Visual Sensation and Performative Cultural Politics: 
Chinese Literary Text Messages and Colors of Texts

THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the performative cultural politics of Chinese literary text messages. Literary compositions of text messages have developed into a hybrid popular and folk literary genre in the hypermedia of cell phone. After investigating the creation, circulation, and consumption of literary text messages as well as their literary and cultural properties, I discuss the political performativity of such texts in negotiating power on the representational, technological, and socio-political levels. By playing with the fluid identities of sender and receiver of the text, subjects exchange relations with each other interpassively, and negotiate their relationships with the symbolic order of representation. The users’ particular experience of poeticity of mathematic models and tempo of visuality dominating the text enables them to resist the potential alienating power of technology. The colors of these texts, as part of a larger cultural phenomenon of politicization of color codes, are related to particular hegemonic negotiations. The yellow, gray, and black literary text messages counteract the unifying power of the colors red and green, thus negotiating counter-hegemonic cultural spaces and implying further decentering and multi-loci of power. This analysis of multi-layered cultural politics that literary text messages involve enables us to better understand the postmodern condition and specific socio-cultural scenerios in contemporary China.
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Introduction

With the rapid growth of cell phone use in China in the past decade, a distinctive cell phone culture has developed, which constitutes a significant part in contemporary Chinese culture. Literary text message is a unique and important part of the Chinese cell phone culture. This thesis intends to discuss the cultural political aspects of Chinese literary text messages.

Many scholarly publications on mobile phone culture and its social effects have appeared since the 2000s, aiming to make sense of the impact of mobile communication devices on society, culture and everyday life. For example, research has been done on the cell phone’s relation to popular culture, consumerism, youth subculture, queer culture, and everyday life (see Alberti, 2008; Berry, 2003; Caron, 2007; Goggin, 2006; Katz, 2002; Ito, 2005), as well as its links to social transformation, democratization, civil society, and poverty alleviation (see Castells, 2006; Ling, 2004; Pertierra, 2002).

Research on Asian mobile cultures is particularly active. English language studies on Chinese mobile media and culture have focused on how they relate to the construction of the public sphere, social changes, social conditions of media and information, and issues surrounding youth, gender, citizenship and lifestyle (see Yu Haiqing, 2004, 2009; Latham, 2007; Yue, 2008; Liu Cheng, 2009; Lu, 2007; Gai, 2006; Law, 2007; Gong Wen, 2008; Qiu, 2007; He, 2008; Sterinbock, 2006). Within China, research has also
been done on the social and cultural implications of mobile media, cell phone literature, cell phones and popular culture, and everyday life (see Kuang Wenbo, 2006; Wang Ping, 2008; Wang Jing and Cui Lianhua, 2008).

Chinese cell phone culture is extremely active and has its own distinctive characteristics. Cell phone literature in particular is a unique cultural phenomenon in China. Original compositions of literary text messages, episodes (*duanzi* 段子),\(^1\) cell phone fiction and cell phone poetry have been popular and widely shared, and have acquired a considerable commercial market for their consumption. The exchange of literary text messages, such as jokes, pranks, greetings, and aphorisms, has been integrated into Chinese people’s everyday lives, and holiday and festival customs in particular. Many studies on cell phone literature have been published in China since 2001. Among them, many are on literary text messages, which may be seen as a significant component of cell phone literature. These studies have focused on the literary nature of literary text messages, their definition and classification in literary discourse (Yang Jianlong, 2002; Ge Hongbing, 2003; Ye Congrong, 2004; Zhong Yu, 2004; Shang Ting and Bai Jie, 2006; Chen Honglian, 2005); technological and literary synthesis in the cell phone age (Ge Hongbing, 2003), their communicative and social networking functions and significance (Ni Heng, 2005; Luo Xiangyu, 2003); their connection with the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition and social mentality (Wang Xuehuan, \(^1\) Episodes *duanzi* 段子 are short tales, jokes or episodes, or short musical or vocal pieces, sometimes situated in a larger text but usually comparatively independent. *Duanzi* constitute an extremely wide-spread form of literary text messages. Nowadays, a literary text message is also generally called a *duanzi*.}
2008), their situation in popular culture and youth subculture, and their socio-cultural implications (Heng Xiaohong, 2009; Wang Linghong, 2006).

However, this important issue of cell phone literature has barely been studied in English academia. And in the Chinese studies on literary text messages, some aspects of it have been understudied, and more questions are waiting to be answered. An issue that is particularly interesting to me is the cultural politics involved in literary text messaging. This is an important issue, which is connected with certain key aspects in contemporary Chinese culture and politics, but this issue has been comparatively under-explored in studies done on literary text messages. In this thesis, I discuss the cultural politics of literary text messaging as manifested on three levels. (1) The technological level. Does literature have the power to resist the potential absolute rule of technology? How do literary texts in a post-printing form, such as literary text messages, synthesize technological and literary discourses? What is the political meaning of such a synthesis? How do literary forms function as a political moment in the technological regime? How do literary forms respond to or intervene in the potential alienating power of technology? (2) The representational level. How do literary text messages address the rule of reality? How do they negotiate with the systematic power? How do such new literary forms act in relation to representation and systematic meaning-making? How do texts and the circulation of texts function and problematize the symbolic order and the world of signs? What is the relationship between such literary forms and the rule of reality that is constructed on basis of semiotic representational practices of the system of power? (3) The specific socio-political level. In the post-socialist China of the 2000s, what are the
specific socio-political meanings of literary text messages? How can we situate them on the contemporary socio-political stage? It is commonly assumed among researchers in China that literary text messages can be categorized according to different colors, such as yellow text messages, gray text messages, black text messages, red text messages, and green text messages (He Zhongzhou, 2010; Wang Linghong, 2006; Jiang Zilong, 2009; Zhang Yue, 2006; Liu Fengchun and Wang Changsheng, 2006; Wen Liusheng, 2007; Zhou Xinning, 2008). Yellow and gray text messages stand for a cultural trend towards vulgarity and nihilism in contemporary China. Red text messages are produced under the organization of governmental powers to fight against yellow, gray and black text messages. How might we interpret such scenarios politically? What do these texts of colors and their dynamic interactions tell us about contemporary Chinese cultural politics?

In order to tackle these questions, I first investigate the production, consumption and circulation of literary text messages, and discuss the nature, characteristics and functioning of literary text messages as a literary genre and cultural phenomenon. I then theorize the representational politics, technological politics and specific socio-politics of literary text messages. The potential of literary text messages to destabilize the rule of symbolic order, the rule of technology, and the rule of socio-political dominant powers are discussed. Such subversive and destabilizing capacities are placed in a framework of performative cultural politics, which highlights the performativity of alternative stances, especially stances of irrationalism and irrelevance [see Introduction (3)]. The issue of colors underlies the discussion of cultural politics on the three afore-mentioned levels.
For instance, the obscene yellow text messages and trivial, meaningless grey text messages are often condemned by cultural authorities and some scholars; but this thesis attempts to analyse their political significances in terms of resisting and negotiating with existing representational, technological and socio-political rules.

The thesis is thus comprised of six parts. The rest of this introduction provides basic information about Chinese literary text messages, an explanation of the theoretical framework of performative cultural politics, a clarification of the terms, theories and approaches employed in the thesis, and a brief outline of the political meanings of colors in contemporary China, the color coding of literary text messages, and their social significance in postmodern China.

Chapter One details the growth of literary text messaging in China, describing its emergence, production, authorship, circulation, consumption, and its situation in cell phone literature as a whole. I propose that literary text messages might be understood within the category of popular literature and folk literature in hypermedia, and discuss some of their thematic, formal and functional features,

Chapter Two discusses the representational politics of literary text messages. How individuals (re)adjust their relationships with the symbolic order through a textual and inter-subjective performative process is theorized in psychoanalytic and semiotic terms. The textual play of text messaging provides the users with a liminal position and enables them to cross the boundaries of identity. The naturalized representation or determination of meanings is problematized by subjects’ performance of perversity and an interpassive relationship between subjects. In this chapter I describe how this process of power
negotiation between subjects and symbolic system functions in the activity of literary text messaging.

Chapter Three discusses the technological politics of literary text messages. This chapter first discusses the intertwinement and hybridization of the discourses of technology, literature and politics, and then theorizes some distinctive qualities inherent in such post-printing texts such as literary text messages, namely, what I term mathematic poeticity and visual literariness, and their capacity to resist against technological rule. Mathematic poeticity refers to a poetic experience of processing information and emotions based on mathematic models. Visual literariness refers to the highlighted combination of imagery, words and meaning, in which visuality dominates the rhythm of words and tempo of the surface of the text. The political function of these features in the context of the rule of technology is discussed.

Chapter Four examines the specific socio-politics of literary text messages. This chapter outlines the color codes of literary text messages, and conducts a case study of red and yellow text messages. It first investigates the “red text message movement”, a government-based campaign to promote red text messages since 2005, then proceeds to explore the mentality and politics of the color yellow, focusing on the cultural negotiations of colored texts on the contemporary Chinese social stage.

The thesis ends with a conclusion summarizing the capacity of literary text messages in negotiating cultural-political power on the technological, representational and socio-political levels. I argue that the practices of perversity and interpassivity in the dynamic relationships between text, subject and symbolic system lend the subjects a
space of escape and renegotiation with the reality of systematic representation. The
subjects’ poetic experience through visualized and sensationalized texts enables them to
oppose the alienating rule of technology. The yellow, gray and black literary text
messages counteract the unifying power of the colors red and green, thus negotiating
counter-hegemonic cultural spaces and implying further decentering and multi-loci of
power. This analysis of multi-layered cultural politics in contemporary China enables us
to better understand its postmodern condition and specific socio-cultural scenarios.

(1) Literary text messages

Since 2000, major websites in China began to invest in literary text messages.
With the dramatic increase in cell phone use in China since 1999, telecommunications
operators, cell phone and Internet service providers, and websites aspired to expand the
market for text messaging or SMS (short message service). In order to create a trend for
the consumption of text messaging, large websites and mobile operators cooperated to
promote literary text messages, or original literary compositions of text messages. From
2000 to 2003, full-time or half-time “composers” (xieshou 写手), mostly anonymous,
were hired by websites or agencies to compose literary text messages. These texts were
publicized online to be downloaded from the Internet to cell phones and retransmitted on
the cell phone at a low cost. Common forms included holiday or special greetings, funny
jokes, amusing or poetic episodes, pranks, and aphorisms. A large number of literary text
messages were collected by the major websites like sina and sohu. These websites along
with mobile phone operators were able to accumulate huge profits from the downloading and transmitting of literary text messages. After 2006, the websites decided they had enough stock of literary text messages, and thus this kind of large-scale collection of literary text messages more or less came to a halt.

The SARS epidemic in 2003 increased the consumption of literary text messages, due to the physical confinement and need for solace and greetings. Since 2002, many collections of literary text messages have been published in print. Beginning in 2004, national text message literature competitions have been regularly held and collections of winning works published in print. Also since 2004, other forms of cell phone literature have been developed, such as cell novels and cell phone poetry, and have become a promising business.

Studies of text messaging and cell phone-related literature in China have employed different terms such as literary text message (wenxue duanxin 文学短信), text message literature (duanxin wenxue 短信文学), and cell phone literature (shouji wenxue 手机文学) to refer to these literary works and genres (see Bao Xin, 2007; Yang Jianlong, 2002; Ge Hongbing, 2003; Luo Siling, 2003). In this thesis, I will mainly focus on a body of work loosely categorized under the term literary text messages (see Chapter One). Literary text messages distinguish themselves from other forms of cell phone-related literature by the anonymity of authorship, the interactive mode of consumption between consumers, their textual features, modes of transmission combining point-to-point and point-to-multipoint communications, and their different business modes.
(2) Performative cultural politics

Include a sentence at the beginning here stating what kind of theoretical perspective you are taking in the thesis as a whole. From a semiotic and deconstructivist point of view, the order of the reality is based on systematic representation, or a determination of the meanings of signs. It is through language and logic that symbolic order is established. ² The system of power designates signs and proper meanings, and strengthens and naturalizes its preferred meaning system. The relationship between a sign and its meaning, or between the signifier and the signified, is arbitrary. A sign, in other words, could have meant anything else, and a meaning could have been represented by any other sign. But in reality, such multiple possibilities are limited to fixed, compulsory correlations between a particular sign and a particular meaning. This process of limiting the possibilities of meanings is the very process of representation and reification. Under the mythification and naturalization of dominant meanings, subjects take the established meanings for granted and willingly accept the designated meanings and therefore the rule of the system. It is through this process of representation and subjectification that the symbolic order sustains its rule and inscribes subjects to its systematic power. In this sense, subjects are spoken by language and subjected to the rule of the system (see Lacan, 1998; Zizek, 1999).

² In Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, individuals are subjected to the reality order structured with signs and meanings. The inscription of individual to the symbolic system endows him/her with subjectivity. This reality is called the Symbolic or the “world of the symbolic”.
However, systematic representation never means ultimate determination or the absolute finalization of meanings. According to Judith Butler, the realization of meanings is through subjects’ performances or enactment of such meanings. For example, the meaning of gender is established by the system as proper gender binaries, and it is through subjects’ performing their gender roles, such as proper bodily enactment and gendered dress codes, that the proper meaning of gender is activated and realized. In other words, it is through what one does that what one is is defined. Therefore identity, or what one is, is a process of becoming instead of a static state of being. Meaning is created in the very action of performance. Thus, the realization of meanings depends on how subjects act and perform. This perspective allows for the theoretical possibility of alternative performances creating alternative meanings, thus subverting the representation and dominance of systematic power.

Butler’s idea of “performance” combines J.L. Austin’s linguistic philosophy of the performativity of language and some cultural anthropologists such as Victor Turner’s notions of social drama and cultural performance, thus transforming the notions of performatives and performativity. According to Austin’s theory of speech acts, the function of language is not merely constative or descriptive (such as saying “The sky is blue”), but also has a performative aspect, which creates the very situation or thing by saying it, (for example saying “I apologize” is the very act of “apologizing”) (see Butler, 1997, 1999; Derrida, 1972). Such performatives or speech acts are linguistic-behavioral units that have the power to create situations of reality, and performativity is the capacity of creating, producing and realizing reality. Butler synthesizes this theory with Turner’s
theory of how subjects perform their cultural roles in the social theatre. Thus, by performing or acting out alternative identities (such as queer identity), subjects create alternative identities for themselves and define their own understandings of such identities, thus subverting the established meanings designated by the system (such as gender binaries). Such performatives are powerful weapons for a cultural politics that negotiates power within the symbolic system of representation.

The reified system of meanings is always a site of cultural politics. The power system keeps naturalizing, reproducing, and reinforcing its preferred, prioritized meanings through ritualistic repetition, citation, and reactivation. Exposing and performing rupture, conflict, alternatives, and dissolution of meaning, on the other hand, have subversive political effects. Thus, power struggles can take the form of re-appropriation, re-invention and intervention of meanings. This echoes what Judith Butler calls “a politics of the performative” (Butler, 1997, 1999). The potential for a performative politics is inherent in language and signifying practice. According to Derrida, the “citationality” or “iterability” of signs and performatives is comprised of a duality of “repetition” and “alterity”, the former accommodating stabilization of meanings and the latter destabilization and re-contextualization of meanings (Derrida, 1972). In other words, the indeterminacy of meaning is inherent in the very process of signification or meaning-making. Far from being determined or finalized, the activation and performativity of meanings are always fluid and dynamic. Meanings are always waiting to be acted out, performed and created. Therefore, the multiple cultural
performances and negotiations constitute our very reality, and the performative cultural politics is crucial in defining and shaping the reality.

A performative cultural politics demystifies normative naturalization and institutionalization through alternative or irrelevant social performance. Stuart Hall’s notion of “conflict politics,” one that gives rise to “problematic situations”, not only fits perfectly in the concept of performative cultural politics, but addresses an important aspect of it:

The rise of conflict politics in its deviant form is... problematic for the society, and requires its own ‘interpretative work’. Problematic situations are those in which the available public meanings and definitions fail to account for, and cannot easily be extended to cover, new developments. New political developments, which are both dramatic and ‘meaningless’ within the consensually validated norms, pose a challenge to the normative world (Hall, 1974).

In other words, when some performatives are difficult to account for or interpret with existing terms, it does not mean such performatives are simply meaningless or unworthy of consideration. On the contrary, they particularly deserve our consideration. It is these problematically “deviant” and “meaningless” forms and “new developments” that challenge the representational system. The performance of irrelevance is not simply irrelevant, but has its performativity of subversion through the very act of irrelevance. This is to say, irrelevance is after all also a form of resistance to representation. This is
particularly important for our discussion of yellow and gray text messages, which are
often considered silly, irrelevant, meaningless play and nonsense.

In this thesis, performative cultural politics are discussed on the representational
level, the technological level, and the socio-political level. On the representational level, I
use semiotic and Lacanian psychoanalytic terms to conceptualize the performative
cultural politics of literary text messaging. Lacanian theories on the negotiations between
subject and the symbolic order (the “big Other”) and between a subject and other subjects
(the “small others”) are particularly relevant to my discussion of the act of literary text
messaging. In the “game” of text messaging, players simulate identities and the exchange
of relations with others. By rearranging their relationship with the small others, subjects
in fact readjust their relationship with the big Other. Zizek uses the terms “interactivity”
and “interpassivity” to theorize such a form of performative negotiation. By willingly
allowing oneself to be passively subjected to the desires and demands of a small other,
one actually manages to transpose one’s ultimate passivity as determined by the big
Other. Zizek calls such a process, in which subjects utilize the small others to address the
big Other, “interpassivity”. In text messaging, the subjects’ silly, nonsensical textual play
also demonstrates a symptom of perversity. For Zizek, symptoms such as perversity and
psychosis are precisely equivalent to the “deviant” forms described by Hall that
problematize representation. Therefore, performative cultural politics on the
representational level are realized through subjects’ playing with subjectivity, perversity,
and interpassivity, thus realizing their power negotiations with the symbolic order (see
Chapter Two).
On the technological level, power negotiations with the technological rule are realized through the poetic and literary performativity of literary text messages. Literary speech acts contain the performativity of creating the experience of emotions or “poeticity” through verbal forms. Digital texts such as literary text messages are characterized by a mode of poetic experience based on mathematic models and highlighted, dominating visual effects and rhythms. Such mathematic poeticity and visual literariness have the performative capacity to negotiate with the alienating power of technology (see Chapter Three).

