

## New Heroes, Ideological Shifts and Chinese Visual Culture

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### Abstract

This article explores the hero and new symbolism in 21<sup>st</sup> century mainland China. In the wake of rapid transformations in Chinese society, there are still identifiable references in art and design made to symbols of the past that represent Mao (the collective) and party rhetoric. These symbols are often 'heroic' and are drawn upon in times of rapid social transformation to enable a smoother transition. Despite the documented proliferation of the appropriation of Maoist symbolism associated with propaganda, there is a noticeable shift in symbolism from the 'old' to the 'new' to represent Chinese visual culture in art and design in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The current climate of online social media culture is a testing ground for visual metaphors that represent changing tides during the rapid development in China in the digital age. The *Grass Mud Horse* symbol that emerged as a result of Internet censorship in 2009 may indicate a potential shift in Chinese visual culture, with the creation of symbols that represent dissent. This article argues that, as a result of shifting ideologies, a new hero has risen from online collective co-creation.

### Keywords

visual culture, Chinese Internet memes, online participatory culture, visual metaphors, ideology, new symbolism, Internet censorship, new heroism, symbolism, collaborative heroism

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## New Heroes, Ideological Shifts and Chinese Visual Culture



It is important to examine the role and significance of Chinese political art and it is here that this article shall begin. Revolutionary art and design in the Soviet style was incorporated into artistic expression in the late 1930s (Gladston 2014). Its role in visual culture in communist China under the rule of Mao Zedong, was solely to strengthen and propagate visual materials to promote the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Soviet social realist style employed carefully constructed compositional and symbolic elements to transmit messages. Composition typically was constructed with Mao or another heroic figure's dominance in the work, emulating and radiating hope amongst the people. The hero's godlike presence transcendently floated above the other figures in the image. Colour usage was applied not just in the production of visual messages in art and design, but the coding of the "collective national body" (Chen 2001). Images in visual political messages at this time, as described by Pan (2008) and Minick and Ping (2010), were dominated by the prescribed colours of the revolution; red, yellow and black. Pan (2008, 84) describes socialist realism "with its uplifting content, heroic characters of muscled-bound workers, peasants striking thrusting poses and patriotic labour in idyllic sunlight." The aim of social realism was to represent the people and appear 'true to life'; inevitably the works resulted as propaganda that was used to promote CCP messages to the masses.

Zhao and Belk's (2008) study of Chinese socialist symbols in advertising examines some of the ideology and propaganda schemas in socialist realism. Based on Barthes' (1972) semiotic theory of myth in political ideology and social transition, they discuss the role of the socialist hero in Chinese propaganda and how political ideology has been appropriated by advertising to enable social transformation. The way that we see and read Mao's role in revolutionary art and design can be likened to the function of creating a hero to convey a narrative relaying the values in society (Zhao and Belk 2008). This way Mao becomes a saviour, his godlike figure delivering the masses hope and a bright future. In the forefront of socialist propaganda there is always a heroic figure or group; it may appear contradictory that there is a hero amongst the revolutionary masses when the style was a vehicle of eliminating class status. As outlined by Lane (1981) in Zhao and Belk (2008, 235), heroes in political ideology:

are 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.

Allison and Goethals (2015) 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 whilst retaining their epistemic function. This idea is echoed in Lane’s (1981) research drawing on the function of heroes and their role during times of rapid social change. This framework can assist in examining the use of the hero in the digital age in mainland China. As Allison and Goethals (2015, 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 ourselves in many areas of leadership and ongoing positive psychological development. This framework will prove useful when considering the instantly recognizable heroic visual imagery of the CCP and, in particular, the image of Mao Zedong.

The aim of this article is to contribute and build on the existing body of knowledge in Chinese visual culture. Its intention is to examine the underpinnings of Chinese visual culture, symbolism and online participatory culture, and contribute new insights, theories and analysis regarding the universal aspect of reading images in visual culture, and heroic images. The research methods, including semiology and compositional interpretation, will be applied to test the following hypotheses: first, as a result of Internet censorship, an emergent movement of visual culture and the creation of novel symbols are being used to signify a new hero in 21<sup>st</sup> century China; and second, these symbols are extending communication values offline demonstrating shifts in ideology, thus creating 21<sup>st</sup> century heroes in Chinese visual culture.

