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# The Power of Creativity: How Web-Based Parody Encourages Chinese Civil Participation

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### Abstract

This article investigates that relationship between *e'gao* (parody using web-based media) and Chinese civil participation. *E'gao* (恶搞 EUH-gow) uses videos, images, and text based campaigns that use humor to remove fear of political commentary and action. By detailing the development of China's internet use, and the creation of the *e'gao* movement, I argue that *e'gao* removes the fear of participating in campaigns and movements, which criticize government policy and actions on both local and state levels, by using humor and anonymity of large online numbers. *E'gao* can provide a way for the common citizens to mold policy, and hold authority figures accountable for their actions.

### Introduction

In the past ten years the United States has experienced a wave of user-created content made for viewing on the web. The first attempts were seen in 2003 when shows such as *Red Vs Blue*, *Dead End Days*, and *Homestar Runner* aired. Each of these shows were hosted on individual websites requiring the creators to purchase enough server space to hold all of the videos and handle traffic to the site, and this resulted in some creators requiring users to download the episode before watching the film in order to save on fees. This obstacle was removed when YouTube was launched in 2005, allowing users to upload their videos free of cost. YouTube allowed anyone with any interest in making videos to do so in a cheap and accessible way, and by 2006, there was an explosion of web series, video bloggers, and animators. The explosion of content created a competing force for television networks who, in response, expanded into the web series business themselves by creating webisodes such as *Scrubs Interns* by ABC and *Battlestar Galactica: The Resistance* by SciFi. The popularity and profitability of web-based media allowed individuals to become fulltime "YouTube Stars" by making their living by

creating web content, and also allowed entire companies to emerge with their sole focus being to create web content.

Web-based media is not solely a Western concept or phenomenon. China's boom and development of web-based media started around the same time as in the United States. As early as 2002, artists began experimenting with web-based media and machinima, most notably, Feng Mengbo who created a series of videos using the video game *Quake III* and who inserted himself into the game to make himself the hero. With the rise of microblogging, blogs, and the launch of video-hosting sites such as Youku (2006) and Tudou (2005), users began posting more user created content. The splurge in content resulted in viral videos, such as the one by The Back Dormitory Boys, who posted their first video of themselves lip-syncing to the words of "I Want It That Way" in 2005. By 2006, *The Bloody Case of the Steam Bun* was posted on a personal blog.

Web-based media development followed similarly in the U.S. and China. However, the obstacles created by China's censorship and harsh copyright laws against parody have created a politically heavy form of entertainment not seen in the US. This form of entertainment is called *e'gao* (恶搞 EUH-gow), a form of parody, that allows Chinese netizens\* not only to express themselves as individuals, but also allows them to form a collective voice that vents frustrations about government policies and creates a space in which people feel empowered and safe to express their concerns, emotions, and criticisms of the government. While many *e'gao* artists face repercussions from the government, and many bloggers are jailed or fined for posting *e'gao* and

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\* (citizens of the net)

other politically sensitive information on their blogs, *e'gao* is still used as a humorous way to incite civil participation.

This paper will develop a better understanding of what the Internet is used for, who uses the Internet in China and briefly discussing copyright and anti-*e'gao* laws within China. By analyzing different formats of *e'gao* such as videos, images, and text-based campaigns, we can see a clear picture of how *e'gao* uses humor to engage people in civil participation, as well as allowing them to voice their concerns in a collective manner. Particularly significant examples are the rash of mythical creatures including Grass Mud Horse and Qi Shi Ma, machinima films, and the contribution by Internet activist Hu Ge, Pi San, and Wen Yunchao.

The Internet in China has rapidly developed, allowing it to catch up to Western nations at a rate that is alarming to some. In 2005 China boasted over 111 million Internet users<sup>1</sup> and by December 2009 the number had practically tripled with 384 million Internet users.<sup>2</sup> The two cultural critics, Choi and Shao, both agree that the youth of China and the youth of the United States use the Internet similarly, which challenges long-held classifications of cultural values.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in her article *New Media Practices in China: Youth Patterns, Processes, and Politics*, Cara Wallis writes that Internet activities between American and Chinese users are roughly the same and that Chinese users spend more of their free time online than their American counterparts. She notes that for 44% of Chinese users, there are 30% of American users online during their leisure hours.<sup>4</sup>