On the socio-political level, performative cultural politics are particularly embodied in the cultural performances and negotiations of literary text messages of different colors. Obscenity, profanity, and triviality are performed in the “silly” forms of yellow, gray, and black text messages, which are subversive towards the power system as represented by red and green text messages. At the same time, although it is easy for us to scheme a binary conflict between the dominant ideology (red and green) and counter-normative or nonconformist ideologies (yellow, gray, and black), we should also keep in mind the multiple layers of circulation and symbiosis of power and ideologies. As the metaphor of color suggests, there is not one color or several colors that can act as unified symbols of a time or a place. Each color has its own internal ambiguities, perplexities, and centrifugal forces. In the case of China, if we read colors as super-signs integrating texts, images, and ideologies, the dynamics and multiple interactions among and within colors constitute a heterogeneous, motley scene. This requires us to pay due attention to a
postmodern condition in China and situate the issue of cultural politics in this perspective (see Chapter Four).

(3) Literary text messages and colors

Color can be a form of cultural coding and carry symbolic meanings in particular historical conditions (Gage, 1993). In present-day China, the social signification and resignification of colors is worthy of detailed investigation. Colors are articulated in social narratives and meaning-making processes, thus developing particular socio-cultural associations and meanings. In contemporary China, the colors red, green, yellow, grey, and black are especially prominent, each intimating certain “key categories.” Red, for example, may be read as a token of revolution, socialism, and passion; yellow as eroticism and obscenity; gray as decadence and nihilism; green as life, vigor, and “sustainability”; black as deviance, violence, mystery, and misery (see Barmé, 1999; Clifford, 1997; Dickson, 2003; Jones, 2001, Xu, 2007).

At the same time, color codes and associations may also be discontinuous, multiple, ambivalent, and uncertain. As Riley puts it, color itself has an “uncanny ability to evade all attempts to codify it systematically” (Riley, 2001: 1). This is in fact also the case with other kinds of signs. On the level of connotation and the “second-level sign,” to use Roland Barthes’ terms, although in China the color red symbolizes revolution, the location and articulation of the meaning and its sign is, however, never wholly guaranteed or seamless. Changes, variations, nuances, fluidity, and conflicts in meaning
may always be present not only diachronically, but also synchronically. This intrinsic tension and propensity for plurality of meaning characterizes all signs. To name some other associations of the above-mentioned colors in China, red can also represent blood, virginity, sacredness, and joy; yellow represents royalty, maturity, and harvest; green can symbolize aliens,3 demons,4 mold, and rot (see Xu, 2007).

The dramatic scenarios of colors in contemporary China are particularly conspicuous. With Deng Xiaoping’s implementation of the “opening-up and reform” policy in 1978, China gradually integrated itself into the global capitalist system. But the Communist revolutionary narrative remains the official political ideology to validate the legitimacy of the government (Liu Kang, 2004). A “mainstream” culture has formed based on cooperation between the official and the commercial (Barmé, 1999). Present-day China suffers from multiple complicated problems and predicaments, including bureaucratic corruption, unemployment, dilemmas in political and economic reform and governance, the polarity of wealth, social injustice, the Party-state’s control of the media, popular discontent, and so on (see Heberer and Schubert, 2009; Lee and Yang, 2007). Anxieties evoked in different social groups during China’s recent social transformations are reflected in various cultural forms (Jin and Tao, 1999). In the current socio-cultural theatre, conflicts of colors provides a glimpse into the big picture of contemporary Chinese society and culture. Following patterns established in previous decades, the

3 Such as aliens from outer space, who are imagined as having green skin. Vomit contains greenish matter.  
4 Ghosts in Chinese classical texts usually have a “green face and ferocious fangs” (青面獠牙). For example, in Pu Songling (1640–1715)’s short story Painted Skin (《画皮》), Mr. Wang sees a ghost with a green face having her skin spreading on the bed and painting it, “蹑足而窗窥之，见一狞鬼，面翠色，齿巉巉如锯，铺人皮于榻上，执彩笔而绘之”.
drama of colors takes on new forms in the digital information age, thus highlighting the impact of new media such as the internet and cell phones.

In the post-Mao reform era, red as a super-sign and a narrative of the Communist revolution and the Cultural Revolution has faded from the center of the social stage. The promotion of economic development has, in place of political struggle, become the central task of the government, and a market economy has reshaped key dimensions in mainstream society (Liu Kang, 2004; Yang Guobin, 2009). In such a context, the status of the sign of red becomes ambiguous and incongruent due to its being used as a means of political legitimacy, and due to a degree of de-centering that has taken place under the influence of commercialization. The younger generation growing up after the 1980s is more used to commodification, consumer culture, individualistic lifestyles, pragmatic social competition in education, employment and so on, and less concerned about politics or a mainstream narrative of the revolutionary tradition (Dai Jinhua, 1999). Although this group of youths increases in number as time goes by, it does not mean that the sign of red has become irrelevant. Red is comparatively less pervasive, but remains both a critical power and an ambiguous symbolic resource.

The intermittent “Mao-fever” since the late 1980s, the popularity of *The Red Sun* in 1992, collections of old revolutionary songs, and the Educated Youth’s (*zhiqing* 知青) nostalgia for the old days of the Cultural Revolution period all have some kind of association with the color red, and can be seen as having recreated economic and cultural

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5 A collection of red revolutionary songs, particularly the songs extolling Chairman Mao.
6 This popular nostalgia, which peaked in 1996, features a series of bestselling *Old Photographs Collections*, popularity of *zhiqing* or Cultural Revolution theme restaurants, and other cultural activities in that period of time.
miracles of the color red (see Lee and Yang, 2007; Tao Dongfeng, 2008; Dai Jinhua, 1999; Davis, 2005; Hubbert, 2006). Whereas some believe phenomena such as Mao-fever concern government-sanctioned propaganda, others emphasize different social groups’ disappointment with the post-Mao government, the conflict between a new leftist ideology and the rightist governmental project of reform and capitalization, a nostalgia towards the egalitarianism and nationalism of the Mao-era, or an ironic, anachronistic catharsis of mixed anxiety, as well as the commercial weaving of such ambiguities (see Barmé, 1996; Tao Dongfeng, 2008; Dai Jinhua, 1999; Liu Kang, 2004).

Recent revitalization of the sign of red includes a national Red Episode Movement (hong duanzi yundong 红段子运动) or “Red Text Message Movement” (hong duanxin yundong 红短信运动) in cell phone media since 2005 (He Zhongzhou, 2010; Liang Wendao, 2010; Han Yongjun, 2007). Ordinary people are encouraged by the movements’ organizers to compose text messages and MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service), and in doing so directly share the profit gained from the circulation of their compositions (to be explained below). Unlike the abovementioned red-related trends, the Red Text Message Movement was organized by governmental powers and leading mobile operators (He Zhongzhou, 2010). While it can be seen as a government-based performative to re-strengthen a weakening revolutionary discourse, it also demonstrates certain new features (see Chapter Four).

On the other hand, the uncontrollable rise – and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government’s continual banning – of yellow (huangse 黄色), pornographic or “obscene” literature, audio and visual cultural products, constitutes another facet of the
drama of colors (Ruan and Matsumura, 1991). The government’s 1984 Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign and crackdowns on pornography such as the one in 1989 are often associated with political objectives at certain historical moments (Ruan and Matsumura, 1991; Kraus, 2004; Nyíri and Breidenbach, 2005). The ban on pornography on the internet and the shutdown of yellow-related websites in 2004 has been interpreted in both political and moral terms (McKinnon, 2008; Wen Wu, 2001).

However, many popular soap operas, works of literature, art, and other cultural products demonstrate a persistent tendency towards sexual or erotic themes. Netizens’ spoofing (egao 恶搞) also continuously erotizes various existing symbols for fun, from personal trivialities to celebrities, from cartoon figures to “red canons”7 (Tao Dongfeng, 2008). In the sphere of cell phone media, yellow episodes experienced a golden age before they were proscribed by several new laws. They are told, circulated, and enjoyed by celebrities, professors, officials, soldiers, and college students, among others (Jia Yue, 2005; Pan Guoting, 2006; Hong Hao, 2007; Xu Min, 2007; Zhang Fubo, 2009; Liu Yiqing, 2009).

Yellow episodes go hand in hand with grey episodes. Grey can be traced to Wang Shuo’s novels and a “hooligan” (liumang 流氓) culture in the 1980s and 1990s (Barmé, 1999; Tao Dongfeng, 2008). Internet youth culture in the past decade has also greatly contributed to a tendency towards the color gray. Associated with a loss of faith, sarcastic satire, nihilism, cynicism, mockery of everything and self-mockery, gray forms another critical cultural symbol of the times. It was in order to target the epidemic yellow and

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7 *Hongse jingdian*, usually refers to revolutionary novels, theatre and related literary and artistic texts canonized by the CCP government after 1949. See Tao, 2008.
gray episodes that the Red Episode Movement was initiated (He Zhongzhou, 2010; Zhang Yue, 2006; Lai Shaofen and Xiao Wenfeng, 2008; Zhang Dingyou, 2008).

While the colors red, yellow and gray seem to attract the most attention, the color green appears to be less eye-catching. Green can be seen as a harmonizing effort promoted by both the government and the cultural elites before the color red was re-initiated. Although green seems to be a safe color, it is not strong enough to offset the sensations of yellow and grey. The Green Dam was built on the internet, showing cooperation between the symbols of red and green. In support of the Red Episode Movement, the “construction of a green cell phone culture” is also ongoing (Wang Ping, 2008; Li Peng, 2006; Yang Haiyu, 2006). Therefore green can be seen as representing the cultural elites who cooperate with governing powers to construct social consensus and strengthen the representational system.

The last color is black. Black is associated with the criminal underworld (hei shehui 黑社会), crime, punks, and radical social rebels (Tao Dongfeng, 2008; Chen Liangfei, 2009). The 1984 Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign was accompanied by an “attacking-black” campaign (dahei 打黑) (Ruan and Matsumura, 1991). Black text messages usually refer to blackmail, swindle, malicious harassment and junk messages sent to cell phone users, as well as sharp criticism of the government (see Chen Liangfei, 2009; Zhou Xinning, 2008).

(4) Postmodernism in China

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8 A censorship project on the internet, which is conducted by the governmental power to prevent the citizens accessing “inappropriate” information on the Internet.
In order for us to understand the socio-political performativity of these colored texts, it is critical to define a kind of postmodernism that has both helped bring about their existence and been produced in part through their creation and circulation. This clarification or justification is needed partly because yellow and grey texts and their accompanying trend towards vulgarity and cynicism have been condemned by some scholars. Viewing China as suffering most from a lack of or weakness in civil society and media freedom, these scholars wonder how a popular obsession with obscenity, trivial pleasure and cynicism can lead to actual progress in society. As for “progress”, some Western scholars associate it with “democratization”, and some Chinese scholars associate it with “Enlightenment” or the Enlightenment movement (see McKinnon, 2008; Tao Dongfeng, 2008). However, they neglect an existing “postmodern condition” or mentality that makes such grand narratives of progress difficult.

This postmodern condition is not only present in economically developed, post-industrial consumer societies such as those found in Europe, America or Japan. As an aesthetic condition involving a crisis of legitimation and representation and a tendency towards flattened, trivial play with fragments of signifiers, postmodernism can be neither a temporal issue nor one that is entirely congruent with economic or social conditions. According to Jameson’s characterization, it involves:

the falling away of the protopolitical vocation and the terrorist stance of the older modernism and …the eclipse of all of the affect (depth, anxiety, terror, the
emotions of the monumental) that marked high modernism and its replacement by what Coleridge would have called fancy or Schiller aesthetic play, a commitment to surface and to the superficial in all the senses of the word (Jameson, 1984: xviii).

In this sense, both a political grand narrative (such as democratic modernization and progress) and an aesthetic grand narrative (such as Great Art or high literature represented by high modernism)\(^9\) are problematized in a postmodern condition. Lyotard defines terror as “the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him” (Lyotard, 1984: 63). As for Lyotard, language games are “little narratives” opposed to grand narratives, and a Hegelian illusion to totalize these language games into a real unity will lead to terror. “We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience…Let us wage a war on totality……” (Ibid, 81-82).

Putting China’s case in an aesthetic postmodernist frame, we have to admit that no matter how ironically “unfinished” the modernization project is in China, it also shares an aspect with the global postmodern dilemma. It is as difficult to implement a macro politics or macro social transformation in China as it is in a developed, post-industrial country. Therefore, a totalizing narrative of progress is incapable of addressing the crisis in a fragmented present-day China. This forces us to search for alternative perspectives in

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\(^9\) Modernism is defined as the avant-garde literary and artistic experimentation in the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century such as Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism.
our reading of apparently trivial, meaningless and vulgar literary text messages.

Therefore, I will examine literary text messages and their particular ways of cultural political negotiations in the postmodern cultural stage of contemporary China.
Chapter I: Literary Text Messages in Economic and Literary Contexts

This chapter details the growth of literary text messaging in China, describing its emergence, production, authorship, circulation, consumption, and its situation in cell phone literature as a whole. I propose that literary text messages might be understood within the category of popular literature and folk literature in the hypermedia of cell phone, and discuss some of their thematic, formal and functional features. Thus, this chapter is comprised of four parts. First, the development of the trend of literary text messaging and the underlying economic drives and conditions are analyzed. Second, I discuss the development and status of literary text messages, text message literature, and cell phone literature in the social and literary contexts. Third, I discuss the condition of literary text messages as being a hybrid genre of popular literature and folk literature in the hypermedia of cell phone. Fourth, I analyse some thematic, functional, and formal features of literary text messages. Before we can define the literary text message, let us first look at a few specific examples.

From tonight to tomorrow, there will be snow flakes of blessings falling on your cell phone. Your mood will be mostly sunny. Under the influence of the current atmosphere, a wave of laughter will surround you. In the coming 52 weeks, it is predicted there will be continuous smooth winds! Wishing you a Happy New Year!
今天夜间到明天白天，你的手机将出现鹅毛般的祝福，你的心情将以晴为主，受气氛影响，笑声将席卷你周围，预计未来52周将不断刮顺风！新年快乐哦！

In the long and lengthy night, it is difficult to sleep on one lonely pillow. Just sending you a message to wish you sweet dreams tonight. But I guess you won’t see it immediately, because usually pigs should be sleeping now!

长夜漫漫，孤枕难眠。发个信息祝福你今晚作个好梦。但估计你不会马上看到，因为猪现在一般都睡了！

In the past few days, I’ve wanted to say three words to you, but I worried that if I said them, maybe we could not even remain ordinary friends anymore. But still I can’t control myself, I just have to say it: lend me money!

这段日子以来，我一直想对你说三个字，但又怕说了连普通朋友也做不成，可我控制不住，还是想说：借点钱！

I am not in a good mood today. There are only four sentences I want to say. Including this one and the previous two. That’s all I have to say……

今天心情不好。我只有四句话想说。包括这句和前面的两句。我的话说完了……

I like Deng Lijun – she passed away;
I like Weng Meiling – she committed suicide;
I like Mei Yanfang – she died of disease;
I like Huang Jiaju – he fell and died;
I like Zhang Guorong – he jumped out of a building;
I like you – you make your own decision! [The names mentioned are all celebrities]

我喜欢邓丽君，死掉了；
我喜欢翁美玲，自杀了；
我喜欢梅艳芳，病故了；
我喜欢黄家驹，摔死了；
我喜欢张国荣，跳楼了；
我喜欢你，你自己看着办吧！

The above are a few examples of popular “literary text messages.” As the popularity of literary text messaging has resulted in a significant amount of social impact, to be described in more detail below, it is interesting to consider: Why do some people like this type of texts? Where do these texts come from? How are they used? Who is using them? What are the factors that boost their popularity? What are their particular social and cultural effects? How can we define and categorize such literary text messages?
I.1. Text message: creative literary compositions and the thumb economy or 1-jiao economy

Cell phone use has grown gradually more popular in China in the past decade. Cell phone users accounted for 1.88% of the population in 1999, but reached 48.5% of the population by February 2009. The figures increased rapidly around 2001~2003. Text messaging (or short messaging service, SMS, texting), partly because of it is much cheaper than phone calls, became extremely popular in China, especially after 2002. For instance, 723,080 million text messages were sent during the year of 2008 in China.

In 2000, one of the three major portal websites in China, Sina (新浪网), first set up its “wireless platform” (wuxian pingtai 无线平台) and started to invest in text messages (Jingbao, 2006). “Text message composers” (duanxin xieshou 短信写手) with a background in literature were hired by Sina, as well as other large websites such as Sohu (搜狐), 163/NetEase (网易), 263 (263网) and Tom (Tom网), to compose text messages. Sina had for a time more than 50 specialized text message composers, who

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10 According to the data from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People’s Republic of China (MIIT), by January 1999, there were 24.5 million cell phone users in P.R. China, counting for 1.88% of the population. By January 2000, the number of cell phone users reached 45.0 million, counting for 3.46% of the population. By January 2001, the corresponding figures were 89.8 million and 6.90%; by January 2002, 149.9 million and 11.53%; by January 2003, 212.4 million and 16.34%; by January 2005, 339.8 million and 26.14%; by November 2006, 455 million and 34.6%; by February 2009, 679 million and 48.5%. 

