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Jiarui Sun
Jiarui.Sun.GR@dartmouth.edu

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Jiarui Sun

Prof. Pease & Prof. McKee

MALS 318: Cultural Studies

The Moe Politics in Year, Hare, Affair

When Pop Culture Meets Nationalistic Propaganda in Contemporary China

In 2015, under the background of China's "Internet Plus" policy and the intensified censorship of foreign animations, a political allegory animation, *Year, Hare, Affair* (in Chinese: 那年那兔那些事, which literally means 'the story of that rabbit happened in that year') went viral overnight among Chinese Internet users.

This study aims to see how a hegemonic political discourse uses different approaches to sustain its hierarchy in a diverse, multicultural society in the age of the Internet. I will first look into the dynamic cultural tension between the hegemonic political power and the distorting nature in the process of decoding that motivates the animation's production. Second, by introducing the concept of *moe*, I aim to study the animation's strategy to stop the distorting process and fix the meaning of its content. Finally, by studying the governmental actions to promote a new patriotic identity for its young supporters, this study will arrive at the conclusion that the Chinese government has updated its propaganda strategy to maintain consistency between the encoding and decoding processes.

Year, Hare, Affair: A New Shell for the Old Ideology

The animation *Year, Hare, Affair* is about a Rabbit family (representing the Communist Party of China and its supporters) that works hard to defend their household, *Zhòng Huā Jiā* (a homophonic word for *Zhōng Huá Jiā*, 中华家, the family of the Chinese nation), and help it prosper

against the attack and suppression from the Chickens (Japan), Bald Eagles (the United States) and Russian Bears (the former Soviet Union and later Russia).

According to Stuart Hall, in the process of producing a TV program, the professional broadcasters assume their position when encoding a message which has *already* been signified in a hegemonic manner (“Encoding, decoding” 101). This is particularly true for the production of *Year, Hare, Affair*. Originally adapted from a series of manga and a novel created by grassroots artists on a military fan online forum, this animation is defined as a show that “uses animals as an allegory for nations and sovereign states to represent political and military events in history. The goal of this project was to promote nationalistic pride in young people, and focuses on appreciation for China’s various achievements since the beginning of the 20th century” (“Year, Hare, Affair” Wikipedia page). Most of the stories and discourses in this animation are consistent with the historical narrative in official text books. As Hall states, “more often broadcasters are concerned that the audience has failed to take the meaning as they – the broadcasters – intended.” (“Encoding, decoding,” 100). To the animation producers, the denotation of their allegories needs to be particularly preserved because otherwise their hegemonic discourse will be disrupted. To achieve this, a series of adjusted historical pictures are displayed at the end of each episode, which directly connects the animated characters in the animation with real historical scenes (Figure 1, 2 and 3). In this way, the animation eliminates most of the other possible assumptions of the allegories in the animation and directly *fixes* the meaning of its narrative.

In “Encoding, decoding,” Hall points out that “systematically distorted communication” is what the TV broadcasters have to confront. In our case, today’s mass communication promoted by the Internet has taken the Chinese public to a time when serious pedagogies such as mainstream newspaper articles, central TV channels, and textbooks are now all subject to parody. The rise of

social media also puts millennials on the frontline of the country's ideological establishment (Figure 4). Growing up twenty years after the Cultural Revolution, these young Internet users don't relate to the difficult times of war and famine that are fundamental to the Party's patriotic discourse. Instead, they feel much closer to the Japanese pop culture and the global celebrity culture, which are calling for an individualistic expression of feelings and emotions. Hence, this generation becomes immune to the conventional governmental propaganda that emphasizes collectivist values. In a sense, to them, the distortion in communication is more likely to happen than ever.

***Moe* as A Strategy**

So how exactly did this animation achieve this goal? What are its strategies to fix the political message for its targeted young viewers without boring or offending them? And how do the viewers respond to or interact with these strategies? To answer these questions, I will look into the animation's protagonist, the Rabbit, as an object intentionally designed to fetishism. Also, I want to bring in the concept of *moe* as a powerful, self-conscious strategy that is used by this animation to engage its audience.