## **The Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976)**

The ten-year period from 1966 to 1976 saw, according to Minick and Ping (2010, 119), “one of the world’s greatest media campaigns and personality cults.” Studies by Dal Lago (2009), Barmé (2003), Minick and Ping (2010), and Gladston (2014) show that this decade witnessed one of the largest international media campaigns in the form of art and design, transforming Mao into a heroic iconic figure. Due to the use of Mao’s image in revolutionary campaigns, all divergent and experimental forms of creative production were seemingly halted; thus, style favoured collectivism over individualism. Images depicting Mao amongst the masses were widely disseminated promoting visual narratives to the population. There is reference to “religious revolutionary zeal” (Dal Lago 1993), which again is often used to describe the portrayal of Mao during this period. Dal Lago (1999) and Galikowski (1990) discuss its function and methods, noting the similarities between Mao portraiture and European religious paintings. The function of depicting Mao with revolutionary zeal was to elevate him into the realm of the gods, a morally cultivated persona in which the masses could trust and follow. The portraits of Mao thus chronologically followed his life and development into an iconic symbol. Galikowski (1990) notes that Mao’s visual narrative can be likened to what is visually displayed in the Christian Church. The story of Christ is shown in stages of his life elevating him to his godlike status through a series of visual narratives, cultivating his persona for public

display. Mao portraits operate in a similar way creating a visual narrative as a founder of the Communist Party, a leader and commander, an educator, and a saviour looking after his people. Carrying these religious visual connotations Mao was depicted in roles that would appeal to the masses.

As a heroic leader, Mao Zedong devised and shaped “the cultural development of the nation”; 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 revolutionary style that continued to pervade Chinese visual culture until the end of the Cultural Revolution appeared more forcefully from 1959, following the beginning of the Great Leap Forward campaign (1958 – 1961). The revolutionary machine’s main method of dissemination was through visual communication. Mao’s image proliferated visual culture through print media, badges, book covers and alarm clocks. Artistic production during this period was orchestrated collective production, utilising hyperrealist illustrations drawing heavily on ideas of a *socialist utopia* where all citizens are depicted as heroic equals. As a result, “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).

Galikowski (1990) analyses Mao’s portraiture in terms of Mao’s depiction amongst the masses, and also as Mao removed from the masses, floating like a god above, transcending human qualities through portraiture. This can be seen in *Follow Closely Chairman Mao’s Great Strategic Plan* where he is in the clouds, his hand outstretched and eyes gazing into the future. In the composition below, the people seem dwarfed and are barely visible as they fade into the background on the painting, making them part of the fabric and seemingly insignificant. As Galikowski (1990, 133) describes, “[h]ere 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.” The role of the masses in this painting is to bolster Mao’s image, which appears multiple times within the painting, as they brandish their Mao portraits and banners with slogans promoting their idol, and Mao’s hero worship.

### **The Shift in Meaning of the Mao Symbol Post-Modernisation**

The death of Mao Zedong in September 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution marked a return to redefining the Chinese national identity, and Chinese heroic symbolism. The new leader of the Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping, created the Open Door policy in 1978 whereby China re-opened after decades of global isolation. Following the Cultural Revolution, Deng began rebuilding what Minick and Ping (2010, 131) refer to as “the most severe error since the founding of the People’s Republic.” Driving the radicalisation and damage to Chinese cultural identity in the arts was the Gang of Four. The group, formed in 1965, included Mao’s third wife Jiang Qing, along with Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan. The Gang of Four used the political power of Mao’s propaganda and media machine to promote their pursuits of population manipulation. However, Mao’s death in 1976 led to the group’s persecution and loss of power resulting in their imprisonment. The subsequent downfall of the Gang of Four demonstrates a significant change in public perception – the ramifications of Deng’s new Open Door policy paved the way for artists and designers. Thus, propaganda art of the period shifted focus from damning capitalism to embracing it; the image of Mao as a symbol that was so enmeshed with proletariat party ideology began to lose its heroic and godlike status, and became open to critique.

The aftermath of the Cultural Revolution began in 1978 following decades of isolation from the West. The introduction of the Open Door policy led to the revival of theoretical, philosophical and aesthetic ideas, as Li (1993) notes. This was particularly true of the younger generation who rejected the Revolutionary style and values therein. ‘*To get rich is glorious*’ was the slogan that accompanied the Open Door policy. Deng Xiaoping made significant changes to the freedom of creative practitioners in China during this time. Minick and Ping (2010, 131) note Deng’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.

