**Memetic Engagement as Middle Path Resistance:**

**Contesting Mainland Chinese Immigration and Social Cohesion**

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A rising area of interest on the affordances of digital and social media is the creation and spread of online memes. Memes refer to cultural ideas, symbols or practices in which dissemination generates imitations and reproductions that do not have to be exact in order to reinforce beliefs and spur thought contagion in society (Blackmore, 1999). Memes are network building and bridging units of social information transmission (Dawkins, 1989). As online interactants consume, produce, and share alternative or unorthodox texts, the potential of online memes to catalyze and facilitate social change has significant meaning for civic participation and the challenges and restructuring of state authority relations (Cheong & Lundry, 2012; Cheong & Gong, 2010).

In light of the corporeal and symbolic expansion of Chinese presence globally, this paper examines the key online memes that have emerged in relation to the intensification of mainland Chinese immigration or the "Mainland invasion". Singapore and Hong Kong have traditionally been migrant states and share a post-colonial heritage with a Chinese ethnic majority. However recent social protests have emerged to contest the influx of Chinese mainlanders, even as immigration policy (or the lack thereof) supports migration of these *zhongguo xinyimin*, to boost

the finance, real estate, tourism, and retail industries. A slew of controversial anti-Mainland

China memes have been transmitted. This prompts a systemic investigation in their spread and

evolution as well as the socio-cultural implications of these newer participatory forms of citizen

engagement where increasing numbers of citizens are using their personal online and social

media networks to communicate and mobilize. This form of lay engagement facilitated by the

"connective action" of personal online networks differs from traditional organization-led

collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

This article discusses the processes and forms of memetic engagement, where online

interactants co-create and circulate memes in transmedia and online-offline ways, highlighting

networked practices of meme circulation and (re)appropriation across contemporary convergence

culture. We argue that memetic engagement can function as middle ground resistance (Scott,

1985) enacted by subordinate classes to effect opposition in strongly regulated societies because

civilians can rarely engage in effective open rebellion but can retaliate in prosaic and constant

struggles. Drawing from two case studies, this chapter demonstrates how memetic engagement

may help lay persons respond to class conflicts even as their governments strategically

restructure their authority to contend with alternative narratives and contentious polity.

Additionally, this chapter will further understanding in how the personalization of politics via

online communication plays out within Chinese societies, and under what differing conditions

and capacities for comparative analyses on public civic engagement.

## Memetic Engagement: The Rise of Chinese Digital Creatives

In recent years, there has been intense public debate about immigration, class and social

cohesion in Singapore and Hong Kong. Attention to this set of interrelated issues has been

focused around changing patterns of immigration, income inequalities, and unprecedented breakdowns in social services affecting healthcare, housing, education and transportation. With the national birthrate below its replacement level, Singapore has seen a steep intake of foreigners with an addition of 1 million foreigners since 2005. Its most recent government policy paper on population said it expected its population to increase by 30% to between 6.5 to 6.9 million by 2030, with foreigners making up close to half of that number (Prime Minister's Office, 2013). Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China, with a different economic, political and legal system (Holiday & Wong, 2003). From 1997 to 2012, 760,000 Mainland Chinese have migrated to Hong Kong (Lau, 2012). Moreover, since the Individual Visit Scheme began in 2003, thousands of Mainland tourists have visited Hong Kong. In 2011, 28 million Mainland Chinese tourists travelled to Hong Kong, with 34.9 million a year later; a significantly high number given Hong Kong's resident population of 7 million (Lai, 2012; Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2013).

Additionally, there has been a growing preoccupation in these cities, along with other societies worldwide, with the possible dangers of immigration to social cohesion represented by growing polarization between the global capitalist class (which include many new immigrants) and the gradually slimming middle classes of locals (Cheong, Edwards, Goulbourne & Solomos, 2007). The Gini coefficient of inequality has risen significantly in Singapore and Hong Kong, whose wealth gaps are currently among the highest globally (Hong Kong Statistical Society, n.d.).

Notably, rising numbers of citizens have mounted demonstrations to voice their opposition to the resurgent discourse on immigration, which frames new immigrants from China,

as "foreign talent" or as "capital" needed to sustain Asian economic prosperity. Their remonstrance presents a plea to authorities to scale back immigration and limit foreigner access to public goods and services; access that is seen as a right of natural born citizens but nonetheless have recently come under siege in light of rising inflation, corporatization and overcrowding.

