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Authors	Cuffe, James B.
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

5 The social manifold

Introduction

Scholars such as Meng (2011) argue that for a more comprehensive understanding of the political implications of the internet in China, one must examine mediated political communication. Looking only for overtly political communication can ignore other communication forms, such as entertainment, which may still have political consequences despite not appearing explicitly political. Yang Guobin underlines this all-too-common pitfall, writing, 'Entertainment is often used as a scapegoat for blaming the supposedly apolitical character of Chinese internet culture. The assumption is that if people play online, they are not doing politics' (2011: 1045). The example presented in this chapter is entertaining and an online viral spoof but has an expressly political undertone; it serves to highlight the role and importance of storytelling in communication and social change.

If Chinese society comes under the permanent liminality framework, one would expect to see signs of the Trickster at work, as a liminal environment best suits their character. The Trickster figure is a mythological character with such particular traits as to be recognisable in distinct figures across cultures – from the Coyote in Native American mythology, to the Leprechaun in Irish folklore, to the Monkey King in the ancient Chinese tradition. The Trickster epitomises duality, manifesting contradictory traits such as cunning and clowning, malice and compassion, cleverness and foolishness. The traits of the trickster as a liminal character that seeks and demands transgressing norms and boundaries aid it in disrupting social and cultural values. There are of course different interpretations of the trickster motif, but the main conceptions are consistent and pervasive to such a degree that Grădinaru (2012) argues it would seem as if the trickster has a cultural function, namely to aid in the movement from one state of affairs to another, particularly as a discursive tool for critiquing or subverting dominant or oppressive systems. We examine the potential of the trickster character to serve a cultural function and articulate the incongruency with a social manifold as requiring and facilitating a transition function of liminal characters. Liminal characters can serve as focal points which provide mediation between experiential understanding of the self with wider society. Here, by examining a mythical and virtual Chinese character that is liminal and clearly displays trickster characteristics, we can explore this process. This particular fictional character propagated throughout the Chinese mediascape both domestically and abroad.[1] The trickster candidate is called the Grass-Mud Horse (草泥马 *Cǎonímǎ*).

The Grass-Mud Horse

In 2009, Baidu – a Chinese internet search engine similar to Google, which holds the largest market share in mainland China at the time of writing – published a list of the ten most popular 'mythical' characters that had appeared on Chinese internet forums, mini-blogs, file sharing networks, QQ groups (online chatrooms commonly used through mobile phones) and other digital spaces. The characters appear to have originated as entries in *Bǎidù Bǎikē*, an online collaborative encyclopaedia similar to the Western Wikipedia platform. The purpose of these 'false' (i.e. invented) entries appeared to be satirical in nature, drawing attention to the futility of contemporaneous attempts by authorities to censor profanity and vulgarity on the web.[2] The authorities' official programme of cleaning up the web was widely perceived as an excuse to eliminate not only pornographic material but also material that questioned official state history, party doctrine, policy implementation and so on. The encyclopaedia entries describe the nature of each creature and its environment, often humorously and with implicit references to extreme profanities and sexual acts.

One of the most popular of these creatures was the Grass-Mud Horse (草泥马 *Cǎonímǎ*). The Grass-Mud Horse is presented as a heroic protagonist in the face of constant threat from its arch-rival, the River Crab (河蟹 *Héxiè*). The Grass-Mud Horses live as a herd in the fictional Ma Le Gobi Desert (马勒戈壁 *Mǎlègēbì*). The River Crabs share the same environment and threaten the existence of the Grass-Mud Horses by destroying the grassland upon which the latter thrive. The variants are many in both terminology and phrasing, with poems, songs, music videos, cartoons all relaying the mythic Grass-Mud Horse universe.

The following is a translation from a popular music video about the Grass-Mud Horse available on most video streaming websites, including YouKu and YouTube. While the lyrics differ between different versions of the song, the antagonism between the defiant Grass-Mud Horse and the encroaching River Crab is always evident, as is the ambiguity of meaning in the language used. The video footage for which these particular lyrics were set to was taken from a 2006 Oxfam commercial seeking sponsors for alpacas as part of its 'Oxfam Unwrapped' Christmas gift campaign in the United Kingdom. Produced in conjunction with Mastercard, the advertisement explains that the sponsorship programme helps Peruvian farmers buy and care for alpacas.

