The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance

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Abstract
Online political satire is an important aspect of Chinese Internet culture and politics. Current scholarship focuses on its contents and views it primarily from the perspective of resistance. By reconceptualizing online political satire as a networked practice, this article shifts the focus of analysis from contents to practice. Five types of networked practices of online political satire are identified and analyzed. Practices which mainly fulfill social functions are referred to as ritual satire and distinguished from explicitly political practices. The article thus shows that online political satire has multiple meanings and uses. Its proliferation in Chinese digital spaces results from the complex and interlocked conditions of politics, technology, history, and culture.

Keywords
China, humor, internet, political satire, practice, resistance, ritual

A prominent aspect of Chinese Internet culture and politics is its playfulness. Humor, parody, satire, jokes, in textual and multimedia forms, are a staple of Chinese online experience. Political satire is part and parcel of this playful online culture. Current research on online political satire in China tends to focus on its contents. Scholars examine their meanings and significance as forms of political expression through textual or discourse analysis (Meng, 2011; Yu, 2007). They are

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often understood within the framework of political control and resistance (Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Li, 2011; Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011).

We develop an alternative approach by conceptualizing online political satire not in terms of its contents, but as networked social practices. In many ways, the sharing and circulation of a political joke online is more important than the contents of the joke. As a networked social practice, online political satire is a form of grassroots political expression which is produced through networks of meaning, while simultaneously activating or sustaining the networks in its dynamic circulation. For this reason, practices of online political satire at their most political moments are not only critiques of power, but popular mobilizations against power.

We will also show, however, that online political satire is not always about political resistance and opposition. It serves social functions, although its social uses can be appropriated for political purposes. We will use the concept of ritual satire (Test, 1986) to designate those practices noted for their social functions. Thus at the broadest level, we distinguish between the more ritually oriented and the more politically oriented practices of online satire. We identify and analyze five types of networked practices of online satire: duanzi (段子, or jokes), national sentence-making (全民造句), multimedia remix, online performance art, and 'online news comments' (新闻跟帖). The distinction between the two types of satires is therefore heuristic and analytical. In reality, the boundaries between them may not always be so distinct.

Online political satire as networked social practice

Satire is notoriously difficult to define (Combe, 2015). It is often viewed as a sub-genre of humor, which always has an element of social critique (Gray et al., 2009: 8). Test (1986: 28) finds four elements in Western satire—aggression, play, laughter, judgment, but notes that these four elements are manifest in such diverse ways that 'attempting to define satire has been like trying to put a shadow in a sack' (Test, 1986: 13).

Current studies of online political satire in China cover a broad spectrum. Parodies, jokes, slippery jingles (*shunkouliu*), verse, songs, flash videos, and egao have all been studied as political satire (Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011; Voci, 2010; Yang, 2009; Yu, 2007). We follow this broad conceptualization in our own analysis. Where we depart from current scholarship is our shift of focus from the contents of online satire to practice. We find that studying the contents cannot adequately capture the dynamic character of political satire or explain its production and circulation in the networked society (Castells, 2009).

We argue that the significance of online political satire goes well beyond its content. It is a participatory activity involving multitudes of people interacting through digital networks. In this crucial sense, online political satire is first and foremost a networked social practice. Drawing on de Certeau's (1984) work on

everyday practice, we think of the networked practice of online political satire as playful ways of communicating about critical social and political issues online. This conceptualization enables us to highlight the dynamic nature of online political satire.

In her work on Chinese Internet poetry, Inwood (2014) departs from the conventional conception of poetry as artistic products. She follows instead a more sociological understanding of online poetry as culture, scenes, and 'dynamic networks of people, practices, and discourses connected across multiple media spaces and conditioned by the current historical moment' (Inwood, 2014: 5). In the same way, we posit that online political satire is not reducible to the contents of humor and jokes, but consists of networked practices across multiple media spaces—practices of meaning-making as well as circulation.