Underpinning these expressed alarms is the notion of class, since many *xinyimin* are perceived to be economically privileged, yet culturally inferior (marked by their unfamiliarity and disrespect for local laws, customs and languages). In Singapore, new mainlanders have been implicated in high-profile cases as perpetrators of physical violence (e.g. drivers involved in road fatalities), verbal abuse (e.g. hurling insults at locals) and threats to the local community (e.g. Chinese family curtailing their neighbors from cooking aromatic local foods) (Mahtani, 2012). Similarly, in Hong Kong, class dynamics are operant in the case of the "Chinese Locust" where mainlanders are portrayed as rapacious consumers, and opportunistic pregnant mothers. Under the Immigration Ordinance, children born in Hong Kong gain citizenship with access to benefits unavailable to their Mainland born counterparts, like superior medical care, free education and visa-free travel to many countries (Chu, 2012).

Of interest here is the increasingly visible, vigorous and mediated expression of these class dynamics alongside recent social protests. Both countries do not enjoy unfettered press freedom, and reports produced by international agencies such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders show a decline in the freedom of information, although Hong Kong traditionally has a more outspoken and free media. Yet both countries enjoy one of the highest Internet usage rates worldwide, making them fertile contexts to examine meme engagement.

We attend to digital meme communication given their recent popularity and capacity to provide understanding of lay resistance and civic engagement. Broadly, memetic engagement for purposes of political commentary and activism involves the creation, circulation, transmediation, remix and reappropriation of striking cultural ideas, symbols, and their derivatives across multiple communication platforms. Digital media convergence affords citizens the ability to collaboratively construct and share previously inaccessible information as they archive, tag and reticulate news (Goode, 2009). In the process, online users simultaneously act as producers, distributors and critics. In some contexts, this implies an increased agency in what has hitherto been lay persons' limited capacity to communicate about civic and political affairs.

Under these circumstances, it is significant to understand how memetic engagement may alter the current episteme, including how people come to understand and interpret current events. The construction of "truth" is contested alongside rumors and misinformation, particularly in an information vacuum or censorship amidst heightened social anxieties (Bernardi, Cheong, Lundry & Scott, 2012). Consequently, the (re)circulation of memes can function as media "viral codes" (Rushkoff, 1996) to influence a society's agenda or cultivate resistance to its dominant discourse. As activist Andrew Boyd argued, "truth is a virus", "social movements cannot live by meme alone. Yet memes are clearly powerful- both analytically and operationally. A vital movement requires a hot and happening meme." (p. 378).

Historically, alternative interpretations of the social order have been performed "backstage" by marginalized populations to critique authority (Goffman, 1959), and entertaining "carnivalesque play" to satirize elite norms (Bakhtin, 1993). Jokes and humorous texts have challenged official news of national disasters (Oring, 2010) and public strategic communication

on international security (Goodall, Cheong, Fletcher & Corman, 2012). Digital media use today potentially extends the scope and impact of oppositionist activities as jocular digital remixes and dramatic video mash-ups constitute varying (re)presentations of the "truth" (Meikle, 2008) to affect how lay publics perceive and remember political authorities (Lessig, 2008). Silvia and Garcia (2012) for instance, argued that the spread of the "Downfall meme" on YouTube mashups that featured the portrayal (and reproach) of Hitler critiqued political systems worldwide when meme-making addressed politicians' abuse of power, greed and corruption.

Against this background, we propose that memetic engagement functions as middle ground resistance (Scott, 1985) enacted by online participants embedded in highly regulated contexts. Subordinate classes enact "middle ground" resistance as they rarely engage in outright rebellion, yet fight back to their minimum disadvantage. In contexts where open criticism is met with disapproval or punishment, the average citizen is in a weak position vis-à-vis the ruling authority. Thus, middle ground resistance practices represent "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985) to help civilians articulate their critique of power, while enjoying a measure of impunity.

Emerging from James Scott's ethnographic research in Malaysia, middle ground resistance had been conceptualized to understand quotidian tactics practiced by rice farmers when faced with the then "new green revolution". Refusing to accept official definitions of power and marginalization by wealthy land owners, peasants engaged in experimental and inventive practices like humor and mockery, grumbling and slander, rumor mongering, character assassination, and sabotage. Strikingly, Scott's analysis of the guises of peasant ideological struggle under conditions of social stress and inequality reveals certain features in common with contemporary mediated activism. They require little or no coordination, make use of implicit

understanding and informal networks, practice safety in anonymity, and often represent a form of

self-help and typically avoid any direct clash with authority, making middle ground resistance a

compelling frame and equally applicable to understand memetic engagement directed toward

oppositional goals (Cheong & Lundry, 2012).

As we will illustrate, in a climate of heightened social anxiety, memetic engagement can

conceivably help citizens protest against mainstream media representations and express their

dissent on government policy. Examination of anti-Mainland Chinese memes permits us to

observe emerging dimensions of proletariat participation as the current episteme is altered by the

sharing of unorthodox texts amidst tensions in immigration and class in Singapore and Hong

Kong. As forms of resistance and cultural protest reflect the conditions and constraints under

which they are generated, our inquiry is grounded in case studies.

