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DOI:
[10.1162/ARTM_a_00199](https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00199)

Document Version
Final published version

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Holmes, R. (2018). Meanwhile in China ... Miao Ying and the Rise of Chinternet Ugly. *ARTMargins*, 7(1), 31. Article 26. https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00199

Published in:
ARTMargins

Citing this paper
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MEANWHILE IN CHINA . . . MIAO YING AND THE RISE OF CHINTERNET UGLY

ROS HOLMES

Kitsch, self-consciously amateur, unashamedly artless: these might be appropriate descriptions for *Meanwhile in China*, an online-exhibition series of Internet artworks created by Miao Ying in 2014. Combining GIFs, appropriated advertisements, online videos, and Internet poetry in a torrent of synthesized imagery and text, these works bring together the specter of online censorship and *Shanzhai* [fake or pirated] aesthetics with a deliberate disavowal of the commodity fetishization and online self-posturing that have come to characterize China's digital realm in the early 21st century.¹ Their self-conscious celebration of the amateur and the ugly similarly present a triumphant vision of digital parochialism that is inherently at odds with the avowed internationalism of the new-media art currently emerging from China's contemporary art world.²

In 1994, when China first connected to the World Wide Web, "Chinese" contemporary art was undergoing an unprecedented surge

1 Fang Yi, "Ershiyi shiji yilai woguo qingshaonian wangluo wenti yanjiu shuping" [Research Review of the Problems of Internet Usage among Young People in 21st-Century China], *Zhongguo Qingnian Yanjiu* [China Youth Research], no. 3 (2006): 65–72.

2 See, for example, the press release for *Qi Wu Deng Guan—2014 Guoji Xin Meiti Yishu San Nian Zhan* [Thingworld—International Triennial of New-Media Art] (exhibition presented by the National Art Museum of China, June 11–July 6, 2014), www.namoc.org/zsjs/zlzx/201405/t20140526_277449.htm.

in demand in the global artistic arena. This demand grew steadily throughout the 1990s, galvanized both by the country's burgeoning economy and by the new geographies of access opened up by the exigencies of globalization, in which art from previously marginalized countries was suddenly thrust into the tectonic undertow of international biennials, museums, and auction houses. In a process aimed at destabilizing pre-existing center/periphery dynamics, these developments sought to remove the "Chinese" component from the weaker side of the equation, promoting a universality that nevertheless frequently worked to affirm the otherness of this art from "elsewhere" as a marketable counterimage to Western neoliberalism.³

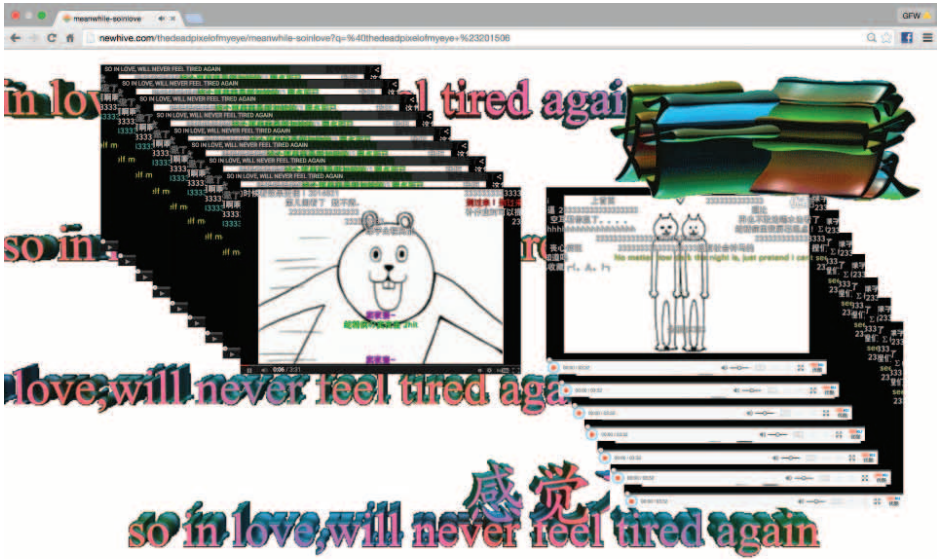
In 1998, the same year in which major exhibitions—*Inside Out: New Chinese Art* and *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*—opened at the Asia Society, P.S.1, and the Guggenheim in New York, Chinese Internet users reached one million. By the mid 2000s, when it seemed that demand for works of art from the world's fastest-growing economy had reached its apotheosis, China's aggressive broadband rollouts facilitated the art market's expansion online, capitalizing on an invigorated domestic market. Today, China is the second largest economy in the world, home not only to an ever-expanding museum and gallery system, but also to 731 million Internet users, 297 million micro-bloggers, 695 million Internet mobile phone users, and four of the top ten Internet companies in the world, including e-commerce giant Alibaba, social-media and gaming company Tencent, and search specialists Baidu.⁴

The economic benefit of fostering communications technology has been clearly recognized by the Chinese state, who promoted information and communications technology as one of the "four modernizations," resulting in an Internet "that has global features yet has assumed distinctly Chinese characteristics."⁵ These characteristics encompass the cultural and linguistic features of Chinese websites, but also extend to the more pernicious aspects of online censorship,

3 Anna Brzyski, "By Whose Rules? Contemporary Art and the Geography of Art Historic Significance," *Artl@s Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 46–51.

4 "Di 39 ci Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao" [The 39th China Internet Development Statistics Report], provided by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), January 2017, www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201701/P020170123364672657408.pdf.

5 Guobin Yang, "A Chinese Internet? History, Practice, and Globalization," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 5, no. 1 (March 2012): 49–54.



Miao Ying. *Hao ai, ganjue bu hui zai lei le* 好爱, 感觉不会再累了 [So in Love, Will Never Feel Tired Again], 2014. Browser-based (GIFs, video-sharing website, still image). Image courtesy of the artist.

Internet surveillance, and the contingencies of political control. Viewed collectively, these sinicizations illustrate how the Internet in China “has become domesticated to the extent that it is now possible, even necessary, to talk about the Chinese Internet, as opposed to the Internet in China.”⁶ While the coevolution of the Chinese art world and the country’s online sphere thus traces a developmental arc to an unparalleled ascendancy, the Chinese government’s embrace of the digital realm has presented a paradox in terms of the political, cultural, and artistic consequences of the widespread adoption of the Internet in an authoritarian society.

