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A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

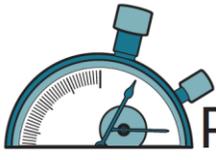
Affective Rhetoric in China's Internet Culture

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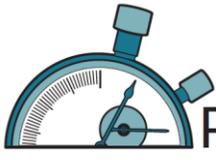
China's Internet culture is subject to strict monitoring and censorship but finds opportunities for expression in the circulation of signs, images, sounds, and silences that generate an affective energy in excess of their symbolic or referential meanings (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 5-16, 44-49, 125-29). As an affective rhetoric, this circulation of signs and images serves not so much to persuade as to promote solidarity and mutual support among people who have suffered their government's long history of oppression. Affective rhetoric is grounded in theories of affect that recognize the bodily, visceral response to signs and images that preserves but exceeds their symbolic or referential value (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 44-49; Chaput 13-18; Hillis 78-80). In Internet culture, this affective rhetoric can entrap people in communities of their own making (Dean 91-93). In China's Internet culture, it also promotes feelings of community and solidarity, resistance and opposition, expressed in covert codes and metaphors, memes, videos, cartoons, and silences (Abad-Santos; Blagdon; Qiang; Robertson; Wines; Yang 44-63; Zhai), particularly evident in the marking of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre (Jacobs; Lim, "Dangerous Memories" and *People's Republic* 105-32; MacLeod).

Affective Rhetoric: Unity and Division

Like traditional rhetoric, affective rhetoric both unifies and divides (Burke, *Rhetoric* 19-23, 43-46).

According to Kenneth Burke, rhetoric is "*the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*" (43). Rhetoric induces cooperation to effect an identification between speakers and audiences and among members of organizations and social groups. It therefore also both unifies individuals and groups and divides them from one another. It is a "simultaneous identification-with and division-from" (46). Affective rhetoric encompasses both the symbolic *and* affective means by which people are united with and divided from one another.

Theories of affect are complex and range from bodily to non-bodily and from textual to non-textual (Paasonen et al. 3-8). Brian Massumi explains affect as a bodily intensity that precedes and resists codification and textual representation and therefore requires that we "rethink body, subjectivity, and social change in terms of movement, affect, force, and violence—before code, text, and signification" (66). Others, however, find affective energy in the circulation of texts and images but always in excess of their symbolic or referential meanings. Julia Kristeva maintains that the semiotic emerges within the symbolic, the affective within the linguistic and especially within semi-linguistic expressions such as rhythms, intonations, musical or nonsense effects, fractured syntax, and even silences (*Desire* 130-40; *Tales* 297-317). Sara Ahmed and Catherine Chaput observe, moreover, that affect is



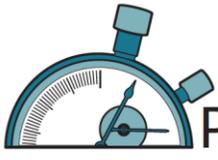
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intensified via the circulation of signs and images (Ahmed 44-49; Chaput 13-18). Ahmed maintains that “affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value)” (45). Chaput finds a similar affective value in the circulation of images, such as the Confederate flag, which conveys both White Southern patriotism and pride *and* Black oppression in excess of its referential meaning (14-15). Ken Hillis calls this affective dimension of signs and images its “indexical” or “more than” quality, that is, “the direct, visceral connection” between the sign or image and its interpreter that exceeds its referential value (78-79).

As Chaput’s example of the Confederate flag suggests, an affective rhetoric can both unify and divide. In Internet culture, Jodi Dean argues, signs and images posted to Facebook, Twitter, and other social-media services can provide opportunities for participation but are not only “networks of computers, protocols, and fiber-optic cables” but also “affective networks capturing people” (93). In China’s Internet culture, these affective networks serve to bind people in communities of solidarity with each other and against their government. Thus they both unify and divide. These networks are, however, increasingly threatened by the government and its sophisticated censorship apparatus. They are sustained, in part, by the nature of the Chinese language, which is particularly susceptible to puns. As Tania Branigan reports, however, the government has cracked down on “the irregular and inaccurate use of the Chinese language, especially the misuse of idioms,” ostensibly in an attempt to maintain the cultural heritage of the language but more likely in an attempt to curtail the use of puns to evade censorship. And Simon Denyer observes that the Chinese government may actually be winning the battle.