**Examining Memetic Engagement associated with Mainland Chinese migration**

As case studies provide rich contextual details to understand the processes and causes

underlying contemporary events within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2008), we selected the two

cases below based on an information-orientation selection (Flyvbjerg, 2006) to yield maximum

heuristic content. Following the method recommended by Shifman & Thelwall (2009) to conduct

web memetics, adapted to the specifics of our contexts and research objectives, we gathered as

many URLs of pages mentioning the memes as possible, using a combination of search engine

queries in English and Chinese on Google and Baidu. This helped to "assess the Web presence of

the memes, and the URL list is used for subsequent analysis" (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009). Data

was then collected on YouTube, in Chinese and English, using keywords "Singapore Ferrari car

crash" and "Hong Kong locusts" that are mentioned in the titles or "About" sections of the videos.

        We followed the links directed to "suggested videos". Videos were organized by ranking view counts with the "Filter" tab on YouTube, to identify the top videos for data analysis. We then created lists of data where titles, URLs, dates, number of views, comments and shares of videos were entered into a database (N= 400). We also employed the Google and Lexis Nexis search engines to source other iterations of the meme, across platforms, and through following hyperlinks that reflect the archival and web-like nature of digital records. These searches also allowed us to identity the earliest appearance of each meme and trace a timeline of its evolution. When no new derivatives were found, and after analyzing variations of repeated material, collection stopped after more than 200 hours of ethnographic observations of textual, audio and visual content in newspapers, websites, public forums and social media sites. The researchers reviewed the data mainly in Chinese and English, and in the vernacular dialects known as "Singlish" (pidgin mix of English, Malay and Hokkien) and Cantonese. Attention was paid to qualitatively assessing the revised and additive nature of each meme engagement, and observations on altered versions were recorded in our database. Given this chapter's length, we focused our discussion on the top 20 videos, and key derivatives in print, blogs, microblogs, online forums and open groups on social media including Facebook, Renren, Tianya, Sina blogs, Netease blogs and Sina Weibo (N= 1000). Mainland Chinese/Mainlanders are used as shorthand descriptors, to differentiate between Singaporean Chinese/Singaporean and Hong Kong Chinese/Hong Konger. When citing quotations, we have reproduced the original meaning of the content as faithfully as possible when the primary language was not English.

**The "Ferrari Crash" meme of a feckless Mainland Chinese migrant**

The "Ferrari crash" meme of a feckless Mainland Chinese migrant is related to and arguably catalyzed by the spread of Singapore's first viral video. This amateur video is especially noteworthy since it first surfaced on the internet, rather than as breaking news on the State's strongly managed media. The 29-second video, which was uploaded by a user called "TheMockymocky" on Monday May 14th, 2012, shows a speeding Ferrari after running a red light colliding head-on into the side of a cab, sending both vehicles flying through the air (TheMockymocky, 2012). The brief yet highly dramatic video clip, which was uploaded on YouTube two days after the accident was shot from a video camera from a fellow cab driver who was two car lengths behind the taxi that was hit as it moved off slowly after the traffic light turned green at a junction(Anonymous, 2012).

The driver was identified in the local newspapers the next day as 31-year-old Chinese businessman Ma Chi, a financial investor from Sichuan who had relocated to Singapore with his wife and child four years prior, and who was in the midst of applying for permanent residency. Ma Chi was instantaneously killed in the car accident while the Singaporean taxi driver and his Japanese passenger died later in hospital. Another two people – a Malay motorcyclist and the female passenger in the Ferrari were also injured.

This crash promptly drew irate responses, and the "Ferrari Crash" quickly became a meme and recurrent topic of blog posts, status updates, tweets, photoshopped images and video mashups. The amateur video went viral with 2.4 million views on YouTube in the first 5 days, and subsequently hitting more than 5 million views. The video also drew 3,597 comments, 2,308 likes and 3,845 shares. This number of views is high in a nation of about 5.3 million

residents. Even more remarkable is the total tally of the top twenty YouTube videos searched in English and Chinese related to this content, with 14 million views, more than nine thousand comments, four thousand likes and six thousand shares.

Sharing and recirculation of the meme took place publicly on YouTube where comments made on the original video included vulgar and derogatory pronouncements on Ma Chi. Numerous comments denounced Ma Chi as being typical of all Mainlanders, who were ascribed reckless and dishonorable motivations ("worst drivers in the world"), on top of being "barbarian" law-breakers. Many comments appeared to be made or voiced from the standpoint of Singaporean Chinese, some eager to direct misgivings toward new mainlanders and differentiate themselves from the "ungrateful migrants" allowed into the country. Anti-foreigner sentiments based on class practices were rampant, as evident, for example, in a comment by "goonersify" that said, "All these f* Chinese nationals do is bring their anti-social behavior here. Spitting everywhere and shouting on their mobile phones among other things. I'm a Chinese Singaporean and even I can't stand them…", and "YouuTubeKinG" who wrote, "I'm Singaporean Chinese and we are civilized and conscience unlike China Chinese today. In the past, our forefathers aka descendants also came down from China to Singapore. As our forefathers grew families, they taught us character values, hygiene, manners and show compassion…China people are zombies."

