

# **Cultural Flows in the Digital and Beyond: The Potency of a Symbol in Mainland China**

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## **Abstract**

In the twenty-first century, access to a fragmented global culture through online portals has created what Bauman (2011) calls a ‘liquid culture’. As screen-mediated ways of being grow and propagate through our art galleries, museums and online social media feeds, how are we to read this emergent visual grammar so that we can motivate, move or elevate our ways of knowing?

This thesis explores the symbolism created in mainland China in 2009 through an emergent and retained set of subversive symbols: the Grass Mud Horse lexicon in Chinese visual culture and beyond. To date, theorists have focused predominantly on internet memes, independent of other multimodal forms generated and transitioned from symbolic online internet memes to offline symbolic use in art and design. I investigate ways of deciphering and articulating these visual gestures through accessing cultural keys. I claim that the new symbolism generated as a result of internet censorship in mainland China demonstrates a generational and ideological shift; it does so through the creation and propagation of new visual grammar in twenty-first century China. To scaffold my claims, I explore an overview of historical changes in the visual articulation of Chinese culture. The use of Mao Zedong as a symbol in art and design clearly illustrates a shift from veneration to subversion. By exploring the symbolism in visual culture dating from 1912 to China’s digital age, this study reveals a transition that proposes a new heroic icon, the Grass Mud Horse.

The creation of this new symbolism has political relevance; it deploys practices and art forms to signal, dissolve and raise awareness of social and ideological change. This study maps the new symbolism to test the claim that over time, some symbols may lose potency, while others remain and reflect ideological shifts. The findings will be demonstrated through a synthesis of online digital ethnography, including semiotic and compositional interpretation, and incorporating multimodal discourse analysis. This study will challenge the Western perspective of Chinese stereotypes in visual culture by working with and interpreting visual cultural flows in the digital age.

## **Declaration of Authenticity**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree. The PhD thesis entitled *Cultural Flows in the Digital and Beyond: The Potency of a Symbol in Mainland China* is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature



Justine Poplin

*To the challenges and joys of understanding and unfolding the many ways of  
knowing*

## Acknowledgements

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This journey has granted me the time to research an area with which I have a strong and deeply rooted connection a cross-cultural researcher and also as a creative practitioner. My interest in creativity in China has been sparked by living, working and exhibiting on the mainland contractually since 2001. During this time, I met some wonderful academics, researchers and creative thinkers who share my thoughts on the rapid changes that are occurring to the *ways of being* in China. Most notably, Dr Michael Fitzhenry; we had many conversations about this transformative shift and its impact on visual culture. Sadly, Michael passed away suddenly in June 2015; he was a loyal and supportive colleague, friend and mentor of great inspiration. Our many conversations planted a seed that initiated this research.

My thesis is dedicated to people with limited access to internet freedom in mainland China. With this limitation, creativity rises to the fore. To the online co-collective of creative practitioners who, through manifesting new visual forms, give voice to what cannot be written. To the YouTubers, tweeters, the artists and the unknown, may we all have the ability to read the replicators of our time.

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This thesis has been edited in accordance with the ‘Guidelines for Editing Research Theses’, jointly developed by the Institute of Professional Editors (Australia) and Australian universities. The thesis has been edited according to British/Australian punctuation and spelling conventions.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

|      |  |
|------|--|
| APA  | Australian Postgraduate Award                |
| BDB  | Back Dorm Boys                               |
| CCP  | Chinese Communist Party                      |
| CDT  | China Digital Times                          |
| CIIR | China Internet Illegal Information Reporting |
| GMH  | Grass Mud Horse                              |
| HLD  | Heroic leadership dynamic                    |
| PLA  | People's Liberation Army                     |
| PSB  | Public Security Bureau                       |
| RC   | River Crab                                   |
| VPN  | Virtual private networks                     |

## Glossary

Used interchangeably throughout the thesis: 10 Mythological Creatures/Grass Mud

Horse Phenomenon/Grass Mud Horse Lexicon

Netizen/s: a citizen of the internet

Baidu: one of China's largest internet companies

Baidu Baike: is a Chinese collaborative web-based encyclopedia produced by the Chinese search engine Baidu

Sina weibo: one of the most popular blogging/social media sites in China

Sohu: Chinese internet company

Tencent: Chinese provider of online content and services

Shanzai: imitation, pirated or improvised products

Kuso: an appropriated Japanese term used in Chinese online culture meaning a lo-fi parody

E'gao: literally reckless doings used interchangeable with kuso within Chinese online culture.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## Setting the Research Question

The way in which we communicate through art and design originates from deep within our cultures. Csíkszentmihályi and Halton (1981, 1) believe that ‘things embody goals, make skills manifest and shape the identities of their user’. They posit that, as the creators and users of objects, our creations become a mirror of ourselves. Cultural identities, as portrayed through visual culture in this liquid modern world (Bauman 2011), are more difficult to decipher. This is because globalisation, mediated through internet interaction, dramatically blurs these identities. The expansion of liquid modernity may take symbolic meanings into spaces that are perhaps not equipped with the literacy to inform knowing.

This thesis investigates new symbolism in Chinese visual culture. It surveys the symbols that are created and then used online and offline in multimodal forms, including art and design that reflect a change in Chinese culture and belief systems. This research builds on and contributes to the current body of knowledge in the field of visual culture in the digital age. My contribution to the current scholarship on China and visual culture originates from a Western perspective. I claim that, due to social change in China, a new set of communicators has been formed. In addition, its signification has now been historicised, renewed and extended through the Chinese diaspora, or people who wish to understand the complexities of China, creativity and online cultures. The aim of this study is to broaden knowledge of visual forms that carry specific cultural messages by researching Chinese visual culture and its application within the field. Studies into creativity, visual culture and symbolism will contribute original insights, theories and analysis regarding what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) outline as a universal approach to reading images. Through this manner of interpretation, I will explore the current visual ecology, its symbols and uses in the field of twenty-first century visual culture in China. I show how these new visual indicators culminate in a creative subculture that has resulted from internet censorship, and how the symbols have developed from their instigation in 2009 to the present. Further, this study maps the potency and evolution of the symbols, following their multimodal representations in online and offline visual culture discourse and practice.

The significance of this study is to suggest how these particular symbols communicate transculturally; that is, to a Western audience. Mirzoeff [2002] (2013) and Rose (2014) claim that visual culture is enmeshed and entangled with contemporary life, and thus becomes life itself. The current digital age is said to be a convergence culture (Jenkins 2008; Manovich 2001), involving the remixing, re-mashing and re-creation of user-generated content. Scholars such as Jenkins and Manovich develop their perspectives from a convergence-culture paradigm that combines cultural, political and economic factors. This combination enables a deeper analysis and a way to discover the relationships in this multimodal, cross-cultural 'liquid culture' (Bauman, 2011). As online communication grows through our social and educational networks, this thesis addresses the consequences of such a heightened state of public engagement with online environments. With the visual increasingly pervading daily life, the ability to read visually will increase our 'ways of knowing' and unlock cultural keys that can then unravel meaning through symbols and myths. For this reason, this study identifies online symbolism as a creative communication tool that reflects culture and meaning.

Chinese communism has generally been regarded as structurally rigid and not conducive to creativity or freedom of thought; this is a result of strict censorship policies. However, Tkacheva (2013) claims that the internet and social media have opened up a new transparency in Chinese political discourse. This new transparency also creates covert communication forms that are being used in clever and creative ways, not just for politics and subversion, but also for identity politics (in particular cultural and lifestyle identities) and regional identities (Damm, 2007). In China, internet users are called 'netizens', which literally means a citizen of the internet (Fung, 2012). Many scholars, including Yang (2014) and Meng (2011), suggest that Chinese netizens (as individuals) are searching for a voice to communicate with like-minded people, trying to understand a tacit national identity, and seeking to join the global network that enriches and informs culture. This dramatic contrast between social and cultural transformation, paired with ancient history, has inspired my research into twenty-first century Chinese creative practices and new symbolism.

My interest in Chinese creative practices began in 2002, when I first started visiting mainland China. I experienced culture shock. As an artist, I was monitored by party officials when I posted a VHS video cassette of my artwork from Daqing to Beijing for

consideration in an exhibition. The video was allegedly held, watched by a panel and returned to me for postage to Beijing after two weeks of deliberations. Several years later, I attended an artist residency in Beijing at Red Gate Gallery in 2006. I have continued going back to China to teach visual communication up until 2012. Over this time, changes in China have been dramatic; as a result, my scholarly and artistic interest in experiential learning and research into creativity in China in the digital age has developed.

In 2012, I taught a unit in advertising copywriting in a Chinese university and raised the topic of image and word interplay. I used an example advertisement that employed wordplay, rhythm and rhyme. When I asked the students about similar uses in Chinese language culture, I was surprised to hear them giggling and talking. Without knowing the entire story of the GMH, I was offered crumbs of connections, which piqued my curiosity. In another class, *Computer Visual Design*, I asked students to use Photoshop to create one person by mashing two image sources from the internet. One student put the head of Mao Zedong on Homer Simpson's body. It was at that moment I realised—from teaching over the past decade in China—that a dramatic shift in ideology was occurring. This shift was being mediated through online computer manipulations and I was inspired to dig deeper. Previously, students would never have altered an image of Chairman Mao; he was a venerated 'heroic figure' and his image symbolised and upheld the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideological belief systems. I returned to Australia and commenced a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) primarily to investigate how creativity manifests within the limitations of internet censorship in mainland China.

To begin examining the complexities of the creative use of visual material in China, a brief overview of the formative years of the twentieth century is outlined here. Further discussion on historical changes in art and design are outlined in Chapter Three. The relevant cultural change in China began after the abdication of the last emperor, Puyi of the Qing Dynasty, in 1912 (Gladston 2014). The change to republican rule during this period initiated dramatic cultural changes in Chinese society and affected culture, politics and belief systems. The educated classes' belief in historical Confucian values prevented China's ability to progress, develop and modernise. This transformation led to the 'new culture movement' in art and design, along with the establishment of many art academies introducing Western ideologies and techniques across China. In 1912 Cai



Yuanpei, the Minister of Education, implemented ‘five educational principles’ strongly influenced by Western philosophy and ‘world spirit’ (Shen 1996). Today, these could be considered analogous to ‘globalism’. To make the connection between world spirit and globalism, Mattelart (2000) defines globalism as a response to global complexities in connecting economic and social orders. Through the process of unification and blurring transnational boundaries, the term was first used to describe the general state of the world in the 1980s. Similarly, we can extrapolate that the ‘new culture movement’, with its use of the Chinese term ‘world spirit’, encapsulates the response to change and the accelerated search for unification and contemporaneity.

On 4 May 1919, a social revolution (*wusi yundong*) that became known as the May Fourth Movement indicated that change was imminent. This change was an attempt to modernise China. Young Chinese intellectuals were seeking change and used ideas from American pragmatism, social Darwinism and Nietzschean theory to fuel the emerging ideology. This conflicted with China’s desire to uphold indigenous cultural traditions and values (Shen 1996). Gladston (2014) believes that, due to this tension, two ideological positions were formed: the radical liberal bourgeois who sought democratic reform and the conservatives chasing socialist and revolutionary change. Immediately following the May Fourth Movement (at the beginning of the 1920s), a cultural renaissance once again began to thrive. With this shift, the position of art and design—and their role within Chinese society—became a subject of intellectual debate (Minick and Ping 2010). Further, the new interest in Western ideologies and style transformed the visual culture of China into a combination of traditional Chinese and Westernised styles—a ‘world spirit’.

I propose this period is significant and wish to make a connection between the May Fourth period and China in the digital age. I suggest these two periods in China demonstrate a cultural renaissance resulting from globalisation, or a ‘world spirit’. We have now arrived in the twenty-first century: ‘the Asian century’. Here, trans- and cross-cultural texts, images and audio are readily available online to those with access. This opportunity to source material from countries other than our own can broaden our idea base and cultivate the creation of new work in art and design. While online sources can extend cross-cultural exploration, they do require the user to encompass the ability to

decipher, comprehend and use those sources in a culturally specific way. Thus, the ability to read with cultural specificity is central to this thesis.

The story of the Grass Mud Horse (GMH) unfolds as internet participatory culture in China spiked on English-language websites and online forums in 2009. This was after an article was published in *The New York Times* in March (2009), linking YouTube videos, memes, songs and faux video documentaries of the GMH. The GMH in Chinese Mandarin is the most notable and visually retained of mythological creatures, a set of homophones used as visual metaphors for political protest. As a symbol, the GMH is the key figure from the 10 Mythological Creatures, *Baidu Baike* (2009) in Wikipedia (2013). As one Chinese blogger explains, ‘the GMH’ represents information and opinions that cannot be accepted by mainstream discourse and ‘The Song of the Grass Mud Horse has become a metaphor of the power struggle over the internet’ (Carter 2013). Throughout this thesis, I refer to the collective set of symbols as a lexicon and interchangeably refer to them as: the GMH phenomenon, the 10 Mythological Creatures and the GMH lexicon.

The character of the GMH manifests visually in the form of a creature resembling an alpaca; it symbolises a netizen or freedom fighter on the Chinese internet. According to Qiang (2012) ‘the grass-mud horse is playfully defiant of government censorship, and in a small way subverts the authority of the ruling Communist Party’. The GMH phenomenon forms a set of homophones that when written are innocuous. However, when sounded with voice and intended intonation, the Mandarin transforms harmless wordform into witty wordplay. The symbolic significance of homophones is linked intrinsically to Chinese language and visual culture. They are often used as symbols or signifiers where the sound of the word (the homophone) will conjure a visual representation to either make the word desirable or render it unlucky. Research into language games (Chao 1931 in Weiner 2011) demonstrate that secret languages (*fanqieyu*) use the syllable onset and fixed rhyme-spelling system. However, unlike traditional forms of wordplay, it appears the mythological creatures (internet memes) play on the intonation of Mandarin where the tone of the *pinyin* (alphabetised Chinese) can change the text’s meaning. Davis (1980, 193) defines this concept as ‘a widespread language play phenomenon in which phonological forms of words are systematically altered so as to disguise what they are’. It is important to note here that this research is

not a linguistic study, but an examination of visual communication through visual culture. This study will not incorporate the methodologies used to study language—the references to linguistics cited here are significant only because they play a role in the visual evolution of the GMH phenomenon.

I should point out that the GMH lexicon and associated writings are predominantly driven by an expatriate group of Chinese scholars, including Meng (2011), Mina (2014) and Yang (2014). While a growing number of critical netizens exists in China, the broader Chinese population is unlikely to appreciate the subversive sentiments portrayed, especially those expressed in the form of writing or scholarly articles. This research aims to collect data as visual representations of the phenomenon's emergence: the 10 Mythological Creatures, including the most notable, the GMH. It is argued that these internet memes (in circulation from 2009) represent a significant shift in Chinese visual culture. The collection and cataloguing of these visual manifestations—mythological creatures created on the internet—will support my hypothesis. This is that these creatures potentially symbolise a generation of Chinese who no longer identify with traditional historical symbols, but who wish to write, create and shape their own China, a China devoid of traditional symbols and histories. Additionally, a shift is apparent, from politically based hero worship towards an increasingly ironic and critical attitude. The central hypothesis proposes that this new set of symbols allude to the formation of a creative movement that represents freedom of expression in twenty-first century China.

Zuckerman (2011) pinpoints a gap in knowledge that is prevalent in Western audiences with no experience of the 'great firewall' and who are unaware of China's internet culture. The gap in scholarly research in English on China's most popular microblogging network, *Sina Weibo* assists in the formulation of mythologies about internet culture. Mina (2011) questions 'whether English-speaking scholars pay insufficient attention to Chinese social media due to an assumption that Chinese media has been censored to the point of sterility'. Further, Mina concedes that American audiences perhaps have general knowledge about what is 'censored' on the Chinese internet due to the broad brushstrokes of American journalism; as a result, what actually exists may not be accurate. This perception and knowledge of internet censorship in China could also apply to Australian audiences. Thus, it is integral to undertake an in

depth analysis that will uncover the complexities of internet censorship, creativity and the manifestation of new symbolism.

My thesis investigates the methods used to communicate through images in art and design by using emerging technology, and largely draws on online sources. The thesis also suggests ways in which to examine symbolism created online that then moves into offline representation. In this way, I propose a synthesis of methods to identify, read and use the symbols. These tools include semiotic and compositional interpretation (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Rose 2014) to guide and enable recognition of symbols in the lexicon, multimodal discourse analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) and digital ethnography in the form of ‘lurking’ (Bryman 2012). The contribution to knowledge here not only maps the trajectory of this symbolic phenomenon in China and beyond, but it also identifies that the images and symbols created offline are typically uploaded online. In this way, the study is unique, as it maps visual forms born online into offline spaces where they are further circulated, renewed and extended. I note that this creation process differentiates the way in which the new multimodal visual forms are read and propagated. As a result, the language of images born and disseminated online—the GMH phenomenon in the ‘Asian century’—can inform cross-cultural readings and guide appropriate usage and methods of analysis to visual communicators, creative industry educators, artists and designers.

## **Thesis Structure**

In the next chapter of this thesis, I explore the background and relevant literature on internet censorship in mainland China and survey the expressions of cultural identity that exist there. Specifically, Chapter Two examines how the internet drives new forms of visual culture by outlining how new heroic icons emerge through participatory forums in online communities. The chapter argues that due to internet censorship, new symbols were created to circumnavigate these restrictions. Further, it proposes that creativity and online identities manifest and thrive through coded visual metaphor. The exploration then focuses on the meaning of memes and myths, and maps the etymology of memes in Chinese online digital culture. Ways of knowing and communicating in online communities are explored through the work of writers and theorists, including Mina (2011, 2014), Davis (2011), Shifman (2014) and Zuckerman (2009, 2011, 2013). I survey the literature on memes and myth, identifying the possible limitations of this

literature when applied to Chinese visual culture. Finally, I suggest memes and myth are cultural replicators in the digital age and reflect the ideologies of the time.

Chapter Three provides an extended literature review on Chinese art and design in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with an overview and background of Chinese visual culture from 1912 to the digital age. The chapter also investigates the symbolic use of Mao Zedong as a visual pathway to examine the restrictions and guidelines on creativity in the arts. This approach provides a framework for my claims. The chapter focuses on the symbol of Mao Zedong and maps the use of his image over time, from veneration to subversion. The historical use of symbolism demonstrates a transition to new symbolism related to political resistance or subversion. Noting the visual evolution of the Mao symbol in art and design, I suggest that the diminished or subversive use of his image in recent visual culture is a precursor to the development and scope of new heroes.

Chapter Four outlines the methodological and theoretic frameworks used in this thesis. I begin by outlining what visual culture is and how other researchers, including Rose (2014) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), have used analytical methods to read visual images. The chapter includes a discussion on paradigm proliferation in visual culture and art and design as a bridge to the reading of online and offline multimodal visual grammar. Dal Lago's 1999, 2001 and 2003 studies of Mao Zedong's image will offer further support for the analytical reading of artworks; Dal Lago's methods involve an underpinning analysis of identifying ideological signifiers. Finally, the chapter outlines Mina's analysis of visual culture in relation to examining Chinese internet memes. A comparative analysis of the ways in which Dal Lago in the twentieth and Mina in the twenty-first centuries have conducted their studies will identify possible limitations of the dataset.

Chapter Five examines the data analysis and findings. It includes information on research sampling and data collection methods and processes. The analysis of the 10 Mythological Creatures will demonstrate how these symbols are entering art and design through their offline symbolic representations. There are ten original symbolic memes; some of these will be identified and described in detail regarding their compositional, multimodal and semiotic interpretation in their online and offline contexts. The data will

then focus on the most popular meme, the GMH, and discuss how this meme has evolved visually over time and how it signifies a shift in Chinese ideology.

This is a long chapter where the results of the content analysis are offered in three separate parts. For ease of reading (and to relate the multimodal symbolism), this chapter is broken into three main parts: ‘Internet Symbols, Online Symbolism’, ‘Symbolism in Art’ and ‘Online/Offline Symbolism in Design and Commodification’. The first section proposes that meanings and symbols may be fleeting, temporal and surveilled, but are vital to the trajectory of the symbol and the lexicon, as they represent experimental processes of co-creation and online collaboration.

The second section includes an analysis of new symbolism, observing the trajectory from its creation in 2009 to ongoing and sustained use in 2017. This section offers a further explanation of the transition and evolution of this symbolism and the meaning extended through contemporary art. By establishing multimodal analytic modes of these representations, certain works are identified as salient and reflecting a significant shift in ideology.

The final section explores online/offline symbolism in design and commodification. Of particular interest here is the evolution of the GMH as a symbol and its application in multimodal visual culture. Each section of the analysis concerns the symbols in the data sample, which are identified and described in detail. At the end of the chapter, the way in which these symbols work together and relate to different types of representation is examined and discussed.

The final chapter begins with the conclusions of the research, followed by a review of the hypothesis and research questions. Throughout this chapter, I address the gap in knowledge regarding the new symbolism found in Chinese online visual grammar and offer suggestions regarding how and why some symbols from the GMH lexicon have entered offline communication through extended visual culture. Identifying connections to the historical restrictions on visual material in China (as outlined in previous chapters) provides support for my claims that ideological shifts have emerged within this guided and controlled system. Deeper into this final chapter, I suggest approaches for interpreting this symbolism, their meaning and potential applications. The chapter revises the theoretical and methodological synthesis as a framework for examining

emergent symbolism from China in the digital age, and how this may facilitate the understanding of the ‘universal aspect of reading images’ from a Western perspective. Further, I outline some key insights in the findings and possible future directions for research pertaining to Chinese art and its reception in Australia. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the unique practice and sustained use of the GMH phenomenon in online and offline contexts. Throughout the thesis, my ideas draw on the political significance of deploying visual forms to signal, dissolve and raise awareness of social and ideological change in online and offline contexts. The following discussion explores the capacity for understanding this contemporary and unique online visual phenomenon. It also demonstrates how it manifests, drives and creates new forms of visual culture with a world spirit in mainland China and beyond.

## **Chapter Two: Internet Censorship and Expression of Identity in Mainland China**

This chapter outlines the background literature surrounding internet censorship in mainland China and explores significant expressions of identity that proliferate despite the censorship. The literature is focused on the emergence of the GMH phenomenon in 2009. This particular visual lexicon is used to explain how the internet is a driver for new forms of visual culture. It outlines how, through online communities, new heroic icons are emerging. The chapter further argues that due to internet censorship, new symbols were created by anonymous online users to circumnavigate the restrictions of internet censorship. By giving examples of how creativity and online identities manifest and thrive through online communities using coded visual metaphors, this chapter proposes that the creation and use of the new symbolism signifies an ideological departure from accepted and acknowledged Chinese values and belief systems.

### **The Introduction of Censorship Policies in Mainland China**

To understand how internet censorship could be a driver for new forms of visual culture, one must acknowledge that the rapid growth and accessibility of technology to the public has created a sense of global community and a ‘liquid culture’ in recent years (Bauman 2011). As discussed in the introduction, globalisation is a product of technology and media innovation; it has created a connected worldwide community. With the expansion of our social networks and access to information through freely available online sources, the internet can provide an inspiring and highly educational method of working, communicating and researching. Yet not all people have unfettered connection to the global community as mediated through online sources, but instead are constrained by online and offline environments created by political entities. This results in a form of global disconnection. China is a nation with more internet users than any other country, with the exception of India (Desilver 2013). *The 39th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (2017) claims the number of internet users in China has reached ‘731 million Internet users, with a yearly increase of 42.99 million’, with specific global networking platforms enabled via popular sites such as *Sina Weibo*.



An expanding body of literature recognises the increase of internet users in China. With this increased use comes the implementation of methods to retain social harmony, such as monitoring and censoring online behaviour. According to MacKinnon (2012) the censorship is rhizomatic (faceted like the layers of an onion), yet is very simple. The outermost layer is ‘the great firewall’, which restricts access to foreign websites. MacKinnon (2012) expands upon this, explaining that eight gateways exist through which the Chinese internet connects to the global stratosphere, with internet routers placed at each gate to detect, block and filter certain keywords. Although the authorities have the power to censor and block all politically motivated content, Reilly (2011) suggests that they chose ‘selective censorship’ to monitor public opinion as a predictive tool against social unrest. The Chinese government employs highly trained programming professionals who have created what is called the ‘golden shield’ (another, affectionate term for ‘the great wall’). Some sites provide the censors with access so the authorities can alter content directly. Others get an email or a call when changes are required. Similar methods are applied to blogs. Sensitive entries are erased, and in the most egregious cases, blogs are shut down altogether (August 2011). However, ‘great’ this firewall may seem, there appear to be many internet users (netizens) who are able to circumnavigate the rigorous surveillance through code or metaphor.

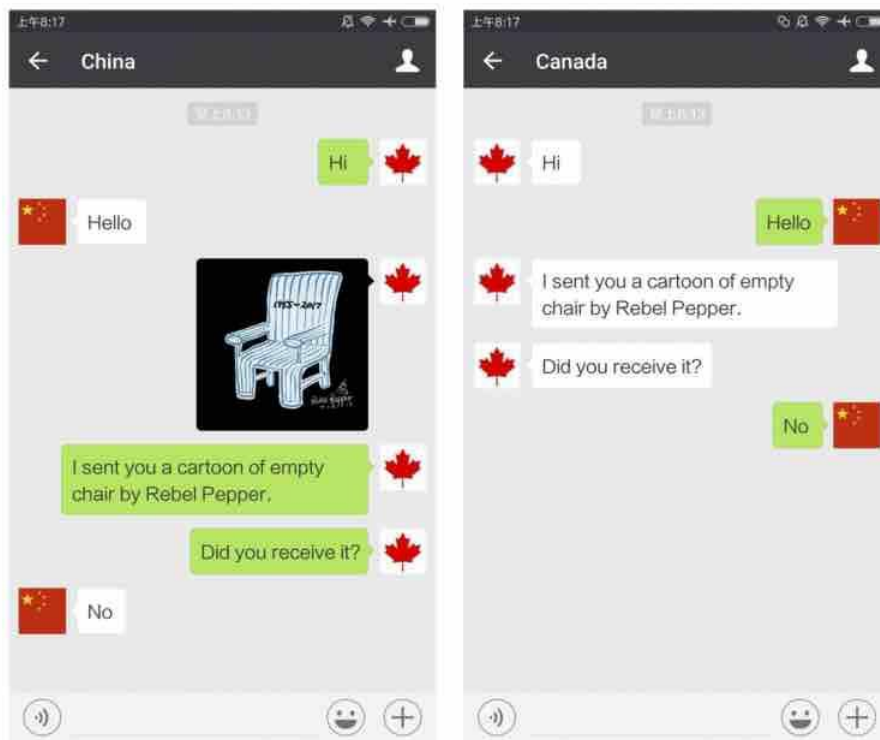
It is important to note that internet censorship does occur outside China. Recent accounts of monitoring on social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram have been reported by *The Guardian*, with Facebook defining the parameters and difference between digital nudity and real world art. These censorship policies are enforced in a number of ways, not only on the Chinese internet, but also on known Western social media platforms. Methods of monitoring and censoring online content include both human moderators and algorithms, with some claiming that only humans have the capacity to monitor and censor images (Hopkins 2017).

Current attempts in China demonstrating internet censorship combined with visual metaphor to communicate online can be seen with the recent death of Liu Xiaobo on 13 July 2017. It is known that Liu wrote a manifesto, ‘Charter 8’, that called for political change and proposed new ways of thinking in China. The Nobel Prize winning scholar

expressed his beliefs in this, which were relayed in a speech for his Nobel Prize Lecture in Absentia (10 December 2010):

Freedom of expression is the foundation of human rights, the source of humanity, and the mother of truth. To strangle freedom of speech is to trample on human rights, stifle humanity, and suppress truth.

In response to Liu Xiaobo's death, research team Citizen Lab (2017) propose that censorship is becoming more vigorous due to 'fear for the potential of collective action and as a tactic to save face or avoid embarrassment'. The research further claims that sharing images within the social media app WeChat were blocked. The blocked WeChat image was of a chair that is a visual metaphor for Liu in online discourse (see Figure 1). This was the first time that user-generated images of sensitive material were blocked online (*Global Voices*, 2017).



Source: *Global Voices*, posted 17 July 2017. Accessed 23 July 2017.  
<https://globalvoices.org/2017/07/17/censorship-after-death-chinese-netizens-quietly-mourn-nobel-laureate-liu-xiaobo/>

**Figure 1. Citizen Lab WeChat Screenshot**

On Facebook, Hong Kong academic and Citizen Lab researcher Lokman Tsui (2017) summarises the group's findings:

For WeChat, before his death, discussion of Liu was allowed as long as it did not touch on certain sensitive topics such as ‘Charter 08’ or his medical care. After his death, any mention of his name in English and Chinese (both simplified and traditional) is enough to get messages blocked. His death is also the first time we see image filtering in one-to-one chat, in addition to image filtering in group chats and WeChat Moments [which is equivalent to Facebook’s news feed].

For Sina Weibo, there already was a ban on searches for Liu’s name in English and Chinese (both simplified and traditional). However, after his death, his given name (Xiaobo) alone is enough to trigger censorship, showing increased censorship on the platform and a recognition that his passing is a particularly sensitive event. Nevertheless, there is also evidence suggesting there continues to be genuine user interest in producing and finding Liu-related content using alternative keywords.

This recent example of censorship in action shows how sensitive some words and symbols are, and how online communities attempt to communicate in other ways to seek truths and relay their thoughts about contemporary Chinese society. The Facebook page has since been removed, leaving residual evidence to the link on Global Voices (2017) as cited. Notably, this demonstrates the fluidity of online space for communicating what can and cannot be said through visual metaphor, which now appears to have a limited lifespan in surveilled online ecologies.

## **Internet Censorship and Expressions of Identity**

As the memes and new symbolism in this thesis were created in 2009, research into the internet and censorship spanning the period 2009 to 2017 will be a focus. The previous reference to current censorship is contextual and extends my ongoing claims that visual metaphors reflect current ideology. Franken (2007) suggests that it is through both the process of and exposure to reading textually or visually that new ideas, creative thought and uniqueness are manifested. It could be argued this uniqueness and display of self-expression via the internet differentiates this generation of Chinese from previous ones. Once a society has made a material step into a world economy (as China did in 2001 according to Crouch [2010]), its culture becomes embedded in a complex network of demands that enforces flexibility because cultural structures must adapt to change. Crouch offers a further analogy that ironically resonates with the Chinese sage Confucius, Kong Qiu (551–479 BCE): ‘[t]he green reed which bends in the wind is stronger than the mighty oak which breaks in a storm.’ There is extensive research into Chinese cultural values that identify ‘harmony’ based on the ancient philosophical

concept of a harmonious society. This is ideology paired with philosophical beliefs and is both a social and political vision. It was initially devised by President Hu in 2006 to cultivate unity and party control (Wang, 2012). Further, relationship cultivation, as identified by Hofstede (2004), suggests that Chinese culture is closely connected to Confucian doctrines emphasising the maintenance of close collective relationships, as opposed to the Western individualistic model. The differences outlined here may be a result of globalisation creating the paradox of parallel conflicting ideologies of China and the world via online activity. In turn, it could be argued that the rest of the world has also had to adjust their ‘Westernised scope’ to understand and include contemporary Chinese expressions of identity appropriate for a collective context.

It appears in the twenty-first century that some Chinese people are searching for self-expression and an individual identity, one that deviates from the values of communist harmonious ideals and resonates more with Western individual values. Online ecology gives people scope to cultivate a community, to support my claims proposing the changes in traditional Chinese belief systems and values. Sima and Pugsley’s (2010, 287) research identifies the rise of a ‘me’ culture in China:

In this decidedly postsocialist China, individual expression, achievement and pleasure have taken over the arguably ‘collective interest’ mentality that marked the older, Mao generation.

Further, Sima and Pugsley’s research maps what they call ‘the lacuna’ in current studies that are weighted towards Western blogging contexts. Their study illustrates how China’s youth are shaping symbolic identities that build on notions of individualism and consumerism—giving insights into China’s post-socialist Generation Y bloggers:

Chinese youth’s rapid and enthusiastic adaption of net identities based around individualism and consumerism suggest a major departure from previous generations. The rise of the ‘me culture’ in postsocialist China occurred within a generally accepting political climate – it remains to be seen how this culture will evolve and whether political and social discourses will become more prevalent on the blogs of China’s Millennium Generation. (Sima and Pugsley 2010, 303)

Sima and Pugsley’s findings illustrate the rise of online identities, where self-expression and social interaction symbolise and showcase individuality. This supports my hypothesis that online identities and new-found forms of self-expression have resulted in new visual communicators. It also attests to a rapid departure from the collective and

compliant society that the CCP wishes to propagate. The collective values of the CCP support a harmonious society, a collective society with restrictions not only on the internet, but in how artists, designers and writers are able to represent the collective interests of the state (Heddaya 2014; Yang 2009, 2014; Yang 2013).

The internet has facilitated a global networking voice. This enables Chinese netizens to communicate in a cohesive digital community not only nationally, but also globally. It is a very different space to the physical boundaries of daily life in mainland China. Fung in *The Atlantic* (2012) refers to this online space as a ‘virtual town square’ where users are entitled to freedom of expression that circumnavigates internet restrictions by using coded language and metaphor. Due to the increasing weight of internet censorship, individual expression as a means to circumnavigate restrictions on the internet has surpassed the ‘collective interest’ of post-socialist values (Sima and Pugsley, 2010). Research into the lacuna in current internet studies in China focuses more on political aspects, which are crucial to understand, as they underpin and instigate the creation of visual culture emerging from this global portal. Sima and Pugsley’s study identifies their sample as bloggers of Generation Y. In the sample explored as evidence in this thesis, the creators are largely *unknown*. This is particularly the case for the sample of online visual metaphors in the lexicon that includes memes and viral videos. The unknown or anonymous demographic of online visual creators further shape symbolic identities with the ability to defy the values of the CCP and critique post-socialist China.

## **The Internet, Social Media and Community in China**

Internet users are called ‘Netizens, or in Chinese, *wangmin* a portmanteau that literally means a citizen of the Internet’ (Fung 2012). The newfound online citizenship suggests new ways of communicating in a manner divergent to real face-to-face communication in a collective society:

We are the new generation of bloggers ... To whom does the pleasure of communication belong? It belongs to you and me. It belongs to us, the new generation that are no longer silent!

This is a quote from a webpage no longer exists online; however, it is documented in Sima and Pugsley’s 2010 research. In China, the *netizen* inhabitants are voicing their

opinions and searching for identities just like the broader global community within the realms of the 'harmonious society'. Fung (2012) refers to Chinese netizens as being a cohesive digital community, which is a very different space to the physical boundaries of the everyday:

Citizenship in that digital state confers new privileges and opportunities. Whether it's intentional or purely coincidental, it makes a great deal of sense for a digital community that leans on coded language and metaphor as a matter of course in the process of evading free-speech restrictions. In a country where political discourse is restricted in the physical world, the construction of a virtual town square could be considered an appropriation of the kind of active, public-minded citizenship that's inaccessible to the non-Internet-using population.

The description above shows online space as a discourse that offers difference from the realities of the physical world in China and offers much scope for exploration. Notwithstanding the restrictions on speech and expression of ideas that are divergent to the harmonious society, the online ecology lends itself to creative pathways to circumnavigate and attain information. The practice of using online visual metaphors is an alternative way to communicate to a like-minded community, simultaneously connecting to the subculture through codes, that were initially created to be read by people in that community.

An online community and a following in China have been cultivated by Han Han, a published writer and popular blogger who claims to avoid dissent. His blog disseminates how expressing freedom, questioning public standards and behaviour in mainland China can be communicated within the legitimate realms of what is considered 'harmonious' by the CCP:

Intellectuals tend to think of democracy and freedom as a single package. Actually, for the Chinese, democracy may well lead to lack of freedom. In the eyes of most Chinese, freedom has nothing to do with publishing, media, and culture or with personal expression, elections and politics, but with public standards of behavior. Thus, people with no access to power feel free to make an uproar, jaywalk and spit, while people with connections feel free to ignore regulations, take advantage of loopholes, and engage in all kinds of malfeasance (Han 2012, 233).

The above example very cleverly uses loopholes to navigate the changing cultural landscape and creates a sense of freedom without Han becoming a dissonant or subversive. In his book *This Generation*, Han draws on popular Chinese culture and

propagates a public persona of blogger/philosopher and racing car driver. He is a literary star, a satirist who avoids discussing the GMH in his book *This Generation*, where he draws on popular Chinese culture. As Han alludes, many loopholes exist in Chinese online ecology; here, it is pertinent to discuss briefly VPN (virtual private networks) and their use in mainland China. As noted, the internet in China is monitored and censored. This results in limited access to information via online sources. This environment has created a want and or need for VPNs in mainland China, not only by Chinese users but also by expatriates living in China. Using a VPN is a strategy to bypass online filtering by enabling users to connect to websites that would usually be 'blocked' in China through third party sites (Mai 2016). This way of connecting to the internet while in China enables users to visit websites such as YouTube, Google and Twitter from within China. Not surprisingly, VPNs are forbidden in China. Han cleverly propagates a public persona as a blogger, philosopher and free-thinker that allows him to operate without the restrictive limitations applied to known subversives when discussing sensitive topics that may cause unrest to the harmonious society. The manner in which Han or others may or may not evade censorship offers insight into the nuances and sophistication involved in such strategies and offers insights into the cultural complexities of online and offline citizenship in China.

### **Homophones and Online Visual Manifestations**

Homophones are intrinsically linked to Chinese language and visual culture. They are often used as symbols or signifiers where the sound of the word (the homophone) will conjure a visual representation to either make the word desirable or render it unlucky. The GMH phenomena are a set of homophones that when written are innocuous, but when sounded with voice and intended intonation the Mandarin transforms a harmless wordform into witty wordplay. GMH (草泥马, Cǎo Ní Mǎ) resembles an alpaca, the spoken Chinese with intended tonal play creates cào nǐ mā (禽你妈) fuck your mother (Wikipedia 2017). The character of the GMH manifests visually in the form of a creature as mentioned resembling an alpaca that symbolises a netizen, a freedom fighter on the Chinese internet. According to the CDT (2014) '[a] GMH is web-savvy and critical of government attempts at censorship and harmonising'. It is through online visual metaphor that new symbolism and narrative was born. It can be seen that a new hero was created through a playful use of Mandarin to produce visual forms that defy



internet censorship in mainland China. These actions signify a change in the ideology of the Chinese belief systems as they carry an agency through symbolic gestures that communicate change. Cui Weiping is an academic at Beijing Film Academy and writes via *hecaitou.net*, about the GMH phenomenon, translated by CDT (2009):

As for ‘Grass Mud Horse’, I applaud the one who invented such a pun. Its underlining tone is: I know you do not allow me to say certain things. See, I am completely cooperative, right? Of course I think it inappropriate to utter these obscene words. I need not to demean myself below some level because of you. Even if you force me to say those words, I won’t comply. I want to keep my decency and dignity. Even if you retreat to a barbarian level, I am going to keep my identity as a civilized person. You gonna tell me I can’t do that? So, I say ‘Grass Mud Horse’, not fxxx your mom. What is ‘Grass Mud Horse?’ It always works hard in harsh conditions. See, it is from the vast grassland. I like it. I love it. This whole thing is too far away from you, out of your jurisdiction. Oh well, why are you always staring at me? Am I not perfectly fine? I am innocent. I have not been snatched away by some crooked folks. I have not been put under their control. And I am not vulgar. Why do you have to worry so much about me? I am singing a cute children’s song—I AM A GRASS MUD HORSE! Even though it is heard by the entire world, you can’t say I’ve broken the law.

Cui Weiping’s sentiments demonstrate that the visual metaphor with playful ambiguity allows netizens to transgress and speak through symbols online. This visual way of communication allows netizens a type of freedom without penalty. Further, Cui demonstrates that some people identify as a GMH, as a way to critique the political realities of online and offline discourse and surrounding culture in mainland China through visual metaphor and narrative. The implications of post digital folklore as propagated through online visual culture is discussed in an interview with Xu Cong 许聪, a Chinese artist and Gabriele de Seta in *Burning Incense* (2016):

In our everyday life, online we already see some peculiar pieces of Internet culture that already have ten or more years of history. The Chinese internet environment isn’t peculiar, but it’s ‘magnified’: it’s an enlarged version of small details of the Internet in other countries, an enlargement of desires, of productiveness, of commerce, and of control.

This controlled internet environment creates an internet culture that reflects and magnifies desires, commerce and productiveness. The online communities in China include netizens on *Sina Weibo* and *Baidu Baike*, two of the leading commercial websites. In 2009 when the GMH lexicon was conceived, *Google* was still operational. Following the 2009 anti-vulgarity campaign (Wang 2012; Yang 2011), *China Internet*



*Illegal Information Reporting Center* (CIIR) requested that the websites cleanse *Baidu*, *Sina*, *Sohu*, *Tencent*, *Netease*, *Mop* and *Tianya* in response to the campaign. By ‘February 24, 2009, a total of 2,962 websites had been closed’ (sina.com 2009 as cited in Yang 2014). While this online ecology may be limited and monitored, netizens can still test ideas through coded metaphor. These metaphors created a subculture that articulated a freedom of expression manifested in the form of a GMH. Due to online activity within online communities, such as *Sina Weibo*, *WeChat* and *Baidu*, a lexicon of 10 Mythological Creatures was created to reflect the current ideologies of living in China in the digital age.

This thesis builds on the cultivation of a new hero that was created through the playful use of the Chinese National Language (Mandarin) to produce visual forms that defy internet censorship in mainland China. As outlined, the homophones directly critique the CCP’s attempts to cleanse the internet of vulgar content. These actions signify a change in the ideology of Chinese belief systems in that they carry agency that signify change.

### **Towards an Understanding of Memes in the Digital Age**

Internet memes, now an embedded part of popular online culture globally, are particularly pertinent and relevant for cultural analysis (Johnson 2007). These visual replicators are critical ‘cultural keys’ that reflect contemporary ideologies (Shifman 2014), particularly as we embark on a broader understanding of global culture and knowledge of the ability to universally read symbols. Where internet memes may appear to be trivial pieces of popular culture, deeper analysis ‘reveals that they play an integral part in some of the defining events of the 21st century’ (Shifman 2014, 6). This research aims to collect data and visual representations of the GMH phenomenon—initially formed as mythological creatures manifesting as internet memes. I suggest these are new symbols, a lexicon of coded metaphors used to evade censorship in Chinese visual culture and at the same time, signify a new creative movement reflecting belief systems. Moreover, the creation of these symbols indicate that only the most potent are retained and that through online signification the most meaningful symbols are renewed and extended beyond the Chinese subculture.

The GMH is one of the 10 Mythological Creatures in the lexicon that I claim symbolise a Chinese subculture. These particular netizens may no longer identify with traditional historical symbols of the past, such as Mao Zedong or other symbols mentioned in the previous section. Instead, they want to write, create and shape their own symbols of representation within Chinese visual culture in the digital age. The remaining creatures in the lexicon are discussed later in this chapter; they are also visual metaphors for freedom of expression. It is believed that the GMH symbol however, in terms of this thesis is the most significant, thus it is predominant focus for this research. Nahon and Hemsley (2013, xiii) note the rise in online memes, claiming that ‘viral events are the remarkable bits of culture that rise to the top’. This increase in viral events through memes and shared online culture reflects and tells the stories of our cultures. With scholars (e.g., Nahon and Hemsley 2013; Shifman 2014) noting that memes are culturally specific, then the creation and usage of new symbolism through memes (online visual replicators) heightens the need and ability to read these symbols. Therefore, cultivating understanding through cultural origin specificity is central to unlocking meaning.