Covert Protest: Codes and Metaphors

Notwithstanding these continuing threats, China’s Internet culture thrives on the affective energy that preserves but exceeds referential meaning. The Tiananmen Square Massacre of June 4, 1989, cast a dark shadow over the pro-democracy protest movement that had been gaining strength in China since the Democracy Wall protests in Beijing in 1978-79 (Yang 25-43). Tiananmen Square dashed the aspirations of the protestors and dampened their proclamations of hope and promise for a better future. But the emergence of the Internet in China in the 1990s offered new opportunities and invited new forms of protest, no longer grand aspirations openly expressed but scorn and ridicule expressed in more covert forms. Due to the government’s vigorous censorship efforts, these protests are veiled in a variety of incongruous signs and images, including codes and metaphors, memes, videos, cartoons, and many more, not necessarily distinct from each other and not necessarily confined or restricted to online forums (Robertson; Yang 44-63; Zhai). These signs and images convey minimal referential meaning but generate affective energy as a result of their “indexical” or “more than” quality and their direct bodily and visceral connection to their readers and viewers (Hillis 78-79). Codes such as simple insertions or substitutions of textual elements and incongruous visual metaphors permit covert reference to the names of people, places, or events. For example, a simple insertion was designed to evade censorship of online discussions of the murder of a Beijing University student in 2000 (Yang 57-58, 61). When posts containing the characters for Beijing University (*Beida*) were blocked, students—sometimes wanting nothing more than to express their grief—inserted punctuation or symbols between characters, thus: *Bei.Da* or *Bei2Da*. A simple substitution was devised by Kai-Fu Lee, former President of Google



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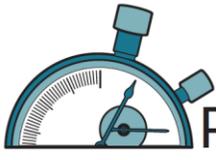
China, to avoid direct reference to *Southern Weekend*, or *Southern Weekly*, an outspoken and oft-censored newspaper (Zhai). Kai-Fu Lee promised to talk only about East, West, and North and Monday through Friday, an obvious substitution for South and weekend, and he also posted a photo showing a bottle of black tea and a tea set, a suggestion that he was invited to tea, a common reference to a warning from authorities. Metaphors such as strikingly incongruous visual images can represent well-known political figures on the basis of a character common to both names (Robertson). Thus a silly image of Teletubbies (from a BBC children's television series), for example, was readily recognizable as an allusion to then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

Solidarity and Resistance: Popular Memes

Other signs and images similarly convey minimal referential meaning but generate affective energy and accumulate "affective value" as a result of their widespread circulation (Ahmed 45). These signs and images are powerfully affective means of binding people together within and beyond China and as such are both divisive and unifying: divisive in opposition to government censorship and oppression, unifying in alliance and sympathy with this opposition. Memes are especially powerful as they circulate rapidly and widely and invite participation in many forms, both on- and offline. One of the most popular memes—a protest against government censorship efforts—is particularly (and deliberately) obscene and offensive. As Kristeva observes, however, even obscenity can be powerfully affective since it typically has no direct symbolic or referential meaning (*Desire* 142-43). Children's counting rhymes (the "obscene folklore of children"), she adds, similarly lack objective referents and so also have a primarily affective rather than symbolic quality (143). The popular protest meme widely

known as the Grass-Mud Horse is both obscene and childlike (Qiang; Wines). The meme originated with the video "Song of the Grass-Mud Horse," which shows mythical alpaca-like creatures singing what sounds like a cheerful Muppets or Teletubbies song for children but is extremely crude and vulgar (in Chinese, though the characters differ, the pronunciation of *grass-mud horse* sounds like a particularly vile obscenity) (Qiang). The video circulated rapidly online and then spilled over into the broader culture as it morphed from videos to cartoons to drawings and then to several popular lines of merchandise, including Grass-Mud Horse alpaca-like dolls, coffee mugs, T-shirts, hats, mittens, smartphone cases, mousepads, and much more. As these imitations circulate via the Internet and then into the broader culture, they accumulate affective value and provide a means of displaying solidarity and sympathy among people who oppose government censorship and celebrate freedom of expression.

Another popular meme is a protest against the most devastating act of government oppression in recent Chinese history. This popular meme is based on a photo taken at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989: the now iconic image of a man standing in front of a row of tanks as they were rolling into the Square (Abad-Santos; Blagdon). Like the Grass-Mud Horse, the Tank Man meme has become increasingly less representational and more affective in the course of its wide circulation. The Tank Man memes replace the original row of tanks with images such as a row of large, bright yellow rubber ducks, a Lego man in front of a row of Lego tanks, or a cow in front of a line of bulldozers (Abad-Santos; Blagdon). But the memes do not entirely displace or replace their referential meanings: one meme, for example, removes both the man and the tanks and shows only the empty street, but the scene is so widely



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known and revered that no one can fail to recognize the missing but obvious reference.

Oppression and Opposition: Government Silence and Mothers' Voices

Even silence, visually represented in signs and images, can generate an affective energy. At the time of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the Chinese government enforced a pervasive silence (Jacobs; MacLeod). But the silence surrounding the anniversary events affected both sides—the result of “a circulation process that functions independent of rational deliberation” (Chaput 15). If the government sought to create “affective networks capturing people” (Dean 93), then they succeeded, not because they unified the Chinese people but because they effected a division between themselves and those they sought to silence, not least, the mothers who had lost family members at Tiananmen Square. At the time of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary, the silence was enforced by strong police and security patrols around the Square and by strict Internet censorship, including censorship of any words or sounds that might appear as veiled references to the massacre, for example, “Tiananmen,” “Wang Weilin” (the alleged Tank Man), “VIIV” (Roman numerals for 6-4), “IIXVIIIIX” (Roman numerals for 1-9-8-9), etc. (Garber). This silence was occasionally (but also silently) opposed in private theatrical performances and visual images. In one instance, artist Chen Guang held a private performance in which a small girl appears shining a flashlight around a darkened room, showing the dates from 1989 to 2014 (Lim, “Dangerous Memories”). The lights then go on, and Chen Guang appears, a mask muzzling his mouth, and whitewashes the walls, obliterating the years. In another instance, a woman at a protest in Hong Kong (the only Chinese city to hold public protests)

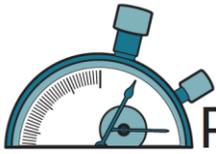
appeared with red tape crossed over her mouth as a visible mark of the silence (MacLeod).