11 The SMS business was initiated in China in May 1999. In 2000, the total number of SMS messages transmitted in the year was approximately 1,000 million; in 2001, the number was 18,900 million; in 2002, the number increased dramatically to 90,000 million; in 2003, 137,100 million; in 2004, 217,700 million; in 2005, 304,600 million; in 2008, the number reached 723,080 million, meaning each cell phone user sent approximately 3 SMS messages per day on average in 2008.

12 The other two major portal websites are Sohu and Netease.

13 The composers usually held a B. A. degree in literature or above.
provided text message compositions to the website everyday. It is said there were about one to two hundred full-time text message composers in Beijing in 2002~2003, most of whom were college students or young “white-collar” (bailing 白领) employees (Qin Pei, 2006). Text message compositions are usually no more than 70 Chinese characters in length, the content of which includes humor, pranks, greetings and aphorisms. These compositions are put online to be read, downloaded, or sent from the Internet to cell phones, and then further circulated on cell phones (Li Cun, 2005). In addition to directly hiring composers, the websites also purchase text message compositions from text message agencies or companies, who hire composers and select compositions for sale (Jingbao, 2006).

Below is an example of a humorous prank greeting text from around 2005, which represents a typical popular style:

When you see this blessing that I send you, please hit your head hard against the wall. Can you see? The numerous stars in front of your eyes stand for my infinite wishes for you. I wish you a happy new year!

当你看到我发给你的这份祝福,请将头用力撞墙,看到没有,你眼前无数的星星是我无限的祝福,祝你新年快乐!

Funny text messages like this are likely to be frequently sent and transferred among younger cell phone users and close friends who would like to tease each other

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14 Usually a text message has a capacity of 70 Chinese characters. If a message is more than 70 messages in length, the first 70 words will be sent in one text message, and the rest will be sent in following message(s).
every once in a while. In 2002, on the Sohu website, the message below composed by Dai Pengfei 戴鹏飞\textsuperscript{15} was sent 1,537,206 times (Wang Ping, 2008: 123). This composition is among the earliest examples of this prank style.

Don’t move! This is a robbery! Everybody, hands up! Men stand on the left, women stand on the right, perverts stand in the middle. Hey! I am talking about you – don’t pretend to be looking at your cell phone! (2002)

不许动！抢劫！全部举起手来！男的站左边，女的站右边，变态的站中间，哎！说的就是你，还装着看手机！

This text is characterized by a shift from a fictional narrative space to an actual space – from the story space of a “robbery” to the real space of the receiver of the text message. This technique innovatively utilizes the narrative potential of a cell phone text message. The temporal immediacy and spatial hybridity characteristic of cell phone use and experience have created the potential for innovative forms of narratives and speech acts. This prank style became extremely widespread and was further developed in later compositions.

Light humor and amusing greetings have also been popular. Even if a text itself is just a joke or tale, it still has the function of greeting and communication. In the circulation of the text, the sender passes on the joke or story to say hi and share fun with

\textsuperscript{15} Dai has the title of “the No. 1 text message composer of China”. Usually the text message composers are unknown to the public, because none of the literary text messages put online provide information about the authors. Dai is an exception partly because he had a personal column of literary text messages on Sohu during 2002–2003? – “Dai Pengfei Text Message Column” (see Li Cun, 2005).
the receiver (Ni Heng, 2005; Mi Youping, 2007). Thus, the act of text messaging itself already forms a primal narrative and performative frame for the text. Below are some examples of jokes, humor, and amusing greetings that circulated during 2002–2003:

6 ran into 9 and said: Just walk, why do you bother to walk on your hands? 0 ran into 8 and said: Fat is fat, why bother to use a belt? 7 ran into 2 and said: Stop kneeling in front of me. I won’t marry you anyway. 2 ran into 5 and said: When did you do a breast enlargement job? (2002)

6 碰见 9 说：走两步就走两步呗练什么倒立阿；0 碰见 8 说：胖就胖呗还寄什么腰带阿；7 碰见 2 说：行了，别跪着了，再跪也不嫁给你；2 碰见 5 说：几天没见隆胸啦？

If an old man with a white beard climbs into your window tonight and packs you into a sack, you must not panic. It’s because I told Santa Claus that the gift I want the most is a friend like you! (2002)

如果今晚有一个白胡子老爷爷从窗口爬进来，把你装进袋子里，你一定不要惊慌，那是我告诉圣诞老人我最想要的礼物是一个像你这样的朋友！

I wish you good luck like a landmine, always to be stepped on by you. Bad luck like meteor shower, which never falls on you. Wealth like trash, you can find it everywhere. Happiness like a fly, that sticks to you and never leaves. (2003)
This kind of light humor often utilizes rich rhetorical techniques, such as personification, exaggeration, irony, oxymoron, and parallelism, and demonstrates strong effects of alienation or *Verfremdung*. Many literary compositions of text messages are quaint, clever, imaginative, and “cute”. This kind of cuteness is comparable to what Julia Kristeva calls “baby-talk” (see Kristeva, 1984), which generates a mild, ambiguous playful relationship with representation. The pleasure that consumers obtain from such humorous texts is a kind of pleasure and satisfaction derived from “displaying cleverness”, to use Freud’s words (see Freud, 1963).

By the end of 2004, *Sina* had collected tens of thousands of text message compositions in stock, and stopped purchasing new compositions in early 2005. *Sohu*, too, with close to 100,000 text message compositions in stock, along with other major websites, had also stopped this activity by 2005–2006. Text message compositions on the internet have no copyright and can be circulated among different websites without any copyright issues or remuneration involved. Nowadays, many websites have their own “text message collectors and editors” (*duanxin caibian renyuan* 短信采编人员), who collect, edit, manage, and maintain their stock of text message compositions.  

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16 Huang Peng, who worked at the “wireless platform” of *Sina*, said in 2006 that, although every once in a while there were still activities such as collecting original text message compositions for the Spring Festival, they were mostly a marketing strategy of the operators in stimulating text message consumption in a particular period of time rather than the large-scale purchase of text message compositions of several years earlier (*Jingbao*, 2006).
message compositions contributed by unpaid anonymous netizens are also common and available online (Jingbao, 2006).

Before their investment in text messages, the large websites had “gained enough eyeballs but not enough money”. (reference?) It was text messages that enabled them to turn a profit. In 2003,

the financial records of the several major websites show that in general they adopted a profit mode of combining text messages, advertisements and games. Considering that income from text messages in Sina and Sohu exceeds 50% of their total income, the claim that text messaging has salvaged three major websites is not an overstatement. (Yan Kaili and Ji Yu, 2003)

In 2004, the income from text messaging alone\textsuperscript{17} exceeded 10 million yuan per month for each of the three major portal websites, for example over 30 million yuan per month in 163/NetEase (Lin Hua, 2006). At present, text messaging remains a major source of profit for commercial websites (Zhao Kun, 2009). TV stations and program organizers also greatly benefit from text messaging, by means including audience participation via text messaging (Lin Hua, 2006).\textsuperscript{18} The 2005 “Super Girl” (\textit{chaoji niusheng 超级女生}) singing competition held by Hunan Satellite TV is estimated to have

\textsuperscript{17}This income does not even include the profit from more expensive “value-added services” (\textit{zengzhi fuwu 增值服务}), i.e., other non-voice mobile businesses such as downloading ring tones and MMS.

\textsuperscript{18}The mobile operators collected charges from cell phone users, and then the profit was shared among mobile operators, cooperating websites and TV stations, as well as text message service suppliers who had been approved by the mobile operators to provide technical platforms (Lin Hua, 2006).
brought in an income of 60 million yuan from text messaging alone (Zhang Xiaoming, 2006).\(^{19}\) From the 2006 CCTV Spring Festival Evening Party alone,\(^{20}\) the CCTV received a share of profits of over 100 million yuan from mobile operators (Lin Hua, 2006).\(^{21}\) Text message greetings to family and friends, especially during special holidays, have also created “economic miracles.” During the 2008 Spring Festival, in a period of a week from the Lunar New Year’s Eve on, New Year greetings text messages (bainian duanxin 拜年短信) sent in China exceeded 17,000 million messages.\(^{22}\) This number was around 23,000 in 2010.\(^{23}\) A large number of holiday greeting messages sent are text message compositions available online (Lin Songhua, 2008; Guo Huiying, 2007).

Sending a text message usually costs only 1 jiao (roughly 1.4 US cents), and downloading a text message composition from the internet costs 2 jiao.\(^{24}\) Huge profits result from these cheap services; this economic phenomenon is therefore called the “1-jiao economy” (yimaoqian jingji 一毛钱经济) or “thumb economy” (muzhi jingji 拇指经济) (Qin Wen, 2004).\(^{25}\) As we can tell, the creative composition of text messages played a crucial role in promoting the fashion of text messaging, which subsequently resulted in these economic miracles. It is closely connected to people’s need and desire

\(^{19}\) The 2005 Super Girls singing competition is said to have created a cultural-industrial chain with an estimated value of more than 2000 million yuan according to the 2006 Cultural Bluebook, a series of research carried out by the China Social Science Academy. See Zhang Xiaoming, 2006.

\(^{20}\) Chunjie lianhuan wanhu 春节联欢晚会 or chunwan 春晚, the largest annual national TV evening party or TV performance show on the Lunar Chinese New Year’s Eve, lasts about 4–5 hours, and is organized by related official cultural departments and CCTV.

\(^{21}\) It was only around 25% of the total profit brought by mobile services during this TV program; the mobile operator took 15% of the total profit, and the text message service supplier took 60% (Lin Hua, 2006).


\(^{24}\) 1 jiao equals10 cents in Chinese RMB. Downloading ring tones or MMS from the internet costs around 2–3 yuan.

\(^{25}\) As people use thumbs to type on and operate their cell phone.
for communication, maintaining contact, and entertainment. On the other hand, in order to maximize profit, expand the market, and carry on further events, mobile operators, SMS service suppliers, commercial websites, and the media worked together to further stimulate cell phone-related consumption and to develop new forms. Since 2002~2003, other parties such as printing publishers, leading literary journals, universities, and other institutions have also become involved.

I.2. Literary text messages, text message literature and cell phone literature

The text message compositions created and circulated during 2000~2003 had established early prototypes of “literary text messages.” This was also one of the most active and productive periods of literary text message composition. With an increasing number of text message compositions appearing online and circulating among cell phone users, collections of selected text message compositions were published in 2002, such as *Text Message on the Cell Phone – Online Quips*, *A Full Record of Cool Text Message Classics*, *Happy Text Messages* and *Blissful Text Message Classics* (Li Cun, 2005; Lin Chunyu, 2002).

During the SARS epidemic in 2003, composed poetic greetings, solace messages and cheer-up forms of humor, lyrics and parodies of classic circulated widely among cell

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phone users, who were confined at home or school dormitories due to the epidemic (Yu Haiqing, 2004). SARS is considered to have powerfully advanced the fashion of literary text messaging, which eventually developed into an influential force and became integrated into contemporary everyday lifestyles and culture (Kuang Wenbo, 2003, 2006). One greeting text message during SARS reads as follows:

We didn’t feel the preciousness of breathing freely until encountering SARS. We didn’t feel the preciousness of showing real faces until we are behind the mask. That we miss each other at this unusual time shows the preciousness of our friendship! (2003)

遭遇非典才知道自由呼吸的可贵，隔著口罩才知道面目真实的可贵，非常时期的思念显示出我们友谊的珍贵！

Light humor, teasing or amusing tales and jokes also prevailed, such as:

According to experts, the main transmission of the SARS virus is through the circulation of paper money. For the sake of your and your family’s health, please put all your cash into a sealed plastic bag. I will come to your door to collect it (only a small service fee will be charged)! (2003)

据专家介绍，非典的主要传播途径是流通的纸币。为了您和您家人的健康，请整理好您家全部现金并用塑料袋密封，我将上门回收（只收取少量费用）！
If you are working now, you are a soldier. If you are shopping, you are a warrior.

If you are partying, you are a fighter. If you don’t reply to this message, you must be a martyr. (2003)²⁷

如果你现在上班，你是战士；如果你现在逛街，你是勇士；如果你现在聚会，你是斗士；如果你看了短信不回，那你一定是烈士。

I found a string of fireworks and wanted to save it for the Spring Festival. You saw it and insisted on lighting them. I said no, but you got angry and yelled: “I must light them! I must light them [Wo feidian, sounding like: I have SARS]!” Then the hospital took you away. (2003)²⁸

我拣了一挂鞭炮，准备留着过年放，你看见了就要点，我说先别点，你和我怄气，大喊：“我非点，我非点！”结果医院把你接走了。

Travesties or humorous imitations of classical lyrics, poems, and masterpieces were also particularly popular during the SARS epidemic. In the following examples, Mao Zedong’s famous classical poem Qinyuan Spring, Snow (Qinyan chun, xue) 沁园春·雪, Li Yu’s 李煜 Yu meiren (虞美人), modern poet Xu Zhimo’s 徐志摩 poem A Second Farewell to Cambridge (Zaibie kangqiao 再别康桥), the Chinese National Anthem and a textual style of classical bibliographical studies were parodied, respectively:

²⁷ People were mostly staying at home to avoid being infected during the SARS.
²⁸ During the SARS, any suspect case would be quarantined compulsorily.
In the capital of Beijing, a thousand miles of sick wind, and ten thousand miles of floating virulence. Within and beyond the Great Wall are panicking hearts. Up and down the capital, chatter has been silenced. Drinking *banlangen* herbal medicine, taking vitamins, all intending to struggle against SARS. Not a day of peace; yet masks and gloves sell well! (2003)²⁹

首都北京，千里病风，万里毒飘。望长城内外，人心慌慌，京城上下，顿失叨叨，喝板蓝根，吃维生素，欲与非典试比高，无宁日，看口罩手套，分外好销！

When will the SARS virus end, and how many patients are there known to be? The building was blocked again last night. The capital cannot bear retrospection in the bright moon. Food supplies should still be there, just a bit hard to buy. How much worry and anxiety can there be? The thing feared the most is being quarantined as a suspect case of infection. (2003)³⁰

SARS 病毒何时了，患者知多少？

小楼昨夜又被封，京城不堪回首月明中。粮油蛋菜应犹在，只是不好买。问君能有几多愁？最怕当成疑似被扣留。

SARS, softly softly you come……Damn it, so why won’t you leave? (2003)³¹

非典，轻轻地你来了……TMD，你怎么不走了？

²⁹ Mao Zedong’s original text can be found here: [http://www.dxgzs.com/mzdsc/](http://www.dxgzs.com/mzdsc/)
³¹ Xu Zhimo’s original text: [http://www.shigeku.org/shiku/xs/xuzhimo/](http://www.shigeku.org/shiku/xs/xuzhimo/)
Rise, those who do not want to be infected! Cast our love into a Great Wall against SARS. When the Chinese nation comes to the most endangered moment, everybody is forced to utter the loudest shout: Distribute money! Distribute medicine! Distribute masks! (2003)\(^{32}\)

起来，不愿被传染的人们，把我们的爱心铸成我们抗非典的长城；中华民族到了最危险的时候，每个人都被迫发出最大的吼声：发钱！发药！发口罩！

According to classical bibliographical studies, the earliest record of SARS in China is in the *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*: Cao Cao was raided by Wu. Fortunately Dian Wei protected him by risking his own life. After getting out of danger, Cao cried: I would have been dead without Dian [sounding like: I will surely die in the SARS]! (2003)\(^{33}\)

据考证，中国最早记载非典的文献是《三国志》：曹操遭东吴偷袭，幸有典韦舍命护卫，操脱险后哭道：非典，吾命休矣！

More collections of text message compositions were published in 2003, such as *A Fateful Love of Text Message* (2003), *A Split Second of SARS – Humor Pies in April* (June 2003) and *You Are Still Not Texting* by Dai Pengfei (October 2003)\(^{34}\).

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\(^{32}\) The original text in the National Song: [http://library.hsfz.net.cn/guoqingjie/song01.htm](http://library.hsfz.net.cn/guoqingjie/song01.htm)

\(^{33}\) See [http://baike.baidu.com/view/16815.htm](http://baike.baidu.com/view/16815.htm) for additional information about Cao Cao and Dian Wei.

\(^{34}\) *A Fateful Love of Text Message*（duanxin qingyuan 短信情缘）(2003), *A Split Second of SARS – Humor Pies in April*（tanzhi feidian 弹指非典——四月里的幽默派）(June 2003) and *You Are Still Not Texting* by Dai Pengfei (October 2003)
In 2003, “text message literature” (duanxin wenxue 短信文学) competitions were held in cities, universities, and regions of China (see Li Cun, 2005). In 2004, China Mobile, a leading mobile operator, famous journal Tianya 天涯, and a leading website Tianya Community 天涯社区 cooperated to hold the first national text message literature competition. Literary works such as poems, prose, and short stories customized for cell phone reading were accepted. Famous writers such as Tie Ning 铁凝, Han Shaogong 韩少功, Su Tong 苏童 and Ge Fei 格非 were invited to be judges. The competition developed into an influential series in the following few years, with collections of prize-winning works published successively, such as The Ladder Lifter (Kang tizi de ren 扛梯子的人) (2005). Other literary forms, such as greeting messages, diary extracts, love letters, jokes, and couplets were also included later. The judges for the second term of this competition in 2005 included famous writers Fang Fang 方方, Chi Zijian 迟子建, Zhou Guoping 周国平, Han Shaogong 韩少功, Jiang Zidan 蒋子丹 and so on.35 Other text message literature competitions were held and collections of works were published, such as Selected Works in the First Cell Phone Micro Short Story Competition, Summer 2005 (shoujie shouji ) (Dasai zuweihui, 2005).