在那荒茫美丽马勒戈壁,
有一群草泥马.

In the wild and beautiful Ma Le Desert,
there is a herd of Grass-Mud Horses.

他们活泼又聪明,
他们调皮又灵敏,

They are lively and intelligent.
They are mischievous and nimble.

他们自由自在生活在那草泥马戈壁，
他们顽强勇敢克服艰苦环境。

They live freely in the Ma Le Desert.
They are courageous, tenacious, and overcome the difficult environment.

噢，卧槽的草泥马！
噢，狂槽的草泥马！

Oh, lying down Grass-Mud Horse!
Oh, running wild Grass-Mud Horse!

他们为了卧草不被吃掉 打败了河蟹，
河蟹从此消失草泥马戈壁.

They defeated the River Crabs in order to protect their grass land,
River Crabs forever disappeared from Ma Le Desert.[3]

There are multiple meanings present in the story, and the place to start is with the individual names. 'Grass-Mud Horse' sounds very like a popular curse in Chinese, though the tones and characters when spoken and written are different, and it is therefore not a true homonym. The Communist Party of China (CCP) can be described as *Mother of the People*, and therefore the phrase *Grass-Mud Horse* ('Fuck Your Mother') can be suggestive of cursing the CCP. But even just taken as a curse, it resonates with the general populace as one of the most common and severe insults and profanities (not unlike its English-language equivalent). River Crab (河蟹 *Héxiè*), meanwhile, sounds like the Chinese term for 'harmony' (和谐 *héxié*) and reminds us of Hu Jintao's official philosophy for striving for a harmonious society in China. The online censorship of blog entries and articles is often described as the particular article being 'harmonised' to bring it into line with the ideals for a harmonious society. Someone described as a Grass-Mud Horse is someone who is savvy and able to circumvent the efforts of censors, the censors themselves being the River Crabs. In a further layer of meaning, in Chinese, the term 'crab' can also be used as slang for a bully who exerts power through violence (Qiang 2011: 51). The alternative meanings of the lyrics are quite course and profane, and this adds to the amusement potential of the piece. Guo Yuhua writes that the message is simple:

> If the government is not messing up, the people won't do the same; if the upper rank elites don't torment, the subordinated won't do the same; if the 'river crabs' are not vulgar, the 'Grass Mud Horse' won't be vulgar.
>
> (Global Voices 2009)[4]

Such use of alternative meanings for humorous effect is known as *è gǎo* (恶搞) – online spoofs or, literally, 'reckless doing' (Meng 2010: 503). Guo Yuhua takes up

James Scott's idea of 'weapons of the weak' in trying to explain the Grass-Mud Horse phenomenon:

> They are not the powerful, and are not in control of the 'public transcript'. For them, open, appropriate and free expression has been blocked, and they can only use the 'weapon of the weak' to create 'hidden transcript'. We shouldn't underestimate this kind of 'Grass Mud Horse' expression, as it is a sign of free choice: either to become a silent and tamed goat or to become a 'brave and stubborn' Grass Mud Horse.
>
> (Global Voices)[5]

In Western media this particular example has often been portrayed as a direct confrontation between the Chinese government and Chinese netizens (see Meng 2011; Qiang 2011; Tang & Yang 2011). Such a portrayal, however, is an overreaction; it is, moreover, indicative of the starting position from which much progressive discourse proceeds, resting upon the inevitability of democracy and the liberative capacity of technology. I suggest instead a more nuanced narrative in which the Grass-Mud Horse is seen as a representation of the ability to overcome mechanical censorship and thus highlighting the futility, and ultimately the annoyance, of such a system. The existence of the Grass-Mud Horse is ultimately dependent on the censors/River Crab, without whom the joke is void of meaning and the phrase merely a crude play on words.

