Peppa Pig, Unlikely Rebel Icon, Faces Purge in China,” https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/world/asia/peppa-pig-china-censors.html?_ga=2.166175861.602200556.1587713466-258091312.1587351241.

A collaborative online encyclopedia in the likes of Wikipedia but subject to much more stringent censorship. It is owned and run by Baidu, the largest search engine in and has long been a main origin of Internet subcultures in the country.

Here are the links to the two most popular videos: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAJ4 ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2F3fz5gZNc.

The work can be seen here: https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ai-weimei-art-is-like-sex-354203.

Both are found in classic Confucian texts. The former is from Chunqiu Guliang Zhuan, and enjoins people to avoid talking about the errors of those above them, and the latter is from The Analects, which warns against speaking of (writing about) impropriety. Both principles were sanctioned by Confucius.

The article can be seen here: http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-07/13/c_1124748306.htm.

Here is the link to the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m43UyujVsXk.

Although each Chinese character was originally a word in its own right, the modern Chinese language relies heavily on two-character words. The Party’s filtering system is set to only screen the word instead of the characters it is composed of. The word moha is banned, but neither mo or ha is, because they, combined with other characters, could make up different words. If any single character gets banned, it will wreak havoc on the language and upend day-to-day communication. This unique feature of Chinese is the main reason why it has been so difficult for the Chinese censorship regime to completely purge the Internet.

Shehuiren, literally “society person,” is an Internet buzzword that went viral in 2017-2018. Bearing similar meanings with another word diaos, it is used by the online youth as self-deprecating humor to announce their status as someone at the bottom of society.