The main difference between Chinese and American Internet usage and web media is censorship. Bat Batjargal explains that a major problem with censorship is that it comes from a vast number of organizations. The two main agencies involved are the Information Department of the State Council and the Ministry of Information Industry. However, the State Secrets Bureau, Ministry of Public Security, the General Administration of Press and Publication, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, the Ministry of Culture, and local governments also issue differing regulations.<sup>5</sup> Robert S. Rogoyski lays out flaws within Chinese copyright laws, the influence of the American government in Chinese copyright laws, and the lack of protection for parody within those laws.<sup>6</sup> Other laws listed by Hongmei Li chart the government's efforts to remove parody videos due to their "bad influence on Chinese youth" and the "necessity of developing 'a clean Internet culture,'" which resulted in a series of crackdowns on "yellow"—pornographic or offensive—content in 2006. Many observers view these crackdowns as a smoke screen to remove politically sensitive material and websites under the guise of removing pornographic or vulgar content (Hongmei Li, 80).

Another point of contention within China's censorship regime is the constant flux of what is acceptable. Many who create web content in China are never quite sure where the line between entertainment and parody or satire is due to its constantly changing nature.<sup>8</sup> Following the uploading of Charter 08, a petition calling for democratic and legal reforms that quickly amassed over 8,000 signatures, and a series of important anniversaries in 2009 (such as the 1919 May Fourth Movement, 1959 Tibetan uprising, 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, and the anniversary of the founding of the PRC), the government increased crackdowns on censorship, forcing

netizens to find more creative ways of bypassing censors such as VPNS, anonymizing tools and software.<sup>9</sup>

China's censorship is not just handled by filters and blocking websites, however. The government also employs over two million people who monitor microblogging inside and outside of China.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the government employs "50 Cent Party Members" or users who receive money to post messages promoting the Party line.<sup>11</sup> Censors do not remove direct criticism of the Party, but do remove any content that has the potential of inspiring collective action.<sup>12</sup> The government is more likely to remove creative content with negative connotation that goes viral than outright criticism.

Recently the Chinese government has been strengthening its laws in order to get more control over creative content in response to the popularity of *e'gao*. In 2006, authorities announced that individuals were required to get licenses for distributing short films, and individuals could be fined up to 5,000 Yuan (about \$625) for spreading defamatory information.<sup>13</sup> In 2007, the government required that any music to be changed had to gain governmental approval before being uploaded. In 2008, the law requiring licenses was followed up with a law limiting video broadcasting to websites held by state-controlled companies such as sina.com, sohu.com and netease.com.<sup>14</sup> Later in 2008, the government required Tudou and Youku to register as broadcasters and accept regulations similar to TV and radio.<sup>15</sup>

Chinese copyright law also presents problems for parody or satirical works. While the wording of the copyright law does not directly mention parody videos, the interpretation of the law takes

away any wiggle room parodies might have had.<sup>16</sup> A major problem with the copyright law is how American policy makers directly influenced Chinese policy makers. The American policy makers were concerned about American intellectual property, in particular, compliance with American copyright laws when the property came into question. The influence of the American policy makers and their attempts to make changes in Chinese copyright policy produced strict rulings about what is and is not a violation of copyright law (Rogoyski et al, 251). Due to this strict adherence to copyright law, parody is often seen outside the scope of free use and harshly criticized by government officials.

After Hu Ge released *The Bloody Case of the Steam Bun*, the film caused an immense controversy regarding fair use and copyright. *Bloody Case* was a parody of the recent film, *The Promise* directed by Chen Kaige. Chen sued Hu Ge for using scenes from *The Promise* in his cinematic parody. The copyright battle looked completely one-sided as many government officials reacted negatively to Hu Ge's film, and sided with Chen. However, the lawsuit never went to court. Hundreds of people rallied behind Hu Ge online, criticizing Chen's reactions to the parody and criticizing his decision to go to such lengths as to sue Hu Ge. While a victory for Hu Ge, the intense media coverage of the case helped trigger regime response to prevent the same thing from happening again. Several agencies including Chinese Internet Society, 81 Film Studio (a military-affiliated film studio), major newspapers and Chinese universities were assembled to resolve how to stop the *e'gao* phenomenon and to elaborate on the need to contain its bad influences and "immoral and unacceptable distortion of Chinese history."<sup>17</sup> Government agencies responded in kind shortly after the meeting in 2006 by producing a series of laws aimed at containing *e'gao* works.

