

# **Grass Mud Horse Style: Popular Resistance, the Politics and Poetics of Internet in Post-socialist Crisis**

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## **Introduction: Grass Mud Horse as Revolting Style and Signifying Practice?**

With the rapid growth of the Internet and the advent of social media boom in contemporary China, the recent years has seen a burgeoning interest in the relation between the internet and social change. A number of studies have explored the technological and socio-economic mechanisms of the internet in the postsocialist globalized condition, whereas more attention has been given to the socio-political functions of such online platforms and dialogues in facilitating political discussion and deliberation and their potentials in advancing political transformation of China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. While it is conducive to recognize and bring to light the rise and explosion of internet in the last two decades as an important political discourse and a central player in social change and identity construction in contemporary China, one of the frequently overlooked and insufficiently addressed aspects is that the internet shall be conceptualized not merely as an instrument to reflect and bring forward social and political change, but also as a multifarious and fluid discourse that lives up to entertainment, consumption, everyday practice, vernacular expression, artistic

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<sup>1</sup> The rise of internet and new media has stirred up heated discussions not only in the business domain but also in diverse fields of political and social practices. Given its fast development and large-scale influence in contemporary China, there is a growing body of work dissecting the attribute, function, and trajectory of Chinese cyberculture. Much of this work has centered on the sociopolitical consequences this new mechanism brings to Chinese society. For a selection of publications on this topic, see Michael Chase and James Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent!: Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies* (Rand, 2002); Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (Routledge, 2006); Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State and Society in China* (Stanford University Press, 2008); Junhua Zhang and Martin Woesler, eds, *China's Digital Dream: The Impact of the Internet on Chinese Society* (Berlin: European University Press, 2004); Johan Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society* (Peter Lang, 2010).

creation, and a discursive style that is both political and poetic.

In this paper, I intend to draw from but move beyond the predominant socio-political reading of the internet and engage the problematics of the internet both from an ideological and aesthetic perspective. As Dick Hebdige defines the meaning of style in subculture:

Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go “against nature,” interrupting the process of “normalization.” As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the “silent majority,” which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus. Our task becomes, like Barthes, to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as “maps of meaning” which obscurely re-present the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal.<sup>2</sup>

Building my discussion on this stepping stone and following Hebdige’s call for “a semiotic approach” to “read significance into the loaded surfaces of life,” my focus is not only on the “ideological character of cultural signs”<sup>3</sup> as Roland Barthes claims but also, as Dick Hebdige proposes, on the formal and aesthetic styles of digital manifestations and configurations. My goal is to decodify the hidden messages and look into the complex ways and the very means how the sociopolitical messages are delivered to the Chinese netizens and a wider audience through this resourceful style of concealing, pun, parody, and spoof. Hence, my focus is on the form and the practice of the style. In other words, to look at China’s socio-cultural change through the lens of internet popular culture, I seek to delineate a multitude of sociopolitical and cultural factors that are intricately woven into the formation and evolution of the new medium, while choosing to concentrate specifically on its discursive audiovisual practice and unique aesthetic experiment. Engaging the different methods and measures of digital production, how and in what ways does internet popular culture take on a new aesthetic form and build into the destruction and reconstruction of

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<sup>2</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 18.

visuallandscape, mediascape, and ideoscape in the new era? How does it enrich and redefine our understanding of cinema, television, newspaper, and other kinds of traditional media? How, then, does this tide of technological revolution and new experiment speak to and bring out a new type of social space and cultural milieu in China? To tackle the questions with a close textual analysis of *Grass Mud Horse*, I adopt a cultural studies, media studies, and aesthetic approach to scrutinize the production, complication, and circulation of *Grass Mud Horse* and interpret it as a cultural practice, a popular and creative expression, and a new audiovisual representation with a distinctive staple of satire and resistance both for sociopolitical and everyday causes in the new century. I argue that *Grass Mud Horse* exemplifies the practice of resistance in the digital age through style. What characterize its stylistic practices are demonstratively its digital content and context, the carnivalesque poetics and politics—to borrow Bakhtin’s famous formula, and what I call “critical profanity” that articulates a novel and alternative mode of cyber representation, subaltern voice, and civic culture in constant tension and negotiation with the mainstream ideologies and aesthetics.