Following the appearance of this song and its subsequent popularity across the internet in China, scholars and commentators began to pick up on the power of the Grass-Mud Horse as a symbol. An example of responses includes artist and activist Ai Weiwei's photo of himself jumping naked with one hand in the air, with the other hand holding a toy Grass-Mud Horse to censor his genitalia. As a symbol, the Grass-Mud Horse has gained political and commercial capital while reaching a wide audience. The Grass-Mud Horse has become an important symbol for protest and dissatisfaction with the authorities and with censorship, even outside Mainland China, as evidenced in Hong Kong, where activists used the symbol when protesting planned changes to the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) underground system.

Tang and Yang (2011) examine the symbolic power of this internet sensation and persuasively argue that many factors need to be in place before such an otherwise contingent cultural product could become so powerful. Specifically, there needed to be a groundswell of support and sentiment before the song came to be in order for it to become so popular. This is an important aspect, and one that is sometimes elided in favour of more hasty discussions of the song as an example of dissidence and the liberating capacity of the internet. Indeed, Tang and Yang reference an earlier version of the Grass-Mud Horse story that, for different reasons, did not reach anywhere near the popularity of the contemporaneous version. In their words, the Grass-Mud Horse is a crystallisation of pre-existing sentiment, one that suits its cultural and linguistic context and thus becomes a successful theme. According to these authors, the Grass-Mud Horse takes advantage of the

communicative capacity of the internet as a communications technology, but its origins and power are ultimately not derived from the internet. They write,

> [T]he emergence of the horse and its symbolic power and social effects must be understood dialectically – the horse draws its power from the social context and at the same time it opens up a space for a whole new set of resistant discourses to emerge and flourish.
>
> (ibid.: 667)

As Tang and Yang argue, the Grass-Mud Horse is not specifically anti-communism or anti-party or anti-government. It is an expression of negative sentiment towards an identifiable experience in which the system impinges on one's expression of self by enforcing one voice over many possible voices, a single meaning over multiple meanings and possible interpretations; the feeling of a system that is singular and totalising, eliminating ambiguity, ambivalence, difference and the possibility of interpretation. The story of the Grass-Mud Horse is primarily a manifestation of understandings of these experiences of censorship and surveillance on the internet in China. This is a theme that can be unpacked with the use of Walter Benjamin's insights on storytelling and art.

Becoming through mediated events

Let us begin with some precepts about communism which are particularly relevant to the case at hand. Communism has as its goal a utopia in which all are equal. To achieve such an aim, all must act in accordance with one another; everyone must be in harmony with everyone else. If different groups or factions act in different ways, they are not acting faithfully in the pursuit of the final goal. Communism (in a theoretical utopian sense) cannot allow a plurality of voices, as it would be an affront to the ideology; for example there cannot be multiple unions representing the same cohort, so in China there is one union for each cohort of workers. This enforces the need to remove the subjective experiences of the people. The 'I' of the subject is thus eliminated and replaced with a meta-narrative – the official history, the party's story. This one story or history becomes official policy, acting as 'Truth' and guiding the populace in their march towards destiny, their progressive development towards utopia and the end of history. In the official story – history as told by the party – life, the lived experiences of individual people in all their diversity and variety, is reduced and disparaged as 'tradition', stagnant and cultic, to be set aside in favour of the harmonious official story. With such an official line on life and history, interpretation of individual lived experiences is removed, and lived experiences become explained by official doctrine or lack of political consciousness. However, all of this can be written with ease because it is itself an abstraction, and it is certainly not the case in contemporary China. Society resists such easy descriptors.

Looking at increasing technological complexity as progress and as an aid to social progress obscures the role that communications technology in-and-of-itself

plays in social change. This has led to a large field of literature on the theme of China-in-transition, positioning China as abnormal or deficient according to the view of linear historical development to which the notion of 'progress' generally subscribes. In this understanding, China's lack of democratic credentials is seen as lagging unusually far behind the pace of economic and technological development – 'as an orientalist despotic or communistic totalitarian deviation from some transcendental liberal democratic "norm"' (Zhao 2008: 49) (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Exploring the internet through a predetermined democratisation lens (Meng 2010: 501) exacerbates this mis-focused attention on the internet as public sphere. As Yang notes, seemingly apolitical activities such as these