There are many problems with Chinese censorship. In 2003 during one of China's crackdowns on "yellow" content, a young woman, Mu Zimei, had her blog removed from the Internet. On her personal blog, Mu talked in-depth about her active sex life, bringing into public discussion topics including freedom of expression, privacy, sexual morality and women's rights. Her subject matter resulted in the removal of her blog, the loss of her job, and the prohibition of sales of her book. However, Mu continues to sneak past censors and make headlines—publishing the accounts of her sexual encounters via podcasts.<sup>18</sup>

Censors can also take anywhere from a few minutes to a few days to completely remove or block content from the web. The video *Little Rabbit, Be Good*, an episode of the web series *Kuang Kuang*, which is described later in this article, survived for two days in spite of its highly controversial content. In this instance, censorship was somewhat thwarted. *Little Rabbit, Be Good* was saved and uploaded to places outside of the reach of China's censors. The video has been uploaded to foreign video hosting sites such as YouTube, and has made headlines in Australia.

Another issue is connecting images with their *e'gao* movements. When hundreds of people started posting images of empty chairs from various ads, paintings, and pictures, it took censors a few hours to connect the pictures with the Nobel Prize protest to which they were connected. On websites like Weibo, an equivalent to Twitter, which churn out over 40 million posts a day, it is difficult to monitor every post. The government leans on the websites to have "self-discipline" and to monitor the content being produced on their own sites.<sup>19</sup> While these websites need to

self-monitor in order to earn points towards renewing their licenses, the same problems still exist. The sheer volume of content produced in a day, not to mention increase in the numbers of people using the Internet daily swells the amount of content produced. The result outpaces censorship and censors.

Blocking “vulgar” content has also created a backlash of Internet memes widely used as a form of symbolic defiance of the widespread Internet censorship. The dirty homophone jokes, also discussed at greater length later in the article, often take the guise of mythical animals. The most recognizable is the *Cao Ni Ma*, which—depending on the pronunciation—can mean Grass Mud Horse, or vulgar allusions involving one’s mother. The video of the Grass Mud Horse song was removed, but merchandise, references, and users reposting the video are causing problems, and the mythical beast continues to make appearances in other *e’gao* images. The rate at which the Chinese Internet is expanding and evolving is leaving China’s censors far behind. Censors continue to have difficulties in keeping up with new content, blocking or removing all content from certain users and stopping the content from making its way back onto the web.

The Chinese web draws attention to the factor of new media “prosumption” or new media products that arise from a breakdown of the line between producers and consumers. Prosumption can be seen in young writers creating web sites and blogs to distribute their own writings and to discuss literature. Nowadays one can read cell phone novels in installments, which allows professionals and amateurs to mix and become both the producer and consumer.<sup>20</sup> This is even more the case for creating web-based television series, animations, and machinima products due to the high availability of high-speed broadband, inexpensive web cams, editing software, and

video recorders. These easy-to-get and quick-to-learn products allow the common person at home to create their own media and express their own thoughts. Another popular method of prosumption is making “machinima” films. Machinima, meshing together the terms “machine” and “cinema,” refers to works that use real-time computer graphic engines to create a cinematic production. However, it is very common for machinima films to be made within a pre-existing video game, such as *World of Warcraft*, *Halo* or *The Sims*. Coupling the ability for anyone to create videos and the use of free-to-upload video sites such as Youku and YouTube, the average person can become famous on the Internet with relative ease.

These developments have given rise to many forms of new media prosumption in China including video blogging, microblogging, blogging, *e'gao* images and videos. While the creation of the new media is closely linked to tech-savvy digital youth, there are users who fall into the age range of thirty to forty-year olds who still enjoy, create, and participate in new media prosumption. The Internet is slowly making its way into rural areas, connecting the urban population to them and spreading information and ideas faster. All of these factors help the netizens of China unite across the country, express their discontent with current politics, vent frustrations with the government, and to have access to more entertainment.<sup>21</sup> *E'gao* removes the fear of participating in movements and helps mobilize people since more people are likely to participate if it can be seen as a joke. Wen Yunchao said, after an *e'gao* movement prompted the release of a Chinese blogger, “If it hits a nerve, like a case of injustice or abuse, it can be contagious. It’s indirect — just a joke, right? — So people lose their fear of getting involved.”<sup>22</sup> These opportunities generated by new media have not only helped users in evading Chinese censorship, but also have changed the actions of the government. In 2009, a rich college student

hit and killed a pedestrian. As a result of how the police handled the incident, the online community created a mythical creature called Qi Shi Ma, whose backstory ridiculed police and accused them of being greedy, corrupt officials who were paid off by the rich. The embarrassment of the Qi Shi Ma campaign resulted in the arrest of the student and the filing of an honest report of what happened. New presumption has given the people a way to hold authority figures accountable, and has allowed for a space within the Internet that encourages self-expression and thinking for oneself.