### **Grass Mud Horse, Critical Profanity, and China’s Cyber Imaginary**

In early 2009, an inflammatory posting of “Ten Mythical Creatures” (*shida shenshou*) originating from Baidu Baike—one of the most popular Chinese portal sites equivalent to Wikipedia—was promptly picked up, widely circulated, and massively reproduced among a large scale of self-proclaimed Chinese netizens. Of particular interest is *Grass Mud Horse* (*caonima*), the central character of these ten virtually created imageries. What makes it intriguing and even contentious is its sardonic undertone and homophonous reference alluding to the Chinese vulgar slang

fuck your mom. Intricately and tactfully designed with an effort to protest against the prevalent internet censorship enforced by the Chinese authorities, this cult figure soon rocked the culture and media scenes by its strategic insinuation and simulacrum, its original and audacious play on the Chinese profanity, and its blatantly resistant, defiant, counterhegemonic stance that furthermore fueled a national uproar and public outcry for freedom of speech in the cyberspace as well as the postsocialist, globalized reality.

It is believed that the upsurge of Grass Mud Horse was by and large triggered by the long-standing and aggravated censorship in China. The beginning of 2009 witnessed another wave of tightened internet regulation and censorship in China. Shortly after the release of Charter 08 online, a manifesto drafted by a well-known cultural critic and dissident Liu Xiaobo that calls for democracy and political freedom, the government arrested Liu Xiaobo and sentenced him to eleven years' imprisonment. A campaign "against internet pornography and deviance" was subsequently launched, according to the Chinese state, to "purify the internet sphere" and "build a harmonious society." By mid February, the government had shut down thousands of websites and blogs that contain "large amounts of low and vulgar content that violates social morality and damages the physical and mental health of youth."<sup>4</sup> The top five popular websites, Sina, Sohu, Tencent, Baidu and Netease, were also charged as providing vulgar content at some of their webpages and were forced to issue a public apology. In mainland China, this kind of cleansing campaign is not rare. It has been a common practice that the party-state often steers away from the real political causes and sensitive topics and instead justifies their accusations from another moral and ethical standpoint. It is against this heavily censored environment that a surge of protesting

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Wines, "A Dirty Pun Tweaks China's Online Censors," *The New York Times*, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html?em>>

voice, Grass Mud Horse erupted and bubbled in the cyber-public sphere.

After the original encyclopedia entry appeared online and attracted millions of clicks, numerous follow-up postings and writings poured into and flooded chat rooms, bulletin boards, and blogs instantly and new entries were added to give more complex twists to this cult figure. Most notable is a short video named *Special Program of Animal World: Grass Mud Horse in the Mahler Gobi Desert (Dongwu shijie tebie pian male gebi shang de caonima)*, which was quickly produced and uploaded to some of the major portal sites specializing in mobile movies and internet films (such as YouTube, Youku and Tudou) and fermented a deluge of public discontent and resentment to its climax. Running slightly over six minutes, this unauthored or rather multi-authored work gives a vivid account of a cohort of Grass Mud Horses who used to live in a peaceful, idyllic land but now are threatened and jeopardized by a group of vicious alien invaders River Crab (*He Xie* in Chinese). In a playful manner, the film adopts the format of a famous CCTV programme, *Animal World (Dongwu shijie)*. From its narrative structure to visual representation to sonic design, this short video was meticulously fashioned after *Animal World* yet furnished with new connotations. The opening prelude showcasing a wide array of animals in the real world with fast editing and a touch of dynamic music closely resembles the familiar structure of *Animal World*, whereas the superimposed text “Animal World” with different variations inserted into the frames seems to deliberately re-stress its homage to this household brand name. After the opening title sequence, the film begins with a television anchorman introducing a special kind of animal, “On a piece of bleak and beautiful Mahler Gobi Desert, there lives a group of mighty animal named Grass Mud Horse.” The screen then fades into the wide shots of a desolate desert landscape. From there, the film progresses to show how Grass Mud Horse evolves in the natural

environment and survives through the harsh condition. The first part of the film has incorporated a great number of stock footages of animals and natural landscapes to create a sense of realism and scientific objectivity that is often tied to CCTV's *Animal World*, whereas the male vocal narration in a very low and deep voice recalls that of Zhao Zhongxiang, whose idiosyncratic voice and visual presence have become yet another important hallmark of the program. The second part of the film then shifts from a seemingly scientific illustration of the unique breed to a simulated interview that looks to be set upon the real spot. A female reporter called *Ya Mie Die* walks into the frame and reveals the life of Grass Mud Horse from a first-person point of view. To further testify and supplement her in-person and on-the-spot experience, she invites another reporter to join the conversation and conduct a first-hand interview with the local residents. All of these are obviously modeled after the famous formula of CCTV's *Animal World* in particular.