As recent scholarship has been quick to point out, “Defying such prevailing techno-utopian predictions that the Internet sides with freedom and undermines autocratic rulers, Beijing has so far managed to weave and guard an expanding filtered web.”⁷ It has achieved this thanks to the so-called Great Firewall, the semipermeable membrane that blocks tens of thousands of websites deemed inimical to the CCP’s legitimacy, while remaining porous enough, until recently, to enable the country’s intellectuals and artists to circumvent its restrictions

6 Yang, “A Chinese Internet?,” 49.

7 Min Jiang, “The Coevolution of the Internet, (Un)Civil Society, and Authoritarianism in China,” in *The Internet, Social Media and a Changing China*, ed. Jacques deLisle, Avery Goldstein, and Guobin Yang (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 29.

with the help of virtual private networks (VPNs).⁸ As state power continuously builds new boundaries to curb information flow, the government's avowed policy of cyber sovereignty, which former "Internet czar" Lu Wei referred to as "traveling on a path of 'cyber-governance with Chinese characteristics,'" has done little to quell mounting anxieties over China's growing economic dominance as well as the country's efforts to redefine itself as a benign 21st-century superpower.⁹

In this context, it is hardly surprising that the same binaries, of "access versus restriction," "freedom of speech versus repression," and "media democracy versus autocracy," have come to define non-Chinese scholarship regarding the Internet in China, just as they continue to persist in writings on Chinese contemporary art. As Craig Clunas remarked in an article dealing with "The Art of Global Comparisons," the operation of these forms of "pre-existent knowledge" has served to reinforce certain narrative veins over others, resulting in the entrenchment of established art historical hierarchies: "putting the Other in its place has always been one of the acts that made the constitution of a history of art, particularly a singular story of art, possible."¹⁰ Despite the technological advancements of today's hyper-networked, media-tized art world, it would appear that the portrayal of contemporary Chinese artistic development as inextricably bound to economic and political liberation persists not only because it chimes with Cold War teleology but because the asymmetries of knowledge that it promotes often sit comfortably with efforts to make art (and technology) from a different country intelligible in terms of our own political and societal concerns and biases.

How, then, to deal with the perceived double bind of producing contemporary "Chinese" Internet art—namely art that, according to Zhang Ga, "is primarily experienced via browsers and computer net-

8 In July 2017, the Chinese government told telecommunications carriers to block individuals' access to VPNs by February 1, 2018. See "Beijing Reportedly Orders Ban on All Personal VPN Accounts by February," *South China Morning Post*, July 11, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2lV32do>.

9 Lu Wei, "Dandang daguo zeren gong jian wangluo kongjian mingyun gongtongti" [The Responsibility of World Powers to Steer the Fate of Cyberspace Communities], Cyberspace Administration of China, posted April 27, 2016, www.cac.gov.cn/2016-04/28/c_1118761681.htm.

10 Craig Clunas, "The Art of Global Comparisons," in *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century*, ed. Maxine Berg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165.

works”¹¹ or, in Josephine Bosma’s words, is “created from an awareness of, or deep involvement in, a world transformed and affected by elaborate technical ensembles”?¹² The recent establishment of new-media departments in China’s major art academies, alongside the emergence of galleries dedicated to the display and circulation of such art, and the inauguration in 2014 of a major international prize for net art, has inevitably served to amplify the visibility of Internet art practices within China.¹³ While it is perhaps prudent to regard these developments as the latest in a long line of government-sponsored soft power initiatives, the rise of Internet art practices within the country has been embedded from the outset in a much larger media ecology and social process, one in which the artistic impact of the Internet has been mediated through a complex mix of social, economic, political, and institutional circumstances.

As early as 2000, exhibitions featuring an array of established figures, from Song Dong to Lin Yilin and Chen Shaoxiong, sought to examine the impact of the Internet on the country’s contemporary art scene, yet arguably only with the generation of artists born predominantly in the 1980s has the potential of digital technologies been fully embraced and brought to greater critical and curatorial attention.¹⁴ Miao Ying’s practice is frequently situated among an emerging generation of Chinese artists influenced by “post-Internet” or new-media art, including Xu Wenkai (Aajiao)’s, Jin Ningning’s, Wang Yuyang’s, and Lin Ke’s manipulations of found digital materials and standard software programs; the augmented reality of Shen Xin and Lu Yang; the celebratory pop aesthetics of Ye Funa and Chen Tianzhuo; and the veneration of the ugly and the artless evident in the works of Liang Shuo,

11 Zhang Ga, “Guoji wangluo yishu dajiang pingjiang shiming” [Prix Net Art Prize Mission], <https://cn.prix-netart.org>.

12 Josephine Bosma, *Nettitudes: Let’s Talk Net Art* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2011), 25.

13 The China Academy of Art’s New Media Center in Hangzhou and the Loft New Media Art Center in Beijing were both founded in 2001. Chronus Art Center was established in 2013 and is China’s first nonprofit art organization dedicated to the presentation, creation, and study of media art. The “Guoji wangluo yishu dajiang” [Prix Net Art] was originally established in collaboration with the Tsinghua Art and Science Media Laboratory and Rhizome.

14 2000 Nian Zhongguo Wangluo Sheying Yingxiang Yishu [China Internet, Video and Photo Art 2000] (exhibition presented by the Jinlin Academy of Fine Arts, Changchun, January 8–February 12, 2000); Di San Xing Wangluo Yishu. Zhongguo [The Third Sex—Internet Art. China] (exhibition presented by Beida Online, Beijing, October 1–November 30, 2000).

Guan Xiao, Liu Yefu, and Liao Guohe.¹⁵ As the first generation to have grown up with mass digital technology, adept at maintaining parallel selves on social media, their practice not only confronts the complex and contradictory facets of China's online culture (as seen in Miao Ying's 2016 work *Chinternet Plus*)¹⁶ but also interrogates the increasingly mediated nature of contemporary life through the hybridization of digital and physical forms.

Already the focus of several major exhibitions and group shows, these artists have found a receptive audience among a younger generation of gallery-goers and collectors who are fully conversant with the aesthetics of Internet memes, WeChat stickers, and GIFs and the valences of photo filters, and who are accustomed to navigating online exhibitions, WeChat galleries, and other innovative artistic initiatives capitalizing on the popularity of social-media platforms.¹⁷

In contrast to the sleek aesthetics of many new-media artists, Miao's practice revels in eschewing technical mastery in favor of lo-fi aesthetics, old school "dirt-style" web design, and an eclectic repurposing of the copy-and-paste imagery that proliferates in the creative recesses of the *Chinternet*.¹⁸ Why has Miao chosen to work in this style, glorifying the so-called limitations of China's online realm? And what does her celebration of Chinternet aesthetics reveal about assumptions surrounding the perennially sensitive issues of online censorship,

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- 15 Most accounts agree that the term "post-Internet" was first coined by the artist Marisa Olson and developed further by Gene McHugh in the critical blog *Post Internet*, during its activity between December 2009 and September 2010. A contentious term that has elicited much scholarly debate, it is frequently employed to summarize the impact of networked technologies on artistic production. See Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter, eds., *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015). See also Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, *Art Post-Internet*, pdf exhibition catalog <http://post-inter.net>. The term was transliterated into Chinese as *Hou Wangluo Yishu* 后网络艺术.
- 16 *Chinternet Plus* is an installation featuring found-video collages and wall texts that reference the "Great Firewall" and satirize the government's cybersecurity initiatives, specifically its big-data initiative "Internet Plus." The installation was originally commissioned by Rhizome and the New Museum and was later exhibited in Beijing as part of *The New Normal: China, Art and 2017* (UCCA).
- 17 Such online initiatives include www.netize.net; Wenhuaguan 文化馆 [Culture Pavilion], a virtual gallery designed for WeChat; and Chronus Art Center's online activities. Selected exhibitions focusing on these artists include *ON/OFF: China's Young Artists in Concept and Practice* (UCCA, 2013); *Art Post-Internet* (UCCA, 2014); *The Ballad of Generation Y* (OCAT Shanghai, 2015); *Hack Space* (K11 Art Foundation, 2016); and *.com/cn* (K11 and MoMA PS1, 2017).
- 18 The neologism *Chinternet* is a portmanteau of *China* and the *Internet*, reflecting this so-called Internet with Chinese characteristics.