Before looking into the character Rabbit, we first need to bring the perspective of the viewers to our discussion. As said, the Rabbit is a character purposely designed for fetishism. And when it comes to the discussion of fetishism, observers have the tendency to focus on the work that is done to fetishize the object. However, as Hall points out, the signifying process is not completed until the relation between the action of looking at the image and the meaning of the image is built ("Race, Representation and the Media" 16). In other words, meaning does not exist until the viewer has associated it with a certain image in the process of looking. Hence, it is necessary to study the signifying process of certain images from the viewers' perspective, one that involves the emotional reactions and participations on the recipients' side. It is particularly true in

today's digital era when the interaction between the visual and the viewers plays a crucial role in the process of assigning meanings to specific images, which in turn contributes to the emergence of all kinds of subcultures. The conventional detachment between the cultural product and its consumers in the TV/newspaper era is now replaced by an active interaction that contributes to the construction of the viewers' emotions and political views.

Moe (in Japanese: 萌え, pronounced as 'moh-eh'; or in Chinese: 萌, pronounced as 'méng') is an important concept in Japanese ACGN subculture.ⁱ According to Asako P. Saito, *moe* may be defined as "an affectionate response to fictional characters" (Galbraith, 17). In her article, Saito continues to explain that "*moe* is triggered by fictional characters; it does not exist in the character itself, but is found within the person who is responding to the character. Thus, certain characters may elicit strong emotions in people" (Saito, 138). In other words, *moe* is a strong, affectionate emotion that a viewer experiences for a certain fictional character.

Because the Japanese kanji can be easily adapted to the Chinese language, when the term *moe* (萌) comes into Chinese, it is soon assimilated into daily usage. However, as the word becomes widely used in all kinds of contexts (newspaper entries, official social media accounts, television news reports etc.), the public has gradually neglected the fact that *moe* is originally working on the subject who is watching an animation, not the object in the animation.ⁱⁱ Hence, not enough attention is put on the effect on the viewers, or the *investment* viewers put into these products. When it comes to the study of an animation that is promoted as a *moe* anime, there is a tendency to overlook the psychological effect of, and the power behind, those *moe*-arousing characters. So here I intend to point out that the process of getting to feel a strong, usually affectionate emotion towards a fictional character remains the core of *moe*. And the cultural industries (both in Japan

and China) have developed a whole set of comprehensive strategies aiming to arouse an emotion of *moe* in their viewers.

In *Year, Hare, Affair*, the main character Rabbit is widely tagged as a *moe* figure for its physical features: long fluffy ears, a big, round white head with a smiling face, pink little hands and a child-like, gender-unspecific voice, all these features are defined as “*moe*-points” by its viewers. Apart from the appearance, the Rabbits also use an innocent, child-like language, which rephrases the nuclear weapon as the Mushroom Egg, and the economic development as “making small pennies. In this way, the animation sugars up the conventional nationalistic discourse with simple, familiar language that is easier for the young generation to take in and digest. By transforming the conventional image of a solemn Communist Party into a gentle, friendly, witty rabbit, the animation guides the audience to see the Party from a pair of affectionate eyes. As Hall has pointed out, the meaning of an image is always contextual (Hall, 18). Despite the Rabbit’s appearance, it is the context that the animation has put the Rabbit in, i.e. the political/ military history of the last century, that generates a comprehensive, powerful meaning. Watching the child-like, innocent Rabbit, who is whole-heartedly devoted to helping his household prosper, the viewers are deeply moved. The emotional impulse to help, to protect, and to defend the Rabbit is aroused, and a devotion to the regime is achieved.

With this innocent facade, the animation is able to conceal the complicated political background of the rise of the Communist Party and the violent history of its rise to power in mainland China. The gentle, smiling rabbit bypasses the brutal side of the Party’s history when it persecuted landowners, capitalists, scholars, and intellectuals throughout the last century. In the meantime, other characters, such as the Japan Chicken or the Bald Eagle are all presented as clumsy and violent clowns that create humorous effects. Laughing along with the triumphant witty

Rabbit, the young audience comes to the agreement that the Party gains its regime naturally because all of the enemies are unintelligent and evil.