To build an understanding of these mythical creatures, concepts such as memes and myth can provide further insight. When Dawkins ([1976] 2006, 192) wrote about evolution and the ‘human soup’ he was conceiving names for new cultural replicators of transmission and imitation:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

Further, Davis (2011) believes ‘that the internet meme is the predominant (and logical) form of myth in an augmented society, and that it both reflects and shapes cultural realities’. By this I extrapolate, that in a technologically mediated world, internet memes have a powerful mythological role as visual culture communicators that recount, shape and transmit the stories of our time through imitation and evolution. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ (1957) theory that myth is a representation of the dominant ideologies of our time, Davis (2011) claims that ‘myth is a type of speech’ (Barthes 1957, 109). This is particularly interesting when examining the Chinese language. The characters (*hanzi*)

have roots in a pictorial system, thus distinguishing the way Chinese speakers read their language. The connection to the pictorial has a far greater meaning to Chinese speakers than, perhaps, to English speakers, the root of whose language derives from the alphabet. In the English alphabet there are 26 letters; in Chinese there are more than 50,000 characters. The Chinese written language has pictorial roots, infographics, and a visual story that can be readily shaped into wordplay and the creation of myth. Francesca Dal Lago (2001, 36) notes that '[t]he pictographic dimensions of Chinese language makes it an ideal site for visual manipulations and many artists have employed this scope in their cultural critique'.

Study and analysis of internet memes in China is documented in the work of Mina (2014) Milner Davis (2014), Yang (2014), Shifman (2014) and Zuckerman (2011). Shifman (2014, 342) broadly refers to internet memes as 'cultural keys' and suggests that internet memes are digital items that:

- a. share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance
- b. are created with awareness of each other
- c. are circulated, imitated and transformed via the internet by multiple users.

Shifman (2014) differs from Dawkin's (1976) definition of meme, arguing instead that memes cannot be represented as a singular cultural unit that has kept its momentum through the process of propagation, but that they are groups of 'content units'. In this way, Shifman departs from Dawkin's 'singular unit' to plurality and multiplicity. This is due to the new ways in which memes are represented and creatively replicated in the digital age. The 10 Mythological Creatures that are further outlined in this chapter are indeed a group, a lexicon and a multiplicity. If we use Shifman's classification codes listed above, the lexicon would share common characteristics. The memes were created as a lexicon as a way to communicate ideas with an awareness of each other. After the anonymous creation of the lexicon, as detailed in the CDT, the memes as cultural replicators are then circulated, imitated and, through online participatory culture, transformed by multiple users.

When applying the concept of cultural keys, a significant point to consider when deciphering the meaning of the memes *as* keys is our understanding of the culture in

which the memes originated and how rapidly they transmit and propagate via the internet. Shifman (2014, 15) suggests that ‘internet memes can be treated as (post) modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artefacts such as photoshopped images or urban legends.’ Shifman’s definition here can be used as a framework for the exploration of memes as symbols that are only understood through shared cultural values. It can be argued that these cultural keys should be used to unravel sophisticated and nuanced meaning when analysing memes from cultures other than our own. Notably, I suggest that memes are a crucial vehicle then, with which to communicate predominantly via visual grammar that furthermore propagate ideological beliefs through co-constructed narratives within ‘particular’ online cultures. Compellingly, when we look at the themes and folkloric dimensions of the 10 Mythological Creatures this theory rings true. It can be said that only through our ability to read these symbols are they able to communicate the desired messages. When is an alpaca not an alpaca and indeed a GMH? The meme then, has a function that aligns more with design and advertising in the way that it targets a specific audience who have the ability to decipher the complexity of the intended visual reading. The intent of this thesis is to extend the cultural significance of the symbolism in context and to give people the ability to read the symbols by interpreting these significant cultural visual signifiers.

## **Understanding Memes and Their Use on the Chinese Internet**

While it’s easy for Software to detect and block words like ‘censorship’ or ‘harmonize,’ it’s much more difficult to detect and block images (Zuckerman 2013, 13).

The internet has created a transparency in China’s political space, despite the rigid restrictions on regularly monitored content. This internet participatory culture can be likened to ‘street art’, as described by Mina (2011), where the internet is the new ‘virtual street’, or as Fung (2012) declares, a ‘town square’. ‘Netizens’ have created a space for a community who through common beliefs have creatively voiced their thoughts about the current socio-political and clashing ideological systems using internet memes. Yang (2009) defines the nature of online activity as contagious, where participants use emergent communication tools via the internet. Yang’s (2009) ideas revolve around the internet being a cultural form. He further delineates that these characteristics of online behaviour emerged only after 1989, with the introduction of the

internet. By the 1990s, it displayed more convergent online activity that articulated broad changes in political, social, economic, technological and cultural ways of being in mainland China.

The study of this form of digital creative phenomenon could be likened to an art movement, as the online visual content mimics and reflects a variety of ecologies of the time, including social, ideological, political and technological evolution as it occurs contextually. One could further argue that this new symbolism created online has a more immediate and rapid transmission via the image or symbol that renders it a potent carrier of culture and ideological belief systems, just as artefacts reflect art movements and signify periods in history. Further, rapid transmission through online portals propagates visual forms into the global arena, where they may be shared, replicated and transferred to places such as YouTube and Google, sites that are banned in mainland China.

With Photoshop or other image manipulation software, creators have the ability to tag, hashtag, mash, appropriate and repurpose existing visual images than create original content and are perhaps less likely to be censored or traced by the Chinese government. The dimensions of the internet offer scope for image creation paired with the creative use of employing the homophonic dimensions of the Chinese language (Mandarin) has emerged as a form of internet participatory culture. I suggest that the participatory culture in online activity within and outside China that is engaged in by largely anonymous users invigorates a new co-creation subculture that is unique to the last decade. Castells (1997) refers to plasticity in networked societies and believes that power in the twenty-first century is inherent in:

the codes of information and in the images of representation around which societies organize their institutions, and people build their lives, and decide their behavior (Castells (1997, 359).

Open political criticism in any form is not permitted in China. Indeed, code and visual metaphor are ways to express a narrative if words cannot. This sentiment was recently reinforced by Cambridge University Press, when it agreed to the CCP's request to remove politically sensitive articles from its Chinese website. Tom Phillips' article in (*The Guardian* 2017) stated that:

This restriction of academic freedom is not an isolated move but an extension of policies that have narrowed the space for public engagement and discussion across Chinese society.

Some researchers who focus on China, such as Mina and Zuckerman, have little Chinese linguistic ability. With these considerations, it is through reading scholarly articles by Chinese academics in English that further insight can be gained into the deployment of images on Chinese internet sites such as *Sina Weibo*. In turn, this helps untangle the complexity of Chinese internet culture's rich ecologies. Mina (2011) identifies the ways in which netizens evade algorithmic and human monitoring in China to communicate messages online. She suggests three ways in which messages are disguised and manipulated. First, homophones are used as coded language to evade censors. Second, Chinese online sites are image-heavy; netizens use images as they are more difficult to block images than words. As a result, images are critical and often loaded with parody and critique. Finally, Mina suggests that virality is retained if the content is 'catchy and interesting'. In this way, blocked online content becomes more difficult to detect and identify when multiple users are posting, sharing, reposting, renewing and propagating within the online ecology.

Zuckerman' (2009) describes using images to disseminate activist content online and avoiding censorship as 'the cute cat theory'. He suggests that symbolic meaning is disguised through cuteness: this is particularly applicable to internet and symbolic metaphors that carry ideological signifiers. Zuckerman's theory is that the internet is a vast space for ordinary people to publish and propagate material, making online publication and distribution of content an attractive tool to use for activists. In this way, governments that censor online content find it more difficult to monitor, as online content is a mix of consumer, prosumer, activist and non-activist material.

Posting images, viral videos and memes on the Chinese internet is not always politically motivated. User-generated content does, however, illustrate a departure from traditional collective culture. It is content uploaded by individuals that reflects ideological shifts and is then redistributed back into online communities and shared and replicated. This suggests that anonymous creation (individual) is fed back into the 'collective' and shared within that subculture via co-creation (collective). Wang (cited in Mina 2014, 361) further outlines that the activity of youth in China and the creation of internet

memes only ‘make up just one part of a larger repertoire of youth expression and identity formation online’.

An example of this can be seen in a viral video created by arts students in Southern China in 2005, which predates the GMH phenomena. While in China in 2005, I was introduced to my first internet meme (viral video). The Back Dorm Boys (BDB) is a Chinese group who appropriated the name of the Back Street Boys, a Western boy band. The Chinese version is presented and performed by students Wei Wei (韋煒) and Huang Yilin (黃藝馨). The BDB post videos of themselves performing lip-syncing, over gesticulated songs such as The Backstreet Boys song ‘I Want It That Way’. The BDB dress mostly in Olympic-style red tracksuits or at other times in Chinese opera gowns, a symbolic reference to their ‘Chineseness’. Yao Yung-Wen (2015, 972) claims that ‘Chineseness’ is an indefinable concept in contemporary China:

In contemporary China the understanding of concepts such as cultural diplomacy, nationalism, postcolonialism, modernity and contemporary Chinese art was often based on reinterpretations of those concepts that were consistent with China’s national interests, which were basically conflated with the Party’s interests. To put it another way, things had to be read in the ‘Chinese’ way, usually involving a nationalist sentiment.

Further, Yao (2015) delineates that a unified Chinese identity does not exist in contemporary Chinese society. However, the differences between Chinese and Western cultures are strongly upheld and propagated by the Chinese government and are generally supported by the Chinese people.

Thus, the student’s use of cultural replicators signifies ‘Chineseness’. BDB perform in low-fi videos shot in their dormitory in Southern China, which are uploaded online. In the foreground, the two front-men perform framed within tightly cropped headshots. The camera pulls back and forth so the viewer is able to see their environment. The audience sees another student in the student dormitory playing a computer game or randomly walking by. The duo use parody to playfully critique the prevalence of ‘Western’ pop aesthetics, both aural and visual, entering Chinese youth culture. Not only is the viral video a glimpse into youth culture, it highlights the living conditions of many Chinese students and foregrounds their computer- and internet-driven lifestyle. The BDB are an obvious parody, although they do not venture into political satire. Their main *modus operandi* is to critique cross-cultural representation of China’s social,

economic and ideological changes, bringing humour into ways of being in transitional China.

Another subject of internet memes is the cultural figure of Lei Feng. Unlike BDB, Lei Feng's use is politically motivated. Lei Feng was a historic and heroic figure in the People's Liberation Army (PLA); his relevance and iconography will be explored further in Chapter Three. Netizens have reworked Lei Feng's image, adapting it to 'serve the people' so that it reflects not only the political values of the CCP, but also conveys subversion and dissent. Lei Feng has also inspired a fictitious microblog by an office worker who blogs the latest scandals in China (Milner Davis 2013).





Source: CDT, posted 6 March 2012. Accessed 16 June 2015. <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/03/lei-feng-hero-for-todays-china/>

### Figure 2. Hong Kongers are Dogs

In 2012, *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin posted the article ‘Hong Kongers are dogs’ (see Figure 2) (Goldkorn 2012). This website has since been removed with the site was last accessed in January 2017. Goldkorn (2012) recorded that Xijin:

[P]osted this spoof image to his Weibo microblog; it shows two icons of very different political persuasions Photo shopped into Lei Feng images - rebel artist Ai Weiwei, and nationalist professor ‘Hong Kongers are dogs’.

Hu Xijin (in Goldkorn 2012) commented on the spoof image (in translation):

The louder the volume of the government campaign to study Lei Feng, the more such spoofs will be enthusiastically circulated online. This is the sigh-inducing balance of contemporary China’s public debate. When I see such Photoshop images, my heart just feels uncomfortable. But I know that the fact that such photographs appear is a sign of China’s progress. Making everything appear ugly is not just a way of thinking but has become a way of existing. Its importance to China is like that of the waste water pipes and sewers that even a city of light cannot do without.

The use of image manipulation online in this way reveals a visual parody that critiques and offers commentary reflecting social change through pre-existing and renewed cultural signifiers. Despite being uncomfortable and offensive to some, through this process the visual forms allude to some of China's progresses and paradoxes. The use of Photoshop software for image manipulation and meme generation has been heavily used in the creation of memes. Shifman's (2014) study of internet memes analyses 'Reaction Photoshops' and defines this genre as photographs that can be edited and manipulated, and as they tap into popular culture are then further reshaped and propagated as mimetic images. *Floating Chinese Government Officials* from 2011 is an example of what Shifman claims is a memetic photo. This popular Chinese meme was originally created by (and featured) government representatives and was uploaded to a government website in Huili, Sichuan. The photographic, Photoshopped image depicts three Chinese officials levitating slightly and inspecting what appears to be a newly laid road (see Figure 3) (*The Guardian* 2011).



Source: *China Smack*, posted 30 June 2011. Accessed 12 January 2014.  
<https://www.chinasmack.com/floating-chinese-government-officials-stun-netizens>.

### **Figure 3. Floating Officials**

The doctoring of this photograph created a fictional narrative that subsequently led to further online parody and scrutiny. *Sina Weibo* social media sites in China reported:

[a] flood of parodies showing the officials variously landing on the moon, surrounded by dinosaurs and, in one instance, joined on their inspection tour by the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il. (*Guardian* 2011)

The case study of internet memes surrounding activist lawyer Chen Guangcheng has been explored in the work of Mina (2014). Chen Guangcheng is a blind lawyer and human rights activist who was imprisoned in 2006. Soon thereafter, his name and surrounding information formed one of the most heavily censored topics in 2011 and 2012 in China. As Chen is a political dissident, any key word searches for information about his case were censored on the Chinese internet. Mina (2014, 362) claims:

Memes, as micro-actions of media remixing and sharing, are particularly important in a censored, propagandized state, which seeks first to isolate individuals who express opinions contrary to state interests, and then to deaden the sort of public debate that fosters a diverse sphere of opinion.

As a result, prolific grassroots memes emerged that depicted visualisations of Chen in symbolic protest. The intent of the state, the CCP, which attempts to isolate public opinion, alternatively manifests in the creation and collection of memes (visual forms) involving images and remixed representations. In October 2011, the anonymous meme maker and artist, known as Crazy Crab began a campaign to propagate images of Chen to appear on the internet. Chen Guangcheng's dark sunglasses became a visual signifier that was specifically identified as a symbol. Crazy Crab organised online audience participation and activism, requesting netizens to upload pictures of themselves wearing sunglasses (Mina 2011). During an interview with Mina (2014), Crazy Crab reported that 600 netizens sent him a single headshot, a selfie and wore sunglasses. These participants, just like Chen, contributed to the political protest for his release by collective online civic engagement. These pictures were then added to a central website that collected and added to the symbolic representation of Chen online through what Jenkins (2009) refers to as 'participatory culture'. Jenkins et al. (2009) define participatory culture as way of practice:

1. that has relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. that has strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
3. that has some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. whose members believe that their contributions matter
5. where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).

As an English-speaking and reading scholar who does read Chinese *pinyin*, it is relevant to note that these visual messages may be easier to read than the Chinese written language. That is, if one is aware of current global trends in culture that are translated and transmitted through Chinese and Western scholars, with the added assistance of Google translate. This approach is illustrated in Zuckerman's reading of the subsequent memes generated after the 2009 case in China where melamine was found in infant milk powder. Zuckerman in *My Hearts in Accra* (2011) notes, regarding his interpretation of the internet meme 'Niu Gensheng, CEO of Mengniu Dairy the Melamine scandal in 2008', that:

I don't speak or read Chinese. That means that my interpretation of the Mengniu cow could be deeply mistaken. But it also means that it's possible to puzzle out a breaking story in Chinese media using WeiboScope, Google Translate and a few web searches.

Regardless of the ability to read or speak other languages, the ability to read symbols as signifiers or cultural replicators is central to the findings of this thesis. As Zuckerman and Mina demonstrate, interpretation assists in cross-cultural research with a focus on China. The power of the image through memes circulated by online participatory culture is a potent tool for connecting to subcultures and broader online communities in China and beyond. As previously outlined, images are less likely to be deleted or censored (Zuckerman 2008). Emergent research however suggests that this is also changing (Tsui 2017). Moreover, the ability to read images propagated as internet memes draws on the 'cultural keys' described by Shifman; thus, tools to decipher memes are reliant on cultural background, language literacy skills and visual recognition through semiotics and contextual interpretation.

### **Chinese Internet Memes: The 10 Mythological Creatures**

Considering the gap in knowledge of Chinese internet mythologies that Yang (2013) declares 'monolithic', it is productive to commence with an exploration of the symbolic significance of homophones. Homophones are intrinsically linked to Chinese language and visual culture. They are often used as symbols or signifiers where the sound of the word (the homophone) conjures a visual representation. The formulation of these symbolic homophones began to manifest directly following an anti-vulgarity campaign in January 2009. The campaign was initiated:

[To] contain the wide spreading of vulgar contents online, further purify the cultural environment on the Internet, protect the healthy growth of the underaged, and promote the healthy and orderly development of the Internet (NewsXinhua.com 2009 in Yang 2014).

Shortly after the campaign was launched in China, anonymous Chinese bloggers rhizomatically created homophonic pathways (words with a similar pronunciation but differing in meaning) to infiltrate internet censorship, thus avoiding sensitive key words. With wit, humour and visualisation they expressed their freedom on the internet. The 10 Mythological Creatures (CDT 2009; Meng 2011; Yang 2013) became popular as a result of draconian internet censorship in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Initially, the 10 Mythological Creatures were uploaded on the interactive encyclopedia *Baidu Baike* (the Chinese version of Wikipedia) and have since been removed. To date, most of the evidence and manifestations of the ten have been deleted, blocked or removed from Chinese websites. It is important to note that the original lexicon was created together as a vernacular expression to resist censorship policies. The term 'lexicon' here is used here to group the visual forms together, as they were conceived as a set. Representation of the lexicon initially manifested through memes and viral videos online. Mapping the meaning and signification of the 10 Mythological Creatures and their evolution over time reveals why some of the symbolic creatures have continued their evolutionary path and others have not.

The following definitions of the original 10 Mythological Creatures are sourced from the English website Wikipedia (originally on *Baidu Baike*). It is important to note that Wikipedia is not generally considered a *scholarly* source. However, for researching the origins of online cultures and the lexicon as a set, Wikipedia as a source that historicises and archives proves useful. There are also references to the lexicon on other internet sites such as Know Your Meme, that catalogue and describe popular culture memes. As these sites retain and catalogue historic online phenomenon they can act as a library or database. The following are a list of the 10 Mythological Creatures that followed the anti-vulgarity campaign. The creatures as a set (a lexicon) are also referred to throughout the thesis interchangeably as the GMH phenomenon. Adapted from Wikipedia, originally the creatures were catalogued on *Baidu Baike* and have since been removed. The 10 Mythological Creatures are defined in adaptation as follows:

Grass Mud Horse (草泥马, Cǎo Ní Mǎ) grass mud horse (resembles an alpaca). The spoken Chinese with intended tonal play creates [cào nǐ mā](#) (尕你妈) ‘fuck your mother’.

French Croatian Squid (法克鱿, Fǎ Kè Yóu) the tones in spoken English give insight into the intended meaning. It is said that the squids exhibit deviant behaviour.

Small Elegant Butterfly (雅蝶蝶, Yǎ Miè Dié) a reference to Japanese eromania and again tying into the pornography and vulgarity themes.

Chrysanthemum Silkworms (菊花蚕, Jú Huā Cán) the implication implies hopelessness, referring to broken anus, thus Broken Chrysanthemum is a Chinese idiom.

Quail Pigeon (鹁鸽, Chún Gē) is a homophone with 春哥 (Brother Chun).

Lucky Journey Cat (吉跋猫, Jí Bá Māo) homophone with 鸡巴毛 pubic hair, as the homophone jība (鸡巴) is a vulgar term for ‘penis’, while the definition of 毛 máo is ‘hair’ or ‘fur’.

Stretch-Tailed Whale (尾申鲸, Wěi Shēn Jīng) a near-homophone with 卫生巾, wèishēngjīn, menstrual pads.

Singing Field Goose (吟稻雁, Yín Dào Yàn) homophone 阴道炎 Yīn Dào Yán an infected vagina.

Intelligent Fragrant Chicken (达菲鸡, Dá Fēi Jī) homophone 打飞机 Dǎ Fēi Jī ‘hit the airplane’ masturbation.

Hidden Fiery Crab (潜烈蟹, Qián Liè Xiè), literally qián liè xiàn (前列腺) translates to prostate glands.

All 10 Mythological Creatures function dually as Mandarin tonal wordplay and to critique restrictions on internet censorship. As discussed earlier, the creation of the lexicon immediately followed an anti-pornography campaign initiated by the CCP in 2009. All creatures allude to juvenile sexual puns, connecting to a narrative using wordplay and visual metaphor to disguise the intended meaning. Residual visual evidence online, including scholarly articles regarding the other nine creatures of the lexicon other than the GMH, has progressively become more difficult to source. The content has either been blocked, erased or—as I argue—the symbolism has not proved potent or meaningful enough to remain in circulation and propagate, unlike the GMH symbol in its multimodal forms.



## The Grass Mud Horse

The GMH manifests visually in the form of a creature resembling an alpaca that symbolises a netizen, a freedom fighter on the Chinese internet. The use and commodification of the GMH symbol, representing the people and freedom of expression, has become something of a social movement within the visual culture of the internet (Rea 2013; Wang, Juffermans and Du 2012; Wiener 2011; Wines 2009). With this background, I will now briefly explain the mythological creature the GMH. Wang et al. (2012) explain that grass mud horse comes from cǎonímǎ (草泥马) in Chinese...it is the homophone (with different tones) of another Chinese expression, cànǐmā (禽你), which means fuck your mother, indicating the motherland.

The animation entitled ‘Song of the Grass-Mud-Horse’ is a viral internet meme that was disseminated via social media communities in China in 2009. It became known to the English-speaking world through online communities when it was uploaded to YouTube (which is banned in China). In his *Spoofing (e’gao) Culture on the Chinese Internet*, Christopher Rea (2013, 162) shows how the parody in the song can be read in one way, in the left column, but heard in another, in the right.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1. Multiple Meanings in ‘Song of the Grass Mud Horse’**

| <b>Text</b>  | <b>Sound</b>  |
|--|---|
| On the vast and beautiful Ma-le Gobi Desert is a herd of grass mud horses.<br>They are lively and clever;<br>They are naughty and quick-thinking.<br>They are lively on that grass mud Horse plain;<br>Stubbornly and bravely they overcome<br>The adverse environment.<br>Oh you resting grass mud horses!<br>Oh you crazy grass mud horses!<br>To graze on grass and not be eaten they defeated the river crabs, | In your mother’s vast and beautiful cunt is a group fucking your mother.<br>They are lively and clever;<br>They are naughty and quick-thinking.<br>They live freely fucking your mother’s cunt;<br>Stubbornly and bravely they overcome<br>The adverse environment.<br>Oh, fuck your mother laying down!<br>Oh, fuck your mother with abandon!<br>To fuck and not be eaten they defeated the ‘harmonizing’ censors,<br>And censors forever after disappeared, so fuck |

<sup>1</sup> The Gobi Desert borders China and Mongolia. The Ma-le Gobi (MLGB) is an invented geographical name, where Ma-le is an approximate homophone for ‘mother’s’ and Gobi for ‘cunt’ (Rea 2013, 162); it is also a metaphor for the vastness of the internet.

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And the river crabs forever after disappeared your mother's cunt.  
from the grass-mud-horse plain.

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Source: Adapted from Rea (2013)

Visual narratives run through the lexicon like modern day folktales. The GMH has an enemy—the River Crab (河蟹 *héxiè*)—which symbolises the harmonious society (和谐 *héxié*, harmony) of the ‘collective ruling party’. The power of the River Crab or harmonious society homophone is heavily politicised, as the crab symbolises the CCP. The CCP nurture the people like a father would look after his children. Thus, the people rely on the leaders of the country for guidance and ‘the fathers’ have state control. Concepts of the harmonious society are pivotal to the Chinese belief system. The crab symbol is discussed in the findings and analysis in Chapter Five, as it is the only mythological creature named in the ‘Song of the Grass Mud Horse’ viral video and symbolic related memes.

## Summary

Use of the GMH as a symbol of the people and freedom of expression has become a social movement (*New York Times* 2009; Rea 2013; Wang, Juffermans and Du 2012; Weiner 2011) of visual culture that was born and disseminated via the internet. Klisanin's (2015) research on digital collaborative heroism suggests that this type of online participatory action is only possible through collective co-creation that relies on a multitude of individuals. It is in this online cohesive community that anonymous co-creation takes visual form to critique the restrictions on freedom of speech. In this way, individual expression manifests and strengthens within the collective value system, gaining strength from propagating symbolic metaphors. Notably, Allison and Goethals (2016, 6) point out that ‘deep truths contained in hero myths are difficult to discern and appreciate because they are disguised within symbols and metaphors’. This is further illustrated by the increased use of these symbols online and offline demonstrating a ‘system of mass production and the homogenising regime of capital, which produces mass desires, tastes, and behaviour’ (Wang 2012). Notwithstanding this, mass expression exemplifies the once collective Chinese culture tapping into Sima and Pugsley's (2010) ‘me’ generation, where netizens employ a Western, individualistic value system and engage in a pseudo-democratic realm online. Wang (2012) argues that ‘the values of “Grass Mud Horse” represent the equivalent relation between



commodities, symbols, and popular culture’, some of which delve into capitalist values typically aligned with Western ideology. Wang (2012) further suggests that the people have created a cultural product through social interaction and participatory internet culture.

The GMH and lexicon symbolises a need for what Ricoeur (1975, 192) refers to as narrative identities—so that people who participate in this subculture ‘can make sense of themselves and their lives through the stories they can (or cannot) tell’. The pathways to communicate these narratives are through code and metaphor in visual forms that create new heroes reflecting shifting ideologies. The creation of this symbolism through multimodal online visual culture and its continued use over time highlights the power of images online and in art and design that transcend cultural boundaries communicating cultural ways of being. The following chapters endeavour to expand on these potentials and decipher the transfer of this online symbolism into offline realms.

## **Chapter Three: An Historical Overview of Chinese Visual Culture**

### **Symbolism in Chinese Art and Design in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

In recent years, China's visual culture landscape has witnessed a transition to a new symbolism related to political resistance and subversion. Through a brief survey of art and design, this section explores the power of symbolism and the impact of visual language in mainland China. As outlined in the introduction, artefacts reflect a culture's ideology and belief systems, resulting in practices that create and manifest beliefs. These artefacts are a visual language that tell stories and unfold or create alternative truths. This chapter will define what is already known historically in Chinese visual culture by outlining the use of some significant symbolism associated with art and graphic design in China. The chapter will focus on one symbol—that of Mao Zedong—and map its changing historical significance through art and design. Mao's image reflects history in important ways, shaping cultural values. It is used in this chapter as a signifier of change. Thus, mapping Mao's image as evolutionary, a heroic symbol of declining potency, is a precursor to recognising new cultural forms that may represent heroes in the digital age.

This chapter presents an historical overview of the transitions in ideology and meanings of prominent visual symbols that represent both political power and the people of mainland China. It does so by examining the changes in a sample of important symbols in Chinese visual culture throughout the twentieth, and into the twenty-first, centuries. In particular, this chapter will review the symbols and images associated with Maoist thought and symbolism. These symbols often represent the CCP political ideology, promoting communist values with messages that are easily understood in a visual medium. Minick and Ping's (2010) survey of graphic design reveals how cultural and political forces shaped visual communication under the CCP. Minick and Ping (1990) demonstrate how a new visual language and style emerged under Mao Zedong's guidance in 1942. This style was devoid of all foreign influences except Soviet realism, which fed visual propaganda and bolstered the CCP until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

For this reason, this chapter is built primarily on the analysis of symbols in art and graphic design, with a particular focus on Mao Zedong and associated CCP symbolism. The visual style created during this time contributed to the country's revolution machine by using visual culture as an ideological driver. Barne (1996), Gladston (2014) and Minick and Ping (2010) show that from 1944 to 1976 (under Mao Zedong's rule), visual imagery was a powerful tool in communicating to the masses. Artistic practice developed in such a way that it operated at a classless level; art and design were tools that supported political motivations. For these reasons, art and design are ideal for discerning the changing representations of heroic icons.

The first section in this chapter details how these symbols have entered art and design and how they are used by the CCP to transmit messages for the 'collective' consciousness. The second section examines how these symbols have been appropriated and continued to pervade contemporary art and design in the latter part of the twentieth century. The third section demonstrates how these symbols have been used to represent divergence from, or resistance to, state powers in recent times. This will later be used to determine if the symbols used by creative practitioners to show political resistance and subversion in the past are being transgressed by the newer generation of symbols.

### **Section 1: Symbolic Significance in Chinese Political Art Post-modernisation (1919–1976)**

The aesthetic symbolism of Soviet Socialist Realism propaganda has played a vital role in China's visual culture under Mao Zedong. Soviet-style revolutionary art and design was incorporated into artistic expression in the late 1930s (Gladston 2014). This changed followed the brief Modernist period in Chinese art history, also referred to as 'Shanghai Style' (Pan 2008). Artists were sent to Moscow for training in Soviet Social Realism to further reject the West's modernist aesthetic and to strengthen and propagate visual CCP propaganda. The Soviet Social Realist style in China employed carefully constructed compositional and symbolic elements to transmit messages. Composition was typically constructed with a dominant Mao or other heroic figure, both emulating and radiating hope; the hero's 'godlike' presence is typically depicted as floating transcendently above other figures in the image. Colour was applied not just in the production of visual messages, but was also used to code the 'collective national body'

(Chen 2001). Colours in visual political messages—as described in ‘Red Light, Bright’ (*huang huang liang*)—were dominated by the revolution’s prescribed colours: red, yellow and black. Lyn Pan describes socialist realism as containing ‘uplifting content, heroic characters of muscled-bound workers, peasants striking thrusting poses and patriotic labor in idyllic sunlight’ (Pan 2008, 84). Social Realism aimed to represent the people and ‘appear true to life’. Inevitably, the works resulted in propaganda used to promote the CCP.

Zhao and Belk’s (2008) study of Chinese socialist symbols in advertising examines some of the symbols, ideology and propaganda schemas in Socialist Realism. Based on Barthes’ semiotic theory of myth in political ideology and social transition, they examine the role of the socialist hero in Chinese propaganda and how political ideology has been appropriated by advertising to enable social transformation. How we see and read Mao’s role in revolutionary art and design can be likened to creating a hero who conveys a society’s values through narrative (Zhao and Belk 2008). In this way, Mao becomes a saviour; his ‘godlike’ figure delivers hope and a bright future to the masses. The heroic figure or group is always prominent in socialist propaganda. This compositional device of placing a hero among the revolutionary masses may appear contradictory, particularly when the visual style was used to eliminate class status. However, as outlined by Lane (1981) in Zhao and Belk (2008, 235), heroes in political ideology:

[a]re called upon to offer a role model for emulation, especially during rapid social changes, in order to ease the reorientation. Socialist heroes are political symbols and the concrete embodiment of selective ideological norms (e.g., altruism) that are fundamental to the political system.

The period of reorientation and rapid social change in China is central in the development of understandings of the historical formation of symbolism its use and noting changes. These changes, I argue, occur through the use and construction of the hero. The symbol of the hero enables hope for the future, with an ideological function to propagate narratives visually.

## **From the May Fourth Movement to the Founding of the Communist State (1912–1949)**

Cultural change in China began after the abdication of the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, Puyi, in 1912 (Gladston 2014). Under the republican rule of Sun Yat-sen, attitudes towards education and society broadened; this led to dramatic cultural changes in Chinese society and affected culture, politics and belief systems (Gladston 2014). Calls for modernisation departed from previous Confucian values, which the educated classes believed had prevented China's progress. It is important here to note the role of 'the Literati' in the arts and Confucianism leading up to republican rule in 1912, as this dictated the social role of the arts. The Literati embodied the Confucian belief system of social and moral harmony. China's scholarly gentry was self-cultivated and educated (Gladston 2012). The Literati scholars (*shi dafu*) were educated in the Four Arts: 四藝, *sìyì*. Notably, in relation to the visual arts focus in this thesis, painting within these Four Arts was characterised by subjective expression and an individual treatment of reality.

Republican rule changed the landscape after the fall of the last dynasty and this national cultural transformation led to the new culture movement. This invigorated art and design, with the establishment of many art academies introducing Western ideologies and techniques across China. This departed from the literati's approach. New ideologies were introduced in 1912 by Minister of Education Cai Yuanpei and were swiftly implemented as the republican government's 'five educational principles'. These principles were strongly influenced by Western philosophy and 'world spirit', a parallel concept to current 'globalism'. Mattleart's (2000) definition of globalism references the function and role of global complexities in connecting economic and social order through a process of unification and a blurring of transnational boundaries. During this time of attempted modernisation in China, a renaissance of ideologies occurred. Young, educated Chinese scholars advocated for social change. With ideas based on a mix of theories including American pragmatism, social Darwinism and Nietzschean theory, they unsurprisingly conflicted with China's desire to uphold indigenous cultural traditions and values (Shen 1996).

On 4 May 1919, student unrest and protests occurred in response to the Treaty of Versailles, published that same year. Cultural modernity in China was in flux and the social revolution of the May Fourth Movement (*wusi yundong*) indicated imminent

change. Pan (2008, 49) marks this period ‘as the start of the social revolution to which the Chinese Communist Party would eventually lay claim’.

Immediately following the May Fourth Movement, at the beginning of the 1920s, a cultural renaissance began to thrive. With this shift, the position of art and design and their role within Chinese society was subject to intellectual debate (Minick and Ping 2010). The new interest in Western ideologies and styles transformed China’s visual culture through the combination of traditional Chinese and Westernised styles. Foreign books and illustrated journals highlighting the emergent styles of the 1920s were imported into China for expatriates. Due to shipping distances, the arrival of these visual materials was delayed. This is reflected in the delayed influence on art and design in 1920s China. The late Art Nouveau style, with its curve-linear and self-reflective style embraced by Chinese book and magazine covers ‘re-cycling what had originally begun in the West as an Asian-influenced design movement’ (Minick and Ping 2010, 22).

From the early 1920s, designer Tao Yuan-Qing led the school that had begun explorations of Chinese national identity through design and visual culture. By incorporating traditional patterns and decorative motifs, Tao Yuan-Qing and other key designers believed that design would reflect the self and experience therein (Minick and Ping 2010). This newfound aesthetic identity was fuelled by the desire to create a hybridised aesthetic that incorporated the roots of Chinese culture, informed by foreign images. This hybrid retained an overall ‘Chinese’ aesthetic identity. At the same time, Beijing and other major urban locations in China saw the introduction of art academies teaching Western artistic theory, techniques and practice. The most important of these academies was the Shanghai Painting and Art Institute (Gladston 2014). Chinese students were instructed in academic fine art methods that followed European and North American techniques, including painting and drawing directly from a subject. These methods of creating art departed from Chinese traditional pictorial tradition. Centuries of Chinese classical visual style were about to change. During this time intense debate occurred among Chinese painters regarding the adaptation and appropriation of Western Realist and Modernist styles.

Radicals and conservatives interpreted revolutionary ideologies pertaining to modernism in the arts differently. Gladston (2014) believes that because of this tension,

two ideological positions were formed: the radicals were liberal bourgeois seeking democratic reform and the conservatives pursued socialist-revolutionary change. Political unrest followed the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925. In 1926, the leadership of the republican government was handed to Chiang Kai-shek who then headed the *Kuomintang*. In 1927, the *Kuomintang* and the CCP engaged in civil war with the PLA. With continuing military struggles between the *Kuomintang* and the CCP, the CCP and the PLA fostered military campaigns from the mid- to late- 1930s. These campaigns used artistic expression to reach China's broad population through folk music, dance and drama to unify and communicate their ideological position.

From the late 1920s to the early 1930s, prominent cultural figures such as Lu Xun urged emerging artists to 'take close heed of the affairs of society' (Wang 2010, 16). Artists were advised to represent the proletariat, rural dwellers, workers and farmers. The proletarian symbolism used in these works interrogated the socio-political climate and drew heavily on peasant life, labourers and the urban working class. During the late 1930s and up until the 1940s, an interplay existed between Western modernist techniques and symbolism in art and design (Barme 1996; Gladston 2014; Pan 2008). The work that emerged from the Lu Xun Academy in Yan'an represented artists who nourished the communist-led interrelationship between art, politics and society. Examples of this can be seen in the woodblock printing produced for the first exhibition held in Shanghai in 1931, and again five years later in 1936 (Minick and Ping 2010). The European influence can be seen in the works with 'their emotional depictions of man's struggles against cruelty' (Minick and Ping 2010, 91). The symbolic style references the works of artists such as Kathe Kollwitz and Frans Masereel.





Source: Reproduced from *Selection of 50 Years of Chinese New Printmaking*, Vol. 1, 1931–1949 Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House (1981). Woodcut, 14 x 17.7 cm. Accessed July 2016. <http://artinprint.org/article/new-woodcut-no-name-group-resistance-medium-message-20th-century-china/>.

**Figure 4. Kill the Resisters (1931) Jiang Feng**

Despite the advice offered by Lu Xun, the PLA and the CCP, interest in Western art techniques grew, especially those that followed a modernist style and an academic realist approach (Gladston 2014). Modern collectives formed, such as Golden Horse Society. Most notably, the Shanghai-based art group Storm Society (formalist modernists), founded by Ni Yide and Pang Xunqin in 1931, created works inspired by Western abstraction and anti-realism (Croizier 1993).

Zhu and Chen in Croizier (1993, 139) outline the rationale for their choice of title using manifesto excerpts:

‘Storm Society’ was their choice for an English name. Wang Jiyuan explained its significance, ‘... we want to hit the rotten art of contemporary China with a powerful wave’. The manifesto clearly showed where their inspiration would come from: ... The war cry of the Fauves, the transformed shapes of Cubism, the fierceness of Dadaism [printed in English], the violent awakening of Surrealism ... The Chinese art world should also create a new climate.

Several years after this significant development in Chinese art cultivated by groups such as Golden Horse Society and Storm Society, a world spirit was reflected through visual expression. The excerpts from the manifesto above suggest that a drive existed other than making art for the state. Despite this, in 1940 Mao released his policy statement ‘On New Democracy’, whereby all democratic culture was led by proletariat aims and outcomes (Gladston 2014). At this time, Mao Zedong concreted his cultural policies



through specific doctrines stating that all visual forms must narrate CCP ideologies. This policy making began in the late 1940s and continued for the next two decades under his rule. The CCP relied on the visual communication strengths of China's artists and designers, using authorised creative work to reconstruct national identity in the twentieth century (Minick and Ping 2010). At the Yan'an Forum on Literature, Mao beseeched artists to reject Western or foreign images in their work and draw on a Chinese artistic language to address the cultural needs of the masses. One consequence of this was that Chinese artists had their passage to Moscow paid so they could study Soviet Social Realism. As previously discussed, Soviet Social Realism offered an alternative aesthetic for propaganda models that would later be used by the CCP (Minick and Ping, 2010).

In May 1942 (after achieving dominance over the *Kuomintang* and Japanese forces in China), Mao chaired a three-week forum, 'Yan'An Talks on Literature and the Arts':

He argued that there is no art detached from, or independent of politics, and that truly revolutionary art should be used to represent and promote the views of the masses, meaning the workers, peasants, soldiers and urban petty bourgeoisie who made up the vast majority of China's population at the time (Mackerras in Gladston 2014, 63).

Mao Zedong is an instantly recognisable visual image of the CCP. As a leader, Mao Zedong devised and shaped the cultural development of the nation (Gladston 2014; Minick and Ping 2010). Mao also 'formulated the party's basic artistic and cultural doctrines' believing that 'the more artistic it is the more harm it could do to the people and the more it should be rejected' (Minick and Ping 2010, 102). The culture of the proletariat presented a controlled space, with the introduction of the 'New Democracy' policy once again constructing an inward focus on Chinese society and the imperative to reject all Western or foreign influence. This politicised inward turn was a stark contrast to the 'organic' synthesis of Western ideology into Chinese culture, creating new visual forms as demonstrated by such groups as Storm Society in the 1930s.

### **Great Leap Forward Campaign 1958–1961**

After a speech by the Chinese Cultural Minister in 1957, Mao issued new parameters for his campaign, where notions of 'revolutionary romanticism' were merged with 'revolutionary realism'. These new combined ideologies resonated with the CCP's

beliefs about ‘poetic and romantic’ Chinese traditions while simultaneously upholding the tenets of socialist realism. According to Tong Dian in Gladston (2014, 66) this new aesthetic was outlined by two doctrines:

[R]ed Light, Bright (*hong guang liang*) and The Three Prominences (*santuchu*). The former required artists to include the colour red in paintings both as a symbol of revolution and as a traditional signifier of happiness and good fortune, alongside brightness as a symbol of hope. The latter required the prominent placement of generic representations of soldiers, workers and peasants the three principle heroic groups at the forefront of the revolutionary masses.



Source: <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-557.php>\_ Designer Shao Wenjin.

**Figure 5. Strike the Battle Drum of the Great Leap Forward Ever Louder (1959)**

The Great Leap Forward campaign (1958–1961) was intended for social and economic advancement, to promote agriculture and industrialisation (Gladston 2014). These guidelines proposed that artistic expression be used solely to uphold and signify CCP doctrine. Slogans were created, such as ‘more, faster, better and cheaper’; the CCP focused on rapid transformation aimed at closing the gap between rural and urban areas. Mao relied heavily on the skills of artists and designers to develop propaganda, but also extended the creative program further to engage peasants and worker art associations to produce the massive campaign (Minick and Ping 2010). Further nationwide visual media campaigns to unite the Chinese people were introduced in 1958. As discussed

earlier, this period saw the cultivation of ‘revolutionary realism’ mixed with ‘revolutionary romanticism’, which was intended to reinvigorate indigenous Chinese visual style and symbolism.

The revolutionary style that continued to pervade Chinese visual culture until the end of the Cultural Revolution appeared more forcefully from 1959. The revolutionary machine’s main method of dissemination was through visual communication and culture. Mao’s image proliferated in visual culture through print media, badges, book covers and alarm clocks. Artistic production during this period was orchestrated ‘collective production’, using hyperrealist illustrations that drew heavily on ideas of a ‘socialist utopia’ where all citizens were depicted as heroic equals. Thus, ‘the effect of creating art collectively was just one more symbolic step in the attempt to destroy aspects of individualism’ (Minick and Ping 2010, 124).

Under the CCP, artists associations (work units/*danwei*) were created between 1949 and 1966 to manage the direction of artistic creation. Gladston (2014, 67) outlines that *danwei* were ‘first used as a part of the collectivization of working practices and the setting up of state owned enterprises during the revolutionary period between 1949–1976’. These associations were strictly guided by the doctrines outlined in Maoist thought and were further used to bring together artists as cultural interpreters (Gladston, 2014). Pan (2008), Minick and Ping (2010), Dal Lago (2009), Barne (2009) and Gladston (2014) have all observed that art and design were the most useful and far reaching form of communication, simultaneously serving political purposes through artistic representation. Artists however, operated under strict guidelines regarding what they could or could not create, with art adapted to suit the CCP’s ideological aim of mass social transformation.

The Great Leap Forward’s visual style introduced new mediums and techniques that were employed to strengthen the nation. During 1958 to 1959, photography depicted conscientious, hard-working individuals cultivating and harvesting better crops to promote agriculture, building and construction. However, Minick and Ping (2010, 106) suggest that for artists, illustration was the ideal medium for effective communication, as it produced ‘compelling imagery that would mobilise a nation’. This idealised style presented colours and symbols in a more dynamic way than other mediums:

The importance of this creative decision should not be underestimated, for it set a precedent, not only for an important illustrative style that photography could not match, but simultaneously raised the level of motivational graphics to a higher conceptual level, a technique that was repeated during the Cultural Revolution (Minick and Ping 2010, 106).



Source: <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1958-024.php> Designer: Wang Liuying (王柳影); Xin Liliang (忻礼良); Wu Shaoyun (吴少云); Jin Zhaofang (金肇芳); Meng Muyi (孟幕颐); Yu Weibo (俞微波); Xu Jiping (徐寄萍); Lu Zezhi (陆泽之); Zhang Biwu (张碧梧).

**Figure 6. Brave the Wind and the Waves, Everything has Remarkable Abilities (1958)**

During the Great Leap Forward campaign, art and design were predominantly created for print in an easily circulated format. Posters and magazines were considered the main vehicle for dissemination as they could be displayed and circulated in the workplace. Slogans were often used as a motivational tool to promote nationalism (the collective voice) and engage the people. Artists depicted exuberant, productive and happy workers in a variety of settings symbolising China's advancement and the modernisation of factories, hospitals and power stations. Minick and Ping (2010) argue that the symbolic style of this period is ridiculed for its blatant propaganda messages; however, the style was an effective motivational tool of visual communication. In part, it led to the unification and reconstruction of Chinese society through artistic visual culture.