Online political satire is a networked practice in at least three ways. First, the process of production often involves multiple individuals collaborating online. In this sense, online political satire is a form of grassroots production. Second, it takes on its life in dynamic and networked circulation and interaction. Websites of jokes and satire exist, but those are static, waiting for people to discover. As a networked practice, however, online political satire comes in search of you. It shows up often in mobile texting, microblogs, group chats, and popular online forums. Third, the textual vehicle or products of this practice are networks of meaning in two senses. On the one hand, what results from this practice is often a remix of different symbols and units of meaning. On the other hand, the remixed product is most meaningful in relation to some other symbol(s). An example is the 'Grass Mud Horse' meme (see below; also see Meng, 2011; Nordin and Richaud, 2014), which takes on its full satirical power only in relation to another satirical symbol—the 'river crab.' 'Grass Mud Horse,' a homophone for 'f___ your mother' in Chinese, is a veiled and playful protest against censorship. 'River crab,' a homophone for 'harmony,' signifies the state ideology of 'social harmony' and stands in for the censoring regime.

Distinguishing between strategies and tactics, de Certeau argues that everyday practice is tactical in nature. While operating within the confines of the strategies of the state and other structural conditions, everyday practice 'invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others' (1984: xii). Thus, everyday practice is infused with the spirit of creative resistance. The networked practices of online political satire are full of creativity, but are not always about resistance. At times, the sharing of a political joke is to build or lubricate personal relationships rather than make social or political critique.

Our typology of online political satire in China ranges from the strictly playful genre of duanzi to forms that can only be loosely defined as playful. 'Online news comments,' for example, are not a playful genre per se, but one with playful elements. Nevertheless, the most famous 'online news comments,' run by Netease, has developed a reputation for its sometimes biting, sometimes playful, and always critical user comments that it is possible to loosely think of it as a networked practice of online political satire.

Duanzi

Duanzi (段子), or jokes, is one of the most popular cultural genres in China today. Its distinct feature is humor and 'lightness' (Voci, 2010), as it is short and easy to spread. People share duanzi routinely via texting, online forums, Weibo, and WeChat.[1] The contents of duanzi fall into several colorful categories. 'Red' jokes convey positive messages aligned with mainstream politics and moralities. 'Gray' jokes convey critical views about politics and society. Jokes containing political satire belong here. 'Yellow' jokes are sex jokes.

The history of duanzi as a form of humor is as old as China's literary tradition (Davis and Chey, 2013; Xu, 2011), but the contemporary fascination with duanzi has a more recent origin. It is as much linked to public disaffection with bureaucracy as it is with new lifestyles and consumption capabilities. With the popularization of mobile phones and Internet use, sharing duanzi has become an especially popular social activity since the late 1990s. The results of an online survey conducted in 2010 with 8,762 netizens and a written questionnaire of 1,048 respondents lead researchers to conclude that 'Everybody in China does duanzi' (People's Tribute Survey Center, 2010). As Table 1 shows, a high percentage of respondents said they received duanzi in their mobile text messages.

The percentage of political satire is remarkable. When asked which type of duanzi they send or receive the most, respondents say 52% are 'good-luck duanzi,' 29% are 'gray duanzi' (political satire), 9% are 'yellow' duanzi, and 9% are 'red.'

The popularity of duanzi is inseparable from its social functions. Sharing duanzi is literally a means of networking with friends and colleagues. The above survey finds that when asked why they send or receive duanzi, most respondents (39.5%) said it was to strengthen personal ties and relationships, while 28.9% said it was to 'share information with others.' Only fewer than 10% said they do it 'to show one's personal humor,' 'to expose the truth of an issue,' or 'just for fun, with no clear purpose' (People's Tribute Survey Center, 2010: 16).

Table 1. Percent of duanzi in text messages (2010).

% of respondents	% of duanzi in text messages
29	10–20
19	30–40
16	50–60
6	70–80 or above
31	Less than 10

Source: People's Tribute Survey Center (2010).

