

Reading the history of the Chinese internet through metaphors

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Abstract

This essay examines the history of Chinese digital media, specifically the internet, through social imaginaries and metaphors. The text identifies three different set of metaphors that reflects the roles of the government, business sector, and civil society in the last 30 years of the Chinese internet.

Keywords

China imaginary, internet history, metaphors

This essay examines the history of Chinese digital media, specifically the internet, through social imaginaries and metaphors inspired by Yang Guobin's (2009) and Yu Haiqing's (2017) works.

Lakoff and Johnson's (2008) Conceptual Metaphor theory suggests that metaphors serve as a tool that enables people to use their knowledge of direct physical and social experiences, to understand more abstract concepts such as work, time, mental activity, and feelings. Recently, Wyatt highlighted that metaphors on the internet are not only evocative and political but also important to reveal how users understand the physical and material aspects of new media (Wyatt, 2021).

Furthermore, cognitive function metaphors can be seen through a “pragmatic view” carrying positive or negative connotations on a particular agent or phenomenon both directly and indirectly (Charteris-Black, 2004). The strategic role-played by the metaphors is also provided by their “selective processing” (Ottati et al., 2013) according to which metaphors

highlight some features of a perceived reality obscuring others.

Despite the relevance of metaphors in digital media and the internet, the Chinese academic debate in this field is still early. Indeed, previous research made by Chen Qiuxin (陈秋心) on the evolution and development of metaphors focused on the Chinese internet realized by Chinese scholars in the Mainland China highlights two particular aspects. First, one of the earliest Chinese scholars to shed light on the relevance of metaphors in digital media was Hu Yong (胡泳) in an article published in 2015. Second, among the 14 metaphors analyzed in Chen's article, which maps the history of the Chinese internet from 1994

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to 2022, no one had a direct connection with the Chinese language and culture (Chen, 2022). Chen highlights that all the metaphors were imported, mainly from the US novels and/or research papers (ibid.). Even Hu Yong's article is mainly based on American books such as "The Metaphors We Live By," "Neuromancer," "Programming the World Wide Web," "The Virtual Communities," "Understanding Media," and others. However, it is also important to highlight that at the very beginning of China's internet era, theorists such as Guo Liang (郭良) (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) and Zhu Guanglie (朱光烈) (1994) (Communication University of China) proposed their metaphors. In coordinating the first edition of the World Internet Project, Guo Liang identified six options (library, amusement park, postal office, school, bank, gathering place, shopping mall), eventually included in his survey focused on 12 Chinese cities, to understand how Chinese users saw the internet at the end of the 90s (Guo & Bu, 2001).¹ Zhu Guanglie suggested the metaphor of the "bubble" (泡沫) focusing on the effects caused by the development of the information highway on mass and traditional media.

In line with a study by Chen Yanrong (陈彦蓉) and Cao Yue (曹钺) (2021), this essay focuses on the very first years of the Chinese internet and its metaphors—from 1994 to 2003—mainly for two reasons. First, my suggestion is to highlight the role of media "constitutive choices" as a process that sets the conditions for the future development of an institution (Starr, 2004). Second, during the first years of the Chinese internet, the evolution of imported metaphors and the needs and ambitions of the government, the business sector, and nascent civil society were paradoxically more visible and accessible. The choice to focus the analysis on the first 10 years of the Chinese internet is also justified by Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling" which allows defining "emergent" (or better "pre-emergent"), ways of thinking, and living in a specific period or epoch of the past (Williams, 1961). This approach can be useful to identify the way how people position themselves vis-à-vis new emerging cultural formations (Falasca-Zamponi, 2020).

In more general terms, the history of the internet in China can be seen as a process in which different

social actors, such as the national government, market, and civil society, image and generate discourse practices. This essay identifies three groups that reflect specific metaphors related to the roles of the government, business sector, and civil society.

Fire and walls

One of the very first metaphors that characterized the history of the Chinese internet recalls the Prometheus myth of "stealing fire" (盗火) symbolizing access to new technologies supported by a more liberal and internationalized environment. The idea of cosmopolitanism is also present in the metaphor expressed in the object of the first email sent from China in 1989 "Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner of the world." It is interesting to note that the reference to the Great Wall can have more than just a single interpretation. If from the Chinese perspective, the Great Wall was considered a symbol of humiliation in modern history to be put behind also through technological progress, from a Western perspective, the reference to the Great Wall was used to coin the new Great Firewall metaphor used to express "the digital equivalent of China's Great Wall and designed to keep Chinese cyberspace free of pollutants of all sorts" (Barmé & Ye, 1997).