Source: <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/5653/socialist-realism-soviet-chinese-socialist-aesthetics-art-painting> MK Lau Collection).

### **Figure 7. Village Construction (1950s)**

From 1959 to 1960, the CCP's aims were to use the masses collectively to invigorate social and economic transformation. Visual culture was employed as an integral element of this program. However, extreme weather conditions led to a decline in agricultural production, which resulted in a national famine. Gladston (2014) claims that Mao and the CCP were criticised for the events that led to the famine, a national disaster where between 18 and 45 million people perished. Simultaneously with the 'mass visual propaganda campaigns' and rigid doctrines that typified creative practice during this period, artists were also working on the periphery, creating coded criticism of the CCP from 1949 to 1966 (Gladston 2014). This was despite the potential punishment they could face for such non-compliance. Clark as cited in Gladston (2014, 67) notes Fu Baoshi's (1904–1965) pictorial response to one of Mao's poems 'Heavy Rain falls on Youyan' (1961). He states that the poem... 'presents an obliquely allegorical (though still discernibly negative) commentary on the events that took place in the wake of the Great Leap Forward'. Chinese Modernist artist, Lin Fengmian of the New Culture Movement, continued with expressionist landscape paintings (see Figure 7) from 1949 until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. At this point, as Clark (cited in Gladston 2014) notes, Fengmian was forced to destroy his paintings due to public criticism. The relevance and famine-related destruction of the land and people led Mao and the CCP to conceive stronger campaigns in an attempt to retain strengthen and once again unify the nation.



## **The Cultural Revolution 1966-1976**

The ten-year period from 1966 to 1976 saw ‘one of the world’s greatest media campaigns and personality cults’ (Minick and Ping 2010, 119). Studies by Dal Lago (2009), Barne (2009), Minick and Ping (2010), and Gladston (2014) show the decade between 1966 and 1976 witnessed one the largest international media campaigns producing visual media in the form of art and design transforming Mao to a cult figure.

Galikowski’s 1990 research into political art in China includes a translation of Mao’s 16 May Circular that outlines his plans for cultural reform for the Cultural Revolution:

Now we have to hold high the great banner of the Proletarian Cultural Revolution and thoroughly expose the bourgeois reactionary position of a group of anti-Party, anti-socialist academic authorities; we must thoroughly criticise bourgeois reactionary thinking in the academic field, the media, publishing and the arts, and seize the power of leaders in the cultural arena. In order to achieve this, we must at the same time criticise the representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the Party, the government, the army, cultural circles, and all other areas. We have to get rid of these people. These people ... are a group of counter-revolutionary revisionists. Once the opportunity is ripe, they will attempt to grasp power, to transform the proletarian dictatorship into a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, (Wang Nianyi, 1949–1989 *nian de Zhongguo–dadongluande niandai*, 13–14 in Glikowski 1990, 130).

In following years, the new revolutionary style that emerged in 1966 incorporated Mao Zedong’s image into the rumblings of revolution. The Cultural Revolution was born from an ideological struggle between Mao Zedong and President Liu Shao-qi. It created an anti-bourgeoisie phenomenon with a revolutionary spirit. As Mao’s image was being used for the revolutionary campaign, all divergent and experimental forms of creative production were apparently halted; thus, the style of this period favoured collectivism over individualism.



Source: [http://www.pandaguides.com/hot\\_topics/the\\_cult\\_of\\_mao.html](http://www.pandaguides.com/hot_topics/the_cult_of_mao.html). The text on the left is a calligraphy by Mao: 'Learn from Comrade Lei Feng'.

### **Figure 8. Learning from Comrade Lei Feng (1963)**

The propagandistic themes of the 1960s differed in style and symbolism with their hyperrealism, depicting utopian, dream-like illustrations of the masses (Barne 1996, Clark 2008; Gladston 2014; Pan 2008). Posters illustrated moral tales and selfless actions. Lei Feng is an example of one personality used to shape CCP visual and mythological ideologies. Lei Feng was an orphaned peasant who became a CCP soldier. At the age of 22, he was attributed with hero status by CCP propaganda after he sacrificed himself to save another life. Minick and Ping (2010) define the visual style of propaganda during this 10-year period as elevating individuals to 'hero status' while simultaneously addressing the broader population. It also incorporated issues of gender equality, with slogans such as 'women can hold up the sky'.

The period's style and symbols also drew on traditional folk painting and minority motifs, such as those first used in 1949 by artists from the Lu Xun Academy. Stylistically embodying an indigenous Chinese aesthetic, these folkloric scenes were intended to revitalise party propaganda during the Cultural Revolution (Minick and Ping 2010). 'Red', 'bright' and 'shining' art and literature were designed to speak to and inspire the masses; artists incorporated New Year's paintings (*nianhua*) into their

work to promote communist ideals for the Cultural Revolution (Li 1998). New Year's paintings became synonymous with Maoist stylistic principles throughout this period, bringing Mao Zedong's image not only into the workplace, but also into the family home. Images depicting Mao among the masses were widely disseminated to promote visual narratives to the population. Li (1998, xiii) aptly describes the impact and style of the Cultural Revolution's visual style:

The Cultural Revolution was Maoist Revolutionary Realism's high point. The fervent political idealism, combined with the increasing coldness of China-Soviet relations, did away with the solemn vestiges of Soviet Socialist Realism. Folk paintings were shown on a large scale in major national museum exhibitions, and their bright colours and romantic, festive emotion created a strong impression on artists, inspiring many, whether consciously or unconsciously, to make lavish use of reds and other bright colours in their palettes, and to paint with quick, energetic strokes that seemed to manifest an almost religious revolutionary zeal.



Source: <https://chineseposters.net/themes/mao-cult.php>. Designer: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House Propaganda Group.

**Figure 9: The Sunlight of Mao Zedong Thought Illuminates the Road of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966)**

'Religious revolutionary zeal' is often used as to describe the portrayal of Mao during this period. Francesca Dal Lago (1999) and Galikowski (1990) note the similarities between Mao portraiture and European religious paintings in terms of method and composition. The overall function of depicting Mao with 'revolutionary zeal' was to elevate him into the realm of the gods: a morally cultivated persona whom the masses



could trust and follow. The portraits of Mao thus followed his life and chronologically mapped his trajectory and development into an iconic symbol. Galikowski (1990) notes that these visual narratives can be likened to depictions of Jesus Christ in the Christian Church. The story of Christ is shown through the stages of his life, elevating him to his 'godlike' status through a series of visual narratives that cultivate his persona for public display. Mao portraits operate in a similar way, creating a visual narrative of roles and events that would have appealed to the masses. These roles encompass Mao as a founder of the CCP, a leader and commander, an educator, and a saviour looking after his people:

[F]rom his student years in Hunan, through the 1920s and the early founding of the CCP, the Jinggang Mountains period, the Long March (particularly the Zunyi Conference, which saw Mao emerging for the first time as leader of the Communists), the Yan'an period, the civil war, liberation and after (Galikowski 1990, 132).

The religious similarities can also be seen in Zhou Shuqiao's painting *Hunan Communist Group*, where a youthful Mao assembles a group in a small interior setting. Here, Mao is depicted as the central figure, addressing his comrades with an open hand reaching across the table, a gesture that denotes peace. The handmade paper lampshade is tilted to light up his face and radiates like a halo above him, while his audience gazes up towards him. Galikowski's 1990 study into Christian iconography and Mao paintings found that Christ and Mao are often depicted in similar compositional arrangements. Paintings of Christ represent him in an elevated placement, where the apostles are looking up to him. The placement of figures within the composition in Zhou's painting creates a similar effect whereby a triangle is formed with Mao at the apex. Compositional elements draw the viewer's eye to the apex and Mao becomes the preliminary focus.

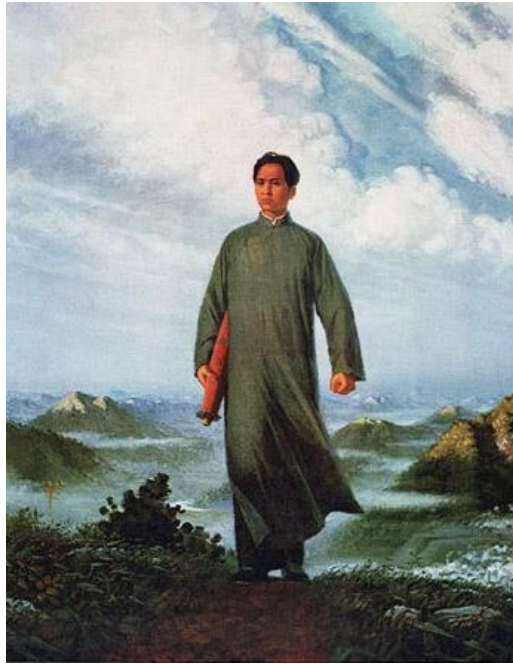


Source: screenshot from <https://americangallery.wordpress.com/2010/01/08/shuqiao-zhou-1938/>.

**Figure 10. Hunan Communist Group (1970), Zhou Shuqiao**

The overall mood is one of solemnity and spirituality, created by the muted brown and russet tones and the light from the overhanging lamp, which casts an ethereal glow on the faces of the figures below. Only the rather jarring portrait of Marx on the wall and the pile of political tracts and communist newspapers scattered reveal this is not the depiction of a Christian saviour, but a gathering of the embryonic CCP (Galikowski 1990, 133).

Galikowski (1990) analyses Mao's portraiture both in terms of Mao among the masses and as Mao *removed* from the masses, floating above like a god and transcending human qualities through portraiture. In *Follow Closely Chairman Mao's Great Strategic Plan* 1968 Mao is in the clouds, his hand outstretched, with eyes gazing into the future. In the lower part of this painting, the people seem dwarfed and are barely visible; they fade into the background and appear insignificant. Further, their role in this painting is to bolster Mao's image, which appears multiple times within the painting as the masses brandish their Mao portraits and banners with slogans promoting their idol: here he resembles not so much a political leader, but a god or a Buddha, a superhuman force capable of bringing about momentous changes on earth. It is an example of the deification process taken to extremes (Galikowski 1990, 133).



Source: screenshot from <https://chinese posters.net/themes/mao-anyuan.php> Designer: Liu Chunhua.

**Figure 11. Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan (1968)**

Another significant painting illustrating the Mao personality cult during the Cultural Revolution is Liu Chunhua's *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan 1968* (see Figure 11). Mao's dominant image, again central in the composition, shows him clenching one fist as he glides confidently over mountainous terrain, almost touching the sky. Mao is depicted as youthful and determined, symbolically dressed in a Chinese robe. He carries a red paper umbrella under his arm. Galikowski (1990, 134) notes that '[his] figure totally dominates the scene, seemingly filling the gap between the ground and sky, symbolic of a Chinese emperor mediating between Heaven and Earth'. The symbolic Mao uses elements including colour and composition to represent the state's power and the CCP's supremacy. During this period, Mao is elevated to a godlike status within visual culture through a range of narrative, thematic and compositional devices.

Despite strict doctrines regarding creative expression (Barme 1996; Li 1993), some artists worked outside these guidelines. These artists produced works that diverged from the propaganda machine, social realist themes and symbolism. Gladston (2014) suggests how these artists, including Zhao Wenlaing (b. 1937), Shi Zhenyu (b. 1946), Yang Yushu (b. 1944) and Zhang D'an (b. 1941) continued to employ a Western formalist style with impressionistic qualities. This work first emerged during the mid-1960s and continued until 1973:

There is emerging evidence to suggest that artistic production resistant or divergent from the established conventions of Maoist social realism was increasingly prevalent in the PRC from 1973 onwards (Gladston 2014, 27).

The decade from 1966 to 1976 also experienced massive upheavals, including re-education programs and the devaluation of culture. The scope of this is difficult to convey within the confines of this thesis. Maoist campaigns depleted the Chinese people as a whole, including artists and intellectuals. The CCP's mandatory re-education campaigns resulted in the oppression of intellectual and creative communities, as they were confined by strict guidelines for creative production.

## **Section 2. The Shift in Meaning of the Mao Symbol Post-modernisation (1978–present)**

Mao Zedong's death in September 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution marked a redefining of Chinese national identity. The Gang of Four used the political power of Mao's propaganda and media machine to promote their pursuits. The group had formed in 1965 and included Mao's third wife Jiang Qing, along with Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan. Their Red Guards controlled all aspects of party policies on education and ways of thinking and being in mainland China. The group ultimately damaged Chinese cultural identity in the arts (Barme 1996). Mao's death led to the Gang of Four's subsequent persecution and loss of power, which resulted in the members' imprisonment for their manipulative activities related to the Cultural Revolution.

Following the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping began rebuilding after what Minick and Ping (2010, 131) refer to as 'the most severe error since the founding of the People's Republic'. As the CCP's new leader, Deng Xiaoping created the Open Door policy in 1978. China was re-opened after decades of global isolation. The subsequent downfall of the Gang of Four demonstrates a significant change in public perception. The ramifications of Deng's new policy led the way for artists and designers to work without the previous restrictions on creative content. Propaganda art of the period shifted its focus from damning capitalism to embracing it, and the symbolic Mao that was so enmeshed with proletariat party ideology began to lose its 'godlike' status and became vulnerable to critique.

## **The Open Door Policy Movement (1978–1980s)**

The Cultural Revolution' aftermath began in 1978, after decades of isolation from the West. The Open Door policy resulted in the revival of theoretical, philosophical and aesthetic ideas. This was particularly so for the younger generation, who quickly rejected the revolutionary style and values of the past, as Li (1993, x) notes:

The next ten years saw the emergence and development of Chinese avant-garde art. Just as occurred with the first instance of disillusion with existing cultural value concepts and the resulting attempts to rebuild a new culture in the May Fourth period, the world of contemporary Chinese art has seen conflict, interweaving, and mutually transformative effects among the Chinese literati tradition, Revolutionary Realism, and modern Western culture a phenomenon which continues to be an important part of the creative process in China.

In the years before 1978, 'Maoist socialism advocated abnegation, sacrifice, and egalitarianism and rejected hedonistic enjoyment through the pursuit of material possessions' (Belk and Zhao 2008, 236). This was now replaced by a consumer-driven culture. 'To get rich is glorious' was the slogan that accompanied the Open Door policy in 1978. Deng Xiaoping also made significant changes to the freedom of creative practitioners in China during this time. Minick and Ping (2010, 131) refer to Xiaoping's message to the 4<sup>th</sup> National Congress of Writers and Artists:

Writers and Artists must have the freedom to choose their subject matter and method of presentation based upon artistic practice and exploration. No interference in this regard can be permitted.

The changes that accompanied this shift in symbolism and ideology renewed businesses and opportunities for individuals. As Minick and Ping (2010) note, this opened the way for creative practitioners to forge careers in graphic design through advertising and marketing. China's rapid social transformation from 1978 until today demonstrates a dramatic shift in ideology and symbolism. This turnaround in relation to value systems underlies the transformation in visual art and design that reflect a renewed promise of 'openness' and apparent freedom.

### **Cynical Realism 1978**

Cynical Realists drew on the immediacy of their personal experiences. Li (1993, xx) compares the Cynical Realists to British Pop artists of the late 1940s, crediting them

with a similar ambition for ‘fame and fortune now’. He defines the sensibilities and demographic of these artists:

[T]hey are mostly in their twenties, and are uniformly concordant in their refusal to be encumbered by the baggage of idealist commitment. The experience of the Mao era to them is principally a childhood memory, mostly silly and festive, horrifying only in the second-hand experiences related through older relatives. They have no direct experience of the heroic fanaticism of Mao, nor do they share the soul-searching angst of the generation of artists born in the 1950s.

Depictions of Mao shifted from the iconic, godlike representation of his ‘surveilling gaze’ over the Chinese people, with the first-known subversive use of his image in 1978. Sculptor Wang Keping exhibited *Idol 1978* in a work combining Mao’s ‘flaccid features’ with what resembles a winking Buddha. Other artists, such as Wang Guanyi with *Mao Zedong Red Grid No.1* and Yi Youhan with *Mao and Whitney* in 1988, produced some of the earliest examples of non-propaganda paintings featuring Mao (Dal Lago 1999). These works are some that led the charge indicating a shift in not only methods but subject matter and ideological reflection.

The loss of the Maoist model’s value structures in the post-Cultural Revolution period caused artists of necessity to begin the quest for a new set of values to support their development. They expressed their rejection of the now-discredited Maoist values in a widespread enthusiasm for modern Western culture (Li, xxiii 1993).

This desire to invigorate Chinese visual culture was displayed in an experimental exhibition, *The Stars*. The exhibition was ‘unofficial’, as the request to use the Beijing Worker’s Cultural Centre was rejected after two (appealed) applications to show the work there (Gladston 2014). The exhibition was finally shown at the National Art Museum in Beijing from 27 to 28 September 1979, with the Public Security Bureau (PSB) closing and seizing all artworks soon after it opened. Artists in *The Stars* exhibition included Wang Keping, Zhong Ahcheng, Bo Yun, Qu Leiei, Yan Li, Li Shuang, Gan Shaocheng, Yang Yiping, Mao Lizhi and Ai Weiwei, all born between 1949 and 1957. The years following *The Stars* exhibition—and subsequent campaigns against ‘bourgeois liberalism’ in 1981—resulted in some artists, including Ai Weiwei, Yan Li and Wang Keping, leaving mainland China (Gladston 2014).





Source: screenshot from <http://www2.oberlin.edu/images/Art251/156c.JPG>.

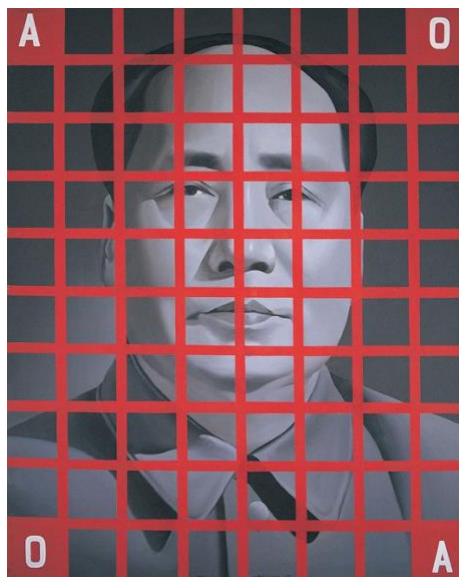
**Figure 12. Idol, Wang Keping (1978)**

According to Dal Lago (2014), Wang Keping's *Idol* (1978) is the first-known use of Mao's image in a non-heroic or iconic depiction. Keping denies the ambiguity between conflicting symbols and contests Köppel-Yang's (2003) claims that *Idol* questions personality cults. Instead, Keping contends it is simply a Buddha head, a cult object, and that the artwork coincidentally follows the end of the Cultural Revolution that upheld and cultivated the personality cult of Mao Zedong. *Idol* is carved out of stained birch wood, stands at 10 cm and displays hybridised characteristics of both figures. These characteristics render the work ambiguous and enigmatic, as the viewer ponders who this 'idol' embodies. The sculpture's rounded cheeks sit firmly under a cap reminiscent of a PLA soldier cap adorned with a five-pointed star. Köppel-Yang (2003) describes this symbolism as ambiguous; the PLA star may also be read as the Bodhisattva jewel. The figure's forehead also displays another symbol, which is playful in its interpretations, oscillating between resembling a 'pagoda' and an 'official stamp'. Köppel-Yang (2003, 122) asserts that *Idol* was read by the Chinese audience as depicting Mao, as his persona had been cultivated in their visual vernacular as the '[e]pitome of the Chinese personality cult. Therefore, common interpretation of the works as Mao's caricature is appropriate'. Further, Köppel-Yang (2003, 122) illustrates the significance of this artwork:

[Its s]ignificance lies in the collective misunderstanding, the general consent that defines it as Mao's caricature. This phenomenon not only reveals the mechanisms of political propoganda, but also indicates the sensibility with which the Chinese people react to such propoganda and the fact that this repertory of signs actually had infiltrated the collective consciousness.

Another artist whom Dal Lago cites as one of the first to use the Mao symbol in a non-traditional interpretation is Wang Guanyi. Wang chose to appropriate and abstract the image of Mao towards the end of the 1980s, drawing on his own cultural experience (Gladston 2014). Mao's image up until his death was omnipresent and incorporated into almost every facet of Chinese daily life. Posthumously however, his portraiture began to be reshaped as he has reshaped a nation through representations of his image. Cohen in *ArtAsia Pacific* (2012) writes:

For Wang, the image was imbued with the same intense religiosity and devotion as that of Christ: 'One is the idol of Christianity, the other is the idol of [Chinese] communism', he says.



Source: screenshot from <https://www.westkowloon.hk/en/siggcollection/highlights-1384/mao-zedong-red-grid-no-2-wang-guangyi-born-1957-harbin-1988-1>.

### **Figure 13. Mao Zedong Red Grid No. 1, Wang Guanyi (1988)**

In the painting *Mao Zedong Red Grid No.1*, Wang appropriated the portrait that is best known for its public display in Tiananmen Square. He retains the palette of greys used in the original painting and overlays a symmetrical grid, following Gombrich's example of image analysis over the iconic image. The grid obscures the image's iconic aesthetic values, diffusing the portrait's aura (Gladston 2014). Further analysis of the portrait reinforces that by following Western tradition, the elements of the painting 'are reduced to their essential volumetric forms and/or analysed through a cold abstract grid, reminiscent of iron bars, in a process meant to divest them of all emotional impact' (Dal Lago 1999, 51).



This shift in the use of Mao as a symbol is also demonstrated in Yu Youhan's painting *Mao and Whitney* in 1988. Here, Yu combines the Communist Cultural Revolution imagery of Mao Zedong with that of US singer Whitney Houston, creating an unlikely marriage of conflicting symbolism.

These examples demonstrate the trend towards—or the emergence of—a new subversive language, whereby shared understandings of culture are adapted and expanded visually. For some, the Mao symbol became a potent vehicle indicating a slow-burning shift from transcendental to seditious portrayal. Mainland Chinese artists who use Mao as a symbol in their work are aware of the way in which he has been, and continues to be, represented to the masses. However, a subculture of artists and audiences wishes to create, represent and read Mao in a way that reflects and shapes individual opinions and not that of the state.

### **Political Pop (Maocraze)—1990s**

The term 'Political Pop' (Li 1993) defines a re-emergence of the visual language propagated during the Cultural Revolution. As Barne (1996, 49) notes:

Similarly one could cheerfully observe that the 'ironic' inversions of Mao in pop art, music and mass culture indicated a further rejection or devaluing of ideology. It could also be claimed that the revivalists have used Mao creatively, that they have not become slaves to the past but have proved they could *enslave the past and transform it into a vehicle for the expression of their own tastes*.

Art critic Li Xianting (1993, xxi) gives further insight into the use of symbolism in this genre of Chinese visual culture:

An existence saturated with politics has become the accustomed state of being for most contemporary Chinese: every person, (and particularly intellectuals), will consciously or unconsciously adjust his own position according to the changes in the political climate.

Li suggests that attempts to avoid the reality of living within this system of power are evidence of the political stronghold of the CCP over the people. The use of political pop is then an acknowledgement of this political reality and artists use it to satirise politics. In that sense, "Mao Fever" and political pop art are linked in that inherent in both is the use of past icons or "gods" to criticize, or in the case of the latter, to satirize, current reality' (Li 1993, xii).

Notably, visual political satire in China was first depicted in an emperor from the Eastern Han Period (AD 25–220). By the late nineteenth century, with the influence of foreign artists such as Goya, Daumier and Beardsley, satire in art and design grew (Minick and Ping 2010). In Shanghai between 1934 and 1937 over 20 journals dedicated to exposing the abuse of official control and human rights issues were published (Minick and Ping 2010). These journals illustrated how powerful visual imagery could be. It was ‘far more effective than words alone’ (Minick and Ping 2010, 78). The government at that time made continued attempts to shut down publications, again highlighting the power of images. Unsurprisingly, the revival of ‘Mao-craze’ and political pop harnessed a visual satire incorporating the renewed use of Mao Zedong. The Mao symbol re-emerged, stripped of its original powerful revolutionary past, appropriated and forcefully illustrating social transformation in China.

Art curator Luo Fei in his blog (1993) distinguishes between Political Pop and Cynical Realism, two schools of creative thought intertwined through their ‘inseparable spiritual connection’. Luo believes that ‘Political Pop is trying to use a playful attitude’ by combining images of Mao, consumerism and capitalism to expose the core and question ideological beliefs. Further to this Luo suggests that ‘Cynical Realism is a form of nothingness... meaninglessness with a mocking attitude.’ Luo asserts the importance of political pop as a tool for social commentary. However, I suggest that cynical realism may use mockery, but it is not meaningless, and as Luo suggests both are somewhat intertwined. The importance of cynical realism then, is the manner in which it reflects contemporary social views and demonstrates a generational shift in the use of tone, symbolism and directness. However, in the twenty-first century a hybridisation of the two genres is apparent, combining both Mao and elements of propaganda symbolism. Li Xianting describes Political Pop as a reflection of ‘mass culture’, where the Cynical Realist did not experience the *Mao era* directly, being born post-1976. Moreover, the re-mashing of Political Pop with new ‘heroic’ symbolism I suggest has re-emerged in the digital age in the form of a particular internet meme representing a demographic of the Chinese people. This development is discussed further in the following chapters. The use of the heroic forms or symbols as described in this chapter offers communities and cultures an image of solidarity in times of rapid social change. The downfall of a hero through appropriation, reshaping or subversive use creates a pathway for new heroes to emerge.

## The Subversion of the Mao Symbol and Its Significance

Many artists and designers used Mao Zedong as a symbol in their work after the Cultural Revolution. The sociocultural phenomena of the re-emergence of Chairman Mao via contemporary art and design in the 1990s has been approved by the CCP, as it goes some way to re-establishing and acting like political propaganda in its reinstatement of Chinese values (Dal Lago 1999). The portrait of Mao Zedong is recognisable globally. Chairman Mao's best-known portrait is on the cover of the *little red book* (*The Communist Manifesto*). Dal Lago (1999, 48) claims that an estimated 2.2 billion prints were in circulation for every citizen during the Cultural Revolution; this is three prints per person. Mao Zedong's portrait was the 'single most reproduced portrait in human history'. Use of this iconic Chinese portrait permeated into the West through the work of US Pop artist Andy Warhol, who remade the portrait, cultivating its 'aura' to sit among predominantly American celebrities in the 1970s.



Source: screenshot from <https://www.aliexpress.com/w/wholesale-mao-zedong-poster.html>.

**Figure 14. Mao Zedong Communism Revolution Leader Standard Portrait  
History Retro Vintage**



Source: <https://fineartamerica.com/art/paintings/mao+zedong>.

**Figure 15. Mao Zedong Andy Warhol Lithograph Mao Zedong (1990)**

Due to the power of Mao as a symbol, the research frameworks that discuss the use of social realism for propaganda comprehensively illustrate visual shifts in the use of his image. The Mao image as an iconic symbol in art and design has been studied by Dal Lago (1999), Wiseman (2007), Barme (1996) and Li (1993). Dal Lago's research maps the re-emergence of the Mao icon in avant-garde art and also demonstrates how works with a *subversive* use of Mao are not permitted to be shown in mainland China and have only ever been exhibited abroad.

Dal Lago's research explores the renewed popularity of the Mao symbol in the 1990s, in which it began to be used subversively. Her research maps the use of Mao from 1946 in the propagandistic superstructure to the use of his portrait in public domains, such as Tiananmen Square and above the entrance to the Forbidden City. Hung (as cited in Dal Lago 1999, 48) notes that Mao's portrait is placed to create a symbolic connection to the architecture of Tiananmen Square:

The placement of the portrait has been well considered taking into account traditional cosmological and socialist ideologies that endow the placement of the portrait with heightened sacrality.

Dal Lago's *Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art*, examines the re-emergence of the icon in what she refers to as the 'Maocraze' (Barme 1996). Lago (1999) notes that a gap exists in the research linking Cultural Revolution visual propaganda to the dissemination and success of the 'Maocraze' in visual culture. These crucial visual connections identifying gaps are a precursor to ideologies and symbolism inform the methods of analysis in this research. Visual culture, as explored in this survey, operates within a system fuelled by political ideology. It forms a base from

which to examine potential connections and unidentified gaps in the current visual domain.

### **Section 3: Demographic Dissonance in the Viewing of the Mao Symbol (1990–present)**

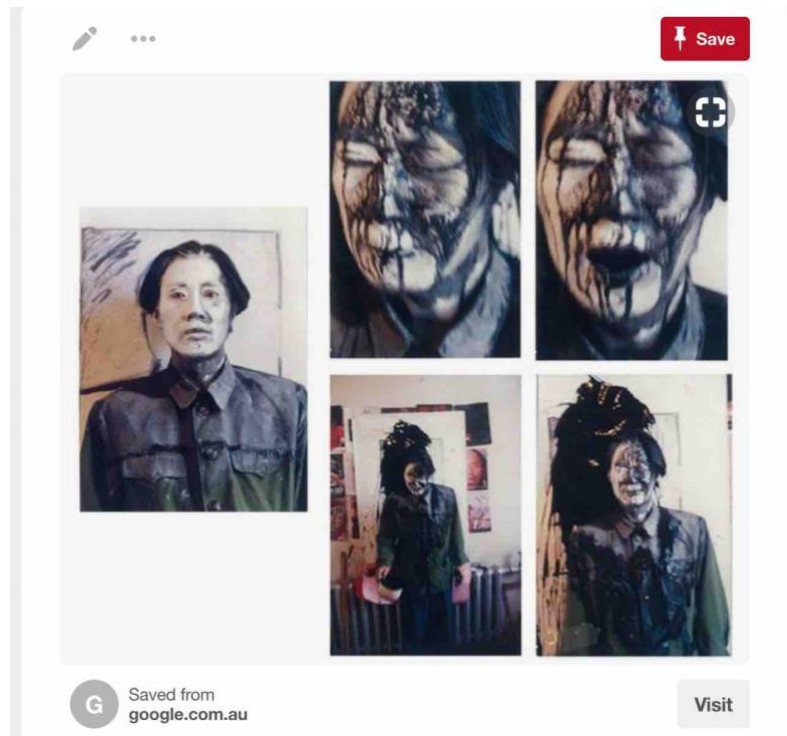
This section discusses how symbols of Mao Zedong and associated ideological signifiers have been used to demonstrate divergence or resistance to state powers since 1990. In particular, discussion will focus on whether a generational shift has affected the creation of a symbol that reflects meaning and culture. This exploration will then be used to determine if these subversive symbols are themselves being transgressed by symbols from the digital age.

#### **Subversive Artworks: Artists Born 1949–1976**



Source: screenshot from online source that has since been removed; saved to Pinterest 2016.

**Figures 16a, 16b, 16c. Counterrevolutionary Slogan, Liu Anping (1992) Video Stills**



Source: screenshot from Google.com.au saved on my personal Pinterest, removed 2016.

**Figure 17. Counterrevolutionary Slogan, Liu Anping (1992)**

By the start of the 1990s, more works that subverted the Mao symbol were emerging. According to Li (1993), artists born in or after the 1960s suffered ‘less from the “Mao complex” even though in the works they are very alive to the fact that politics is the most sensitive point of Chinese reality’. Liu Anping’s (b. 1964) 1992 video *Counterrevolutionary Slogan* (see Figures 16–17) shows the artist re-enacting the ‘real life’ defacement of Mao’s portrait on the Tiananmen gate that had occurred in 1989. Three young men from Hunan threw eggshells filled with ink at Mao’s portrait; they were sentenced to life for ‘counterrevolutionary propaganda and arousal’ Dal Lago (1999, 51). In the video, Liu positions himself in uniform (the Mao suit) in the centre of the screen, while eggshell-infused ink is thrown onto his face. The video acts as a historical document that reveals the penalties for vandalising symbols of the state.

In *China Dairy No.16* (1995) by painter Zhu Wei (b. 1966), Mao is depicted as well-known pop singer, Cui Jian. He is blindfolded with ‘a piece of red cloth’, a double-headed metaphor: first, the red flag; second, singer Cui Jian’s iconic bandanna. Wei creates two iconic stars who collide in one painting. Dal Lago (1996) explains the visual



reference to the two idols, noting the paradox of symbolism portraying Chairman Mao wearing a symbol of a society he created.

Since the 1990s, the use of Mao as a symbol has continued to pervade Chinese visual culture. Liu and Wiseman (2011, 9) recognise that '[t]he growth in the Chinese Art market requires artists to be increasingly subversive if they are to function as a bona-fide avant-garde'. Economic growth and ideological shifts can be seen in visual form by Chinese avant-garde artists (1990–2002) with the emergence of communist propaganda symbols incorporating the great leader in their work. Huang Yan uses busts of Chairman Mao (see Figure 18) as a canvas for his contemporary traditional watercolour paintings. Through this use, Huang Yan links symbols, tradition and contemporary artistic practice.



Source: [https://www.chinesecontemporary.com/huang\\_yan.htm](https://www.chinesecontemporary.com/huang_yan.htm). Porcelain, 60 x 45 x 8 cm.

**Figure 18. Huang Yan, Mao Zedong Bust (2006)**

Smith (1998, 2) believes that Yan's work is far reaching:

[a]re linked by the underlying search for a distinct new language of expression, a language rooted in the techniques, motifs and creative approaches that belong to the revered compendium of Chinese culture.

Notably, the shift in visual culture is apparent in the changing use of symbolism. The works create a visual connection to preconceived and recognisable imagery, while simultaneously invigorating and imaging a new visual culture. The search for new expressions is also seen in Cang Xin's *Communication Series No.4* (2000–2003), where the artist produced an ongoing series of 'licking' performance pieces. The Forbidden City and Mao's portrait are paired centrally in the shot, and Xin positions himself facing Tiananmen Square. In *Tiananmen, Beijing* of this series, he lies prostrate in front of the

Forbidden City with the portrait of Mao above his head while he licks the ground under Mao's surveilling gaze. Cang Xin's performance photography is a combination and recreation of symbolic identities. His work analyses 'people's differences, resulting in a series of divisions and critiques of the order and rules of modernity and capitalism' (Huang Du 2002, 14).

A symbol depicting Mao's China can be seen in the military uniform of the proletariat. As a symbol, the uniform is predominantly used by artists from a certain generation to represent China's turbulent past and the coding of the collective national body. Until 1976, it was mandatory to wear prescribed colours and styles, what is now known as the Mao suit.

Zhao (cited in Chen 2001, 146) describes 'the muted colours of a self-sacrificing socialist society':

Fashion, regarded as bourgeois in origin and surplus to authentic human needs, was for many years more or less abolished, which turned China into a country of people dressed in grey, black, white, army green, and navy blue-the colour scheme of Chinese puritan communism.

Roche (cited in Chen 2001, 155) identifies the Mao suit's 'dual purpose of the uniform: to produce coherence through sameness and establish hierarchy through detail'. The uniform and its colours had cultural resonance for all Chinese people from 1949 to 1976, as colour signified their role in the collective culture.



Source: <https://www.artslant.com/global/artists/show/239387-shen-jingdong?tab=ARTWORKS> Oil On Canvas 120 X 150 Cm / 47.24 X 59.06 In. © ChinaSquare Gallery New York 2008.

**Figure 19. Salutation, Shen Jing Dong**



The Mao suit often appears in Shen Jing Dong's art. In *Salutation* (2008), the uniform symbolises a connection to the past (see Figure 19). Shen Jing Dong positions this cloak of (the past) on the characters in his paintings: glossy, plastic people with indistinct facial features that symbolise aspiring capitalism. The conflicting symbols of the uniform contrast with the saturated colour and gloss that reflects a hybrid identity. The painting's symbolism narrates China's burgeoning economy and the conflict between Chinese values and identities.

The use of Political Pop art also pervades a series of paintings by Wang Guangyi. In *Great Castigation: Coca Cola* (1993), Wang depicts three heroic workers in uniform with the iconic capitalist logo, drawing on symbolism and political propaganda. The first man clutches a red book and the communist flagpole becomes the nib of the pen, which writes the capitalist logo *Coca Cola* in the bottom right corner. Wiseman (2007, 113) uses compositional interpretation and semiotic readings of the work; she states 'the combination and contrast of symbolic elements in the painting-the Communist worker and Coca Cola trivialise Maoism and Western economies'. Reducing Maoism to kitsch subverts authority and degrades values and belief systems.

### **What has Become of Mao's Image in Visual Culture?**

Numerous artists and designers both in China and abroad have used Mao's image symbolically in their work. In the twenty-first century, this visual language has been appropriated in the West and used as a vehicle for commodification. Duggle (as cited in Wang 2008) highlights an education supplement in a British newspaper reminiscent of a Cultural Revolution propaganda poster, accompanying Mao's image with education Secretary Charles Clarke. In 2007 more recent uses of Mao's image and associated symbols appeared in Pizza Hut's Spring campaign 'Lunchtime Revolution' in Hollywood (Wang, 2008). The campaign distributed communist-style khaki tote bags as a fashion accessory, all adorned with five-pointed red stars with slogans such as 'Serve the People' (in Chinese writing). That same year at Christmas, *The Economist* featured Mao Zedong on its front cover wearing a Santa hat adorned with the five-pointed red star on the fluffy white rim. The headline ran: 'Mao and the art of Management'. Wang (2008, xii) explains:

Clearly times have changed, for their original contexts the casual or iconic use of such symbols and slogans would have been as politically offensive in the West during the Cold War as in China during the Cultural Revolution.

Earlier iterations of Mao Zedong's image shifted from veneration to a subversive critique of the state. Further, the evolution of this visual iconography from icon to Political Pop subject is translatable across cultures. It is important to acknowledge that his image signifies something with an infinitely deeper meaning to people who lived through the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (Barme 2003; Dal Lago 1999; Li 1993). For Chinese people born after 1976, who are identified in Sima and Pugsley's (2010) research as the 'me generation' (see Chapter Two), the differing perceptions of visual culture and symbolic lexicons are seen through the lens of individualism and social media. This generational shift may signify that the power of Mao's image has become diluted in the present and for the near future.

In China today, humour, parody and satire in politics are openly displayed in visual culture. Milner Davis (2013, 8) refers to 'the importance of individual self-concept for modernity and the role of humor in self-expression and that, humor is becoming extremely salient to the modern state'. These often bold, yet tenuous elements illustrate China's transformation in art and design and the effect of coupling old and new symbolism in a complex communist–consumer-driven value system. In the wake of rapid transformations in society in terms of the individual self, it is interesting that identifiable references are still being made in art to these symbols of the past that represent Mao (the collective) and party rhetoric.

### **The Changing Hero in Chinese Visual Culture**

These changing visual references can be evidenced by the example of Lei Feng. Lei Feng is a semi-mythical soldier, a 'hero of the people'. As mentioned in Chapter Two, he remains and a figure that carries narrative. Annually on 5 March (the date of his death), China celebrates a *Learn from Lei Feng day*. Lei Feng's story is a moral tale of a self-sacrificing PLA soldier who 'served the people'. After his death in 1963, Lei Feng became a national symbol of social morality. In *Learn from Comrade Lei Feng 向雷锋同志学习* (Goldkorn 2012, Milner Davis 2013) the heroic soldier's image is still used to uphold the state's beliefs and values. In 2007, artist Dai Xiang appropriated the image of Lei Feng as a vehicle for his photographic works *Xin Lei Fen gushi* (the new story of

Lei Feng). The artist juxtaposed Lei Feng with a series of modern day ‘incongruous’ photographic tableau. The photographs depict a mannequin in a variety of settings in a khaki PLA uniform and winter hat adorned with the five-pointed communist star:

Lei remains the moral hero who dedicates his life to helping others. He saves a child from drowning and captures a robber with a knife, while spectators do little more than watch. In other pictures though, Lei seems like a cultural icon. He reads book by Mao Zedong in a McDonald's and poses in an advertisement for Canon (Bao Kun as cited in Wang 2010).

In an interview with the *China Daily* (2010), Dai states that these works present Lei Feng as a symbol more than an individual. He believes that the spirit of Feng has faded, as his image was used by the CCP to maintain party ideological solidarity. Somehow the use of this icon as a symbol of heroism echoes the political past, albeit in a modern day restaging. Dai’s work draws on clashing symbols, such as communism, commercialism and consumerism, reflecting the modern day conundrums of Chinese visual culture and values. The pairing of these symbols is an incongruous juxtaposition of ideological belief systems. The combined placement of communist and capitalist values in one shot constructs a perplexing binary narrative that is tolerated by the party, perhaps only because of Lei Feng’s presence. Milner Davis (2013, 13) claims that ‘[s]ince political joking is also an accurate indicator of what is salient to ordinary people, it undoubtedly holds additional interests for the authorities’. Further, Dai’s, Maoist–consumerist visual metaphors are deemed offensive, as are those of other artists currently working in China, such as Ai Wei Wei and Siu Ding (both of whom are discussed in Chapter Five).

The use of Maoist symbolism conflicts with what some scholars believe to be current themes in Chinese visual culture. Dai was born in 1978; according to Wiseman (2007), Li Xianting (1993) and Wang (2008) artists born towards the end of the Cultural Revolution ‘suffered less from the Mao complex’ (Li, 1993). Thus, it is interesting to see Maoist symbolism resurfacing today in the works of an artist born after 1976.

Mary Wiseman’s *Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-Garde Art* (2007) gives further insight into the rationale and use of symbols in Chinese visual culture. Her research into a series of subversions in art at the turn of the twenty-first century illustrates the shift from the use of Mao and all symbols connected to the Cultural Revolution. Wiseman (2007, 109) breaks these subversions into sections:

The first subversion is the presumption that the communist government with a capitalist economy can carve out a social space in which people can be themselves; the second, that the discourses in place in China are interpretable; and the third, that Western conceptions of art supposing as they do a chasm between art and nature raw, can be adequate to China at the turn of the new century.

Wiseman's three claims resonate with my hypothesis that an impetus existed to create new symbols. The internet is used as means of self-expression, resulting in the creation of new visual communicators. A subculture of Chinese people have created a space with capitalist values within the realm of communism. As Wiseman (2007) claims, this is a 'social space where people can be themselves'. This newfound social space, I speculate, is a place to express, craft and cultivate an online self through participation culture. The GMH phenomenon, with its creation of new symbols (some of which represent the people) could be perceived as the new subversive avant-garde, a new creative movement, a renaissance that represents freedom of expression in twenty-first century China. Wiseman further argues that to be truly subversive, art should generate rawness, a newness of visual vocabulary. Further, she questions whether Chinese art discourse is interpretable, especially when ideological structures and cultures are factored into the interpretation. Her example of the 'third subversion' addresses the gap between art and nature, the visceral chasm of using the body in art. Using the body in a non-traditional way (for instance naked) in Chinese art remains relatively taboo in China. Yet Ai Weiwei (2009) was photographed naked with a GMH plush toy covering his genitals.



Source: Know Your Meme August 2012 <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/379212-baidu-10-mythical-creatures-grass-mud-horse>.

**Figure 20. Ai Wei Wei. A Grass Mud Horse Covering the Centre = Fuck your Mother Communist Party Central Committee**

This truly subversive and avant-garde work combines a new symbol of the GMH lexicon to demonstrate freedom of expression. In this context, Wiseman addresses the interpretations of Chinese art through the lens of Western scholars, questioning whether the cultural perspective is adequate. Enquiry into questioning this cross-cultural knowing has been the driver of this thesis. The visual forms emerging from online spaces in China require knowledge of the visual trajectory of Chinese visual culture. The changes in representations that imbue meaning and narrate values are central to accessing significant cultural practices that tell stories online and offline.

## **Summary**

This chapter has documented the abundant appropriation of Maoist symbolism associated with propaganda. The chapter argues that symbolism in China has moved towards political resistance or subversion. A noticeable shift is apparent between the symbolism of the ‘old’ to the ‘new’ styles. These new styles represent Chinese visual culture in art and design in the twenty-first century. This shift also signifies a subculture of Chinese and Chinese diaspora who may no longer identify with the traditional historical symbols of the past, but who want to write, create, shape and carve out their own visual culture in China, one that is devoid of the symbols and histories of the past. By exploring Chinese visual culture from 1912 until the present, we can see how heroic symbolism has changed over time. The current climate of online social media culture has become a testing ground for visual metaphors that represent the changing tides of China’s rapid development in the digital age. Notably, restrictions on creative content are still in place, maintaining Chinese value systems. Despite the restrictions on culture that create artefacts and reflect values and ideologies, the new symbolism co-created anonymously online in 2009 has initiated new visual forms and potential new heroes.