media democracy, and the tensions wrought by digital divides? In this article, I first look at Miao's self-conscious embrace of the Chinese web's vernacular in two of her online works: *LAN Love Poem* and *iPhone Garbage*. I examine these works' recontextualization of visual elements usually upheld as emblematic signifiers of the Chinternet's parochialism, insularity, and state strictures, reading them in direct relation to the emergence of countercultural discourses such as the *Diaosi* meme and the rise of *Shanzhai* aesthetics. Placing Miao's often humorous employment of elements from popular culture in relation to the global circulation of "poor images," I explore how these artworks have been made possible by the dramatic impact of digital, networked, and mobile technologies on contemporary Chinese society. Finally, I examine whether Miao's distinct anti-aesthetic can be read as an attempt to destigmatize preconceptions about China's online realm by reasserting the value of vernacular creativity emerging from the world's largest online community.

While Miao's studied political ambivalence and celebration of ostensibly superficial aspects of online culture could be read as a gesture of resistance against critics that have rightly condemned China's censorship regime, I argue that humor is deployed throughout the artist's work as a kind of winking subterfuge masking critical implications. While many may dismiss this type of surface inquiry as ineffectual, Miao offers an unapologetic reappraisal of the counterfeit and the contrived as a means to probe deeper socio-political and economic concerns, including the consequences of neoliberal outsourcing; the psychological effects of censorship; the politics of representation, class, and nation; and the human impact of "The China Model," which has promoted economic ascendancy at the cost of political freedom. As Guobin Yang notes, this inquiry assumes added significance because a "deep-China" approach may also entail in-depth analyses of the surface of China, especially since "many aspects of this surface—the institutions, policies, and market activities of the Chinese internet—call for deeper analyses."¹⁹

Dissecting the multifaceted and complex dimensions of China's digital spaces, my contention is that much is to be gained from broadening the examination of artists' engagements with online culture beyond the contours of existing scholarship, especially in relation to

19 Guobin Yang, ed., *China's Contested Internet* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015), 14.

China, where utopian and technologically determinist arguments regarding the potential of the Internet still dominate. In sketching out a comparative account of Miao's work within a wider global framework, my goal is furthermore to read the artistic intents and functions of this work against the theoretical frameworks for Internet art practices that have been set up by Western precedent, and in so doing, hopefully to reveal some of the blind spots and elisions that still condition the critical evaluation and reception of Internet art, both within China and beyond its borders.

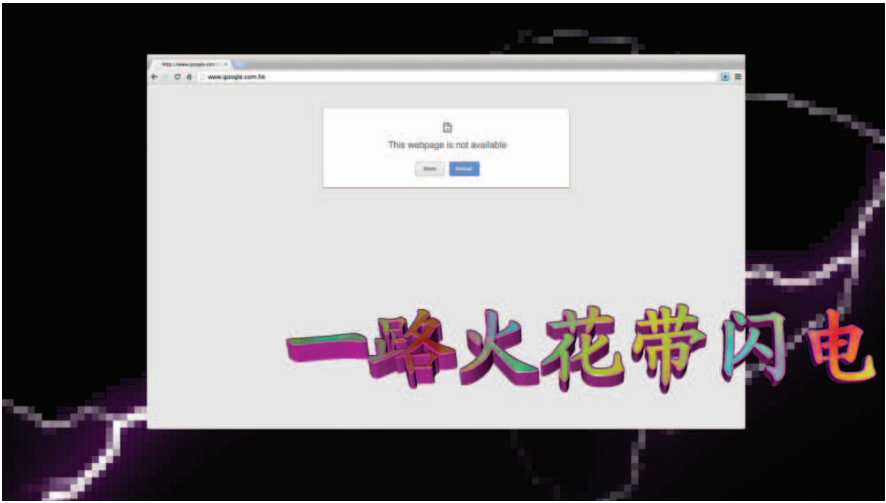
LAN LOVE POEM

Comprising eight online works, *Meanwhile in China . . . So in Love, Will Never Feel Tired Again* was the title adopted for Miao's solo online exhibition, hosted by Netizenet in 2014.²⁰ The exhibition not only commented on the cultural clichés that are often primary fodder for Internet memes, but also highlighted how the attention economy of meme culture often thrives on differences in symbolic power and the appetite for a visual culture of cultural difference. Miao's *Meanwhile in China* is a playful and ironic reference to the original "Meanwhile in X" meme, which first circulated online in Australia in 2010. The meme gained popularity through its employment of a simple picture and caption as a means of illustrating ridiculous and absurd situations that were easily identified as stereotypical of a certain ethnicity, nationality, occupation, or subculture.²¹ Spreading rapidly to Internet users around the world, it became a favorite material to repost on image board sites, blog networks, and aggregation services. Miao's *Meanwhile in China* satirically appropriated the meme's deployment of cultural stereotypes to examine some of the abiding assumptions regarding China's online sphere.

If memes often rely on a combination of visual and textual materials and references in order to construct humorous parodies of existing issues, then the *LAN Love Poem* series is no exception. In these works,

20 The exhibition was curated by Michelle Proksell and commissioned by the online archive Netize.net in collaboration with the multimedia publishing platform NewHive. The exhibition can be viewed online at <http://newhive.com/thedeadpixelofmyeye/meanwhilepostfinal?q=%40thedeadpixelofmyeye+%23yingmiaomeanwhile>. Several of the works were also featured in *Folklore of the Cyber World* (exhibition presented online by Chronus Art Center for the Chinese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, May 9–November 22, 2015).

21 Examples can be found at Know Your Meme: The Definitive Internet Meme Database, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/meanwhile-in>.



Miao Ying. *Juyuwang qingshi—Shou na caidao kan wangxian, yilu huohua dai nei dian* 局域网情诗-手拿菜刀砍网线, 一路火花带闪电 [LAN Love Poem—Holding a Kitchen Knife Cut Internet Cable, a Road with Lightning Sparks], 2014. GIF animation, 5,000 × 2,812 pixels, 16:9. Image courtesy of the artist.

Miao employs the *Meanwhile in China* trope to address the country's quest for cyber sovereignty. Each image features a screenshot of censored websites, including Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, complete with the usual automated messages that appear when users seek to access them from Mainland China without using a VPN: "Safari can't connect to the server," "This webpage is not available," or "This page can't be displayed," visual reminders of the circumscriptions enforced by the Great Firewall of China. These screenshots are framed by a background of eight-bit Internet landscapes²² that depict a variety of deserted environments, including sand-swept scenes scattered with the remains of classical ruins; brooding, blood-red skies replete with crows scavenging for carrion amidst tumbleweeds; and wintry landscapes shrouded in snow.

The synthesis of these two visuals could be interpreted as a wry commentary on the misconception that the Internet in China is nothing but a barren wasteland, a space censored to the point of sterility, and therefore devoid of any meaningful creative expression. However, against these visuals Miao projects excerpts from "Internet poems," purposefully delineated in animated three-dimensional GIF typography that accentuates their intrusion into the flat space of the foreground. Miao in fact appropriated these "poems" from the QQ

22 In computer architecture, an *eight-bit Internet landscape* refers to eight-bit integers, memory addresses, or other data units that contain at most eight bits (1 byte).