Interestingly, we also observed how comments on the same YouTube platform voiced from the standpoints of overseas Chinese in Hong Kong and Toronto mentioned similar negative stereotypes and encouraged mutual solidarity to block the entry of mainland Chinese. For instance, "terrymanwai" wrote, "We Hong Konger and Singaporean should unite together to maintain our 'core value'. We should let the western people know that our real Chinese are

different from those communist educated Chinese in China! They speak noisy…like showing off

big brand, cheating, dirty, always say patriotic but emigrate." In response to this comment,

"88daruma" wrote, "Agree with Terry! Mainland Chinese are NOT Chinese period. Another

Mainland Ching recent killed some poor Hong Kong driver by speeding in Sai Kung. We now

watch very carefully for these cars coming cross border to Hong Kong. They break the law and

leave very quickly". Strongly worded comments like these reflect the rage that some diverse

overseas Chinese have toward mainland migrants, illustrating how the Ferrari Crash meme

served as a portal for some to express criticism at their respective government's open

immigration policies to Chinese nationals.

The "Ferrari Crash" video was quickly copied, generating multiple identical mirror

videos with different URLs. Several videos containing the original footage were released, but

were altered by the addition of photos showing the crash wreckage and also included subtitles

and commentary (for example, in the second most popular YouTube video (IZ Reloaded, 2012),

it was pointed out that Ma Chi's flamboyant red shoes matched the red color of his sportscar).

The relative longevity of the "Ferrari Crash" meme after the accident could be partly

attributed to the bland and fairly positive mainstream media portrayal of Ma Chi. The breaking

news story in the main English newspaper, *The Straits Times*, was a brief writeup, headlined "2

dead, 3 injured in three-way Bugis crash" (Siau, 2012). The 371 word article described Mr Ma as

"generous with donations to the [immigrant group] association and to the needy", and a "hard-

working, righteous and loving father and husband." In addition, headlines on Chinese media

described Ma Chi as a "young and capable" "tall and handsome" successful entrepreneur, who

was "not a heavy drinker" preferring "tea" over alcoholic drinks ("PRC Ferrari", 2012). In

contrast, little attention addressed the suspicious circumstances of his accident (for example, why was he in the car with a lady who was not his pregnant wife at 4am? Initial eyewitness accounts also said he reeked of alcohol, yet mainstream news reported that no traces of alcohol were found in his blood and urine). This seeming disjuncture and lack of information transparency ("State media", 2012) prompted a series of "humanistic flesh searches" that ensued when netizens took it upon themselves to act as "vigilantes" and collectively investigate the socio-demographic information of deviant personalities (Cheong & Gong, 2010) to determine Ma Chi's background. It seemed particularly suspicious that a young person in his early thirties could offer to drive a "limited edition" luxury car (worth US $1.4 million dollars).

In the midst of the information vacuum on Mr Ma and the accident, online interactants spread rumors that tainted Ma Chi as a "spoilt, rich brat" or scion of a prominent family (Peh, 2012) gained traction, including one widely circulated rumor that claimed he was the son of a fugitive Chinese mafia boss ("PRC netizens", 2012). These rumors were not officially verified. Other blogs also mentioned postings by Chinese netizens which alleged that Ma Chi was involved in money laundering of millions in Hong Kong (Iron Bowl, 2012). Another rumor labeled him as the son of a high ranking official Ma Kai, and pictures of Ma Kai's wife (Tan, 2012), who resembled the image of Ma Chi's mother as shown in Singapore media reports surfaced (this speculation was later disputed). In addition, "conflicting information" was found on the "mystery female passenger" (Anonymous, 2012). Online interactants speculated about the relationship he had with his young female passenger, who was described by mainstream news as a recent graduate of a hospitality course but other accounts have painted her as a scantily dressed "ah lian" (prerogative term for shallow, materialistic, sexually loose Chinese girl), believed to be

working at a well-known nightclub. Overall, these alternative accounts appear to render Ma Chi as corrupt and lawless, representative of the "fu er dai" (rich second generation) who flaunt their wealth with impunity.