Also, we should bear in mind that most of the audience of this animation is already familiar with the *moe* culture hence the encoding process becomes transparent to them. The process of personifying the characters and recognizing these specific *moe* features can then be understood as what Stuart Hall would call the *investment* of the viewers (Hall, 17). The viewers cannot drag themselves out of the images, because the moment they set their eyes on them, they spontaneously feel the effect of *moe* arising and the meaning behind them is naturally recalled.

Furthermore, as Hall points out, “the meaning that you as a spectator take, depends on that engagement – psychic, imaginary, engagement – through the look with an investment in the image or involvement in what the image is saying or doing” (“Race, Representation and the Media” 17). The animation constantly relates the audience’s ordinary life with the narrative of national well-being. For instance, in one episode, a Rabbit who fights in North Korea says, “we eat noodles with snow here, so that our Dears back home can debate over whether tofu jelly should be sweet or salty for ten pages [online].” CITATION?? The ordinary experience of eating and debating over tofu jelly is now associated with the heroic acts conducted by the Volunteer Soldiers who fought in North Korea, creating a strong emotional reaction among the viewers who type in crying Emojis and comments like “I can’t help crying” on the bullet screen (Figure 6).ⁱⁱⁱ In this way, as the audience follows the hints of decoding hidden in the narrative, they are gradually trained to project their own experience and their own identity onto the character Rabbit.

Because the *moe* effect has caused enjoyment (watching their beloved character playing on screen is extremely satisfactory), as well as a sense of belonging (the shared feeling of *moe* effect has created a fandom of a considerable size for this animation), the audience becomes the one who

calls for the *moe* features in this animation. By feeding its audience with *moe* features, the animation gains control over the process of decoding. As Hall has suggested, images are “trying to construct a position of knowledge or identification for the viewer in relation to what has been depicted in the image” (“Race, Representation and the Media” 16). The animation has not only signified the character Rabbit as the Socialist China, but also its supporters, i.e. the numerous Rabbits that look alike and chant slogans together (Figure 7). The juxtaposition of historical figures with allegorical animal figures breaks down the estrangement between ordinary people and the great historical figures. In this way, the animation subtly leads to its fans’ self-identification as a part of the narrative, which can be found in the bullet screen comments where many address themselves as “I Rabbit” or “We Rabbits” (in Chinese: wǒ tù, 我兔). And this identification is exactly what the propaganda aims to achieve: to create a recognition of the nation, to gain acceptance for the hegemonic history narrative, and to generate a “natural” sense of support for the current regime.

In the meantime, the *moe* effect fits well with the individualism that is popular among the young generation. The feelings of affection and sentimentality, as well as pride, are all personal and closely connected with every single viewer’s ordinary life. To these fans, their *moe* reaction is turning the imagined concept of a native nation from an almighty “motherland” to an adorable friend and a reliable partner. By individualizing the emotion of patriotism, the *moe* effect conceals the collectivistic nature of the propaganda and turns the fans of the animation into a part of the collective nationalistic advocator without feeling a loss of individual identity, even though in reality they are fundamentally turned into homogenous subjects under the regime.

Also, the animation uses *moe* as a way to sugar up the ideology that praises diplomatic conspiracy. The absolute friend-or-foe division and racism have been innate within the Communist

Party's propaganda discourse since, if not before, Mao era. In this animation, one of the Rabbit's *moe* features is what is called *fū hēi* (in Chinese: 腹黑) or black belly, literally meaning the white rabbit has a hidden black, cunning or scheming inside, especially when it comes to the topics of diplomatic negotiations. For example, in the episode about China's economic support for African countries, a Rabbit cunningly offers a Hippo (a symbol for African countries) an interest-free loan and asks for resources in return by asking, "Do you have coal? Oil? Tombarthite? It's okay if you don't have money, as long as you have resources!" CITATION?? On this scene, the bullet screen is filled with a same line of comment from different users, "seeing our Rabbit is such a bully, I am so relieved" (Figure 8). To these commenters, the Rabbit's cunning personality contrasts with its innocent appearance, making it even more adorable. This kind of affection is also aroused when the usually polite, cute Rabbit occasionally makes a vulgar remark, or when it acts violently – a little bunny can't create big harm, but isn't it adorable to know that it has an attitude? In this way, the animation actually helps the authority in China to justify its tough, sometimes violent actions towards other nations. The animation's fans' pursuit for *moe* has concealed the fact that the ideology behind it is actually replacing the basic morality and sanity with appreciation for violence and bullying.