Lately *e'gao*, translated literally as “evil joking,” has received much scholarly attention from the West, especially because of the arrival of *e'gao* videos on the international scene. *E'gao* is a versatile form of parody or satire that pokes fun at events in media and the political sphere ranging from the format of video, image, text to audio media. In order to get around government censorship of key terms, the events and issues that *e'gao* mentions or interprets often need to be coded with different messages, including the use of homophones, which results in the creation of an entire lexicon of coded language.<sup>23</sup> *E'gao* often meshes popular images and phrases together, allowing for past popular *e'gao* images to make guest appearances within other *e'gao* jokes.

When blogs or forum posts are deleted or blocked by censors, it is most common to comment that the blog or the content has been “harmonized.” This is a sarcastic remark that refers to government announcements in the recent past few years where people are encouraged to build a “harmonious society.” Since the phrase “harmony” or “harmonious” is used sarcastically so often, censors have begun to block posts and comments using those phrases. In response to this, people began to use the characters for “river crab” instead of “harmony.” In Chinese the two

words are homophones. River crabs now commonly represent the government and government authority. The river crab image is also commonly photoshopped so that the crab is wearing three watches. The watches refer to the name of a well-known blogger, Dai Sange Biao (to wear three watches) and are a jab at the governmental policy of the “three represents,” which was promoted by former President Jiang Zemin.<sup>24</sup> Due to using homophones and embedding double meanings within images and songs, *e'gao* jokes can mesh and mix older with more recent material, which results in new jokes, such as “River Crab with Three Watches.”

The image of the river crab is often invoked with *e'gao* images and videos. The Grass Mud Horse, a mythical creature resembling an alpaca, has an entire song and video dedicated to the history of the Grass Mud Horses. The video just splices together images of alpacas. The same images are put in a loop and repeat as a song plays, describing the Grass Mud Horses' lives and how they defeated the river crabs that invaded their lands. The characters used for the lyrics have benign meanings and are harmless; however, throughout the song one can hear phonetic equivalents of vulgar Chinese swear words involving one's mother.<sup>25</sup> Cao Ni Ma (grass mud horse) is the equivalent to “F\*\*\* your mother” or “motherf\*\*\*er,” while the name of the mythical land where the horses live, Ma Le Gi Bi Desert, is another obscene phrase once again alluding to one's mother. Later, some subspecies of the Grass Mud Horse were introduced, including Wo Cao Ni Ma (I f\*\*\* your mother) and Kuang Cao Ni Ma (violently f\*\*\* your mother).<sup>26</sup> However, the Grass Mud Horse is not the only mythical creature with a hidden vulgar name. A post on Baidu Baike, a collective Chinese encyclopedia, listed the top ten mythical creatures on the Chinese Internet, with the Grass Mud Horse taking the number one spot. The list included creatures such as: Fa Ke You (which literally means 'French Croatian squid' but refers

to the English swear 'f\*\*\* you'), Ji Ba Mao (Lucky Journey Cat but a homophone for pubic hair), Wei Shen Jing (Stretch-Tailed Whale, but referring to menstrual pads), and Yin Dao Yan (Singing Field Goose but referring to vaginal infection) as well as other creatures (Li, 79). All of these creatures were created in response to the government crackdown on vulgar content and its increased attempts to get websites such as Baidu, Google, Sina, and others to censor themselves more and to crack down on large volumes of vulgar and pornographic material. Due to the harmless literal meaning of most animals, the Grass Mud Horse and others slipped past censors for a long period of time.

In 2009, another mythical creature was created Qi Shi Ma, whose literal meaning “70 kilometers per hour (kph)” uses the Chinese characters for “the horse bullying the honest.” This creature is in response to an incident in Hangzhou on May 7, 2009. A Chinese pedestrian, Tan Zhuo, was killed while crossing in the crosswalk when a rich college student sped through a red light. The police did not arrest the driver, but announced in a press release that the driver was going 70 kph, though eyewitness estimated that the driver had to be going at least 100 kph. Well-known blogger and professional racing driver Han Han estimated that the speed was over 120kph. Between wild speculations that the driver’s family paid off police, and the release of unclear statements about the incident, Qi Shi Ma was created as a way to express resentment and anger towards the police specifically, and government officials generally.