Yet duanzi can also be a highly politically charged practice. During the SARS crisis in 2003, for example, many duanzi jokes mocked official ideology. The following is a parody of the 'three represents' theory of former Chinese president Jiang Zemin:

SARS represents the demand of a special virus for development
SARS represents the advancement of a culture of terror
SARS represents the basic interests of the broad masses of wild animals (Yu, 2007: 47).

The satire of this duanzi becomes evident in comparison with the original theory of 'three represents' articulated by Jiang: 'Our Party must always represent the requirements for developing China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people' (Jiang, 2013: 519).

National sentence-making

The Chinese phrase for national sentence-making (全民造句) literally means 'all people make sentences.' It refers to the emerging online practice of remaking and circulating popular phrases and sayings. Because this phenomenon became popular only with the adoption of the Internet and social media, it is sometimes called 'Internet sentence-making.'

The best-known example is 'My father is Li Gang!' This top catchphrase of 2010 came from a hit-and-run incident where the 22-year-old automobile driver Li Qiming yelled at security guards upon interception: 'Sue me if you dare. My father is Li Gang!' Li Gang, it turns out, is the deputy police chief in Baoding, Hebei Province. The phrase took flight online, with many outraged by the imperious behavior of such 'officiallings' (i.e., children of government officials). A few popular online bulletin boards alone produced more than 300,000 remade sentences (Netease, 2010). In these online forums, netizens remade poems and sayings to satirize officiallings and the rich and powerful they represent. For example, the second line of famous Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai's poem 'Bright moonlight near my bed/White frost on the ground' is replaced with 'My father is Li Gang,' because 'Gang' rhymes with 'shuang,' the Chinese word for frost. Russian poet Pushkin's verse is transformed into 'If by life you were deceived, don't be dismal, your father is Li Gang!' (Liu, 2011). The insertion of 'My father is Li Gang' in sentence-making is dubbed the 'Li Gang Form' (李刚体).

Another example, known as the 'High-speed Rail Form' (高铁体), mocks the idiotic official reaction to reporters' inquiries about the collision of a high-speed train near Wenzhou in 2011. Arguing that the crashed train was buried immediately after the crash not to remove evidence as the reporters had claimed, but to facilitate rescue efforts and protect national technology from being stolen, an official from the Ministry of Railways stated: 'Whether or not you believe it, I believe it.' Soon, a microblog handle 'High-speed Rail Form' appeared on Tencent Weibo,

calling on fellow users to adopt the form 'xxx, whether or not you believe it, I believe it' in a sentence-making contest. Thousands took part in deriding the ministry's absurd explanations. One remade sentence goes:

> If you ride the subway, the escalator will collapse. If you ride the high-speed train, there will be a train collision. If you take the bus, the bus will catch fire... If you donate for disasters, your money will be spent on a Maserati. Whether or not you believe it, I believe it.

The tweet invoked several public scandals involving official incompetence and corruption.

Sentence-making entails the modification and transformation of text. Borrowed from ancient poems, famous sayings, or other popular expressions, the remade text is appropriated with almost unlimited possibilities. Memorable and well-known texts, such as a famous poem, can enhance the spreadability of the transformed sentences. Intertextuality derives not only from a prior text, but also from the newly created expression. Thus, a new meme like 'My father is Li Gang' can be combined with a line from an ancient poem and then inserted together into a new situation to achieve a particularly comic effect. In this sense, the multiple versions of remade sentences are *networked*, drawing their meanings from the memetic new expressions and gaining potency from one another. Through online forums, microblog hashtags, and retweets, users weave a complex web of meaning around each new cultural expression. As sentence-making follows a simple form, it encourages mass participation and (re-)production.