Texting (ni hai bu xin 你还不信). You Are Still Not Texting is the first personal collection of original text message compositions in China. See Li Cun, 2005. 
35 See their official website http://www.emz.com.cn/
The publication of Outside the City (Chengwai 城外) by Qianfu Zhang 千夫长 in June 2004\(^{36}\) marked the beginning of “cell phone fictions” (shouji xiaoshuo 手机小说) (Wang Daqiao, 2007; Yang Zhongju, 2006; Qian Lili, 2006). This fiction of 4200 words in length is said to have the “structure of a novel.” The fiction contains 60 chapters. Each chapter contains 70 characters and can be sent in one text message (see Qianfu Zhang, 2005). This unique way of writing is called “text message style” (duanxin ti 短信体). 

Dai Pengfei’s Why Did You Fall in Love with Onion (Shui rangni aishang yangcong de 谁让你爱上洋葱的, 2004), claiming to limit each paragraph to 70 words and attempting to “make readers laugh every 70 characters,” also shared the label of “text message-style novel” (Ni Zifang, 2004; Dai Pengfei, 2004). “Cell phone fictions” later grew out of this highly challenging style. In later compositions, this rigid limitation of “70 characters” was abandoned. Longer fictions or novels customized for cell phone reading, featuring shorter sentences, shorter paragraphs, dense plots, and intense sensations became prevalent. By 2009, the subscription to and reading of cell phone fictions through the cell phone media had created a promising business chain.\(^{37}\) According to a recent survey by CNNIC, 27.7% of cell phone users in the survey have subscribed to a cell phone fiction service.\(^{38}\) A report by the Enfodesk Database of the Analysts International in 2010 shows

\(^{36}\) This “cell phone fiction” was bought by a telecommunications operator Huayou Shiji Communications Co. Ltd. 华友世纪通讯公司 with RMB 180, 000, see Yang Zhongju, 2006; Wang Daqiao, 2007.

\(^{37}\) According to the CNNIC, the users can either (1) download or read online on the mobile operator’s portal (the operator charges the fees per use or monthly. The fees concerning data flow go to the operator, but business income is shared by the operator and the copyright agent of the cell phone novel) or (2) register on a wireless website that adopts the form of free WAP, to log in to read or download part of the cell phone novels for free. Other parts may cause fees.


that 36.4% of the consumers of cell phone reading services prefer novels or works of literature that come from the paid cell phone reading services (Analysys International, 2010).


The above summary provides some contextual information for our analysis of “literary text messages.” To sum up and clarify the use of some terms, in general, we can

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39 *Both Lonely and Happy* (you jimo you xingfu 你寂寞又幸福, 2004) and *My Thumb Tells You*, (wode muzhi dui ni shuo我的拇指对你说, 2005), poetry collection *You Are in My Eyes Only* (ni zhizai wo yanli 你只在我眼里, 2005), the collection of fables *Straight Wisdom of the Thumb* (damuzhi zhide zhihui 大拇指直的智慧, 2007).

call original text message compositions in literary or non-everyday language “literary text messages”; literature that uses text message forms “text message literature”; and cell phone-customized literature of various forms “cell phone literature”. As we can see, these categories are far from being either definite or mutually exclusive. For example, Qianfu Zhang and Dai Pengfei’s cell phone novels are at the same time “literary text messages,” “text message literature”, and “cell phone literature.” Considering the variety and complexities of the literary forms involved, I will mainly examine a body of works that can be categorized under the name of “literary text messages.” Now that we have some basic idea of what literary text messages are like and the context of their development, now let us try to situate them within a broader literary category, and have a look at their thematic, functional and formal features.

I.3. Popular literature and folk literature in hypermedia

When text message compositions are called “literary” or “literature,” justification may be required. Let us temporarily evade the strenuous task of defining “literature”, and instead turn to Raymond William’s notion of “popular literature”:

[M]any, even most poems and plays and novels are not seen as literature; they fall below its level, in a sense related to the old distinction of polite learning; they are not ‘substantial’ or ‘important’ enough to be called works of literature. A new category of popular literature or the sub-literary has
then to be instituted, to describe works which may be fiction but which are not imaginative or creative, which are therefore devoid of aesthetic interest, and which are not art. (Williams, 1983: 186)

Williams’ notion of literature is based on a transparent literary hierarchy and a series of “old-fashioned” distinctions, such as the distinction between “fictional” and “factual.” As we will see, it is such distinctions as well as categories such as “aesthetic” and “imaginative” that are problematized in a performative notion of literature (see Culler, 2000, 2007; Miller, 2001). In fact, the hyperreal, made up of simulations of simulacra, as well as a view recognizing the imaginary nature of the subject-reality relationship, has ultimately rendered distinctions between the factual and the fictional meaningless. Ironically, however, if we admit that all “language games” are justifiable, and we treat such a discourse of literary hierarchy as a language game instead of a “terrorist”/totalizing meta-narrative, then it is also justifiable on its own terms within its own gaming territory. With such reflexivity in mind, let us try to work temporarily with this concept of popular literature.

Almost all literary text message compositions are anonymous, with the texts available online without the authors’ names being mentioned. The authors of the texts were paid by the website or agencies41 and they have no copyright for any of their compositions. Dai Pengfei is the exception. He had a literary text message column

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41 The pay to the composer per text message composition ranged from 6 yuan to several scores yuan. Dai Pengfei, as the most successful composer, said he received 60–200 yuan per composition in his best time. See Jingbao, 2006.
online and has had his collections published under his own name. But when his compositions are circulated among cell phone users, the consumers do not necessarily know his name. At the same time, some anonymous composers upload their compositions online, seeking no payment or fame at all, but doing so instead for the simple joy of sharing (Jingbao, 2006). Besides, some literary text messages can be seen as adaptations or re-textualizations of pre-existing jokes, tales, or humor (see Huang Lin, 2003; Hu Hongyi, 2003). When a text message composition is copied from one website to another during the process of circulation, the text inevitably develops variants. The text message collectors and editors working for a website, as well as the consumers and transmitters themselves, may edit or adapt the text based on their own perspectives or needs. In addition, certain traditional and folk cultural elements are observable in particular types of literary text messages, such as Spring Festival greeting text messages (Wang Xuehuan, 2008). Therefore, literary text messaging also shares some features of folk literature with regards to its textuality and modes of creation and circulation, such as the existence of recurrent forms with variations, the downplaying of individual authorship, and interpersonal transmission (see Fang Yu, 2009).

In fact, both folklorists and popular-culture scholars argue for critical connections between folk culture and popular culture (see Storey, 2003; Brunvand, 1998). As Neuburg puts it, “There is always an interplay between oral culture and popular literature – although in the end the printed popular literature becomes predominant.” (Neuburg, 1977: 52). Similarly, some studies show that “though oral transmission may be the
essence of folklore, a chapbook or a broadside or even a postcard or comic strip can often be a link in the chain of folklore dissemination” (Dorson, 1986: 411). This is to say, in addition to oral transmission, print materials may also have the function of transmitting folk literature. For instance, collections of folk stories are often published (see He Huo, 1989), and elements of folk literature (such as jokes) may be transmitted through print materials such as printed literary works (see Chen Yiyuan, 2000; Wang Nianshuang, 1996). While print materials may play an important role in the transmission of folk literature, the mass media can also carry out such a role. In fact, as one folklorist claims, the ‘interference’ of mass media vehicles not only accelerates the folklore process but also contributes to a numerical growth, indeed, a never-before-experienced inflation of folklore (Dégh, 1994: 24).

In this sense, literary text messaging may also be seen as involving active (re)creation and transmission of a kind of folk literature. However, in a context of digital hypermedia such as cell phones, where “the audience is at least co-creator of the work” (Smith and Dean, 1997: 257), a tension between orality and textuality is highlighted. A similar tension can be found in both the oral tradition itself (Foley, 1988) and certain aspects of the mass media, such as closed captioning or teletext on TV (for instance, the automatic textual transcription or teletext of a football announcer’s speech in a live-broadcast football match on TV). As Gu Xiaoming points out, if two people’s oral conversation

over the cell phone is automatically transcribed in written form on the cell phone, such a text thus derived also highlights the tension between orality and textuality (Gu Xiaoming, 2004). As we will see, the status of literary text messages as a hybrid literary form contributes to its particular functionality, aesthetic disposition, and performativity.

I.4. Motif, functionality, formality

Humor, entertainment, greeting and communication of feelings seem to be the main thematic and functional features of literary text messages (see Zhong Yu, 2005; Ye Congrong, 2004). Dai Pengfei claims “humor” and “expression of feelings” (yanqing 言情) as its two main functional features (Dai Pengfei, 2003). In literary text messages, aphorisms, quibbles and clever sayings form a subgenre that overlaps with humor and jokes. Freud included quibbles in the genre of “joke/Witz” (Freud, 1963)43. Quibbles has a close connection with so-called “cold jokes” (leng xiaohua 冷笑话), a popular style of unconventional joke-telling that usually lacks a climactic punch line (see Chapter III). For example: “I turned her from a girl into a woman. She turned me from a boy into a…poor man. 我把她从女孩变成了女人；她把我从男孩变成了…穷人。” “You need to eat an appropriate amount to have the energy to lose weight. 要适当吃一点，才有劲减肥啊。” Parodies of famous sayings are common. For example, “The result of birth control: if not successful, it will accomplish ‘a human’

43 The German Witz is translated into English as joke or wit, either of which is considered completely equivalent to Witz.
(humanity). 避孕的效果：不成功，便成仁。"44 “Those who have money (love) will eventually become a couple. 有钱人终成眷属。”45

Another type of cold joke also constitutes a subgenre of literary text messages. For example,

One time I went to the street. A group of girls stopped me. They said I was handsome. I denied it. Then they beat me, and called me a hypocrite.

有一次我上街，一群女孩把我拦住，她们说我帅，我不承认，她们就打我，还说我虚伪。

This type of texts is not a quibble, but rather a form of coded presentation of particular conditions. When the codes are deciphered in a way that suits their milieu, they can generate not only pleasure, but even a genuine(ly felt) poeticity (see also Chapter III).

This is a type of mathematic poeticity, generated from interior rhythm in a mechanical arrangement, phasing and matrix. For instance, “beating/fighting (da 打)” is a distinctive coding element in cold jokes and a certain version of youth subculture. It implies mild, ambiguous tease, “cute,” symbolic or feigned aggression. As in the case of animals that fight each other under the shared meta-communication of the message of “play” rather than real fighting, here “beating” turns into a kind of ambiguous play in the text. In such textual architecture, a crisp snapping shut of a certain opening will create such a moment

44 The idiom 不成功便成仁 derives from 《论语·卫灵公》：“志士仁人，无求生以害仁，有杀身以成仁。”
45 The idiom 有情人终成眷属 derives from 《西厢记》： “愿天下有情人终成眷属。”
of pleasure and the Kantian Sublime, and hence a sense poeticity. “A very cold very violent joke: one day, Cold and Violence ran into each other in the street, and they began to beat/fight each other.

很冷很暴力的笑话：一天，冷和暴力在大街上相遇了，他们打了起来。”

The need for (the consumption of) such poeticity is nonetheless also practical. While text messaging creates virtual carnivals all the time, real legal or folk festivals, such as National Day, Dragon-Boat Day and Children’s Day, do witness higher traffic and climaxes of text messaging (Kuang Wenbo, 2006). This is partly due to the commercial parties’ promotion of text messages at this time, and partly due to people’s need to contact family and friends. As the condition of text messaging during SARS shows, a social event, disaster, or particular moment may stage new compositions and a higher circulation of text messages. In this sense, text messaging has formed a type of public ritual in contemporary festivals and incidents culture (Ibid).

On the level of formal features, literary text messages are known for: (1) Being short in length and hence demanding challenging techniques of “dancing in shackles”46 to create textual climax within 70 words (Li Cun, 2005); (2) Rich literary rhetorical techniques, especially “style-imitation/simulation” (fangni 仿拟) technique (Guo Yunxue, 2006; Wang Zhening, 2006); (3) Their communicative and interactive nature (Wang Ping, 2008; Ni Heng, 2005; Luo Xiangyu, 2003).

46 戴着镣铐跳舞 is a quotation of Wen Yiduo 闻一多 in his poetic essay 《诗的格律》 in 1926.
47 Fangni, to imitate a particular established style of writing, such as weather report, court judgment, product manuals, driving directions, official documents, political slogan and so on. This technique is widely used in literary text messages.
Chapter II: Literary Text Messages and Representational Politics

This chapter discusses the representational politics of literary text messages. How individuals (re)adjust their relationships with the symbolic order through a textual and inter-subjective performative process is theorized in psychoanalytic and semiotic terms. The textual play of text messaging provides the users with a liminal position and enables them to cross the boundaries of identity. The naturalized representation or determination of meanings is problematized by subjects’ performance of perversity and an interpassive relationship between subjects. In this chapter I describe how this process of power negotiation between subjects and symbolic system functions in the activity of literary text messaging.

This chapter is comprised of two parts. First, the issue of representational politics, as described in the Introduction, is elaborated in the particular context of textual play between the sender and the receiver. The background and conditions of such a representational politics are explained. Second, the particular textual play between the sender and the receiver is theorized in three aspects: (1) how subjects utilize and identify with a temporary, shifting avatar enabled by the text and play with a liminal status of identities; (2) how the sender and the receiver exchange symbolic relations through the speaking text and perform a form of perversity; (3) how subjects realize negotiations of relationships with the symbolic order (the big Other) through a dual relationship of interactivity/interpassivity with other subjects (the small others). With these analyses, the chapter ends with summarizing the representational politics of literary text messages.
II.1. Representational performativity and symptomatic codes

The consumers of literary text messages (the sender and the receiver of a text) are provided with an opportunity for extraordinary experiences of multiple transgressions of boundaries. This is made possible by the text and the interactive play between the sender and the receiver. This process of textual play lends the consumers a hyperspace where ambiguous stances can be performed. This hyperspace is both real and unreal; the sender and the receiver are “communicating” and exchanging signals in reality, but at the same time these activities are also beyond reality and infringing the principles of reality. In other words, the consumers are exchanging ambivalent, vague signals on one hand, and eluding and escaping the order and meaning of reality on the other. The textual play grants the players a performativity that creates this ambiguous hyperspace through the very act of texting. By joining the game of texting, the players obtain the particular possibility of escaping the rule of the reality world.

In Lacanian concepts, the reality world is the world of representation. Representation, embodied by signs with designated meanings and symbolic order based on them, dominates the reality. The subjects form their subjectivity through establishing a “normal”, affirmative relationship with the representational system. The established meanings are well taken by the subjects, and the subjects therefore acquire a legitimate position in the symbolic system. The whole process of normalization and naturalization is the foundation for the functioning and rule of representation. On the contrary,
“symptoms” are crucial in subverting such normalness and naturalness of representation. For instance, according to Zizek, psychosis and perversity create such moments that the legitimacy of representation is questioned. In other words, by performing the kind of abnormalness defined by the system, the subjects are in fact bringing the normalness of the system into question. By performing insanity and symptoms, the subjects are challenging the intrinsic systematic insanity of the reality.

The game played by consumers of literary text messaging conspicuously demonstrates a degree of perverted pleasure. When many scholars condemn this kind of silly play as frivolous, meaningless, and inane, I will show the political meaning of such activities. It is through these symptomatic performances that subjects negotiate power with the system of representation. In the next section, I will explain how this political negotiation proceeds in literary text messaging.

II.2. Text, subject, and representational politics

a. Textual avatar and liminal subjectivity

In the context of literary text messaging, the sender and the receiver are both playing with a text generated elsewhere. In the game of the textual play, text is neither the goal nor self-contained, it is a point in a stream of activity, integrating a flexible prop, a mission and a textual medium. Through the multi-meaningful textual game, a series of relational and symbolic exchanges are realized. When the receiver receives a literary text
message, the cell phone medium and the text medium together form the interface. It is within this interface, as well as within a dynamic inter-subjective relation between the sender and the receiver situated in a larger network of social codes, that the text takes on meaning. Therefore, the text provides a floating avatar, to be grabbed contingently and mobilized into a somewhat open-ended virtual adventure.

It seems important to be aware of the distance between the voice or language of the player and that of the avatar, and of the communicative and stylizing systems in the avatar world. For example, just as “beating” or “fighting” can connote a degree of intimacy and “cuteness” in some contexts, there are also other such functions and principles. However, the performativity of the textual avatar has brought to reality not only themselves, but also their space, which becomes hybridized with the players’ space. In other words, the player is at the same time both “himself” and represented by the textual avatar in the hyperspace of the game. In this sense, the obsession with literary text messaging can be interpreted as a desire to traverse back and forth across the imagined boundaries and liminality of identities. This idea is vaguely encapsulated in the following literary text message:

In the dull and busy life day after day, sometimes we may forget the existence of ourselves. At this time, you just need to take a hammer and gently hit your thumb – then you can rediscover yourself easily……

日复一日单调忙碌的生活，有时会让人忘了自己的存在，这时，你只需拿一把榔头在大拇指上轻轻一砸，便可轻而易举地找回你自己……
Metaphorized with a sort-of-joking scenario in which one hits one’s thumb with a hammer and “rediscover” one’s self, the liminal status and slippage of identity are portrayed. The pain is metaphorized as a means of crossing the boundary back to the physical existence. And the irony also lies in an implicit tease of what is really one’s “self” and what is really the “reality”.

b. Speaking text and perversity

Below is a literary text message:

Psychological test: scroll down if you feel your IQ is pretty high
Scroll down if you feel you have a pretty good sense of humor
Scroll down if you feel you are pretty charismatic
Scroll down if you feel you are pretty handsome
Test result:
You are pretty shameless

心理测验：自我觉得智商挺高的往下按
觉得自己还挺幽默的往下按
觉得自己还挺有魅力的往下按
觉得自己还相貌挺帅的往下按
测试结果：
挺不要脸的
In this prank text message, the receiver is both forced to scroll down without choice in order to read the message, and at the same time is participating in this “psychological test”. Hence the receiver is interpellated into a performative paradox, being both physically and mentally subjected to the imperative of the speaking text, and lost or nullified in the vacuous dictation of the predestined “test result.” Through such a prank text, the sender performs the role of a fantasmatic imposter of the big Other (the symbolic order), thus satisfying his own narcissism and imaginarily filling a gap between his subjectivity and the Symbolic. Relying on the demanding power of the text, the sender performs an imaginary role of controller and simulates a controlling relationship with the receiver. This creates a form of subjective power to the sender, which enables him or her to imagine an approximate identification with the big Other. In this sense, the sender gains an opportunity of playing an imposter of the big Other and obtaining pleasure from playing such a role.