The Qi Shi Ma was a cross between a river crab and a Grass Mud Horse that was kept at bay by throwing riches down an old well called *jiao jing* (which phonetically sounds like traffic police). No matter how much money was thrown into the well, it never became full, and in May 2009 an

unnamed evil erupted from the well. According to the opinions of the brick masters (phonetically: experts) and teaching monsters (phonetically: professors), that unnamed evil was the Qi Shi Ma. This spawned a series of Qi Shi Ma merchandise and products that were sold over the Internet with 70 kph shirts sold in Hangzhou. Due to the public outrage and circulation of the Qi Shi Ma creature, the police had to change their position on the hit-and-run. After arresting the driver, the police publicly apologized for how the case was initially handled and announced that the driver's speed was between 84 and 101 kph at the time of the accident. Tan Zhuo's family reached an agreement in which the driver agreed to pay over one million Yuan in compensation.<sup>27</sup>

Around the same time as the Qi Shi Ma creation, a directive was issued by the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), which required the installation on every personal computer of Green Dam, a form of content control software. Originally, the directive was to take effect on July 1, 2009. However, Michigan researchers found various bugs within the program and the developers were under legal attack from a California based company. The California company accused the developers of stealing code. Alongside the technical issues was strong protest from individuals associated with programming code media, computer retailers and Chinese Internet users. Due to all of these issues the decree was delayed.<sup>28</sup> As of August 14, 2009, Li Yizhong, the Minister of Industry and Information Technology, announced that, while computer manufactures and retailers were no longer obligated to ship the software with new computers used for home, the computers used for business, schools, internet cafes and other public use would need the program.

Internet users created Green Dam Girl to ridicule the government's efforts at regulating the Internet. There are at least twelve different versions of Green Dam Girl, including an image of the Green Dam Girl dragging along a chained up Grass Mud Horse. The image indicates that they finally were able to tame the Grass Mud Horses, and the Green Dam Girl states "I'm a rich girl worth 400 million yuan (reference to the amount of money paid for the software by the government), and the no-good information is very disgusting." The Grass Mud Horse states "I'm just an alpaca!" By taking this program, which the government considers serious and turning it into something laughable, the importance of the censorship is downplayed and reveals the ignorance and hypocrisy behind official culture (Li, 81). Green Dam Girl is not, however, the only *e'gao* spawned from the Green Dam software incident.

A 64-minute machinima film entitled *War of Internet Addiction*, created by Corndog, touches directly on the Green Dam software by making it a prominent villain featured in the film. *War of Internet Addiction* also touches on other polemical topics: using electroshock therapy to treat those alleged with internet addiction; the government's attempts to censor *World of Warcraft* by removing any skull images from the game; a corporate battle between China's two primary game servers over renewal rights as well as government infighting over control of the game. The movie took three months to produce with the help of one hundred volunteers, and World of Warcraft fees covered the costs for production. While the main focus of the film is on the strict regulation of *World of Warcraft* in China, it also harbors broader resentment towards censorship of the Internet. The Chinese government labeled the video as rebellious and bold, although the video won Best Video at the Tudou Video Film awards in 2010 as well as being listed on *China Daily's* The Best Ten Chinese Films of 2010.<sup>29</sup>

However, not all films are able to escape repercussions imposed by the government as seen in the case of one of the first *e'gao* films produced. In 2006 Hu Ge created *The Bloody Case of the Steamed Bun*, a 20-minute parody of the 2005 blockbuster hit *The Promise* by Chen Kaige.<sup>30</sup> The video spliced parts of *The Promise* together with clips from a popular TV show, *China Crime Report*. A monotone reporter tells the story in the same format as the television show, and music of that previous era is spliced over scenes from the movie, which thereby pulls the movie out of its historical context and into the modern era. The video is spliced together to retell the deep, complex story of love, freedom and destiny in the form of a crime drama where the cause of the murder is a stolen steamed bun. The video went viral shortly after it was posted on Hu Ge's blog, and copies of the video soon appeared on multiple video hosting sites. Users celebrated Hu Ge as *The Promise* did not live up to expectations and was disconnected from the reality of the Chinese people. Chen Kaige felt that Hu Ge's parody ruined the integrity of his movie, and threatened to sue Hu Ge for copyright infringement and defamation (Gong et al, 11). While government officials sided with Chen, thousands of netizens rallied in support of Hu Ge as well as many reporters. Articles started appearing in order to criticize Chen Kaige for such rash actions, and one article even appeared from his ex-wife saying how narrow-minded and stubborn Chen was. Chen later dropped the lawsuit due to public pressure. This is one of the first videos that proved how a large online following and support system could change how the government and other high-level figures dealt with situations.