Likewise, the *moe* effect is also achieved at the expense of racism towards other nations or races. For instance, in the same episode about China's financial support for African countries, the dark skinned hippos are portrayed as so unintelligent that they don't even know the answer to the question "1+1=?" In the animation, the Rabbit delightfully says, "you are so simple-minded! Now that all the other animals don't play with me, we can become friends!" (Figure 9) Not only does the animation stigmatize the African people as unintelligent barbarians, it also simplifies and romanticizes the Socialist China's relation with Africa as two little animals play together. Although

in this case, the animation seems to go against the Party's consistent rhetoric of "uniting African brothers." The difference in species paves way for the nationalistic rhetoric in the conventional propaganda of the Communist Party.^{iv}

The Power Intervention in the Promotion of *Year, Hare, Affair*

According to Hall, the meaning can never be fixed, but power will always want to make attempts to fix it through means of intervention ("Encoding, decoding" 96). The promotion of the animation by the propaganda institutions of the Communist Party in China is exactly an attempt to fix the meaning of the animation's allegories. While the *moe* effect of the animation immediately won high clicks online for it, what makes *Year, Hare, Affair* particularly influential among the Chinese internet users was the public praise and promotion from the official social network accounts run by the governmental propaganda institutions such as Communist Youth League and Xinhua News Agency. In this section, I will discuss why and how this animation is used by Communist Youth League's social media accounts as a new form of propaganda.

To start, we can look into the means of intervention the Chinese government is currently conducting. In the last fifteen years, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (*abbr.* SARFT; He, "China's ban") has created a series of regulations on the censorship over cultural products, including a ban on homosexual relationships and a ban on the usage of dialects on TV (SARFT, "Notification"). Meanwhile, the government has been encouraging the domestic cultural industry to deliver the mainstream values. The domestic animation industry has been one of its main focuses since the end of last century with financial support growing over the last ten years (Saito, 142). Under these circumstances, it is not a surprise to see the domestic animation *Year, Hare, Affair* is welcomed by the government. As said before, all these attempts are examples of what Hall would call power interventions to *fix* meanings: "what

ideology tries to do, [...] what power in signification is intended to do [is] to close language, to close meaning, to stop the flow” (“Race, Representation and the Media” 19). It is not about whether foreign or grassroots cultural products contain information that is potentially “harmful”, rather, it is the power’s nature that requires it to be the only and absolute authority to take charge of the register of meaning/interpretation to any kind of image that is viewed by the public.

Furthermore, *Year, Hare, Affair* received particular attention from the Communist Youth League (CYL)^v because the Chinese government is well aware of the importance of naturalizing dominant ideologies among young people. In 2015, the Weibo account of the Central Communist Youth League (CCYL) started to share and compliment the animation since the third episode of the first season aired. Afterwards, it constantly follows up with updates and starts to address the account’s patriotic young followers as Rabbits. Also, the language this account uses gradually assimilates into the colloquial language in the animation, unlike the traditional distant dogmatic rhetoric. Internet users have recognized this as the League to be “selling *moe*”, meaning, using tricks that arouse *moe* to lure followers. And it works – the mascot League Rabbit (adapted from the animation) is warmly welcomed; the CCYL’s Weibo account has gained five million followers; many Weibo users use lines in *Year, Hare, Affair* in the comment session below CCYL’s posts. In a word, by learning to re-code the Party’s *fixed*, unquestionable narrative into the young Internet users’ language, the power has reached an agreement with the young recipients who are willing to learn the cultural codes that are not only engaging, but also praised by the authority that they recognize and adore.

