Rice Bunnies vs. the River Crab: China's feminists, #MeToo, and Networked Authoritarianism

Vlady Guttenberg

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ABSTRACT - As censorship algorithms for digital communications evolve in China, so do netizens' evasion techniques. In the last two decades, strategic users have employed the language of satire to slip sensitive content past censors in the form of euphemisms or analogies, with messages ranging from lighthearted frustration to wide scale resistance against repressive government policies. In recent years activists have used spoofs to discuss controversial subjects, including the president, violent arrests by the Domestic Security Department, and even the #MeToo movement. In addition to providing an outlet for criticism and free speech, spoofs can also be a powerful organizational tool for activists in authoritarian societies through their ability to facilitate decentralized, personalized, and flexible connective action. This paper investigates how feminists used spoofs for social mobilization throughout China's #MeToo movement while evaluating potential frameworks for measuring activists' success against the media censorship and political repression of a networked authoritarian regime.

Peppa Pig, Winnie the Pooh and river crabs are leading double lives. Their on-screen characters may serve as wholesome role models for children, but in their spare time they make appearances on the Chinese Communist's Party (CCP)'s most wanted list; Peppa Pig is actually a "gangster" symbol associated with dangerous fad-chasing, counterfeit merchandise, and youth counterculture. Winnie the Pooh's likeness is used to drive home criticism of President Xi Jinping, and river crabs have grown into a metaphor for the state's strict censorship program (Qin 2018; Hunt and Wang 2018). The subversive value of the characters comes not from their original design, but from their use in online spoofing culture – a form of parody which undermines "cultural, social and political agendas" through satirical euphemisms (Gong and Yang 2010). In authoritarian regimes, spoofs can function as subtle analogies for sensitive or unwanted political viewpoints, allowing their manifestations to bypass censors. Parodies are a powerful tool for expressing dissent or criticism, particularly for marginalized groups that are unable to express themselves through mainstream media channels.

On an individual level, satire creates an environment of free speech and allows for emotional catharsis. However, when aided by social media platforms that allow for the quick spread of information, spoofs facilitate decentralized, personalized, and flexible connective action. These tools have ultimately expanded opportunities for digital activism and social resistance by China's feminists. Spoofs have been an essential force for disseminating information about feminism through Chinese social media platforms – especially during the #MeToo movement, a social campaign founded in the United States with the goal of holding perpetrators of sexual violence accountable and overcoming the stigma surrounding survivors. This paper will begin by contextualizing the censorship environment in which spoofs were first introduced in China, followed by an analysis of spoofs as an evasion technique. The paper will then discuss why the framework of connective action is best suited to explain the success of spoofs in a networked authoritarian society. Finally, using the logic of connective action, it will evaluate how spoofs have bolstered China's #MeToo movement and analyze the implications of such parodies for feminist activism.

Political Context of China's Censorship and the Rise of Spoofing

Prior to the economic reforms of the late 1970s, Chinese media were a direct arm of the CCP's propaganda machine. After 1978, the CCP began to modernize the media industry by giving up its monopoly over journalism. However, the government maintained a watchful eye and news outlets that published controversial content faced closure, while the journalists who wrote for them risked harassment or dismissal from their posts (Tai 2014, 189). As the internet grew more accessible, more people were able to talk and learn about subjects that the authoritarian government had deemed inappropriate for unsupervised discussion. Soon, the internet enabled netizens to mobilize opposition, such as labour protests, human rights activism, calls for democracy, political reform, seperationist movements, etc. (Tai 2014, 189). As ordinary netizens became more involved in communication channels, the CCP created a new system of censorship, regulating Chinese servers through agencies such as the State Council Information Office (SCIO) founded in 1990. This "networked authoritarianism" occurs when an authoritarian regime retains control over expression despite perceived social-networking freedoms (MacKinnon 2011, 32-33). Users may feel as if they can speak and be heard on the Internet, but in reality, the regime is monitoring and manipulating digital communications. Thus, there is no guarantee of free speech.

Although censorship is run by privately owned companies, they are held liable to government leadership, leading censors to filter content according to the CCP censorship platform. The two main companies carrying out pro-government censorship in China are the live streaming platform, YY and the social media application, WeChat. YY filters content from the client-side, which means that all of the commands for censorship can be found within the application.