Multimedia remix

In addition to playing with texts, Chinese netizens also creatively remix audio, visual, and gaming materials in a satirical spirit. Aided by the proliferation of visual technologies, tech-savvy netizens in China, like their peers elsewhere, have taken advantage of PCs, mobile phones, imaging/editing software, and gaming platforms to express dissenting views. Photoshopping, for instance, has become a staple practice of China's online political satire. In the famous 'My father is Li Gang' case, Chinese netizens used Photoshop to manipulate texts and images in inventive ways. A picture capturing President George Bush Jr. in a buffet queue was photoshopped with an imaginary monolog that reads: 'Give me more food! My father is Li Gang!' Another man in the same queue with a wretched expression lamented: 'God damn it! How come my dad is not Li Gang?' While the original picture had no intention to emphasize President Bush's family privilege or the imperious behaviors of the Bush administration, the photoshopped speech bubbles clearly alluded to such widely shared perceptions in China and produced additional comedic effects by drawing similarities between President Bush and Li Gang's son (see Figure 1). A traffic sign in Baoding of Hebei Province was photoshopped that now reads: 'Friends, slow down. Your father is not Li Gang' (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. My father is Li Gang—G.W. Bush.
Source: Global Voices Online (Lam, 2010).

Figure 2. My dad is Li Gang—Traffic Sign.
Source: China Digital Times (2010).

New text was superimposed on the original image, adding humor to a roadside traffic sign. In addition, cute cats, Chinese comedy movies, and Cultural Revolution themed posters have also been employed in netizens' playful satire of social elites.

Remix does not stop with images, however. Some users remix materials to produce mini videos and short films. Marking the beginning of an 'egao' (or online spoof) culture in China (Meng, 2011), Hu Ge's video *A Bloody Case of a Steamed Bun*

reworked famed Chinese film director Chen Kaige's 2005 mega-million-dollar fantasy film *The Promise* to mock the culture establishment. He turned the love epic into a ludicrous crime drama, remixing footage from Chen's film with other domestic and foreign hits including *Hero, Shaolin Soccer, Harry Potter*, and *The Matrix*. Most strikingly, Hu Ge redubbed an episode of state media CCTV's (Chinese Central Television) Legal Channel program, replacing the original soundtrack with his own tongue-in-cheek narrative about an official investigation into a murder case caused by a steamed bun. Its absurdity mocks both Chen's film and CCTV's signature pretentiousness in news broadcast. The video was initially posted on his blog, but became an instant success drawing millions of viewers because of its irreverent mockery of mainstream media and culture.

Chinese gamers have also left their mark. For instance, led by creator 'Sexy Corn,' a 26-year-old World of Warcraft (WoW) player, 100 gamers spent 3 months and produced a remarkable 64-min in-game video *The War of Internet Addiction* (网瘾战争)[2] (TechCrunch, 2010). Through the creation of a series of lively in-game characters and storytelling, young players dealt a hilarious critique of social elites: state censors who tried to control the Chinese Internet, game companies who placed profit above users, and money-obsessed 'experts' like psychiatrist Yang Yongxin who subjected young 'Internet addicts' to electroshock therapy. Touching a nerve of a generation of young netizens (more than half of China's Internet users are under age 30), the video won the top prize at the 2010 Tudou Film Festival.[3] It was prompted by players' frustration with their experiences of marginalization in both their virtual and real lives. State regulators censored the game significantly, forcing players to choose between playing the full version of the game on foreign servers or the censored domestic version. Mainland users who played via overseas servers were vilified as 'mainland locusts' by Taiwanese players and as 'gold farmers' by other foreign users, and thus alienated by the game they love. Further, gamers who bear the stigma of 'Internet addicts,' subject to tremendous family and social pressure, felt powerless. 'I no longer want to keep silent,' gamers let out their pent-up frustration through the in-game character, ending the movie in Bon Jovi's *Have a Nice Day*: 'Why, you wonna tell me how to live my life? Who are you to tell me if it's black or white?'

By manipulating visual, audio, and gaming content, Chinese netizens developed a sophisticated repertoire of multimedia political satire. It is networked in production, distribution, and consumption. Creators leverage online resources, be it an image, a video, a song, or a gaming platform. A large-scale project like *The War of Internet Addiction* is produced via a collaborative online network, even though its leader did not know all the participants. Contents are released and consumed on popular online platforms to attract viewers. Moreover, when disguised in visually stimulating and pleasurable forms like funny pictures, self-made 'egao' films, and game productions, political critiques are more likely to be widely shared and remembered. Unlike text-based messages that can be easily searched and filtered, photo-based political satire can slip through censors.