## **Chapter Four: Research Frameworks**

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodological and theoretical frameworks used to analyse the collected visual samples for this study. I begin by outlining what visual culture is. I then move onto how other scholars who investigate Chinese visual culture have created and used analytical methods for reading visual images. With the abundance of visuality in contemporary life, there is seemingly a gap between our visual experiences and our ability to read what we see, signifying the need for visual culture as a field of study (Mirzoeff 1998). The chapter includes a discussion on divergent paradigm proliferation within visual culture, noting methods of analysis from within the field that determine the synthesis of methods for this study. Notably, this discussion traverses the reading, interpretation and understanding of the increasing occurrence of multimodal visual grammar in online and offline art and design that represents the focus of this study, the GMH lexicon.

The way in which we read visual imagery is culturally specific, as discussed earlier in Chapters Two and Four. This chapter examines these connections in greater depth by looking at methods of reading visual imagery within Chinese visual culture. As Chapter Three outlines, the use of Mao's image changes significantly through his lifetime and continues posthumously. With cultural positioning and specificity being an important element to assist the interpretation, the methods used by Francesca Dal Lago for her investigation into the use of Mao Zedong's image expands the transmutation. This chapter will further scaffold a framework to support the analysis reading the artworks within this historical evolution of Chinese visual culture. Francesca Dal Lago's methods not only employ compositional interpretation, but analysis of underpinning ideological signifiers, which Dal Lago claims to be culturally specific.

Visual culture analysis conducted by An Xiao Mina further explores the online ecology focusing on Chinese internet memes. Internet memes, as outlined earlier in this thesis, are a digital age phenomenon (Meng 2014; Shifman 2014; Yang 2014). The ways in which scholars currently examine visual forms is mediated through a broader set of methodological tools. Recent methods that navigate how meaning is constructed and explored draw on relevant and specific cases, such as Mina. In addition, the way in

which Mina explores meaning through methods specific to her work as a journalist. Thus, the inquiry lens offers an interdisciplinary perspective. The chapter concludes by acknowledging ways of framing and interpreting the dataset samples, outlining a diverse set of tools with which to explore and interpret these new symbols.

## **What is Visual Culture?**

The dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave, the relation of warp and woof. The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a 'nature' to which only it has access (Mitchell 1984, 529).

The struggle for dominance between visual and dialectical signs has been thoroughly explored by academics from various disciplines. Wilson (1970, 62) states that the English proverb 'pictures are the books of the unlearned' (in circulation around 1660) lead to another proverb still used today: 'a picture tells a thousand words'. Whether or not these ideas are translatable cross-culturally, a similar belief is apparent in the Chinese Confucian idiom, 'hearing something a hundred times isn't better than seeing it once' (百闻不如一见, *bǎi wén bù rú yī jiàn*). In this sense, the connection to the ways we read an image is strong in both English-language and Chinese cultural domains. A comparative study of the struggle between the two forms of literacy was conducted in a memory retention test reviewed by Paivo in 1971. Paivo's findings indicate that pictures are recalled more readily than participants' memory for verbal language (Paivio and Csapo 1973). These findings enhance our understanding of the visual and its impact before the internet. When the study was conducted in the 1970s, only limited exposure to varying forms of visual communication was available. Contemporary digital globalism has extended the reach of signs and symbols. Paivo's research findings provide a framework for exploration, as images today move rapidly into cross-cultural spheres through online propagation.

Art and design each contribute to our visual landscape in both analogue and digital modes, enriching and building visual culture. Visual theorists, including Mirzoeff (2013), Jenks (1995), Rose (2014), Berger (1972) and Mitchell (1996) lead the charge in defining what visual culture is and how it is important. A symbol in a magazine can be the same as one in a painting, sculpture or perhaps an internet meme. Symbol



propagation in the digital realm moves rapidly, as images can be reshaped, remixed and shared almost instantaneously. As the speed of image propagation increases, so too does the necessity of the ability to read for meaning and intent. The way in which we will read a symbol is determined by our cultural background and draws on cultural literacy. Our tacit visual language denotes, conjures and determines the way/s in which we read a symbol. Research into the symbolism that promotes literacy across cultures, translating and interpreting emergent symbolism from cultures other than our own is crucial in the context of contemporary globalism. This need for understanding—or ‘ways of knowing’, incorporating cultural literacy—is what drives my research into the GMH phenomenon.

John Berger’s (1972) highly influential *Ways of Seeing* explored the expansion of new ways of investigating Western art, particularly through the lens of visual culture. Berger transformed the way in which Western scholars read an image. He extended existing analytical methods through aspects of imagery, visualising process, varying forms of image and examining cultural and ideological contexts. In the digital age, the notion of what McLuhan (1992) refers to as the ‘global village’ and (Mirzoeff 2002) ‘global visual culture’ still suffers from what Van Den Berg (2004) claims is the Western domination of ‘art history’s universal museological scope’. This refers to looking at visual forms through lenses and methods created and used in Western culture. The need exists for a heightened exploration into Chinese visual culture from a Western perspective, to identify the cultural and ideological aspects that examine Chinese visual culture and how it incorporates a world spirit and the new symbolism of the digital age. I suggest a new way to look at Chinese art in the twenty-first century is through an extended and culturally specific lens. In a short essay on Chinese art, Bertold Brecht (1967, 278–9) wrote:

As we know, the Chinese do not use the art of perspective. They do not like to see everything from a single point of view. Chinese composition thus lacks the compulsion to which we have become altogether accustomed ... and rejects the subjugation of the observer.

To make such assumptions today is misinformed and fails to consider the appropriate cultural specificity of Chinese art and symbolism. Brecht’s lens does not consider cultural values, metaphors or creative innovation. The required lens would be developed through cross-cultural exploration and understanding. Any associated ontology would



explore the historical and cultural significance of artefacts, demystifying stereotypical interpretations of Chinese art. Brecht quite clearly suggested that Chinese art follows different methods of production for a targeted Chinese audience. As outlined earlier in this thesis, Chinese artists were for some time shut off from the West. During this time, the only permitted influence on art and design was the Soviet aesthetic style, used to promote the image of Mao to the masses. I would argue that Brecht's claim is significantly limited and highlights the need for further understanding of the Chinese perspective in art, culture and ideology. To access this perspective (through visual culture theory and lived historical experience) will result in nuanced cultural interpretations that lead to deeper understandings of the culture and people. Further, this thesis' exploration of the knowledge gaps draws on both Western and Chinese scholars. This will enable examination of the surrounding, historical, economic, political and cultural reasons behind the emergence of these new symbols. This knowledge, as Shifman (2014) argues, will reveal the cultural keys that can enable discussion and analysis of the new symbolism, and its evolution, sustainability and readability in visual culture.

As discussed in Chapter One, creative wordplay is used in Chinese culture to say what cannot be said. Visual culture theorist WJ Mitchell (1984) links this idea to Wittgenstein's 'language games'; Mitchell claims the image is used in a playful way to suggest or pose questions about the historical 'forms of life'. In the twenty-first century, these 'forms of life' can comprise surrounding culture and ideological systems that created a visually based language play. Mitchell (1984, 529) suggests:

[t]he relationship between words and images reflects, within the realm of representation, signification, and communication, the relations we posit between symbols and the world, signs and their meanings.

To develop an understanding of the new memes and symbols' significance, it is important to define the field of visual culture. Mirzoeff (1998, 3) defines it as:

[v]isual events in which, information meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By visual technology I mean any form of apparatus designed to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the internet.

Bryson, Holly and Moxey (1994, xvi) believe that visual culture is 'the history of images' and is best suited to semiotic interpretation. This method, relying solely on

semiotic analysis may not be effective when used alone. Other methods should be used to substantiate any claims. One such approach could include the consideration of surrounding cultural underpinnings that are driving the new symbolism. Jenks' (1995, 1) 'social theory of visibility' suggests an approach that Mirzoeff argues (1998, 3) 'seems open to the charge that the visual is given an artificial independence from the other senses that has little bearing on real experience'. Jenks' approach is limited. Symbolism (according to this thesis) is born from real experiences and thus needs to be visualised through potent symbolism. The lived experiences of the Chinese people during the 2009 anti-pornography campaign were a direct result of the ability to speak without words, using an image, an icon or a symbol for self-expression. Mirzoeff (1998, 3) identifies that 'visual culture is not a part of your life every day, but is your life, contemporary culture is visual'. What we see, how we see and why we see are intrinsically linked to the way in which we communicate. It is crucial in this study to examine methods that explore symbols in a way that is not Western-centric, but can be applied cross-culturally.

In another approach that focuses on reception and practice, Rose (2015) outlines on her blog the reading of visibility 'is about how people encounter visual images, and what happens in those encounters'. This way of looking at visual entanglements and effect is useful for following the connections and flow between online and offline uses of symbolism. Rose's analytical methods can be used by this study in the following ways:

1. The encounter can initially be in the form of digital/online/social media feeds, propagating, multiplying and morphing in form digitally within participation culture.
2. The encounter can integrate understanding through symbolism, connectedness and understanding the new language.

There are many approaches to the way we look at and read visual forms that reflect our culture. The lens through which we look at symbols in cultures other than our own must be considered deeply for an accurate analysis. I suggest that the new symbolism generated due to internet censorship in mainland China demonstrates a shift in ideology through a new visual grammar. Regarding the GMH lexicon, aesthetics alone are insufficient to inform the analysis. These symbols cannot be read with universal

methodological analysis tools. There needs to be a multiplicity of ways to examine the symbols, why they occurred and what they mean, determining the different levels of connections. Finally, we will uncover how they transmit, propagate and either maintain or lose potency in their multimodal forms.

## **Reading Visual Imagery**

Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures ‘made in the image’ of a creator to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image (Mitchell 1984, 504).

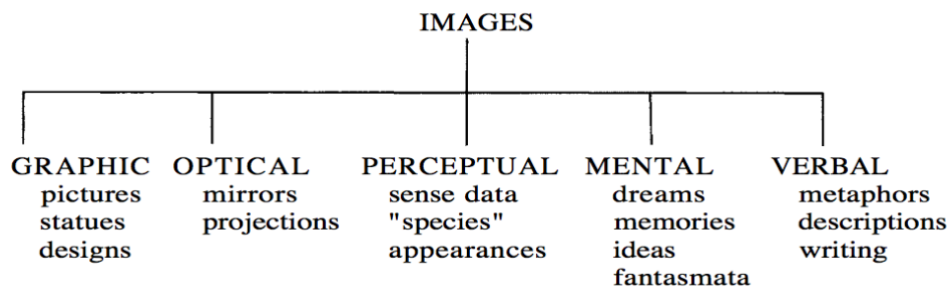
The manifestation of the GMH lexicon mirrors Mitchell’s quote; it tells a story that signifies a historical moment and thus, some become ‘endowed with legendary status’. So far, this chapter has discussed what visual culture is as viewed by other scholars in the field. The following section discusses approaches to reading visual imagery. To gain a broader understanding of how other researchers have approached visual imagery and visual culture, certain methodologies are discussed in the following section. Sarah Pink (2012) outlines the increased volume of books published at the turn of the twenty-first century. As a digital ethnographer, Pink (2013) describes visual culture as being pivotal in contributions to the viability of qualitative research visual methodologies in the social sciences and humanities. As she suggests:

The field has since developed in exciting and divergent ways. It is losing none of its momentum and indeed continues to inspire innovative and important studies across a range of disciplines as well as further theoretical and methodological reflection (Pink 2013, 3).

Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s *The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006) and Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies* (2014) are some recent publications that shed light on emergent visual methodologies. With this growing momentum and methodological reflection on the way in which we view visual culture, examining the ways in which scholars categorise image types is a useful place to begin. Mitchell (1984, 504) illustrates image categories and divides images into five analytical categories (see Figure 21):

We speak of pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even

ideas as images, and the sheer diversity of this list would seem to make any systematic, unified understanding impossible.



**Figure 21. Mitchell’s Image Categories**

When visual culture theorist WJ Mitchell devised these image categories, the predominant medium of messages were traditional methods, including, print, billboard and television. Noting the time these categories were developed, and considering the internet’s growth in users, participation and power, these categories are still useful to dissect visual images. However, further methods will need to be employed to form stronger analyses and findings. When using such categories for analysis adaptation, particularly with images manifested online (as they will have a graphic basis), further subcategories will be required to assist the analysis. Mitchell (1984, 504) claims that each illustrated category relates to a particular discourse:

1. Graphic, sculptural and architectural imagery to the art historian.
2. Optical imagery to physics; optics scholars collaborate with philosophers and literary critics.
3. Perceptual images occupy a border region where physiologists, neurologists, psychologists and art historians dwell.
4. Mental imagery belongs to psychology and epistemology.
5. Verbal imagery belongs to the literary critic.

Mitchell (1984, 505) refers to Aristotle’s account of the creatures that dwell between these borders; they occupy the spaces between physical and psychological imagery as species or sensible forms that ‘emanate from objects and imprint themselves on the wax-like receptacles of our senses like a signet ring’. The wax-like receptacles of our

senses can today be likened to internet use and societies' compulsion to incorporate this interface into our daily life, hold it close and wear it like a signet ring. In the digital age, most people carry a screen that holds the creatures who dwell the spaces between these borders. I suggest that these creatures are memes, and the screens are mobile devices that each day imprint current and relevant cultural signifiers in visual form.

### **Revisiting Dal Lago. Impressions of a Methodological Framework**

In Francesca Dal Lago's 1999 study of Mao's image, both compositional interpretation and semiotic methods were applied to read the artworks. Using Dal Lago's methodological framework in this chapter reiterates the ways in which we can decipher visual grammar and the symbolism that narrates change. Dal Lago's methods enable a pre-digital historical interpretation of Mao as a symbol, its importance, emergence and divergent manifestations in art. Not only did Dal Lago identify aesthetic methods with which to read artworks, she also applies approaches externally to contextualise the work and then identifies ideological signifiers to decipher the elements. Dal Lago's research focus on the visual domain and symbolism of the *Maocraze* is used as a methodological approach in this thesis. Documenting the evolution of one specific symbol (Mao Zedong) clearly demonstrates and documents the changes in Mao's image representation chronologically. In particular, Dal Lago explores the renewed popularity of the Mao symbol in the 1990s, in which it began to be used subversively. As discussed in Chapter Three, historical and political shifts affected culture and ideology significantly during Mao Zedong's reign. This exploration further supports the evolution of change in symbolism in China. Dal Lago maps the use of Mao from 1946 in the propagandistic superstructure to the use of his portrait in public domains, such as Tiananmen Square and above the entrance to the Forbidden City. Mao's portrait creates a symbolic connection to the architecture of Tiananmen Square. Hung (cited in Dal Lago 1999) posits that the portrait's location acknowledges traditional Chinese cosmological and socialist ideologies, which endows the portrait with a heightened sacredness.

Dal Lago's (1999) extensive exploration into Chinese art (with a focus on Mao symbolism) suggests the research gap in relation to linking the Cultural Revolution's visual propaganda with the success and re-emergence of *Maocraze* in visual culture. These visual connections use ideologies and a symbolism that informs the analytical

methods for this thesis exploring new symbolism and connections to current and historical visual domains. These methods assist to identify whether political ideology and symbolism have been appropriated by online symbolism and later into art and design. Dal Lago was able to identify ideological signifiers with which to decipher the artworks' elements. She suggests the Mao portrait can be read in the same way that Byzantine portraiture operates: 'making visible that which can't be perceived by the senses' (Baggley as cited in Dal Lago 1999, 48). Further, when referring to Mondzain, she suggests:

The icon contemplates us, it becomes in its turn the gaze of God on the beholder who finds himself caught within the circuit of informative and transformative relations (Dal Lago 1999, 48).

Connection to a silent meaning and powerful iconography is given through the visual symbolism. Images possess the power to say what words cannot. Notwithstanding this, Mao Zedong's icon has held continual fascination in China and abroad; his image is a quintessential representation of China (Dal Lago 1999). The use of iconoclastic forms is further outlined by art historian, Michael Fried (1980, 92) claiming that painting's purpose is:

to attract the beholder, then to arrest and finally to enthrall the beholder, that is that a painting had to call someone, bring him to a halt on front of itself and hold him there as if spellbound and unable to move.

Depictions of Mao shifted from a godlike representation of his iconoclastic and 'surveilling gaze' over the Chinese people with the first-known subversive use of his image. Dal Lago's methods predominantly employ descriptive compositional interpretation, while reflecting on historical and cultural elements that heighten the analysis. Her study mapped the evolution of Mao's representation through his life, from veneration to subversion. Overall, she concludes that since the 1990s, the use of Mao as a symbol has continued to pervade Chinese visual culture. Wiseman (2011) further proposes that changes in Chinese society due to art market growth seemingly require artists to create more subversive works if they wish to be considered avant-garde.

The mapping of Mao's image by Dal Lago's study clearly shows a journey from veneration to subversion. Use of his image signifies ideological change; this is done through employing methods such as compositional interpretation to read the artworks. Dal Lago (1999) and Galikoski (1990) refer to reading the artwork through identifying

similarities between Mao portraiture and European religious paintings. The combination of constructing knowledge through compositional and semiotic interpretation assists ways of mapping the new symbolism and the GMH phenomenon's trajectory in the digital age.

## **Evaluation of An Xiao Mina's Studies of Internet Memes in China: Integrating Digital Ethnography**

Recent visual methodological concerns are documented by many scholars in the digital age. This includes Banks (2001), Pink (2007 [2001]), Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Rose (2014). Increasing interest in visual culture has played a pivotal role in contributing to the viability of qualitative research and visual methodologies (Pink, 2013). These contemporary inquiries extend the ways in which we look and select methodologies. Current exploration is further complicated by disciplinary and interdisciplinary concerns that have resulted from applying methodologies that were not specific to that field. To navigate the visual material in this thesis, methodologies reflect an interdisciplinary perspective. This is because I examine visual forms in both art and design in online and offline contexts. I define 'interdisciplinary' as research that synthesises ideas and ways of knowing from divergent disciplines to unravel truths and reveal cultural keys.

The *Journal of Visual Culture* for December 2014 was dedicated to internet memes. The journal explores interdisciplinary visual culture studies and is a forum for scholars to engage and explore emergent methods and phenomena in the field. This particular issue included the GMH in An Xiao Mina's 'Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China'. The article highlights methodological frameworks that examine internet memes within visual culture. Mina (2014) uses a case study approach with *Chen Guangcheng*, one of the most heavily censored topics on the Chinese internet from 2011 to 2012. Mina's approach is reflective, drawing on her skills as a writer, researcher and scholar, including journalistic methods and tools. She examines participatory internet culture and the social and political changes instigated by memes. In this way, Mina uses what I call digital ethnography (as outlined by Hine [2000]), where the internet is a place—a 'cyberspace'—where a researcher can examine a community. Other ways to explore



online activity include what Bryman (2012) refers to as *lurking*, where the researcher observes, reads content and conducts analysis, but does not participate. Here the participants are not aware of the researcher's presence. Bryman (2012, 659) observes that:

[i]t is likely that these distinctions between online and offline will become less significant as younger people who grow up with the internet conduct larger portions of their lives online. This development would have considerable implications for social researchers, since for many research participants the online world may become very naturalistic.

Mina (2014) discusses the challenges present when researching such swiftly moving online cultural forms. This is due to the memes' evasiveness and how rapidly they transform and propagate. Her field notes outline that she collects and analyses the memes and their changing forms as best she can. This online fluidity resonates with Bauman's term 'liquid culture' that evokes the slipperiness of memes and their transient and temporal nature. This temporality is particularly important when examining internet spaces that are surveilled and content-swept excessively. In particular, this is relevant when the surveillance is greater in relation to elements that do not fit a nation's ideological beliefs. From a cross-cultural perspective, Mina's studies examine the online manifestation and transmissions of internet memes. The research for this thesis extends this focus, documenting the emergence of memes, their meanings and manifestations and how they have become embedded in visual culture. Memes have extended their communication value in both online and offline contexts.

### **Extending Methods of Constructing Meaning**

This study examines symbolic meanings and the construction and application of internet memes in Chinese culture. It also looks at how these symbols have entered offline visual culture. As Kress and Hodge (1979) note, language is integral to the construction of social reality. A researcher's epistemological stance will explain 'how we know what we know' (Crotty 1998, 3). The approach selected for this study is constructivism. Here, knowledge is co-constructed through online and offline sampling and analysis. As (Jones, Torres and Armininio 2006, 5) suggest, constructivism epistemological positions are a place where '[r]esearch truths are created together through interaction in the community'. In this study, visual images created through online communities will be reviewed to gain an understanding of new symbolism by analysing online and offline

visual forms. Within constructivism, the researcher seeks and generates multiple readings through ‘interpretation’ (Jones, Torres and Armininio 2006, 5). I have selected qualitative research methods using Dal Lago’s theoretical framework and the methods of compositional interpretation as a foundation. As outlined earlier in this thesis, Dal Lago’s (1999) research into the use of Mao’s image illustrates the visual shift in uses of his image. This methodological framework employs compositional interpretation and semiotics. Through these methods, I examine the GMH lexicon, a series of homophonic internet memes that emerged from online communities in 2009. I do this to uncover if these symbols have entered offline visual culture and if they are used and recognised as symbols of political dissent and subversion.

Lather (2006) believes that contemporary researchers experience paradigm proliferation. She encourages researchers to indulge themselves in divergent and multiple ways of knowing. This thesis includes field notes and observations, as discussed in Mina’s 2011 and 2014 studies into internet memes. My documentation process includes screen shots (as evidence) observations and ‘lurking’ (Bryman 2012) in online forums and internet sites such as YouTube. These collection methods build a dataset of visual forms for analysis. In reviewing and analysing the symbols, I map and dissect their meaning and suggest interpretation use and appropriate contextual application within visual culture. In doing so, I uncover the evolution of the symbols and their potency. This interpretation and way/s of analysis may be applied in art and design and extended into culture and internet studies regarding how digital visual forms enter offline art, design and commodification. Most, but not all of the symbols remain online. Some are more prolific and can be seen in galleries, and even bedrooms in the form of plush toys or in public on t-shirts.

What is essential in this study is that Chinese visual culture is more broadly understood and visualised for a global audience. In this way, we can unravel the ‘layers of knowledge or ways of knowing’ (Pink 2013, 3). Additionally, the claim that the GMH lexicon is entering offline art and design culture as a new visual grammar is supported. This process represents a new visual culture movement signifying freedom of expression in China.

## Semiotic Analysis

The initial memes in this study exist in diverse forms and are predominantly disseminated online. In terms of analysing the multimodal visual forms in this thesis, semiology offers a rich vocabulary for reading signs and symbols and expressing their function. To guide the analysis and decipher the underlying messages of these new symbols, semiotic theory is used as an initial foundation. As Rose (2014, 105) explains:

Semiology offers a very full box of analytical tools for taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to the broader systems of meaning. Semiology is also influential as an approach to interpreting the materials of visual culture because it draws upon the work of several major theorists whose impact on the social sciences since the 1960s has been immense.

Through a synthesis of methods that build understanding of the evolution of the GMH phenomenon. As the data sample includes many forms, it is crucial to include semiotics in the analysis; otherwise, how do we know when a GMH is a GMH? Kress and van Leeuwen (2014) believe that truths are constructed through ‘symbiosis’; thus, semiotics can construct meaning:

[a] social semiotic theory of truth cannot claim to establish the absolute truth or untruth of representations. It can only show whether a given proposition (visual, verbal or otherwise) is represented as true or not. From the point of view of social semiotics, truth is a construct of symbiosis, and as such the truth of a particular social group arises from the values and beliefs of that group. As long as the message forms an apt expression of these beliefs communication proceeds in an unremarkable ‘felicitous’ fashion (Kress and van Leeuwen 2014, 154).

Rose (2014) proposes a clear framework to identify visual forms for analysis: **connotive**—‘carrying higher levels of meaning’; **metonymic**—‘the type of sign that is associated with something else’; **synecdochal**—‘the sign is standing in for something, or representing a part’ (Rose 2014, 122). In this way, the researcher decides what the signs are. Once they are identified, the researcher can then consider what they signify in themselves. Once this is established, the signs’ connections (and the connections to the connections) to wider systems of meaning—from codes to ideologies—can be explored. Finally, the researcher returns the signs via their codes finding connections to connections to explore the precise articulation of ideology and mythology.

The limitations of semiology for this study may be that the ‘ontological lens’ of the researcher is ‘Western’. Thus, the signs and what they signify must be considered in the context of the culture and value system from which they derive. However, Rose’s approach lends itself to exploring the GMH lexicon, from online meme manifestation to the broader contexts of offline usage. This is particularly relevant when returning the signs via their coded messages, further exploring the precise articulation that relates to shifting ideology by using mythology.

### **Compositional Interpretation and Multimodal Textual Analysis**

Compositional interpretation can describe both art and design. It has been applied to many images and icons, such as Mao Zedong. Compositional interpretation complements further analysis, breaking down and deconstructing visual elements. It also deciphers the meanings of online and offline phenomena, including still images, video animation, graphics, artworks and commodities. In terms of reading images as compositions, the term ‘multimodal text’ has been used by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, 177):

Composition then, relates the representational and interactive meanings of the image to each other through three interrelated systems:

**Information Value.** The placement of the elements (participants and syntagms that relate them to each other and then to the viewer) endows them with the specific informational values attached to the various ‘zones’ of the image.

**Saliency.** The elements (participants as well as representational and interactive syntagms) are made to attract the viewer’s attention to different degrees, as realized by such factors as placement in the foreground or back ground, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or colour), differences in sharpness, etc.

**Framing.** The presence or absence of framing devices (realised by elements which create dividing lines, or by actual frame lines) disconnects or connects the elements of the image, signifying that they belong or do not belong together in some sense.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 177) apply these three compositional principles not only to single images, but also to ‘composite’ or ‘multimodal’ images, such as ‘[v]isuals which combine text and image and, perhaps, other graphic elements, be it on a page or on a television or computer screen’. These methods of analysis are flexible and dynamic ways of reading a diverse range of visual forms. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 4) note

that ‘visual language is not—despite assumptions to the contrary—transparent and universally understood; it is culturally specific’. Compositional interpretation has its limitations. The interpretive elements include colour and meaning, due to the ‘ontological lens’ of the Western researcher, whose salience may be affected. What these methods do provide is a set of descriptors that may be applied ‘universally’ to images intended for online and offline viewing contexts. These compositional principles complement other methodologies; together, they can lead to deeper ways of knowing.

## **Summary**

The GMH phenomenon that emerged in 2009 may indicate a larger potential shift in Chinese visual culture, one demonstrated by the creation and retention of symbols that represent freedom of expression. Through exploring the new symbols in their multimodal visual forms, I have created a pathway for the new visual grammar to be understood more universally. I predominantly draw on the use and symbolism of the GMH to discuss the new visual grammar. Qualitative research methodologies are used to analyse, decipher and map the phenomenon. A synthesis of methods used to test these claims includes digital ethnography, semiotics, compositional interpretation and multimodal analysis. By deciphering and exploring this gap in knowledge pertaining to the symbolic lexicon, this thesis will increase understanding of the evolution and meaning within Chinese visual culture. It also aims to inform broader systems of knowing. The synthesis of methods provides insights into why and how new symbols are used within visual culture to subvert dominant ideologies and encourage freedom of expression. By exploring an emergent and subversive set of symbols, I identify that some symbols lose potency and circulation. This may signify a new movement or renaissance in twenty-first century Chinese visual culture, where only the most potent symbols will remain.

## Chapter Five: Findings and Analysis

This chapter details the findings from the data and offers an analysis. It incorporates information on research sampling and data collection methods and processes. In addition, it includes an analysis of GMH symbolism and offers suggestions about how these symbols enter offline art and design. Ten original memes—the 10 Mythological Creatures shown in Chapter Two—are documented on *Baidu Baike* (now preserved in Wikipedia) and CDT online. These 10 original Mythological Creatures are described interchangeably throughout this thesis as the GMH Phenomenon and GMH Lexicon. Some of the original memes will be identified and described in relation to their compositional, multimodal and semiotic interpretations through a synthesis that also employs digital ethnography. The methods engaged to explore the symbols lend themselves to analysis in online and offline contexts. The data will then be used to focus on the most popular meme, the GMH, and discuss how this has evolved visually over time from 2009 to 2017. It will then help determine how this symbol may signify a shift in Chinese ideology.

This comprehensive chapter offers the content analysis results in three separate parts. Each part examines symbols from the data sample; these are identified and described in detail. Appropriately, the use of visual categories informs the data collection and methods. Thus, I map the symbols' evolutionary path, and so begin the analysis with the first-known viral video that entered the English-speaking arena via *YouTube*. Further, towards the end of the chapter, the way that these symbols work in relation to different types, or multimodal representation, is examined and discussed.

As stated, the analysis focuses on the most popular symbol in the lexicon: the GMH. The other symbols in the lexicon similarly play on the use of profanities, mostly 'juvenile puns for curse words or genitalia' (Martinsen 2009). However, the findings show that the other symbols in the 10 Mythological Creatures lexicon may not continue to propagate. The GMH symbol (as discussed throughout this thesis) resembles an alpaca. Initially an online symbol created following an anti-vulgarity campaign on the Chinese internet, the GMH has now made appearances offline through art and design. Propagated through online viralness and memes, it is also seen in commodities or associated merchandise, including plush toys, cups, alarm clocks, t-shirts and WeChat

emoji such as Choco Milk Alpaca. The number of visual representations is staggering, and there is no sign of either decreased use or propagation. A Google search on 10 July 2015 for the GMH from Melbourne, Australia, yielded a result of 807,000 hits. If I enter it using *Cao Ni Ma* (alphabetised Chinese *pinyin*) I receive 1,030,000 results. *Baidu* (the Chinese search engine equivalent of Google) results in 46,700 hits and in *pinyin* 9,670,000 hits. The mythical creature continues to roam free on the internet, both in the English and Chinese language cyberspheres, with Google yielding more results. Recent Google searches in 2016 resulted in significantly lower hits: on 5 August 2016, a GMH search revealed 667,000.

Keyword searches for this thesis were undertaken in both English and Chinese (*pinyin*) alphabetised Chinese (*Cao Ni Ma*). As a result, the study is predominately a digital exploration of the GMH found by Google and *Baidu* search engines. Keyword searches in English and *pinyin* yield and collate data through visual forms; this is the departure point for a visual analysis of the GMH lexicon. As shown in Figure 22, Google has categories for varying forms of representation. This study has found this a very useful method of collating and reflecting on samples for analysis.



Source: www. Google.com keyword search. Accessed May 2017.

### **Figure 22. ‘Grass Mud Horse’ Keyword Search**

Symbols and ideology that reflect social transition in China have been explored by scholars, including Zhao and Belk (2008) and Lane (1981). Some of these studies are based on Barthes’ theory about the role myth plays in reflecting socialist propaganda schemas. In particular, in Zhao and Belk’s (2008) study, these visual narratives function to relay collective ideologies and social values that deliver hope to the masses during times of social change. The GMH, I argue, represents a new symbolism in twenty-first century online participatory culture in mainland China. Therefore, it signals a shift in symbolism and ideology, as the symbol moves into offline spheres.



This analytical chapter is dedicated to the GMH. It may from time to time include an analysis of some other symbols that continue to propagate visual narratives online as a part of the lexicon. At times, two symbols appear in the one video/meme/or frame of an artwork. I suggest these symbols are the hero and the anti-hero. Thus, the GMH and the River Crab's values remain substantially strong in online and offline contexts, as they appear to represent opposing ideological viewpoints. The data and analysis will focus however on the most popular meme, the GMH. Discussion will centre on how this meme has evolved visually over time between 2009 and 2017 and on how it is a potent carrier of ideas. I conclude with the argument and analysis that this symbol has evolved from being politically charged to one that carries collective grassroots solidarity and then moves to become a softer power. Ultimately, it is broadly acknowledged as signifying freedom of expression, a signifier that has evolved from the Chinese internet into offline spheres.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first draws on the data and relates the phenomena's genesis: internet symbols and online symbolism. These symbols may be temporal and fleeting, such as memes and viral videos. They are also fragile and surveilled, but are vital as they are experimental processes of co-creation and online collaboration. The second section explains the transition and evolution of the symbolism and the meaning being created through these processes. Certain works reflect important shifts in ideology. The third section focuses on online/offline symbolism in design and commodification. Of particular interest is the evolution of the GMH as a symbol and its retention in visual culture. Initially used to cleverly circumnavigate Chinese internet censorship policies in 2009, it has now become a heroic metaphor—symbolising a fight for freedom of expression. Not only has this symbol pervaded online portals in China and globally, it has also entered offline spheres, extending its communication value. This multimodal representation of the GMH phenomenon can be seen in commodities and merchandise, such as t-shirts, coffee cups, apps and emoticons, as well as visual art exhibited in galleries. The three sections map the genesis of memes as cultural replicators that reflect values and belief systems. This chapter continues to explore online visual symbols and map their trajectory into other visual forms and modes of representation. By following the digital flow of these online cultural replicators, I demonstrate a new way of knowing that transcends online-born symbolism into offline representation.

## Section 1: Online Visual Forms, New Symbolism and Analysis

Meanings and symbols may be fleeting, temporal and surveilled on the Chinese internet, but they are vital to the genesis of the symbols, as these are experimental processes of co-creation and online collaboration. This first section introduces samples of online memes and viral videos that use GMH symbolism to uncover meanings and extend ways of knowing.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKx1aenJK08>; YouTube screenshot. Accessed 17 May 2015.

**Figure 23. Song of the Grass Mud Horse**

The viral video and internet meme ‘Song of the Grass Mud Horse’ (*Cao Ni Ma*) was disseminated via social media in China and became known to the English-speaking world and online communities through YouTube (which is banned in mainland China) soon after. The video was reported in *The New York Times* in 2009, enabling English-speaking internet users to enter the online narrative. During the period of observation for this research, *Song of the Grass Mud Horse* viewing hits grew and by 2 April 2016, it had received 333,943 views. Current comments total 320, which far exceeds those for any other GMH videos on YouTube. These numbers suggest that this video has had the broadest reception, reaction and distribution of any GMH video on YouTube.

The following comments are taken from the YouTube comments field; usernames for this study have been replaced by numerical reference. (Any spelling or grammatical errors are as written in the YouTube comments field.)

1. What a brilliant and original way to protest against censorship.

2. trump is going to be in my town and im going to play this super loud so every one of his supporters hear it.
3. From a linguistic standpoint, this meme is genius because there is a whole Chinese Ligature character, with a seal script form, for the name of this meme xD
4. Next China will ban your mom. Stupid tyrannical communist state. And I'm Chinese of ethnicity and thank God I'm not from China.
5. I remember the time back in high school when Grass Mud-Horsing President Hu started Internet Grass Crab and blocked YouTube and stuffs, we sang this song while our national anthem was playing lol
6. Best video of 2k 17
7. 草is Grass 泥is Mud 馬is Horse
8. This video was as a response to the Chinese government when doing a antivulgarity campaign on the internet. They forced ISPs to 'ask for public forgiveness for the indecent content they had provided'
9. My favorite part is 'Wo shi yi zi Cao Ni Ma' in that edited high pitch voice. Even direct translation into English is funny. 'I am a Fuck Your Mum'
10. I first saw this in the Hungry Beast video. But they only showed the English translation at first. I screwed up and translate it in my head to 'cao ma ni' could not understand what was so interesting. Then they saw the video, literally fell off my chair. Damn my chinese is terrible and my surname is Wong.
11. If you think the Chinese are different from you, or anyone in the world, this video proves you're dead wrong. The internet is the most powerful, most important tool humans have ever made. We can communicate at light speed, with absolutely anyone on Earth. Government cannot, and will not EVER be able to adapt to it. Government is an idea that because we can't communicate with other cultures, we must have our own set of rules. This no longer stands true, and the countdown to failure is here.

12. sigh,,, look at all the chinese experts with their great logic. chinese guy: i am from china and lived a great life, have lots of freedom, have all the luxuries you have. 'chinese expert': no, you make 1 cent per day and live horribly depressed lives, thats what the news source in my country tells me, what you don't believe me? you are so brainwashed!

The comments reveal a diverse range of ideas. Further, expanding the Western perspective on visual analysis, some commentators have a Chinese name or even clearly state they are Chinese; for example, #5, # 11 and # 12. The content is sensitive and political. As discussed in previous chapters, the creators of the video are anonymous. Due to the sensitivity of the content however, many participants are willing to identify themselves by their YouTube user name and leave a comment regarding their personal reactions or interpretations of this video. From the comments, and looking at the username as an indicator, it appears that the community leaving comments are mostly from countries other than China. This interpretation is only gleaned from their YouTube username and by reading the comments field. In this way, I am able to interpret the data to verify my claims in the visual reading of the video, further supported by the literature regarding the symbol's linguistic and visual manifestation. Data pooled from the comments field are directly related to the visual material, thus enabling a broad analysis.

Further examination for a future study may enable more in depth data, such as user age and country of origin. However, for this study I am mapping the evolution of the symbol over time, online and offline. Thus, the current data are sufficient for my analysis. Interviews were considered in the early design for this study, but as seen from the comments field, this form of curious exchange has great potential. Participants on the YouTube forum offer their comments freely. There is also a to-and-fro exchange of ideas regarding interpretation, which is a cross-cultural perception due to a global misunderstanding of Chinese cultural realities. The above-listed comments are time-coded from under a year ago in January 2017. It is interesting that one participant also relates this *F\*\*\* your mother* concept to President Donald Trump. The meme is translatable across cultures, and has the power to critique a state's power, highlighting the 'connection' made through visual forms cross-culturally.

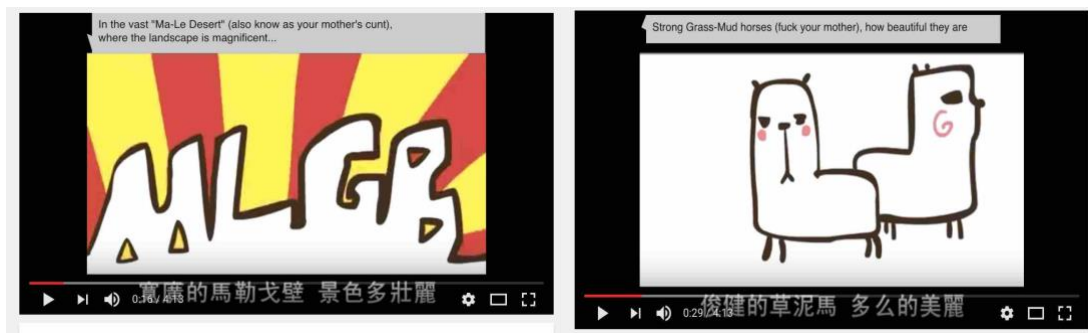
The YouTube video was the first viral video to be seen in the English-speaking world. Initially, it was unclear why alpacas and freedom of expression are synonymous on the

Chinese internet. The audience engage with a re-mashed/re-purposed low-fi parody, singing the modern day folkloric myth; we see buck-toothed alpaca frolicking in a desolate and arid hinterland. The viewers, without what Shifman (2014) refers to as cultural keys, cannot access the story through the symbolism alone. It is not until English speakers read the subtitles that we obtained a deeper understanding of the symbol's poetics and context, through poetic wordplay with subversive connotations. The resulting underlying message is a multi-layered narrative regarding a shift in Chinese ideology through using coded metaphor, not a trivial video and audio display propagating the new symbolism. As explained, the symbol of the alpaca is identified as a freedom of speech icon, created anonymously on the Chinese internet. Delving deeper into the narrative through karaoke or MTV subtitles, English speakers can link the visuals to the narrative to access the GMH story

The video re-mashes footage on a loop, employing slow motion, panning and close-ups of alpaca, adding to the strange romanticism. The creatures swing their long manes after running and playing freely; they salivate and chew grass, some wearing flowers behind their ears. The colour of the flowers changes from white (symbolising death in Chinese culture) to yellow and red, the colours most commonly aligned with socialist propaganda. These signs are perhaps encoded with broader ideologies that signify the shift in visual culture through online metaphors. The government's anti-pornography campaign in 2009 resulted in the creation of online communities circulating GMH related content. The subversive lyrics are sung to the melody of a digital children's chorus and is referred to as the 'Smurfs' theme song' in Chinese, adding to the parody. Homophonic wordplay in Mandarin disguises crude and symbolic metaphors, evading freedom of speech restrictions. As discussed, satire and humour are often associated with politics in visual culture, art and design in mainland China. In the face of the crackdown on pornography, the video highlights that Chinese online communities are still able, through anonymous co-creation, to communicate through code and metaphor. By creating mythologies around the GMH and representing them where they are banned, co-creators connect and articulate newfound expressions and ideologies.

The GMH heroic narratives continue to pervade YouTube and pay homage to the mythology through rap. The YouTube user *skippybentley*, who has a collection of GMH videos under his name, uploaded this version in 2009. Here it would seem that

the maker is targeting a particular demographic, as the music and animation style reflects a younger or more contemporary aesthetic.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3D2eh4xehc4> YouTube screenshot.

### Figure 24. Song of the Grass Mud Horse

‘The Grass Mud Horse Cartoon’ (rap) has had 61,299 views, with 278 likes and 14 dislikes (27 July 2016), the 46 comments reveal the video’s reception:

1. Best epic ever. Not even the Epic of Gilgamesh, Illiad and Kalevala combined compare.
2. 1: This video can be found EVERYWHERE in YouKu and Tudou 2: ‘1.3 billion people don’t have access to YouTube and never heard of it’ basically means ‘they live on the Mars’ 3: PRC now is full of capitalists and I will be glad (and curious) if you find a single Communist in China.
3. I’d like to know what each of the cartoon characters corresponds to. I have a feeling that there is a lot going on in the cartoon as well—I get that the ‘H’ in the crab is symbolic of Hu, but what is the holstein cow with big lips? The various types of riding people. Also, some of the other letters—JQ is what? The spirit leaving image with the V on each—what are those? What does it say on the hats? This video is amazing in so many ways.
4. Though I do not approve of the profanity this amounts to, I realize and applaud the spirit of resistance and freedom in it. Plus, the rap's pretty great! hahaha.
5. This is so fucking epic ... Long live the internet and the freedom in which it inherently gives to its users of free speech, they will always find a way to have their voices heard!

6. this is so touching, not because of the story itself, but because of the struggle to regain free speech in such a funny way. 我很高兴。
7. a german mainstream newspaper (spiegel) redirected me to this video. I hope u all will get back your freedom of speech! In germany sadly they are making big efforts to install uncontrollable censorship on the web, too...
8. wow, for once a country other than japan has come up with something so strange that I have been left speechless.
9. We need a translation here.

From these comments, we can speculate that the YouTube user who uploaded the video is not Chinese, nor do they read or write Chinese. One of the first comments left in the forum (as stated in #9) proclaims, '[w]e need a translation here'. It appears that the translator privately messaged skippybently to interpret the lyrics of the song. With the English lyrics later added via subtitles, a broader audience then had access to the meaning behind the video and its contribution to the GMH mythology.

This video, accompanied by an upbeat rap song, uses animated calligraphic ink brush painting in modern Chinese traditional style. Further visual elements highlight traditional Chinese symbols or signs, with the protagonists wearing Chinese PLA khaki winter hats and playing the *erhu* (traditional Chinese stringed instrument). Colour symbolism is seen in the use of red and yellow, emulating rays that are typically used in socialist propaganda schemas. In this video, the use of the emulating rays takes on a Pop Art aesthetic, as the colours radiate from behind the typography of the Male Gobi desert (MLGB). The signs and symbols contained in this animated video are more transparent than in the initial viral video; with a modern twist, they also appear more appealing, emulating 'cute' animated emoticons. The video's appeal is perhaps aimed at a younger generation, or has been created by that generation. The creator's identity is unknown; as stated, all videos in the analysis have been collected on this dedicated YouTube channel, collated by skippybently. The viral videos are created anonymously in this way to avoid 'ownership,' drawing on online participation and co-creation. Subtitles are included for English-speaking/reading viewers, which in turn broadens the audience base cross-culturally. The narrative has more depth than the previous video and the English subtitles reflect the action. The Crab symbol is used in this video and as



discussed symbolises the CCP. The crabs are seen devouring the fresh grass, further ‘harmonising’ the freedom of the GMH in the (fictional) Ma-la Gobi Desert (Mother’s C...t). While the two videos described differ in style and execution, both incorporate common symbols, either visually or textually represented. The alpaca and crab in both narrative mythologies elevate the GMH to a heroic status, leaving the Crab as an opponent who must be defeated.