YY refers to a master list of terms that must be censored before allowing the client's device to send a given message. As such, YY's master list can be reverse engineered in the application and potential trigger words are monitored to allow netizens to figure out what specific terms to avoid using when discussing controversial subjects. YY's keyword list can be tracked on an hourly basis and the current dataset from Citizen Lab has identified over 20000 keywords. Conversely, WeChat relies on server side censorship, whereby its algorithm is kept on a remote server, thus preventing its keywords from being reverse engineered. Once a message is sent by a user, it is filtered privately by WeChat's parent company, Tencent, and censored only if it contains an unwanted keyword combination. Decoding WeChat's server-side sensors requires more involvement because keywords by themselves may not trigger a censor and may only be flagged when used in conjunction with other keywords. In addition, users are not notified if their message is blocked; the intended receiver just does not see it. Thus, avoiding WeChat censors is challenging for the ordinary netizen because server-side filters are less transparent. Such complex algorithms have prompted evasion techniques to arise and evolve (Crete-Nishihata, et. al. 2020).

Spoofing culture is a slang-based evasion technique that grew alongside the expansion of digital communications. Due to the use of characters in Chinese writing, the language contains many homographs and homophones, which can be used as substitutes for censored words. If users know from experience that a certain character will be filtered by Wechat, they can use a spoof to slip a message past the censor. One of the most famous examples is the "Grass Mud Horse," which is a spoof that rose to prominence in 2009 as a consequence of a CCP campaign against online pornography. Campaigns against vulgarity are routine in China, and are often used by the CCP as a means of removing unwanted political views from the internet (Wang 2012). At first, "Grass Mud Horse" gained notoriety as a way of using pornographic language without attracting negative attention because its pronunciation (cǎonímǎ) was a close homophone of the phrase "F*** your Mother"

(pronounced càonǐmǎ). Over time, the euphemism evolved to symbolize defiance against internet censors and was further popularized through toys, cartoons, and songs. Later renditions have depicted the grass mud horse as a challenger of another spoof: the "river crab," which grew out of the idea of the "harmonious society." Former President Hu Jintao used the term "harmonization" to refer to CCP censorship of online content that opposed party propaganda. After users began to use this term sarcastically to criticize the CCP's attempts to filter the internet, the CCP banned it as well. As a result of the censorship of "harmonization" (pronounced héxié), netizens turned to its homophone, the river crab (héxiè). Songs, videos and posts depicted the grass mud horse as an alpaca-like creature struggling against an evil river crab, symbolizing the tension between freedom of speech and government censorship (Wang 2012).

Sometimes, the censorship apparatus detects spoofs and censors the substituted word. However, spoofs are adaptable and often evolve into further analogies in order to confuse censors. For instance, the phrase "national treasure" (guóbǎo) is a homophone for the "Domestic Security Department (DSD)" (guó bǎo), which was censored due to prolific criticism of the DSD's violent suppression of dissidents. In addition to "national treasure," netizens also use the word "panda," or even the panda emoji as an analogy for the DSD, because many Chinese people view the panda as a "national treasure." Homophone spoofs like this are the most common because they are recognizable and easy to link together (King, et. al. 2013, 3). However, spoofs are not always language based. On occasion, they also sprout from memes or niche online communities. One of the spoofs for President Xi Jinping is Winnie the Pooh because of an internet joke from 2013, where a picture of Xi walking alongside President Obama was compared to a similar cartoon image of Winnie the Pooh next to Tigger. As a non-political term, Winnie the Pooh is much more likely to evade censors than the President's name. In addition to his domestic fame, Winnie the Pooh also gained prominence with international news outlets such as BBC News, The Guardian, and Telegraph. Better

equipped to evade keyword-based censorship, Winnie the Pooh's position as an image-based spoof helped him cross linguistic divides to draw attention to China's censorship culture.

Theoretical Framework

Spoofing is an important anti-censorship technique because it performs as a "personal action frame" – an individualized political orientation based on "personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances" (Bennet and Segerberg 2012, 743). Personal action frames are a key characteristic of decentralized social campaigns because they do not require ritualized action or packaging in order to spread into new contexts. Instead, they rely on broadly understandable themes that can be adapted by individuals in order to overcome barriers to "established political organizations, ideologies, interests, class, gender, race, or ethnicity" (Bennet and Segerberg 2012, 747).

Decentralized campaigns that rely on individual connections or identities rather than social ones are also known as "connective action," a type of campaign typically used by activists in authoritarian states. Connective action is often understood through its parallels with collective action, which is the "pursuit of goals by more than one person controlled or spurred by actors other than government officials or their agents" (King, et. al., 2013, 6). The two are best distinguished through the way they interact with networking tools. Collective action campaigns typically have an offline base and technology serves as a tool that helps bolster the existing movement. Conversely, with connective action, technology itself is the primary organizing agent and it is digital communications that bring the campaign into existence. Collective action typically demands more education, pressure or socialization, and places heavy emphasis on formal organization and resources, whereas connective action is decentralized, accessible to most education levels and adaptable.