Meme sharing and transmission further propagated online where this meme evolved overtime with personalized ideas, images and messages in social media platforms. For example, a mock Facebook profile page for Ma Chi was created, characterizing him as a restless soul "in Hell" (Mahtani, 2012). A handful of readers commenting on the satirical page praised its unidentified creator and posted anti-Mainland Chinese comments. After the Facebook account was banned, a twitter parody account with the username "mrmachimachi" was set up ostensibly by Mr. Ma Chi, whose bio read "I currently reside in Hell. Burn me some love." The first tweet on 18th May 2012, was "Just checked in, Hell seems like a pretty dark place" and subsequent tweets featured updates on his interactions with Satan and other dead celebrities from global pop stars to a previous Singaporean President. In another instance on the site "Singaporememe.blogspot.com", a graphic poster was created that headlined in bold capitals "You Deserved it!" against the background image of the mangled Ferrari. The seven deadly sins were printed across the image and subtitles read "SIN CITY, where Wealth and Social Status triumph over morals".

After the crash, the amateur video and its derivatives were taken up by a number of international news agencies, facilitating the global spread of the meme. Reports highlighted the accident but linked it specifically to foreigner resentment in Singapore. For instance, a report by Agence France-Presse (Anonymous, 2012) was entitled "Ferrari crash fuels Singaporean anti-foreign sentiment"[i], a Bloomberg story headline read "Ferrari Deaths fuel Anti-Foreigner Anger

as Singapore Votes" (Adam & Tan, 2012), a *Wall Street Journal* article was titled "Ferrari Crash foments antiforeigner feelings in Singapore" (Mahtani, 2012) and an article by the *New York Times* was titled "In Singapore, vitrol against Chinese newcomers" (Jacobs, 2012). These articles highlighted the growing public resentment, particularly toward Chinese nationals ushered in by liberal visa policies to boost growth by immigration. These reports and other commentaries written by local bloggers weeks and even months after the accident, referenced the Ferrari crash and other issues in transportation breakdowns, housing inflation and unemployment, to explain this uncommon wave of hostility and defend the alleged "xenophobia" expressed by native Singaporeans ("Seeing through", 2012; Okulski, 2012)

### The "Locust" meme of the animalistic Mainland Chinese national

The "locust" meme involving the animalistic portrayals of Mainland Chinese nationals as rapacious consumers in Hong Kong surfaced in January 2011, arguably ignited by the viral video named "Locust World" which portrayed new Mainlanders as locusts, and presented critiques lobbed against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese government. The 258-second video, which was created by three online users of the Musical Channel of the Hong Kong Golden forum online and uploaded by one of the online users named ChinglishVlogs, was itself an amateur mash-up of video clips, photos and adapted lyrics, mimicking the form of a music video, based on a classic Cantonese song (ChinglishVlogs, 2012). Specifically, the music video highlighted various frantic and maniacal behaviors of Mainland Chinese, including their border crossings to give birth in Hong Kong hospitals and grabbing imported milk powder (perceived to be of higher quality than those found in China). The video also featured many socially

inappropriate behaviors of Mainland Chinese, including eating in the subway, relieving their bowels indiscriminately, smoking in public venues, and abusing officials of the Hong Kong government. Critique was also directed at the Chinese government as seen for instance, in the lyrics that said, "the nation [China] cheats and steals", "the statement that 'China is a powerful country' is a trap to brainwash Hong Kongers" and "the nation assimilates us with Mandarin Chinese". Throughout the video, it seemed that concerns were raised about the future of Hong Kongers because of the influx of Mainlanders and the growing dominance of CCP and the Chinese government.

The locust world music video spread virally and has had over 2 million views. It also received extraordinarily high exposure with thirty five thousand comments and forty thousand likes. Viewers commented on the original video of "Locust World" in Chinese, Cantonese and English on YouTube. Comments included vulgar attacks, fierce arguments and dissatisfaction. Strikingly, some comments disparaged Mainland Chinese as a "wumao" (literally means five pennies, a derogatory label for a member of CCP), Mainland "dogs" or "pigs", and pests of a country that is powerful yet culturally inferior to Hong Kong. Many comments raised objections to the entry of Mainlanders, as exemplified by this comment by "TheMyHK" which said, "Mainland Chinese grab milk powder, what can our babies eat? Mainland Chinese speculate on property, how can we afford an apartment? Mainland Chinese drive up prices of commodities, how can we support ourselves?" Furthermore, comments also highlighted the perceived threat of erosion to the Hong Kong identity. For example, "mslovehk1" said, "I have never been a Chinese in my life. We are Hong Kongers. Hong Kongers should support the independence of Hong Kong. We must build the wonderful future for our next generation", and

"khl14" wrote, "I will never become a Chinese. I firmly deny the Chinese identity. I am a Hong Konger". Numerous comments also labeled CCP as "authoritarian" ("like Hitler") and some expressed an eagerness to eliminate CCP ("Overthrow CCP").