Online performance art

Performance art is 'a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based' (Goldberg, 2001: 7). Unlike traditional theatrical performances with a linear narrative, fictitious characters and scripted interactions, it is noted for 'appealing directly to a large public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of art and its relation to culture' (Goldberg, 2001: 8). Here, the performer is the artist, intent on disrupting traditional categories and creating new types of human expressions. Digital media offers performers and audiences new ways of producing and sharing political satire.

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is credited for popularizing this art form in China and is noted for his employment of new media to criticize authorities. Ai cited Marcel Duchamp as an influence: '[A]fter Duchamp, I realized that being an artist is more about a lifestyle and attitude than producing some product... A way of looking at things' (quoted in Stahel and Janser, 2011: 64). In an act of protest in 2011, Ai posed nearly nude in a provocative self-portrait, covering his genitals with a stuffed Grass Mud Horse toy. The photo's caption reads: 'grass mud horse covering the middle' (Goldman, 2011). Of the two homophones embedded in the caption, 'grass mud horse' is an impish protest against censorship that gained popularity through the distribution of toys, children's songs, and online videos. 'Covering the middle,' on the other hand, is a homophone for 'the Party's Central Committee.' The combination thus becomes a coded, yet direct, insult of authorities. The humor is not lost on perceptive audiences. After Ai's assistant, Zhao Zhao, was investigated by police for spreading pornography online, Ai's supporters posted their own (semi-)nude self-portraits to express solidarity and mock censors (Lee, 2011). Controversial and crude as they may be, these images circulated online and collectively amplified the expressive energy of this new 'performing class' who seeks to shock the public to rethink art, self, and the society in which they live.

Political satire and performance art are not reserved only for professional artists. When Chen Guangcheng, a self-taught blind lawyer and human rights activist, was put under house arrest, his supporters made stickers modeled after the KFC logo, featuring stylized graphics of Chen's face with his signature sunglasses and replacing the text 'KFC' in the logo with 'FREE CGC' (Moore, 2012). A Google Maps page was set up for the 'FREE CGC Car Sticker Club' where those who have put the sticker on their cars could register their approximate locations. In addition, an anonymous Chinese artist 'Crazy Crab' solicited and curated digital photos of netizens wearing the blind activist's signature sunglasses. As individual portraits, these photos looked innocuous, but when aggregated, they presented a powerful statement of collective dissent (Dark Glasses Portrait, 2012).

These performative acts blend resistance and play, idea and action, online and offline, the shocking and the mundane. Artists and participants engage in playful manipulations of meaning that baffle authorities and expand the universe of alternate meanings. Texts are remixed, logos changed, and objects and human acts assigned new significance. 'Grass Mud Horse,' 'covering the middle,' KFC,

Colonel Sanders, and sunglasses acquire fresh connotations, confounding the innocent with the profane, the vulgar with the sacrosanct, the mercantile with activism. In some cases (e.g., Ai Weiwei's seminude photo), multiple meanings are overlaid to render intriguing revelations. Moreover, as a creative act, performance art invites participation. It transforms audiences into artists of sorts, challenging them to think and act differently. These episodes of performance art are possible because of their networked nature. The creation, contribution, distribution, curation, depository, and experiences of the artwork are carried out digitally, open to potentially large numbers of participants. Indeed, to borrow the words of Schechner, 'the performance's subject [is] transformation: the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become—for worse or better—what they ordinarily are not' (Schechner, 2003: 1).

Online news comments

Online news comments (*xinwen gentie*) are not peculiar to China, but a common feature of news websites (Himelboim and McCreery, 2012; Rebillard and Touboul, 2010). However, they have special significance for Chinese readers due to the monopoly of official news sources and the lack of channels for public communication.[4] Chinese Internet firms and netizens have also developed distinct ways of using this function.