> give the internet its cultural content. . . . As the values, behaviour and practices associated with these activities merge into everyday life, they become a central part of contemporary culture. Dismissing them as 'shallow infotainment' in favour of rational-critical debate and deliberation is problematic. Implicitly, this view uses the Habermasian notion of online discourse as the normative standard to measure online activities. It not only ignores the importance of emotion in public life, but at its worst reduces the emotional to the irrational and runs the danger of pathologizing online behaviour.
>
> (2011: 1046)

It is hoped that by proposing a framework incorporating the dialogical importance of storytelling as a primordial means of communication (as envisaged by Benjamin) will help to facilitate a re-examining and refocusing of how communication relates to social change and what role technology might play in such change, while also acknowledging the ways in which the democratisation lens has previously coloured communication studies on contemporary China.

The Grass-Mud Horse presents a narrative of netizens' experiences of officials' interference with the online community. The most important aspect of the Grass-Mud Horse phenomenon, I would argue, is that the story allegorically delivers an understanding of an experience that many netizens may not have directly experienced themselves. Experiences of the negative side of the communication system (censorship and surveillance) are represented in a format that allows others who may or may not share the experiences to understand its meanings and values in relation to their own position. They can then, in turn, come to understand their own position within the narrative and thus within the narrative of life, the universe and everything. And this story must be told in a manner that at once escapes the alternative absolutist narrative of the totalitarian monologue yet also demonstrates the pathology of that same dominant and unforgiving meta-narrative. The Grass-Mud Horse lives on the threshold, with many possible voices playing on the boundaries of meaningful language by flirting with censorship, blasphemy and humour all at once.

Let us turn to Benjamin for further insight into the work of the story; we note that there are many variants of the story of the Grass-Mud Horse, and this is

important; all living stories have variants, as the story is reproduced not only to convey new ideas and messages but to match the audience and the times, but the frame of the story allows it to carry the content in its various guises: it maintains the resonance of the story through the ability to reinterpret anew relevant meaning. The story provides the element of transmission as the storyteller's memory seeks to resonate with the listener; in fact, Benjamin refers to 'transmission' as 'tradition' (1968) – the story survives death and simultaneously presupposes its community. There are several important takeaways from Benjamin for understanding the Grass-Mud Horse.

That the Grass-Mud Horse draws its power from its social context has led to the emergence of the following phrase as the 'first law of Chinse cyberpolitics', coined by Xiao Qiang, editor in chief of *China Digital Times*: 'Where there are River-Crabs there are Grass-Mud Horses, or, where there is censorship there is resistance' ('那里有河蟹，那里就有草泥马' – *Nàlǐ yǒu Héxiè, nàlǐ jiù yǒu Cǎonímǎ*. Xiao 2009). The use of the internet has greatly increased the communicative space available to many individuals. However, this is true only insofar as there is someone different with whom to communicate: if two people are saying the same thing, there is no true communication taking place. The extent to which the internet can act as a catalyst for social and political transformation does not rest in the technology but in the transformation of discourse at the threshold of two domains, where 'meaning is both created and found . . . in the interaction between "inner" image and "outer" narrative structure. . . . [P]owerful narratives, "frame" and "make intelligible" inner contents through dialogical relationship' (Rowland 2006: 294).

Following Benjamin, the Grass-Mud Horse – as a story – communicates experience like good storytelling should. The experience the story works to communicate is that of censorship and oppression under a threatening force. This threatening force is only indirectly (if at all) the Communist Party of China; rather, the threatening force is the refusal to acknowledge the alternative voice, the subjective voice that speaks out of tune. The story tells us of this experience: one life or one voice being threatened by another.

This has two results. Firstly, people who share this experience see something of themselves in the story and identify with it. This reinvigorates the strength of the story in its relevance for the current social context and community. Secondly, those who have not experienced the threatening force can come to understand this experience through interpretation of the narrative, by reading the play on words, the hidden code that avoids censorship by obeying the rules. This is the importance of storytelling: communicating experience not only to those who have shared the experience but also, more importantly, to those who have not, so that these latter can come to understand something of an unknown experience portrayed by the story. This explanation is both specific to the Grass-Mud Horse but also generally applicable, which will be shown with further case studies in the next chapter.