In other cases of such speaking texts, a “real” physical control of the receiver is abandoned or subdued, and substituted by an imagined simulation. “Dear user: your cell phone now has the function of withdrawing money. You can simply take the SIM card out and insert into an ATM. If the ATM declines the transaction, please hit your cell phone hard against the ATM!

尊敬的用户：您的手机目前已具有提款功能，只需将SIM卡取出插入提款机即可，如提款机不受理业务，请用手机用力砸提款机！” The prank is enacted on a hyper-
platform temporarily set up through the text, where the addressee is called to be present to undertake the voyeuristic gaze of the sender.

This control can also be intermediate between actual and imaginary, and exercised in a mental process.

Hey, is your Chinese pronunciation standard enough? Read along with me:
wanwan-wangwang, wangwang-wanwan, wanwan-wangwang, wan-wang, wangwan. Ok! Now stop barking, doggie. It’s time to eat!
嘿嘿你的国语够标准吗?请跟我一起念：万万望望、旺望万望、万万忘
忘、万望、忘万。好了!狗狗别叫了，开饭了!

Eating shit, dancong, yexi, jiushang, guangqiang, meidan, hupi, epei and shitong. How many of these words do you know? Did you find out that you know nothing except eating shit?
吃屎、簟璁、醭歙、艽绱、癀穑、魍旃、偬彘、硪钚、鲥硐，上面的词你认识几个，是不是发现自己除了吃屎就什么也不会了呢?

In such cases, the receiver often finds himself helplessly spoken by the text, unless he otherwise adopts a performative alternative of masochism. Nonetheless, the sender (imaginarily) shares an illocutionary power with the speaking text, not because he can resolve the demand/authority of the text, but simply because he has access to the use of the text. This explains why a receiver of such a text will go on to send it to another, thus
turning himself into a sender and exploiter and balancing his position in a chain of relational exchange.

The voice of the text can also play with the ambiguous signifiers of “you” and “I/me.” Under the manipulation of the text, the “you” can be miraculously displaced and suspended, rendered into an unreasonable void or shameful metamorphosis. Thus, the process of interpellation becomes a reflexive circulation of nonsense and contradiction. By imposing an alien other into the position of the “you”, the “I” (player) symbolically accomplishes a surplus value of the “me” (the avatar), which acquires additional symbolic meaning from emptying or exploiting the content of “you”.

Now it’s both National Day and Mid-Autumn Day. I really have to tell you now. Do you know how much I like you?! I really can’t live on without you. I miss you in the day time, I dream of you in the night time. Why don’t you like me? Why do you like other people? I especially dislike that you like the rich and disdain the poor. You have aroused such deep love and sharp pain in me, my dear Renminbi [money]!

国庆节加上中秋节, 我不得不说了, 你知道我有多喜欢你吗？！没有你我真的活不下去, 我白天想你, 晚上做梦梦见你, 你为什么不喜欢我, 偏偏去喜欢其他人, 我尤其讨厌你嫌贫爱富, 你真是让我爱之深痛之切, 亲爱的人民币！
I saw you yesterday, in the grocery! You secretly put your hand under the bar code scanner, and the screen showed: pig trotter, 8 yuan. You thought something was wrong with the machine and leaned forward to have a look, then the screen showed: pig head, 5 yuan!

那天我看见你了，在超市！你悄悄的把手伸到条码扫描器上，只见屏幕显示：猪蹄8元。你以为机器坏了，把脸凑过去看，屏幕显示猪头肉5元！

In the latter case, the mutation and loss of the “you” is incarnated with the partial body imagery of a pig – with transformation from the receiver’s hand into a pig’s trotter and from face into a pig’s head. The contracted value is even plainly quantified. The scanner, implying digital precision and “scientific certainty”, provisionally acts as the discursive authority and mediator and declares the precision of degeneration. Thus, loss takes on a shape and is measured in a plain unit.

Going further, the text can be an arbitrary dictator and enounce an ultimate order: “When you read this message, you already owe me a hug. If you delete this message, you owe me a kiss. If you save it, you owe me a date. If you reply, you owe me everything. If you don’t reply, you are mine.

当你读这短讯，你已欠我一个拥抱；删除这短讯，欠我一个吻；储存它欠我一个约会；要是回复，你欠我全部；要是不回复，你就是我的了。”

As we can see, this kind of “naive” or silly play between the sender and the receiver has a purely symbolic aspect, representing a symbolic treatment of the relation...
between the subject and the big Other. Small others, such as the contingent “you”s in the
texts, are utilized as surrogate mediators to help share the burden of the big Other.

“[W]hen individuals exchange symbols, they do not simply interact with each other, but
always also refer to the virtual big Other. (Zizek, ??)”. When the subject simulates a
playful relation with the big Other, s/he also in this form confides a traumatic symptom:

[W]hen I develop a symptom, I produce a ciphered message about my
innermost secrets, my unconscious desires and traumas. The symptom's
addressee is not another real human being… Who, then, is the symptom's
addressee? The only remaining candidate is the virtual big Other (Zizek,
2006). 48

The “message” that is ultimately intended for the big Other is also referred to
by Zizek as an unsent letter Lacan once mentioned:

One can even say that the only letter which fully and effectively arrives at its
destination is the unsent letter - its true addressee are not flesh-and-blood
others, but the big Other itself… (Ibid)

There he quotes Lacan:

The preservation of the unsent letter is its arresting feature. Neither the writing
nor the sending is remarkable (we often make drafts of letters and discard

them), but the gesture of keeping the message when we have no intention of sending it. By saving the letter, we are in some sense 'sending' it after all. We are not relinquishing our idea or dismissing it as foolish or unworthy (as we do when we tear up a letter); on the contrary, we are giving it an extra vote of confidence. We are, in effect, saying that our idea is too precious to be entrusted to the gaze of the actual addressee, who may not grasp its worth, so we 'send' it to his equivalent in fantasy, on whom we can absolutely count for an understanding and appreciative reading. (Lacan, cf. ibid)

Interestingly, by reversing this procedure of preserving/unsending the message that is “too precious”, the obsessed literary text message-senders conversely keep lavishly sending “cheap” messages (after all it costs only 1 jiao) to “flesh-and-blood others”, for anything but “an understanding and appreciative reading”. This obsessive desire for pranks and affected game-playing symptomizes a desire to deny the big Other, which is exactly a symptom of perversity. In this symptomatic process, the relation between the subject and small others is highlighted.

c. Interactivity and interpassivity

In the digital textual play between the sender and the receiver, when text messages and the process of texting on the cell phone screen seem to be an “interactive object”, it is at the same time an “interpassive object” between the two actors. The notion of interpassivity is developed by Zizek based on Lacan’s comments on the audience’s
passive affective involvement in watching Greek tragedy – the Chorus stages the supposed proper feelings for the audience. “Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you” (Lacan, cf Zizek, 1999: 104). A typical example is the “canned laughter” in TV sit-coms, which laughs for the viewers. But through such passive watching, the viewers do feel relief and relax after it (Zizek, 1997). Zizek associates this experience with an interpassive process that opens up a space for subjects to transfer or transpose their ultimate inert passivity to the Other(s), thus remaining active.

[T]he basic matrix of interpassivity follows from the very notion of subject as the pure activity of (self-) positing, as the fluidity of pure Becoming, devoid of any positive, firm Being: if I am to function as pure activity, I have to externalize my (passive) Being – in short: I have to be passive through another (Ibid: 116-117).

Zizek uses interpassivity to supplement the notion of interactivity, which is often used to describe new media such as the Internet (as different from TV), and claims “interpassivity, like interactivity…subverts the standard opposition between activity and passivity” (Zizek, 1999: 105). According to him, the notion of interactivity is used in two senses: (1) interacting with the medium – not being just a passive consumer; (2) acting
through another agent, so that one’s job is done, while one sits back and remains passive, just observing the game. For Zizek,

While the opposite of the first mode of interactivity is also a kind of ‘interpassivity’, the mutual passivity of two subjects, like two lovers passively observing each other and merely enjoying the other’s presence, the proper notion of interpassivity aims at the reversal of the second meaning of interactivity: the distinguishing feature of interpassivity is that, in it, the subject is incessantly – frenetically even – *active*, while displacing on to another the fundamental passivity of his or her being. (Ibid: 106)

To use Zizek’s terms, text messaging is an interactive process first in the sense that the user’s interacting with the cell phone (the medium) is a precondition for its functioning. Second, when the sender sends a literary text message to the receiver, it realizes both an interactivity and interpassivity. For instance, when a joke or greeting is sent, on the one hand the receiver is experiencing it *for* the sender (interactivity), and on the other hand the sender is imaginarily satisfying and pleasing the receiver (interpassivity). When the sender transposes his inert passivity to the receiver by actively “taking care of or pleasing” the latter, the latter, too, transposes his own inert passivity to the former by actively satisfying the former’s desire of “taking care of or pleasing others.” Thus, this is an intertwined, multi-layered exchange of relations. This complicated mode of satisfaction may explain why the receiver of a prank message still
feels pleasure, even though he is spoken and caused symbolic loss by the prank text. The receiver may turn the very text into an interpassive object for his own transposition of inert passivity. Moreover, after all, the sender and the receiver are both playing the same game with a (degree of) awareness of its dual interactivity/interpassivity, therefore likely achieving an “active-active” situation.

Below is a literary text message in the form of a classical lyric (ci 词)\(^49\) that was circulated by cell phone in 2003. The receiver is told to read the lyric aloud:

Please read the ancient poem below aloud:

Crouching Spring

The pale plum blossoms scent the air faintly,
The crouching branch glooms, bending low in regret.
From far away is carried the sound of flowing water,
Crystal clear, nestling in the depth of the green spring.
The banks appear green,
The banks are pervaded in green,
The banks are pervaded in thick, dark green.

请大声读这首古诗：

\(^{49}\) In the classical lyric pattern *ci* 词牌 of *Ruyi lìng*如意令.
《卧春》

暗梅幽闻花，
卧枝伤恨低，
遥闻卧似水，
依透达春绿。
岸似绿，
岸似透绿，
岸似透黛绿。

Through the receiver’s recitation, the poetic verses of spring are transcribed into vulgar self-mocking verses in the Henan dialect, calling oneself a donkey:

I’m Dumb

I am boorish and uneducated,
I have a low IQ.
You wanna know who I am?
I’m a big dumbass.
I’m a donkey,
I’m a big donkey,
I’m a big dumb donkey.

《我蠢》

俺没有文化，
我智商很低，
要问我是谁，
一头大蠢驴。
俺是驴，
俺是头驴，
俺是头呆驴。

The “hidden” and “real” words are close to, in fact right on the other side of the words on the “surface.” As shown in the first version of the poem and the second one in the Henan dialect, both share exactly the same sounds. They are “speaking” of the same thing but at the same time a different other. The sender encodes the truth for the receiver, and the receiver speaks it out for the sender. And the reverse is also true: the (dumb) truth is maintained in a poetic envelop, and the sender and the receiver exchange with each other both “truth” and “poeticity”. The dumb donkey is preserved to be the unsent letter to the big Other. Therefore, such a dual architecture of interactivity/interpassivity situates both players of the game in a narcissistic position of perversity, both denying/deferring the big Other through each other interpassively.
After conceptualizing some of the hybrid and symptomatic performatives of literary text messaging and its representational political capacity, we can now shift our attention to its technological and socio-cultural staging, thus better understanding the scenarios of political negotiations and symptomatic sensations.
Chapter III: Literary Text Messages and Technological Politics

This chapter discusses the technological politics of literary text messages. This chapter first discusses the intertwining and hybridization of the discourses of technology, literature and politics, and then theorizes some distinctive qualities inherent in such post-printing texts such as literary text messages, namely, what I term mathematic poeticity and visual literariness, and their capacity to resist against technological rule. Mathematic poeticity refers to a poetic experience of processing information and emotions based on mathematic models. Visual literariness refers to the highlighted combination of imagery, words, and meaning, in which visuality dominates the rhythm of words and tempo of the surface of the text. Visuality transforms the overall condition of the text, rendering words mere arrangement and matrix of characters with an abstract rhythm, which causes meaning to idle. Thus, the text simply presents a series of visual procedures whose meanings are undefined. This kind of literary creation of text and behavior of texting utilizes technology itself to offset the weight of technology. The mechanical rhythm of technology is reproduced and mimicked into a mechanical rhythm in the text, but with appropriation and displacement, as we will see below. The political function of these features in the context of the rule of technology is discussed.

III.1. Technology, literature, and politics
What can literature do in a technocratic age? Is there still literature at all? What is the landscape of cultural politics in a technology-dominated historical period of time? Derrida once prophesied the death of literature with the arrival of telecommunications technology:

An entire epoch of so-called literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications (in this respect the political regime is secondary). Neither can philosophy, or psychoanalysis. Or love letters… (cf. Miller, 2002:155)

J. Hillis Miller interprets this prophecy like this:

[T]he concept of literature in the West has been inextricably tied to Cartesian notions of selfhood, to the regime of print, to Western-style democracies and notions of the nation-state, and to the right to free speech within such democracies…the new regime of telecommunications is bringing literature to an end by transforming all those factors that were its preconditions or its concomitants. (Miller, 2002: 157)

The literature thus defined is a modern and capitalist category related to the “printing era.” The arrival of “telecommunications technology” indicates an era defined by information media, post-industrial society and postmodernism. Interestingly, Derrida
claims the “political regime” is secondary compared to the “technological regime,” indicating the dominance of technocracy. Similar insight in a technological rule is shared by other philosophers. Kittler claims that in the age of modern technology, the Lacanian symbolic world “now encompasses linguistic signs in their materiality and technicity” (Kittler, 1999:15). Machine and technology materially (re)mold the signs that link the constructed “reality” and our imaginary self, and therefore, “for that reason, Lacan designates ‘the world of the symbolic’ [as] the world of the machine” (Ibid). Going beyond Lacan’s age of the “machinization” of reality, with the appearance of new electronic media and cybernetic and VR technologies, Baudrillard brings up his notion of the hyperreal and virtual reality, announcing the merging of virtual simulation and reality. Thus, when Zizek goes across Baudrillard back to Lacan, he calls the big Other “the virtual big Other”.

In fact, acknowledging the transformative power of technology, we may find that literature and politics share a similar fate in a new technocratic era: both have become de-centered as ontological entities but at the same time have had omnipresent penetration in everything (see Yu Hong, 2009). Diluted, micro elements of both pervade hyperreality. This results in a postmodern micro-politics and a postmodern micro-literature (see Best and Kellner, 1997). The former may include a Foucauldian micro-discursive analysis of power, such as particularized personal, identity politics, Best and Kellner’s notion of micropolitics, and Butler’s politics of performativity, among others. The latter, a postmodern micro-literature, finds a convenient expression in our literary text messages, as we will see below. What is more important is, in the ultimate pastiche of hyperreality,
such forms of literatures, politics, play, “communication,” games and so on all mix and hybridize with each other. Therefore, those “mad” and “strange” crossbreeds and hermaphrodites derived from such hybridizations constitute part of the eclectic postmodern hodgepodge. A literary performative may thus at the same time be a political and technological one, a game, play, and vice versa.

The question then becomes: In what ways is this micro-postmodern literature different from, say, the modern literature that Derrida describes? Is the form of “literariness” mentioned by Miller and de Man still applicable for post-print texts? How does it integrate technological, political and everyday-life aspects?

III.2. Mathematic poeticy and visual literariness

In contrast to a definition of literature as an expression or mimesis of experience, Miller questions the pre-existence of emotion before the expression of emotion. Instead, he treats literature as “passionate speech acts,” and maintains that emotion is created in the very process of performative literary speech. “Passion,” or various feelings of joy, anxiety, awe, disgust and so on, is put under scrutiny because of its believed connection with such a thing called literature:

The problem of passion…is…the problem of whether the outward expression of passion, in words or other signs, simply reports,
constatively, an emotion that already exists inwardly, or whether the outer expression creates, performatively, the inner passion. (Miller, 2001: 159)

In fact, it may help if we make a distinction between passionate experience and literariness. Literature has something to do with words, but passionate experience not necessarily so. Instead, passionate experience can also be experienced through, say, musical, artistic, dramaturgical, ritual, religious and everyday life processes. Passion is a real-time encounter and only comes into being at the moment it is experienced. Literature, as well as other experiential forms, provides a platform for people to experience such passionate experience. In this sense, literature may be seen as a form of play, which opens up opportunities for exploring emotions and feelings, similar to childrens’ random play, without particular purpose or planning. The classical concept of literature as “mimesis of experience,” – for example, experiencing passion and then going ahead to compose a literary piece, – in fact involves two processes. The first process is a passionate experience without words. The second process is the performative literary experience, in which another passionate experience is activated.