The use of and need for English subtitles is interesting. I speculate that the initial creator of the video/s was a Chinese internet user in mainland China, where they would not have had English subtitles. The video was shared and propagated through online social networking in China until it was removed from that sphere. Skippybentley catalogued the video/s before they were removed from the internet in China. These claims are based on constructivist epistemology (Crotty 1998), where inquiry into knowledge is jointly constructed through examining the social and political reality in mainland China. These ideas are further explored through Jones, Torres and Armininio’s (2006) constructivist approach, where knowledge is gathered through interpretation. Considering the archival purposes of taking content off Chinese search engines and online spaces, perhaps skippybentley added the English subtitles to reach a more global audience. In this way, the video would be evidence of the phenomena, catalogued on a known and secure global website. The YouTube website then becomes a carrier of historical documents, a library of social and cultural forms, truths and folklores. Users can become documenters and if one is pre-emptive enough, in countries where freedom of information is limited and/or surveilled, it is possible to upload documents/images/videos to secure networks that enable shared social and cultural forms and enable this visual culture to be disseminated to a global audience.

Skippybentley has catalogued 12 GMH videos from 2009 and stored them on *YouTube*. The name skippybentley suggests an Australian identity (a kangaroo, if one were to give this *YouTube* user an animal). The gender could be either male or female, although Bentley may be associated with a male, it is also the name of a university in the US (Bentley University in Massachusetts). To date, there have been no academic references found that can identify this user, other than that the person has an interest in the GMH phenomenon. One could hypothesise that this user may be of Chinese descent and is aware of the importance of capturing, cataloguing and historicising these videos that

document significant Chinese cultural shifts. As stated, the sensitive material moves swiftly; thus, if not catalogued or screenshots taken, the videos are deleted from Chinese online portals. This highlights the importance of screenshots and the documentation of online phenomenon in China, where rigorous censorship surveillance exists. It is crucial to document historic visual forms that generate a new visual grammar and perhaps signify ideological change.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9YFko9nKmk> YouTube screenshot.

**Figure 25. Grass Mud Horse Sweet Child Version**

‘Grass Mud Horse sweet child’ version employs a similar visual style of animation as the previous animation; this video is also catalogued in skippybentley’s suite on YouTube. As noted, the creator is not named. One could suggest that the animator here is the same person who created the ‘Grass Mud Horse rap version’, with the animation in a similar calligraphic ink brush stroke that gives form and animates the ‘cute’ creatures in the video. The GMH is in the centre of the compositional frame, with socialist-style rays radiating outwards from the hero. This video employs a colour palette that is not socialist, but uses the red, white and blue colours commonly associated with the US. This is also accentuated by the use of 5-pointed star elements. These are not the 5-pointed communist star, but are those seen on the stars and stripes of the US flag. The GMH is securely framed and central within these radiating, emulating rays. The positioning emphasises a double centrality within another framing device, a bold red and white polka dotted cursive and ornate frame. The video uses the same audio soundtrack, (the Smurfs’ theme song with adapted lyrics); again, the children’s chorus sing a high-pitched rendition of ‘The Song of the Grass Mud Horse’. The horse waves its arms and motions in a cheeky and provocative manner as we enter the video. We see a white screen-wipe transition from left to right before the titles appear. To the left of frame, we see what appears to be a brown and white spotted cow next to a sign. Through the compositional positioning, the cow appears to be thinking about being

somewhere else; to the right of the frame we see palm trees, a sun and the ocean. These symbols are globally recognisable and perhaps symbolise an idyllic dream or holiday. Suddenly, three characters pop up from the background to reveal themselves as three bikini- and tutu-clad GMHs; they dance and make way for the cheerleader GMH rabbits. The outfits of the creatures are pink, and the choice of clothing genders these dancers in the 'binary sense' as female. The cheerleaders wear singlet tops with MLGB Ma Le Go Bi desert. As previously outlined, 'Mother's vagina' reiterates the gender choice for this character.

In the following shot, the GMH appears in close-up on the bottom right of the frame. He/she is chocolate brown and pink-cheeked and has a leaf sprouting from his mane. A flurry of swirly trees blooms and reveals red berries as we see the GMHs collecting in the bottom left-hand corner of the frame. Words of revolution are changed and there seems to be a battle between parties in the video. As the calm GMH eats grass, angry-faced people and a man with an Elvis-style quiff appear, swearing. The GMHs protect bales of grass in their red underpants. The red underpants may signify that they still belong to mainland China, but wish to eat grass (grazing on the open internet). The River Crab is seen with green grass in his pincers; he is defeated and surrounded by a herd of GMHs. They are innocent-looking; two are presented with ribbons around their neck. Finally, the cluster of GMHs forms a pyramid, a triangle with love hearts punctuating the frame on either side. The triangular compositional formation here signifies strength and the heroic collective stay together. The symbolism has much potential for future gender and sexuality studies; however, this is beyond the scope of this particular study. The video brims with a symbolism that reflects a duality and a world spirit while narrating the GMH story.

## Soybean Grass Mud Horse Song



Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hl4IuJo\\_FzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hl4IuJo_FzU) YouTube screenshots.

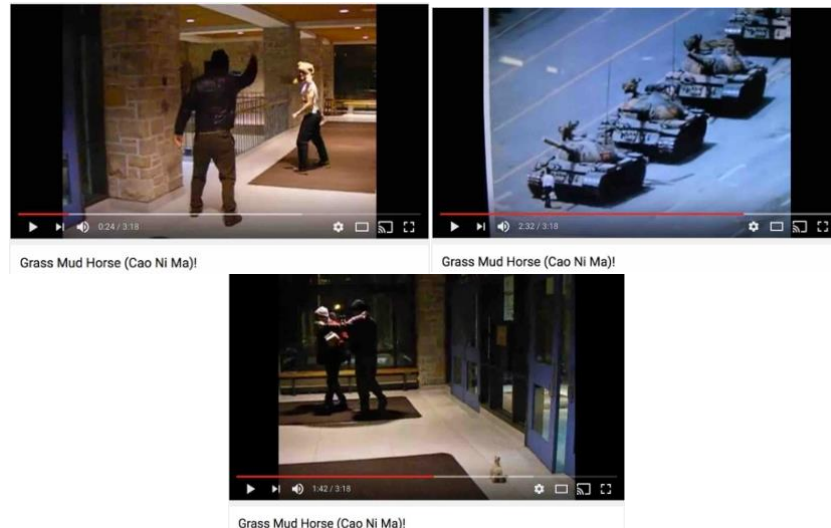
### Figures 26a, 26b, 26c. Soybean Grass Mud Horse

The calligraphic ink brush animations continue with ‘Soybean Grass Mud Horse’. This is another video uploaded by skippybentley in the same style as the previous two animations. This video uses a different audio soundtrack, but the visual elements remain the focus of this analysis. The characters are drawn in black ink; the visual style situates the characters in a white background. The protagonist shouts out and then hits the delete button on a computer. In the next frame, we see a girl wearing a GMH hat singing happily. We then see the GMH and a protector (a caretaker), perhaps in the form of a small man. The following sequences present a new look for the GMH, one that has not been seen in other viral videos on *YouTube*. The GMH wears protective red clothing and a yellow symbol painted on its hind leg.

As outlined previously, the colour symbolism associated with socialist propaganda uses red and yellow as discussed in Chapter 3. These colours resonate in rays emanating from the hero in the centre of the composition. Red in Chinese culture is considered a prosperous colour and is used in many traditional festivals and celebrations: red lanterns and red firecrackers; red bracelets worn by students before an exam; and the red scarf worn by children of CCP officials. Costume changes are frequent in this video and thus the colour and composition move swiftly. In the next frame, the character wears a new outfit that resembles British military attire with a helmet. The superficial guises cloak the philosophies of online censorship. The diverse attire may symbolise that the GMH as freedom fighter could be anyone.

The costume morphing continues and next we see what appears to be a spoof of the Beijing Olympic characters in the shape of a GMH. The GMHs group together in a triangular formation displaying the variety of community; they stand strong and united. The small man then swipes at a ghost, saying ‘*fu ke yu*’ (*pinyin* wordplay that sounds like a similar English phrase). An animated ghost figure then manifests into a butterfly leading into a ‘Manga style’ pornographic anime accompanied by the sound of a woman’s orgasmic sigh. This ensemble of sound and image sends a strong message of resistance through parody to the online anti-pornography campaign. Reference is made to the other 10 Mythological Creatures. Regarding *Fu Ke Yu* (*Fǎ Kè Yóu*), the tones when spoken suggest the intended meaning. It is said that the squids exhibit deviant behaviour (*Baidu Baike* in Wikipedia) and the Small Elegant Butterfly (*Yǎ Miè Dié*) is a reference to Japanese eromania, linking the symbols to themes connected to broader GMH mythologies and resistance. McLelland (2005) suggests that *hentai* in Japanese or *ero* Manga, refers to a Manga style anime with sexual content. *Hentai* or ‘eromania’ (as described in Wikipedia) then is used to refer to unusual or perverse sexual situations in the Manga style. In this ‘eromania’ style, we see the GMHs again as superheroes with a small man as the paparazzi. In the final scenes, the GMH is chewing green grass and the video ends with the Crab (*hexie*) being sliced in half and destroyed. In the next frame, we see the GMHs again as superheroes, as the small man with a video camera shoots them. This video shares a common narrative with other viral videos on *YouTube* uploaded by *skippybently*. Notably, the GMH in the videos discussed thus far is depicted as a hero and always defeats the River Crab.

Moving away from the *skippybently* suite of *YouTube* videos, I have selected user *Tannerw29*’s ‘Grass Mud Horse (Caonima)!’ Notably, only one comment was made regarding this video from six years ago—‘fake!!’. Considering the wordplay associated with this phenomenon, this is also difficult to interpret. One of the creatures in the lexicon is *Fa Ke Yu*. Thus, the reading of this word ‘fake’ is ambiguous.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqzBaY0oEOg&t=2s> YouTube screenshot.

### **Figures 27a, 27b, 27c. ‘Grass Mud Horse’ (*Cao Ni Ma!*)**

This video, unlike the others discussed, is a short film with actors. It is set in what appears to be a university campus, near to and using the library and surrounds. It begins with a pan from left to right where we see a beanie-clad protagonist guarding a door when another actor approaches wearing a hat that resembles a GMH fluffy bonnet. We can then assume that the actor with the bonnet is a GMH and the protagonist represents censors (literally a gatekeeper). There are several attempts to enter the doorway, although the guard in a black beanie blocks every one of them. There is pushing and shoving and finally the GMH character leaves the area.

The video is a re-enactment of the dance of online censorship surveillance in mainland China. The black beanie symbolises the censors. The GMH character wears a white t-shirt and a fluffy (alpaca-like) bonnet. The GMH character contemplates a course of action. While thinking about ways to enter the gate, we see him sculpting a ball of clay, which finally manifests into a GMH effigy. He adds the final touches to the completed effigy by adding grass. We then see the deity complete and as if the energy from the maker’s hands give the effigy life, the clay GMH starts radiating and omitting lightning bolts of energy. With this creation in his hands, he now has the power to open the doors that were previously locked to him.

The GMH enters the building, leaping past the security guards and alarms. The footage is jerky and emulates the GMH’s perspective, moving with him on his path to freedom. Viewers explore the corridors beyond the gate of the building with him as he heads

towards the computer lab. Once inside the computer lab, we see the blue screen light of the Windows icon and then the Google icon (Google is banned in mainland China). The GMH then conducts an online search for ‘Tiananmen’ and discovers images of tanks. The camera zooms in on the army tanks and then back onto the GMH’s face looking at the screen. An alarm rings out and we are then presented with a crab on the computer screen. As discussed, the crab symbolises the censors and the force of the CCP. The GMH is captured; the guard in the black beanie grabs and pulls apart the effigy and moulds him back into a ball of clay. The video then cuts to a close-up of the guard’s face laughing with delight. On a black screen, we are left with the hip-hop music that was playing throughout the video with the following text on the screen:

The river crab triumphs today ...

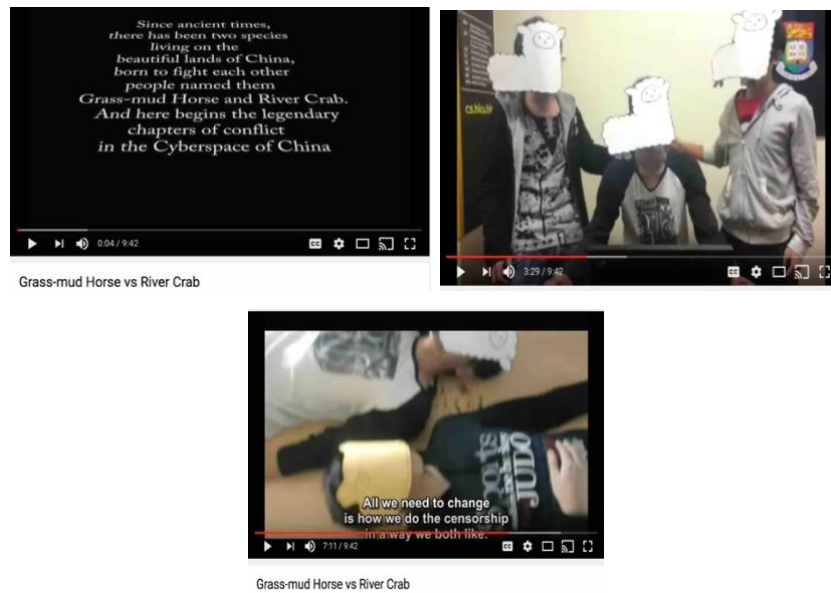
But the great Mud Horse’s Spirit is Indomitable ...

Finally, we are left with the ball of clay as it radiates blue lightning bolts of energy, as thunder roars, and the screen fades to black. Using actors is a new strategy to narrate the story of the GMH.

The next video in the analysis portrays the realities of online censorship in mainland China and how it not only affects mainland Chinese, but also the Chinese in Hong Kong. This video does this by using satire and humour, although the message is political and powerful. It is made by what appears to be a group of university students from Hong Kong University. This Cyber Societies Group uploaded the ‘Grass Mud Horse vs River Crab’ in the name of YouTube user Wang Kyme. The video was uploaded and published on 27 November 2012. The number of views is quite low considering the potent narrative, with only 529 views as of 23 March 2017. The video has received three YouTube thumbs up and one comment:

This is only a compromise towards censorship. I am helping my classmate go through the GFW by selling them cheap proxy, and I am proud to do this against the Communist party. you piece of shit, river crab-er





Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTT\\_3jrS9T8&t=268s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTT_3jrS9T8&t=268s) YouTube screenshots.

### **Figures 28a, 28b, 28c. Grass Mud Horse vs River Crab**

As seen in the comment, the video tells a story that this user can relate to. Due to the nature and sensitivity of the issues discussed in this video, I claim that other YouTube users have viewed the video, but were not prepared to leave a comment. YouTube users have to login if they wish to generate content or leave a comment, thus revealing their YouTube identity. This aspect of YouTube renders the videos less open for discussion and analysis. As a result, many users living inside or outside China may not wish to comment, due to heavy censorship and associated value systems. It can be seen from the lack of comments that even in an ‘open’ online resource such as YouTube, people are still not prepared to speak freely. This may result in conflict with the ‘harmonious’ values of the CCP.

Despite this, the Hong Kong University students have created a video that cleverly and realistically iterates the realities of living in China under internet censorship. They made a 9:42 minute video, employing a simple narrative and amateur acting skills. The video touches on the current realities of being online in China and Hong Kong while outlining the differences and implications for both locations. They give examples of language that is censored and act out the ramifications of using key words and language deemed ‘inharmonious’. The students visualise the process of censorship through a narrative of personal daily life. To show the effect on an individual in mainland China as opposed to Hong Kong, they use characters that come from the two different regions, clearly

referring to the one party, two-system rule. This video begins with a black screen and white text simulating the credits of *Star Wars*.



Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTT\\_3jrS9T8&t=268s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTT_3jrS9T8&t=268s) YouTube screenshot.

### **Figure 29. Grass-mud-Horse vs River Crab**

The text reads:

Since ancient times,  
  
there have been two species living on the  
  
beautiful lands of China,  
  
born to fight each other people named them  
  
Grass Mud Horse and River Crab.  
  
And here begin the legendary chapters  
  
of conflict in the Cyberspace of China

The music is dramatic and has a momentum that builds suspense. It does this by integrating the visual cues used in film, such as credits or the narrator's role. Text (in the form of subtitles) is used even though the actors speak in English. The filmmaker obviously wants to create a meaning that is clear to native speakers of English. The subtitles then act as a bridge, so that the broader audience can form a cohesive understanding of the narrative. For the analysis of this video, I will also include the

transcript supplied in it. With these two elements, interpretation will be undertaken in relation to the textual and visual narrative, and its symbolism.

The audio is in English, but the makers of the video have chosen to include English subtitles as follows: (Note that the text here is as given in the video; as such, grammatical and other errors are included.)

Hey the new apple store is open this year let's go there together

See this Sunday is June 4<sup>th</sup>, let's go there

Hey stop!

The clash of values

Resistance and Compromise

Cyber societies Group T5 presents

Grass Mud Crab vs River Crab

It begins with the parallel story of a girl from Hong Kong

And a boy from mainland China, who are both attending a friend's birthday

On June 4<sup>th</sup>

There is a discussion regarding work, and then finally the young couples go to the party. Later we see the girl on her computer wanting to share the events of the evening in a Facebook post:

'It was such an awesome party on the 4<sup>th</sup> June, let me share this on Facebook with my friends'. 'Oh, I've got a few replies from my friends!'

Well ... as for the mainland boy the experience isn't that pleasant

‘hey let me share the party on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June!’ Immediately the river crabs jump up and attack him ‘Don’t you know this is against the law!?’ ‘You will be censored’

(he is dragged away from his computer)

Subtitles: After an hour ... when he finally recovered from the shock...

‘I’m so angry I was just censored! I have to share it’. ‘Hey... my friend has sent me a link. Well let’s see it! Oh great, I can get rid of the Great Firewall now!’

The visuals show him surfing freely online with a GMH symbol attached to his head. He laughs maniacally as he is joined by other GMHs. Here, the audience realises that when the boy clicked on the link he was sent, he could break through the firewall. Perhaps a VPN address or proxy server allows netizens to use sites that are banned in mainland China, such as Facebook and YouTube.

A mash-up of appropriated images from many interrelated sources is used, including the French Croatian Squid (*Fǎ Kè Yóu*), the Great Wall, a censor stamp, a person leaping and a Matrix binary code. This is overlaid with text:

Frustrated by the inconvenience that the censorship had brought on he joined the Grass Mud Horses.

The photographic montage of the other GMH lexicon symbols merge and are animated across the screen. We are then given text that relates the story of the GMH and the power struggle over freedom of expression on the internet:

More and more Chinese netizens are resisting and expressing their anger by breaking through the Great Firewall or using euphemism to circumvent keyword censorship. However, the River Crabs, too, have realized what’s happening and would not overlook it

There is then a cut-away to the masked River Crab character that relays the following message:

Okay stupid Grass Mud Horses! This is your ultimatum! What you’re doing now secretly, climbing over walls and using euphemisms in forums, are seriously undermining the government! This is your last chance! If you don’t

stop those actions, we will have to eliminate you! I repeat, this is the ultimatum!

Three GMHs sit and watch television. We only see their backs with the paper GMH masks facing us. They discuss the following:

Oh my god, the River Crabs in TV show just said something rubbish! River Crabs just like to hate the wrong things we do, and do not let people to talk about sensitive issues. The censorship censors and filters information in the internet. Because of this rubbish censorship, I cannot express my ideas and post comments freely in the forum or blog. What's more, it seriously affects my daily life in the internet, like I cannot create a birthday party for my friend in the internet who was born in the 4<sup>th</sup> of June and cannot search some academic passages, which just contain a few sensitive words. What's wrong with the stubborn and stupid River Crabs? I feel very unsatisfied and angry towards the government's censorship! Let us battle!!! Oh great!!

The action then cuts away to a simulated battle scene akin to a *Gameboy* fight scene. The two GMHs wear white masks and the River Crab team wears orange masks on their heads. They are clad in black; one fighter wears a suit that may symbolise a CCP party member. The camera spins in circular motion and dramatic music plays out. The surrounding environment looks like a generic university foyer: this further suggests that the makers of this video are students from Hong Kong. Neon graphics of green enhance the drama, evoking a *Gameboy* feel. This is further enhanced by lightning and special effects using dramatic music and a foley incorporating the sound effects of punching and kicking.

The following final scenes in the almost 10-minute video are important. As stated, the creators are most likely university students living in Hong Kong, and some are living with the realities of censorship in mainland China. As a result, their video reflects these realities and is a potent example to add to my findings and analysis.

The discussion after the fight continues:

Subtitle: After the battle

GMH: Ugh... I'm exhausted

RC: You think I'm not. Fighting you people is all I do every day. And honestly I don't want to spend the time and money if I could.

GMH: But speaking of wanting or not, why exactly do you want to fight us?

RC: Because what you people say on the web may do great harm to the country, I have to do my duty to ensure the stability of the country. Rumours and sensitive issue must be censored.

GMH: But what most of us want to do is just to talk with friends and have parties! That doesn't seem to have any relationship with sensitive issues, right? We're not dissatisfied with the censorship itself, but we're angry that you brought the vast majority of unrelated people into your battle with the very few. Your stability is ensured at the expense of most netizens' convenience.

RC: But...but...that's what I had to do!

GMH: What you worry about is the safety, but what most of us netizen want is just a convenient and free internet environment, is to be able to type "party" when we have fun with friends, and honestly, most of us don't care much about debating politics. So, our goals aren't exactly contradicting, are they? All we need to change is how we do the censorship in a way we both like.

RC: I see...But censoring keywords, blocking websites, that's the only way we can now implement the censorship, to ensure no bad things escape.

GMH: There has to be some other ways, right? If we work together, we will sure come up with some ways to make the implementation more efficient and humanized. What do you think?

RC: That doesn't seem to be unreasonable...but aren't Grass Mud Horses and River Crab born to fight each other?

GMH: Of course not! Dude, haven't we known each other well enough through so many encounters?

RC: Hmm...That may be right.

They link arms in solidarity.

Subtitles: In fact, because of the efforts and activities of netizen, many official internet servers have already made their changes. Baidu, the biggest forum in China, for example, has implemented complaint systems with administrators ready to review complaints 24-seven and recover contents that are accidentally deleted by the censor system. Censorship would undoubtedly go on existing in China. But it is surely possible to implement it in a better way to satisfy both the authority and the public netizen, to find the balance between safety and convenience. We are all only beginning to change. River Crabs and Grass Mud Horses aren't born to fight each other. It's only when we realise this that we can truly stop the battle between the Grass Mud Horses and River Crabs and start to work together for a better Cyberspace to live in.

Credits role.

This video illustrates the narrative of the GMH phenomena and the issue of internet censorship in mainland China and its effects. This is shown in the video by the two main character's perspectives. One student is from Hong Kong and the other mainland China. This personalises the issues, and gives the audience real examples through dramatising the ramifications of using certain keywords in email correspondence. By drawing on sensitive dates and keywords, as discussed in the transcript, the students can relate the repercussions of use. They incorporate the symbolism of some mythological creatures, including the GMH, the River Crab and the French Croatian Squid. The symbolism is used throughout the video to reflect the tone of dialogue and text. This video seems to reflect the younger generation of Chinese thinkers. This aspect is particularly interesting when thinking about the deeper political aspects of the video. The transcript states 'most of us don't care much about debating politics'. If this is true, then the younger generation only wishes to access information and freedom of expression without the confines of censorship.

The video cleverly alludes to the differences between mainland China and Hong Kong. Reference is made to the one party two-systems rule. In the video, it is the boy from mainland China who is detected through using sensitive keywords, but when the girl from Hong Kong uses the same words, they are undetected in cyberspace, as she resides in Hong Kong. This simple use of narrative in the video sets up and demonstrates the differences in ways of being online, drawing a comparison of the realities regarding online censorship in mainland China as opposed to Hong Kong.

This comparative perspective is broadened in the video 'What do you think Americans understand about the Grass Mud Horse', uploaded to YouTube by Yxqff. The video cites that the original source was located on [www.Video.Soho.Com](http://www.Video.Soho.Com), an online video channel used in mainland China. The video however no longer exists in China, but is documented or historicised on YouTube.





Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZRYd78vMT0&t=2s> YouTube screenshot.

### **Figures 30a, 30b, 30c. What Do You Think Americans Understand About the Grass Mud Horse, Yxqff**

John Vause’s video describes the GMH’s evolution in a documentary reporting style. Despite the title given by Yxqff, John Vause speaks with an Australian accent. The alleged media report on *YouTube* was also seen on Video.soho.com and CNN. Vause methodically goes through the evolution of the word *Cao Ni Ma* and its visual manifestation. There is a discussion and visual lecture on the etymology of Mandarin linguistic and tonal wordplay that shapes the GMH and the mythological narrative. He then gives the viewer a general warning: that the content in the video is sensitive and that it may be inappropriate for children. In the background, the GMH anime-rap video is cut into the media report with the audio playing in the background. In the following shot, we see Vause facing a computer screen engaging in a Skype interview with Rebecca McKinnon, a leading scholar on China and the internet. McKinnon relays that Chinese netizens are aware that if they write using Chinese characters their words will be censored. As discussed, participants then make use of tonal word play in Mandarin and not the Chinese characters. The report then reiterates the mythology of the legend that has emerged on the Chinese internet. McKinnon (2009) states in the video, ‘it would be over simplistic to take this GMH phenomenon and assume that it represents some movement to overthrow the government’. Vause closes the report with a statement regarding the symbolism: it is related to the growing frustration with China’s policy on internet censorship. This video report has received 46,231 views and many comments in the feedback fields. Some comments indicate that CNN is incorrect; there are also racist comments and comments about democracy and freedom. The following comments are a sample from the current 65 for this video:

1. yeah, it has only a small part of teasing the government (not resisting), the main reason for this ‘fuck you mom’ thing is for fun and laugh. CNN always tries to

link everything with Chinese government, therefore, I want to say: 草泥马 CNN

!!!

2. Hey~Even myself as a Chinese never link this with the government. So does many other Chinese people I have spoken to. Honestly, you can link anything to political if you want. Please stop this funny explanation for our pop cultures~ This is really none of your business.
3. a real-world uprising??!! are u fucking kidding? I'm a Chinese and I really just regard this as a joke. the lame CNN shouldn't make a fuss.
4. I agree what you said. Western media often lead everything to 'people against government'. They say that all the time because they are afraid of China. Because China is going to become the greatest power of all time in 20 years. And Chinese people are known as communists.
5. WTF IS THIS? CNN, YOU NEED a Chinese consultant.
6. To 大陆人 slamming CNN: This story panders to the US fantasy of 'saving' the 'Chinese people' from 'their oppressors', yes, and BBC > CNN any day, but honestly I'd rather watch this than all of those ridiculously contrived stories and junky pop videos played on public buses you all have to put up with. At least nobody forces CNN into my face -- 草泥马假新闻！！

The statements and comments indicate that the Chinese users all believe the report is inaccurate. The users mostly claim it is media hype from a Western perspective. Western people are afraid of China and therefore the Western media claim that Chinese people are against the government. These ideas conflict with the approach of some Chinese experts, scholars and artists who use the symbol in their work with the intended wordplay, as a metaphor for resistance and a symbol of freedom. Surprisingly only one of the comments mentions the creativity or courage behind the co-collective wordplay or symbolism:

7. LOL protest comes in some inventive forms...good on the young Chinese for voicing their distain on internet censorship.

The comments for the video are time-coded from eight years ago in 2009, with the most recent comment made in 2016. Considering that YouTube users need to state their identity to leave a comment in the fields, it is no surprise that the comments from Chinese users are made in a certain way. Regardless of the comments listed here, as a researcher, one of the most interesting aspects of this study relates to the creative routes taken around censorship, and how that then creates a need to be playful, and to use parody and linguistic word play that forms visual metaphors. This alternative creative etymology is used for a precarious emancipatory subculture that is neither visual nor linguistic, but is a synergistic new communicative symbolic form born of technology. Further, I suggest that this *censored* environment is an incubator for creative cultural forms that would not occur anywhere else but in China and other countries with restricted internet freedom. This is what makes it a potent and incredibly rich exploration of visual grammar as manifested from a subculture. With the ability to read the symbolism through its underpinning semiotics, we can map the evolution and changes as they occur over time.

The analysis so far has seen a mix of animation, documentary report style and dramatisations of the mythology. They all give the same compelling narratives that support my hypothesis: that there is a new symbol for freedom of expression. The continued use has become a movement, as it reflects shifting ideologies through using visual cultural forms. From the analysis, we begin to see multiple perspectives from a range of demographics; however, some are clearer than others.

Returning now to the skippybentley suite on YouTube, ‘Grass Mud Horse: Business man’ cites that the video was originally sourced from Toudou.com. This video is archived on YouTube as a historical document. It has had 879 views as of 23 March 2017, with seven thumbs up and two comments in Chinese dated to seven years ago.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mExgULkkJzA&t=123s>.

### Figures 31a, 31b, 31c. Grass Mud Horse: Business Man

The video employs GMH symbolism, but also heavily relies on textual references in written Chinese that an English speaker would need to translate. The makers appear to be young adults, as there are three males wearing black suits with their heads pixelated to blur their identities. Other shots that contain ‘real people’ also pixelate identity and mask the heads with a blur or alternatively use an alpaca or panda head. The panda is a widely known Chinese symbolic animal and thus can give the video a ‘Chineseness’, as defined by Yao Yung-Wen (2015). Other visual clues are embedded as satire and use this trope to tell the story. Deeper meanings, however, cannot be read visually as an English speaker, due to the audio and writing in Chinese that convey the loaded narrative. I do have the ability to read Chinese *pinyin* but not Chinese characters. Thus, an attempt to unpack the visual using cultural keys at times can be challenging.

Crudely animated GMHs appear throughout the video using three colours: red, yellow and blue. With this emphasis on colour, the eye is drawn to the collage-like figures in the motion graphics video. A colour halo or aura surrounds these characters, giving a pop art aesthetic. The predominant colours used are red and yellow, symbolising the Chinese cultural values of socialist propaganda and aesthetics. Other colours used do not appear to hold any specific reference, apart from making them stand out from the background of the re-mashed video to resemble emoji or gaming characters.

The meaning of this video is clear as the business men are not what they seem; during the video, they break out in song and dance morphing into GMHs. There is a sense of

foreboding chaos, as an overwhelming amount of imagery moves quickly off and across the screen, entering from all angles of the frame. This video is an example of an element of Chinese culture that employs *kuso* (parody), whereby *kuso* is the manifestation of a postmodern culture that draws on online participation culture (Cai & Liu, 2008, Han 2014). This video uses photoshopped images from online sources, re-mashing and transmitting current and popular visual culture online. This way of re-mashing sources is apparent not only in this video, but arguably is present in all other visual forms described in this analysis. This creates a familiar collage of contemporary China, whereby the creator or maker mix many visual sources acquired online to remake and shape a narrative propagating the folkloric mythology of the GMH.

Chinese cultural stereotypes are evident throughout the ‘Grass Mud Horse: Business Man’ video. These include, but are not limited to, the black suit, the panda and Chinese celebrities. Other symbols refer to or allude to the ‘Chen case’, which relates to the case of the blind sunglasses-wearing lawyer who was incarcerated (Mina 2014). These online actions act like an awareness campaign for the plight of the lawyer. As such, the symbolic use of a man with dark sunglasses in online Chinese culture probably represents Chen. We witness phenomena that can be understood as convergence culture (Jenkins 2008) where media jamming is prevalent. Borrowing and imitation (*Shanzai*) exists through the use and appropriation of cultural signifiers. The use of parody and the remixing of visual symbols in this video relays the message that things are seldom as they are seen. This is further illustrated by the use of camera angles and aesthetic elements, particularly the use of black and white, and by including framing devices that replicate surveillance camera angles. It could be interpreted as that when no one thinks they are being watched, a well-dressed person in business attire will dance freely alongside emancipated and wild GMHs. Here, anyone can be a freedom fighter, even a businessman in a black suit and tie. The reading of this video and visual analysis has been informed by certain signifiers, making connections to connections and constructing meaning through visual analysis. What may offer further insight or perhaps conflict with the dominant visual analysis is the translation of the song that accompanies the video. Like many of the videos described here, this work also uses music and song in the narrative. Again, the song has a childlike voice singing initially. A solo male voice then carries the song, leading to a chorus that is relayed throughout the song, where we hear other voices singing in unison.

## Summary

This section has outlined a selection of videos that began circulating online during the GMH phenomenon. The material began to appear in 2009 and is still circulating online through online and offline propagation. It seems that not many new images are being created, and those from 2009 are popular. They are widely used in journalism and scholarly articles written in English to discuss the phenomenon. Overall, two search engines were used for this study. The Google search engine yielded more results for a 'Grass Mud Horse' keyword search, with 342,000 results. The Chinese counterpart *Baidu* yielded 59,900 results. The keyword search *Cao Ni Ma* in Google yielded 779,000 results and *Baidu* yielded 59,900. This clearly shows censorship in action. In relation to the YouTube videos saved and collated by skippybently in 2009, the users that upload the videos cite that they had been removed from equivalent Chinese servers. This aspect of archival retrieval is vital for future studies into internet symbolism and documenting cultural visual forms. Where many examples of popular visual culture can be harnessed by certain search engines, effective research in some countries, along with the longevity and security of the archive, may be limited. Many factors may contribute to this short-lived display of images, including the online censorship policies of individual countries. The policies of social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube may deem some material inappropriate for public display.



## Internet Memes and Online Propagated Grass Mud Horses



**Figure 32. Online Propagated Grass Mud Horses**

The previous section discussed the initial viral video ‘Song of the Grass Mud Horse’. This video gave the English-speaking world the story of the GMH (Wines 2009). The other selected videos further unfold the narrative, propagating many depictions as moving images, from animation to documentary, to role-play involving amateur actors. This section discusses the use of online symbolism with a selection of nine GMHs. These symbolic memes are represented as still images that have been shared in online communities as predominately still images. The visual forms are broken into a discursive analysis for each image or animated gif. These memes are categorised as the most popular and prevalent, as they come to the fore in Google and *Baidu* image search queries. Keyword searches for the GMH were undertaken in English and Chinese *pinyin*. The keyword search is doubled to ensure that the sample demonstrates flexibility to avoid stereotypical sampling of the online images, thus heightening the Western perspective. The use of both English and Chinese ensures that I harness and harvest the best of the samples. Employing this keyword search in Google and *Baidu* yields diverse results. This way of searching indicates that keywords are censored or surveilled more in Chinese; thus, English is the preferred language that yields more results. In Figures





preconceived ideas regarding Western perceptions of China and cultural stereotypes. Yang (2013) believes that this aspect of understanding is crucial to acknowledging the layers of complexity in China's online internet mythologies. As acknowledged by many scholars, the growth in globalism is mostly due to the impact of the internet. It is through using the internet that we extend connections and attempt to heighten understanding of cultures other than our own.

I begin the analysis with the GMH as meme, painted in a style that is universally read as a Chinese paint brush style. This GMH uses traditional stylistic methods of production that are readily interpreted by the viewer as 'Chinese'. The use of the calligraphic ink brush style *Shui Mo* (ink and wash) is a traditional adaptation of the symbol in the digital age.



Source: Google Image search 2015.

**Figure 35. Grass Mud Horse**

This screenshot was originally sourced from *Chestnut Tree Café Blog*. The image on the blog no longer exists, but can be found in other searches, using keywords as described. Chinese traditional pictorial practice followed three methods: *Gong bi* (meticulous), *Shui Mo* (ink and wash), *Shan Shui* (mountains and water) (Xie He as cited in Gladston 2014). To add to the traditional methods of production, six principles had to be followed. These principles were created by Xie He, a writer and historian in the fifth century (c.500–535). The following classifications are adapted from the preface of Xie He's book, *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters*, given in Gladston (2014):

Spirit resonance (*Qiyun Shendong*) The overall energy of a work of art.

Bone method (*Gufa yong bi*) the way of using the brush this refers to texture and brush stroke, linking handwriting to personality. Calligraphy and painting were of the same value, both showed texture, stroke and personality.

Correspondence to the object (*Yingwu xiangxing*) depicting the form including shape and line.

Suitability to type (*suilei fucai*) colour, value and tone and layers.

Division and planning (*jingying weizhi*) composition, space and depth.

Transmission and copying (*Chuanyi moxie*) copying from life but also other artworks.

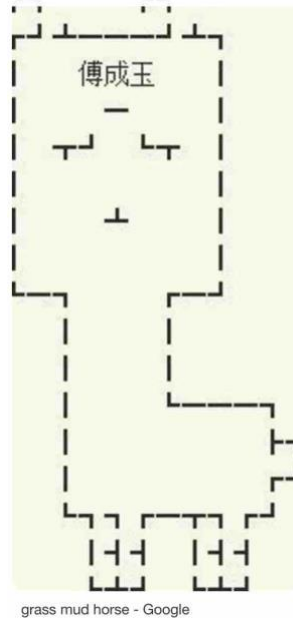
As stated throughout this chapter, most if not all creators of the visual forms in this section are anonymous. The decision to use this style of brush stroke for the GMH portrait with the River Crab has significant implications. The clashing of traditional styles and the use of these new symbols signify divergent ideological beliefs and values. For analysis of this meme, I believe that Xie He's *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters* is relevant and may offer an extended inquiry into the connections present. *Spirit resonance* (*Qi Yun Shandong*) pertains that the overall energy of a work of art is strong. The GMH is central and dominant in the frame. In his mouth, we see half a devoured, limp river crab with another crushed underfoot. The GMH is dominant and will defeat any others that take him on.

Regarding bone method (*gu fa young bi*), the way of using the brush refers to texture and brush stroke. The brush strokes are powerful and textured. The calligraphy and painting are of the same value; both show texture, stroke and personality. Correspondence to the object (*Yingwu xiangxing*) depicts the form, including shape and line. Correspondence is used here by clearly depicting the GMH and River Crab through form, shape and line. A Chinese text reads *Caonima*, 草泥马 or 'Grass Mud Horse'.

Suitability to type (*suilei fucai*) refers to colour, value, tone and layers. The tone, colour and layer dimensions of the type (Chinese writing) are matched in all categories that in turn balance the division and planning (*jingying weizhi*) of the composition. The last category is transmission and copying (*Chuanyi moxie*), which means copying from life but also other artworks. This is a particularly interesting and relevant category and will be used throughout the discussion here. The new grammar of the GMH lexicon is

generated from the act of transmission and copying, re-mashing and imitating. As the semiotic connections to connections are made within Chinese visual culture, as discussed by Rose (2014), the role of the researcher is to find these links. These can assist in reading the online symbol; we can use and adapt the methods applied to painting in fifth-century China.

The more recent phenomenon in this way of replicating and transmitting visual material is through *kuso* 恶搞, one of the terms used on the Chinese-speaking internet. *Kuso* culture describes user-generated content that employs satire or parody in a similar way to e'gao (as outlined Milner Davis (2013) and Rea (2013)). More recently, the concept and use of the term *kuso* has been used as an 'umbrella concept' to describe a broad range of internet cultural phenomena, converging with old and new media (Jenkins, 2008) into what can be likened to a 'prosumer' culture. In this environment, the power of the creative media producer becomes a prosumer, creating new cultural forms from pre-existing and existing multimodal forms. The material includes photoshopped images, movies and posters, re-mashing and transmitting visual culture content online. In terms of 'convergence culture', cross-media production that employs the GMH symbol is strong. As this chapter illustrates, the symbol and narrative is communicated across a range of media platforms. Initially an online conception to use within the realms of the Chinese internet, it has moved into broader online global spheres. The symbolic forms transmit for use on mobile devices with symbol as an emoji or sticker. It has evolved for use in art galleries and museums and has finally arrived at the commodification stage: plush toys, t-shirts and other deliverables.



Source: catalogued in my personal Pinterest.

### Figure 36. Screenshot No Longer Available Online

The GMH meme comes in many digital forms, employing recognisable Chinese watercolour style, ASCII art and Photoshop collages, as well as digital emoticons, some of which are pre-existing symbols, compositions and colour schemes. The GMH shown above is ASCII art with Chinese text on its forehead. The Chinese character 冫 (*Jiong*) was created before the 2009 emergence of the GMH in online communities and is found on one of the many Chinese blog sites in English. Wong (2013) states that the facial expression of the GMH (alpaca) is reminiscent of 冫 (*Jiong*) and is typically used online ‘to express helplessness or disappointment’. The Chinese blogging community uses *Jiong* to allude to the GMH online. The title *Chestnut Tree Café* indicates a connection to George Orwell’s novel *1984*, in which the Chestnut Tree Café is a meeting place disconnected from society: it is a place to be free. *The Chestnut Tree Café blog* outlines the crusade of the GMH mythology as grassroots aspiration, the dream of the working class awaiting democracy and freedom. The ASCII art alpaca resembles the Chinese character for *Jiong*. This symbol represents helplessness. The simple black and white graphics create a stark and strong image of the GMH. It is thus linked to a lineage of ASCII art created online by a computer keyboard. This GMH has now joined the anonymous co-created memes that are propagated, retained, removed and saved in other storage modes to catalogue and historicise the symbol.





Source: <https://www.wired.com/2011/07/web-semantics-the-grass-mud-horse-lexicon/>.

**Figure 37. Screenshot of PR Caonima: The Grass-Mud-Horse Lexicon**

PR Caonima’s narrative reads clearly, with the symbols designed to illustrate function. Advertising’s compositional triangular formation and compositional traits was also employed in Chinese propaganda art. The River Crab sits centre frame above a dark pink ribbon that reads ‘PR Caonima’ (I suggest PR stands for People’s Republic). Busy on the computer keyboard equipped with a mouse, the Crab wears three watches. The watches symbolise time. However, within this parody and folklore, watches in other memes are depicted as expensive and gold, which suggests corruption and power within the CCP. The River Crab symbolises ‘harmony’ (和谐 *héxié*) and President Hu Jintao’s (2002–2012) harmonious society. *The CDT* (2017) also states that in pre-internet wordplay and the GMH phenomena, the crab in Chinese culture symbolises a bully. So in this frame we are presented with the crab, a computer keyboard and screen; on either side of the computer screen the composition is flanked on left and right by a GMH. The left one has a dark pink erect penis that points to the computer keyboard; likewise, the mirrored horse on the right possesses a vivid blue erection, again pointing at the keyboard. This may suggest that content here is driven by sexual desires and is particularly inharmonious; thus the River Crab’s intervention.



Source: [https://wai88707.blogspot.com.au/2013/07/blog-post\\_23.html](https://wai88707.blogspot.com.au/2013/07/blog-post_23.html).

**Figure 38. Screenshot of Grass Mud Horse Chengis me from *The Chesnut Tree Café***

‘Grass Mud Horse, Chengis me’ employs Chinese folk art. The style and symbols draw on traditional folk painting and minority motifs. This style was first used by artists in the Lu Xun Academy from 1949, as discussed in Chapter Three. Stylistically embodying an indigenous Chinese aesthetic, artists from 1949 incorporated these folkloric symbolic scenes to revitalise party propaganda during the Cultural Revolution (Minick and Ping 2010). The style used the colour red. These artworks were bright and shining and generally appealed to the masses. In a similar function to ‘New Year’s paintings (*nianhua*), their purpose was to promote communist ideals for the Cultural Revolution (Li Xianting 1998). New Year’s paintings became synonymous with Maoist stylistic principles throughout this period, bringing Mao Zedong’s image not only into the workplace, but also into the family home. The GMH in ‘Chengis me 2009’ is central to the work and stands in a red background. Proud and strong, well-groomed and dressed for an occasion, the GMH appears to depict traditional Chinese style and majesty. This more traditional Chinese folk art uses block colour and flat perspective, giving clear and simple lines and symbols. This cloaks the creature in history and gives the viewer a sense that this symbol has been in use for far longer than it has. As outlined in Chapter Three, Chinese folk art style was used by PLA military campaigns from the mid to late 1930s. These campaigns used artistic expression to reach China’s broad



population using folk music, dance and drama to unify and communicate their ideological position. Artists were advised to represent the proletariat, rural dwellers, workers and farmers as equals. The style deployed here for the GMH contextualises the creature as a farmer, a peasant or a worker. It is thus rendered as the people's symbol, if we are to read the work following Chinese political ideological signifiers.