The best known 'online news comments' in China is run by Netease, one of China's leading Internet firms. In fact, Netease's 'online news comments' function is not just a regular feature of its website, but has become part of its brand. With its slogan 'No online responses, no news,' Netease aggressively projects a user-friendly and interactive image to the public. Sometimes, the news stories published on Netease are so ludicrous that it almost seems as if they were deliberately held up for ridicule.

On 22 May 2012, Netease reported that the Beijing municipal government had approved the 'Management and Service Standards for Beijing Public Toilets,' requiring, among other things, that the number of flies in a public toilet should not exceed two. Two days later, it reported that the southern city of Nanchang had required that the number of flies should not exceed three. These two news items alone attracted 2,171 comments on Netease's website (Tang, 2013). One reader's comment parodied the official ideology of 'scientific development' (Tang, 2013: 489):

> That a Beijing public toilet can have no more than two flies is a historical choice, the choice of the Chinese people. This is China's internal affairs, and nobody should interfere with China's internal affairs. It is widely known that China's national conditions determine that China has flies. Having two flies not only suits China's basic national conditions, but also is an international customary practice. China is a country ruled by law, but the law does not shield flies! We firmly believe that two flies embody the scientific concept of development.

Similarly, a news story in August 2012 about possible pesticide residuals found in Changyu wine, a major wine brand in China, provoked readers' satire. In his own defense, the company's general manager claimed that only if a person drank 123 bottles of its wine on a single day would it be harmful to health. This story generated over 3,000 comments and involved the participation of 12,629 users by 23 November 2012 (Yang, 2013). Readers made fun of the manager's remarks. One person commented that the manager actually meant 'as long as you do not die of drinking their wine, that would be ok!' Others showed their distrust of 'experts': 'No need to drink 100 bottles. Just ask the experts to drink one bottle.' Tapping into the networks of meanings of online satires about food scandals, another commentator invoked the Sanlu tainted milk scandal in 2008: 'It turns out that Changyu's testing standards are the same as China's milk powder [producers'], which is that it is supposed to have passed the test as long as it does not kill the drinker on the spot' (Yang, 2013). Readers' satire targets not only ruthless merchants but also government's failure to contain such widespread health hazards.

Online political satire between ritual and resistance

How to assess the significance of online political satire in China? Most current studies view it as a form of political resistance. Our analysis shows that online political satire is more than political resistance; it is also cultural expression. Satirical remarks in 'online news comments,' jokes in duanzi, creative sentence-making, multimedia remix, and online performance art engage online participation not only because they contain some form of political critique, but also because they are occasions for personal expression and social interaction. Test (1986: 67) finds individuals and groups all over the world 'perform and express themselves in a communal context.' They use direct and indirect means to mock and deride individuals, groups, and institutions of their communities and in effect have a license for doing so. Calling these activities 'ritual satire,' Test argues that like other religious and social rituals, they serve solidary functions for both individuals and communities. Our study shows that the social function of political satire is present in the practices of online political satire in China. Duanzi, for example, is often shared and circulated online as a form of socialization rather than political expression or resistance. Jokes of all colors, gray or yellow, enjoy wide circulation online because they serve as a medium of sociality. The networked practices of online political satire in Chinese digital spaces have both a ritually oriented side and a politically oriented side.

Ritual functions are performed in the circulation of duanzi between friends and colleagues, online news comments, as well as readers' responses to other readers' comments. National sentence-making has a ritual side too. Netizens often participate both in the act of sentence-making and in its dissemination. They do so not necessarily for the sake of political protest but, like the sharing of duanzi, for a communal laughter or even for a display of one's linguistic and literary talents. Similarly, large-scale multimedia remix projects like *The War of Internet Addiction*

and online performance arts like *Dark Glasses Portrait* manifest the expressive desires of individuals and communities.