The first glimpse of this short video gives the audience a Darwinist taste of how Grass Mud Horse, a species of alpaca, is severely endangered yet manages to survive through River Crab, a mob of mythical intruders. However, this is much more than a documentary and a new episode of *Animal World* that sketches out yet another category of animal on the verge of extinction. Heavily relying on the existing audiovisual resources and the cultural contexts that give rise to these forms, the mini-video cuts and pastes segments from an extensive repertoire of documentaries, photography stocks, and colloquialism to create a seemingly acquainted yet distinct context. Grass Mud Horse is a homophonous expression (the same pronunciation with different tones) to a popular Chinese curse word *caonima* (meaning fuck your mom), whereas River Crab, *hexie*, refers deliberately to “harmonization,” a propagandist slogan constructed by the Chinese party-state to deal with social conflicts and crises

in the new era. Besides the two protagonists, other characters including the television anchor, reporters, and interviewees are all associated with the neologies of the internet; hence, cultural signifiers that, when invented in the cyberspace, are inscribed with symbolic meanings and a sense of humor and irony. For instance, the two female reporters who appear in the short film named *yamiedie* and *weishenjin* derive their names from two of the ten mythical creatures: “Small Elegant Butterfly” (a hint of the Japanese word “stop” commonly seen in pornography) and “Stretch-Tailed Whale” (which is homophonous with sanitary napkin in Mandarin). The male anchor of the program carrying the name of *chunge* in reference to another mythical creature “Quail Pigeon,” is a pun to Brother Chun that alludes to a popular term often associated with Li Yuchun, a young singer who has won a nationwide singing competition Super Girl in 2005 but quickly became a polemic target due to her androgynous outlook and ambiguous sexuality. More telling is the uncanny ways how this fictional effeminate anchor mimics Zhao Zhongxiang, the well-known host of *Animal World*, in every detail from his appearance to body gesture to intonation, which serves as a caricature of this once iconic figure in Chinese television whose reputation and professional career took an unexpectedly drastic downturn when he was allegedly involved in a big piece of sex scandal in 2004<sup>5</sup>. The caption on the upper left corner of the screen “RPTV 囧” furthermore reveals the very nature and key concept of this documentary: namely, a farcical and burlesque imitation, or *E’gao* in Chinese. According to Ruoyun Bai in her in-depth study on this new practice of *E’gao* (“messing with the originals

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<sup>5</sup> For decades, Chinese viewers and audiences have been very familiar with Zhao Zhongxiang and his signature broadcasting style. He joined CCTV and became one of the founding members since the late 1950s. His reputation grows as this principal Chinese broadcaster evolves and expands throughout the years. However, his well established image and credibility severely crashed when Rao Ying, a former medical staff at CCTV, went online and unraveled her long hidden extramarital affair with Zhao and his immoral and abnormal sexual activities through her personal blog. For more details, see Ruoyun Bai, “Disrobing CCTV: Scandals, *E’gao*, and Resistance in China’s Cyberspace,” in *Three Asias: Japan, S. Korea, China*, eds. Takayuki Tatsumi, Jina Kim and Zhang Zhen, *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 22 (2010): 249-69.

with a mischievous intention”), it exemplifies a new mode of internet-mediated activity that is at once entertaining and political participatory from the grassroots level.<sup>6</sup> RP (an acronym for *Ren Pin*) and 囧 (pronounced as *Jiong*) are the two newly coined internet phrases, closely tied to and crystallizing a feel and sensibility of parody and *E’gao*.