Source <https://www.deviantart.com/art/Cao-Ni-Ma-280590896>.

**Figure 39. Cao Ni Ma by Furrama**

The next meme is a black GMH. Most, if not all the creatures are usually depicted as white. To create a black GMH signifies difference. The term 'black sheep' has origins in the genetic process of recessive traits. Sykes (1993) traces the symbolism back to eighteenth and nineteenth century England, where the birth of a black sheep was a sign of the devil. To reiterate, a meme is an image propagated and recirculated online. Thus, the image or symbol is widely distributed and found on many sites that appear when Google or *Baidu* locate keywords through their specific algorithms. It is located now on the *Know Your Meme* website and has propagated as a meme; it was originally created by US digital Artist Christine Leach on Deviantart.com. Leach (2012) writes this below her online visual submission. As discussed, it is rare that there is any dialogue regarding the creation behind these particular memes. They are mostly anonymously created, appropriated and propagated. This sample is important as the audience can glimpse the creative motives directly from the artist. This would still have been the case if, in 2009, the original sources were intact on Chinese blogs and not removed.

The text below generates an extra layer of discussion reflecting empathy for freedom of speech in mainland China. On the artist's webpage, she writes:

This is topical: [\[link\]](#) . So, I drew a grass mud horse in support of those in China who are fighting the river crab's day in and out.

Pardon my language.  
(Google if you don't get it, but the whole thing is a Chinese meme which is basically a dirty word pun on censorship. There's even a song! [\[link\]](#) )

EDIT: Fixed the front legs a tad, and set the ink color all the way to pure black. I think I might have also subconsciously channeled the Ferrari logo into this thing.

This demonstrates that people who are aware of the mythology and meaning associated with regarding online censorship in China are willing to offer support. This support is propagated and transmitted across cultures online. This is also an example of a maker who is not of Chinese nationality and is willing to give her identity in an online forum.

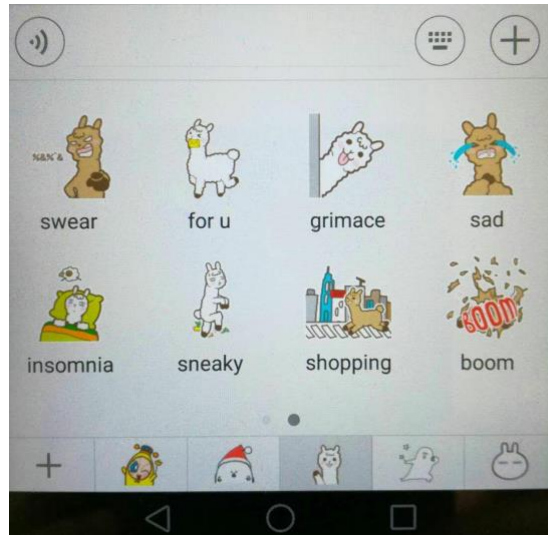
In this propagated meme, the GMH stands strong on hind legs, her jet-black form standing out from the pale pink background. The GMH wears a hot pink flower in her hair and looks ready for a confrontation. The use of colour and style here does not reference traditional Chinese elements, but rather the symbol and its power. The artist refers to her use of the ink and its pure blackness, stating that she 'subconsciously channeled' a logo of a very expensive car. This gives the creature a commodification power that can be used as currency. The impact of this black GMH is strong. It is found through algorithmic flows when searching Google images for the GMH. It is also located on other sites such as *Know Your Meme* (a *go to* for English-speaking social media networkers and visual culture researchers).



Source: OSU Beatmap Listing 2015 » Yu Lin Xian - Cao Ni Ma Zhi Ge <https://osu.ppy.sh/s/350167>.

**Figure 40. CAO NI MA!**

This meme is a standard animated gif that repeats as an animated loop. In this way, it is different from the other memes so far described. The frame consists of an overexposed Asian woman wearing a white shirt set in a white background. The three words *Cao Ni Ma* sit bottom centre of the frame, capitalised in a sans serif font. The text dominates one quarter of the frame and the black border surrounding the white text is further enhanced by an exclamation mark. The woman in the repeated loop joyfully waves, with her gaze directed outwards. The crispness of the framing suggests the use of colour (white) as signifying clarity and purity. The intended meaning cannot be mistaken; regardless of the missing tones above the words and without audio, the young woman is shown stating what would be forbidden in mainland China. The interplay between quirky cuteness and Korean K-POP aesthetic bring this animated gif into the ‘realm of cool’. Young Chinese adults aspire to the Korean style in fashion and music. By digging deeper into K-POP culture, I was able to find that the woman is well-known K-POP icon Choi Jin-Ri. The use of her image in this meme, which appears on many sites, propagates the freedom of expression mantra. Using the words *Cao Ni Ma* and a K-POP celebrity ensure the meme’s popularity through propagation and shared online distribution.



Source: WeChat App screenshot Choco Milk Alpaca Stickers: Justine Poplin, 2017

**Figure 41. Choco Milk Alpaca**

On our daily voyage in the digital world, many scholars believe the way in which we communicate is becoming less textual and more visual (Rose 2004; Pink 2014; Zhou and Hentschel et al. 2017). This can be seen in the use of emoticons that are formed simply by using a computer keyboard or mobile device, for example :-)). As the way in which we communicate digitally increases, so too does the use of symbols that represent the way we feel. Initially, emoticons such as the sun, a smiley or winking face, indicated our mood. To add to the symbolic emotional states that we experience and can convey instantaneously online, emoji have taken up this role as a logical trajectory in the digital age. The word emoji originates in Japanese: [E] ‘picture’ and [moji] ‘letter’ (Sugiyama, 2015). As communication grows via online means, so do does the creation of emoji to reflect these experiences. The more we communicate via devices, the more descriptive visual representations are needed: stickers are the progression of emoji. Stickers are pictorial representations, but offer a heightened visual narrative as they contain more detail and are often animated. The use of GMH symbolism in stickers or emoji is visible in the mobile application WeChat, an instant messaging platform used in China. The evolution of and interest in instant messaging applications is gaining momentum in academia. A recent study (Zhou, Hentschel and Kumar 2017, 1) found that WeChat users in Guangzhou:

[u]se WeChat for calling taxis, making various reservations, booking flight tickets, and more. We find that WeChat is now an integral part of daily life in China and emoji/stickers are too.

As discussed earlier in Chapters One and Two, due to ongoing internet censorship in mainland China, the dissemination of certain material is not permitted, either online or offline. WeChat users can create and circulate custom stickers between individuals and group users. As outlined previously, images are more difficult to censor or monitor. As such, stickers can be circulated freely on WeChat. Here, users have the creative space to use and make visual replicators that represent themselves and their communities.

Why is the emoji named an alpaca and not GMH or *Cao ni ma* in the WeChat realm? I suggest that to sustain use of the symbol in a surveilled space, this name retains the sticker's longevity without revealing that it is a GMH. For the visual analysis of this sticker, I used the WeChat application installed on my smart phone. Further visual collection used Google as a search engine in May 2016; the results revealed one image for Choco Milk Alpaca, the banner, as displayed in Figure 16c. The composition places the GMH in the front of the frame with block colour pastels as the background. The alpaca appears free with a bountiful amount of fresh grass to chew on. The connection with the 'fresh grass' shown here is important in the Chinese cultural context. A common greeting in Chinese is *Ni chi le ma?* (have you eaten?). This phrase has its roots embedded in Chinese culture and is arguably a spin off from the great famine during Mao's reign. Even today, it is quite readily used as a greeting. Thus, the importance of the GMH having enough fresh grass to eat is a potent symbol that carries broader meanings. The GMH symbolises a freedom fighter and this type of person may be considered an outcast or as living on the peripheries of Chinese society and mainstream communist values. The ability of the GMH to survive and be well nourished is a key cultural insight. This ensemble of elements creates an ecosystem where freedom of speech is permitted. Further, the 'grass' symbols appear not only in this work, but in many others and create an environment that is sustainable for growth and nourishment.

The following list includes descriptors of the 16 WeChat stickers shown in screenshot above (see Figure 41): Great, scary, SHU, hello, what? vomit, shy, haha, swear, insomnia, sneaky, for u, grimace, shopping, sad and boom.

**Great** is milk chocolate brown in colour. When you click the GMH gives you a *thumbs up* and a wink of the right eye.

**Scary** begins as a white GMH then turn grey. His hand holds his throat while action movement strokes indicate movement around his body.

**SHU** is milk chocolate brown in colour. His name SHU is written in capital letters above his head while he holds a finger to his mouth indicating secrecy.

**Hello** is white, spritely and fluffy-looking with a pink mouth and cheeks. *Hello!* is written above his head as he waves his hand.

**What?** Uses question marks around the GMH to further indicate the meaning. This GMH is white showing his full body with a red question mark to the right and green question mark to the left.

**Vomit** is milk chocolate brown in colour. He is shown from the neck up with hollow white eyes and green vomit streaming down, like slime from his mouth.

**Shy** is a white with pink cheeks and pink small lines above his nose. Shy is seen from the waist up with his hands places together. With animation, the GMH's ears move and so do his hands from the together position to an open position indicating unease or coyness.

**Ha-ha** lies flat on his stomach and is milk chocolate brown in colour. After clicking this sticker, he rolls from back to front moving his arms back and forth as if in a star jump exercise. Motion indicators show movement lines animated around the laughing GMH.

**Swear** is a milk chocolate brown GMH. He is angry with hollow white eyes and an open mouth that expletes in punctuation form *!!!##\$%!!* indicating swear words. He points at the viewer crosses his arms and spits.

**Insomnia** is a white GMH that lays in a bed with his head on a green pillow, green bed sheets with an orange trim. His arms hold the bedsheets up close to his neck as he lays with eyes strained opened counting sheep, as they navigate their path animated over his bed.

**Sneaky** is white with pink cheeks and eyes closed. He is shown in a side-on view walking with his two hands in a sneaking pose and his walks on tip toe past clumps of grass and stones.

**For U**, a white frolicking GMH enters the screen from right to left. In his mouth, he holds a yellow envelope as he winks his right eye.

**Grimace** is a playful white GMH that pokes its head out from behind what appears to be a wall. He initially pokes out his tongue then makes a grimace (screwed up face) as he smiles.

**Shopping** is a milk chocolate brown GMH, he appears to be on a pedestrian crossing leaping across the road. In the background, we see several high-rise buildings, grey, blue and red. Interestingly there is what appears to be on top of one of the buildings a surveillance camera. The camera is grey and is located just above the GMH head. It could be read that this surveillance camera is embedded in the urban shopping environment.

**Sad** is a milk chocolate brown GMH with hands to throat you see his eyes begin to fill with tears, his mouth warbling. His head starts to move from side to side and blue tears stream heavily from each eye like a waterfall as he clutches his small hands together.

**Boom** we see a milk chocolate brown GMH with his mouth closed. The animation shows the GMH expanding then finally exploding into small pieces. The text BOOM is red, seen with yellow debris mixed with the milk chocolate brown remnants of the GMH.

As shown, the Choco Milk Alpaca use the name alpaca and not GMH or Cao *ni ma*. WeChat has a predominantly Chinese demographic. Thus, I claim the meaning of this symbol would signify to most users that the emoji is the GMH and not just an alpaca. Despite the symbol's emergence in 2009, it remains in circulation in varying forms. The use of a sticker here within the app perhaps is more salient with the WeChat user base. Further, with the restrictions on online communication in China, the use of symbols and coded metaphors will only rise. What is interesting about Chinese online communication systems that occur due to censorship is that there is more creative symbolic play in visual form to circumnavigate censors. Western countries have seemingly no restrictions on online content. This raises the question of online symbolic/emoji/stickers globally—we have come full circle in terms of communication using pictograms. I would claim that the need to communicate visually results in relaying a message quickly. As McLuhan (1964) illustrated, the medium is the message,



and thus symbols carry meaning to places where words are unable to go. The GMH in this multimodal extension enables quick symbolic use through a multiplicity of forms.



Source: Know Your Meme 2014. <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/572976-baidu-10-mythical-creatures-grass-mud-horse>.

**Figure 42. Screenshot, Grass Mud Horse**

*Know Your Meme* is a website that hosts and acts like a meme glossary, describing and cataloguing memes from the scattered debris of internet meme culture. There are GMH memes located on this site and generally the descriptors are accurate. The site catalogues a vast collection of memes; it often does not specifically name them or cite the original source. Due to this, the meme (as shown in Figure 42) does not have a name on *Know Your Meme*. However, the image is found in general searches on Google. As with many of the other memes in this thesis, this particular meme is also found on other online sites and blogs. The GMH lexicon originally followed an anti-pornography campaign on the Chinese internet as outlined, and it is interesting to note that the visual symbolism in most memes does allude to pornography. This meme makes both visual and signification of the censorship subversion explicit, in order to create a double entendre. The creator of this meme has paired the GMH with Japanese-style Manga anime characters. Framing devices show the GMH from the neck up, revealing its long neck, with a length and shape not dissimilar to a phallic symbol. On either side of the GMH, the schoolgirl *Mangaesque* anime characters use their glistening tongues to lick the long neck in an erotic power play of symbols. In the background a third anime character is seen peering from behind the GMH. She wears a khaki-green army hat; her

eyes have the look of surprise, her bare thighs parted as if she is preparing for the GMH to enter her. As outlined earlier, the GMH symbol is seen as a heroic figure and a freedom of expression icon. The signification of this reading turns the narrative of the GMH into an erotic idol. Within this frame we see the idol flanked with erotic pornographic admirers; this I suggest relates to the anti-pornography campaign and the new symbolism. The symbol of the GMH is a grassroots freedom fighter *Cao Ni Ma* (f...the motherland). This image appeals to a certain audience who, in following the GMH's trajectory, is on the pathway to satisfy their desire for sexual admiration within the augmented complexities and limited boundaries of the Chinese internet.

## **Summary**

This section has analysed the date relating to the genesis of internet symbols and online symbolism. These surveilled symbols may be temporal and fleeting, such as memes, emoji and animated gifs, and are vital to map genesis of the symbol. They are experimental processes of co-creation and online collaboration. As a result of the complex nature and ramifications of subversion, the original source of the online image may be lost, as manifestations are replicated and shared across safer and more secure online portals that document the phenomenon. This further begs the question: are there images, still or moving, of the GMH lexicon saved on personal hard drives? If this is the case, what remains online may only be the scraps of the bigger story. The visual forms online, however, are large and significant enough to make the relevant connections for this thesis and its claims.

## **Section 2: Symbolism in Art**

The previous sections in this chapter explored visual forms of online representation from viral videos, memes, emoji and animated gifs. The common thread with most, if not all of these is that the creator is rarely acknowledged. Online visual forms are shared and replicated in a co-creation community, removing ownership and the potential risks involved in subversive agency.

This section will explore the GMH symbolism as observed in contemporary art discourses from 2009 to 2017. It will explain the transition and evolution of the symbolism and the meaning extended through this form of visual artefact. What is of

interest in this study is whether these symbols created in online communities have entered the global community offline, and how and where they are being used in culture. Connections will be gathered predominantly through collating the samples from online sources and through attending exhibitions and public forums in Melbourne, Australia. As stated in the previous section, the main method of collecting data for this study is through Google and *Baidu* search engines. Unlike the online memetic symbols made and propagated by anonymous co-creators, the artefacts discussed in this section are made by artists who use their name. The artists are aware of what the symbols mean and wish to propagate this meaning globally by using their name or popularity to reach a broader audience.

One artist well known outside of mainland China is Ai Weiwei. I will begin by examining some of the works created in 2009 directly following the anti-pornography campaign initiated by the CCP to cleanse the Chinese internet. To give some background into Ai as an artist, it is important to highlight that he used Sina Weibo in China to voice his opinions among Chinese internet users prior to using the GMH as a freedom of expression icon. A statement from Ai Weiwei's first recorded post on his Sina.com blog is documented below on the CDT website (19 Nov. 2005 in CDT 2015) Ai (2015) writes:

表达需要理由，表达就是理由 If to express oneself one needs a reason, let me say that to express oneself is the reason.

In the following interview with Vine (2008), he discusses the realm in which he lives and breathes, which gives insight into the work he makes. Ai Weiwei grew up and developed this way of being and knowing amid a society that was in the throes of ideological struggle:

[The] system devolved into extreme totalitarianism with no personal rights, no freedom of speech or expression. Justice was replaced by class struggle, which is really just an excuse for the government to maintain its power. From a very early age, I found it almost impossible, in those conditions, for individuals to develop self-consciousness or any real awareness of aesthetic values. Instead, there was a severe conflict between individual and state power. These struggles pervaded the environment in which I grew up. And still, after 30 years of so-called "opening and reform," we have a reduced version of the same state. Today, we are still under a one-party system with very limited space for freedom of expression (Ai Weiwei cited in Vine 2008, 99).

Several days before the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre on the 4 June, the censors shut down, removed and erased content from Ai Weiwei's *Sina* and *Sohu* blogs. Not to be deterred, he continued blogging on *Twitter* and *Fanfou* and on *Aiweiwei.com* (Shultz, 2017). Following these events that restricted his civil liberties, he posted pictures of himself nude as symbol of resistance to internet censors, with the GMH plush toy covering his genitals. This was the first use of the symbol in his work and directly followed his online *discursive* discourse being surveilled and dissolved.

The historical overview of the evolution of the symbol of Mao Zedong from veneration to subversion was outlined in Chapter Three. In that chapter I referred to Mary Wiseman's discussion of what subversive artwork could be in the twenty-first century. Here I revisit the three main points of her rationale into subversion in Chinese art.

Wiseman (2007) addresses the interpretations of Chinese art at the turn of the twenty-first century through the lens of Western scholars and questions whether the cultural perspective is adequate. In pre-modernisation Chinese art and into the present, the naked body remains relatively taboo. Yet Ai Wei Wei used this rawness (his naked body in art) and paired himself with a symbol that manifested from an anti-vulgarity campaign to cleanse the internet. Ai has done much for the propagation of the symbol through his contemporary art practice and exhibitions globally. The pairing of the naked artist and the GMH demonstrates a double entendre, a parody with agency endowing penalties. The self-portrait titled *Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle* (2009) is an example of one of the first-known penetrations of the symbol into a global maelstrom of art, design and scholarly consciousness. Goldman (2011) in *Business Insider* claims 草泥马挡中央 ('grass-mud-horse covering the middle') sounds almost the same in Chinese as 你妈党中央 ('fuck your mother, the Communist party central committee'). The *Washington Post* relates that the image was a 'direct and obscene insult to senior party officials' and may have played a part in Ai's arrest in 2011 (Fisher 2012).



Photo: [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)

Source: <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/ai-weiwei-art-2011-6?r=US&IR=T#the-caption-grass-mud-horse-covering-the-middle-to-ais-self-portrait-sounds-almost-the-same-in-chinese-as--fuck-your-mother-the-communist-party-central-committee-1>. Business Insider 'Wiki entry is now deleted'.

### Figure 43. Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle (2009)

The use of the GMH by a high-profile artist such as Ai Weiwei (who is also a known advocate for freedom of expression) promoted the symbol of the GMH in the global context. His Gangnam Style video parody is titled *Grass Mud Style* and shows him after his house arrest in Beijing in 2011. The faux MTV parody of PSY's *Gangnam Style* pays homage to the GMH as it directly critiques restrictions on freedom of speech. Some critique Ai's video on YouTube suggesting Ai is performing for the Western world, targeting Western fans and journalists Fisher (2012). Ai is seen in the video parody following the K-POP phenomenon of PSY's *Gangnam Style*. In the video Ai is wearing a pair of handcuffs. This universal symbol communicates directly to a global audience. The symbol of the handcuffs is paired with the title of the video in GMH style. Throughout the video there are abundant visual references to the GMH that directly critique the CCP's internet censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression. The video was uploaded to Tuduo.com, the Chinese equivalent of YouTube, and according to NTDTV (2012) was removed after two hours.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LAefTzSwWY>. Accessed 24 October 2012.

Figures 44a, 44b. Screenshots from YouTube video草泥马style

In an interview with NTD Television (2012) Ai Weiwei claims that:

Overall we feel that every person has a right to express themselves, and this right to expression is fundamentally linked to our happiness and even our existence. When a society constantly demand that a society should abandon this right then the society becomes a society without creativity it can never become a happy society.

The *Grass Mud Style* video does not directly use the symbol of the GMH, but rather alludes to it by using cutaways emulating PSY's horse-riding gestures. In *Gangnam Style* by PSY, PSY rides an invisible horse in the original music video; this is mimicked in *GMH style* by Weiwei. The video is laden with references and further connotations. Exploring connections to connections (Rose 2014) and employing semiotic interpretation suggests that the sunglasses worn by many of the characters in the video may further refer to the Chen case of the blind lawyer whose symbolic replicators engaged participation culture (Jenkins et al. 2009; Klisanin 2015). This further layers the parody with heightened political and ideological signification. The video shows paperwork crumbled and flying through the air, a potential signifier that the 'official business' is done, and it is now time to dance be free and ride the GMH. Later we see Ai and another man handcuffed together. Despite this bondage, they continue to dance and gallop about with wild abandon. Colour symbolism is employed by using an almost fluorescent tone of pink that Ai wears as a t-shirt, coupled with a black suit. The pairing of formal and casual attire give the artist a smart-casual appeal. It must be noted that Ai wears pink and not red as previously discussed; the colour red is coded and aligns most closely with colours that represent the state and the CCP's values. The colour pink pervades the other participants' attire in the video as they dance freely to PSY's soundtrack. Soon after uploading this video on Ai's YouTube channel, many other YouTube users shared and distributed the video. Yet others remade a parody of their own based on the appropriation of PSY and Ai's video. Artist Anish Kapoor's YouTube video interpretation gathered artists and activists aligned for freedom of speech. The video was uploaded by the Brooklyn Museum and went viral, propagating a freedom of speech message using the same Gangnam Style pop phenomenon. Amnesty International (2012) claim that 250 people participated in Kapoor's support video. Among the artists were *The Guardian's* art critic Adrian Searle, artists Mark Wallinger, Roberta and Bob Smith, and Institute of Contemporary Arts chair Alison Myers.



Thus, the Korean singer not only gained notoriety from the popular song and video, but from the re-use, re-purposing and re-mashing of his video. In its appropriated forms, the video *GMH style* then aligns with the current political ecology that generates symbols of dissent and freedom of expression. The intertwined connection of the GMH symbol and Ai Weiwei is propagated by Ai, an already established artist known more recently for work that uses subversive and or political issues. The symbolism as seen in the Grass Mud Style video employs both the GMH freedom metaphor and PSY's music video to effectively ride on the tail of pop culture born out of the 2009 phenomena.

Ai has made other works that use the GMH symbol to promote freedom of speech and democracy in China. He does this through global social media and online contexts, including YouTube and Twitter, which are banned in China. The symbols from the lexicon are then transmitted to inform the global community to show how they affect and signify social change in China. As discussed throughout this thesis, the symbols in the lexicon began as a set of 10 Mythological Creatures. The trajectory of sustained use of some of these symbols from 2009 to 2017 allows researchers to dig deeper into the residue of the ongoing use of symbolism propagated from this lexicon, further examining why some symbols retain potency and circulate while others fade.

In recent years, Ai Weiwei has discussed his conceptual work and expressions of freedom in documentaries about his art making and creativity in mainland China. Alison Klayman's 2012 documentary film, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* screened in Melbourne in 2015, at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. It was curated under the theme 'The Art of Dissent'. Interestingly, Ai includes some of the GMH lexicon in the film and discusses the feast of 1000 river crabs. After the Melbourne screening and panel discussion, it was revealed the audience and panel were unaware or did not wish to discuss the symbolic gesture of the feast of 1000 river crabs. Further, there was no discussion regarding the crab symbol and the symbolic gesture made by its use in this context. Unless the viewer is aware of this visual grammar and meaning, the ambiguity of the crab symbol may mean that the feast is an extravagant 'Chinese meal', a final parting from his Shanghai studio, which was consequently demolished. What would be missed is that that eating the crab was a symbolic retaliation against being 'harmonised' by the censors. What is important and not to be overlooked is that Ai has taken some of the symbols used in the GMH lexicon out of the Chinese blogosphere and inserted them



into offline screen culture. This gives life to the new symbolism and may bridge understandings in a global context, while simultaneously generating conversations regarding China's rapidly transforming ideologies through visual culture.



Source: Photographs taken from Ai Weiwei's blog (since removed).  
<http://translatingpracticesblog.blogspot.com.au/2011/03/>.

**Figure 45. Ai's Studio in Shanghai, Never Sorry 10,000 River Crab (*hexie*) Banquet**

Hartley et al. (2013) explore the transformative role of digital technologies on the creative industries. Ideas surrounding the digital media's transformative role in mainland China give insights into China's creative transformation as well as the rising economy, the digital turn and internet technologies. Keane (2013, 12) claims transformation can be mapped through data, such as evidence for public policy, technology design, implementation, and public debate:

The creative industries had metamorphosed; they had taken on a hybrid character. From one perspective they were traditional, political and slow moving, highly centered on tourism and manufacturing; from another perspective they aspired to be 'more free' of politics, to 'take off' into the new media age.

China's rapidly growing and highly cultivated creative industries are further disseminated globally as a result of new media and online networks. Despite the high restrictions on online content, I argue that as a result of internet censorship there is an increased output of creativity that differs from Ai Weiwei's view.



Photo credit: Justine Poplin, Installation view 'Cao Ni Ma Balloon', Ai Weiwei 2015.

**Figures 46a, 46b. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Australia: Andy Warhol | Ai Weiwei**

The global context and survey of East and West was further explored in a recent exhibition in Melbourne at the National Gallery of Victoria. This was *Andy Warhol | Ai Weiwei*, on from 11 December 2015 to 24 April 2016. The exhibition showcased the trajectory of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries featuring Warhol and Weiwei. Both artists represent contemporary culture through their practice, Warhol encapsulating 'The American century' and Weiwei, the predicted 'Asian century'. Weiwei's *Blossom* (2015) advocates his freedom of speech ideologies through an installation of thousands of intricate white porcelain flowers. This work preceded entry into his next installation, *LetGo Room*, featuring Australian portraiture (representing Australians who advocate for human rights and freedom of speech.) The GMH makes an appearance in this exhibition in the form of a playful *Cao Ni Ma Balloon*, luminous and gold, filled with helium. The icon is incorporated into an installation with another immediately recognisable symbol, the Twitter icon (represented as a red balloon). The two icons fill the room with colour and buoyancy, reminding participants that here, in this space, you are free to play among the herds of golden GMHs and scarlet Twitter birds. Through play, all age groups participate and interact with the balloons. In this way Ai taps into the child and the 'sense of freedom' there is in play. Unknown to most participants, the balloons they are playing with are a loaded metaphor for freedom of

speech restrictions on the Chinese internet. In the gallery, I stood and watched the audience participating in interactive play with the two balloons. In this space all deeper meaning was forgotten, the rules abandoned and symbols buoyantly loaded with meaning evolved into participatory toys. The display of dissent in this context reiterates Dal Lago's (1999) claims that the 'most subversive' works are exhibited abroad and not in mainland China. In this high art space in Australia, Ai's *Cao Ni Ma Balloon* is a loaded metaphor for those who are able to read the potency of the symbol away from the stronghold of the CCP.

It appears that Ai Weiwei was the first artist to lead the charge on the global propagation of the GMH symbol/s in online and offline art. Not only has he bridged the realm of online offline visual communication in visual culture through the use of poignant, persuasive and politically charged work that relay truths, but he does this by employing his popularity and brand name (that of the artist of dissent, the artist of freedom of expression), thus reaching a broad audience globally. Wilson claimed on *Radio Netherlands Worldwide* (2013) that part of Ai Weiwei's appeal is his activism and critical stance against the Chinese government.

Notwithstanding his reputation as an artist, Ai has also been involved in a curatorial role that saw the GMH symbol used in the new work of Qin Ga in 2013. The exhibition entitled *FUCK OFF 2* was curated by Ai Weiwei, Feng Boyi and Mark Wilson and was held at the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands in 2013. This was the second exhibition curated by Ai and Feng; the first, titled *FUCK OFF*, debuted in Shanghai in 2000. The exhibition in mainland China was 'censored by the authorities, as it was considered too sensitive with its radical content' (Groninger Museum, 2013). Online Chinese blog *Randian* (2016) claims that the first exhibition held in Shanghai 2000 was closed by China's Cultural Inspection Bureau. There were several noted controversial works that either contained sexually explicit photos, or content that was considered as pushing ideological boundaries too far, such as Yang Fudong's *The First Intellectual* and the visceral and subversive work of Zhu Yi in *Eating People*, where he cannibalises a dead infant. The themes of the exhibition, as outlined by Wilson in an interview with *Radio Netherlands Worldwide* (2013) explain that 'activism plays a central role. The works are a response to the fact that people in China are (still) not free to do as they wish'.



Source: screenshot taken from Google search from a source that is now removed and saved within my personal Pinterest account.

**Figures 47a, 47b, 47c. Screenshots from the Video Counter Revolutionary Slogan Liu Anping (1992)**

In this context, let me draw a connection between the use of the GMH symbol in Qin Ga's 2013 work and a video work by Lui Anping created in 1992. As discussed in Chapter Three during the 1990s, subversive works were emerging that used Mao Zedong as a symbol. As noted earlier, Li Xianting's (1993) claims that Chinese artists born after the 1960s suffered 'less from the Mao complex'. Dal Lago (1999) further claims that the use of Mao's image in art and design continues to be a sensitive point of reality, with more subversive representations of Mao exhibited outside China. Qin Ga's work resonates with Liu Anping's (1992) video, *Counterrevolutionary Slogan*, showing the artist re-enacting a 'real life' defacement of Mao's portrait on the Tiananmen gate in 1989; the original defacement was carried out by three young men from Hunan Province. The men threw eggshells filled with black ink at the Chairman's portrait and were later sentenced to life for 'counterrevolutionary propaganda and arousal' (Dal Lago 1999). As discussed in Chapter Three, in the 1992 video, Liu positions himself in uniform (the Mao suit) at the centre of the screen, while eggshell-infused ink is thrust onto his face. The video acts as a historical document that reveals the penalties for vandalising symbols that represent the state, while simultaneously subverting the hero worship of Mao Zedong. During the Cultural Revolution, black, according to Wang (2014) had counter revolutionary associations, in contrast to red, marked as the revolutionary colour. By reducing the Mao's iconic status, his image was treated in the same way as any counter revolutionary during the Cultural Revolution.



Source: originally taken saved from <http://www.qinga-studio.com/>. Original source now removed, documented now within my Pinterest account.

### **Figures 48a, 48b. Screenshot Grass Mud Horse Song**

Chinese artist Qin Ga created a work that uses the symbol of the GMH. On his website, he breaks the beast into three parts to describe the parts of the work in more detail as they relate to the dimensions and mediums he uses. *Grass Mud Horse Song* (2013) is a sound installation. *Grass Mud Horse Sculpture* 120 (l) x 60 (w) x 160 (d) cm. is made of resin, with automotive paint. The base of the work is 140 (l) x 80 (w) x 200 (d) cm and it is made of stainless steel, automotive paint, electronic sound equipment and a timer.

In an artist statement regarding the work, Qin Ga (2013) stated (in a now-removed documented screenshot):



In 2009, the Chinese government launched a large-scale censorship movement directed at “low culture” content and curse words on the internet. Several internet sites were forced to shut down, creating widespread discontent among Chinese netizens. The phrase “Grass Mud Horse” was invented as a homophone that would not be detected by the internet filters and would later come to be used by Chinese netizens to represent grassroots humor and free spirit and resistance against oppression.

In December of 2009, I used the format of a monument to create the “Grass Mud Horse Song” to connect with the vernacular usage and to materialize this spirit of freedom.

Within the base of the sculpture is a large speaker that plays a child singing the “Grass Mud Horse Song”. As you approach the sculpture, the stainless steel reflects your face and expressions...

At 6pm New Year’s Day 2013, I poured a bucket of black automotive paint over the alpaca sculpture, in this way to represent the multitude of grass mud horses who pursue the spirit of freedom.

#### **Figure 49. Screenshot Statement**

In this statement, the artist neither refers to nor draws a connection to Liu Anping’s work *Counterrevolutionary Slogan*. The work was at the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands, in 2013. The mythological creature is mounted on a plinth, reinforcing its iconic status. The silver reflective plinth on which the GMH proudly stands elevates the mythological creature to the status of heroic leader. The work draws on elements and symbolically references Liu’s *Counterrevolutionary Slogan*, where the artist re-enacts a real-life defacing of Mao Zedong’s portrait that occurred in 1989 in Tiananmen Square (Dal Lago 1999). In Qin Ga’s sculpture the alpaca’s face has been marred with black ink, just as the portrait of Mao Zedong was defaced in Tiananmen. The viewer is left to question the power of the mythological beast as an icon. Is it a new hero or a counter revolutionary? This dramatic narrative builds on Chinese historical symbolism and pre-existing ideologies, which powerfully intertwine latent connections and new symbols of revolution and heroic icons in twenty-first century China.

It was a pivotal moment in the research when I made the connection between these two works of art. As stated, the symbolism is a poignant reflection of the change in eras and ideologies. This is particularly so when we examine what a hero is in the digital age in mainland China. Allison and Goethals (2016) review the cultivation of heroes and hero worship. They suggest a framework, the ‘heroic leadership dynamic’ (HLD), to assess the underpinnings of how and why heroes are created, retained and changed, and how heroes can provide both narrative and energizing functions while retaining their epistemic function. This idea is echoed in Lane’s (1981) research that draws on the function of heroes and their role during times of rapid social change. This framework can assist in examining the use of new symbolism and the construction of the hero in mainland China of the digital age. As Allison and Goethals (2016, 1) explain, hero narratives provide ‘scripts for prosocial action, by revealing fundamental truths about human existence, by unpacking life paradoxes, and by cultivating emotional intelligence’. They further discuss how society needs heroes to heal in many areas of leadership and ongoing positive psychological development. Klisanin’s (2015) research on digital collaborative heroism suggests that this type of online participatory action is only possible through a collective co-creation that relies on a multitude of individuals. Notably, Allison and Goethals (2016, 6) point out that ‘deep truths contained in hero myths are difficult to discern and appreciate because they are disguised within symbols and metaphors.’

Heroic figures give us inspiration; the function and cultivation of the hero and surrounding mythologies reveal essential truths about human existence (Allison and Goethals 2016; Campbell 1949; Lane 1981). Allison and Goethals (2016) support that people identify with the underdog, and we regard them as inspirational when successful in accomplishing what they set out to do. Thus, the connection between these two artworks heightens the claims of this thesis: that as a result of internet censorship in mainland China in 2009, a new movement of visual culture was born. The creation of new symbols continue their mimetic journey as cultural replicators, illuminating deep truths and creating a new form of hero (GMH) and anti-hero (RC).





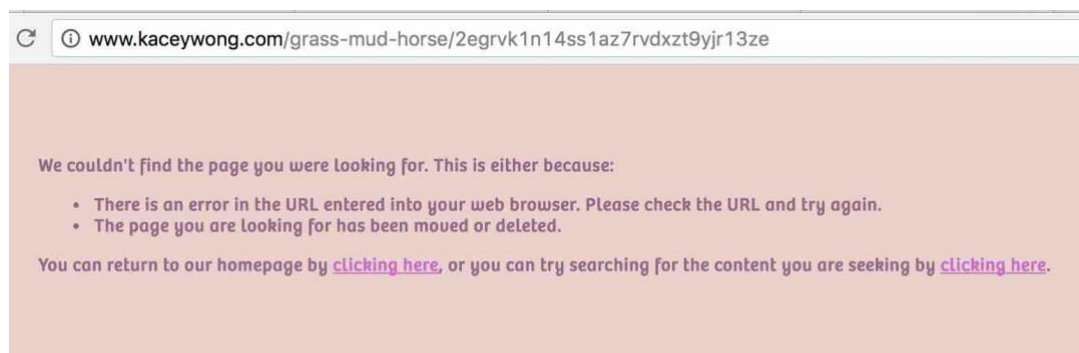
Source: <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog?year=2011&month=8> Photo Credit: Lam Yiu Him The GMH has appeared many times in Ai Weiwei's art creations.

**Figure 50. Screenshot from Art Asia Pacific August 2011 'Grass Mud Horse'**

The hero as a vehicle was used in Hong Kong artist Kacey Wong's work in 2011. Wong is an artist, academic and activist who was also the founding member of Art Citizens. Wong (2011) believes his practice can be likened to detective work in the way they investigate the self, and the spaces between the self and social practices. The purpose of his practice is to explore politics and public sites of protest through using his artworks at these sites. On his blog Wong writes and documents images of his artwork, including the GMH that he cites was created for a public protest in Hong Kong. Wong (2011) notes that when mainland artist Ai Weiwei was arrested and imprisoned, he was inspired to take the artwork into public protest. The public protest attended was by 2000 people (Wong 2011) and called for the immediate release of Ai Weiwei. The protest involved him riding on top of the GMH and delivering a speech regarding freedom of speech and the release of Ai Weiwei at the Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui.

The GMH sculpture stands 183 cm (L) x 80 cm (W) x 183 cm (H). It is made of wood, leather and has wheels for mobility as a vehicle of protest. The GMH is tall, white, clean and fluffy with a black face and ears. The platform base has Astroturf to resemble fresh *green* grass. On Wong's website, there is a photo of him holding the monolithic GMH beast with a white rope, leading him along the street in Hong Kong. In this way, there is a double play on the 'internet as being the superhighway', a literal interpretation. When Wong reached the protest destination of Tsim Sha Tsui, he then mounted the great the GMH to deliver his speech, to an audience mostly wearing 'V'

for Vendetta masks (Wong 2011). In this way, we can see that the GMH symbol created anonymously online has become a physical advocate for freedom of expression. The symbol (here as sculpture) becomes a mascot for political protests about freedom and democracy. Not only has the symbol emerged from a cyberspace that previously confined it to a screen based culture and replication, but here the sculpture has form and function beyond the dimensions of the internet. The GMH mascot and all that it represents is now out on the street in Hong Kong, beyond perhaps the anonymous co-creators' imaginings and the realm of online social networks.



Source: <http://www.kaceywong.com/grass-mud-horse/2egrvk1n14ss1az7rvdxzt9yjr13ze>; the content has been removed.

**Figure 51. Screenshot of Link with Most Recent Content (May 2017; August 2017)**

Documentation on the event remained in cyberspace on Wong's website until May 2017. Recently, when I revisited Kacey Wong's site (see Figure 51), the documentation of any GMH related symbolism and reference to the protest had been removed. Thus, the image cited here is from *Art Asia Pacific* (3 May 2011). The removal of material from his website signifies a fear of political ramifications and proves that the symbol retains currency as a freedom of expression vehicle. In subsequent searches, I found that the URL had changed and that Kacey Wong had remodelled his site. In one of the pull-down menus named 'PROTEST <http://www.kaceywong.com/protest-2/>', I then located the image of Wong and the GMH, double-clicked and followed the link to gain access to material that documented the discussed protest, using the GMH <http://www.kaceywong.com/grass-mud-horse>.

The artist's caution could be due to recent arrests in Hong Kong for politically related activism using another symbol, an umbrella. As known, the symbol of the yellow umbrella was used for political protest in 2014 and recently the activist who initiated the

protest was incarcerated. Joshua Wong was sentenced to six months in prison with fellow protest leaders, Nathan Law and Alex Chow given eight and seven months, respectively (Wong 2017). The symbolism of an umbrella, however, is more universally read than the GMH lexicon and its symbols. The umbrella is a global symbol of protection (usually from the rain). In the case of the umbrella movement in Hong Kong, there was no tonal wordplay: an umbrella is an umbrella—a shield offering protection. Thus, I claim that the use of the GMH lexicon is an innovative extension of creativity and further demonstrates that coded visual metaphors are preferable over universally read ones.

Siu Ding is another Hong Kong based artist who works on the cusp of subculture with themes that may offend the ‘harmonised’ motherland in mainland China. Her work employs inferences exploring ‘alternative porn’ and coded cultures that were explored at *Transmediale* in 2012. Katrien Jacobs (2011) refers to the online DIY subculture of user-generated material that is formulating identities that are moving towards a new-found freedom in China. Within the iDIY online space, Siu Ding creates a portal to explore her sexuality through online content that reveals her explicit desire to question the control of the internet, morality and ideologies therein.



Source: <http://www.siuding.com/2010/09/my-nude-portrait-project-xxivgrass-mud.html>.

**Figure 52. Screenshot Grass Mud Horse Romance**

Among the photographic work on her blog, Siu Ding and the GMH are found in *Grass Mud Horse Romance* (2010). The pair is shot on location in some wetlands, and the blog claims that the shot will be used for a book cover (see Figure 52). Ding is naked, crouched-down in a meeting with the GMH. Ding's gaze looks out of the frame, as if to surveil the landscape for any predators (such as the River Crab). Both characters are in the forefront of the frame with mountains in the background. The photograph is black and white and does not appear pornographic to the Western eye. As described, the GMH lexicon was born out of an anti-pornography campaign in mainland China. With semiotic knowledge interpreted through this thesis, both Ding and the GMH would be considered subversive subjects in such an artwork in mainland China. Ding does not reveal parts of the body considered 'pornographic', however. The artist is known for subversive photographic work that depicts her naked body. Moreover, the connection and narrative, by using these two symbols of subversion in the photograph, create a double entendre. The symbol of the GMH positioned with an artist known for 'sexually explicit content' (Jacobs 2011) in the one photograph, creates a subversion that is transferred to the subculture. This visual coupling further demonstrates that cultural forms are changing the ideological landscape in Chinese stereotypes by the creation, circulation and interest in such works of art that are documented online and distributed by galleries abroad.

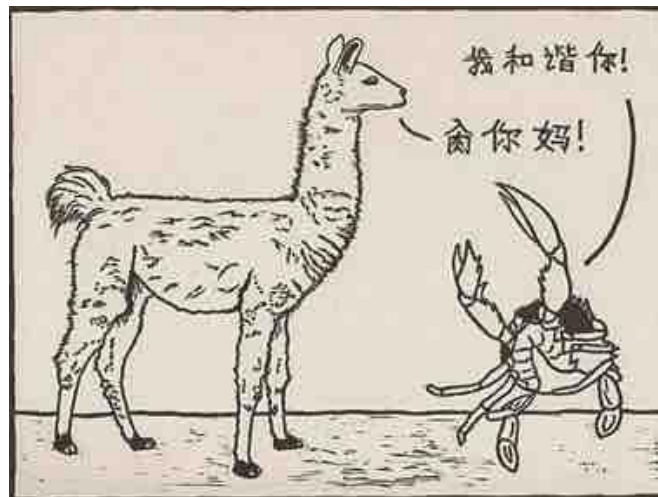
The lexicon of ten symbols that initially acted as online subversive memes to circumnavigate China's internet censorship have now also moved to broader offline spheres. The lexicon began as 10 Mythological Creatures, although only the strongest symbol remains, the GMH. The GMH symbol has entered offline signification and use, extending its communication values and reflecting shifts in ideology in China. This phenomenon could be interpreted as a new movement or a subculture propagating this symbol into offline spheres through the creation and cultivation of visual art and artefacts. For this reason, it is crucial to this research to map how this meme has entered cultural flows through online and offline communication in art and design. The artists that are using this symbol in their artwork, unlike the memes in their online anonymous propagation, use their name. They are the creators and usually include an artist statement regarding the concepts that fuelled their creation.