Collective action is more likely to be detected and cracked down on by authoritarian regimes because its base is centrally organized and founded in collective identity values that are then turned into social campaigns. Collective speech is not only more identifiable but also more threatening to the CCP because it builds "collective action potential"– a destabilizing situation where "a locus of power and control other than the government, influences the behaviours of masses of Chinese people" (King, et. al., 2013, 14). Thus, authoritarian governments will target both unwanted political ideas and movements that have the potential to mobilize others against the state. For example, Wechat's censors are more concerned with group chats, where users might have an audience of up to 500, than with simple one-on-one conversations (Crete-Nishihata, et. al. 2020). Furthermore, any symbol or topic that facilitates unified social interactions is at risk of being targeted by censors, which is why certain topics that may not seem anti-governmental are targeted. Although Peppa Pig is not explicitly a symbol for dissent, she is a unifying figure for subculture and thus she has collective action potential. In short, activists in authoritarian states need to develop organizational structures that are fragmented in order to avoid being identified as a potential mobilization threat.

Connective action is far more appropriate for decentralized mobilization because it encourages social communication on an individual level. Content is spread in the form of seemingly apolitical symbols, which are only politically meaningful to those who actively seek to engage with the information that way. For instance, if a young child shares a picture of Winnie the Pooh to their friend, they are most likely discussing the cartoon, not President Xi Jinping. On the other hand, if this picture is shared by someone humorously or sarcastically, then those who recognize the analogy will be able to engage with the other person's political message. Without openly discussing politics these two users can gauge each other's sense of political awareness without officially stating their own views. Although users may not be engaged in direct conversations with each other, they are interacting with the same material, which ultimately fosters the sustainability and reach of the movement (Zeng, 2020, 185-186). Furthermore, netizens tend to appropriate applications that are used by most citizens, such as WeChat, which reports over one billion monthly users (Crete-Nishihata, et. al. 2020). This not only increases chances of proliferation, but also makes it more difficult for the government to block activists, since a full shut down of something essential, such as business transaction sites or messaging apps, would create a problematic level of criticism and attention (Zuckerman 2013).

Hashtags are an example of effective personal action frames because they provide a low-cost and low-risk way for people to get involved in digital activism (Caidi and Zhang, 2019). With hashtags, a user is able to categorize their posts as part of a broader discussion or theme without necessarily linking themselves to a formal organization. In 2016, football player Colin Kaepernick purposely knelt instead of standing during the American national anthem as a form of protest against police brutality and racism. For him, this was a high cost move, as he would later be released from his contract and criticized by many in his field. However, sharing the hashtag that he inspired, #takeaknee, was significantly less risky. Without engaging in protests themselves, users could back Kaepernick and share their own personal statements regarding racism or police violence. Using a hashtag allows an individual to demonstrate support for an idea, or to share their own perspective without committing themselves to it offline. However, just as they can be low risk and low cost, hashtags can also be low reward. Typically, hashtags work best when they are followed up with offline demonstrations, such as the Women's March in 2018 that followed the rehabilitation of the #MeToo Movement in 2017. Yet, offline movements are not always an option for those in authoritarian states, where demonstrations and protests are forbidden (Zeng 2020, 181). Thus, while hashtags and other forms of connective action may not be high-reward, they are an important tool for activism because they create new avenues for momentum where otherwise there might have been silence.

Spoofs perform similarly to hashtags. Like hashtags, spoofs are based in semantics, appeal to subcultures and they carry meanings that are not explicitly verbalized. Since only the underlying message is controversial and not the words themselves, the perceived risk of sharing the message is low. Although digital activists run into trouble with the government for crafting controversial messages, those who share them are significantly less culpable because they can claim to not understand the political meaning of the spoof or to have been participating in the joke as a gag (Larmer 2011). As such, spoofs have found traction as a form of activism in China. Moreover, because of their ability to appeal to counterculture, spoofs are an invaluable tool for minority or human rights activists who are excluded from the dialogues of mainstream media, which strictly adhere to CCP's censorship policies (Wonneberger 2020). For instance, when Chinese blogger Guo Baofeng was detained by police in July 2009 for reposting a video which accused local Xiamen authorities of covering up a murder and gang rape, an expression based on an internet trend was created to advocate for his release. The phrase, "Guo Baofeng, your mother is calling you home for dinner," was derived from a then-popular World of Warcraft meme where a user jokingly posted, "Jia Junpeng, your mother is calling you home for dinner" (Larmer 2011). This appealed to the shared experience of most Chinese kids of being called home for dinner after playing outside. Prompted by another activist, netizens made noise by sending postcards with this message to the police station and sharing it online. While it is unconfirmed whether this campaign was the deciding factor in Guo Baofeng's case, this particular activist was released after only 16 days whereas many others with the exact same charges had been sentenced to multiple years (Larmer 2011). Most notably, neither the blogger who started the spoof, nor the netizens who reshared it faced formal consequences from the CCP.