While Grass Mud Horse presents a new digital form of popular culture practice, a convoluted form of social critique, and a collective action of defiance, this distinct formation thrives in a digital condition and is predicated upon a postmodern aesthetic of parody, a unique tongue-in-cheek humor, or rather what I call a discourse of “critical profanity.” Many characters and names in the film from *Cao Ni Ma*, *Ma Le Ge Bi* (Mahler Gobi Desert), *Cao Ni Zu* (Grass Mud Tribe), *Cao Ni Xiao Huo* (Young Man of the Grass Mud Tribe), *Cao Ni Da Ye* (Old Man of the Grass Mud Tribe), *Wo Cao* (Fertile Grass which is the only thing Grass Mud Horse can eat), *Wo Cao Ni Ma* and *Kuang Cao Ni Ma* (two subcategories of Grass Mud Horse) all have a double meaning and are insinuations of the Chinese curse word “fuck your mom” and its diverse variations. The creative, erratic employment of obscene phrases with a markedly defiant posture and iconoclastic spirit therefore strike a raw nerve in Chinese officials and stage a direct resistance against censorship and some other coercive measures imposed by the state.

Guobin Yang, in his book-length study of Chinese society and online activism, outlines several important genres of “digital contention” that he conceives make up the broader landscape of China’s new citizen activism with an endeavor to promote democracy and civil rights. Speech is identified as one of the most popular genres that

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<sup>6</sup> See Ruoyun Bai, “Disrobing CCTV: Scandals, *E’gao*, and Resistance in China’s Cyberspace,” in *Three Asias: Japan, S. Korea, China*, eds. Takayuki Tatsumi, Jina Kim and Zhang Zhen, *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 22 (2010): 249-69.



conjoins this bustling online traffic. What sets it apart from other types of contentious rituals nevertheless is not only the traditional sources it greatly draws upon that “have been preserved, revived, adapted, or digitized in online activism” but more importantly the “parodic-travesty” form, to borrow Bakhtin’s famous formula. Yang continues to argue that the various forms of parody, irony, and satire with a humorous and critical edge become a new trend in Chinese cyberspace and “merge into a broader current of a playful internet culture.” While Yang’s serious inquiries into the playful style of digital contention is quite informative, his concentration has been primarily placed on language and text-based practices such as slippery jingles, doggerels, and blogs. To him, these various forms of online activities embody and affirm what Bakhtin have called “a condition of heteroglossia.” However, a discussion of “heteroglossia” or “polyphony”, I argue, would not be complete without an in-depth exploration of a multidimensional visual and aural practice, a new expressive form that prevails in Chinese virtual space as well as real life in recent years. In his book, Yang quickly glanced over a flash film *A Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun* made by Hu Ge, an ordinary young man as well as an internet fancier who invokes the new audiovisual means to mock and ridicule the eminent filmmaker Chen Kaige’s blockbuster *The Promise*. For Yang, it “exemplifies a particular kind of cultural contention in Chinese cyberspace—challenges by ‘little people’ against cultural power and authority.”<sup>7</sup> The same logic can be found in *Grass Mud Horse* that engages and extends a similar internet language to talk back to the authoritarian regime and cultural authorities in a disparaging manner.

Evidently, the increasingly expanding internet domain and online activities have become and are still likely to be the dominant theme in the years to come. As opposed

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<sup>7</sup> For further discussions, see Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009): 76-82.

to the traditional avenues, the pervasive cyberculture has become a new and primary channel for media production and distribution and played an increasingly important role in shaping people's everyday life and opening up an alternative public space—a grassroots-based, more interactive, and comparatively independent avenue—that offers views different from mainstream policies, perspectives, and ideologies. While the internet has surely become a rather effective tool of mass communications and mobilization in the new millennium, what I want to stress is not only the unique ways how the internet has affected and reformed the life of ordinary Chinese citizens but also the completely new experience and aesthetic style the digital revolution has brought to Chinese screen and popular culture. Here, an observation from Howard Rheingold who declaims that the internet enables “people to act together in new ways and in new situations where collective action was not possible before” by creating “smart mobs” or “associations of amateurs”<sup>8</sup> is quite illuminating. This idea of “smart mob” finds its discursive resonance in Jing Wang's theoretical framing of contemporary Chinese youth culture and his proposition of “neo-tribalism” as the key and defining discourse in the networked, urban China. In the case of Grass Mud Horse, what is important therefore is not only how this virtual image or neology was ingeniously created and materialized but moreover how it was responded and reproduced by “smart mobs” or a tribe of like-minded netizens to reinvigorate and give new life to this particular form of online contention and artistic expression.