China’s rapid social transformation from 1978 until today demonstrates the dramatic shift in heroic (and broader) ideology, and symbolism therein. Before 1978 “Maoist socialism [which] advocated abnegation, sacrifice, and egalitarianism and rejected hedonistic enjoyment through the pursuit of material possessions” (Zhao and Belk 2008, 236) was replaced by consumer driven culture.

There are many artists and designers that have used Mao Zedong as a symbol in their work post-Cultural Revolution. The sociocultural phenomena of the re-emergence of Chairman Mao via contemporary art and design in the 1990s has been a vehicle that the party has approved, as it somewhat re-establishes and acts like political propaganda reinstating Chinese values (Dal Lago 1999). Chairman Mao’s most well-known portrait is on the cover of the little red book (The Communist Manifesto). According to Dal Lago (1999, 48) an estimated 2.2 billion prints were in circulation, three copies for every citizen during the Cultural Revolution, making it the “single most reproduced portrait in human history.” The use of Mao’s iconic portrait permeated into the West through American pop art in the 1970s when Andy Warhol appropriated the portrait, reshaping Mao’s aura to sit amongst, predominantly, American celebrities.

Due to the power of the Mao image as a symbol, the research frameworks that discuss the use of Mao can illustrate more deeply the visual shift in the use of his image. The use of Mao Zedong as an iconic symbol in art and design has been studied by Dal Lago (1999), Wiseman (2007), Barmé (1996), and Li (1993). Dal Lago (1999) maps the lineage of the re-emergence of the Mao icon in avant-garde art and argues that works featuring a more subversive use of Mao are not permitted to be shown in mainland China, and have only ever been exhibited abroad. Dal Lago’s (1999) paper *Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art* examined the re-emergence of the icon in what she refers to as the “Maocraze” (Barmé 1996). Dal Lago (1999) notes that there is a gap in research linking the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution propaganda, and the dissemination and success of the re-emergence of the Maocraze in visual culture. The revival of Maocraze in political pop and the use of satire in visual form that would make use of Mao Zedong is no surprise. Mao as a symbol re-emerged stripped of its original powerful revolutionary past, which strongly illustrates social transformation and ideological shifts in mainland China. Images of Mao combining consumerism and capitalism break open the existing system and ideologies. This way, visual culture works as a commentative tool strongly reflecting contemporary society, and demonstrates a generational shift in the use of tone, symbolism and directness in the work.

These visual connections in the use of ideologies and symbolism will inform the methods of analysis in the study of new symbolism and connections to the current visual domain, illustrating this article's hypothesis that newfound heroic symbolisms are fuelled by changing ideologies.

## Enter the Grass Mud Horse

Though it is actively regulated, "the Internet is often cited as the freest public space of political protest in China, thanks to the vastness of anonymity" (Rea 2013, 159). In 2009, a subversive movement of Internet memes in mainland China entitled the *Grass Mud Horse phenomena* was reported by *The New York Times* (Rea 2013; Wang, Juffermans, and Du 2012; Wiener 2011). The Grass Mud Horse lexicon in Chinese online communities reflects a type of freedom in the form of parody tagged E'gao, "evil doing" or "malicious manipulation" (Rea 2013). According to Weiping (2009) in *China Digital Times*, this newly emerged set of visual communicators followed a 2009 government Anti-Vulgarity campaign. Hereafter, mostly anonymous Chinese bloggers created homophonic pathways (words with a similar pronunciation but differing in meaning) to bypass the Internet censorship, thus avoiding sensitive keywords, and with wit, humour and visualization, freely expressed their freedom-of-speech on the Internet.

What can be seen, is that through online participatory culture there are a growing number of Chinese people (*netizens*) (Rea 2013; Wang, Juffermans, and Du 2012; Wiener 2011) who through online portals can disguise *deep truths* embedded in heroic symbols and metaphors (Allison and Goethals 2015). This reveals shifts in ideology, visual culture and symbolism therein. Wiseman's (2007) *Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-Garde Art* 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 21<sup>st</sup> century illustrates the shift away from the use of Mao and all symbols connected to the Cultural Revolution. Wiseman (2007, 109) breaks these subversions into three claims which resonate with this article's hypothesis that there is a need to create new symbols and heroes. The Chinese people have indeed created a space within the realms of communism with capitalist values, a "social space where people can be themselves" (Wiseman 2007, 109). This new space has been co-created online through participatory culture. With the creation of new symbols representing the people, the Grass Mud Horse phenomena could be perceived as the *new subversive avant-garde*; a new creative movement, and a renaissance that represents freedom of expression and *collaborative heroism* (Klisanin 2015) in 21<sup>st</sup> century China. Klisanin's (2015) research shows that:

just as interactive technologies and social media have profoundly impacted the social, economic, and political spheres, among others, so too are they impacting the mythic and moral spheres—giving rise to a form of heroism described as collaborative.

