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Reimagining Clicktivism: The Innovative Chinese Meme Culture

Although social media in this digital age has been able to connect people and ideas across the globe, many critique these platforms as ineffective clicktivism. Both Micah White from *The Guardian* and Malcom Gladwell from *The New Yorker* support these claims through anecdotes and analysis. But these scholars and intellectuals often frame their viewpoints of online activism through a western lens, as shown via Gladwell and White. With these critiques in mind, opposing ideas surrounding clicktivism should therefore be decentered and reevaluated through a more global context. Basing their claims on solely American examples, Gladwell and White overlook the entire global community as they make generalizing claims about social media. While the internet is often seen as a vehicle for recreation or even lazy clicktivism in America, highly censored Chinese activists show that social media can go beyond such notions and instill activism and change via their innovative use of memes as a vehicle for political engagement.

While the current American administration has reintroduced the fears of governmental censorship, with Trump's close watch on free speech, no country has implemented a filtering system of such capacity as China (Pasha-Robinson). In comparison, the Chinese government has kept tight reins on the media that circulates through its country for many years, starting in 1996, as a means to control the public and for political reasoning (Qiu 4). With the growth of more democratic digital networks within the Chinese borders, the authoritarian regime is forced to

take their governmental policing into the web. The Chinese government aims to create a “favourable online opinion environment for the building of a harmonious society”, therefore leading them to create one of the most sophisticated filtering systems in the world to ensure the erasure of any dissenting opinions (MacKinnon). While the close monitoring of the Chinese internet is largely internal, this surveillance system at play is commonly called, “The Great Firewall”, referring to the filtering programs that block all harmful sites that are hosted overseas. Those found guilty of posting politically sensitive material often face disciplinary actions, varying from deletion of posts to actual arrest (Meng 38). These potential consequences then force many users to self-regulate. But many users still find ways around this firewall as a means to contribute to social progress, as activists supporting Chen Guangcheng have demonstrated.

Despite the American-centered framing around the internet, the west does not have a complete monopoly on internet memes, as every country has their own unique collection of memes, including China. And some memes have an added function in China’s heavily censored Internet: vehicle for political critique” as demonstrated by the #FreeCGC sticker campaign (Bright). This particular meme took the Chinese social media site, Sina Weibo, by storm. Activists and supporters were rallying behind Chen Guangcheng, a blind, human rights lawyer, who was placed under house arrest in 2006 as a result of a lawsuit against governmental family-planning practices and later received a four-year sentence as a result of one of his organized protests, ending in house arrest for up to a year. While Chen Guangcheng’s arrests occurred while the internet was at its early stages, once news about his arrests spread, activists started to campaign on internet sites, especially the microblogging platform called Sina Weibo. As a result, the government began to strengthen their digital censorship surrounding the case. According to a 2012 study on censored phrases on Sina Weibo, the words “光诚 (Guangcheng)” and “陈光诚

(Chen Guangcheng)” were in the top three most censored words on this platform at the time, with other terms that referred to the case following (Fu, Chan, Chau 46).

Due to the increased patrolling of the internet, activists were quick to find solutions to sidestep censorship. With the government slowly censoring hashtags such as #FreeCGC, activists reimagined the phrase as an image of the Colonel from Kentucky Fried Chicken wearing glasses as a homage to Chen Guangcheng (See Appendix). The image eventually grew in popularity and transformed into shirts, posters and stickers that activists placed on cars and motorcycles that moved an originally virtual campaign into the real world (Koetse). With these articles circulating around the web and in the streets, activists inspired by the movement organized a sunglass-wearing flash mob.

The act of undermining such a touted filtering system is not simply a form of lazy clicktivism, but is in itself a bold form of digital activism, especially in a highly censored country such as China. Turkish writer, Zeynep Tufekci, claims that such posts are no small feat and are in fact “perhaps [the internet’s] greatest contribution to social movements” (Tufekci 2014). This particular case study demonstrates the political importance of online activism as well as repurposing the internet as a disguise for social progress in China. An Xiao Mina supports this idea in arguing that these memes reflect a crucial change that broadens different forms of dissent through the creative dialect of social media (Mina 368). The reconfiguring of the iconic KFC colonel to resemble Chen Guangcheng is the particular disguise or creative dialect that the #FreeCGC campaign has adopted. In fact, Guobin Yang and Jiang describe these “everyday practices of playful resistance” as a “tactical” form of resistance and expression against the government. They then explain that China’s strict eye on the internet is actually what fuels activists to deploy humor and the internet as a way to speak against their authoritarian