Hu Ge has made many *e'gao* movies despite Chen's lawsuit and government disapproval. In 2010, *Animal World: The Department Dweller* was uploaded, spoofing the popular nature show

*Animal World*, in which each episode focuses on a different animal and its habitat. In his film, Hu Ge introduces a new species called The Apartment Dweller. This new species stays inside their apartments and lives off the Internet. The most harmful thing about the species is their ability to be infected by the contagious disease of “thinking.” The piece continually shows bloggers and netizens in their homes as they shop online or post on forums and often demonstrates how the Apartment Dweller must be “protected” by others. This protection is in the form of disabling the Internet or not allowing them to post. One Apartment Dweller is shown trying to post to Weibo, but a progress bar appears saying that the data is being processed. The bar slowly progresses throughout the film only to stop at 99% saying there was some kind of error. Another man is protected by being physically carried away from his computer and out of his apartment by plainclothes police officers; the film lingers on his empty apartment for a moment before moving on. The Apartment Dweller is told to avoid the dangerous thinking disease by becoming online gamers and online shoppers.<sup>31</sup> The video was made with the help of well-known bloggers who could disappear from their apartments without notice just as other bloggers and web activists have disappeared during government crackdowns.

The fame from viral videos such as *The Bloody Case of the Steamed Bun* and *Animal World: The Apartment Dweller* has sent Hu Ge into stardom and helped him make his name within Chinese media. Hu Ge has taken up commercial pursuits alongside his satirical work by producing viral ad campaigns for McDonalds and 7Up. The companies hired Hu Ge to make short ads to place on video-sharing sites to promote their product in viral videos. While Hu Ge’s 7Up commercials show the same kind of humor present in his *e’gao* videos, the topics stay far away from any political content. The 7Up campaign is very popular, but Hu Ge did not take the job to try and

break his way into advertising; he only took the offer because he was broke.<sup>32</sup> This is a sentiment shared by other *e'gao* producers such as Pi San who makes the cartoon series *Miss Puff* for Youku, but is also the man responsible for *Kuang Kuang*, a series of very violent cartoons that harshly criticizes the government. Pi San admits that one must split oneself between *e'gao* videos and videos made for companies as some videos make money whereas others make fun.<sup>33</sup>

Through his commitment to making fun, Pi San is often worried about police detainment, his safety and the welfare of his friends as many can disappear without notice (Larmer). After fellow activist Ai Weiwei was detained by police, Pi San made a 45 second video entitled *Cracked Sunflower Seeds* in which children from his web series *Kuang Kuang* begin to tell the story of a man who sold sunflower seeds. The sunflower seeds are a reference to Ai Weiwei's latest exhibit in which porcelain sunflower seeds were spread on the floor with visitors encouraged to walk across them; the scenario served as a metaphor for how the common people are crushed in China. Before any of the children can get far into their story, a black hand from off screen snatches them away. At last Kuang Kuang comes up to microphone but does not even attempt to tell the story; he sighs before being dragged off screen. The character for sigh (哎) and the character for Ai (艾), Weiwei's last name, are strikingly similar (Larmer). Pi San released the video to China's top video sites and within hours it garnered millions of views before it slowly started disappearing one by one from each site. Copies of the 45-second video still exist on foreign hosting sites such as YouTube.

In fact, many episodes of *Kuang Kuang*, a web series that follows a little bloody-nosed boy named Kuang Kuang on his day-to-day life as he deals with problems at his school, can be found

on video sites outside of China, and often with subtitles. The *Kuang Kuang* series mainly criticizes the school system that Pi San grew up with through out the 1980s and 1990s. In the episodes, the schools are a place of violence and ridicule for Kuang Kuang and his classmates. There is rarely an episode where a teacher is not seen violently and physically abusing the students. In one episode students are led to a big machine outside that they are pushed into; blood shoots out from the machine, and the children appear on the other end with their heads mashed into the same identical squares. In the opening of the episode entitled *Blackboard*, a traffic officer stands by while two buses hit and run over a man, leading to a pile up of cars. In another episode, Kuang Kuang plans to blow up the school due to the abuse he suffers daily in the establishment, and in another Kuang Kuang is beaten and ridiculed for not having a Party-approved dream of what he wants to be when he grows up. The main theme of the show focuses on the power that authority figures have, how often they get away with abusing those underneath them. They are often shown up to be hypocrites of the rules that they enforce without following themselves.