It is not the content that is singularly important but rather the story as a whole which marries content and form in such a way that it can resonate with its

community (Benjamin 2006: 367). The practice of storytelling, its activity is part of the form of the story. Thus, the storyteller or communications technology are both potential modes by which a story may be transmitted. Storytelling provides understanding to those who may not have particular social experiences, and those people within a community or those people who seek entry to one can do so from understanding via the stories of that community in whatever forms they take, understanding this othered experience and also, more generally, understanding the expectation of their position and place within the state, the world, the community, as articulated through the story and the community it 'presupposes'. Technology, which according to Benjamin obfuscates history and abstracts knowledge from experience (see Chapter 2) nevertheless remains a lattice structure through which communication can supersede instantaneous reproduction through dialogical participation with the audience (see immanent overcoming later in the chapter). The Grass-Mud Horse thrives in the communications technology environment and certainly has a story to tell that would not be possible in the traditional manner of spoken activity. The Grass-Mud Horse relies to a large degree on its anonymous and fictional nature, residing within digital technologies for communication.

Benjamin is aggrieved by what he describes as the fall in value of experience represented or evidenced by the lack of good storytellers (2006: 362). For Benjamin, a storyteller is someone who uses skill or craft to relay experiences to a listener or audience via narrative. A storyteller can offer careful representations of humans' relationship to their experience. The idea of experience is central here, as across cultures, this kind of experiential understanding is frequently held above that acquired via rote learning or explanation (Benjamin 2006: 378). Why is this experiential knowledge important? And why has it historically (and still contemporarily) been valued above understanding gained via explanation, abstract reasoning or education?

The answer would seem to lie in the interpretative potential of experience versus the 'dictatorial' perspective of explanation. Whatever one experiences in life can always be revisited and reinterpreted in light of new experiences and thoughts. The 'truth' of an event is not nearly as important as the meaning derived – that is, interpreted – from the event. When we come to understand something via education or explanation, 'truth' is held up in a tyrannical manner, by which the knowledge we gain is legitimised. When 'truth' is held up in such an omnipotent way, the communicability of experience is damaged, as one's personal experiences become subject to judgement as 'right' or 'wrong' on the basis of this or that 'fact'. The meaning of the individual's experience is then weakened in favour of knowing the 'truth' of an event, which objective 'fact' can, in reality, never be reached.

Storytelling communicates experience and understanding in the form of wisdom which carries down through the ages. For Benjamin, this is the case regardless of how the content of the story might change or its method of telling be transformed, so long as the core message or communicability of the experience remains comprehensible. In this understanding, it is *necessary* that the content

and method of transmission change, so as to keep the story relevant to the social context of the present day. Changing forms in this manner enables the story to better hold and access its interpretative capacity. The story (tale, song, poem, image, figure etc.) must contain an interpretative capacity so that we can still recognise the story and the relationship it narrates between ourselves and our social existence despite changes in our experience of that relationship. Both the interpretative capacity of a story and our ability to comprehend the meanings it communicates need some explanatory framework so that the influence or impact of technology on these processes might be elaborated. And what of the role of the trickster regarding the communicability of experience that Benjamin espouses as the virtue of storytelling?

The social manifold

While conceptions of self may vary across cultures and throughout time, there remains a relationship between what we might call an 'individual' (regardless of the kind of conception of self) and a 'society' (that collectivity of individuals operating in an interdependent, complex fashion). This dialogical relationship between many beings, many experiencing selves and the total social fabric is referred to here as the social manifold. The social manifold can be defined as the encompassing space between the actual contextualisation of societal meaning-formation and the perceived or imagined social context for societal meaning-formation. Meaning-formation refers to the understanding of oneself as a social being – a multi-variant interpenetrating social phenomenon. Within the social manifold, the interaction between an individual and their society is not direct; that is, the individual cannot comprehend the totality of their own society but can only come to know it through the culture's signs and symbols. The transmission of a society's values and wisdom (mythic experience) takes place across an unequal plane: from the vast complexity of an entire social system and its repertoire of knowledge, mores and norms to the comparatively limited faculties of its individual members, groups and strata. The extreme variation and complexity of the social manifold must be condensed, skimmed, fragmented, packaged and translated, moving from the world *out there* to one's own inner world and understanding of one's own place, own time in one's community.