As a result of rapidly shifting ideologies in mainland China, a new hero has risen from online collective co-creation.

Fung (2012) refers to Chinese netizens as belonging to a cohesive digital community, beyond the physical boundaries of everyday China. Furthermore, he delineates the need for coded

language and metaphor as a pathway to communicate within the restrictions imposed in the concept of a *harmonious* society:

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. (Fung 2012).

Examining pre-existing symbols of heroism with a particular focus on the use of Mao Zedong, gives extensive background to existing ideologies, belief systems and symbolism. Yang (2013) describes what appears to be a lacuna in the analysis of Chinese Internet censorship mythologies written from a Western perspective. Yang (2013) points out that Western scholars fail to fully analyse the context of Chinese culture and therefore create stereotypes, reducing extremely layered and complex networks into 'monolithic,' and not giving shape to what actually lies within. This article suggests that the creation and propagation of new symbols as a result of Internet censorship, represents a new creative movement of visual culture signifying shifts in pre-existing ideology in 21<sup>st</sup> century mainland China. The main and most replicated symbol is the Grass Mud Horse – it represents a shift in Chinese visual culture as a new heroic creature that symbolizes a generation of Chinese who are writing, creating and shaping their own visual culture through online co-created communities.

New ideas and creative thought are generated through exposure to reading texts and visuals within our cultures and communities. Franken (1994) believes that reading and interpreting generates new ideas, driving 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. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Chinese people are global citizens/netizens, searching for self-expression and an individual identity that deviates from the values of the communist *collective* 'harmonious ideal' to resonate more with Western *individualistic* values.

Sima and Pugsley (2010, 287) identify in their research that "individual expression, achievement and pleasure have taken over the arguably 'collective interest' mentality that marked the older, Mao generation." They map what they also call the lacuna in current studies, which are weighted toward "Western blogging contexts" (Sima and Pugsley 2010, 287). Their study illustrates how China's youth is shaping symbolic identities that build on notions of individualism and consumerism, giving insight into China's Y generation of bloggers in post-socialist China. Their findings attest to the rise of online identities and the "me culture," in which self-expression and social interaction symbolize and showcase online individualities: "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!"<sup>i</sup>

Sima and Pugsley's (2010) findings support the 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 anonymously. Online collaborative heroism as defined by Klisanin (2015) closely aligns with virtuous personality strengths that encompass such qualities as compassion and emotional resilience, especially for those living under surveillance and

Internet censorship. The symbols are generated in an online co-created community, so that individuals do not to reveal themselves as sole perpetrators of dissonance or dissent. This way, netizens are creating new symbols, communities and ideologies in 21<sup>st</sup> century China, and newfound heroes are coming to the fore.

The current climate of online social media culture is a testing ground for visual metaphors that represent changing tides during the rapid development in China in the digital age. The new symbolism created online from 2009 in the form of the Internet memes, their commodification and penetrations into the real-world, symbolize a generation of Chinese who may no longer identify with traditional historical heroic symbols of the past, but who want to write/create/shape, *carve out* their own visual culture in China – devoid of the symbols and/or histories of the past. Despite the documented proliferation of the appropriation of Maoist symbolism associated with propaganda, there is a noticeable shift in symbolism from the ‘old’ to the ‘new’ to represent Chinese visual culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***Memes as Social Commentators***

Internet memes, a now imbedded part of popular online culture globally, are particularly pertinent and relevant for cultural analysis (Johnson 2007). It is critical to acknowledge that these visual replicators are ‘cultural keys’ reflecting the ideologies of our time (Shifman 2013), particularly as we embark on a broader understanding of global culture and knowledge of the ability to universally read symbols. With this gap in knowledge of Chinese Internet mythologies that Yang (2013) declares ‘monolithic,’ let us begin with 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) will conjure a visual representation. The Grass Mud Horse phenomena are a set of homophones, that when written are innocuous, but when sounded with voice and intended intonation the Mandarin transforms harmless word-form into witty wordplay.