Miao Ying. *Juyuwang qingshi—Sinian shi bieyang de meili* 局域网情诗·思念是别样的美丽 [LAN Love Poem—To Be Missed Is Another Kind of Beauty]. 2014. GIF animation, 5,000 × 2,812 pixels, 16:9. Image courtesy of the artist.

signatures of other *Wangmin* [netizens].²³ Displayed in both Chinese and English, the intentionally poor translations of these texts appear as humorous embodiments of Chinglish²⁴ expressions that frequently circulate online: *Shou na caidao kan wangxian, yilu huohua dai nei dian* 手拿菜刀砍网线, 一路火花带内电 [Holding a Kitchen Knife Cut Internet Cable, a Road with Lightning Sparks], *Xiangyan aishang huochai, jiu zhuding bei shanghai* 香烟爱上火柴, 就注定被伤害 [When Cigarettes Fall in Love with Matches, the Cigarette Gets Burned], and *Sinian shi bieyang de meili* 思念是别样的美丽 [To Be Missed Is Another Kind of Beauty].

The inclusion of the Chinglish texts here is not arbitrary, especially given that the dynamics of Chinglish illuminate a wider set of sociocultural processes and concerns.²⁵ Often used to derogatively label English considered to be nonstandard or inflected by Chinese, the discourse of Chinglish represents larger geopolitical anxieties about

23 Tencent is China's largest Internet company, which was originally built around its QQ instant messenger. This application was first released in China in February 1999 under the name of OICQ QQ, and quickly it became China's first ubiquitous social network. In addition to instant messaging, the current version offers a variety of interlinked services, including online games, music, shopping, microblogging, movies, and group and voice chat.

24 Chinglish, also known as *Engrish*, refers to spoken or written English language that is macaronically influenced by the Chinese language.

25 Eric Steven Henry, "Interpretations of 'Chinglish': Native Speakers, Language Learners and the Enregisterment of a Stigmatized Code," *Language in Society* 39, no. 5 (2010): 669–88.

nationalism and modernization in a global context.²⁶ By making the animated typography of the Chinese and the Chinglish text continually rotate and dance across the screen, however, Miao enacts a reversal of the texts' semiotic power. By raising Chinglish from a site of linguistic subordination to a newfound position of lexical authority, Miao's work highlights how the growing linguistic confidence of Chinese in the international arena has translated into a re-evaluation of the legitimacy of Chinglish as syntactical code.

The text's appearance in both languages, floating next to each other against the incongruous background of censored screenshots, thus reinforces this short-circuiting of the power structures of online communication. Miao's choice of the Taobao 3-D font,²⁷ a visually eye-catching red-and-gold typeface inspired by the gimmicky aesthetics of China's largest online retail portal, ensures that the dialect of the text in many ways mimics the visual aesthetic of the surrounding images: everything is unsettlingly mutable and contextless. By isolating and replicating this distinct form of Internet idiolect, Miao celebrates the text's original absurdity and the ephemeral nature of its creation and replication, as well as the often low-tech and whimsical nature of China's online platforms. Miao's visual paean to the localized aesthetics of the Chinese Internet not only serves to define the unique characteristics that typify China's online sphere but also offers a repudiation of the imposition of global linguistic and cultural conventions.

By titling the work *LAN Love Poem*, where LAN stands for local area network,²⁸ Miao makes it abundantly clear that, far from lamenting or decrying the denial of access to Google, Facebook, or YouTube, the work represents a celebration of the local, a humorous reappraisal of Chinglish poetics, and the elevation of this anti-aesthetic to the level of art. Miao employs the digital aesthetic style of Chinternet Ugly (discussed in the following section) to effectively critique the bland, safe formulas of mainstream media and the increasing professionalization

26 Wang Xin, "Saochu zhongshi yingyu: Yi chang bi da zhi zhang-jiu lutou she yi ze xiaoxi qian tan qufen zhongshi yingyu he Zhongguo yingyu de biyao xing" [Eliminating Chinglish: A Necessary Battle—A Brief Discussion of the Necessity of Differentiating Chinese English from Chinglish on Reuters], *Gaige yu kaifang* [Reform and Opening], no. 9 (2009): 183–85.

27 Taobao is the largest website for online shopping in China and is operated by the Alibaba Group.

28 Netizens frequently refer to the filtered, monitored version of the Internet available in China as "Da Zhonghua Juyuwang" [The Great Chinese LAN].



Miao Ying. *Juyuwang qingshi—Hua luo jin, niao fei jue* 局域网情诗-花落尽,鸟飞绝 [LAN Love Poem—Flowers All Fallen, Birds Far Gone], 2014. GIF animation, 5,000 × 2,812 pixels, 16:9. Image courtesy of the artist.

and standardization of the “global” Internet, in which regional variations are gradually eroded in favor of a universal pictorial language.

Offering an amalgamation of the diverse ephemera of China’s online sphere, *LAN Love Poem* acknowledges the paradox that domestic interest in foreign sites within China is often low to begin with—a consequence not only of digital or democratic divides, but also of linguistic and commercial ones. With information technology and the mass media flourishing as never before in China, and tech companies offering a range of digital capabilities and interlinked services that currently exceed anything envisaged in the West, the vast majority of the country’s online inhabitants are happy to remain within the confines of its continuously expanding architecture.²⁹ *LAN Love Poem* thus accentuates the distinct nature of commercial platforms such as Taobao, which is often erroneously compared to Amazon or Ebay, but has in fact developed social characteristics quite distinct from its non-Chinese counterparts.

In a marked departure from the Western model of single-purpose online providers, Chinese web giants Tencent, Alibaba (which owns Taobao), Baidu, and others have prioritized hybrid development, enabling features of social media to be embedded within them and thus facilitating expansion into a vast array of interlinked digital services. Tencent, for example, has significant interests in e-commerce, online and social gaming, online ads, news and entertainment portals, and dozens of mobile apps. This diversification has also been facilitated

29 Jiang Qiping, “‘Hulianwang+’ yu Zhongguo jingji de weilai xingtai” [“Internet+” and the Future Form of China’s Economy], *Renmin Luntan* [Frontiers], no. 10 (2015): 52–63.

by the development of online payment services, (often referred to as “digital wallets”), which has resulted in a more effective monetization of social-media platforms. As recent research has highlighted, “All of the above suggests that rather than looking for an autonomous effect of social media on commerce, we should see social media as simply part of a new fusion of personal, commercial and communicative developments.”³⁰

Rejecting the digital ecosystems of the “global Internet,” with its Silicon Valley–dominated companies, Chinese netizens and mobile users are offered sufficient—and sufficiently mature—choices by local companies to ensure that they rarely venture beyond China’s digital frontiers, a situation that enables the Chinese government to effectively herd its Internet users toward methods of communication that it can more reliably monitor. As a result, the real centerpiece of China’s system of information control is not just censorship and restriction, but also distraction, a condition enabled by the vastness and fluidity of its online infrastructure, one that successfully keeps users “captive” among its sophisticated systems. Miao’s work thus accentuates how the sheer volume of Internet users in China ensures that the country is effectively becoming its own online center of gravity, one with the power to create its own sphere of influence over network norms.