This movement, social process, requires an arena so that such a transition can take place; a space whereby the relative incongruency of one's experience interplays with the expectations and perceptions of wider social values and norms. In such a manner, the incongruency creates a type of natural attraction, a pull for the lack of resonance to be resolved. All that is missing is a focal point within such an arena to act as a conduit for multiple meanings through recognition of an experiential congruence. Via interpretation, the meaning is *recognised* as it pertains to the self and the social. Understanding the place one occupies in one's own narrative of life requires not so much an explanation – such as a guide in traditional rites of passage – but an interpretative process that seeks resonance between one's experiences and social expectations, a process that expresses,

indeed authenticates, the potential for co-existence in terms of one's own experience. This mode of communication must be open-ended and interpretative rather than explanatory, Bakhtin explains that:

> with explanation there is only one consciousness, one subject; with comprehension there are two consciousnesses and two subjects . . . therefore explanation has no dialogic aspects. . . . Understanding is always dialogic to some degree.
>
> (Bakhtin, 1994: 111)

The extent to which one's own experience is congruent with the expectations of ones' society (and vice versa) is relative because the relationship is dynamic and recursive; it is dialogical. The incongruent spaces once occupied by a suitable conduit may dialogically weave experience and experiential understanding through identity and social knowledge. This space makes possible the kind of intergenerational wisdom and knowledge that society generates from larger aggregates of lived lives and their experiences. Through communication, experiences are presented and re-presented so that others can come to understand their meaning and values in relation to their own position in any given society. But what of the conduit? Can we say this then is the cultural function of liminal characters, and in our example of our Grass-Mud Horse trickster?

It is this process that we can see in the story of the Grass-Mud Horse, whereby knowledge of censorship and political authoritarianism is communicated within the confines set out by that same censorship and authoritarianism. The portrayal of such political experience in the form of a mythic animal transmits understanding of the experience to others only once they interpret the representation relative to their own experiences and the experiences of others. In other words, they can come to understand their own situation relative to their socio-cultural and historically bound context within the social manifold.[6] This is similar to the power of art: it is, in a sense, beyond truth; it is meaningful – if not necessarily factual – to the living tradition of a society. It is useful to look at parallel examples to see the kind of dynamics at work within the social manifold.

In describing the method of language acquisition in children, Lotman invokes the term 'intertextuality',[7]

> On the basis of some contextual-situational equivalence (situations: 'good', 'pleasant', 'bad', 'dangerous' etc.) the child establishes a correspondence between some texts familiar and comprehensible to him in 'his' language and the texts of 'adults' (for example on the principle 'incomprehensible but pleasant,' or 'incomprehensible but frightening'). In such a translation – of one whole text by another whole text – the child discovers an extraordinary abundance of 'superfluous' words in 'adult' texts. The act of translation [from the point of view of the child] is accompanied by a semantic reduction of the [adult] text.
>
> (Lotman 1976: 302)

There is not a one-to-one equivalence here between language learning and communication and experience, but there is similarity. As the child comes to know the world through the signs of the parent – by reducing the complexity and number of signs, thereby enabling understanding but with a narrower scope of meaning – so too does the adult come to know their world and society at large via communication. Meaning carries across an unequal place from a more complex faculty to a lesser complex faculty.

This process of intertextuality resonates with another pedagogical process: Vygotskiĭ (1978) proposed a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) for understanding a particular process of intergenerational learning. The ZPD in this regard refers to the disparity between the physical ability of a child to do something and the child's knowledge of how to do something. With guidance, children can be shown how to utilise their own capacity to act. The gap, then, between adult/teacher and child or that between 'higher' and 'lower' levels of ability is called the zone of proximal development, defined in the following way by Vygotskiĭ:

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.
>
> (Vygotskiĭ 1978: 86)