The character of the Grass Mud Horse manifests visually in the form of a creature resembling an alpaca that symbolizes a netizen, a freedom fighter on the Chinese Internet. According to *China Digital Times* (2014) a Grass Mud Horse is someone who is “web-savvy and critical of government attempts at censorship and harmonizing.” The use and commodification of the Grass Mud Horse 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). This is further demonstrated by the increased usage 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 behaviour.” This exemplifies the once collective Chinese culture tapping into Sima and Pugsley’s (2010) “me generation,” where netizens engage with a Western, individualistic value system and pseudo-democratic realms 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 the West. Wang (2012) further suggests that the people have created a cultural product through social interaction and participatory Internet culture. Klisanin’s (2015) research on digital collaborative heroism, suggests that this type of online participatory action is only possible through collective co-creation relying on a multitude of individuals.

Notably, Allison and Goethals (2015, 6) point out that “[d]eep truths contained in hero myths are difficult to discern and appreciate because they are disguised within symbols and metaphors.” Whether or not the Grass Mud Horse is a product of mass consumption, it symbolizes a need for what Ricouer (1975, 192) refers to as “narrative identities” – Chinese who participate in this subculture “can make sense of themselves and their lives through the stories they can (or cannot) tell,” and through code and metaphor in visual form create new heroes that reflect shifting ideologies.

## Analysis and Findings

The Grass Mud Horse meme comes in many digital forms, employing recognizable Chinese watercolour style, ASCII art, Photoshop collages as well as digital emoticons, some of which are pre-existing symbols, compositions and colour schemes. For example, the Chinese character 囧 (Jiong) was created before the 2009 emergence of the Grass Mud Horse in online communities and is found on one of the many Chinese blog sites in English. The Chestnut Tree Café blog (2013) states that the facial expression of the Grass Mud Horse (alpaca) is reminiscent of 囧 (Jiong) and typically used online “to express helplessness or disappointment.” The Chinese blogging community uses Jiong to allude to the Grass Mud Horse online. The Chestnut Tree Café outlines the crusade of the Grass Mud Horse mythology as grassroots aspiration, the dream of the working class awaiting democracy and freedom. 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 Grass Mud Horse phenomena, 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.

### *Song of the Grass Mud Horse*

The first iteration of the viral video the [\*Song of the Grass-mud Horse\*](#) was disseminated via social media communities in China, and became known to the English-speaking world and through YouTube (which is banned in mainland China) soon thereafter. The video uploaded by SkippyBentley originally in 2009, has 341,017 views, 1,632 likes (thumbs up) and 50 dislikes (thumbs down) as of 27 July 2016.

As described earlier, the Grass Mud Horse employs wordplay (pronounced “cǎonǐmǎ”, very similar to “càonǐmǎ”), “fuck your mother.” The audience is presented with buck-toothed alpaca running free in an arid hinterland, as the song rings out. Initially, it is unclear why alpacas and freedom of expression are synonymous on the Chinese Internet. It is not until English speakers read the English subtitles that we get a deeper understanding of the symbol’s poetic wordplay, heroic subtext and subversive connotations. 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 the use of karaoke/MTV subtitles, non-Chinese speakers who read English can link the visuals to the narrative to access the story of the Grass Mud Horse.

Lyrics of the “Song of the Grass Mud Horse”<sup>ii</sup>

*I am a Grass-Mud Horse*  
*Here comes the song*  
*There is a herd of Grass-Mud Horses (Fuck Your Mom)*  
*who live in the MaLe Desert (Your Mother’s Cunt)*  
*They are lively and intelligent*  
*They are fun-loving and nimble*  
*They live freely in the MaLe Desert (Your Mother’s Cunt)*  
*They are courageous, tenacious, and they have overcome the difficult environment*  
*Oh, lying down Grass-Mud Horse (Oh, Fuck Your Mother!)*  
*Oh, running wild Grass-Mud Horse (Oh, Fuck Your Mother, hard!)*  
*They defeated the River Crabs (Harmonism)*  
*in order to protect their grassland (Free Speech)*  
*River Crabs (Harmonism) disappeared from the MaLe Desert forever!*

The underlying message is a multi-layered narrative regarding a shift in Chinese ideology through the use of metaphor, not a trivial and seemingly vulgar video and audio display. The audio is a digital children’s chorus and has been referred to as the Smurfs theme song in Chinese, adding further to the parody. Satire and humour are often associated with politics in visual culture, art and design in mainland China. The lyrics in this song through creative wordplay critique Chinese Internet censorship via the use of the Grass Mud Horse as the narrative of the hero, as outlined by Levinson (1978), Campbell (1949), and Allison and Goethals (2015). By creating mythologies around the Grass Mud Horse and representing them where they are banned (online), co-creators connect and articulate newfound expressions and ideologies.