Contrary to Claire Bishop’s assertion of artists’ desires to create a visual archive of their online discoveries and searches via “the pursuit of impromptu, subjective connections via the aleatory free association of navigating the Web,”³¹ in *LAN Love Poem* Miao satirizes the boundedness of Internet searches in China, exploring the psychology of limitation in what she has referred to as her Stockholm syndrome approach to the Chinese Internet: “Censorship is like a bad lover you can’t get rid of, or a chronic case of Stockholm syndrome, in that you become dependent on the trauma. This type of love, which occurs in an isolated environment, sees the kidnapper, the person who makes the rules, become so powerful that the hostage gradually falls in love with them.”³²

30 Daniel Miller et al., *How the World Changed Social Media* (London: UCL Press, 2016), 93.

31 Claire Bishop, “Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media,” *Artforum* (September 2012): 439.

32 Miao Ying, quoted in Chen Jingyin, “Miao Ying yu hulianwang de langman guanxi: Zhongguo wangmin minjian jingshen denglu Niuyue” [Miao Ying’s Romantic Relationship with the Internet: The Spirit of Chinese Netizens Arrives in New York], *Artnet News*, July 2, 2016, <https://www.artnetnews.cn/art-world/miaoyingyuhulianwangdelangmanguanxizhongguowangminminjianjingshendengluniuyue-36851>.

Exposing the despondent, even dystopian effects of living in a surveillance state, one that automatically engenders acts of self-censorship from those wary of the disciplinary implications of traversing the unknown and often unknowable line between what is permissible and what is not, Miao's work attests that a significant psychological price is paid for being constantly aware of the variety of ways in which your activity can be monitored and tracked. In a choice between paranoid vigilance and easy participation, few choose paranoia, a moral compromise that ensures that the state, constantly wary of any potential threats to its stability, secures many netizens' continued complacency.

While *LAN Love Poem* thus exposes the vulnerability of the Chinese Internet to political control, ironically it also highlights the sociability, liveliness, and resourcefulness of online culture. Articulating an inventiveness born of limitations and restrictions, Miao asserts that creative constraints can paradoxically be empowering, because they necessitate infinite ingenuity on the part of China's Internet users, a community that must continually evade state strictures as they navigate between China's online and offline spaces. This does not suggest, however, that the artist is some kind of crypto-nationalist, complicit in the state rhetoric of a "civilized Internet" and the promotion of "online harmony,"³³ but rather that she directly challenges dichotomous and reductive ways of thinking about China's online culture, by producing works that refuse to reduce the history of the Internet to a simple story of resistance versus control or state versus society. Emphasizing the heterogeneity of responses to censorship, which are frequently neither entirely counter-cultural nor unashamedly pro-system, the artist advocates an eclectic and confident integration of the paradigm of restriction that is seen as foundational to the Chinese Internet. She does so as a means of rejecting the epistemological and power hierarchy of "freedom of access versus restriction," with its ineluctable imbrication in the unequal relationship between China and the West, in favor of the more ambiguous and, one could argue, insidious reality of Internet use as a form of psychological conditioning. Her work therefore questions the extent to which the Internet—not just within China, but also beyond its borders—can function as a social, ideological, or cultural tool of self-

33 The promotion of *Wenming* [civility] and *Hexie* [harmony] in Chinese official discourse is widely regarded as a feature of state propaganda and censorship. See Astrid Nordin and Lisa Richaud, "Subverting Official Language and Discourse in China? Type River Crab for Harmony," *China Information* 28, no. 1 (2014): 47–67.

empowerment, given that the idealized notion of a wide-open Web where hyperlinks from site to site have created a nonhierarchical and decentralized network of information has largely been supplanted by platforms designed to maximize our time within their walls.

CHINTERNET UGLY AND ONLINE “LOSERS”

In *LAN Love Poem*, Miao locates an abject beauty in the way that modern technology is doomed to obsolescence. Drawing attention to the artistic merit and value of mainstream user-generated content, whose visual manifestations frequently range from the banal to the kitsch to the ugly, her employment of rudimentary eight-bit landscapes, Taobao 3-D animated typography, and Internet love poems does not mock but, rather, celebrates the amateur aesthetic and messy vitality of the early Internet, a frontier that is being paved over by the homogenized tools of “advanced” Web design. She thus accentuates a nostalgic affection for an era when the Internet was less globally integrated, professional, and sleek.

Nick Douglas, writing for a special issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* on Internet memes, explored this topic more extensively in his provocatively titled article “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic.”³⁴ He defines *Internet Ugly* as a definable aesthetic running through meme culture, a celebration of the sloppy and the amateurish, whose visual elements combine poor grammar and spelling, human-made glitches, and rough photo manipulation as “an imposition of messy humanity upon an online world of smooth gradients, blemish correcting Photoshop, and Autocorrect. It exploits tools meant to smooth and beautify, using them to muss and distort.”³⁵ Visual examples of Internet Ugly that Douglas references range from rage comics,³⁶ to the popular Reddit blog “Shitty Watercolor,” to the Google Earth parody “Shitty Earth Porn,” many of which have already successfully crossed over into mainstream Internet culture in China.

Miao’s work creates a similar, “Chinternet Ugly” aesthetic, which in addition draws heavily on a distinctly Chinese form of online self-fashioning—namely the *Diaosi* 屌丝 meme, which has grown

34 Nick Douglas, “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (December 2014): 314–39.

35 Douglas, “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit,” 315.

36 Rage comics are web comics with characters, sometimes referred to as “rage faces,” that are often created with simple drawing software such as MS Paint. See <http://ragecollection.com>.

in popularity since it first emerged online in China in 2012.³⁷ *Diaosi* is a derisive term for a “self-deprecating loser”—originally coined to denigrate young people of lower social status, distinguished by their dead-end jobs, addiction to the Internet, cheap clothes, and *Shanzhai* phone—that has ironically been embraced by this group as a form of simultaneous self-mockery and self-affirmation.³⁸ The meme has been read as part of an emerging genre of grassroots practices characterized as *E’gao*, or “online parody,” which has recently attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention.³⁹ Defining “a popular subculture that is characterized by humor, revelry, subversion, grass roots spontaneity, defiance of authority, and technology,” the meme is an instantiation of a prevalent scatological online culture that defies the prevailing status quo.⁴⁰ More than just an uncouth caricature generated by China’s disaffected youth, the *Diaosi* meme has also emerged as a galvanizing imaginary for China’s Internet generation: a class of self-perceived urban underdogs who reject the rhetoric of the Chinese Dream, with its promise of upward social mobility.⁴¹

Diaosi culture pokes fun at the sociopolitical problems and malaise that ordinary Chinese people collectively experience online, by celebrating amateur aesthetics and venerating the self-declared “cultural loser” on the fringes of mainstream society. It embraces the self-ascribed epithet of *Diaosi*, *Ai cuo qiong* 矮矬穷 [short, ugly, and poor], as a counter-image to the *Gao fu shuai* 高富帅 [the tall, rich, and handsome]—those