This passionate experience may also be called poetic experience or poeticity. In early Chinese classical poetics, qing (情, sentiment, feeling, emotion, affect, passion) and zhi (志, aspiration, frame of mind, will, ideal) are crucial in defining the poetic (see Du Songbai, 2010). In Shangshu – Yaodian (《尚书•尧典》, around fifth century B.C.E.), poetry is defined thus: “Poetry speaks about zhi. 诗言志.” This thought is developed in later literary theories. Tang scholar Kong Yingda (孔颖达, 574~648) comments on the
relationship between qing and zhi: “It is qing when it is with oneself, and is zhi when qing moves. Qing and zhi are unified. 在己为情，情动为志，情志一也.” The Preface of Mao Poetry (Maoshi xu 毛诗序, around second century B.C.E.) summarizes the poetic theories before Qin Dynasty, and defines the poetic in this way:

The poetic is where zhi is about; it is zhi when it is with the heart, and is poetry when it speaks. When qing moves inside, it shapes into speech. When speech is insufficient, it turns into sighs and laments. When sighs and laments are insufficient, it is chanted and sung. When chanting and singing are insufficient, one dances and flourishes without knowing it.

诗者，志之所之也，在心为志，发言为诗。情动于中而形于言，言之不足故嗟叹之，嗟叹之不足故永歌之，永歌之不足，不知手之舞之，足之蹈之也.

Hence poeticity is fundamentally related to experience of feelings, passion, desire and will, or qing and zhi. This poeticity may be experienced “with the heart,” or experienced in “speak[ing]” yan 言 and poetry (a form of literature with words, or literary performative), or experienced in other artistic or non-artistic forms. Poeticity is also closely connected to bodily sensations and sensualities and status of infatuation and enchantment. Literature is only one form of experiencing poeticity, namely, experiencing poeticity in/with words. With poeticity thus defined, we can also tell that a digital
information age and “telecommunications technologies” do not necessarily indicate the death of poeticity. A convenient example of contemporary poeticity can be found in a PC game player, who *passionately* clicks the mouse pursuing his *desire* that is projected in the virtual mission on the screen. In fact, when capitalist commercial ideologies, cybernetic technologies and “instrumental rationality” are believed to lead to alienation and “one-dimensionality” of humanity, poeticity never ceases to be a possibility. As Terry Eagleton says about the poetic from a Marxist perspective:

> One thing the poem does…is to show us that the pragmatic and the poetic are not always mutually exclusive. This is also true, as it happens, of Karl Marx’s concept of use-value, which involves using things in ways appropriate to their inherent properties. For Marx, the opposite of ‘exchange-value’, which means a purely instrumental use of objects without regard to their particular features, is not refraining from using things at all, but using them with an eye to their sensuous qualities.” (Eagleton, 2007: 41)

He gives an example of eating a plum, which is not only practical consumption of the commodity, but also a poetic experience of the pleasure and sensuality of the plum (Ibid:). As he says elsewhere, “anything can be viewed poetically”. In fact, such a desire for “constructing life into art” agrees with what Featherstone and Tao Dongfeng call the “aestheticization of everyday life”, which may also be associated with Schiller’s
“aesthetic play” and Marx’s “liberation of humanity” in a Communist utopia (see Zizek, Jameson, Featherstone, Tao).

Particularly, in a wireless digital cyber age, this poeticity may be encapsulated as “mathematic poeticity.” This notion alludes to a base-2 numerical system generally used in cybernetic technologies, and describes a poeticity experienced in the particular rhythm and spatiality defined by mathematic coding. Precisely as in a PC game, the mechanism of pleasure and passion, or poeticity, is programmed into workable graphic symbols and fictional missions. The computer language seems dry and dull, and so lacks the sensual textures of the “literary language,” but immense sensualities are nonetheless created through non-sensual language and encoding. A flower blooms and opens itself in seconds on the screen, more artistic and vivid and much “faster” than in reality, whose sensualities are internally consonant with and defined by the mathematic language. Such climatic change in poeticity may have particular effects on individuals’ aesthetic practices and dispositions, or in fact, the ways individuals process information and emotions and their ways of thinking and feeling.

In the field of literature, or the experience of poeticity with words (literature thus defined includes “popular literature” and “folk literature” among other forms), a distinguished effect demonstrated in literary text messages may be a form of “visual literariness.” This is accompanied by a disposition of irrationalism and regressive behavior (which may be seen as a defensive mechanism or poetic strategy in technological and capitalist “alienations”). Images and symbols are abundant in literary text messages, and such built-up symbolic uses result in the occurrence of particular
codes and subsystems of codes, such as the beating/fighting mentioned above. But most important, one can also choose not to perceive such images and symbols as meaningful codes, and instead take them simply as regressive visual stuff meaning nothing, or idle play of empty ephemeral visual fragments. Take for instance, the following literary text message:

When my friend Li Shansi and I moved, there was no TV at home, and we both felt bored. Then we pretended there was a TV on the table, and that we had remote control and could change channels. This son of a bitch kept changing channels, and when I complained, he didn’t listen. Then we began to fight/beat each other.

我和朋友李善思刚搬家的时候, 家里没有电视机, 两个人很无聊。我们就假装桌子上有电视机, 然后两个假装手里有遥控器, 还能换台。这个王八蛋不停的换台, 我说他, 他还不听, 后来我们就打了起来。

This short composition may be seen as loaded with rich symbols and codes. Silliness and intimate symbolic aggression are aesthetic codes, and poetic tensions between “feeling bored” and “changing channels”, between “complaining” and “not listening” and so on create certain tempo-spatial rhythms in the imagined picture. Motions and visual effects dominate the literary words. The motionality and visuality in the words tend to intervene with the surface of the words, thus reconfiguring the poetic rhythm of the latter.
Such visual literariness is particularly apparent in cold jokes. The composition below is said to be the origin and forerunner of cold jokes:

One day, a polar bear had nothing to do on the ice, so he began to pull out his hairs for fun. When all the hairs were pulled out, he said: oh~~ it’s so cold~~

有一天, 一只北极熊在冰面上吃饱了没事干, 就拔自己身上的毛玩,

等所有的毛拔光了, 他说: 好冷哦~~

Such a text plays upon a tension between the referential world and the referent. The idle game that the polar bear plays in the text corresponds to the idle game of words on the surface of the text. The words and the images created by the words are both idling and playing with themselves pointlessly. The surface of the text presents symbols of logical coherence, represented by conjunctions such as “so”, “then” and “when”. At the same time, such coherence is ridiculed by the vacuity and frivolousness of the content. “Cold” (leng 冷) also develops into a code indicating the sheer internal incongruity, idleness, and absurdity in the interplay of words, images, and meanings.

When one hears another tell a cold joke, one’s “proper” response is to say “It’s really cold~~”, accompanied by bodily gesture such as shaking or holding one’s arms as if experiencing coldness. Some cold jokes play with a sheer cartoonish effect, highlighting visual and emotional “sharp turns”:

A bee is flying, buzzing, suddenly —— he hits the wall……
Other texts play hard with sense and sensation. The logic underlying words is ruthlessly ridiculed, thus creating a defamiliarizing rupture in representation:

A cabbage keeps taking off clothes when it walks. Eventually it disappears…..

There is a hide-and-seek society. Their chairperson has still not been found.

The idiot stole the beggar’s wallet, and was seen by the blind man. The mute burst into a scream, and the deaf one was startled. The hunch back stood up straight, and the cripple swept out his leg. The pockmarked one said: let’s forget about it in favor of my face. The lunatic said: right, people should have sanity.

傻子偷乞丐的钱包，被瞎子看到了，哑巴大吼一声，把聋子吓了一跳，驼子挺身而出，跛子飞起一脚，麻子说：看我的面子算了。疯子说：就是，人要有理智。
A Five-Dollar bill was kidnapped by the criminal gangs. They called the One-
Hundred-Dollar bill: “Hey! Your son is here. If you don’t want us to tear him up
[sl. kill the hostage], you come to exchange yourself for him!” The One-Hundred-
Dollar bill thought for a while and said: “Tear him up then! Then you won’t even
have 5 dollars!”

五元钱被犯罪团伙绑架了，打电话给百元钞：“喂！你儿子在这里，不想我们撕票就用自己来换他！”百元钞想了一下说：“撕吧，撕了你们连5块钱都没有了！”

The target of the attack or ridicule in such texts is rationalism and logo-centrism. The foundation of representation, the logicality, cognition, certainty, and “reliability” of the fixation between things and names, between existence and symbols, between void and order, between visuality and visual impossibility are presented and exposed with comical incongruities and slippages. Such teases not only destabilize the naturalness and coherence of representation, but also challenge the legitimacy of knowledge and “scientific objectivity”, which are the basis for the rule of technology. Therefore, these aspects also add to the intrinsic political meanings of mathematic poeticity and visual literariness.

Specifically, the political implications of literary text messages may lie in several facets. First, it is precisely from such poeticity and rhythm that counter-hegemonic dynamics may be generated against the technocratic rule or “technological regime” mentioned by Derrida. Tactics utilized by technology, such as logocentrism, myths of
certainty, and causal relations, are appropriated, parodied, and used in these literary text messages against technology itself. A rhythm that originally serves to strengthen the legitimate rationality of technology is displaced and remodeled into a pastiche of anti-technological rhythms. This tempo creates intense sensations for the players, which enable them to negotiate power with technology. Second, the hybrid spatiality thereof facilitates subjects’ traversing across a multitude of spatial fragments, thus offering them temporary escape from the virtual big Other armed with technology. Third, the microcoding system can be subversive in the configuration of dominant coding systems. The representational myth of certainty, factuality, and objectivity is unveiled, with the “impossible kernel” and primordial absurdity exposed, thus challenging the dominant meaning systems. Meaningless, “obscene”, and mischievous objects are playfully put in the central gap to display silliness and elicit perverted laughter. A good example of such perversity lies in the color coding in literary text messages, which I will discuss next.
Chapter IV: Literary Text Message and the Socio-Politics of Colors

This chapter examines the specific socio-politics of literary text messages. This chapter outlines the color codes of literary text messages, and conducts a case study of red and yellow text messages. It first investigates the “red text message movement”, a government-based campaign to promote red text messages since 2005, then proceeds to explore the mentality and politics of the color yellow, focusing on the cultural negotiations of colored texts on the contemporary Chinese social stage.

IV.1. Color coding in literary text messages

It is not surprising that some cold jokes are categorized as “grey episodes.” Grey is an ambiguously subversive but obscure and perhaps abstract color. Silliness, unreasonableness, frivolousness, sarcastic self-mockery, reflexive stupidity, and so on are often associated with grey. Grey episodes may be connected to the wulitou (无厘头, nonsense) culture in the 1990s (see Tao Dongfeng, 2008) and an Internet subculture exemplified in the Lonely Party (jimo dang 寂寞党) in the 2000s, to name some of its recent associations. Some typical grey literary text messages include the following:

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50 The wulitou culture is often associated with Hong Kong commercial cinema, especially Stephen Chow films. Illogical, absurd comicality, cute silliness, exaggerated situations and so on. See Tao Dongfeng, 2008.
51 An Internet trend of producing frivolous quibbles, travesties of proverbs, famous sayings and slogans and other often short funny aphorisms and quotations.
I can’t get out of bed in the morning, so I take 6 coins out of my pocket. If all six coins turn heads after I fling them, then I’ll go to class! But after thinking for a long time, I decide not to take the risk……

早晨懒床，遂从口袋里掏出6枚硬币：如果抛出去六个都是正面，我就去上课！思躇良久，还是算了，别冒这个险了……

The accountant says: “Can you come back later to get your salary? I don’t have any change [small money] now.”

会计说：“你晚点来领工资吧，我这没零钱。”

Every morning when I get up, I will take a look at the Forbes millionaires list. If my name is not listed there, I will go to work.

每天早上起床都要看一遍“福布斯”富翁排行榜，如果上面没有我的名字，我就去上班。

“Hahahaha, it’s not funny at all.”

”哈哈哈哈, 一点也不搞笑.”

I want to have an “early love” [a term coined in the 1980s for unauthorized romance between those under the legal marriage age, especially teenage students], but it’s too late……
我想早恋，但是已经晚了……

Is there anything that makes you unhappy? Let us know, so we can be happy for a bit.

你有什么不开心的事? 说出来让大家开心一下.

A gangster leader stopped a youth at the entrance of a lane and asked him:
What is one plus one? The youth was very scared. He thought for a long time and said: Two. The gangster leader immediately took out a pistol and killed him. At leaving, the gangster leader said: you know too much.

一个社会老大在巷口睹住一个年青人，问他：一加一等于几。年青人很怕，想了很久说：等于二。社会老大连忙掏出手枪杀了他。走了时候丢下一句：你知道的太多了。

Compared to grey, black may be a strong, dark color explicitly opposing the dominant meaning and code systems. If we use Freud’s terms, roughly, grey episodes have certain overlaps with Freud’s “innocent jokes” (jokes without a clear objective or target), black episodes with his “hostile jokes”, and yellow episodes with his “obscene jokes.” The latter two together are referred to by Freud as “tendentious jokes,” or jokes with a clear purpose or target of ridicule (Freud, 1963). Black literary text messages

Freud thinks tendentious jokes reflect the basic instincts of aggression and sex that have been repressed and inhibited in the conscious and pushed into the unconscious. After processes of condensation or
often show hostility towards political power and privileged groups, or criticize social reality. Here is an example:

Nowadays, there are miswritten characters everywhere: plant trees to make the forest “null” (full), thrive through “embezzling” (hardworking), select “tyrants” (talents) to be leaders, assign the “lazy” (wise) to positions, recruit the “foxy” (excellent), combine “wealth and dollars” (virtue and talent), inspect and accept “banquets” (projects), strongly “eat” (support), “save” (eliminate) harm for the people, release “with money” (in advance), Miss “governor relations” (public relations) [All the “miswritten characters” are pronounced the same as the originals].

这年头，到处都是错别字：植树造零(林)，白收(手)起家，勤捞(劳)致富，选霸(拔)干部，任人为闲(贤)，择油(优)录取，得财兼币(德才兼备)，检查宴(验)收，大力支吃(持)，为民储(除)害，提钱(前)释放，攻官(公关)小姐。

displacement in the unconscious, similar to the way in which daily residues are converted into dreams, these repressed instincts find converted expression in the preconscious. Freud calls this psychic process of formation of jokes “the joke-work”, corresponding to that of dreams, “the dream-work”. For Freud, innocent jokes, especially trivial jokes, are more meaningful than tendentious jokes, as the manifest messages are not clear, and the latent information can be richer. See Freud, 1963.
Let part of the population get wealthy first, then eliminate those who cannot get wealthy, thus eventually realizing common wealthiness.\textsuperscript{53}

让一部分人先富起来，再消灭所有富不起来的，最终实现共同富裕。

Nowadays,
Professors solicit everywhere to make money, just like businessmen;
Businessmen give lectures and publish books, just like professors.
Doctors ignore the dying and mishandle lives, just like killers;
Killers are quick and efficient, just like doctors.
Movie stars are flirtatious and go to bed whenever given money, just like prostitutes;
Prostitutes are charming and plainly priced, just like movie stars.
Police are despotic, bullying the weak and scared of the strong, just like hoodlums;
Hoodlums control an area and take their responsibilities, just like police.
Rumor has solid grounds and is mostly true, just like news,
News is based on hearsays and willful exaggerations, just like rumor.

这年头，
教授摇唇鼓舌，四处赚钱，越来越像商人；
商人现身讲坛，著书立说，越来越像教授。

\textsuperscript{53} This is a twist of Deng Xiaoping’s slogan: Let part of the population get wealthy first, and then they will help the rest of the population get wealthy, thus eventually eliminating poverty and realizing common wealthiness.
医生见死不救，草菅人命，越来越像杀手；
杀手出手麻利，不留后患，越来越像医生。
明星卖弄风骚，给钱就上，越来越像妓女；
妓女楚楚动人，明码标价，越来越像明星。
警察横行霸道，欺软怕硬，越来越像地痞；
地痞各霸一方，敢做敢当，越来越像警察。
流言有根有据，基本属实，越来越像新闻；
新闻捕风捉影，随意夸大，越来越像流言。

Of course, the colors of literary text messages are often mixed. The one-size-fits-all (super blending) color is yellow, which can hybridize with any other colors. Particular motifs serve as codes of yellow, such as prostitution, rape, mistress/secretary, sexual scandals, body parts and “excrements in the most comprehensive sense” (to use Freud’s words). Below is a grey-yellow episode:

A male panda tried to rape a female panda. The female panda struggled against him with all her strength.

Having failed, the male panda said indignantly: “Don’t you know, our species is close to extinction!”

54 The panda is a highly endangered species, partly due to its lack of sexual drive (which results in low reproduction).
熊猫男要QJ熊猫女，熊猫女奋力抵抗、誓死不从。
熊猫男失败后愤愤地说：“我们都快灭绝了耶！”

An example of black-yellow episode:

The village chair gave his annual work report: Our village has three problems. First, like a widow, we have no man on top [levels who can take care of us]. Second, like a prostitute, the men on top always change. Third, like sleeping with one’s own wife, our own people always fuck with our own people!

村长作年度总结：我们村的问题有三个，一是像寡妇，上面没人，二是像妓女，上面的人老换，三是像和老婆睡觉，老是自己人干自己人！

Yellow episodes may also be neutral or serve no purpose, such as satire or criticism, but instead provide humor or a mild sense of fun, for example:

I’m really exhausted. You have me change positions endlessly, from front to back, and won’t let me sleep until I shoot. After shooting, you are intoxicated but I’m exhausted. Then you still want me to discuss my feelings and experience. Oh, playing soccer is so tiring!

真的好累，让我不停的换位，做完前位换后位，还让我不射不得睡，射进去后你陶醉我崩溃，完事还要我谈体会，唉，踢球真累！
Hey buddy, stop touching! You’ve touched the top and you’ve touched the bottom, you’ve touched so much, even the hairs fall off! The skin is so tender, now even water comes out! How can I do business in the future? These peaches are all fresh, if you don’t want to buy them, just forget about it!