Notably, we also found self-identified overseas Chinese from Macau and Taiwan who commented on the music video, voicing similar anti-Mainland sentiments. For example, "Yan131452008" wrote, "I am a Macanese and support Hong Kong. Let us eradicate 'locusts'!" In another comment made by Macanese, "dylan96117" said, "F* Mainland Chinese! The situation of Macau is also not good. So many Mainland Chinese come to Macau every day to purchase milk powder, spit, dump rubbish, and give birth to babies. F*! As a Macanese, I will support you (Hong Kongers)". Voices from the standpoints of overseas Chinese in Taiwan implicitly showed the dissatisfaction with Mainland Chinese and resentment toward the Chinese government. For instance, "bj8888jb" wrote, "Taiwan would rather be governed by Japan! Taiwan wants independence!" Another comment made by "131321a" stated that, "I felt like crying when Taiwan carried out the Individual Visit Scheme for Mainland Chinese. I think Taiwan would become another Hong Kong if we implemented this policy at the national level. Please do not stain Taiwan, okay?"

The animalistic portrayal of Mainland Chinese as "locusts" rapidly became a meme, igniting its travel as a symbolic idea and image in discussions and debates on ethics, race, social problems and politics online and offline, in Hong Kong and China. It has since been copied and featured as a key motif in videos, photoshopped images, full page advertisements and blogs.

Specifically, imitation and adaptation of the Locust World video swiftly generated numerous similarly titled but varied videos. These highly circulated mashups mostly employed

the same background music, but were modified with different titles, subtitles, pictures and video

clips portraying Mainland Chinese as locusts, exhibiting a varied array of inappropriate

behaviors. There were also other mashups which utilized different songs, pictures, subtitles

and/or video clips. Memetic engagement also appeared to deepen the narrative of Mainland

Chinese as locusts, since several videos added lengthy commentaries explicating the choice of

the locust symbol and its good fit as a derogatory mascot for the Mainland Chinese.

Moreover, memetic engagement involved performative and embodied actions when

several small scale citizen resistance tactics were enacted, filmed and then circulated. For

instance, a top circulated video created by *Apple Daily* documented how several Hong Kong

students sang "Locust World" in front of Mainland Chinese in shopping areas and even publicly

humiliated a woman who sat on the street by questioning whether she is educated or not. Another

video entitled "Crowd outside the door of D&G [Dolce & Gabbana] curses upon seeing 'Locust'

tourist bus" featured how a crowd of almost 100 Hong Kongers responded to an event initiated

on Facebook by cursing loudly and taking photos when a bus ferrying Mainland Chinese tourists

approached a luxury goods store (Anonymous, 2012; Chen, 2012). In yet another example of

online-offline meme engagement, a video entitled "Hong Kong mothers are angry and Mainland

mothers are locusts" featured multiple Hong Kong pregnant women responding to a call on

Facebook for a sit-down demonstration in the iconic Victoria Park and protested with hand-held

signs with slogans like "Local pregnant women are angry", and "It is time for us to say 'No'"

with images of pregnant women and babies" (Appleactionews, 2011).

Memetic engagement also proceeded with personal appropriation of older media forms

into the genre of online music videos, drawing upon material reflecting the mounting historical

tensions between China and Hong Kong. In one video that garnered more than 175,000 views, a twelve second segment of an old Hong Kong movie was used to show the disruptive and outlandish behaviors of Mainland Chinese on the subway such as pushing others and toying with the handrails, and the reactions from two Hong Kong passengers who expressed ridicule and resentment toward them (Tayman, 2012). Another music video utilized a three second segment of an outdated television commercial on pesticides, and added a voiceover with subtitles to convey the parallel urgency of eliminating Mainland Chinese like household pests (Littlesteak, 2012).

Besides mimicry and reappropriation of the "locust" meme on online videos, lay engagement with the "locust" meme was enacted via transmediation of the meme in various print and social networking sites. In February, 2012, Hong Kongers published a full page color advertisement titled "Hong Kong has endured enough" on *Apple Daily*, one of Hong Kong's best-selling newspapers. The advertisement directly referenced the locust meme by portraying a giant locust perched atop a mountain looking at Hong Kong's skyline, and the tagline pointedly decried border crossing and "instant citizenship" activities by Mainland Chinese with the rhetorical question, "Are you willing for Hong Kong to spend one million dollars every 18 minutes to raise children born to mainland parents?" This controversial advertisement was created after monies were raised via an online fund-raising campaign on Facebook and the Hong Kong Golden Forum (Anonymous, 2012).