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- 37 Dong Haijun and Huang Qiping, “Diaosi liuxing ji yiyun fenxi” [An Analysis of the Popularity and Implication of the *Diaosi* Meme], *Zhongguo Qingnian Yanjiu* [China Youth Study] 1 (2013): 5–8.
- 38 Zhang Huiyi, “‘Diaosi’: Diaosi xianxiang yu dangxia Zhongguo wenhua” [‘*Diaosi*’: The *Diaosi* Phenomenon and Contemporary Chinese Culture], *Mingzuo xinshang* [Masterpieces Review], no. 1 (2015): 95–101.
- 39 Li Sisi, “Ze shan yu e’gao: You ‘diaosi’ ruxuan kan wangluo yongyu de jiazhi quxiang” [Choosing between Virtue or Online Spoofs: *Diaosi* as an Entry Point into the Value Orientations of Online Language], *Jiangnan luntan* [Jiangnan Tribune], no. 5 (2013): 138–40; Peidong Yang, Lijun Tang, and Xuan Wang, “*Diaosi* as Infrapolitics: Scatological Tropes, Identity-Making and Cultural Intimacy on China’s Internet,” *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 2 (2014): 197–214; Marcella Szablewicz, “The ‘Losers’ of China’s Internet: Memes as ‘Structures of Feeling’ for Disillusioned Young Netizens,” *China Information* 28, no. 2 (July 2014): 259–75.
- 40 Huang Qing, “Parody Can Help Ease Work Pressure,” *China Daily*, July 22, 2006, www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2006-07/22/content_646887.htm. See also Meng Bingchun, “From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet,” *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1 (April 2011): 33–51.
- 41 Officially stated by President Xi Jinping in late 2012, the Chinese Dream is an ideological continuation of national rejuvenation, in which an important goal of the state is to produce China as a great cultural power through creativity and innovation.



Miao Ying, *Aifeng laji* 爱疯垃圾 [iPhone Garbage], 2014. Browser-based (GIFs, video-sharing website, still image). Image courtesy of the artist.

with status, success, and bright futures. In times of corporate social-networking platforms, viral infotainment, and participatory media, the *Diaosi* phenomenon brings visibility to a group of young people rendered otherwise invisible by a society in which success is often predicated solely on educational achievements and material wealth, and in which the fetishization of the commodity has usurped every value except the power of the state.⁴²

If the *Diaosi* online phenomenon represents a China coming to terms with the challenges and limitations of its rapid economic growth in the 21st century, the phenomenon similarly provides evidence of the importance of digital media in rejecting mainstream visions of how beauty, success, and aesthetic values continue to be defined. The ugliness and self-conscious celebration of the amateur, the pastiche, and the poor-quality valorized by *Diaosi* culture (and so evidently on display in Miao's work) is therefore indicative of wider issues at the confluence of culture, economy, media, and politics in the conjuncture of 21st-century China.

42 Liu Xingeng and Liu Jianya, "‘Diaosi’ xingfu gan: yingxiang yinsu yu tisheng celüe" [The Joy of Being a *Diaosi*: Influencing Factors and Promotional Strategies], *Zhongguo qingnian yanjiu* [China Youth Study] 1 (2013): 21–24.

Miao's hybrid images and composite visual configurations serve as a spatial metaphor for the ostensibly immaterial traffic of images online. Presenting cultural parallels with Hito Steyerl's definition of low-resolution digital images as "poor images" in today's "class society of images,"⁴³ Miao asserts in the *LAN Love Poem* series that the ugliness of the amateur Internet does not destroy its credibility, because the ugliness is actually a by-product of the medium's advantages—its speed and lack of curatorial control. As opposed to the more traditional state-controlled media in China, including television and print—where the amateurish is often marginalized and audience attention is clearly directed—the Internet can facilitate attention to the amateurish, the accidental, and the surprise hit as a mode of counteracting the more sanitized and mainstream formats of the country's state-sanctioned media: "In my opinion the attractiveness of the Internet in China lies in its sense of humor; compared to the era of television, when everyone gathered in front of the TV set at 7 o'clock to watch the same news channel, the Internet may have restrictions, but it also enables contradictions."⁴⁴ Miao thus draws attention to the disparity that still exists between the official discourses presented by the party-state and its highly autocratic media channels, which are rigid, formalized, and saturated with propaganda and ideological rhetoric, and the multi-voiced, more pluralistic, albeit commercialized and profit-oriented activities and popular discourses that flourish online, which are invariably more intimate, creative, amateur, and ugly.

IPHONE GARBAGE

In an age when the Internet continually matures and offers ever-evolving tools and apps to make amateur work appear more professional, and when users can always reach beyond their technical capabilities, what does it mean to deliberately eschew these advancements and instead focus on the anti-aesthetic of Chinternet Ugly? This question is explored in more depth in Miao's work *iPhone Garbage* (2014), which, like *LAN Love Poem*, is composed of videos, GIFs, and still images. The video component is appropriated from the Chinese

43 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux Journal*, no. 10 (2009), www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

44 Miao Ying, "Chifan shuijiao shua shua ping, wangluo yishu jiu hui fazhan" [Eat, Sleep, and Swipe Your Screen: Internet Art Will Develop], *Art-Ba-Ba*, August 9, 2015, www.art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=85930&forumId=8.

website Bilibili and is a remix of an original video made to promote the Chinese smartphone brand Jin Li.

Bilibili is a video-sharing website, themed around anime, manga, and game fandom, that uses Adobe Flash video and HTML5 technology to display user-submitted videos hosted by third-party sources.⁴⁵ Beyond hosting the video content, Bilibili's core feature is a real-time commentary subtitle system that displays user comments as streams of moving subtitles overlaid on the video playback screen, visually resembling a *Danmaku* shooter game.⁴⁶ These subtitles are called *Danmu* [bullets], since they are simultaneously broadcast to all viewers in real time and disappear seconds after their appearance, thus encouraging rapid-fire ideas and conversational volleys.⁴⁷ This form of interactive viewing has proved so popular within China that in 2015 Bullet Screen cinemas were unveiled in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, allowing viewers to superimpose subtitles onto movies by scanning a quick response (QR) code and transferring their comments directly to the screen via text message.

As Miao Ying has noted, Bilibili's popularity can be attributed to its status as a repository of the ugly and the unprofessional, in which entertainment is derived from *Tucao* 吐槽 [ridiculing or mocking] badly edited or amateur videos. In turn, Miao has appropriated these deliberately ugly videos as inspiration for her own form of visual satire. She comments:

Bilibili is very blunt—the comments flying around make it almost ugly to the visual taste of the post 80's generation—but that is exactly why it is so lovely.

It was mind blowing for me to see these 弹幕/bullet comments on *Bilibili* for the first time. As an artist, it is visually stimulating to see moving text floating in front of a moving picture. Also, since all the comments are live, it makes the video into a canvas. Leaving a comment is like drawing on the video. From a net artist's point of view, it is a tangible "social hologram" of the video.⁴⁸

45 The site can be found online at www.bilibili.com.

46 *Danmaku* shooter games are top-down shooter games that were first popularized in Japan. They feature profuse amounts of bullets arrayed in aesthetically pleasing patterns.

47 Tu Bage, "Rang zimu fei: Hulianwang 'danmu' shipin quan fangwei jixi" [Let the Subtitles Fly: A Comprehensive Analysis of Internet "Danmu" Video], *Dazhong Ruanjian* [Popular Software] 15 (2011): 19–27.