But some voices demanded to be heard. In a dramatic interview, Zhang Xianling speaks about the massacre, the loss of her son, and the deafness and silence of the Chinese government:

Twenty-five years is a long time. It is a quarter of a century. But towards such a big event, an event that caused horror to the world, sadly our government continues to feign an attitude of complete deafness and silence . . . As a mother, I would never forget what happened, not even after 25 years, or 50 years, or 500 years from now. The pain and the loss are eternal.
(MacLeod)

Many years earlier, moved by the pervasive silence and their own grief, Zhang Xianling and other mothers had bonded to form a larger group. In *The People's Republic of Amnesia*, Louisa Lim recounts the story of how Zhang Xianling and Ding Zilin, another mother who had lost her son, founded The Tiananmen Mothers, initially in search of mutual support and then in an effort to break the government's persistent silence (105-32). The Tiananmen Mothers searched for the names of others killed in the massacre, appealed to China's Communist leadership to give their people “truth, compensation, and accountability,” and offered their support to other mothers and fathers who had lost family members in the massacre (107). Some joined them. Others insisted on maintaining their own silence, perhaps in fear or perhaps in self-defense—for, as Kristeva explains, silence can serve as a self-defense mechanism, lest the “body and senses run the risk of toppling over into a black, unspeakable affect” (*Tales* 312).

The Chinese government nonetheless persists in its silence, and even the words “Tiananmen Mothers” are blocked on Weibo—China's version



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of Twitter (Ng 144, 218). As Lim observes, however, recalling the words of former Czech President Václav Havel, “Even though the authorities pretend to see and hear nothing, they cannot ban this kind of appeal month by month, year by year. The appeal gets passed down through the Internet, media, and the people. It simply cannot be banned, suppressed, deleted, or blocked” (*People’s Republic* 129). Sometimes the appeal is a simple silent image, such as the Tiananmen Mothers’ version of the popular Tank Man meme, showing a mother in front of a row of tanks:



Figure 1: Tiananmen Mothers' version of the popular tank meme

Sometimes the appeal is yet another explicit challenge to the Chinese government to break its silence, to engage in open discussion and dialogue, and—as the mothers have demanded so often—to give their people “truth, compensation, and accountability” (*The Tiananmen Mothers*). Yet the Chinese government not only persists in its silence but also in its official campaign to blot out the

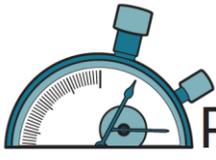
memory of the events of June 4, 1989, recently banning the digits “64” and “89,” even from financial transactions (Pascaud).

The silence remains a point of contention in contemporary China, both a quest for unity and also a deep rift, a division, between the Tiananmen Mothers and the Chinese government. On the one hand, Zhang Xianling maintains that if the Communist leadership had ever responded to their entreaties, the Tiananmen Mothers would not exist (Lim, *People’s Republic* 125). On the other hand, self-professed Outcast Journalist Wei Ling Chua insists that the silence itself is proof that the massacre was nothing more than an invention by Western media:

The so-called Tiananmen Square “Massacre” is one of the most misleading events the US government and the Western media have used to demonize the Chinese government each and every year since 1989. There was ample silent evidence in the images produced by the Western media that told the story of a highly restrained and caring Chinese government facing a protest similar to those in the West at various stages of their economic development. (1)

From this perspective, the famous Tank Man image is not a sign of the people’s courage but the government’s restraint. These conflicting responses suggest that even a pervasive silence can convey powerful (but conflicting) affects: a bonding of mothers and other mothers, mothers and their families, countered by the government’s stubborn refusal even to acknowledge their grief.

The affective rhetoric of China’s Internet culture provides an instructive illustration of a kind of rhetorical activity that preserves but exceeds overt and explicit symbolic or referential meanings: a rhetoric that at once binds and separates people

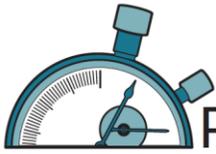


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not only by overt symbolic representations but also and especially by the circulation of affective energy. Though particularly pervasive and powerful in China's Internet culture, however, this affective rhetoric is not unique to this culture but is a subtle and sometimes hidden dimension of all rhetorical activity and a source of identification not only among the Chinese people but with people everywhere who share their sense of grief and loss.

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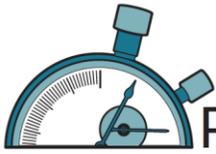
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