Just because ritual satire serves social functions does not mean it is nonpolitical. On the contrary, rituals have an interpretative openness that allows them to be appropriated in multiple ways (Couldry, 2003; Curran and Liebes, 1998), including the appropriation by activists as expressions of dissent (Pfaff and Yang, 2001). The 2009 meme 'Jia Junpeng, your mother wants you to go home to eat' was born out of collective sentiments of frustration in Baidu's WoW online community about the temporary suspension of access to the game. Yet very soon, activists transformed the phrase into a slogan for political mobilization, in one case sending postcards with the phrase 'your mother wants to go home to eat' to a police station to demand the release of a detained blogger (Latham, 2013).

On the more explicitly political side, online political satire can be a form of individual resistance, a point well recognized in current scholarship. Yet, what is not recognized is that the networked feature of online political satire gives it a collective character, making it resemble what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) refer to as online connective action. National sentence-making clearly has a collective character. Even the not-so-national acts of online performance art, typified by Ai Weiwei, have a collective character. The difference is not qualitative, but one of scale. It is because of their potentially collective character that many practices of online political satire can become radical enough to incur the repression of the state. And it is for this reason that political satire often has to take implicit and disguised forms (Esarey and Xiao, 2008).

Can online political satire breed cynicism and political apathy to the extent of discouraging people from protesting in the streets? Possibly, but there is no systematic empirical research in support of this argument in China or elsewhere. Although critics contend that satire may create escapism rather than political engagement, other scholars have argued that satire almost always contains social critique (Gray et al., 2009). In China, furthermore, what we do know is that there is no lack of contentious activities online or offline (O'Brien, 2008; Yang, 2009). There is no evidence that online political satire has weakened or replaced other forms of political expression and action in China. It is part and parcel of a broader field of citizen action in the Internet age.

Complex conditions and contexts

How to explain the proliferation of online political satire in China? To the extent that it is a global phenomenon (Baym and Jones, 2012), its manifestations in China are related to global social and cultural change. We will argue, however, that online political satire in China is the product of Chinese netizens' practices in circumstances defined by Chinese history, politics, culture, as well as technological developments.

The popularization of online political satire reflects the development of new communication technologies. Duanzi, a conversational term for the popular art

form *xiangsheng* (crosstalk), for instance, began to take on its current meaning as online jokes when texting on mobile phones became common in the 1990s. Today, China has over 600 million Internet users and 1.1 billion mobile phone users (CNNIC, 2014).

These technological developments are essential to the proliferation of online political satire, but cannot explain its peculiar Chinese forms. Media technologies do not just spread, but take on distinct cultural forms and meanings in everyday practice. Some of the most popular networked forms and services in China have distinct Chinese features. Chinese Internet firms, like firms elsewhere, compete with one another by developing their own unique services, brands, and network cultures. For example, Netease's signature 'online news comments' becomes a model emulated by other web sites because it promotes a set of practices which are embraced by its users.

The networked practices of online political satire are as much a story of reception as of production. If Internet firms hire professional duanzi writers (People's Tribute Survey Center, 2010), it is because duanzi appeals to Internet users. Similarly, if numerous netizens participate in 'national sentence-making,' it is because this practice makes sense to them. Having fun makes just as much sense as expressing dissent. To understand why, we need to understand the broader changes in Chinese society and their influences on individual psyche, personal relationships, and general social sentiments. In her study of the *diaosi* ('loser') meme, Szablewicz (2014) shows the term expresses the alternative desires of many young people struggling in a society that constantly celebrates wealth, status, and high style. This playful meme is directly linked to the 'structures of feeling' of contemporary Chinese society. Similarly, 'My father is Li Gang!' and such new phrases as 'officiallings' reflect the grassroots resentment against extreme social inequalities and rampant corruption in China.

Reception is not simply a story about people's disaffections and anxieties about social change, however. Like de Certeauean acts of reading, poaching, and walking, practices of consuming online satire are not always distinguishable from those of production. By conventional criteria, 'online news comments' are just reader responses to news. Yet many online comments generate public opinion significant enough to disrupt the meanings of the original news texts and redirect public attention (Tang, 2013).