This section has discussed Chinese artists creating work with the GMH symbol. Australian artist Jessi Wong (2010) created an etching of the GMH and one other symbol from the lexicon, the River Crab. This artwork (see Figure. 53) has also appeared as a meme on many online sites that discuss the GMH phenomenon. The image relays the narrative in clear visual form, lending itself well to the culture of online meme propagation through re-mixes, re-mashes and sources with acknowledgements of the creator. In this case, however, through rigorous online probing, I was able to locate the creator of this work. In the artwork, the two characters stand in confrontation on a flat arid plain in the foreground of the frame. The etching is sleek and minimal with the GMH standing strong and dominant in conversation. The Chinese characters (*hanzi*) in the artwork offer more direct visual cues for the reading. Translation ‘the crab says I harmonise with you. The alpaca says fuck your mum.’

Wong’s 2010 etching demonstrates how the symbol has entered offline cultural discourse. In this way, it can be argued that the symbol is attaining a broader reach through mainstream media streams such as *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*. The GMH symbol has also reached more popular culture through sites such as YouTube. This could not be attained solely through Chinese online social media platforms within China. Another online site that has now become a reference glossary for memes is *Know Your Meme*. As a result of these websites broadening reception and distribution, there appears to be a need for people to read new and emergent online phenomenon. Transcultural interpretations can give insights into the culture of another nation through being mirrored in the form of internet memes. I claim these are visual carriers of culture and ideological reflections of a person/group or nation. Due to the often loaded narratives that memes portray, reading them often calls on semiotic interpretation. The interpretation is co-constructed using an interdisciplinary approach. In the case of GMH memes, the base symbol is formed through linguistics and tonal *pinyin* wordplay. This then manifests or shapes a visual cultural form, such as the symbol of the GMH. The GMH then has form, but is not limited to one particular form or symbol, such as the smiley face emoji, or the peace symbol. Further, there is play in the co-creation of many styles and guises of this symbol, both in the online and offline spheres. It is through the propagation of the symbol that people who share similar ideas find unity and connectedness through the use of the GMH symbol. This is particularly so in the work of Jessi Wong who discusses her art on her website. Wong’s etching was exhibited in



2010 as part of a biannual fundraiser, 'Impressions'. The print is still currently held at the Australian Print Workshop in Melbourne, Australia. One of the most interesting aspects about this particular work is that its creation was a direct response to the online phenomenon of the GMH. After the etching was created and documented online, anonymous online users, including media reports included the work as 'unacknowledged' and claimed it as a meme.



Source: <http://jessiwong.com/>. Accessed March 2013.

**Figure 53. Screenshot Grass Mud Horse (2010)**

Wong claims not to speak or write Chinese despite coming from a Chinese background. The usage of the subversive symbols in her etching suggests that she has knowledge of the Chinese internet community and understands the double meaning and wordplay therein. My hypothesis of why this occurred has its root in Lane's (2009) ideas about rapid social change and the need for a hero. As stated, my ideas align with the notion that the GMH is the hero and a freedom fighter. The other symbols in the lexicon were created from the same resistance movement, although as Martinsen (2009) suggests they are not as potent, as they are merely profanities born out of the anti-pornography campaign. The hero is the GMH and while he/she shares an ambiguous title, as do the other nine symbols in the lexicon, there is a deeper meaning and connection for the people of this subculture. Thus, the symbol continues to propagate within the community and is extending from a subculture to offline contexts and connecting through art to the mainstream. Wong's 2010 GMH demonstrates how a symbol can have meaning to people who live outside of the culture in which it was created.

As examined in Chapter Three, the aesthetics and function of art in mainland China have been closely monitored since the forging of the CCP and the Yan'an talks on literature and art in 1942. This surveillance is aimed at directing the creation of art that propagate the values of the collective harmonious society. Chinese leaders have also made suggestions on bolstering the socialist state through visual culture. Deng Xiaoping (1979) outlines ways in which artists and writers can align with the values of the nation. In his speech 'Greeting the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists' on 20 October 1979 (<http://en.people.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1350.html>) he states:

[O]ur writers and artists should try harder to portray and help foster the new socialist man and achieve greater successes in doing so.

[T]hrough images of this new man, we must stimulate the enthusiasm of the masses for socialism and inspire their creative activities, which are of historic significance in the pursuit of the four modernizations.

[O]ur socialist writers and artists should create vivid, inspiring flesh-and-blood characters. Through them they should truthfully depict our rich social life and the inner qualities of our people as shown in their social relations, and give expression to the trend of historical development and to the demands of our progressive era. They should endeavor to educate the people in socialist ideology and imbue them with the drive and spirit necessary to build national strength and prosperity.

Historically, the leaders of China have called upon the arts to propagate messages to the people nationally, while simultaneously sending messages to the world. It is through this unity or harmony that a perceived strength can be achieved. Further, if the nation's artists are creating work that represents the people and socialist values, this will also build national strength and unify the nation. Xiaoping implored artists to be 'the engineers of the human soul', a quote taken directly from Stalin. As seen in this section, Chinese artists are revealing the architecture of their souls over the internet. This visual design may not be aligned with the current views on the *harmonious society* that draw heavily from the socialist philosophies of Marx, Lenin and Mao. When economic reform began in the late 1970s, artists were less focused on the ideological requests of the state and starting to explore the architecture of their souls.

More recently, the artistic direction given to artists by Chinese leaders continues. In October 2014, Xi Jinping and the General Secretary of the CCP presented at a symposium in Beijing. The symposium focused on artists cultivating Chinese values



through their art (Heddaya 2014; *New York Times* 2014; *Xinhuanet* 2014). Key ideas extracted from Xi Jinping's 2014 talk include the following:

- 'Fine art works should be like sunshine from blue sky and breeze in spring that will inspire minds, warm hearts, cultivate taste and clean up undesirable work styles'.
- Artists should not be 'slaves' of the market or 'lose themselves in the tide of market economy nor go astray while answering the question of whom to serve. Otherwise their works will lack vitality'.
- 'Mr. Xi also offered criticism of some of the radical architectural designs that have come with China's construction boom, calling for an end to "strange buildings" ...'
- Do: 'disseminate contemporary Chinese values, embody traditional Chinese culture and reflect Chinese people's aesthetic pursuit'.
- Don't: 'plagiarism, mechanization and fast-food style consumption'.
- Definitely make sure you haven't: 'distorted the classics, toppled history, failed to distinguish right from wrong or good from evil'.
- 'The creation of art can fly with the wings of imagination ... but make sure art workers tread on solid earth'.

As seen, there has been a historical stronghold on the arts in China and these prescribed restrictions are still enforced today. Despite this, Chinese artists based in China are creating work that lies outside the boundaries of the CCP. Artists working with conceptual ideas surrounding censorship are not only Chinese people within China (as with Australian artist Jessi Wong), but they are people who wish to comment on or support the resistance movement by contributing art from their practice.

Chinese New York artist Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung is a new media artist who creates digital collages by remixing visual cultural imagery sourced from the internet. Through the exploration of digital communication, he composes contemporary mythologies that critique current social consciousness in China. In 2011, Hung started exploring the use

of the GMH, the French Croatian Squid and the River Crab in his work. The digital print contains symbols employing iconography and colour that refer to and mash-up mainland Chinese and American Pop culture. Central to the work is the GMH, looking directly at the audience as Moarilyn Maoroe. The artist's English wordplay with the American actor Marilyn Monroe reimagines an instantly recognisable pop art icon, Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup can. The can reads 蒜你狠豆你玩 (Vicious Garlic, Play with Beans) (Translation: Artsy.net 2017).



Screenshot: 'The Travelogue of Dr Brain Damages'. Digital print on canvas, Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung.

**Figure 54. After Maorilyn Maoroe Got Biatchslaped by Flying Hotdogs in Mahler Gobi Desert, Grass Mud Horse Invites Her for a Beer Pong Game (2011)**

*Maorilyn Maoroe* is a re-mashed Mao Zedong wearing a blonde Marilyn Monroe wig. She holds a red ping pong paddle between her thighs covering where her panties would be as her white skirt is blown into the whiteness of the GMH's fur standing behind her. This composition is complex, as the references to culture and cross-culture are many. To the Chinese government and many Chinese people, the use of Mao in this way would be too subversive to be shown in Mainland China. *Maorilyn Maoroe* is holding the red paddle that shows a YouTube logo and the Chinese characters (Artsy.net 2017) '五毛党中央' means '50 Cents party blocks the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China'. This work is laden with cross-cultural critique, creating narratives

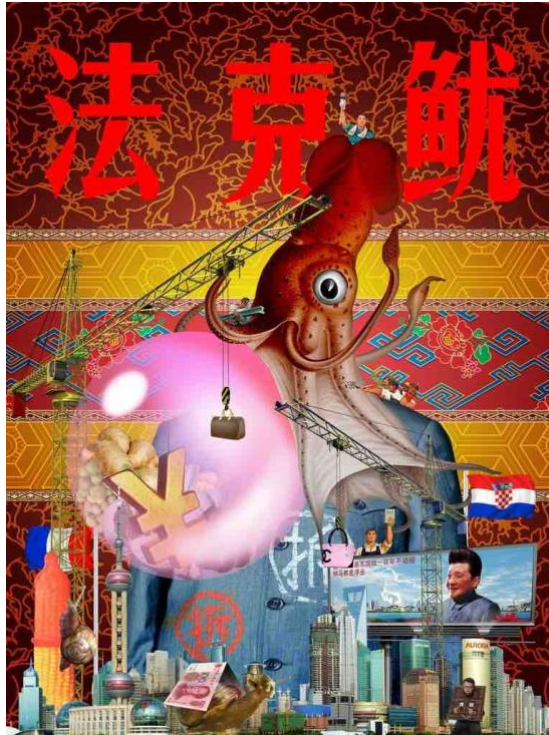
through the exploration of internet mythologies, current affairs and symbolic replicators that reflect the cultures of our time, while simultaneously remixing historical signifiers.

The GMH stands tall with a Valley dove 谷鸽 labelled and residing on his head. References to socialist propaganda schemas can be seen in a poster that has been appropriated from the Cultural Revolution era. Yellow and red rays are emanating from the centre of the artwork as seen in many propaganda posters and in some GMH viral videos and memes. The use of colour and pattern in the rays signifies cultural values and belief systems. Further symbolism is appropriated from posters that historically propagated historical messages to the masses in mainland China with the use of healthy ‘cherub-like’ children. These cherubs are seen frolicking around a giant peach with the characters 马勒戈壁 (Mahler Gobi Desert). The dualism and playfulness of the cherubs may signify the upcoming Chinese generation, one that is comfortable and adapting well to the ecology of the Mahler Gobi Desert. The symbols represent the old and new and the narrative reflects current ideologies in China. The use of the GMH symbol in this way further signifies a new movement and shifting ways of being.

The composition includes abundant visual signifiers. One Chinese cherub holds the Chinese purple note that represents ‘50 Cents Grass Mud Horse Money’. The red flag with the River Crab 河蟹 sketched in yellow replace the usual stars on the Chinese flag. This flag is depicted in many internet memes and is widely distributed online, associated with the GMH lexicon from 2009. Another signifier is the Chinese identification card, which all citizens in China must have. Another cherub holds this card up high and as we can see, the photo is of a GMH. The cherub is sticking his tongue out, mocking the system. The Chinese ID card was also an appropriated and propagated meme following the 2009 creation of the GMH symbol. These symbols illustrate the restrictions and resistance to harmony while simultaneously noting the rise of Western/US culture on Chinese society. In the background of the work, there are many references to Chinese culture and society. Chinese singer/songwriter Li Yuchun is here wearing a flowing white gown. With arms raised above her head, she stands in a Chinese pavilion. Behind her is a GMH kneeling with angel’s wings. The singer and the GMH are both engaged in *Maorilyn* worship. Hu JinTao is framed within the work, sitting among bamboo with GMH to the front of and behind him. His face has been tinted with rosy cheeks, it seems he is unable to react or adjust his surroundings as his

head sits in the golden baroque frame. In front of him is another GMH who wears an African-American style wig. These elements further signify change, not only in terms of ideology but of style, aesthetics and culture. The work is loaded with an abundance of semiotic signifiers that remix and jam cultures. Other significant symbols throughout make it a complex narrative. Some of these are depictions of *stereotypical* symbols denoting culture. These symbols include money, ID cards, flags, 5-point red stars, temples, red lanterns, hotdogs, bamboo, and yellow flowers.

Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung has two other works that draw on the mythologies of the GMH lexicon. As discussed, not many residual images of the other symbols of dissent are located online. Throughout the thesis, I claim that the symbol/s that are retained and hold currency are personified. These symbols are the GMH and the River Crab. I suggest that the GMH represents the people, a freedom fighter, a hero. Thus, retention of the symbol is strong. This is evidenced by the online and offline potency of the GMH symbol, which is circulated prolifically. The French Croatian Squid 法克鱿 is also found in Hung's work *French Croatian Squid chewing Double Rubble* (2011). As discussed, it has proved difficult to locate visual images and forms that employ other symbols of the lexicon. While sourcing artworks has proved challenging, both Hung and Wong use the French Croatian Squid in their work. As noted earlier, the Mandarin homophone wordplay of French Croatian Squid are 'Fa Ke Yu' or 'Fuck You'. Ai Wei Wei also titled one of his films *The Fake Case* (2013). This is directed by Andreas Johnsen and is also a direct link to the wordplay used in the GMH lexicon referencing the French Croatian Squid.



Screenshot: 'The Travelogue of Dr Brain Damages'. 2011 '爱吹泡泡糖的法克鱿'.

**Figure 55. 'French Croatian Squid Chewing Double Rubble', Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung**

In Hung's digital collage, there are many references to Chinese culture and parody. Like the other works in the suite that address and use symbols from the GMH lexicon, this is a digital print on canvas. The giant squid is wearing a Mao suit. Here, the suit denotes mainland China and links it to narratives of the historicised past. Other symbolism is seen through the use of graffiti. In China a building tagged to be demolished it is marked with the word 拆 (demolish). I have seen this character many times in China in the Beijing central business district (CBD), but also in artist districts where live-in studios were constructed without formal application. The squid in his Mao suit blows a bloom of bubbles symbolising an inflation bubble. Inside the bubble are other symbols, we see RMB (Chinese currency), a knob of ginger, green peas and garlic. An ominous demolition ball hangs close to the (inflation) bubble. In the foreground of the 'symbol laden semiotic digital collage', we see what appears to be the Shanghai skyline. Construction cranes tote what appears to be a Chanel handbag. The other handbag, due to its colour is perhaps a Louis Vuitton, as it is brown and matches the conflicting bourgeois/communist complex narrative that plays out in this digital print. The billboard in the foreground of the work shows an 'Elvis-styled' Deng Xiaoping with what appears



to be Lei Feng on top of the billboard waving his red book. The words of the popular Chinese meme 神马都是浮云 are seen in the skyline beyond:

God is in the clouds, nothing is worth mentioning, it could also signify a sigh, a self-comfort word used in times of sadness and turbulence, but during this time it is too hard to discuss or not worth mentioning. (Adapted from *Baidu Baike* 2017)

Chinese performance artist Liang Kegang 梁克刚 appears in the work and the artist portrays him here as a mortgage slave in the bottom right of the frame. The collage *Fa Ke Yu* shapes many narratives on the theme of rapid change in China. The complex work is laden with conflicting values of the CCP and other symbols representative of collective Chinese ideology. These are then layered with the effect of Western, individualist ideologies, building a complex pairing that outlines the complexities of the ideological shifts. Hung's collage enforces these ideas by referencing historical figures of power and culture and by contrasting them with current cultural influences that are not only coming from outside (the West) but occurring with China itself.



Source: screenshot 'The Travelogue of Dr Brain Damages' '乒乓无兵'. Mixed media sculpture 9ft x 5ft X 35 inches. Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung.

### **Figure 56. Ping Ping No Pong 2011**

The final work in this section by Hung is *Ping Ping no Pong 2011 Mixed Media Sculpture*. The symbolism within this piece employs a ping pong table as landscape; this semiotic stereotype signifies that this is China. On each side of the table, a ping pong paddle rests dormant, waiting for the game to begin. The sculpture uses a regular

table and the surface is green; the two red paddles align with the colour commonly associated with Chinese people and CCP ideals. This colour contrast between the red and the green resonates in the space in between the two opponents. One half of the table is cut into the shape of the River Crab *hexie* (harmonisation); this reveals a negative space, a gap to the underbelly of the table, where the viewer can see the floor. Near the giant crab's pincers lies the Great Wall of China, undulating from left to right across the table, signifying the centre. This divide shows the two sides and perhaps represents two belief systems. One system controls the access to information via the Great Wall (great firewall) explored through this thesis. The other side of the table signifies people who wish to have freedom of information, but are unable to reach it, as barriers exist (the Great Wall).

As a Chinese New York artist, Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung is connected to the Chinese diaspora that wishes to illustrate the conflict of ideologies in mainland China. Hung's work reflects and draws on current and ongoing visual cultural conundrums related to the rapid changes occurring in China. The symbolism employs a cultural exploration of digital online communication, with the final artworks mirroring contemporary mythologies that critique current social consciousness in China through visual pop culture.

## **Summary**

Throughout this this section, the use of the symbol/s from the lexicon, in particular the GMH symbol, is used by artists who reveal their names, thus proclaiming to be agents of change in the community. By revealing their names, the artists are not anonymous co-creators, as discussed in relation to the online representational discourse of the previous section. The artists express themselves through their works of art, which they may believe are capable of producing an effect and asserting the power in their visual freedom. As demonstrated, the symbolism of the GMH lexicon is politically charged and offensive to the values of the CCP. A journey through the symbolism, as shown here in artworks that use parody and humour, ensures the works are salient to people who may find the intended messages offensive. As discussed, the symbolism in these artworks is predominantly used by artists not living in mainland China, or in the case of Ai Weiwei, artists who are not afraid of the consequences of using the symbolism in



their work. For these reasons, I suggest, there are as not nearly as many artworks generated as with online memetic anonymous content.

In countries such as Australia, there are no restrictions on content-related internet searches. Google images under keyword searches yield many results. For this research, the keywords entered to acquire data samples in visual forms were GMH and *Cao Ni Man* in *pinyin*. In Google, if I type these keywords and then select images only, there will be a mix of the categories stated above. There will be memes, viral videos, artworks and the commodification of the GMH. Overall, due to the sensitive nature of the intended wordplay of the GMH symbol, not many artists have used the symbol in their artworks. Thus, it can be seen from online resources that the creation and propagation of anonymously made symbolic memes and commodification far outweigh number the artefacts made from 2009 to 2017.

This study predominantly uses internet search engines to access the visual data sources online. The method of selection has proved useful to locate a range of visual forms and their manifestations in all sections described in the chapter. Online sources often make connections to offline exhibitions, film and other proliferations of the main symbol or its lexicon. Through the exploration of this symbol in artwork, I have not found any material that uses the GMH in negative way. Compositionally, the GMH is always prominent in the works and is depicted as strong or dominant in the frame. This suggests that the GMH is always used in a positive way that reinforces and relays a message: that this beast is a heroic freedom of speech icon.

In terms of four-dimensional works such as the Ai Weiwei's *Cao Ni Ma* balloons, Qin Ga's *Grass Mud Horse* or Wong's protest mascot GMH, the same message is relayed, one of strength and freedom. The *Cao Ni Ma* balloons are buoyant and free with a reflective gold sheen, and thus, if the audience hold and look at the *Cao Ni Ma*, they inevitably see themselves. This is perhaps something that the artist wanted to relay: that *the want* of freedom in is all of us. In this way, the artist places the beast in the global arena, and by colour (gold) and using a reflective material, shapes the subversive symbol into a mirror of ourselves: A GMH. This too resonates with the idea that artists are 'the engineers of the human soul' (Deng 1979). This message is a common thread between all work created by the artists identified here. Qin Ga's *Grass Mud Horse/Song* encompasses visual narrative while simultaneously drawing on historical heroic figures.

The placement of a person upon a plinth is usually reserved for kings, queens and leaders and rulers. This iconic positioning is crucial to the bolstering of the GMH to iconic status through the creation of the artwork. It also must be acknowledged that the references in Qin Ga's GMH to the defacement of the portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square are too potent to ignore. These visual references speak volumes and make critical connections to Chinese history. Larger than life, the GMH icon becomes a mascot in Wong's work, where its physical presence manifests on a street in Hong Kong, in the public space for all to see. In this way, the GMH is used by artists unafraid of the consequences of using the symbol in their work in the public domain, visible and surveilled.

More recently, however, not as many new artworks have emerged, with the last work created in 2016. *Cao Ni Balloon*, included in Ai Weiwei's exhibition in Melbourne, Australia as discussed was the most recent work to use the symbol. This discovery may be due to several factors, and the creation of new work using the GMH symbol is still relatively unknown to a Western audience (thus, it is not interpretable). Chinese artists who exhibit outside China may not wish to include the symbol in their work, as they are not permitted to exhibit it nor any other of the symbols in the lexicon in mainland China. Thus, the desire to use the symbol in mainland China is limited and perhaps diffused, as the symbols from the GMH lexicon, in particular the GMH itself, are offensive to the CCP and the values of the 'harmonious society'. I suggest that artists who use the symbols are already known subversives, such as Ai and Ding and Wong. Other artists who use the symbolism, reflect the Chinese diaspora and other people globally who wish to build momentum regarding the freedom of expression in mainland China.

### **Section 3: Symbolism in Design and Commodification**

What is of interest and is becoming more apparent through analysis is the evolution of the GMH as a symbol. Initially used to cleverly circumnavigate Chinese internet censorship policies in 2009, it has now become a heroic metaphor—a symbol of a freedom fighter on the Chinese internet. Not only does this symbol pervade online portals in China and globally, it has also entered offline spheres, extending its communication value. This can be seen in commodities and merchandise such as t-shirts, coffee cups, apps and emoticons, as well as visual art exhibited in galleries.

The use and commodification of the GMH as representing the people and freedom of expression has become a social movement (*New York Times* 2009; Rea 2013; Wang, Juffermans and Du 2012; Weiner 2011). The GMH phenomenon is visual culture born and disseminated via the internet entering offline visual culture. This is further demonstrated by the increased use of these symbols online and offline, demonstrating, as Wang (2012) describes, a ‘system of mass production and the homogenizing regime of capital, which produces mass desires, tastes, and behavior.’ Wang (2012) argues that ‘the values of ‘Grass Mud Horse’ represent the equivalent relation between commodities, symbols, and popular culture’, some of which delve into capitalist values typically aligned with the West. Further, Wang (2012) suggests that the people have created a cultural product through social interaction and participatory internet culture. Whether the GMH is a product of mass consumption, it symbolises a need for what Ricoeur (1975, 192) refers to as ‘narrative identities’—so that people who participate in this subculture ‘can make sense of themselves and their lives through the stories they can (or cannot) tell’. Through code and metaphor in visual form, they create new heroes that reflect shifting ideologies. The creation of this type of symbolism through multimodal online visual culture highlights the power of the images to enable cultural insights about art and design both online and offline.

This section looks at the commodification of the symbol and examines, as Hebdige (1979) argues, the trajectory of elements of a subculture, tracking when they become accessible to the ‘mainstream’. Can a once subversive, radical and symbolic icon of dissent become homogenised? Does the resistant power of that symbol and what it signifies begin to fade, once the dominant mass of a society has the ability to decipher and recognise that subculture? I suggest that restrictions on content within the visual culture of mainland China are a provocation, one that encourages creative innovation and subculture formation. Subcultures are defined by Dick Hebdige (1979, 17–18) as:

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of life... safety pins... These ‘humble objects’ can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meaning.

Hebdige argues that subcultures are initiated through a form of resistance and that their trajectory through time is cyclic. He further suggests that all subcultures experience the

same trajectory. Hebdige's model suggests that subcultures are formed through a shared resistance in a community. This resistance is shaped by views that are not shared by the dominant society, and thus the mainstream or dominant society view these groups as radical, raising anxiety and fears. This fear of difference in turn fuels the resistance power of the subculture. Further, drawing on Keane's (2013) notions of entrepreneur and innovation, the subculture is diffused through the commodification process. Hebdige (1979) gives the example of Edwardian jackets that once signified Edwardian society and were later used by the Teddy Boy rebellious subculture of the 1970s. That same garment is then later recognised and consumed by dominant society. Thus as Hebdige claims, the subculture is diffused of its resistant power.

The analysis of the GMH lexicon uses Hebdige's semiotic theoretical model as a framework to examine the resistant force that creates subcultures and new symbolism. Applying Hebdige's semiotic model, I propose that resistance to the CCP's anti-pornography campaign and heightened censorship in 2009 initiated a group of anonymous co-creators and producers to conceive a lexicon of 10 Mythological Creatures to navigate the Great Firewall and critique the CCP restrictions on freedom of expression. These symbolic replicators of dissent started rapidly propagating as memes in China and further afield globally. As a result of these memes, sub-groups formed, creating radical, creative and unprecedented activity online. Inevitably, the activity captured the attention of the broader online community in China. However, the mass of Chinese society in mainland China under the current belief and value systems of the CCP, saw these groups of netizens as a disruption to their harmonious society. Further, attempts were made to strengthen online surveillance and seek resistant and incongruent behaviours both in visual and textual forms online and offline in China. This gave the subculture more power in some ways, although as it grew, so did the entrepreneurs, propagation and distribution in terms of the commodification of the subculture containing new symbols. As Hebdige (1979) identifies in relation to the punk movement, when elements of the subculture are made accessible to the 'mainstream' in artworks and commodities such as t-shirts, iPhone covers and plush toys, a symbol that represents that subculture, a once subversive and radical form of dissent becomes homogenised. Hebdige (1979) further suggests that once the dominant society has the ability to decipher and recognise that subculture, then the resistant power of the

symbols/signs within the subculture begin to fade, or as Mina (2017) stated in a recent article regarding the GMH, become ‘defanged’.

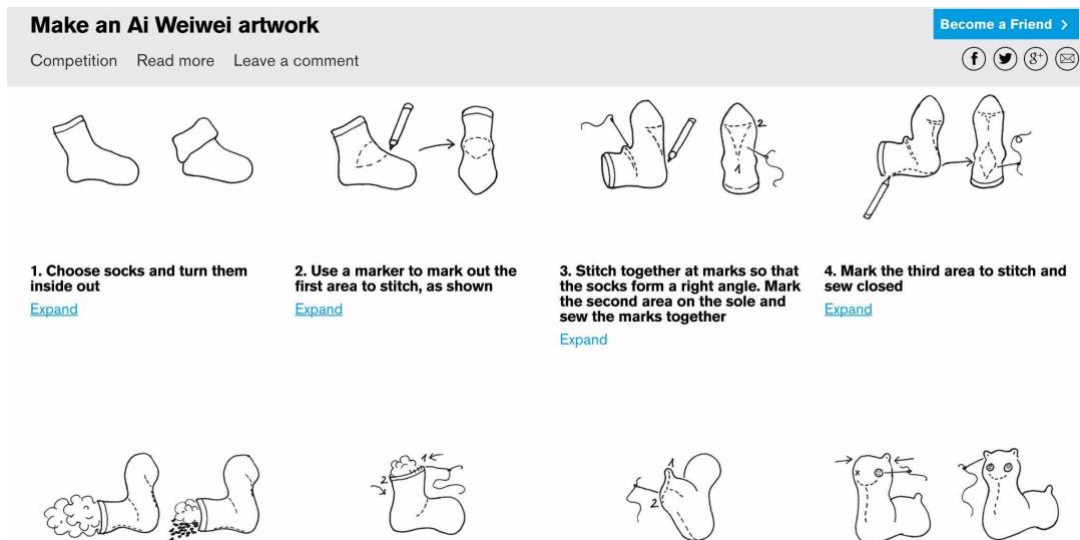
These ideas are further explored in this section on commodification. It is important here to note that, particularly in the initial stages of the meme propagation online, limited numbers of people within the subculture could read the symbols. Once the symbol/s had moved into other forms such as works of art and artists began to use their names to circulate the meaning of the new symbol, the symbolism reached a broader audience, both online and offline.

As a means to collect data and add to the image sampling for analysis, this study uses the two internet search engines Google and *Baidu*. Further to these search engines and to broaden the sample selection to ‘goods of desire’ in a commercial sense, I have used commercial, ecommerce websites. These websites are predominantly Chinese online shopping sites and include Alibaba, AliExpress, Taobao. In Australia I selected eBay to add to the data for analysis. This ecommerce context supports the claim that the GMH symbol has evolved over time and is now commodified on a t-shirt, an iPhone cover or as an oversized plush toy. From what the data have revealed, the GMH symbol is more widely known in mainland China and in Hong Kong. Keyword searches for the symbol in Australia conducted on eBay reveal there is an awareness and desire, with noted monetary exchanges taking place. Noting here that this is a qualitative study, the focus of the analysis is on using digital ethnography as *lurking* (Bryman 2012), then applying a synthesis of compositional interpretation, and semiotics with a multimodel analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen; 2006 Rose 2014). There is however scope to include some statistics to reveal the symbol’s popularity through representation and sales. Items discussed in this section strengthen the argument that the GMH has become a symbol of desire and thus, a community that buys into the mythology propagates the symbolism through material goods purchased online and used as offline consumables.

How do we know that a figure is a GMH and not an alpaca? The synthesis of methods applied in this thesis will equip the reader with the ability to read the symbolism of the GMH lexicon. It is hoped that after the reading this thesis, readers will have the insight to differentiate the GMH and an alpaca, creatures with same name and similar appearance, but markedly different in terms of the visual grammar they communicate. The GMH and its movement can be likened to the narrative of the Trojan Horse; it is a

disguise and used as subterfuge. In the same way that the Trojan horse entered the city of Troy, the GMH entered Chinese cyberspace. Through the creation of a new symbolism in visual form it opened the gates of the Great Firewall of China that is securely protected. However, in the case of the GMH the stratagem allowed the GMH to enter a securely protected place (the Chinese internet) and find free expression through visual metaphor.

Ai Weiwei is intent on propagating the symbol globally. Ai posits the GMH into consumer culture by drawing on 'maker culture'. Wen (2017) relates that since the 1990s there has been a growing momentum in differentiating the terms 'Made in China' and 'Created in China'. Maker culture is born out of the latter and as shown in recent years, creativity and innovation reflect the creative economy China. Ai Weiwei uses this momentum of people globally interested in DIY 'maker culture' and includes the Caonima, GMH in Phaidon's 2015 publication *Do it Yourself, 50 Projects by Designers and Artists*. The book collates 50 designers and artists and states that these DIY projects are for you to do in your home (the flat pack generation). The *Caonima* DIY project can also be found on London's Royal Academy for the Arts (2015) website, along with instructions, including a brief history of the subversive origin of the creature and how it has become a freedom of speech icon. This representation of the Caonima GMH as a DIY sock creation is more design than art and the high-profile reputation of Phaidon as a publisher adds to the commodification of the symbol. Considering this, does Hebdige's (1987) claim regarding a symbol's loss of potency within a subculture once it is taken out of that subculture carry weight? Is this an attempt to popularise the freedom of speech icon within global visual culture? Could Weiwei, 'China's most celebrated artist' (Keane 2013) be assisting with this softening of the symbol? The DIY *Cao Ni Ma* (as seen in Figure 57) is made from a sock, thus making it an object that most people could find the materials for. It is not an expensive item, but an item that most people could afford to make.



Source: <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/make-an-ai-weiwei-work>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/do-something-blog/2015/sep/25/make-an-ai-weiwei-sock-puppet>

**Figure 57. Screenshot of How to Make an Ai Weiwei Artwork**

The Caonima sock (presented in Figure 57) as a DIY project extends the communication of the symbol into the hands of creative participants worldwide. Does this action soften the symbol while simultaneously sending its symbolic significance further afield than the online meme? By extending the invitation for participants globally, most of who do not live within the bounds of a society that the symbolic metaphor represents, does the symbol then lose some of its potency through the commodification process? Or does the invitation to create this Caonima sock extend the metaphor of a freedom of speech icon globally, through using Ai's 'artist activist celebrity'. Earlier in Chapter Four, I referred to Zukerman's cute cat theory where the symbolic meaning is hidden beneath or disguised as 'cute'. Zuckerman applies this theory to the internet and symbolic metaphors that carry ideological signifiers. Despite this, the Phaidon publication, The Royal Academy and *The Guardian* all include the narrative of the symbolic meaning behind the GMH in their articles. The GMH sock (as cute) is then propagating the message of what the symbol means, but is the idea and potency being diluted as a result of commodification through the 'design process'? Does the act of making the symbol of resistance into a cute toy strengthen the meaning or simply extend and educate by making it a DIY activity that anyone could do? Anyone who has a sock could make this creature and tell the story to their friends and



family. This notion is explored in a publication written by Galerie Urs Meile (2007, 10) in relation to Ai Weiwei's works:

The act of changing the understanding and perspective of an object, or reworking an established concept, disrupts its stability and makes it questionable. To have other layers of color and images above the previous once calls into question both the identity and authenticity of the object. It makes both conditions non-absolute: you cover something so that it is no longer visible but is still there underneath, and what appears on the surface is not supposed to be there but is there.

The act of adapting the symbol and reworking it under prescription by the artist is a subterfuge. The art object exists, but the meaning and true identity may be buried deeply in semiotics. I shall refer to this as the third stage or section of the findings where the commodification of the symbol now moves into offline. Returning to Hebdige's (1987) claims that once a symbol leaves the subculture that created it, it then becomes a symbol within the mainstream and loses its potency. The GMH symbol and its lexicon are moving and so too is the message/s that it carries for people who can identify the symbolism in the cute DIY project.

### **Digging Deeper into Sexy and Cute: What's in Plush Toy?**

For some of us, especially in the West, the idea of sleeping or decorating a bedroom with a plush toy is something that may never have been considered. In order to gain insight into why plush toys are popular with adult Chinese women, I have found that there is a significant gap in the research. For this reason, the analysis will focus on another plush toy that is popular with mostly Asian women, *Hello Kitty*. Research conducted by Lai (1999) relays 'Cute' is 'Sexy' in Japan, extending Roach's (1999) claims that the Japanese are assimilated into cuteness, from money boxes, charm bracelets which extends the bounds of what is considered 'cute' for a child into the 'cute condoms' for adult protection. Roach suggests that there is no demographic distinction. Cute makes products that may not be desirable, desirable. Thus, disguising goods as cute may encourage Asian women to engage more with those products Ko (2000). Comparative studies by Roach (1999) and Lai (1999) revealed the differences between US and Japanese consumers of Hello Kitty products. The studies found that in the US, Hello Kitty products are purchased mainly by girls in their tweens (pre-teens and to a lesser extent teens) and that in Japan adult women were the main consumers. White (1995) further identifies that in Japan childhood is indulged in a way that is not

replicated as an adult. During the time of childhood society and the Japanese mother dote heavily on their children. White's (1995) study claims that this is perhaps the justification for Japanese women wanting to return to their childhood, as adulthood in Japanese society offers relentless long hours of hard work.

Could this also be the case for Chinese women, driven by the desire to consume symbols that propagate our identities? Barthes' concept of 'signification' is crucial here to further understand consumer desire for a product. In particular, this desire for a plush toy that signifies a hero and a freedom of expression icon. Does this in turn signify that people who desire or own this symbol are either buying into the parody or are they turning the idol into a tangible, tactile, comforting friend. Or is it a return to childhood? Baudrillard (1998, 21–22) describes the consumption mode as 'a systematic act of the manipulation of signs'. Hence, the power of the product is created through the signification process, or what the product signifies through its bestowed/symbolic meaning is primary. Moreover, a product is not a product without signification, the commodification of our desires. The plush toy then, appears to be an alpaca, signifies a freedom of speech metaphor and therefore becomes a desirable object as the GMH. As this study is in visual culture, the analysis will return to the outlined methodological framework, employing a synthesis of compositional interpretation, semiotics, and multimodal analysis, including the digital ethnography of *lurking* Bryman (2012). A useful framework to apply to the plush toy analysis is Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006, 239) *third dimension*:

Toys are of interest as they occupy a space between sculptures, which are primarily symbolic objects, for contemplation or veneration, and 'designed' objects for use, even though they may also convey symbolic messages.

After the 2009 creation of the GMH as a symbol of dissent and freedom of expression in mainland China, I claim that the fans of this subculture acted in the production and consumption of the GMH plush toy. As seen in the advertisement, the GMH is almost life-size and is often photographed with a young Chinese woman in a bedroom-like interior. Other advertisements of this specific plush toy allude to the sexualisation of the GMH as a protective bedfellow. In this way, the narrative relates more to an Asian target market than to a Western one, as demonstrated through the *Hello Kitty* studies (Hjorth 2005; Ko 2000; Lai 1999; Roach 1999; White 1995). Marketing the plush toy in



the linguistic reference in *pinyin* (*Cao Ni Ma*) as a key word search determines that it is a GMH; not an alpaca, but a GMH signifying the freedom of speech icon. The scale of the GMH, being so large and almost life-sized, may also signify that the consumer could sleep with the icon for freedom of speech (sleeping with the hero). The GMH stands at 1 metre, 52 centimetres (which coincidentally is the exact height of the researcher writing this thesis, but unlike the researcher, the GMH weighs 1.3 kg). Other images for this particular plush toy in the advertisement show the GMH alone in a bedroom or coupled with another GMH plush toy in a face-to-face embrace enacting a kiss.



Source: screenshots from [www.TaoBao.com](http://www.TaoBao.com).

### Figures 59a, 59b, 59c. Affectionate Grass Mud Horse

As we scroll through the images in the advertisement, a narrative about intimacy is built. Next we see ‘the couple’ kneeling on the bed with the woman’s arms wrapped around GMH’s neck. This is followed by her kneeling on the bed with hands loosely holding the length of the GMH’s neck. Finally, we see the woman and the GMH lying on the bed. The woman lies with the pink GMH, spooning the creature with one thigh wrapped around what *would be* the buttocks of the beast, and her arms are embracing the pink fluffy elongated neck. In this final shot her eyes are closed, signifying what could be constructed as a post-coital nap with her hero. Notably, the young woman in the advertisement signifies that perhaps the GMH product is not targeting children, but the demographic represented in the images. This further demonstrates that the plush toy, with its significant dimensions, is a product created for the fans of the GMH as a symbolic metaphor. The sexualisation here is more difficult to decipher. Previous studies revealed that sexualisation of ‘the cute’ is more salient with Asian cultures (Ko 2000; Lai 1999; Roach 1999; White 1995). The product depicted in this advertisement is more expensive than others examined in the data sampling. This may be due to its size or quality of fabric, though this is not conclusive.

The critical line of inquiry, as stated earlier in this thesis, is an attempt to break monolithic misunderstandings and assist in debunking stereotypes from the Western perspective into Chinese visual culture. Han Han is one of China's most popular bloggers and is said to represent Generation Y, children born in the 1980s. Osnos (2011) compares Han to Jack Kerouac and describes him as having the pop charisma of Justin Timberlake. Through this persona he demystifies the archetype of Chinese intellectuals. Han Han as an archetype is visual manifestation of the rising next generation of Chinese. He can sing, race cars, and through his satirical blog writing and books, sheds light on diverse and relevant perspectives on current Chinese culture. Despite being a popular writer on China, Han Han manages to skirt around being censored. Unlike Ai Weiwei, Han's approach to writing alludes to realities, rather than directly reflecting Chinese culture. In this way he is granted freedom of speech. Han Han is more careful in the way he chooses topics and alludes to sensitive topics using satire, although some content is removed. In his book *This Generation*, despite being published in 2010, there is no mention of the 10 Mythological Creatures, the Grass Mud Phenomenon, or any reference to the visual metaphor or wordplay in these.



Source: screenshot from <https://blogs.commonsgorgetown.edu/ln62-netspeak/author/ln62/>.

### **Figure 60. Han Han Wearing Grass Mud Horse t-shirt**

The use of celebrity endorsement to propagate the GMH is seen in Figure 60. In a photo shoot catalogued on the Google images search engine, Han Han wears a GMH t-shirt. The image now only appears on one site (as shown above), when I engage in a Google image search using the key words 'Grass Mud Horse Han Han and Cao Ni Ma Han Han'. Imperative to this study are screenshots. They are crucial to document the phenomena, as 'image response hits' in online ecologies may decrease or be erased over time. This is what I claim to be a result of broader textual and image sweeping due to

ensorship on the internet and also individual users protecting themselves and their online data. Originally, there were more image hits of Han Han wearing this GMH T-shirt (undocumented), but now this is the only one remaining online.

In an interview with Karoline Kan in *The New York Times* (2016), Han Han touches on internet censorship and the Great Firewall, which is rarely discussed in his writing directly:

In the West, a lot of people have the wrong idea that, because of the “Great Firewall,” Chinese don’t know what’s going on in the world. The West imagines that young Chinese are much less informed than they are. In China, especially in mid-sized and large cities, people know much more about politics, history, the news than many Westerners realize.

In another interview Han Han relates that ‘[i]f things continue like this, China will only be known for tea and pandas’ (Jacobs in *The New York Times*, 2010). The significance in Han suggesting symbols or products that represent China, such as tea and pandas, reflects my arguments here. Han alludes to the ability for netizens to gain access to information online, though VPNs. As a result, stereotypical depictions of symbols that represent China are changing along with this new symbolism. The internet has created a space where co-creators can conjure and manifest freely, until at some stage their content is blocked or removed by the censors. Self-expression is a paradox, where internet-mediated technology offers a promise of freedom that is never quite realised.

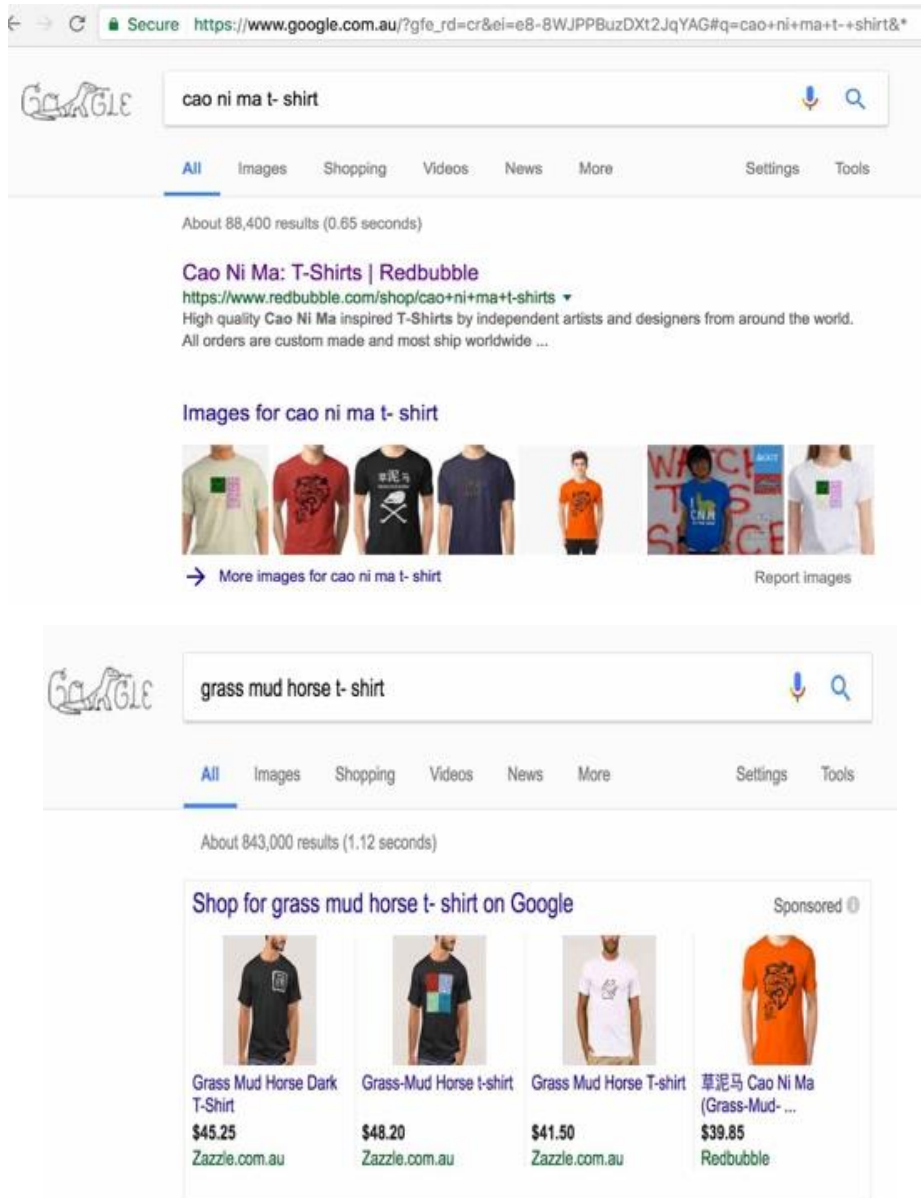
This statement reiterates the importance of the visual, and symbols that signify or relate a story about a nation. The GMH is a freedom of speech icon, it symbolises a shift in the preconceived ideologies of mainland China as a direct result of internet censorship policies, and it tells a story. As a direct result of Han Han’s online and offline visibility since 2006, his blog has become a mouthpiece for ‘this generation’ of Chinese born in the 1980s. A Google image result for GMH and t-shirt yielded many images, but most showed Han Han wearing the subversive creature. Other images were anonymous models, photographed from the neck down, showing only the product. These were on websites selling the product, such as *TaoBao*, *eBay*, *Alibaba*. The image of Han Han is seen on a blog written by a student from Georgetown University in the US. The source is difficult to locate online, which leads to further questions that were raised earlier regarding the saving and storing of images downloaded from the internet (this will be explored later in the conclusion). The appeal of Han Han wearing the t-shirt would



make it attractive to ‘his fans’ and to ‘fans of the GMH lexicon’. The t-shirt plays on the I (heart) something range of t-shirts that are sold to endorse products, cities or regions. In this way, the t-shirt is propagating the symbol online and further attempting to tap into some of Han Han’s popularity to broaden the symbol’s reach and significance, not only in China but globally.