The video cited uses slow motion, panning and close-ups of the mythical beasts tossing their untamed hair after running through the rain. Droplets and beads of sweat fall from the beasts as they run freely through the landscape; the use of slow motion adds to the strange romanticism. The creatures salivate and chew grass, some wearing flowers behind their ears. The colours of the flowers change from white (symbolizing death in Chinese culture) to yellow and red, colours most commonly aligned with socialist propaganda. These signs are encoded with broader ideologies that signify a shift in visual culture through online metaphors. In the face of the crackdown on pornography, the video highlights the fact that Chinese online communities are still able, through anonymous co-creation, to communicate through code and metaphor.

The Grass Mud Horse heroic narratives continue on YouTube and pay homage to the mythology through rap. Again, the YouTube user SkippyBentley, who has a collection of the Grass Mud Horse videos under his name, uploaded this version in 2009. [The Grass Mud Horse Cartoon \(rap\)](#) has 61,299 views, 278 likes and 14 dislikes (27 July 2016). This video, accompanied by an upbeat rap song, makes use of animated calligraphic ink-brush painting in modern Chinese traditional style. Further visual elements highlight traditional Chinese symbols, or signs, the protagonists wearing Chinese People’s Liberation Army winter hats and playing the [erhu](#) (traditional stringed instrument). The signs and symbols contained in this animated video are more transparent than the former; with a modern twist they also appear more appealing, emulating ‘cute’ animated emoticons. The video’s appeal is perhaps targeting a younger generation, or else has been created by that generation. The video also contains subtitles for English speaking/reading viewers, which in turn broadens the audience base

cross-culturally (most of these viral memes are created anonymously to avoid ownership, drawing on online participation and co-creation). The narrative has more depth than the previous video and the subtitles reflect the action, with crabs (the CCP) devouring the fresh grass, further ‘harmonizing’ the freedom of the Grass Mud Horse in the (fictional) Ma-la Gobi Desert. While the two videos described differ in style and execution, both employ the common symbols of alpaca and crab, creating narrative mythologies that elevate the Grass Mud Horse to a heroic status.

What is of particular interest is the evolution of the Grass Mud Horse 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 has this symbol in particular pervaded 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. Chinese artist [Qin Ga's Grass Mud Horse](#) (2013) is a sculpture of the mythological creature, mounted on a plinth, reinforcing its iconic status. The silver reflective plinth on which the Grass Mud Horse proudly stands elevates the mythological creature to the status of heroic leader. The work draws on elements and symbolically references [Liu Anping's](#) (1992) video *counter-revolutionary 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). The alpaca's face has been marred with black ink, just as the portrait of Mao Zedong was defaced in Tiananmen which Liu re-enacted in his 1992 video. 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, new symbols of revolution and heroic icons in 21<sup>st</sup> century China.

## Conclusion

Heroic figures give us inspiration; the function and cultivation of the hero and surrounding mythologies reveal essential truths about human existence (Allison and Goethals 2015; Campbell 1949; Lane 1981). Allison and Goethals (2015) support that people identify with the underdog, and we regard them as inspirational when successful in accomplishing what they set out to do on their journey. As a result of Internet censorship in mainland China in 2009, a new movement of visual culture and the creation of new symbols continue their mimetic journey as cultural replicators, illuminating deep truths. The mythological beast has already had seven creative years of infiltrating multi-modal visual grammar and continues to pervade mainland China as a symbol of grassroots aspiration, and mainstream consciousness globally. The buck-toothed alpaca (the underdog) web-savvy and clever, agile, nimbly navigates terrain in mainland China, extending online and offline communication. This signifies a new hero in 21<sup>st</sup> century China, demonstrating shifts in ideology in Chinese visual culture and heroic symbolism.

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<sup>i</sup> The website from which this quote is taken no longer exists. It was censored after the research was recorded. This is documented in Sima and Puglsey (2010, 303).

<sup>ii</sup> From the YouTube video subtitles (accessed 24 April 2016).

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