大哥，你别再摸了！你摸了上面摸下面，毛都让你摸掉了，这么嫩的皮，被你摸的都流水了！你让俺以后怎么卖？这桃都是新鲜的，您不买就算了！

While yellow and grey episodes are often seriously condemned for being “unhealthy,” obscene and perverted, and for misleading the young (see Wang Jing and Cui Lianhua, 2008), the “clean” and “elegant” green episodes, on the contrary, are approved of and generally advocated by the authorities and elites (see Wang Ping, 2008). The following greeting text messages may be considered green:

Gold is the tail of the ox, collecting the $qi$ [energy] of wealth. Shaking the bell is the head of the tiger, the blessed melody twinkling. Wind chases the traces of spring, and snow saunters in the sea of coziness. Your way back home has been lit up. Whether you are near or far, my wishes have departed to greet you. Wishing you a Happy Year of the Tiger!
Reposing upon a couch of gentle breeze, appreciate the bright full moon. Let a sheet of white cloud be your cover, and lifelong happiness be your pillow. A short message delivers my true feelings. A wish is made, and a pure heart is greeted. Wishing you a Happy Mid-Autumn Festival and your ten thousand wishes fulfilled!

卧榻清风，赏一轮明月，盖一片白云，枕一生幸福，发一条短信，送一份真情，许一个愿望，收一份真心。祝中秋快乐、万事如意！

In many greeting literary text messages, classical literary and philosophical motifs and resources are repeatedly appropriated to create a cozy, romantic or friendly atmosphere (Wang Xuehuan, 2008). Yet, rather than innocently restoring classicism and traditionalism, such nice, “healthy” green is ultimately blended into the background motley pastiche. In a postmodern picture, the classical, modern and other elements are first of all postmodern. To use Jameson’s words, there can be a neoclassical postmodernism, a rococo postmodernism and even a high modernist postmodernism, all of which are objects of the postmodern pastiche (Jameson, 1984). To add even more elements to the postmodernist bricolage, red episodes are contributing to an ambiguous “red postmodernism.” The red narrative or a socialist revolutionary discourse against the
postmodern backdrop also develops new qualities and patterns. The following literary
text messages are claimed to be red episodes:

A drop of rain may not moisturize the vast land, but a drop of water can
nourish a barren heart. A bowl of porridge may not recuperate withered hopes,
but a piece of rice can sustain a declining life. Let there be less waste, let there
be more life.

一滴雨也许滋润不了广袤的土地，但一滴水却能温存贫瘠的心田；一碗
粥也许无法复燃凋零的希望，但一粒饭却能挽回即逝的生命。少一份浪
费，多一个生命。

The hardest thing to do in one’s life is: to be able to use one’s left hand to do
what one’s right hand can do, and use one’s left foot to do what one’s right
foot can do.

人的一生很难做到的事是，让自己的右手做到的，左手也可以做到；右
脚做到的，左脚也可以做到。

A definition of red episodes is: any episode that is not yellow, grey or black, or any
episode that is healthy or is intended to have healthy effects on people (He Zhongzhou,
2010; Han Yongjun, 2007; Renmin youdianbao, 2010). Thus, red text messages do not
necessarily sing high praise for the Communist Party like earlier red texts did, such as red
classics and revolutionary songs. (Although it is even possible to read the above two text
messages politically, such as the subtle allusion of “left” and “right,” and a comparison between “the vast land” and “a heart”/individual can be linked to justification of Deng’s policy of “letting part of the population get wealthy first”). In fact, many red text messages are composed by ordinary people on various subjects such as environmental protection, private love and aphorisms. The following section will provide a detailed analysis of literary text messages of different colors and their implicated social dynamics, with red and yellow used as a case study.

IV.2. Obscenity and seduction: performatives of red and yellow (a case study)

Before we move on to the texts themselves, let us first take a look at how the red episode movement was initiated and organized.

IV.2.1 The red episode movement

a. Background and motivations: between red and yellow

In the 2005 summit forum “Text Message in China,” Shen Yongtao, the associate director of the Quality and Service Supervision Department of the Telecommunications Management Bureau, Ministry of Information Industry, told the press that the first law on text messages in China, Regulations on the Management of Communications Short Message Service, (tongxin duanxinxi fuwu guanli guiding 通信短信息服务管理规定, to
be called *Regulations* hereafter), would be available in the near future (Jiao Likun, 2005). An official document concerning the same issue had been released earlier in April 2004 (Ibid). The new law was said to be created to regulate the text message market; according to the law, those who spread harmful information, such as obscene and pornographic content, via text messaging, should assume corresponding legal liabilities (Ibid). In March 2008, the Ministry of Information Industry, the News Office of the State Council, and the Ministry of Public Security drafted the *Regulations*. They stipulated systematic norms and regulations for text messaging and clearly prohibited the transmission of any illegal content and junk text messages. The *Regulations* was in the process of approval in 2008 (Liu Qi, 2008). In June 2009, when the *Regulations* were still awaiting approval by the State Council, its main content began to also be described as the compulsory implementation of the “cell phone real-name registration” (*shouji shiming zhi* 手机实名制), meaning all cell phone users were required to register their real name and personal information when applying for cell phone use (Huang Rongfang, 2009). This policy is an extension of the “blog real-name registration” and “train ticket real-name registration” policies.

In November 2009, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology\(^{55}\) announced “five measures for the crackdown on cell phone related pornography,” mainly targeted at accessing illegal websites on the cell phone (see Duan Hongbiao, 2009). These measures can be seen as a natural continuation of the crackdown on pornographic websites that has been implemented since 2004 and the “sweeping away the yellow and

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55 MII was reconstructed by the government into MIIT in 2008.
attacking the illegal” (saohuang dafei 扫黄打非) campaign that has been in place since 1995 (see Chen Jian, 2004; Xue Lianshan, 2009). In fact, in the past three decades, similar efforts attacking pornography and illegal activities had been ongoing. The Regulations are expected to be approved and put into effect by the end of 2010 (Huang Rongfang, 2009).

The legislative and administrative efforts to crackdown on cell phone-related pornography and illegal activities are obviously tied to the political control of information and freedom of speech. As the crackdown on illegal websites showed, not only pornographic websites, but also those which spread anti-government information were shut down (McKinnon, 2008). As for the dominant powers, such follow-up measures are necessary to prevent the population from accessing such websites from their cell phones.

Furthermore, the pervasive ennui, nihilism, and cynicism in society has been said by some to have lead to a profound spiritual crisis among the people (Tao Dongfeng, 2008). The yellow, grey, and black episodes keep reactivating and enhancing such moods and crises through their performativity. Marked by deep disillusionment, sarcasm, and an all-round loss of faith and trust, such literary performatives encompass potential de-centering or destabilizing of power. The implicit discreteness bothers the authorities, who promote the idea of the spiritual cohesion of the population. Therefore, the Regulations will simply make illegal mobizens’ transmissions of such “unhealthy” and “bad” text messages (buliang duanxin 不良短信), thus reducing the latter’s political effects (Liu Qi, 2008). Thus, information control, speech control, and spiritual control constitute the main goals of the legislative campaign on text messaging. Such goals are also the main
motivations of the red episode movement. As a matter of fact, the red episode movement
plainly claims its goal to be “fighting yellow, grey and black episodes” (Han Yongjun,
2007; Renmin youdian bao, 2010). Such a goal is cultural, political, and representational.

At the same time, the red episode movement has also resulted in considerable
economic benefits for the telecommunications enterprises and related parties. Ironically,
however, yellow episodes were said to contribute 60%-70% of the mobile operator’s
income from text messaging, and the mobile enterprises were suspected of being
involved in producing and spreading such yellow episodes (see Peng Peng, 2003; Lin
Yufeng, 2004). Hence we may assume that the mobile telecommunications enterprises,
which are closely associated with political powers,56 are seeking new modes of business.
If yellow business means good profits with negative political effects, the enterprises
attempt to experiment with alternative business models with fewer side effects. From
such a perspective, a shift from yellow to red also shows an internal strategic adaptation
within the governing powers.

b. Organization of the movement

Clothes became dirty? I cleaned them! The floor became dirty? I cleaned it!
What if the text messages became dirty? Who cleans them then? Living under
the same blue sky, you and I and he [are all responsible for] a civilized
environment!

56 Telecommunications is run by the state. See http://www.chinaz.com/news/zt/gxb/ for more information.
This is a text message composition selected from a “red episode” text message competition held by the China Mobile Guangdong Company (Han Yongjun, 2007). According to Xu Long, the General Manager of the company and claimed initiator of the idea of red episodes, in order to fight the spiritual pollution of yellow, grey, and black episodes, red episodes are intended to counter negative aspects in the development of communications culture, to innovate and guide its healthy development. While the “blocking” (du 堵) of “bad” messages can achieve immediate effects, “channeling” (shu 疏) is also needed to spread good and positive text message compositions, says Xu (Ibid). The China Mobile Guangdong Company has organized five annual Text Message Red Episode Compositions since 2005. More than 10 million cell phone users of China Mobile Guangdong Company alone (not including other participants) participated in these competitions, and more than 800 million red episodes were transmitted (Li Yusi, 2010). Xu Long defines red episodes as:

Red episodes are those opposite to yellow episodes, black episodes, and so on; their content is healthy and positive, their form is active and lively, and their effect is inspiring and enlivening……[R]ed episodes are those favored by the vast common people, which are positive, healthy and “hot.” They utilize the cell phone media to create a cultural platform for the transmission of health,
connection of feelings, spreading of knowledge, conveyance of ideals, and passing down of civilization (Renmin youdian bao, 2010).

When asked to respond to some experts’ comments that the red episodes staged a “new cultural movement” (xin wenhua yundong新文化运动), Xu Long said such a “new cultural movement” can be understood on three levels. First, there is new content/meaning (neihan内涵). It integrates the most advanced cultural properties, the mainstream cultural route, the new spirit of the times and healthy, colorful, and inspiring content widely accepted by the common people. Second, there is a new mode. Red episodes are based on “grass-roots composition and elites’ participation” and interactive cultural networks in which “everybody is a reader, and everybody is an author.” Third, there is a new function. It provides the common people with an opportunity for “cultural enterprise” (wenhua chuangye文化创意) (Ibid). The organization of the movement takes a “3 + 5 management mode,” highlighting the promotional function of the enterprises, media, and interaction of the people. In the “Red Episode Club” website run by China Mobile Guangdong Company, anybody who has registered can publish original text message compositions. Each text message that has been re-transmitted by a cell phone user of China Mobile Guangdong Company will bring a payment of RMB 0.01 to the author. Those authors who reach the top ten in the users’ votes will also be awarded RMB 1,000 (Li Yusi, 2010).

The red episode movement has spread from Guangdong to Chongqing, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Fujian, Shanxi, Shandong, Henan, Yunnan, Gansu, and other regions in the
past few years (Ibid). In the newspaper *Nanyang Daily (Nanyang ribao 南阳日报)* on January 16, 2008, the Supervising Bureau of the Discipline Committee of Nanyang, Henan encouraged citizens’ to use “red text messages” to fight against the yellow and grey episodes. On April 28, 2009, the influential and eye-catching “2009 Second Red Text Message Composition and Transmission Competition”, or the so-called “Ode of Red Speech” (*hongyan song 红言颂*), \(^{57}\) led by mayor Bo Xilai 薄熙来, commenced in Chongqing (He Zhongzhou, 2010). On February 4, 2010, led by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television and the leading telecommunications enterprises, a conference entitled “The Red Episodes Phenomenon: The Tendency of Cultural Spirit and Industry Development of China in The Internet Age” was held in Beijing. The book *The Red Duanzi Phenomenon: Chinese Cultural Spirit in the Internet Age*, planned by the China Mobile Communications Association since 2008, was released to coincide with the conference. Xi Guohua, the associate minister of the Ministry of Industry and Information, said in the meeting that red episodes should occupy the cultural battlefield of cell phones and the Internet (He Zhongzhou, 2010). By February 2010, more than 50 million people had participated in the red episode movement, and over 1,500 million red text messages had been transmitted (Wang Jing, 2010).

c. Bo Xilai’s red and black movements in Chongqing

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\(^{57}\) Alluding to the “red classic” *Hongyan* 《红岩》.
The red episode movement led by Bo Xilai in Chongqing is particularly significant. Bo Xilai’s “red odes” are accompanied by his “black crackdowns.” Since June 2008, Bo initiated the “singing red songs, reading classics, telling stories, spreading (red) gospels” (唱红歌, 读经典, 讲故事, 传箴言), or for short “singing/reading/telling/spreading” (changdujiangchuan 唱读讲传), activities in Chongqing. All levels of departments and offices in Chongqing were made to sing red revolutionary songs on important days; Chongqing Daily published red songs everyday; Chongqing satellite TV set up a special program, “a (red) song a day”; and specialized artistic personnel and other participants were organized into singing-teaching teams to teach red songs to ordinary people. By October 2009, 71,000 performances of red song singing and 31,000 performances of story telling had been organized, and text messages of red gospels had been sent around 72,270,000 times (Tao Dongfeng, 2009; He Shizhong, 2009). By October 2009, Bo also organized the compilation of a series of canonical readers, Read Some Classics (dudian jingdian 读点经典), including mostly red classics and some traditional cultural classics. This series sold 400,000 copies; 26,000 officials of all levels in Chongqing each have a copy, and all Communist Party members, officials, and leaders were urged to read the classics (Ibid). In 2008, the first red text message competition in Chongqing collected over 10,000 original red text messages, and over one million red text messages were transmitted. In the second competition in 2009, Bo sent the inaugural red text message below to the 1.3 million Chongqing citizens, it was transmitted more than 1.6 million times:
I like these words by Chairman Mao: “The world belongs to us; everybody needs to work together to do the jobs”; “In this world, the really powerful thing is being serious about something, and the Communist Party happens to be the one who is most serious”; “People need some spirit”. These words are very powerful, very practical and very inspiring.

我很喜欢毛主席的几句话：‘世界是我们的，做事要大家来’，‘世界上怕就怕认真二字，共产党就最讲认真’，‘人是需要有点精神的’，这些话很精干，很实在，也很提气。(Tao Dongfeng, 2009)

Bo’s heavyweight “crackdown on black” (dahei 打黑) movement, i.e., attacking the criminal underground and illegal organizations, that took place in Chongqing from June 2009 to February 2010, was even more conspicuous and attracted national and international attention. 30,000 police and 7,000 personnel were deployed in the movement, 204 special task teams were set up, 14 underground organizations were cracked down upon, and 200 group leaders and 2,000 criminals were arrested by the end of 2009. Many of the underground leaders arrested were high-ranking officials in the government (Ibid).

This combination of “singing red” and “attacking black” can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. While Bo claims such moves are simply following the “anti-corruption” (fanfu 反腐) policy of the central government, these extraordinary movements are interpreted by others in terms of a tension inside the Communist Party between an ever rising red, leftist power group represented by the “Prince Party” (taizi
dang 太子党), and a reformist “Communist Youth League Clique” (gongqingtuan pai 共青团派). The Prince Party is a flexible network consisting of the offspring of senior top Communist leaders, – for example, Bo Xilai is the son of former Deputy Prime Minister Bo Yibo 薄一波, and Xi Jinping 习近平, is the son of the former Deputy Prime Minister Xi Zhongxun 习仲勋. The members of the Communist Youth League Clique mostly come from an ordinary family background and worked through the Communist Youth League system to the top levels of power. Representative members include Hu Jintao, Li Keqiang 李克强 and Wang Yang 汪洋. The latter group is closer to the stance of Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦, who are more prone to further political democratic reforms. On the other hand, the Prince Party, with their relational networks, and as the biggest interest or power group at present, is more reluctant to support political reforms. Other cliques also exert political power, such as Jiang Zemin’s clique and the broader “Shanghai Clique” (Shanghai bang 上海帮).

Bo Xilai’s connection with the Chorus of Generals’ Offspring (jiangjun houdai hechangtuan将军后代合唱团) 

hechangtuan is interpreted as displaying the power of red (see Victorbai, 2010). This Chorus is made up of around 200 offspring of top Communist generals and leaders, which is said to have had a performance tour singing red revolutionary songs all over the country in 2009 (Yang Juan and Jiang Ying, 2009). The inaugural performance of the tour was held in the People’s Hall in Chongqing. The Chongqing municipal publicity department and related parties organized the

58 A Chorus of Generals 将军合唱团 was organized in 1959, made up of over 200 senior Communist generals, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the founding of the P.R.C.
performance. This performance in Chongqing constituted a part of Bo’s “singing/reading/telling/spreading” series (Ibid). When asked to respond to some criticism of his being “too left,” Bo said we (should) feel “bold and justified” (lizhi qizhuang 理直气壮) to sing such honorable red songs, which we should feel proud of, and said that some people misunderstood it (as displaying or strengthening the power of red and therefore delivering ambiguous messages to other cliques) (Victorbai, 2010).

Seen from the perspective of cliquish politics, the spread of the “red episode movement” from Guangdong to the rest of the country may also be explained in terms of the Prince Party’s influential power in the telecommunications departments and its intimate relationship with Jiang Zemin’s clique, which is said to have influential power over the propaganda departments (??). Therefore, the Prince Party’s powerful publicity capacity, especially that on the new media, not only enables it to compete against rival cliques, but also provides a deeper annotation to “occupying the cultural battlefield.” The battlefield now is more than a dual situation of “government” and “people,” but involves more layers of power struggles. In a sense, the rising of the color red obviously shows the power of this group roughly called the Prince Party, as well as their attempt to (re)claim their legitimate ruling identity.

According to Professor Tao Dongfeng, Bo creates through his red and black movements a subtle association linking the “blackness” or darkness, corruption and decay of the present society with the weakening of the color red. In other words, in Bo’s staging of such scenarios, it seems Deng Xiaoping’s capitalist economic reforms should be blamed for the systematic corruption and systematic complicity between governmental
and underground powers. Hence Bo attempts to gain more favor from the public for a new leftist tendency (Tao Dongfeng, 2009). Bo’s thorough cleansing of the Chongqing governmental system is interpreted by others in terms of his competition with Wang Yang, who was Bo’s predecessor and political rival; thus, Bo is said to have destroyed Wang Yang’s old local system (Victorbai, 2010). Others interpret it as Bo’s collection of political capital (through an image of “getting rid of bad guys for the people”), thus preparing for entering the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau at the 18th National Congress of the CPC (Yuesheng, 2010).