Soon after the quasi-documentary *Special Program of Animal World: Grass Mud Horse in the Mahler Gobi Desert* broke out, numerous remakes, reproductions, and spin-offs were spawned and inundated the online space at unprecedented speed. One of the most widely circulated remakes is a music video called “Song of Grass Mud

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<sup>8</sup> Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Perseus, 2003).

Horse” (*Caonima zhi ge*):

There is a herd of Grass Mud Horses  
In the wild and beautiful Mahler Gobi Desert  
They are lively and intelligent  
They are fun-loving and nimble  
They live freely in the Mahler Gobi Desert  
They are courageous, tenacious, and overcome the difficult environment  
Oh lying down Grass Mud Horse  
Oh running wild Grass Mud Horse  
They defeated river crabs in order to protect their grass land  
River crabs forever disappeared from Mahler Gobi Desert<sup>9</sup>

A postmodern collage in the form of children’s chorus, “Grass Mud Horse” not only conjures up the images from the original work but also borrows inventively from external resources (e.g., the famous music track of *The Smurfs*, an imported animation series that enjoyed a huge success in the 1980s China) in the creation of a new sonic and visual artwork. Unlike the abrupt, somber ending of the original film in which the interview is brutally cut off due to some unknown reasons—a signifier of the government oppression and ubiquitous surveillance system in China apparently, “Song of Grass Mud Horse” presents a lighthearted, inspiring story in which Grass Mud Horse strives to defeat the invasion of River Crab and protect their homeland. The different ways of representation nevertheless subtly echo the general tone and storyline of *The Smurfs*, one of the major sources of inspiration for “Song of Grass Mud Horse.” Many other short videos were spontaneously produced and quickly mushroomed around this peculiar theme of Grass Mud Horse. Among them are a flash video that rewrites the tale by incorporating and integrating the modern rhythm of hip hop and the indigenous Uyghur folk music from Northwest China, a funny cartoon scoffing at River Crab (namely the official agenda of Harmonization) that was ironically set to the familiar tune of Chinese national anthem but with new lyrics, and a music video entitled “Love of Grass Mud Horse” that makes further teasing remarks

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<sup>9</sup> This song can be accessed on a number of websites, for example, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAJ4>>

on River Crab and some other related social issues.

To many audiences and cultural critics alike, this group of work embodies a kind of collective symbolic action fueled and facilitated by the new technology of internet. It is essentially a sarcastic critique on diverse social phenomenon, ranging from internet censorship, the right of free expression, intellectual property right, to the order of Harmonious Society propagated by the Chinese government when facing a severe challenge of social unrest, political disillusionment, and ideological crisis in the new century. Grass Mud Horse presents—instead of covering up—these conflicts and finds a playful and satirical way to transgress and subvert these linguistic, social norms. The voice and image were frequently borrowed and refabricated not only to inspire hundreds of copies reloaded with vernaculars and local interpretations but also to foster a broader metaphor of “Ten Mythical Creatures” (*Shi Da Shenshou*)<sup>10</sup> that further comments and pokes fun at a wider-ranging social phenomenon by its clever use of euphemism and intertextual references. To be sure, Grass Mud Horse is a cultural symptom that is set off against the subculture paradigm on the one hand. On the other hand, the critical edge and rebellious gesture have been turned into a new vogue, a cultural commodity that can generate exuberant profits in the market-oriented, postsocialist China. As Grass Mud Horse became the top buzzword and trendsetter in Chinese virtual space as well as everyday life since 2009, a marketing craze burst out and a variety of merchandise ranging from toys to T-shirts to everyday goods were churned out to ride on this frantic Grass Mud Horse fetish.

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<sup>10</sup> Besides “Grass Mud Horse” (*Caonima*), “Small Elegant Butterfly” (*Yamiedie*), “Quail Pigeon” (*Chunge*), and “Stretch-Tailed Whale” (*Weishenjin*) as mentioned in the previous text, the other mythical creatures are: “French-Croatian Squid” (*Fakeyou*, a Chinese transliteration of “fuck you” in English), “Chrysanthemum Silkworm” (*Jiuhuacan*, a vulgar slang referring to anal sex), “Lucky Journey Cat” (*Jibamao*, homophonous with hair around penis); “Singing Field Goose” (*Yindaoyan*, homophonous with viginitis), “Intelligent Fragrant Chicken” (*Dafeiji*, referring to a slang for masturbation), “Hidden Fiery Crab” (*Qianliexie*, a phonetic resemblance with prostatitis). While usually referring to some sort of creature in writing, all these terms when spoken either allude to a profane phrase or a social phenomenon that Chinese netizens attempt to criticize in a euphemistic and playful manner.