In both of these theories, the similarity with the earlier discussion is the process of communication across an unequal plane of relative complexity. Whether intertextuality in the case of Lotman or scaffolding in the case of Vygotskiĭ, there is a process of transmission from 'higher' to 'lower' level, from adult to child. There are more of these processes at work – this should be self-evident – and examples are ripe from media which may itself as a form (techno-social) facilitate resolution required by the social manifold. Writing on the social transformation of contemporary Ireland, Keohane and Kuhling phrase the meeting of different social forces thus:

> The process of sharing local and the global, community and society, tradition and modernity, are not forms of life that supersede one another in linear historical progress, but . . . exist contemporaneously and interpenetrate with one another, collide and collude with one another.
>
> (2005: 76)

The proposed social manifold is an interpenetratable, overlapping field that actualises, makes manifest, the relative incongruency of one's perceptions and expectations (based on what they have experienced) with social perceptions and expectations (derived from the social body). Incongruent spaces open up when liminal characters come into focus. This model can offer insight into a particular process of cultural transmission; amidst the overdetermined social forces at play, it is inevitable that our experiences may not fully resonate with our expectations

nor our expectations with those of wider society. This results in an incongruity between our own personal experiences of our society and the wider norms and values of our society. Across this discrepancy some form of transition must necessarily take place in order for cultural transmission and social and individual development to take place.

It may be evident that the terms *transition* and *manifold* have mathematical relevance, and an example can help illustrate both the reason and the framework being described. The term manifold refers to topological space that cannot be perfectly represented in three dimensions; for example, the three-dimensional world cannot be represented accurately in two dimensions (i.e. on a map) unless two charts are used each emanating from one overlapping and shared point. The manifold, in its representation, requires two sub-sets with at least one transition point. The transition point allows for the communication – establishes congruence – between the two sub-sets of the whole.

This can manifest in at least two forms: (1) the communication of a new understanding for one's own experiences and (2) the ability for experiential knowledge to be shared and understood by those who have not undergone that experience. This process of communication is one that is greatly facilitated by communications technology and liminal characters. The process of condensing, packaging and representing an experientially derived social system uses liminal characters as a vector once they move to visibility within the incongruent spaces peeled from the social manifold, that is to say, when they come to be cognised as representative of experiential incongruency.

The weaving and folding of a multitude of experiential qualities into a consummating representation requires special characters that can embody and endure the stigma or fame of such a juxtapositioning against societal norms and values, but subsequently they can serve as a conduit for another to perceive, co-experience and empathise with in an act of societal congruence through new experiential awareness and understanding. So the proposal is that this may be a cultural function of the trickster and other liminal characters.

Like the trickster in our example, liminal and, indeed, peripheral characters can act as a focal point for surrounding social narratives to converge, striking like lightning in a charged atmosphere to illuminate cognition of one's own experiences with and with-in a wider social frame; a frame that is open for interpretation rather than enforced explanation. Liminal characters such as the trickster serve a social and psychological function by drawing on and even transgressing the limits of one's own experience and the values and norms of their society. Such liminal personas act as transition points between the wider changing flux of social relations and the instant of individual self-cognition and understanding. Liminal characters may serve, indeed function, as this transition point between our cognitive capacity and the manifest social complexity of wider dynamic systems of social experience and knowledge.

The Grass-Mud Horse is identifiable as a trickster, and as such is a liminal character; as a trickster entity, it operates through norms and expectations that transgress both societal and individual norms – evident in the play on words and

double meaning that not only transgress censorship (societal) but also linguistic decency (individual). Importantly it is not the case that such a trickster be imitated; rather, they should only act as a heuristic cultural function to aid in the perceiver to re-evaluate their own experiential understanding against that of their communities. By framing itself against and in spite of limits the trickster offers new coordinates by which one can reassess and judge one's own experiences. It is the potential for interpretation within such incongruent spaces, facilitated by communications technology that allows individuals to recognise and renegotiate their relation to their lived experiences of life and society.