In addition, some Hong Kongers appropriated Facebook with 3.7 million users in Hong Kong (Figueroa, 2012), to create new groups and pages to critique Mainlanders. For instance, a Facebook group with more than one hundred and sixteen thousand "likes" named "Opposing

Mainland pregnant women coming to Hong Kong to give birth" described that their community would "regularly hold activities like demonstrations, sit-ins and rallies" to "claim back interests of local pregnant women, moms, women, children and local citizens". Furthermore, they will "always be against all policies regarding new immigrants". To express their dissatisfaction, members of these groups have posted events, news, videos and photoshopped images about prohibiting pregnant Mainland Chinese to entering Hong Kong, satirizing uncivilized behaviors of Mainland Chinese and commenting on Mainland China's history and policies including issues related to human rights violations.

The locust meme ad was promptly circulated in many popular Mainland digital and social media including Tianya Forums and Netease blogs. The ad stirred up dissatisfactions and outbursts of anger among Mainland Chinese interactants. One online user of Tianya Forum wrote, "Hong Kongers always carp at Mainland Chinese. When they come to Mainland China, they show their displeasure with everything to stress how they are superior to Mainland Chinese," and, "I suggest that Chinese government cut off supplies of fresh water to Hong Kong. This will remind them that Mainland China is the mother of Hong Kong. What ungratefulness!" (Yuebeiwang, 2012). Another forum post referenced other meme derivatives of the "Hong Kong had endured enough" poster, and said, "Why do we curse each other instead of correcting our mistakes? Why do some Mainland Chinese only curse Hong Kongers? Why do some Hong Kongers not dissuade them?" to show his anger toward internecine struggles implied by the ad and derivatives like "Shanghai has endured enough" and "Beijing has endured enough" (Honghu, 2012). One popular blog article with about a hundred thousand views titled "The Hong Kongers who have endured enough display their ugliness" said, "those Hong Kongers who

usually praise themselves for being civilized seem to target all Mainland Chinese... I want to ask some Hong Kongers, what do you mean by doing this? Are you Chinese?" (Diguoliangmin, 2012).

To respond to "Hong Kongers have endured enough", some online users created a colored advertisement titled "Mainland Chinese have tolerated enough" and uploaded it onto microblogs. The ad showed a son sitting on his father's shoulders and read, "Because you are the son, Daddy would give you 210 billion as a gift each year" and "We cannot allow the ignorant son to sit on our shoulders any more. We should suspend supplies of power, water and food to the son". Online users of Mainland China and Hong Kong experienced a tit-for-tat and largely intensified the conflict between two areas (Anonymous, 2012).

The locust meme gained traction worldwide as the locust ad was taken up in international press stories. For instance, a report by the *New York Times* wrote that "Angry Hong Kongers have taken to calling mainland visitors "locusts" (LaFRANIERE, 2012), and an article from CNN headlined, "Hong Kong newspaper rails against Chinese 'invasion' (Lai, 2012). A report by BBC News was titled "Hong Kong advert calls Chinese mainlanders 'locusts'" (Anonymous, 2012). These news stories by international news organizations highlighted Hong Kongers' cultural gulf with their Mainland counterparts and their fears that their distinctive post-colonial culture would be eroded by new Mainland sojourners and migrants.

## Conclusion

Tensions over immigration and anti-foreigner sentiments pose a formidable social as well as political challenge for civil societies and governments worldwide, as authorities endeavor to balance economic and community needs, and address concerns for social cohesion. Traditional

research on political communication in western-styled democracies has focused on rational

discourse and participatory action led by powerful institutions, but newer forms of citizen

engagement are emerging via critical discourse shared on personalized networks online (Bennett

& Segerberg, 2012), including the viral sharing of emotional and satirical audio and video

content. This chapter discussed the various forms of memetic engagement as pathways for

citizens' political participation to share critical discourse centered on the negative portrayal of

Mainland Chinese migrants in response to the recent swell of Mainland Chinese migration to

Singapore and Hong Kong.

In information environments that could be characterized as being moderately to strongly

regulated, memetic engagement serves as middle ground resistance (Scott, 1985) enacted by

online users as they participate in the creation, remixing and widespread recycling of alternative

news. By collaboratively (re)constructing and spreading information and images related to the

"Ferrari crash" and the "Locust", the actions of netizens resisting Mainland immigration can

arguably be characterized as a form of "eloquent" political action that "doesn't look like politics"

(Duncombe, 2002) as new multimedia texts challenge official immigration policies and

perspectives put forth by government and mainstream media outlets. Particularly in contexts of

limited press freedom and erstwhile political apathy, memetic engagement allows a participative,

prolonged and potentially more profound social discussion about sensitive issues as citizens

share pointed comments online and collaborate to uncover "the truth" under conditions of

information vacuums, censorship or perceived propaganda. In this sense, memetic engagement

helps facilitate a restructuring of state authority relations as citizens' communication scale up to

affect public opinion and political action (in contexts where they can publicly organize a

demonstration or when their critiques are taken up by ruling authorities in the longer term). It is notable for instance, that the "locust" meme was associated with the passing of a two-can limit on exports of milk formula law (that restricts travelers from taking more than 1.8 kilograms of infant milk powder out of Hong Kong) in 2013 (e.g. Hannon, 2013). At the time of writing, the most recent protests against the influx of Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong also involved protestors waving placards describing mainland shoppers as "locusts" (Shadbolt, 2014).