48 Miao Ying, "My Brain Hole Just Dilated Another 2 Inches," *Rhizome*, February 2, 2015, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/feb/2/my-brain-hole-just-dilated-another-2-inches/>.

The Bilibili video that Miao appropriated for *iPhone Garbage* depicts two men dressed in police uniforms aggressively promoting their domestic Jin Li custom-made smartphone while live comments stream continuously across the screen, obscuring the two figures and the background of the original video in a palimpsest of overlapping text and imagery. The ersatz police officers continually denounce the iPhone 6 as part of their advertising strategy, labeling it *Laji* 垃圾 [a piece of garbage] and fulminating against the consumers who would spend so much money on a phone that they insist is easily damaged, tacky, and badly designed. The Bilibili comments that stream over their faces read: *Zhe ye neng suan zhineng shouji?* 这也能算智能手机? [You call this phone smart?], *Yi tian bu kan hunshen nanshou*, 一天不看浑身难受 [I feel uncomfortable unless I watch this bad video every day], *OMG Zhenshi xinao shenqu a*, OMG 真是洗脑神曲啊 [OMG, this video really brainwashed me], and *Xia de wo ba iPhone laji reng le*, 吓得我把iPhone垃圾扔了 [I just threw my iPhone into the garbage can].⁴⁹

In Miao's *iPhone Garbage*, the video is placed squarely in the center of the screen as an embedded meta-image, while directly under the video player a GIF animation of an apple is suspended in midair as a freeze-framed cascade of water splashes dramatically over its surface. The water emanates from the top right-hand side of the screen, which features a GIF animation of a water bottle whose contents continuously stream through the video player and onto the apple itself. Beneath the video player another apple is reflected in a pool of water, although this mirror image depicts the corporate Apple logo, which has been inverted and distorted through the rippling effect of the surrounding fluid. The background imagery is a remix of the official iPhone 6 commercial, now divested of its original soundtrack and overlaid with a tinny techno version of Offenbach's can-can music. The presence of the music in conjunction with the visuals serves to heighten the parodic nature of the Jin Li ad, satirizing the appropriation of classical music and its digital transmogrification into an ersatz *Shanzhai* ringtone. The embedded commercial features Apple's now standard formula of emotional branding, which employs whimsical depictions of commodities and their users to illustrate the "joy" and "happiness" guaranteed to those who invest in its products. Miao's inclusion of the original ad juxtaposed against the layered visual

49 The video can be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/zhMm2Gr>.

images in the foreground thus presents a critique of the fetishistic appeal of conspicuous consumption.

The multiple water-based visual signifiers in the work are not arbitrary, since Miao is making a deliberate reference to *Shuihuo pingguo* 水货苹果 [water apple], the term used to describe parallel-imported Apple products. These are products that are frequently smuggled into Mainland China by surreptitiously strapping them to people's bodies or by other illegal means.⁵⁰ The relatively high cost of Apple's devices in China, combined with the company's limited worldwide distribution network (Apple retail stores operate in only eighteen countries), provides lucrative arbitrage opportunities for smugglers: devices purchased legally in a more affordable jurisdiction, such as Hong Kong, are therefore frequently resold on Taobao or other electronics markets in the Mainland at a more affordable price than is available from a legitimate Chinese Apple store.

Shui is also a euphemism for spam: the tidal wave of junk emails, videos, and other digital media that inhabit every corner of the Internet, and whose visual products, like the Bilibili-modified Jin Li advert, are frequently classified as belonging to the taxonomy of poor or ugly images that circulate online. Within China, *Shuijun* 水军 [water army] also refers to a bespoke squad of paid posters who can be hired to engage in media manipulation, or "astroturfing." This process entails techniques such as bombarding commercial rivals with spam, spreading rumors about competitors, boosting product reviews on e-commerce websites, or waging opinion wars on bulletin boards and comment sections.⁵¹ Such a phenomenon is common in contemporary China's cultural landscape, where the government also faces a cultural dilemma: caught by its need to establish the nation as a brand through the globalized discourse and norms of intellectual property rights, it also encounters other forms of creative resistance, such as *Shuijun* and *Shanzhai*, that frequently subvert the hegemony of global capitalism by appropriating the capitalist power of dissemination.

50 Wayne Ma and Lorraine Luk, "China's Hunger for Apple's New iPhone Fuels Smuggling," *Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 2014, <http://on.wsj.com/2lVYS4O>.

51 Li Biao and Zheng Manning, "Weibo shidai wangluo shuijun zai wangluo yuqing chuanbo zhong de yingxiang xiaoli yanjiu—Yi jinnian lai 26 ge wangluo shuijun canyu de wangluo shijian wei li" [A Study of the Effect of Online "Water Armies" in Communicating Online Opinions in the Era of Micro-Blogging: An Analysis of 26 Recent Online Events Involving "Water Armies"], *Guoji Xinwen Jie* [Journal of International Communication], no. 10 (2012): 30–36.

CELEBRATING SHANZHAI AESTHETICS

iPhone Garbage can thus be interpreted as both commentary and critique of the saturation of the Chinese market with new forms of communication technology, precipitating the insatiable desire to own the latest model of smartphone. By fusing Apple's sleek professional ad, whose production costs were no doubt considerable, with Jin Li's ironic, homemade parody, *iPhone Garbage* demonstrates the Internet's facilitation of an alternative visual economy in which content can carry multiple possession statuses at once. Miao thus succinctly illustrates that the online terrain, like any other, is ripe for colonization both by the corporate mechanics that pilot Western society and by more local players who insert themselves (and their products) into the interstices of global consumer culture.

These practices of appropriation therefore subvert the monopoly of global brands by defetishizing the class ideology embedded in electronic production and consumption, especially in Apple's extremely successful marketing strategies and dominance within the Chinese market, where iPhones and other devices are considered status symbols by an affluent and predominantly younger generation who have the disposable income and purchasing power to bolster the country's continued economic expansion.⁵²

Ironically, China remains the largest supplier and manufacturer of Apple components, fueled by a ready supply of cheap human labor and low production costs. Most Apple products are manufactured in the south of the country in large factory complexes, such as those run by Foxconn, a company that has come under considerable criticism for its extremely poor and exploitative working conditions and its consistent violation of labor practices.⁵³ By exposing the effects and impact of globalized corporate consumerism and neoliberal outsourcing, *iPhone Garbage* therefore also inevitably foregrounds the question of work: the how and what of labor, artistic and otherwise, from the information navigation that now constitutes so much artistic and salaried labor, to the materiality of industrial production that continues to prop up the global economy.

52 Fan Yang, *Faked in China: Nation Branding, Counterfeit Culture, and Globalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 31–63.