The unequal plane at work within the social manifold between the social world of signs and symbols (intergenerational knowledge) and self-knowledge as a social being must be maintained and transversed through 'the pedagogical activity of the social in a dialogic simultaneity relating to itself in time' (Holquist 2002: 83). As the self cannot achieve a total sense of self or of society from an outside perspective, the social manifold shears and incongruent spaces open, providing interpretative arenas for realigning the signs and symbols of the community by which the self gains social identity and understanding anew. By overcoming the limitations of one's own perspective via negotiation of the presented characteristics of one's socio-temporal circumstance, vested in a liminal character, the self and society can gain experiential understanding of their time and place. The shearing and opening within the social manifold enables the unfolding of a culture's future and for cultural transmission to take place across and among members of the community.

Conclusion

The future of a culture should be considered an open-ended process with no goal in terms of trying to achieve an end but instead a continuous dynamic mode of self-representation at a societal level. Where in Lotman's language acquisition there is intertextuality and in Vygotskiĭ's ZPD there is scaffolding, there are elements of both at work in the spaces of incongruency that come to be occupied by liminal characters. Within these spaces, the techno-social has a role; technology plays a role in facilitating and part-contextualising the representation, even where the representation is itself bound by socio-cultural and historical conditions. The marriage of medium and message ensures a particular frame for interpretation is at work (scaffolding) for the content to be negotiated; to put it another way, the content is contextualised to a certain degree by the communications technology in use.

Through liminal characters operating as a focal point for resonance between the individual and society within the social manifold, an individual's experiential understanding can develop in spite of the auto-framing of perception by the limitations of one's own perspective. That is to say, the limitations of one's own experience can be overcome by the new signs and symbols made available to them by the liminal figure. This is made possible by looking to the mirroring of social life as conveyed by the liminal figure and generated within the transitory

arena that serves both as a congruent and incongruent space. Liminal characters make possible the crossing of the plane between what one can know oneself and what society can teach, so that the individual develops as a social member and cognisant of their role as a social being. Here, the disparity that social life generates between one generation and another (but also horizontally between groups) is made evident through the relative incongruency between those same groups within the manifold. The disparity itself generates momentum for resolution as social beings require and rely on social congruence amongst members. This transitory space within the social manifold enables societies to generate their own cultural identity along with their own social development in a process of unfolding and unfurling from within.

If in permanent liminality we are seeking, striving for the path out, then it stands to reason this striving will be reflected in our popular culture if only we know how to identify it. If the conditions of our society have become unfixed, and things are fluid and upset, (not adequately unfolding and unfurling so to speak), then we should also see greater incongruency between our expectations and those of society, between our experiences and the experiences of others. From this chapter we have identified one liminal character at work in China, a trickster called the Grass-Mud Horse, but there are many more. We will see in the next chapter that the liminal character does not always need to be a trickster, which will entice future questions about distinctions and roles of different types of liminal characters. For example the trickster would certainly prefer to be mistaken for an authoritative figure rather than a mere heuristic device, and the misidentification of the trickster as an authority is an endemic problem of our times (see Szakolczai 2015; Horvath 2013).

However, we have now a working proposal that can explain why we may see liminal characters at work in our popular culture, gaining an authority that would not normally be afforded to them – marginalised and peripheral figures who arrive in the mediated arenas, as will tricksters and jokers who can take advantage of our search for cultural and social stability and, indeed, vitality.

Notes

1 A 'mediascape' refers to the horizon of images available via media from one's subjective perspective, or the totality of available images from a given vantage point – temporal, cultural etc. The term was coined by Arjun Appadurai (1996).
2 The particular government bodies in question were the State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC), State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) and General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP).
3 Author's translation.
4 Guo Yuhua Global Voices 2009; original text in Chinese, with translation available from https://globalvoices.org/2009/03/02/china-more-on-grass-mud-horse uploaded on 2009/03/02
5 Guo Yuhua Global Voices 2009; original text in Chinese, with translation available from https://globalvoices.org/2009/03/02/china-more-on-grass-mud-horse uploaded on 2009/03/02

6 Koselleck (2002) refers to successful realization of one's experience as 'historical consciousness', Bakhtin uses the term transgredience (*transgradientsvo*) to describe the successful dialogic representation of the totality of one's societal participation.
7 The term 'intertextuality' was coined by Julia Kristeva (1980) to replace 'intersubjectivity', in response to Bakhtin and de Saussure.

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