Although the red episodes movement may be seen as a subtle victory of the Prince Party over their rivals, we should not forget the fact of the Communist Party’s being monolithic on many levels. The cliques obviously share many common interests and goals, as well as common responsibilities for particular political situations.

If some people in Chongqing may like the crackdown on the local “black” underground and corrupt officials (ibid), the red episodes, nonetheless, are mocked by many netizens and mobizens. Bo’s famous inaugural red text message, which in fact contained quotations from Mao, is parodied in this text message:

The world belongs to us; you guys need to work together to do the jobs.

People need some spirit of selfless sacrifice.

世界是我们的，做事要你们来。人是需要有点无私奉献精神的。
On the feedback section to the news on red episodes on the NetEase website, a netizen commented:

Alas, it seems we’re gone back to the 1960s……But is people’s thinking still so pure as during that time?
唉，好像又回到60年代了。。。但是人们的思想还像那个年代那么单纯吗？ 59

Red episodes also stimulated a rush of spoofed “alternative red episodes” (*linglei hongduanzi* 另类红段子), for instance:

When Shenzhen mayor Xu Zongheng was caught by the anti-corruption office, his safe at home couldn’t be opened. An experienced official of the Ministry of Supervision said: this is a sound-control lock, and the password is usually eight words. The personnel guessed in turn: “Heaven and earth perish when one sacrifices one’s own interests”; “Heaven bless me with promotions and wealth”; “Man dies for wealth and bird dies for food” 60 ……But none of them worked and they had to take Xu to the spot himself. Xu cleared his

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60 These are all classical quotations, proverbs or idioms.
throat and shouted: “Upright and clean, govern for the sake of people!”61 The safe full of gold and silver opened immediately. The personnel were stunned! 深圳市长许宗衡被双规，家中保险柜久不能开。某识货中纪委官员称： 此乃声控锁，密码多用八字。办案者轮流猜：人不为己，天诛地灭；上天保佑，升官发财；人为财死，鸟为食亡……但均不灵。无奈押许至， 许清嗓大喝：清正廉洁，执政为民！柜门应声而开，满柜金银，惊呆众人！

d. Red texts: a game within a game

When red itself is tinted with rich ambiguities, the red texts become elastic, open and full of possibilities. Meaning segments and crumbs are ready to be dislodged and re-articulated at any time. In Bo’s red text message composition, Mao’s famous quotations are nicely arranged into an inspiring and promising emotional matrix, somehow similar to Shenzhen mayor Xu’s quotation of the anti-corruption slogan for his personal safe. The configuration of the matrix is decent and handsome, emitting its own poeticity. After all, Xu demonstrates a “sense of humor.” The words, despite their plainness, are too “profound” to be taken literally. When a matrix of words reaches someone as a text message, this fact itself also contributes to its meaning. No wonder many mayors and governors instead simply send citizens a “Happy New Year” red text message (see Da Du, 2009).

61 The official slogan of the anti-corruption activity.
On the other hand, Bo’s red movement in fact is “supported by the people.” For instance, some primary school music teachers like the red singing movement, because they now have an opportunity to earn extra money by “teaching people red songs.” Participants in the red movements are also rewarded with gifts, such as a nice wool jacket (see Gong Shifei, 2009; Liu Yankun and Zhu Wenqiang, 2009). When the participants do enjoy the “meaning” of the red movement (such as the jacket), we can say, such a movement is in a sense indeed a “movement of the people” as claimed. When words do not mean what they appear to, the receivers also do not mean what they appear to. Such interpassivity turns the red movement into a postmodern game and a hyperspace of “mutual vertigo”, to use Baudrillard’s term. Below are some red text message compositions that illustrate this condition:

One can only be loved when one has love in one’s heart. Love: it’s the wellspring of power that creates miracles! Even if there is no return, it can warm and purify our soul!

因为心中有爱，才能被人爱。爱，它是创造奇迹的力量源泉！即使没有回报，也能温暖净化我们的心灵！

Three things most important for life: treat the world and life with a tolerant heart; create the world and change life with a happy heart; feel the world and life with a grateful heart!
人生极为重要的三件事：用宽容的心对待世界，对待生活；用快乐的心创造世界，改变生活；用感恩的心感受世界，感受生活！

Sincerity is not wisdom, but sometimes it shines more alluringly than wisdom. Sincerity is an openness of the soul, a crystalline sublime!

真诚不是智慧，但它有时放射出比智慧更诱人的光芒。真诚，是一种心灵的开放，是一种晶莹剔透的高尚！

If one understands that the sky is blue, then one’s soul shall not be covered by grey. If one understands that youth is beautiful, then youth shall not be rusted by evil doings. If one understands that the journey of life is treacherous, then faith shall not vanish in setbacks.

懂得天空是蓝色的，心灵就不应该终日被灰色覆盖；懂得年轻是美丽的，青春就不应该被恶行锈蚀；懂得人生之旅多坎坷，信念就不应该在挫折中消失。

“Love,” “tolerance,” “gratefulness,” “sincerity,” “beautifulness” – all these words can be read with double political implications (such as “be grateful and happy”), but at the same time they can still maintain a “purity” and “miraculous power,” even simply through their vowels or pauses (or exclamation marks!). A genuine innocence and “crystalline sublime” may indeed be activated through the performatives of such texts. “Aphorisms” like these definitely have their market among some people, who seem to
have a need to consume this sort of literary parallelism, similar to their need for the packaging of toilet paper with an “artistic design.” These aphoristic text messages and the artistic design of the packaging of toilet paper are precisely the kinds of things through which they can “construct life into art.” Sometimes they are “touched” by an “ordinary object”, such as by a not-so-artistic design, which is because they are in a game within another game, which itself is within another game…In a sense, they are “touched” by mediocre things to secretly avoid the burden of weighted things such as “real poetry” and “real art”, which are often unreliable. These miracles of touch show a tone of irrationalism, as though the Giant of the Windmill is spontaneously killed even before Don Quixote flings his spears. Therefore, such red texts do have more meanings than simply conveying political meanings, but what exactly those extra meanings and functions are is unknown. This mystery is almost also the mystery of mathematic poeticity, which gives people pleasure simply by presenting certain rhythms (in words, music, visual, conceptual matrix, and so on).

IV.2.2. The issue of yellow episodes

Now let us shift our attention to the yellow episodes. After all, in the postmodern pastiche, we can understand those yellow text messages only when we understand the red ones, and we can understand the red text messages only when we understand the yellow ones.
a. Yellow in folk literature and popular literature

Yellow episodes are of course not new. A large part of stories, anecdotes, entertainment, and other content in folk culture and folk literature has a yellow tone (Chen Yousheng, 2005). This may be true at any time in any society (Freud, 1963). It may be harder for dominant governing powers to control folk literature and culture because of its means of transmission. But it is easier to control popular literature and culture because its transmission often involves modern media such as print, TV, Internet and so on, and the government may simply stipulate rules to control these media. The issue of yellow episode text messages becomes problematic partly because the cell phone seems to combine both the functions and identities of private communication (like a home phone and personal email) and public media (see Wang Ping, 2008), and those of folk literature and popular literature. Text messages in Chinese is literally “short letters” (duanxin 短信), which connotes privacy, similar to an enveloped letter mailed through the postal service. The technological properties of the mobile platform (unlike in the postal service platform) have, however, determined the public nature of such communications. For example, a message can be simultaneously sent to multiple cell phones. It is based on this function that new media forms such as “cell phone newspapers” (shouji bao 手机报) are developed. And the content of the message is not “enveloped” but exposed to the eyes of those involved in the technical services (similar to the content on a postcard).
b. Power and profanation: yellow politics

We may assume that there are two forms of repression in existence: (1) culturally and historically specific repression; and (2) more “universal” repression in a philosophical sense. The former includes various particular repressions in certain societies (e.g., capitalist ideologies were repressed in Mao’s era). The latter includes an essential lack of freedom in existence itself (e.g., one may desire to fly like a bird, swim in fire, not have to sleep, and not have to die). We may roughly equate such repressions with the “law of men” and the “law of nature”. Some forms of repression fall between or combine these two. Some repression has such a long history that it almost counts as “universal”, such as wearing clothes in public, incest prohibitions, and so on. The “Oedipal repression” and the repression of the symbolic order or the big Other may fit into this zone; in other words, they are almost “universal” compared to specific repressions. Or, we may consider them abstract, generalized forms of specific repressions. Perversity and psychosis are among the potentials that symbolically deny such repressions (Zizek, 1997). To metaphorize perversity, all queer, profane, and “sick” situations and performatives also have such denying potential. The yellow issue can be seen from this perspective and counted as one form of such perversity.

When yellow subverts specific repression, as a large number of erotic political jokes do, we should keep in mind that it is also anti-Oedipal (anti-Symbolic) at the same time. When yellow appears apolitical, it is still anti-Oedipal and embodies the potential attack of political, specific repression. See the yellow episode below:
At lunch, Little Fly complained to Mother Fly: “Mom, why do we always eat shit? Can’t we eat something else?” Mother Fly reproached Little Fly: “Don’t talk about such sick things when we’re eating!”

午饭时间，小苍蝇说：“妈妈，咱们怎么老是吃屎，不能吃点儿别的啊？”苍蝇妈妈责备说：“吃饭的时候不许说这么恶心的事儿！”

This yellow episode is obviously anti-Oedipal and subverts “universal” repression and the symbolic order, but we can also easily read it as subversive in terms of specific repression. Such yellowness is often accompanied with a tint of gray, and is associated with the death drive.

c. Textual intercourse and “laugh-making”

Despite the political nature of yellow, such political function is often unconscious or even denied. For those who enjoy yellow episodes, they are simply meant for a little fun or simply something to do. Telling yellow episodes is particularly popular on tourist trips and at informal banquets (jiuxi 酒席) (such as dinners organized by the work place, or friends or family meals out) (Jiang Zilong, 2007). This is perhaps because when people are temporarily confined in the same space, they naturally seek to have fun together. Informal banquets are an important social practice in contemporary China, and public servants, employees of various work units (danwei 单位) and enterprises, journalists, and
so on are often faced with such occasions of informal banquets (Guo Qingchen, 2001). At present, yellow text messages and yellow episode-telling on public occasions, including at jiuxi, are somewhat illegal (Jiao Likun, 2005; Zhou Liyun, 2006; Ling Junhui, 2008; Zhu Mei, 2009). The reasons given by the government are its tendency towards “misleading the youth” or “male superiors using yellow episodes for sexual harassment to female underlings” (Ren Ruiqing, 2007; Zhou Liyun, 2006). Telling yellow episodes at Red Tourism Sites (hongse lüyou jingdian 红色旅游景点) is also semi-illegalized (Deng Rong, 2007).

A episode explains one possible reason why yellow episodes are still so persistent in China:

If you tell the truth, the leaders will be unhappy. If you lie, the people will be unhappy. If you tell jokes, everybody is happy.

Thus, speaking is a performative dilemma, and people simply have nothing to say but tell jokes. They do feel “happy”, however, when “jokes” are told. It is through such “happy” performatives that a resistance is generated. When yellow episode telling was banned at Red Tourism Sites, netizens uploaded

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62 A variant version of this episode substitutes the word “jokes” xiaohua 笑话 with “obscene words” saohua 骚话
cartoons and jokes to mock this policy. According to the new cell phone regulations, mobile operators have the right to cancel the texting function of a cell phone if a certain amount of yellow episodes have been sent from this cell phone (Liu Qi, 2008; Jiao Likun, 2005). The determination of what qualifies as yellow episodes has been debated and mocked by netizens, and a popular form of mockery and spoofing has developed, which playfully uses many sensitive words in innocent ways. For instance, the filtering system is mostly based on key word searches, thus any message containing certain sensitive words, such as “vagina”, theoretically will be determined as yellow by the filtering system (see Wang Qi, 2006). To mock such rigid technology and policies, some alternative yellow episodes have been created, such as:

Follow this boulevard (vagina), you’ll be there in 5 minutes.
顺着这条林阴道，5分钟就到了。

IV.2.3. Obscenity and seduction

An ecological relationship between red and yellow may be summarized with Zizek’s notion of “obscenity” and Baudrillard’s “seduction”. According to Zizek, if modernism is associated with exposing the primordial absence, lack and void,

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63 See [http://blog.tianya.cn/blogger/post_show.asp?BlogID=362739&PostID=9746143&idWriter=0&Key=0](http://blog.tianya.cn/blogger/post_show.asp?BlogID=362739&PostID=9746143&idWriter=0&Key=0)

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postmodernism displays close-ups of the “obscene” and “horrible” objects that fill up such absence with their “excessive presence” (Zizek, 1997). Red obviously is “obscene”, as it speaks on behalf of the power of authority and equates itself with the big Other. As Zizek says, such an obscene dimension is a supplement of power and enables the latter’s very functioning (Ibid). As we can see, when the red texts express innocent themes such as environmental protection and aphorisms on friendship, they seem to bleach their redness into transparency. In other words, they tend to hide their color of red, but instead try to appear neutral, innocent, and non-political. Yellow, on the other hand, is another form of obscenity. Yellow is also more than pornography and profanity, but at the same time forms part of other idle objects and symbols. Yellow does not even necessarily aim at eroticism, but is part of a bigger game of uncolored, unidentified play. Such indetermination renders the contemporary color scenarios a mutually reflexive game and a form of dual-direction seduction.

This seduction, in Baudrillard’s terms, is the attraction of surface and appearance which denies any hidden or latent meaning. Contrary to the seeking of “latent meaning” under the “manifest discourse” (such as a psychoanalyst’s attempts to interpret dreams), in seduction, “it is somehow the manifest discourse, the most ‘superficial’ aspect of discourse, which acts upon the underlying prohibition (conscious or unconscious) in order to nullify it and to substitute for it the charms and traps of appearances.” “Seduction is that which extracts meaning from discourse and detracts it from its truth” (Baudrillard and Poster, 2001:152). Such a tendency towards the surface and appearance is apparent in both the red discourse and the yellow discourse. Bleaching and emptying themselves,
both the sign of red and the sign of yellow are reduced to performative arrays of meaningless shapes, vacuous arrangements of words, and mathematic circulation of muteness. The ritualistic, empty traffic of such idle signs forms an image of two-way challenge and seduction, which also constitutes the basic sensation of the game.

What could be more seductive than a challenge? To challenge or seduce is always to drive the other mad, but in a mutual vertigo: madness from the vertiginous absence that unites them, and from their mutual involvement. Such is the inevitability of the challenge, and consequently the reason why we cannot help but respond to it: for it inaugurates a kind of mad relation, quite different from communication and exchange; a dual relation transacted by meaningless signs, but connected by a fundamental rule, and its secret observance. The challenge terminates all contracts, all exchanges regulated by law (the law of nature or the law of value) and substitutes for it a highly conventional and ritualized pact. An unremitting obligation to respond and to outdo, governed by a fundamental rule of the game, and proceeding according to its own rhythm. (Baudrillard and Poster, 2001: 164)

Such a two-way seduction between the colors of red and yellow, involving enthusiastic exchange of empty yet sensentional signals and tempos, constitutes a landmark in the postmodern cultural landscape in contemporary China.
Conclusion

After the above investigations and theorizations, let us return to the original question posed in the introduction of this thesis regarding cultural politics on three levels: the technological, representational and socio-political levels. From the discussion above, we may summarize the following:

(1) On the technological level, post-print literary forms such as literary text messages demonstrate a distinct political potential of counteracting the alienating power of technology. Passionate experience or poetics is inherent in human existence; the notion of mathematic poetics that I have proposed above is a form of poetic experience in a digitalized virtual reality. Visual literariness may be a literary manifestation corresponding to such mathematic poetics. Motional, visual rhythms of mathematic models dominate the literary performatives, which precisely constitute the political dynamics that are capable of resisting the terrorist reign of technology.

(2) On the representational level, perversity and interpassivity are subversive strategies to deny the structuring power of the symbolic order. The subjects repeatedly play and renegotiate their positioning in the symbolic order through their textual play. Their inter-subjective role-shifting and inter-manipulation on the perverting textual chain enable them to defer the big Other through the small others. Such perversity and interpassivity lend them a temporary hyperspace of escape, and enables them to imaginarily cross the identity boundaries. In other words, the sender/receiver of literary
text messages obtains a virtual space where they can temporarily escape the rule of the reality.

(3). On the socio-political level, colored literary text messages both help construct and are reciprocally constructed in a postmodern politics. In such a situation, the demarcation between the obscenity of power and the obscenity of profanation becomes blurred, and the super-signs of colors tend to keep bleaching and emptying themselves. Meaning is cancelled; seductions of surfaces and appearances replace interpretation. Idling signs, pleasing matrices of words, and rhythms of empty patterns circulate in the hyper political space. The colored texts are endlessly, madly transmitted and circulated, simply to certify the meaninglessness in the ritualistic exchange of political relations. Such a postmodern political condition itself constitutes the biggest challenge to centralized political functioning of power.

These three political levels are always intertwined and crossbred with each other, which forms a primary postmodern background for various literary, technological and political play and graffiti performances. Literary text messages may be counted as one of those hybrid plays. Hence, from our investigation of literary text messages, we can have a deeper understanding of the postmodern Chinese society, and the ways in which media, technology and culture cross-function and shape the cultural landscapes. As we can see, it is misleading and dangerous to neglect such a critical postmodern political condition. Contrary to some opinions that such colored literary text messages are simply worthless and frivolous or indirectly strengthen the dominating power because of their inactivity, we have discovered their crucial political power of destabilizing the technological,
representational and socio-political reigns. This may provides us with refreshed perspectives in further studying the social and cultural issues in China.
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