Information superhighway and heroes

The second group includes the import and the elaboration of other metaphors, mainly imported by the United States milieu such as "信息高速公路" ("information superhighway") and "浪潮" ("wave," a term that became popular thanks to the work of Alvin Toffler *The Third Wave*, published in 1980). These metaphors reinforced the relevance of speed in the process of technological progress as well as the need for an infrastructure that could assure the success of the internet. While the metaphor of the highway in the United States was mostly linked to political discourse, in China, it was mainly related to private action. This phenomenon can be confirmed by one of the first and most iconic advertisements of the Chinese internet placed near the Zhongguancun area and its slogan "How far are the Chinese people

from the information superhighway? 1500 meters to the north” (中国人离信息高速公路还有多远?—向前一千五百米). The advertisement was realized by Zhang Shuxin, one of the first entrepreneurs in the Chinese internet market, whose company was named 瀛海威 to recall the meaning of “information highway” in Chinese.

The promotion and popularization of the internet as an “information superhighway” backed by the private sector were also supported by other metaphors such as “knowledge heroes” (知识英雄, see R. Liu 1998) and eventually “internet heroes” (互联网英雄, see, L. Liu, 2009). Entrepreneurs such as Zhang Chaoyang (张朝阳), Wang Zhidong (王志东), and Ding Lei (丁磊), who founded Sohu, Sina e NetEase, were also labeled with the metaphor of “the Three Internet Musketeers” (网络三剑客) contributing to the promotion of the Chinese internet development not only as a state-driven action but also supported by the private initiative.

Spaces

The popularization and commercialization of the internet in China led to a third group of metaphors that are more focused on internet users. The success of the “second life” in particular, supported the shift from the idea of an “information highway” to a metaphor “for a way of being” (Chen & Cao, 2021). The experience of second life led to the popularization of online games and virtual spaces, as it was demonstrated by the success of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) which, on one hand, highlighted the economic development of the private initiative and, on the other hand, had an impact on society as it was demonstrated by official agencies for creation of the metaphor of “electronic heroin” (电子海洛因) to identify the effects of abuse of online games among young generations.

If the success of video games caused a return of the state in the creation of metaphors, the first years of the 2000s also saw a proliferation of other and diversified forms of virtual spaces such as Bulletin Board System (BBS), blogs, and microblogs. These virtual spaces were all associated with spatial metaphors such as “square” (广场), “home” (家园), and “jianghu” (江湖) all of them provide the idea of a network community (网络社区), setting a shift from

the individual life experience of second life to a more complex net of relationships based on individual responsibilities that have an effect on the creation of specific virtual worlds (Lu, 1998).

In more concrete terms, the reference to “square” recalls the first years of the Chinese internet characterized by ideas such as freedom, openness, and heterogeneity of the participating groups. The “home” metaphor reflects the process of commercialization of the Chinese internet which lets users personalize and share their personal virtual spaces (bought, modified, and filled with text and other multimedia files) with other users. Furthermore, the idea of “home” is associated with users’ awareness and sense of responsibility for their actions in virtual worlds (Jin & Ouyang, 2022). Finally, as already aptly presented by previous studies *jianghu* can be seen “as an imaginative space of alternative, subaltern and courtesan publics” (Yu, 2017) as well as a “second world away from the established social and political order” (Yang, 2009) and “a world of adventure freedom, transgression, and divine justice, but also a world of betrayal, intrigue, and evil” (Yang, 2009). *Jianghu* fits into the dimension of network community because of its high mobility (visibility), low visibility (anonymity), unpredictability (in netizen positions and actions), multiplicity, and diversity (in types of communities and interests) (Lu, 1998).

Deconstructing, systematizing, and analyzing the Chinese internet metaphors

This preliminary analysis of the evolution of Chinese metaphors on the Chinese internet can be useful not only to go further the dichotomist analysis between control and resistance (Yu, 2017) but also to suggest an interpretation of how different agents contribute to the narration of digital China environments. As Wyatt aptly notes, metaphors are not under the unique domains of poets, but their creation also involves scientists, engineers, designers, policymakers, and politicians (2021).

Furthermore, the analysis of the Chinese internet metaphors can support our understanding of the construction of social imaginaries as well as their influence on the evolution of the Chinese internet at the

global level. Identifying the agents that contributed to (still influence) the import and/or the creation of specific metaphors can be also useful for measuring the goals and intentions of specific groups.

Finally, in line with the need to have a retrospective look at the Chinese internet and previous studies that already analyzed the role of metaphors on traditional and new media,² another way to identify political, economic, and social agents who create metaphors aimed at influencing and developing different digital trends both domestically and at the global level can analyze the evolution of specific metaphors, which from time to time can disappear or emerge according to the specific goals of the same or different players.

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Notes

1. In 2005, Guo Liang also proposed the metaphor of “Entertainment superhighway” (娱乐高速公路) to highlight China internet peculiarities (see Guo, 2005).
2. Liu Xiao Information Fantasies aptly documents the impact of Alvin Toffler’s “wave” and “heroes” metaphors in the 80s.

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