Conclusion

The animation *Year, Hare, Affair* is an attempt to fix the meaning in a new way of encoding. By making use of *moe*, the animation uses animal fetishism to disavow and romanticize the

problematic violent history and racist ideology so that the message is naturalized for the young viewers. The satisfaction one gets from the *moe* contents encourages the viewers to invest their emotion and identity into the animation's characters and narrative. In this way, the governmental propaganda has gone deep into the viewers' individual experiences and won itself a group of devoted young followers who believe in both the ideological propaganda and the justice in the authority's potentially violent or conspiratorial diplomatic decisions. However, despite the seeming success of this animation, meaning is always fluid and can never be fixed ("Race, Representation and the Media" 19). While in China we are witnessing a developing conservative attitude towards the cultural industry, it is also true that the official discourse is now only a part of public opinion. The traditional political power that is able to control the entire public opinion is replaced by a struggling political power that wants to win back its power from the public by assimilating itself into the ecosystem of the internet. While we will always stay alert to the expansion of political power over the means of representation, this assimilating gesture gives us the confidence that the power is making compromise and is exploring possible negotiation with the nature of fluid meaning.

ⁱ Animation (or anime) and comics (or manga) along with video games and novels, are often referred to as ACGN (sometimes only ACG, dropping the novel part) by the fans of Japanese popular culture around the world. It has now become a subculture in which participants take virtual characters and products as a way of living, meaning, they believe virtual characters or fantasy world deserves as much, if not more of their emotion or affection than actual people in their real lives. This kind of subculture is also known as the Two-Dimensional (in Japanese kanji: 二次元) in order to differentiate itself from the real world, or the Three-Dimensional (in Japanese kanji: 三次元). The concepts discussed in this article, including *moe* and *bishojo*, are all generated, popularized and shared within this ACGN subculture.

ⁱⁱ A survey conducted by Yang Xue in 2016 shows that over 67% of the total 306 respondents (aged between 19 and 25 years old) associate the term *moe* with young girls and animals, rather than a certain feeling or an affection (Yang, 80-82).

ⁱⁱⁱ Bullet screen comments, or, in Chinese, dàn mù (弹幕), is a type of real-time overlaying subtitle system for interactive playback experience. Comments typed in by viewers are shared on the screen at the exact same time as the video goes on so the viewers who view later will see the comments as they watch the video. It is a popular form of commenting on the ACG products. In mainland China, the biggest host for this kind of subtitles are Bilibili.com and AcFun.com. For more information on this, ref. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bilibili>.

^{iv} In fact, the Communist Party's ideology is always Sinocentric, hence it never quite supports the civil rights movement in the West in the sense of racial equality, but interprets it with Marxist revolutionary theory, as a process

of liberation for the exploited class.

∨ The youth branch of the Communist Party of China, one that plays an active role in propagandizing political ideology among the nation's youngsters, who are officially defined as people aged between fourteen and twenty-eight)

Appendix: Illustrations



Figure 1: *Year, Hare, Affair*. Dir. Shi Yi (十一). Season 1, Episode 3, 5:50. 2015. Screen shot. The subtitle explains the real photo was taken at the battle of Chosin Reservoir in North Korea in November 1950 when the People's Volunteer Army of China was attacking the besieged American troops.



Figure 2: *Year, Hare, Affair*. Dir. Shi Yi (十一). Season 1, Episode 9, 5:14. 2015. Screen shot. The subtitle explains that it is a photo taken when the staff at China's nuclear plant pressed the button of China's first nuclear bomb on October 16th, 1964.



Figure 3. *Year, Hare, Affair*. Dir. Shi Yi (十一). Season 1, Episode 10, 6:53. 2015. Screen shot. The subtitle explains the picture was taken on April 1st, 1950 when P. R. China and India established a diplomatic relation. The Rabbit is placed next to Zhou Enlai, P. R. China's then Foreign Minister, and the Elephant, the symbol of India in this animation, is placed next to Jawaharlal Nehru.



Figure 4. *Year, Hare, Affair*. Dir. Shi Yi (十一). Season 1, Episode 9, 1:50. 2015. Screen shot. On this screen shot, the bullet screen is made of comments from various viewers who identify themselves as a Rabbit by posting their year of birth (the Arabic number at the beginning of each comment), their major/occupation and the title Rabbit on the screen. Also, from this list, one can tell the active viewers of the animation are very young, mostly born after the year 1995.

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