In 2011, Pi San made a special episode of *Kuang Kuang* as a New Year's greeting to welcome in the year of the rabbit. The episode was entitled *Little Rabbit, Be Good* and was uploaded to a few small sites within China in the middle of the night. Nonetheless, the video still received 70,000 views within two hours and took two days for the censors to catch. Once caught, the video quickly disappeared from the Chinese Internet.

The video opens with Kuang Kuang reading a book called *Little Rabbit Kuang Kuang*. The beginning of the book shows the rabbits happy in their village; however, as the story goes on, it

begins to morph into a nightmare. The rabbits are given Tiger Milk, which kills all the baby rabbits (a reference to an incident where baby formula was found to be contaminated causing the death of infants in 2008), and the elite ruling tigers begin to destroy the rabbits' homes. During the tigers' meeting about building a "harmonious forest with the rabbits," a fire breaks out and the rabbits are ordered to stay in the building while the tigers escape to freedom. Later, a gang of tigers runs over rabbits in the road, and then others begin to throw rabbits under the car's tires. While all of these references are based on reality, the ending is pure fantasy: the rabbits rebel against their attackers. The video shows a bloody battle between the rabbits and the tigers as the song lyrics playing over the fight state "[That] if you push me you will find that I can bite hard too." Once the battle is over, we turn back to Kuang Kuang who has fallen asleep while reading. He wakes up holding the book open at a page telling how the rabbits lived happily ever after in the forest. Kuang Kuang then says "This is a really meaningful year!" and goes off to make steamed buns with his mother.

The criticisms are clear within the video. The rabbits are a metaphor for the common people and the suffering that they have to bear from the rich, symbolized by the tigers. The significance of the rabbits rising up and fighting back against the tigers is enhanced by the Year of the Rabbit coming after The Year of the Tiger in the Chinese zodiac. Kuang Kuang's hope that this year is going to be meaningful plays at the possibility of something happening within China: an uprising of the common people. The video was picked up by many foreign sites and garnered reports in international news venues. The video can be found multiple times with subtitles on YouTube. Foreign reporters have questioned Pi San about the New Year's greeting and has asked him to

expand on the meanings behind his videos, however Pi San's only answer is "I only made a fairytale."<sup>34</sup>

*E'gao* is not just limited to video-, audio- and image-based media, and many *e'gao* campaigns have been started on forums and on Weibo, China's Twitter equivalent. Wen Yunchao, a popular blogger and Weibo user, has often urged his followers to participate in many online jokes via the text medium. In 2009, on the anniversary of Mao's death, Wen encouraged his followers to join in on a "de-Maoization" campaign as "mao" also means hair. Wen suggested users take before and after shots of shaved body parts. In doing so, people were literally getting rid of "mao," and hundreds of images of shaved beards and legs appeared.<sup>35</sup> Chinese writer Liu Xiaobo, was jailed for creating Charter 08, a petition called for more democratic rights. When Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, many began talking about the injustice of his imprisonment. In response the government began censoring the phrase "empty chair" as it was used to talk about the writer's absence at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. Wen encouraged followers via Twitter and Weibo to post images of empty chairs resulting in dozens of bloggers posting seemingly innocent pictures of empty chairs from Ikea to one from a Van Gogh painting (Larmer).

One incident happened when fellow blogger Guo Baofeng tweeted his arrest on Twitter. A few hours later Guo tweeted once more, all in English, appealing for help. No more messages came for Guo. Unsettled by Guo's last message and the lack of subsequent messages, Wen Yunchao was trying to figure out what he could do, when he noticed that the phrase: "Jia Junpeng, your mother is calling you home for dinner!" had gone viral. While the origin is unknown, millions retweeted the phrase and latched onto the joke throughout the day. Wen urged his microblogging

followers to send postcards to the police station as well as post them online with the phrase: “Guo Baofeng, your mother is calling you home for dinner!” While it is unknown if this campaign had any effect on Guo’s release sixteen days later, others who were arrested for posting the same video were sentenced to one to two years in prison.

China’s web-based media is heavily entrenched within the political sphere while American web-based media is not deeply entrenched in political topics. American media has more of an obsession with fame and profit from companies who produce their own web media content or individuals wishing to be famous on YouTube. China’s adventure into user-created web media has affected censorship methods and laws created within China in order to suppress politically sensitive *e’gao*. *E’gao* has already changed the way the government works and policies put into place. *E’gao* films such as *The Bloody Case of the Steamed Bun* have shown that a group of common people can win over the elite and authority figures such as prominent director Chen Kaige. *E’gao* has also shown that humor can remove the fear of participation among citizens, and in participating in *e’gao* movements the people can make changes to how government agents handle situations; it can affect the information people receive and help them make the government accountable to its citizens.