53 Pun Ngai and Anita Koo, "A 'World-Class' (Labor) Camp/us: Foxconn and China's New Generation of Labor Migrants," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 23, no. 3 (August 2015): 411–35; Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls: Voices from the Heart of Modern China* (London: Picador, 2010).

iPhone Garbage could also be read as a commentary on the evolution and development of *Shanzhai* 山寨 culture itself, from its original lowly position—derided as illegitimate goods that represented derivative takes on authentic merchandise, including cheap knockoffs that rarely worked or that deliberately sought to deceive consumers with imitation products—to its current reappraisal as an example of technological innovation.⁵⁴ In many ways *Shanzhai*'s status has been transformed as *Shanzhai* merchants have sought to build unique hardware that responds to the specific demands of the Chinese market and its unquenchable desire for new products, offering entirely different capabilities from those of their global smartphone counterparts.⁵⁵ In this way the artist draws parallels between the vernacular aesthetics of *LAN Love Poem* and *iPhone Garbage*'s deliberate veneration of “consumer culture with Chinese characteristics.”⁵⁶

Through *iPhone Garbage*'s visual remixing of humor, consumption, and *Shanzhai* aesthetics as manifested in the online public sphere, Miao's practice of appropriation and recoding of these forms also highlights how aspects of Chinternet Ugly have successfully crossed over into mainstream culture. In Miao's solo exhibition on Netizenet in 2014, *iPhone Garbage* was shown twice in succession: the first version was made using only YouTube embedded videos that are inaccessible in China without a VPN, and the second version was made using embedded videos from the popular Chinese streaming site Youku.com, the second largest video-sharing website in China. By showing these pieces consecutively using the same content from different sources, Miao emphasized the superficial divide between the Chinese Internet and the rest of the Web.

As recent scholarship has been quick to highlight, “the domestication of the Chinese Internet is not all about local appropriation of the

54 Winnie Won Yin Wong, “The Panda Man and the Anti-Counterfeiting Hero: Art, Activism and Appropriation in Contemporary China,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 11, no. 1 (April 2012): 20–37.

55 Andrew Chubb, “China's Shanzhai Culture: ‘Grabism’ and the Politics of Hybridity,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 92 (2015): 260–79.

56 The phrase is a parody of Deng Xiaoping's policy of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” which was used to support the creation of a socialist market economy. While “socialism with Chinese characteristics” was only intended to name the CCP's official economic policies, and thus a specifically Chinese set of circumstances, the prepositional phrase “with Chinese characteristics” has been taken up by commentators to identify various ways in which Deng's policies (ostensibly based on a reading of Marx and Mao), or more often their effects, have traveled both inside and outside of China's borders.

global. Rather, it is a multi-directional process involving multiple social actors, complex flows and interactions, and polyvalent and ambivalent outcomes.⁵⁷ Celebrating the creativity, ingenuity, and resistance to dominant cultural forms embedded within the *Shanzhai* discourse, Miao thus accentuates how the *Shanzhai* aesthetics of *iPhone Garbage* shed light upon the shifting cultural landscape of labor in China, while also signifying a collective conception of an alternative to the globalizing regime of intellectual property rights.⁵⁸

DESTIGMATIZING CHINA'S ONLINE SPHERE

The celebration of *Shanzhai* culture in *iPhone Garbage*, like the *Diaosi* aesthetics of *LAN Love Poem*, could be read as a cipher of resistance against the unadulterated veneration of material wealth and economic prosperity that has been lauded as a panacea in contemporary China.⁵⁹ In highlighting the glaring inconsistencies between state fiction and social reality, between the real and the fake, Miao's celebration of both *Shanzhai* culture and ugly aesthetics highlights how this user-driven content, in both its material and immaterial manifestations, is responsible for producing some of China's most diverse and unexpected cultural products. The artist celebrates this vibrant indigenous form of Internet interaction and localized fashion by highlighting the sense of pride found in creative rejection of the by-products of global consumerism and unfettered online access. In so doing, she acknowledges and celebrates this diversity not simply as an object of parody and ridicule, but as a vibrant subculture whose strong online presence illustrates that the boundary between what has been labeled the Chinternet and the World Wide Web often appears to be little more than an optical illusion.

While the language, relationships, and power structures of the art world have transitioned in the past decade, Internet art, for all its apparent triumphalism concerning its democracy and utopian potential as a borderless art form, still seems to replicate certain pre-existing biases of the art world. In her multivalent image/text works, Miao Ying

57 Yang, "A Chinese Internet?," 52.

58 *Wired* magazine's April 2016 edition featured a front cover story devoted to "Shanzhai Shopping," with the headline "It's time to copy China," www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2016/04/features/xiaomi-lei-jun-internet-thinking.

59 Karl Gerth, *As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers Are Transforming Everything* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

challenges the presumption that Chinese online culture is belatedly repeating an earlier or more international model, by celebrating the ingenuity and innovation of the numerous personalized expressions and actions in Chinese online spaces.

In opposition to reductive equations of how censorship manifests itself, Miao Ying's works accentuate the creative reformatting wrought by digital "inaccessibility" and illustrate how such simple dichotomies as "freedom versus control" or "democracy versus autocracy" no longer suffice as frameworks for understanding either the role and impact of new media in today's China or the increasingly mobile, informational culture that has arisen in step with the country's technological developments. Exploring instead the dynamics of China's global interactions through the lens of online culture, *LAN Love Poem* and *iPhone Garbage* underscore how attentive we must be to strategies that obscure an ever-expanding range of works that engage not only with online visual culture, but also with issues of cross-cultural intelligibility and translatability and with how these dynamics eventually play out in the transnational online public sphere of today's "global contemporary" art world.

Presenting an inversion of the ostensibly unidirectional flow of online imagery from the West to the rest, Miao makes a plangent claim for the increased value of China's symbolic stock in the global exchange of national cultures, drawing attention to the complexity and richness of China's online visual culture, with its indiscriminate and promiscuous recoding of multiple digital sources. The visual bricolage of *Meanwhile in China* brings critical attention to an expanding cultural brokerage between the art world, the Internet and its virtual economies, and the role that online visual culture can play in questioning these developments. By highlighting the uncanny similarities between the projects of nation branding, as articulated in the Chinese Dream, and corporate branding, as manifested in Apple's sophisticated, sleek, and globally recognized imagery, *LAN Love Poem* and *iPhone Garbage* also crucially enable the possibility of an alternative to the ostensible dichotomies between the Chinternet and the World Wide Web, global capitalism and *Shanzhai* aesthetics, online propaganda and media democracy, and the art market's relationship to the virtual economies of an art world online.

By fusing these disparate visual elements into a celebration of the shackles and stereotypes that define China's online realm, Miao's work

offers a reorientation of the visual economy, an opening up of the creative commons to circuits of non-Western exhibition and display, and an ironic integration of the Chinese Internet's often ambivalent responses to globalization, epitomized by the humorous inaccuracies in reproduction, translation, and dissemination embodied by Chinternet Ugly—an aesthetic whose visual interactions lie at the heart of contemporary encounters between China and the wider world.

EDITORS' NOTE *Several of the artworks discussed in this article, including Miao Ying's LAN Love Poem and iPhone Garbage, can be viewed in a special supplement available on ARTMargins Online (www.artmargins.com). The primary aim of this online gallery is to enable readers to view these works as the artist intended. The online supplement also features further detailed critiques of these works written by the author, as well as links to many of the websites introduced in this article.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE *The author thanks the two anonymous peer reviewers, the ARTMargins editors, and Miao Ying for the insight they provided at various stages of this article's development. An early version of this article was presented at the conference Digital Culture in Contemporary China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, held at the University of Oxford China Centre in 2015; I thank the conference participants for their generous feedback.*