Hashtag Feminism and #MeToo in China

Womens' movements use hashtag activism very successfully because they are able to build personal action frames that bring awareness and engagement to the public. In response to the 2014 Isla Vista shooting, the hashtag #YesAllWomen

illustrated how gender oppression could impact women not only through acts of violence, but also through day-to-day aggressions (Thrift 2014, 1091). This hashtag, along with other feminist tags like #bringbackourgirls, find success because they do more than remember isolated incidents; they highlight how everyday experiences are shared across a group. A recent example of hashtag feminism is the #MeToo trend, which was coined by American activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to educate people about the prevalence of sexual assault and abuse. The term was re-popularized in 2017 when celebrities in Hollywood began sharing their high-profile stories of harassment. This hashtag mobilized social media users to share their own experiences with misogyny, raising awareness and motivating many to consider the effects of gender inequality in their own lives. More shares meant more publicity for the topic and, in turn, to increased discussion (Caidi and Zhang 2019).

Because of the CCP, China's feminists have had to navigate hashtag activism differently from other women's movements. Twitter has been banned in mainland China since 2009 and is only sparsely accessible to Virtual Private Network (VPN) users. Thus, communication between international and local feminists is limited. Furthermore, movements with foreign roots are especially hard to introduce in China due to the tension between global and local activism. Attempts to bring in Western ideas are met with government disapproval of the spread of so-called uncritical imitations of Western culture (Hsiung and Wong 1998). Finally, feminist movements in China are perceived as mobilization threats or as having collective action potential due to the fact that women make up a significant portion of the Chinese workforce and population.

Feminists were not always in conflict with the CCP. The women's movement has had a turbulent history working both against and with the state. Although the CCP's platform officially supports gender equality, women in China still experience discrimination, misogyny, and the double burden of being expected to both work and raise families. Initially, women's rights activists worked alongside the party and its institutions in the "All-China Women's Federation." However,

with time, activists turned to more grassroots approaches and the radical feminist movement split away from its government counterpart. Some credit this divide to the inherently sexist structure of party philosophy, such as patriarchal family values or the perception of the President as a father figure at the head of a paternalistic state (Fincher 2016, 87). It also became clear that the CCP's values of egalitarianism did not protect women from gender disparities in income and unemployment, or from harassment in workplaces and educational institutions. Twenty-first century feminism reacted strongly to these discriminatory circumstances and turned to platforms based on ideals including but not limited to personal economic security, individual agency, and sexual autonomy (Wu 2019). Before the switch to grassroots activism, only feminist movements unaligned with the CCP had been considered non-governmental. However, the new iterations were all perceived as anti-governmental because of their autonomy, links to the West, and ideological differences from the Communist Party. In order to limit opportunities for groups to mobilize against the CCP, the state detained feminists and censored related subjects on the internet. As a result, the concept of feminism took on a sort of taboo, causing fewer women to want to associate themselves with it (Hsiung and Wong 1998).

Consequently, contemporary feminist activists resort to creative evasion techniques like spoofing to participate in international feminist campaigns such as #MeToo. When the movement first spread to China, the hashtag was banned by authorities, leading a user to invent a homophone for the phrase: #mǐtù, which would be translated to #ricebunny, since "mǐ" means rice and "tù" means bunny. Netizens could share their support for the movement either with the characters for "rice bunny" (#米兔), the pinyin (#mǐtù), or through emojis (🍚🐰). The emoji is a key tactic because illustrations or drawings are more difficult for automatic censors to detect and require manual filtering. Even more successful were the spoofs that involved other dialects or languages, such as the phrase "#俺也一样," which means "for me, it's the same" in the Northern Chinese dialect, or "老子也是," which means "I also am" in the

Sichuan dialect. Thus, as the #MeToo discussion grew, netizens developed increasingly innovative methods for sharing subversive information.