*E’gao* creators face many difficulties in producing their craft. The threat of detainment always hangs over their heads, but despite the disappearances of fellow bloggers or the aftermaths of posting videos *e’gao* is still being created. *E’gao* is still a strong movement for people to rally behind. Artists such as Pi San and Wen Yunchao have shown that one person can gather a following and can be constructive in changing the world and political situations that surround

them. These artists have also shown that humor motivates others to join in the cause and removes fear of participating in such acts.

The analysis of the development of web-based media in China is key to understanding how Chinese users use the Internet, the political undertones of the Chinese Internet, and the development of such web-based media as *e'gao*. This analysis provides insights into the dangers one can face while creating new media on the Internet, and the attempts to keep all revolutionary and political change suppressed within China. While *e'gao* is not intended for export into the international realm, many videos and jokes have garnered international attention. Paying attention to the *e'gao* creators and movements in China is important because one can see how humor and the Internet can remove the fear of participation, but also affect government agents and policy. These political changes could affect international relationships and change how the country enacts policy. Due to the nature of *e'gao*, foreign scholars should pay more attention to *e'gao* movements and future research of *e'gao* should be done.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Editorial changes were added after the author had left Bowling Green State University. We were unable to reach the author for final confirmation.

Batjargal, Bat. "Internet Entrepreneurship: Social Capital, Human Capital, and Performance of Internet Ventures in China." *Research Policy* 36.5 (2007): 605-18. PDF file.

<sup>2</sup> Cara Wallis, "New Media Practices in China: Youth Patterns, Processes, and Politics," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 411, PDF.

<sup>3</sup> Choi and Chu, "Social Capital and Self-presentation," 415.; Shao 2012

<sup>4</sup> Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 412.

<sup>5</sup> Batjargal, "Internet Entrepreneurship: Social Capital," 607.

<sup>6</sup> Rogoyski and Basin, "The Bloody Case That," 249.

<sup>7</sup> Hongmei Li, "Parody and Resistance on the Chinese Internet," in *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*, ed. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt, Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia Series 25 (New City: Routledge, 2011), 79, PDF.

<sup>8</sup> Brook Larmer, "The Dangerous Politics of Internet Humor in China: Where a Internet Joke Is Not Just a Joke," *New York Times*, last modified October 26, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 422.

<sup>10</sup> "China Employs Two Million," *BBC News*, last modified October 4, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Larmer, "The Dangerous Politics of Internet," *New York Times*.; Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 421

<sup>12</sup> King, Pan, and Roberts, "How Censorship in China," 10.

<sup>13</sup> Li, "Parody and Resistance on the Chinese," in *Online Society in China*, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 421.

<sup>15</sup> Li, "Parody and Resistance on the Chinese," in *Online Society in China*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Rogoyski and Basin, "The Bloody Case That," 249.

- <sup>17</sup> Li, "Parody and Resistance on the Chinese," in *Online Society in China*, 75.
- <sup>18</sup> Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 414.
- <sup>19</sup> Larmer, "The Dangerous Politics of Internet," New York Times.
- <sup>20</sup> Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 422.
- <sup>21</sup> Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 423.
- <sup>22</sup> Larmer, "The Dangerous Politics of Internet," New York Times.
- <sup>23</sup> "The Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon," China Digital Times.
- <sup>24</sup> Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 425; Li, "Parody and Resistance on the Chinese," in *Online Society in China*, 79.
- <sup>25</sup> Wallis, "New Media Practices in China," 426.
- <sup>26</sup> Li, "Parody and Resistance on the Chinese," in *Online Society in China*, 78.
- <sup>27</sup> Li, "Parody and Resistance on the Chinese," in *Online Society in China*, 83.
- <sup>28</sup> Li, "Parody and Resistance on the Chinese," in *Online Society in China*, 81.
- <sup>29</sup> "The Chinese Matrix and the War of Internet," TechCrunch.
- <sup>30</sup> Gong and Yang, "Digitized Parody: The Politics," 10.
- <sup>31</sup> "Video Satire" China Digital Times.
- <sup>32</sup> "Hu Ge Interview: Of Parodying," chinaSMACK.
- <sup>33</sup> Larmer, "The Dangerous Politics of Internet," New York Times.
- <sup>34</sup> Larmer, "The Dangerous Politics of Internet," New York Times.
- <sup>35</sup> Larmer, "The Dangerous Politics of Internet," New York Times.

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