In everyday practices of online satire, netizens borrow from existing cultural forms and practices. History and culture provide resources and skills for the networked practices of online satire. China's long history of political satire and folklore wisdom (Davis and Chey, 2013; Thornton, 2002) is reflected in contemporary practices. Every Chinese with an elementary education would know what sentence-making means, because it is an essential part of the Chinese language curriculum. Anyone who watches television shows would have seen a *xiangsheng* (crosstalk) or two, from which the notion of duanzi comes from. The linguistic and visual devices used in online satire are often borrowed from existing forms familiar to educated publics. For example, the puns in the 'Grass Mud Horse' lexicon or in Ai Weiwei's 'covering the middle' performance may be completely puzzling to outsiders, but not

to netizens accustomed to the everyday practice of online punning. The popularity of duanzi cannot be separated from the common practice of online greeting and information sharing, or even from the culture of dinner table banter and gossip. In short, the networked practices of online political satire are fully embedded in Chinese life.

Internet censorship also shapes the particular forms of online political satire in China. Censorship cannot put an end to political expression, but only channels it into specific forms such as the prevalent use of coded language in political satire (Nordin and Richaud, 2014). A keyword search for 'jokes' (*xiaohua*) on popular Chinese websites will yield numerous results, but a search for 'political jokes' (*zhengzhi xiaohua*) will yield many more jokes from the former Soviet Union than from China. This may be the result of Internet censorship, because blatantly political jokes about China are more likely to be censored than those about the Soviet Union. Yet the circulation of Soviet political jokes targeting its political system and top leaders has its own political thrust in China as they are thinly veiled allusions to Chinese realities. One of these Soviet jokes runs as follows: When several people were arrested by the police for handing out leaflets on the Red Square, they argued, 'These leaflets are all blank.' The police responded: 'Yeah, but everybody knows what the leaflets were going to say, right?'

The user who shared this joke on Weibo added: 'Norms for user behavior on Sina Weibo community: Use of coded expressions to avoid [censorship] restrictions is prohibited.' Another commented, 'Chinese who read this joke will smile with understanding.'

These everyday practices of playful resistance have a tactical character, in contrast to the strategies of state power. While it is vital to recognize the strategies of Chinese censorship agencies, however, it is necessary not to overemphasize it. The Chinese censorship system, like the Chinese state, is not monolithic but multi-layered (Balla, 2014; Schlæger and Jiang, 2014). Multiple parties are involved in the business of censorship, not just the government, but also civil society and Internet firms. All this may limit the coherence of the strategies of censorship and create opportunities for creative and networked transgression.

Conclusion

This article reconceptualizes online political satire in China as a networked social practice. This allows us to go beyond the contents of political satire and highlight its distinct new features and dynamics in the network society. We examined five varieties of online political satire and differentiated between the more ritually oriented and more political oriented practices. We emphasized the multiple and complex conditions in which these practices have thrived, technological as well as cultural and institutional.

Our study opens up several new avenues for future research. More systematic collection and analysis of examples and cases of online political satire over a longer period of time will help to create a more refined typology. Historical studies of

political satire could produce more nuanced patterns and conditions of change and continuity. Comparative studies of online political satire, both across national boundaries and in relation to other online practices, such as online literature, online video culture, and online protest, will deepen our understanding of the meaning and significance of online political satire as a networked social practice. Only by situating online political satire in a particular historical moment with its concomitant cultural, political, and technological opportunities and constraints can we better grasp the production, circulation, and consumption of users' every-day creativity and the alternate universe of meaning they create.

Notes

1. Usually, 'weibo' is used to denote the phenomenon of microblogging in China; 'Weibo' is used as an abbreviation for 'Sina Weibo,' the most influential microblog platform in China. WeChat is a mobile text and voice messaging service developed by Tencent.
2. 'Sexy Corn' wrote the script. A team of players recorded video snippets of their play inside the game and volunteers provided the voice for each of the characters.
3. Tudou is one of China's top video sharing sites.
4. On 7 November 2000, the State Council issued regulations for news services online, permitting official news media organizations to carry news on their websites but officially licensed commercial websites could only repost news from official channels. See Yang (2009: 50).

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