Another spoof that gained traction regarded a high-profile TV personality who was accused of sexual harassment. Due to his ties to the CCP, his name, "Zhū Jūn" was censored. However, netizens 'camouflaged' their discussions of him by using the homophone "zhūjūn," which means "swine bacteria" (Zeng 2020, 184). Eventually, censors caught on to this substitution but netizens had already turned to other means of expression. #MeToo supporters began rotating screenshots of articles with information about sexual predators so that content would remain legible for netizens but undetectable by automated filters. A popular strategy was "caching", which is the process of restoring sensitive content and concealing it in places that are inaccessible for the CCP's censors (Zeng 2020, 182). For example, one user managed to permanently save information about a case of sexual harassment from 1998 by caching the survivor's open letter in a cryptocurrency transaction. Others followed by saving the letter on a popular programming site, GitHub, which the government was unable to tamper with due to its American origins, and unwilling to block due to its use by Chinese IT developers. By diversifying their evasion techniques, activists ensure that the feminist message behind #MeToo withstands CCP crackdowns.

Analysis

Activism needs to be organized on a case by case basis; while Twitter may have allowed for socially connected hashtag feminism in America, Wechat's censorship meant that Chinese feminists needed to organize differently. Where Western movements benefit from themes which stress collective identity, China's feminism was reinforced by individuals. In states without networked authoritarianism, feminists do not need to avoid presenting a unified movement because their government is not intolerant to collective action. Feminists in non-authoritarian states are also likely to have access to money, labour, or

facilities; in China, these resources are more limited, especially when the government supports their own feminist organization over others. China's feminist movement has found traction with spoofing culture because spoofs help activists in authoritarian societies avoid the problem of collective action potential by being decentralized, adaptable, and personalized. The differences between the two regime types also impacts how successful movements may be measured. For Western activists, explicit change or momentum is a marker for social impact, but in authoritarian states it is more important for an idea to endure censorship than to spark dramatic progress. Dramatic change is one-dimensionalthere is no guarantee of permanence and it may be difficult for other movements to recreate. Conversely, when an idea survives censorship, it is a sign of a dynamic and adaptable activist innovation. The Chinese #MeToo movement was not big or immediately impactful and that greatly increased its chances of survival.

The #MeToo movement has been bolstered both by local Chinese activists and the international Chinese community, who supplemented their #MeToo tweets with the hashtags #中国 (the Chinese word for "China") and #China. Within China, #MeToo was supported by a variety of groups and regions, evidenced by the use of diverse dialects. The Chinese diaspora had an instrumental role in keeping the conversation alive. Because they are outside of the scope of CCP influence, diaspora individuals are able to use uncensored platforms like Facebook. Twitter bursts relating to #MeToo by overseas Chinese individuals coincided with quiet periods domestically, suggesting that diaspora activity increased directly in response to heightened censorship (Caidi and Zhang 2019). Diaspora members reacted to silenced activists by drawing international attention to #MeToo and feminist mobilization structures in China, as well as the issue of CCP censorship. Furthermore, overseas Chinese are also able to mobilize in a centralized way without risking a crackdown from above. Diaspora members created platforms such as the website "MeTooChina.org" for those back home to anonymously share stories outside of Chinese servers that would have otherwise

censored them. In addition to functioning as an emotional outlet, this site was used by overseas Chinese to brainstorm potential policy solutions and goals that local activists would otherwise have been unable to discuss (Caidi and Zhang 2019). The diaspora's uncensored voices and mobility allowed them to supplement Chinese feminists' connective action with external organizational structures and global recognition.

More and more activists are urging those in the diaspora as well as members of the Chinese elite to do a better job fighting for gender equality on behalf of working class women. Despite being more likely to face sexually violent crimes, working class women are less likely to be considered victims or provided support because of their low social capital (Zeng 2019, 78). Netizens and members have played important roles making information on activism widely available and inerasable by the CCP. However, the privilege of having an audience is still far out of reach for many. #Mitu, spoofers, and activists have made serious progress for freedom of expression, but the movement needs persistent attention and participation to stay afloat. In order for marginalized groups to be able to advocate for themselves, they need greater access to anti-censorship tools that can withstand government crackdowns.

Hashtag feminism and spoofs worked well in China because they are decentralized, personalized and flexible, allowing them to be compatible with connective action. Fragmentation allows united political messages to evade CCP censors, while personal action frames facilitate individualized engagement with digital activism. Furthermore, social media has made mobilization easier and untraceable because it has relatively few barriers to entry, is economically low-cost, politically low-risk, and extremely accessible (Qiu and Zhou 2019, 362). As a result, netizens were able to participate in the #MeToo movement without being identified as dissidents, thus lowering the risk of dismissal or harassment from the government. Individuals play a critical role by creating and maintaining personal action frames. Because each user can come up with their own method of avoiding censors, evasion techniques are

ever changing, making them much harder to track or regulate. In a regime where media censorship is growing more and more sophisticated and political opposition is thoroughly regulated and suppressed, the innovation and resilience demonstrated by feminist netizens is revolutionary in and of itself.

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