T-shirts and wearables that use the symbol can be found on most ecommerce websites by using both English and Chinese keyword search terms. Mostly, these items appear with only the product and no celebrity modelling the item. Google yields the most responses with *Cao Ni Ma* t-shirt, yielding 88,400 hits and GMH t-shirt shows 843,000 hits. The number of hits returned from the English keyword search demonstrates a significant difference and this lies in the popularity of the symbol using English to disguise the marketing of the ‘censored symbol’ on wearables.





Source: screenshots taken from Google keyword searches for GMH t-shirts Monday 6 March 2017.

### Figures 61a, 61b. Grass Mud Horse t-shirt Word Search

Not only does the GMH symbol appear on t-shirts, but on other wearables including skirts, hoodies, pyjamas and socks. It is conclusive that the GMH symbol has entered the wearable market through the commodification process, suggesting the symbol's popularity has not eased, but has retained its status through this process. The symbol yielded higher returns from the English keyword search in Google. This result I suggest is invigorated by ongoing interest in Western or English-speaking audiences or the Chinese diaspora, and may be the result of extended media reports, blogs, scholarly

articles and visual merchandising keeping the symbol in circulation. It could be claimed that the symbol of the GMH has attached itself to an English-speaking fan base who wish to propagate the cause. Or as stated earlier, English is used as a subterfuge to continue the beast on his global folly, ensuring the symbol retains its original signification through the narrative. Further, as the symbol enters another culture does it become something else? Is it fully understood? Is the cultural understanding deep enough to navigate the complexities of the symbolic metaphor to underpin its dynamic, clever and ideological undercurrents that indicate a shift in ways of being in mainland China? As a symbolic commodification, is the GMH still the freedom fighter, the hero, the defiant underdog to Chinese people? Campbell (1949) relays that ancient hero narratives from all cultures follow a universal fixed narrative that he refers to as a monomyth. The monomyth resonates with the masses, as the hero is an ordinary human commencing a journey into territory that is unfamiliar and peppered with many challenges. As Levinson (1978) relates, it is through this journey that the hero is on the path to transformation. Via hero stories like the GMH, we learn that through adversity change is inevitable for self-growth and that all of us must challenge ourselves to find out who we truly are.

Throughout this thesis there have been references sourced from CDT. Based in Berkeley in California, the online bilingual publishing organisation has been tracking the evolution of the internet in China since 2003 (CDT 2017). The CDT founder Xiao Qiang, Adjunct Professor at Berkeley University, has cultivated a powerful and useful resource that has aided this study, in terms of making connections to connections (Rose 2010). The focus on the internet in China and public opinion, as voiced through Chinese social media gives this study into visual culture a solid interdisciplinary grounding. Notwithstanding the phenomenal number of voices from the Chinese cybersphere that are aggregated, translated and deciphered for cultural contextual signification, CDT predominantly works with content that has been censored or blocked in China. The organisation increases connectivity by mirroring the site in both English and Chinese, so that readers in China are able to access the site. This poses some questions: if the site is blocked in China, how are users able to access the material prior to censorship enforcement? Which brings us back again to questions regarding users saving data collected from the cyber sphere before is removed. I shall call this gesture 'data harvesting': it is to retain online material for documentation and analysis. This further

analysis would include looking for factors relating to why the content needed to be blocked to align with the CCP's harmonisation policy.

However, returning to the visual analysis of the GMH, CDT offers a rich and comprehensive view of the Chinese internet and the GMH phenomenon. In 2013, CDT initiated an ebook that decodes political slang on the Chinese internet. The emphasis however, is on the textual homophonic wordplays. The visuals represented are not as comprehensive, nor do they undergo scholarly methodological analysis. As described by the title the book maintains that it is a glossary (CDT 2013), which underpins the cultural contexts and makes it useful to students, linguists or cultural theorists looking at Mandarin wordplay. The modus operandi of the publication is to highlight online resistance discourse in China for a global audience. The cover shows what appears to be a Chinese style propaganda woodcut print, the hero depicted is *Chairman meow* and *Chairman meow is hungry* is the title of the artwork. Many headshot portraits of Chairman Mao are replicated: Meow wears a PLA shirt buttoned-up with red triangles on the collar, and he also wears Mao's famous cap, donning the 5-pointed red star (a symbol of the CCP). Hanging firmly from his mouth is a computer mouse with a broken USB cord dangling limply, as would the tail of a dead rat in the mouth of its predator. The symbolism is direct, witty and potent, employing parody to clearly communicate the intended message. The use of Mao as a reference in the title and in the posturing of the artwork strongly implies that the uniform and Mao are authoritarian. Mao Zedong still remains a potent symbol that relays power. *Chairman meow is hungry* appears on the merchandising for CDT in the form of a book cover (as discussed), t-shirt and iPhone case. Other merchandise on the CDT online store includes the GMH t-shirt and mug that employ the same artwork.



Source: [www.chinadigitaltimes.com](http://www.chinadigitaltimes.com).

### Figures 62a, 62b. Screenshots of Grass Mud Horse Cup and t-shirt

As seen in Figures 62a and 62b, the design employs a grid of four GMH inside a square colour coded in a pop art style. The colour symbolism in the image does not appear to have any deeper meaning, nor are they aligned with colours relaying any cultural significance. Other merchandise available online at the CDT store has similar themes of resistance (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Themes of Resistance in CDT Merchandise**

| Message                     | Items  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Speech is not a Crime       | t-shirt/hoodie/flowy muscle top or 155 other styles  |
| Speech is not a Crime       | sticker  |
| Speech is not a Crime       | notebook   |
| Crazy Crab Tiananmen        | t-shirt /hoodie/flowy muscle top or 155 other styles |
| Xi Jinping's Little Red App | t-shirt/hoodie/flowy muscle top or 155 other styles  |
| Xi Jinping's Little Red App | iPad cover   |

All the merchandise sends the same message, propagating resistance to online censorship in mainland China. Does this mean that the symbolism and intended meanings are reaching the mainstream? Are these ideas still located within the

community of the subculture that are attempting to implement change? Or is CDT broadening the reception of symbols of resistance, using merchandise to promote their online organisation, to raise money to continue to enhance cross-cultural understanding of online discourse?

Other ecommerce websites however do not engage in explanations of the symbolism used. Is it that the symbol has now cultivated its own charter in these online spheres that there is no need for a small paragraph illuminating the consumer of the subculture from which the symbol came? Has the symbol reached, as Hebdige stated, the mainstream? Does the mainstream recognise the alpaca as a GMH without any descriptive sales pitch on mainland Chinese ecommerce sites? A keyword search of GMH on predominantly Chinese ecommerce website AliExpress.com yields many results, including a ‘hip-hop hoodie’ with a GMH for men and women.



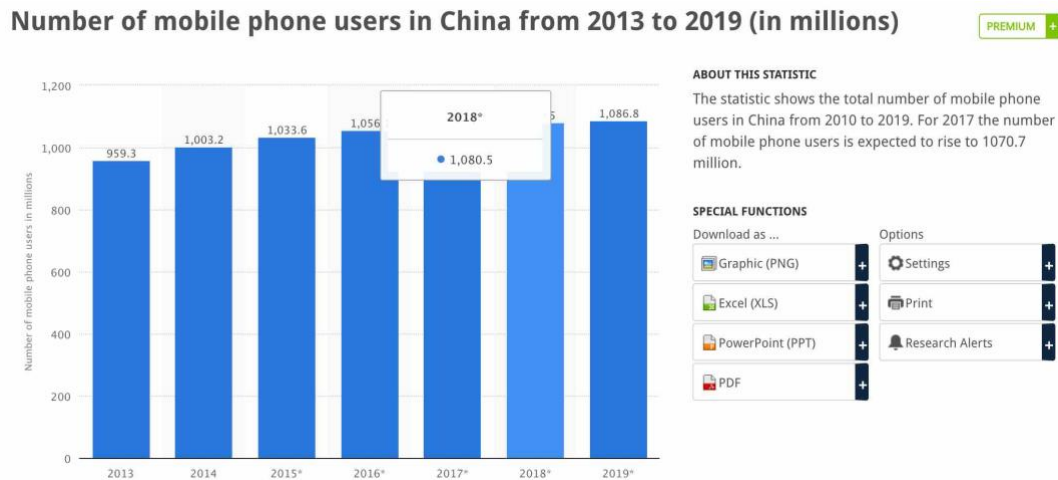
Source: www. Aliexpress.com.

**Figure 63. Screenshot of GMH Sweatshirt**

As seen, the GMH is facing us, the sky is blue and he/she wears a red scarf around its neck. The facial expression could be interpreted as strong and defiant, with body language displaying a full frontal gaze. Red in Chinese culture not only signifies luck and prosperity but is also used in socialist propaganda, with symbolic references to the CCP. In many schools in China, children wear this type of red scarf around their necks if a family member has a connection to the CCP. The deployment of the red scarf in this design I suggest is salient and would resonate with Chinese belief systems, but not with the political ideology. Thus, the people who wear this type of hoodie in mainland China would not be from the mainstream representing mass Chinese cultural beliefs and ideology, but would instead reside in a subculture.

## What's in a Smart Phone Cover?

The rapid growth in digital technologies and creative mobile innovation (Keanne, 2016, Hjorth 2017) in mainland China is indicated in the number of mobile phone users, with an estimated 1,080.5 million by 2018 (Statistica 2017).



Source: screenshot taken from [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com).

**Figure 64. Number of Mobile Phone Users in China**

As seen in Figure 64, mobile phone use in China is considerable, with an increased ownership and use of mobile devices in the population (Statistica 2017). With this rise in demand for mobility and versatility so too is there a rising desire for ‘aesthetic’ protective covers for mobile devices. Studies into aesthetics and ‘cuteness’ (Roach 1999; White 1999) into *Hello Kitty* could be applied again in this context. The GMH mobile phone cover (see Figure 65) comes in a range of colours, each displaying the mythological GMH.



Source: screenshot of taken from www.alibaba.com.

### Figure 65. Grass Mud Horse iPhone Covers

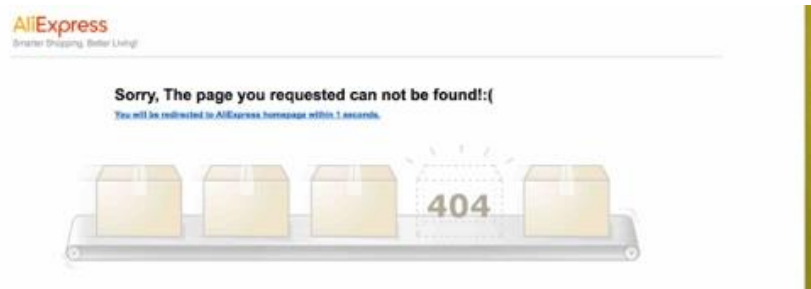
The heading for the product in English reads *Animal Grass Mud Horse Case For iPhone*. This title infers that the product is a GMH and carries the signification of the symbol. Otherwise, the heading would be alpaca or llama. This example was found on Alibaba.com, which not only supplies individuals, but as seen in Figure 65, can dispatch 500 items per day. From this, we can conclude that the cover is popular and sold in large quantities online to commercial and sole traders. Can we now suggest that due to such quantities being readily available for commodification and distribution, that the symbol entered the mainstream?

As seen in the image above, there are five colour ways available: black and red, white and pink, translucent and pink, hot pink, and light pink and blue and white. Only one of the smart phone covers uses colours of any cultural significance to Chinese users. Historically, black and red are used widely in Chinese art and design. Therefore, it can be noted that this colour combination refers to this historical lineage, where the other covers employ non-specific universal tones:

A sign does not simply exist as part of reality-it reflects and refracts another reality. Therefore, it may distort that reality or be true to it, or may perceive it from a special point of view, and so forth. Every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation...The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. *Everything ideological possesses a semiotic value* (Voloshinov 1929, 10).



The domain of the visual pervades our lives, yet the ability to read through ideological semiotic interpretation is perhaps limited. Further methods of collecting image samples for this study have included Pinterest. This has worked well in most cases, as the act of adding a ‘pin’ to an image on a website then directly embeds the link for reference later. The symbols are saved later for evaluation. Pinterest allows the user to save pins and collate image content from various websites. I then make folders that are enabled either in the private or the public domain. This method is not traditionally a suggested method for academic researchers, but is typically used by people who wish to collect and categorise online visual ideas. By using Pinterest, the scholarly researcher is able to build multiple visual image files and folders that link to the site from where the image was obtained directly. In this way, Pinterest allows the researcher to go back to the original source of the file via the embedded website link. Further, data can be set up in allocated folders with titles for ease of access. Overall, this way of collecting data has been beneficial, unless one day the link is ‘missing’ or ‘broken’. Thus, the use of screenshots is a more secure way of evidencing data, especially when looking at data from China. In 2015, I saved a pin of a GMH toy from AliExpress. Two years later, March 2017, the pin still exists within Pinterest, although the link to the ecommerce site no longer exists (see Figure. 66).



Source: screenshot taken from AliExpress 2017.

### **Figure 66. Your Request Cannot Be Found**

The title of the toy is *Angry Family—Alpaca*. It is displayed in a box labelled in English and what appears to be Chinese/Japanese writing.



Source: screenshot taken from site before it was removed documented on my personal Pinterest account.

**Figure 67. Angry Family—Alpaca.**

The text that accompanies the item online tells us that the alpaca is a GMH White Mould Platform Doll (AliExpress.com) 2015:

Vinyl Toys Alpaca Doll Grass Mud Horse White Mold Platform Doll For Children Kids Gift Anime Figuras-in Action & Toy Figures from Toys & Hobbies

The stylish design and stark contrast of the packaging gives the consumer the impression of high-end design. The smooth curvatures of the GMH as it appears do not, as the English title suggests, give the impression of an angry family. To Chinese people, white signifies death. Is there some connection to the death of the family that is signified in this toy? Perhaps that is why the link no longer exists, as any reference to the devaluation of the family values in Chinese culture is surely disruptive to the state's harmonious society. The description of the toy also states that it is for children, but with the name Angry Family, regardless of culture, no parent would buy this product for their child. Thus, it can be assumed it is targeting another demographic. Despite the removal of this product from AliExpress, the semiotic analysis would be that this product was intended for an adult market and not a children's gift. As this study is qualitative, relying on visual analysis and interpretation, the demographic range of the target adult market is unknown. I propose however, through these semiotic connections, that this toy is a direct response to the GMH phenomenon, becoming a product soon thereafter. This signification can be seen in the use of the alpaca symbol, the title Angry Family on the packaging and the English text descriptions on the 2015 AliExpress

website that have since been removed. Digital peripherals and their commodification are a large market in ecommerce. Alibaba.com is another online ecommerce site that has GMH power banks which allow users to recharge their mobile phones remotely. The product is manufactured in Shenzhen, although looking through the statistics about the main consumers, the US is the biggest consumer of this product, followed by the UK.



Source: screenshots of taken from Alibaba.com.

**Figures 68a, 68b. Grass Mud Horse Powerbanks**



Source: GMH powerbanks taken from site before it was removed Alibaba.com  
[https://www.alibaba.com/product-detail/Rubber-Power-Bank-Cute-Power-Bank\\_60022769269.html](https://www.alibaba.com/product-detail/Rubber-Power-Bank-Cute-Power-Bank_60022769269.html).

**Figure 69. Screenshot of Purchasing Transactions**

From the table of export markets (see Figure 69) there were many transactions made in 2016 from mid-May to mid-December. These findings are interesting, as the US market would not necessarily call the power bank a GMH, but an alpaca. The findings here suggest that the US market is buying the portable device for its function and not necessarily for what it symbolises, contrary to the title of the product. The product is titled: Rubber Power Bank Cute Power Bank 2600mAh with GMH Shape. In this

example, despite the English title telling us what it is, perhaps the meaning and connection to the subculture is lost in the commercialisation of the product:

It is a cute, compact product that will perform, it is lightweight and adaptable with most if not all smart phone connectors including iPhone4/4s/5/5s/5c, Samsung, Nokia, Micro USB, Mini USB, PSP, MP3/MP4/MP5 (Alibaba portal 2017).

The exterior is made from rubber and plastic and comes in a range of colours, including white, green, pink, red, blue, yellow, and purple, or there is the option to customise. The product is small, ‘cute’ and resembles Mickey Mouse more than the GMH. For this particular product, suggesting the connotations to the GMH are not as strong as those outlined in other visual forms discussed in this thesis.

## **Summary**

As the symbol of the GMH enters other cultures does it lose its meaning? Does it, as discussed in the example of the GMH powerbank above, become solely a cute device, devoid of meaning to the US consumer? How can we prove this? When looking at the symbols for visual analysis, especially those pertaining to commodification, how are we able to assess that the signification and semiotic interpretation are accurate? It seems that as the symbol progresses and evolves through these *stages of being* that *meaning* or *knowing* may be lost in the process. What is perhaps lost through the commodification process is the original power of the symbol, or as Hebdige claims, the subculture. It is within the subculture that the symbol stays true—it remains an original and powerful signifier. As the symbol moves from being a meme into art and later into design and commodification, meaning perhaps is lost when entering other cultures without the appropriate visual grammar to read the symbolism. Is the symbol read as the symbol of dissent in the US by the masses, when they giggle to themselves as they are charging their Blackberry with the GMH powerbank? Does it then become just another ‘cute’ commodity that was ‘made in China? In this case people who buy the GMH powerbank have a *freedom fighter* in their pocket and they do not even know.

What cannot be proved in this study is which demographic the symbol is more salient with. Due to issues surrounding privacy and ethics, I chose methods that best represented the dataset while protecting participants’ privacy. This was due to the sensitive political nature of my study. By using many sources that were written by

Chinese scholars in English, I was able to gain insights into the justification of the symbols' creation. Again, I will state here that this study is from a Western ontology; I do not claim to read or write Chinese and any translation cited here is directly taken from sources cited in the study. Where this may be seen as a limitation, it may also be seen in the 'constructivist paradigm' as assisting me in making connections based on the synthesis of a selected methodology employing semiotics and compositional interpretation on multimodal visual forms. Further, digital ethnography in the form of *lurking* assisted my analysis, informing a broader global perspective through online communities. The comments fields in sites such as YouTube assisted me in proving my claims regarding the interest of the online community in knowing what the symbolism meant. It also indicated what users may or may not be Chinese.

The limitations of these claims may be tested further in future studies into the symbolism, with online communities using questionnaires or digital ethnographic methods of elicitation from Chinese and non-Chinese participants. Further methods that could potentially offer insight would involve participants from Chinese and non-Chinese backgrounds for a comparative approach. This may give further insight into whether the symbols truly are known and to whom, and whether some are more potent or have now been diffused of their original significance. This further analysis would also offer confirmation of demographics and decipher whether the main symbol, the GMH, remains a freedom of speech icon or has lost its potency, becoming just another 'emoji'.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

On route to a conference in the UK in 2015, my flight departed from Melbourne International Airport in Australia. Window shopping the duty-free section within the vast interior of the transit complex, I stopped at a merino wool shop. There in the front of the shop in a very prominent position were two GMHs made from Australian merino wool. Synchronicity and semiotic awareness informed the reading of this sign, although seeing the GMH in this context it appeared a somewhat ‘unusual’ display to have in a merino wool shop. The GMHs stood approximately 50 cm tall and were seemingly well constructed with a matching price tag of \$138 AUD. Product placement at the Melbourne International Airport was evidence for my claims that the symbol is entering offline spheres through commodification. The GMHs appeared again this year 2017 at Melbourne International Airport, with an increased price. This time, the animal was set among ‘high-end’ dried sea cucumbers with accompanying Chinese writing descriptors on the tags, I suggest targeting Chinese consumers. The value of Australian merino wool is now intertwined with a freedom of expression icon.



Source: Justine Poplin

**Figure 70. Merino Alpaca at Melbourne Airport Australia (2015)**

In this thesis, I present a case study of the GMH phenomenon that emerged in 2009 from mainland China. Originally a set of homophones anonymously created online, the Mandarin tone transforms linguistic wordplay into a visual lexicon of 10 Mythological Creatures to critique internet control in mainland China. Of interest here is the way in which these symbols were generated and how and why they transitioned from symbolic online internet memes to offline symbolic use in art and design. I therefore set out to explore the new symbolism by investigating ways of deciphering online visual gestures through accessing ‘cultural keys’, as developed by Shifman (2014). The creation of the new symbolism, as discussed throughout the thesis, is rooted in political relevance and deploys practices and art forms to signal, dissolve and raise awareness of social and ideological change. My study maps the GMH phenomenon to test the claim that over time some symbols may lose potency, while others remain and propagate in online and offline visual forms. The findings have been related through a synthesis of semiotic and compositional interpretation and multimodal discourse analysis that also employs digital ethnography. The aim of the study is to deepen the Western perspective on Chinese visual culture by working with and interpreting cultural flows in the digital age. I claim that the new symbolism generated as a result of internet censorship in mainland China demonstrates a generational and ideological shift through the creation and propagation of a new visual grammar for the twenty-first century. I argue that the main symbol, the GMH, still carries potency as a freedom of expression icon, as demonstrated by its ongoing relevance to artists and designers. The overall findings suggest that, as a result of social change in China, a new set of communicators were formed and that their signification is now historicised, renewed and extended through the Chinese diaspora or people who wish to understand the complexities of China’s creativity and online cultures.

In Australia, there is a growing desire and interest by galleries and curators to exhibit contemporary art from China. Research examining the Australian interest in contemporary Chinese visual culture would be a rich area for future research. White Rabbit Gallery, which opened in 2009, recently donated six million dollars (UNSW 2017) to UNSW COFA Art & Design for further research into the White Rabbit collection. The gallery, located in Sydney, only shows Chinese artists. Judith Neilson (2017) claims that 2000 was ‘the big bang’ in Chinese art and a turning point. Although the curatorial themes of the work may be coined ‘subversive’, the exhibited content has



not yet included any of the GMH lexicon symbolism. Recent exhibition titles could be termed provocative and are thus indicative of China's rapid social change through curatorial strategies and through the calibre and tone of the work shown. Further, it is interesting to see how Chinese art is represented in Australia and how the gallery is building an audience based on curatorial themes that highlight China's social change. Titles such as *Dark Matters*, *Vile Bodies* and *Double Take* provoke a visual and cultural interest that mirrors the provocative and nuanced themes. The artists who exhibit at White Rabbit are from a diverse demographic range of twenty and twenty-first century artists. Artists have lived during Mao and post-Mao times; this historical coverage encompasses the shifting characteristics of symbolism and artworks. This thesis contributes to understanding the impact on global change in China in what is considered in the West as 'the Asian century' and what this in turn means for visual culture. My research aims to expand the Western perception of Chinese visual culture and the intertwined complexities of cultural signification. Further, galleries that collect contemporary Chinese art, such as White Rabbit Gallery in Australia, and their audiences, could benefit from suggested insights into understanding the artistic practices underpinning ideas, skills and influences and the new symbolism manifested in the Asian century.

The following discussion is a summary of the main findings of the research, followed by a review of the hypothesis and research questions. Deeper into this final chapter, I discuss approaches and methods that build the capacity to understand and interpret this new symbolism in context, with its complex consideration of meaning and application. I conclude with suggestions regarding potential further research into this unique symbolism that is generated online before moving into the offline world. Analysis of the symbolism illuminates plausible transcultural readings of Chinese visual culture relevant for the twenty-first century. I suggest that once the symbol enters offline contexts, it is further renewed and extended, connecting to people who wish to engage in the fight for freedom of expression in China. This research suggests productive tools for identifying the new symbolism and ideological underpinnings of contemporary visual culture from mainland China. Throughout this chapter, I address the gaps in knowledge about the new symbolism found in Chinese visual grammar online, and how and why it has entered offline communication through extended visual culture. This is accomplished by finding the 'connections to connections' (Rose 2014) and by

documenting the historical lineage and restrictions on visual material in mainland China. As outlined in previous chapters, due to the parameters enforced by the CCP, I claim there are ideological shifts occurring within Chinese visual culture. The chapter offers a summary of theoretical frameworks for how the GMH phenomenon has been investigated in this thesis and what this study may offer to the ‘universal aspect of reading images’ from a Western perspective when looking at new emergent symbolism from China in the digital age.

The chapter is bolstered throughout by the literature on the phenomenon. It reveals a gap in Chinese visual culture during a time of paradigm shifts. This, I suggest, was the impetus for the initiation and creation of new symbolism, one that shaped a new hero in this time of rapid social change. Throughout the thesis, my ideas draw on the political relevance of deploying visual forms to signal, dissolve and raise awareness of social and ideological change in online and offline contexts. It does so by examining the underpinning relevance of these frameworks and how they manifest, drive and create new forms of visual culture. Following the trajectory of Mao Zedong’s image from veneration to subversion scaffolds and reflects this overview of China’s visual culture. These changes continue to occur, as indicated by the emergent visual culture in mainland China identified in this thesis.

My interest in the changes in Chinese visual culture that have resulted from internet use is based on my own experience. As discussed in the introduction, my first exposure to these changes occurred through teaching visual communication in mainland China from 2002 to 2012. Using Photoshop as digital practice in my classes enabled insight into the changing ways students engaged with and manipulated digital content to create work that would challenge, critique and offend the ‘harmonious society’. This new way of working digitally with visual forms indicated a playful and experimental ideological shift. This then became a driver for the research, as university students began reshaping visual sources from the internet, together creating visual metaphors that fused Chinese and Western pop culture icons, such as the head of Mao Zedong on Homer Simpson’s body.

As explored throughout the thesis, the way in which we communicate is deeply rooted in our culture and is therefore culturally specific. Cultural theorists Csíkszentmihályi and Halton (1981) suggest that we are the creators of our realities; as such, our creations

mirror ourselves. I argue that creativity and communicating visually manifest messages that reflect cultural ways of being, mirroring internal values and beliefs. It is through the act of shaping visual symbolic meaning that people can say what is not permitted to be expressed in words. This way of communicating involves a state of heightened creativity and occurs as a direct result of restrictions in public and virtual spaces in China. Visual messages and significations in this way act as a seed that can propagate widely and rapidly via the internet. The seeds of visual thought that reflect ideologies move as memes that evolve and replicate. Users in online communities readily propagate and shape content to reflect current realities by reconfiguring and re-mashing visual messages. As discussed, there are many restrictions on internet use in China. The GMH lexicon was born from these restrictions to circumnavigate them with visual metaphor. This illustrates how resourcefulness and creativity thrives within a Chinese subculture. The ‘monolithic’ stereotype of ‘made in China’ (Yang 2014) is here dismissed, as the GMH lexicon reaches beyond the realms of copyist behaviour that play into *shanzai* and *kuso* culture. This way of communicating that incorporates multimodal forms of *e’gao* demonstrates innovation and creativity through online co-creation. I suggest that this creative expression sends clear messages that reach beyond mainland China via visual metaphors and new ways of expression that indicate ideological shifts.

My hypothesis claims the new symbolism created in online communities in mainland China is entering offline contexts through art and design. Therefore, it can be argued that using the internet as means of self-expression has resulted in the creation of new set of visual communicators, some of which are potent and retain significant power. As result of an internet censorship campaign in 2009, a new movement of visual culture that created new symbols began circulation. It signified freedom of expression in online forms. Further, this could be perceived as a new art movement, due to the multimodal functionality of the symbolism and the complexity of what it signifies. Initially a lexicon of 10 Mythological Creatures, the GMH memes began entering offline art and design culture as an original visual grammar. Therefore, I suggest that new the symbolism generated as a result of internet censorship in mainland China demonstrates a shift in ideologies via the iteration of relevant visual grammar from 2009 to 2017.

## **Research Conclusions**

The contribution to knowledge discussed throughout this thesis uses methods that enable access to ‘cultural keys’ through semiotic and composition interpretation including digital ethnography. These methods best reflect the multimodal nature of the evolving symbolism and are used as tools to interpret user-generated content, comments and images online and offline in art and design. The new visual expression in mainland China uses emerging technology to create new symbols that carry messages that reveal shifting ideologies in the Asian century. By identifying and analysing the new symbols we can map the trajectory, noting any changes in the original meaning and the visual forms that carry the symbolism. This study can be used to inform and guide visual communicators, creative industry educators, artists and designers.

This thesis contributes to knowledge by collecting data and visual representations tracing the development of mythological memes and the GMH phenomenon. These internet memes from 2009 represent a shift in Chinese visual culture. After excavating the internet for visual sources to add to the data sample (from 2012 to 2017), I found that the GMH symbol remained prevalent and the other symbols in the lexicon became diffused, removed, unused or retained. Overall findings suggest that the signification of the GMH has now been historicised, renewed and extended through the Chinese diaspora or through people who wish to understand the complexities of Chinese creativity and online cultures. As noted in Chapter Five, during the period of research, many online sources were removed. I highlight the importance of archiving online ecologies to accurately examine emergent online visual culture, particularly in an environment where content is monitored and/or removed. The value of documenting multimodal and fleeting sources via screenshots and by collecting and curating them on Pinterest or YouTube is crucial. Thus, through examining the evolution and mapping the journey of the symbols, tracing their usage and application via ‘cultural keys’, I contribute to knowledge regarding creative subcultures working within the complexities of Chinese culture.

## **Research Question Review**

The literature review throughout this thesis gave an insight into how and why the lexicon was born, and documented the symbols used for online social media discourse. I

looked at how these new symbols created for subversive online use in China are being used in visual culture. Through researching what was known, I discovered a gap in the research. This relates to demonstrating the significance and trajectory of the lexicon and its main symbol, the GMH. Where propagation may have slowed within the Chinese community or the movement that created it, the signification remains in online and offline contexts, historicised as an archive. Further use and dissemination of the symbols is perhaps generated, renewed and extended through the Chinese diaspora and people who understand its symbolic meaning. The heroic freedom of expression indicator, the GMH, retains its potency and continues to be used in both online and offline discourse.

Wiseman's (2007) *Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-Garde Art* highlights the rationale and use of symbols in Chinese visual culture and can be applied to support my research questions, hypothesis and claims. To begin by looking at how metaphors, symbols and myths contribute to ideological change, it is important to give a historical overview. As outlined earlier, Wiseman's research into subversions in art at the turn of the twenty-first century illustrates the shift from the use of Mao Zedong and all symbols connected to the Cultural Revolution.

The use of myth, as defined by Dawkins ([1976] 2006), in relation to the twentieth century is not significantly different to the definition of myth in the augmented and digital societies of the present (Davis 2011). Essentially, myths are shaped with the same binding premise across the centuries. I suggest that the underlying drive behind myth and metaphor in the GMH narrative and lexicon is to reveal truths. Artists and visual communicators do this through visual gestures that reflect current realities. Wiseman's (2007, 109) claims regarding subversion that resonate with the claims of my hypothesis:

People have indeed created a space within the realms of Communism with Capitalist values a social space where people can be themselves.

Where Wiseman's claims of 'subversiveness' ring true in relation to whether capitalism offers freedom is another argument. Online cultural entities are not distinguishably Western or Eastern (Chinese). Notably, Chinese people who have access to the internet through open access (with VPNs) that circumnavigate censored access are globally aware. This new space that Wiseman refers to, I suggest, has been co-created online

through participation culture. It is in this online space that potential freedom is offered, which within mainland China may be regarded as subversive. I further claim that the internet is a driver for new forms of visual culture. The exploration of online internet space through documented sources such as YouTube, Google and *Baidu* demonstrates the relationship between the new symbolism that reflects the current culture and a shift in ideology. In this context as it is commonly understood, images are known to be more difficult to block than words; however, this too is changing. The recent user-to-user image blocks between WeChat users indicate that online sources are being monitored more than ever (*Global Voice* 2017). Online spaces, despite being monitored, still invigorate a new-found 'town square' mentality (Fung 2014), where a perceived freedom of expression is created and propagated through symbolism. This then either remains in circulation or is removed.

The GMH phenomenon (with the creation of new symbols that represent the people) could be perceived as the new subversive avant-garde—a new creative movement or 'renaissance' that represents a broader and contemporary freedom of expression in twenty-first century China. Wiseman (2007) claims that to be truly subversive, art should generate rawness, a 'newness' of visual vocabulary. The research in this study involves a 'newness of visual vocabulary' generated through GMH symbolism and creating a fissure within the core of Chinese belief systems and values. The new symbolism uses linguistic wordplay to critique 'the collective' and its values. The creation and use of the GMH symbol narrates ideological shifts, as the content is critical and subversive when operating within established Chinese belief systems. The new visual grammar informs us of the need to create new symbols that convey the realities of living in mainland China while also drawing on a historic and somewhat acceptable use of satire, puns and humour in Chinese culture (Milner Davis 2014). This thesis has outlined the historical evolution of the GMH symbol so that it can be read and deciphered in a transcultural context. The Western perspective, as stated earlier, is an 'individual culture'. Western culture revolves around democracy and a focus on 'individualism' and freedom of expression. Restrictions and censorship of the internet within a democracy are in comparison, minimal. In terms of freedom of creative content, people from a Western society can create art and design without boundaries, unrestricted by having to reflect the moral and national values of their country. These

cultural differences are pivotal to heightening the awareness and understanding of a Western audience who are accustomed to democracy and freedom of expression.

The GMH symbol has evolved significantly since its creation in 2009. Mapping this evolution and noting the changes have instigated a new area of study. More commonly, content uploaded to the internet is sourced from offline sources. Moreover, offline visualities are typically uploaded online. For example, people upload photographs of their weekends away in Bali or on Hainan Island. In the case of the GMH phenomenon, this typical process is reversed. The symbol was created online and propagated in multimodal digital forms, including memes, animated gifs, viral videos and WeChat stickers. This study shows that online modes were not sufficient and the mythological beast moved into offline representations, including the freedom fighter as depicted in the work of artists such as Ai Weiwei and Kacey Wong, or as a commodified item capitalising on its own online significance.

As outlined, the naked body still remains relatively taboo in Chinese art. The GMH symbol evolved directly following an anti-pornography campaign and a cleansing of the internet. Artists such as Ai Weiwei (2009) have used the GMH symbol in their work to generate and to send a clear message of alliance with freedom of expression in mainland China. Ai generated photographs of himself naked with the GMH plush toy covering his genitals; this work was discussed in depth in Chapter Five. Further naked references are made in Sui Ding's work that incorporates the GMH. These works are regarded as subversive and therefore are banned and censored in mainland China. Reference to these subversive works was found through online Google searches and not *Baidu*. These works illustrate how quickly and freely material moves online, while also retaining historical document status. This online fluidity further assists in the mythologisation and preservation of the GMH story in broader online environments. These works illustrate a new frontier of avant-garde work in twenty-first century China. Further, the use of any of the GMH lexicon within an artwork demonstrates and creates freedom of expression models inside and outside mainland China. Works such as these are picked up like a magnetised popular culture, stored and propagated on other websites, extending and retaining the material for a global audience.

To enable and facilitate a cross-cultural understanding of the Chinese internet ecology, several scholars, including Yang (2014) claim that stereotypes are generated in relation



to the interpretation of the Chinese internet. Through this research, I posit a transcultural analysis that illuminates an understanding of digital phenomenon occurring within Chinese culture. I create this by using methods that would best support a cross-cultural understanding of the symbolism, its origin, use and signification. The complex Chinese visual culture discourse can become interpretable when ideological structures and cultural theory are factored into the analysis. The chapter on Mao Zedong established a historical overview by outlining Chinese art history and mapping the changes in Mao's image. In this way, it offered insightful scaffolding to support the understanding and lineage of Chinese art discourse. Acknowledging the political underpinning of the role of art and design in Chinese culture and mapping the evolution of visual practices gives substance and a relevant background. This is aimed at both heightening cross-cultural perspectives of the visual culture researcher, while embedding this knowledge into the global visual culture paradigm.

As a result of shifting ideologies, a new hero has risen from online collective co-creation. This was explored by examining pre-existing symbols of heroism with a focus on the use of Mao Zedong, detailing an extensive background to existing ideologies, belief systems and symbolism. A key aim has been to contribute to and build on the existing body of knowledge in Chinese visual culture and to delve into what Yue Yang (2013) describes as a Western perspective in the analysis of Chinese internet censorship mythologies. As a result, I have included many Chinese scholars to support my ideas and to assist my comprehensive analysis of the context of Chinese visual culture. My thesis intends to go beyond the stereotypes by investigating historical Chinese visual culture and cultural flows into present modes of production to shape what actually lies within. By doing this, I wish to illustrate the layered complexities in Chinese visual culture that signify change.

The selected samples of visual representations given throughout this thesis document the emergence of mythological memes and their evolution from 2009. Working with this hypothesis it could be argued that the new symbols constitute a new creative movement and mirror the need (or desire) for new heroes in twenty-first century China. Ultimately, focus resided on the most noted and sustained symbol: the GMH. With exposure to reading text and visual forms within cultures and communities, new ideas and creative thought are generated. Franken (2007) believes that the act of reading and

interpreting generates new ideas that drive creative thought and uniqueness. It is this uniqueness and display of self-expression via the internet and online participatory culture that differentiates members of the digital generation from their parents. One could speculate that in the twenty-first century, some people in China are perhaps searching for self-expression and an individual identity that deviates somewhat from the traditional values of the CCP ‘harmonious ideal, one that resonates with Western democratic values.

The internet has changed the way people interact, co-create, make and receive images that reflect their visual cultures. This research is pivotal in revealing noted gaps in knowledge, particularly regarding what is known about Chinese online communities and the creation of new symbolism. Sima and Pugsley (2010, 287) identified that ‘individual expression, achievement and pleasure have taken over the arguably “collective interest” mentality that marked the older, Mao generation’. Their study focused on China’s youth and the Generation Y. This demographic is shaping and cultivating identities using online communities built on individualism and consumerism. The authors’ findings support the rise of online identities and a ‘me’ culture that is a monumental departure from communist ideals and collective values.

Sima and Pugsley’s (2010) findings support my hypothesis that online identities and new forms of self-expression have resulted in a new set of visual communicators. What is more difficult to deduce through research is the demographic that created the lexicon, as these new symbols are mostly created and used anonymously. As discussed, throughout this thesis the online symbols were generated in online co-creation communities, so that individuals do not reveal themselves as sole perpetrators of dissonance or dissent. In this way, netizens are creating new symbols, subcultures and ideologies in twenty-first-century China, and new-found heroes are emerging. Due to its fluidity, residual online content from Chinese servers over time has been uploaded to places outside the Chinese blogosphere to preserve content that would have otherwise been blocked or removed in mainland China.

As for the symbols entering works of art, the selected samples of artworks (shown in Chapter Five) show that artists want to ‘own’ the symbol. In this way, I suggest that they are unafraid to use their public identity as professional artists. Some artists, such as Ai and Ding, are already known for subversive work, predominantly outside mainland

China. The selected artists discussed in this thesis all have Chinese ethnicity. The one artist who is an exception to this claimed that she wanted to propagate the message of the freedom of speech icon through her illustrations with Deviant Art, a well-known online global artist community. All other artists represented in this study were either born on the mainland, were of Chinese decent or had a connection to the Chinese diaspora.

The original lexicon of the 10 Mythological Creatures was created by largely anonymous creators as a defiant and subversive reaction to a political campaign of cleansing the internet in mainland China (this was made known to the English-speaking world in 2009). It is not known whether the initial creator was inside 'The Great Firewall' of mainland China. What is known is that the symbols once created rapidly entered online culture in China and then globally. As discussed, it was not crucial to this study to know the initial creator, but what was interesting was how quickly the symbols were used, propagating a multiplicity of forms carrying the narrative online and offline. The subversive Chinese folk story of the GMH and the River Crab has transcended traditional notions of these realms. The other characters in the story of the GMH lexicon have become mere debris in comparison, as their significance and potency was not meaningful enough to continue evolving. The retention of the GMH symbol has eclipsed the other symbols as it is the hero, and the hero prevails.

The current climate of online social media culture is a testing ground for visual metaphors that represent changing tides during the rapid development of China in the digital age. The new symbolism created online from 2009 in the form of internet memes, their commodification and penetration into the real world, symbolise a subculture of Chinese who may no longer identify with traditional historical heroic symbols, but who want to write, create, shape and carve out their own visual culture away from the legacy of the past. This is evidenced by the documentation, proliferation and evolution of appropriated Maoist symbolism, from an initial association with propaganda to multimodal applications. There has been a noticeable shift in symbolism from the 'old' to the 'new' in Chinese visual culture in the twenty-first century.

## Future Directions

For future studies, exploration involving a different methodological approach to investigate visual data that is no longer online or has been removed and retained on personal hard drives would be fascinating. This would, however, require ethics approval and some risk to participants. All images attained in the analysis in Chapter Five are in the public domain, accessible through Google and *Baidu*. The vast range, variation and frequency of samples retrieved from keyword searches for the GMH and lexicon in English and *pinyin* in Google and *Baidu* indicates the scope of different online ecologies. Access to the visual imagery of the GMH enables the researcher to make explicit connections to the online social differences between China and the West. By ‘the West’, I am referring to Australia, as the searches made through *Baidu* and Google were initiated in Australia. For example, if I was in China and conducting the same study, the results would be vastly different. It can be assumed that searches in the US may yield similar results: this may be a task for future studies. The same investigative tools and methods could be applied to Vietnam or Korea. Would the same keyword searches yield similar data? These ideas are beyond the scope of thesis and could inform future studies in online visual forms and data collecting and sampling.

Due to the digital turn demonstrated through these findings, it could be argued that the way in which we communicate visually may be surpassing the textual, especially in online contexts. Thus, literacy in visual culture to enable fluent communication modes in the twenty-first century is vital. Chinese artist Xu Bing (2007) in *Book from the Ground* uses this theory in his work, creating narratives using universal symbols. The symbols (pictographic icons) in his work translate ideas and issues into visual forms that cross-cultural boundaries and are universally readable. As the use of symbols within visual culture grows, so does our need to understand. This said, it is not critical for all people to have the ability to decipher images and symbols transculturally. As visual culture scholars, however, the capacity to read new visual phenomena, mapping their trajectory (and whether they occur online or offline) is essential, as this process documents, interprets and historicises their cultural significance.

Have we come so far that we are returning to a form of hieroglyphics and pictograms, and using them as direct communicators of emotion as memes, emoji and animated stickers? When looking at online communication, this seems to be the progression. The

new way to represent text or communicate in a coded or transcribed way is through images or symbols. A digital shorthand that draws on visual reliance and interpretation is occurring; this suggests an urgent requirement for the ‘global village’ (McLuhan 1998) to develop the capacity to read these symbols. In this thesis, I embarked on a journey to reveal and create insight into this online phenomenon in a way that considers not only the multimodal forms created, but the ecology of the Chinese cultural context from a Western perspective. The interdisciplinary nature of theorists and methodology included in this thesis enabled me to reveal the layered complexities of visual culture creation, propagation and retention in mainland China. Through following cultural flows in online and offline visual forms we can read, know and understand the potency and connotation of symbols in the digital age, enriching the ‘world spirit’.

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