government (225). Similar to the metaphor, “forbidden fruit tastes so much sweeter”, many users enjoy subverting the system in spite of governmental rules, especially when the forbidden fruit they eventually obtain stands for social change. Koetse explains that for these creators, their use “was not innovative because of governmental change, they are innovative in spite of it”, which was also seen as their way to make the internet a freer environment for all (Koetse). For example, Chen’s detainment was intended to instill fear in activists and force Chinese citizens to forget about Chen and his cause all together, but activists refused to submit to the state’s objectives. Instead they decided to do the opposite by making Chen’s name and cause heard across the country via Sina Weibo. But why is this new form of social media politically relevant in China? In essence, by using the internet as a medium for social change, activists transform governmental methods of propaganda against themselves (Mina 368). This transformation then breaks the dichotomy between author and reader, shifting the power balance that had traditionally skewed to favor the Chinese government. As opposed to western-centered ideas that disregard social media as a medium for inefficient clicktivism, Chinese activists have proven how their work on sites such as Sina Weibo has rearranged the power balance between the state and its citizens while also fighting for social causes.

The shift of power via social media sites opens up the concept of participatory culture to the Chinese people. In his piece, *By Any Media Necessary*, Jenkins explains the idea of participatory culture as political change that is promoted through social tools as opposed to political institutions. In this culture, citizens view themselves as competent enough to express their social concerns via producing and disseminating media, as opposed to merely being mass consumers. While Jenkins applies the participatory culture framework to youth, the same ideas have also broken geographical barriers and have entered China. Expanding on the concept of

participatory culture, Castells claims that “change is being forged through social and political networks that come together online and in physical space to explore new possibilities” (Castells 10). These possibilities are the alternatives to the current ideologies and rhetoric that are forced upon society. In the case of Chen Guangcheng, many users of Sina Weibo were not only consumers of the activist messages, but contributors to the cause in the way they shared these messages both online and in the real world via the #FreeCGC stickers, posters and shirts. Not only did the campaign produce a collective voice of the people online, the subsequent flash mobs also marked a shift towards a more participatory culture in the real world as well. Simply in the act of believing that their contribution is making a difference users are subverting the ideology that the only voices that matter are those of the state and that the people do not have a say in how their country should be run. While this form of civic engagement has been able to bring light to specific political injustices, such as the case of Chen Guangcheng, the emergence of the participatory culture in China also serves a larger purpose in reimagining the strict power imbalance that has forced citizens into silence and oppression for years.

With the emergence of participatory culture also comes a motion towards lower barriers to political expression and engagement, which can be viewed as a slight nod towards a democratic state. On a micro level, activists, such as those behind Chen Guangcheng, are fighting for social causes, but on a more macro level these supporters of participatory politics are making strides to create a more democratic state by opening up social media for all of the unheard Chinese voices. By showing how online civic engagement can successfully make silenced voices heard, activists are instilling the belief in the public that their voices matter and are capable of establishing change. In a 2015 study, Yang and Jiang analyzed five types of online political satire and found that political satire has the ability to create more subtle patterns

and conditions of change (Yang and Jiang 229, 2015). While this concept does not appear to be ground-breaking news, the accumulation of these subtle patterns of change can ultimately contribute to a democratic Chinese government. In their piece, “Why China Will Democratize”, Yu Liu and Dingding Chen use the Chen Guangcheng case as evidence that represents a more independent Chinese society that is increasingly challenging the political regime’s rule. With the number of “collective actions”, mainly via the internet, jumping from 8,700 in 1993 to 90,000 in 2006, Liu and Chen used this information to show how the internet’s fairly open access is one significant factor that is contributing to China’s democratization (*Bloomberg Businessweek*). In fact, on Sina Weibo, one study claims that of the most visited websites in China, six were politically oriented and five were pro-liberal (Liu, Chen 49). With this shift of how people use the internet, Chinese activists can actually craft ways to make a difference in their country and inspire others to do the same, paving the way for a more democratic society.

American citizens already have the freedom to voice their opinions on social media, with some exceptions, but more oppressed countries such as China do not share this privilege. In using creative methods of digital platforms to fight for social causes, Chinese activists are taking steps for political change that American citizens never had to consider because of the country’s democratic nature. And as a result, debunking claims that social media is not a useful tool for activism. With much writing and research about the digital space being centered around the western world, it is important to expand such ideas in a non-American context in order to question its validity. With the case of Chen Guangcheng, Sina Weibo activists have proven the power of social media as an effective tool for social change despite western critiques of this particular medium as encouraging slacktivism. While the Chinese activists behind Chen Guangcheng are only one group of activists who have proven western scholars wrong, there still

are hundreds of papers, articles and books that must be called into question for its solely western point of view and framing. Before making such general claims, scholars must move beyond their western mindset and familiarize themselves as global citizens.

Appendix



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