The seemingly low-brow, kitschy, and transient cultural practice has continuously enjoyed immense popularity and attracted serious attentions even up to date. A search in Google with the key words *caonima* would still yield over 4,380,000 results in Chinese and approximately 1,090,000 results in English now.

### **Ai Weiwei, Intellectual Thought, and the Art of Grass Mud Horse**

The wide-ranging and long-lasting icon of “Grass Mud Horse” has been turned into a symbol of resistance and an alternative outlet for Chinese citizens to protest and express their discontent against government policies and a set of hegemonic discourses. People from different backgrounds joined this online protest campaign. Cui Weiping, a cultural critic and professor at Beijing Film Academy published a rather outspoken article titled “I am a Grass Mud Horse” in her own blog, blasting the state’s monopoly on information while celebrating the arrival of the “Grass Mud Horse” era. She wrote:

I am thrilled and really want to applaud for the wisdom of euphemism and people who created Grass Mud Horse. The underlying tone is: I know you don’t allow me to speak certain things. See, I’m completely cooperative, right? ...Therefore, what I say is Grass Mud Horse, not XXX. What is Grass Mud Horse? It is a type of animal who survives through the harsh condition. Look, it comes from the vast and desolate desert. I like it and I love it. This is something too distant that is beyond your control. Moreover, why are you always keeping an eye on me? Am I really good? I am innocent and not controlled by the bad guy. I am not vulgar too. What do you care? I am singing a cute children’s song—I am a grass-mud horse! Even though it is heard by the entire world, you can’t say I break the law.<sup>11</sup>

To Chinese intellectuals and social activists, Grass Mud Horse is valorized as a revolutionary force that would facilitate political change and promote democratic development in China. Another popular posting and critique that has greatly offended and irritated the state is Ai Weiwei’s performative work “Grass Mud Horse Covering

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<sup>11</sup> Cui Weiping, “I am a Grass Mud Horse,” <<http://www.hecaitou.net/?p=4723>>

the Middle.” The photography exemplifies and extends Ai Weiwei’s minimalist and provocative style. In this very revealing self-portrait, Ai Weiwei captures himself posing against the blank wall, almost being fully naked with only a stuffed Grass Mud Horse toy to conceal his genitals. The Chinese title that suggests the literal meaning of the photography “Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle” is however tactfully sarcastic, especially for many Chinese netizens who are more or less acquainted with the popular imagery and context of Grass Mud Horse. It can be read and interpreted as “Fuck Your Mother, the Communist Party Central Committee.” This furious, open charge against the Chinese officials quickly spread through his personal blog and twitter posting, which is believed to be one of the substantial reasons leading to Ai’s arrest on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011.<sup>12</sup>

Named as “China’s most famous rebel artist” by *New York Times* and “the most powerful figure in the global art world” by *ArtReview*, Ai Weiwei with his visually striking and politically sensitive artworks has drawn a lot of attentions and media coverage around the world. He is a visual artist, a documentary filmmaker, as well as a social activist and dissident that avidly promotes human rights and democracy in China. He is a prolific artist who produced dozens of works including Beijing National Stadium, the installation of Sunflower Seeds, the Sichuan Earthquake project, and more than twenty documentaries. But what makes him really stand out is his perceptive use of internet as an important tool to promote his artistic and political agendas and his full awareness of the power of the internet and the image. In his

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<sup>12</sup> Ai was taken by police from the Beijing airport as he was preparing to board a flight to Hong Kong on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 without any legal justification. It was not until a few weeks later that the authorities specified the charge on him for evading taxes and destroying financial documents. Ai’s disappearance was immediately brought to the spotlight of media reports and his supporters believe that “the tax inquiry was a pretext to silence one of the most vocal critics of the Chinese Communist Party.” He was released on June 22<sup>nd</sup> after a three-month incarceration. Highly hailed as a pathbreaking milestone, Ai’s release was regarded by myriad international media and pro-democratic groups as the victory of the Chinese mass over the authoritarian regime. See Edward Wong, “Dissident Chinese Artist is Released,” *The New York Times*, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/23/world/asia/23artist.html>>