Although YouTube videos are often seen as trivial entertainment, findings here illustrate how raw amateur footage point to the perceived inadequacies of social and political systems and, in this sense, serve to empower citizens to voice critiques of governing authorities. Prior analyses have proposed that Youtube memes have "six common features: focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness and whimsical content" (Shifman, 2011). The present analysis highlights two other striking features: shock and stock.

The "Ferrari crash" had registered a high shock value as it featured how the horrific surprise of a seemingly bizarre car collision, physically and literally, spun out of control. The "locust world" conveyed shock value through its portrayal of mainland newcomers as crass, stock characters. Both memes, also involved the jarring dehumanization of Mainland nationals, who were ascribed with derogatory attributes. Ma Chi, as a representative of the nouveau-riche but corrupt mainlander, is reduced to a spectral ghostly presence while the "locust" meme dehumanized mainland Chinese sojourners through discursive labeling and portrayals of them as pests. These elements are paradoxically at once, farcical and serious, yet not inconsequential in the contexts examined as citizens collectively sought to investigate Ma Chi's background to incriminate him, and as Hong Kong citizens took to the streets to air their grievances.

Yet, it is important not to overly romanticize these "weapons of the weak" as it is unlikely (and hardly possible to conclude that) memetic engagement will promptly stem Mainland Chinese border crossings. Indeed, while online data can be enduring, some data discussed here were transient and sketchy. For instance, the satirical Facebook account of Ma Chi was shut down, and tweets posted before March 30, 2012 including the original meme about "Hong Kongers have endured enough" are not shown on Sina Weibo.

Furthermore, ground and legal conditions expose the tenuousness of memetic engagement. For instance, the arrest for alleged sedition of the creator of a satirical "Demon-cratic" comic strip in Singapore (Loh, 2013), points to the local constrains that may chill lay memetic engagement. As Silvia & Garcia (2012) observed in their analysis of the "Downfall meme", "humorists, in particular cartoonists, play a game of tug-of-war with those in power, a very imbalanced game at times, with serious consequences" (p. 107). Indeed, tug-of-war-like power dynamics influence the civic opportunities and conditions for memetic engagement, which differ from situation to situation. Here, digital media use enabled connective action of personalized content sharing across personal networks, in lieu of trusted organizations to front and orchestrate collective action in the contentious politics surrounding immigration. Concatenate online-offline meme engagement, however, was witnessed in Hong Kong but not in Singapore, where there are stricter laws against illegal public assembly. Therefore the discussion here is instructive for understanding the wider civic and cultural significance of memetic engagement to critique and contest governing authorities as well as addresses some of its pragmatic limitations to effect social change.

Moreover, this chapter adds to our understanding of the global dynamics and artful nature of citizen prosumption. Although both memes discussed here have specific local origins, their significance resonated with online interactants worldwide. Yet as Ang & Pothen (2011) observed in their analysis of "racism" toward Indian migrants in Australia, "instant and pervasive communicative connectivity does not necessarily encourage greater cross-cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and intercultural dialogue. Instead, it tends to solidify nationalist bias and stereotypes…" (p. 140). Related to this, memetic engagement here involved heated invective to highlight a heightened nationalist divide, illustrating the diversity and imbrications between varied peoples of Chinese ethnic descent. Our analyses found that some locals in Singapore and Hong Kong discursively distanced themselves from their Chinese counterparts with the insistence that they are "not Chinese", or "not PRC", and spurred the creation of new labels for Mainlanders like "China-ese", "Cheena" (Singlish for very Chinese influenced person, usually fresh from China) and Mainland "Chings". This critical discourse highlights how "the rise of Greater China" is neither a monolithic bloc nor a cohesive clique (evidenced in for example, the numerous comments on social media that conflated different Chinese societies as one country). As there were thousands of comments on the online videos (e.g. more than 35,000 comments on the "Locust world" video), in-depth content analyses were not conducted on these comments here. Future research could address in more detail, the rich diversity in the expression (and possible contradictions) of multiple Chinese identities, backgrounds and cross cultural adaptations. This could also encompass an investigation in online interactants' construction and diffusion of "counter" memes to invalidate negative stereotypes and promote cross-cultural understanding associated with challenging socio-political developments in Asia and beyond.

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