artistic experiments and political protest, the internet has played a pivotal role in reaching a wider audience, disseminating message, forging a dialogic and democratic platform, and advancing the cause of what he declares “direct confrontation and enlightenment”<sup>13</sup>. Ai has been an enthusiastic photographer and documentarist with a keen interest in capturing and exposing the human right conditions in China. He made about twenty videos and continuously posted them on the YouTube and Twitter for free access and public viewing. Varying from one-and-a-half minutes to three-hours-and-forty-minutes long, these documentaries all seem to revolve around a common theme of human rights. Very different from the mainstream television documentary’s objective, detached approach, Ai takes the audience along with his investigation, delving into the private stories and seeking the truth, something that is so personal and sometimes violent, prurient that can be rarely reached at other channels. Long takes, mobile camera, natural lighting, raw footage with little editing all contribute to a cinema verite quality and resemble many other amateurish videos that are circulated online, whereas Ai’s sympathetic observation and voiceover add a humanist touch to his films. For most of the videos, Ai is both the filmmaker and part of narrative and sometimes even the protagonist. In many ways, this fits into a burgeoning craze of digital video production and corresponds to the internet boom of the new century. Targeting the internet as his primary screening space and the youth-based, educated, progressive netizens as the main audience, Ai’s home videos ally—instead of alienate—his spectators by his empathic and engaged view and, most of all, the easy accessibility of his work.

Before he produced “Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle” in 2011, he made a short video *Grass Mud Horse, Motherland* in 2009, another piece that acutely

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<sup>13</sup> *Ai Weiwei: Fairytale* (Documentary DVD), JRP|Ringier publisher, 2011.

employs the rhetoric and symbolism of Grass Mud Horse after he was beaten by the local police during his investigation of Sichuan Earthquake student casualties and he suffered severe headaches and had to go through a brain surgery in Munich. The film is only about one-and-a-half minutes long, starting with a close-up of the Chinese characters “Grass Mud Horse, Motherland” written on the whiteboard. The film is completely comprised by a sample of eight people from different race, color, gender, and nationality standing against the universal setting of “Grass Mud Horse, Mother” and repeating the same curse “Fuck Your Mother, Motherland” (that shares the similar pronunciation to “Grass Mud Horse, Motherland”) with different languages and inflections. Attempted as a “special” greeting to the sixty-year anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Ai’s outrageous film stirred up the entire country and received numerous responses and criticism across the world. Also related is his other move to organize a feast of River Crab as a protest against the government order to demolish his newly built Shanghai studio. In the same manner, Ai uses the internet to communicate with, draw support from, and establish a network among people who share the similar discontent sentiment. Ai announced and posted his invitation on his Twitter account that immediately draw millions of clicks and replies with only a couple of days. It also caught the government’s attention and Ai was then placed in a home custody by force. Despite his absence, the party took place as planned. A film was shot to record his supporters feasting on River Crab (a pun intended to flout the government censorship) and soon posted online. His most recent work is a short video of “Grass Mud Horse Style.” Capitalizing on the popularity of Gangnam Style, the music video features him and a tribe of his people hilariously dancing to the beat of Gangnam Style yet silenced in handcuffs, which poignantly alludes to his 81 days arrest by the Chinese officials in 2011 and his current bail



conditions despite the release. Like his other works, this video became the target of the Chinese state and was censored again in China.

From *Special Program of Animal World: Grass Mud Horse in the Mahler Gobi Desert* to “Ten Mythical Creatures,” from “Song of Grass Mud Horse” to Ai Weiwei’s “Grass Mud Horse Style,” this constellation of Grass Mud Horse works embodies a kind of collective symbolic action empowered, enabled, and facilitated by the new technology of internet. What marks this sociopolitical and cultural practice is euphemism, sarcastic style, and its appropriation of the official and popular genres, texts, and discourses to talk back and revolt against conventions and establishments, or the so-called an act of bricolage, to borrow Hebdige’s concept, through which popular resistance and subculture styles are constructed. At the core of Grass Mud Horse lies a new concept of “critical profanity” or “politicized pornography,” which is socio-politically provocative and evocative but not erotic; vernacular, kitschy, campy, and amusingly subversive but not vulgar.

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