

## Symbol and Intercourse: Visuality of Chinese Cyber Symbol and Intercourse of Cyber Public Space

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### Abstract

Based on the drawbacks of Medium Dependence and irrational characteristics of cyber symbol which severely impact on the freedom and equality of cyber intercourse and the nature and significance of communication, making it difficult to build a free and equal cyber public space, this thesis, taking examples of social website and IM, say personal QQ, blog, micro-blog, WeChat and other personal spaces, analyzes the relations between visuality of Chinese cyber symbol and construction of cyber public space. It aims at inspiring people to treat cyber intercourse at a dialectic attitude, exploring corresponding strategies and then building a more rational, humanized and artistic cyber public space.

**Key words:** Cyber symbol; Visuality; Cyber public space

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### INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, that humans enter into the dotcom economy and cyberspace enters into our living world used to be imaginations existing in science fictions or fantasy movies, and now that becomes true and near in

our daily life. Honestly, as Jos de Mul said, cyberspace is not an autonomous and free zone beyond our daily life, instead, it is a space closely related with our daily reality. It is a public space that covers and constantly takes in uncountable new comers. Furthermore, the space begins to colonize our living space, difficult to resist.

As a tool for transmission and communication, cyber symbols, such as texts, images, videos and various expression icons, etc., become essential media for people to enter into and construct cyber space. Cyber space filled with rationality, humanity and artistry relies on the application of corresponding cyber symbols. However, obviously, Chinese cyber symbols' design has the characteristic of duplication, plagiarism, formalization and kitsch, and cyber symbols' application has the characteristic of authority, irrationality, randomness, violence, Kitsch or even vulgarization, etc., both of which make it difficult to construct a free and equal cyber public space. From the deep, it results from Chinese social constructions, cultural traditions, values, supervision system, aesthetical psychology and communicational psychology of cyber users, etc..

Since cyber symbols' application and experience are always sensorial and full of pleasure so that uncountable netizens get addicted to Medium Dependence. In daily lives, they relied on network so deep that nothing could replace it. Phubbing can be seen everywhere which witnesses that Chinese younger generation is getting addicted to current network era, information era and vision era without which they will find it hard to live. Network search engine is like Alibaba's spell, exploring an infinite treasure in a moment. In the cyber space, various demands like cyber friends-making, living communication, work communication, information searching, recreation and emotional distraction, etc., are getting people addicted and can't help themselves based on the characteristics of high-speed, high-efficiency, novelty and excitement. With personal cyber space like micro-blog, WeChat, QQ and

the like, the user could have a panoramic view of all kinds of strange visual information by only moving his fingers, easily and without limit of time and location. Meanwhile, the rapidness to keep the cyber space updated constantly proves that these media are invading people's living space overwhelmingly. In a word, network has become people's living necessity, opiate and spiritual sustenance.

## **1. CYBER SYMBOLS AND PROPERTIES**

### **1.1 Types of Cyber Symbols and Functions**

People conduct cyber intercourse via cyber symbols and, since its existence, the forms and meanings of cyber symbols are changing and updating continuously. Generally speaking, the types and functions of symbols in personal cyber space like images, videos and the like consist of below four types.

#### **1.1.1 Implying Symbols**

Implying symbols like images, videos or expression symbols and the like are regarded as a supplement or explanation to the texts, reflecting an excellent effect of text being larded with pictures, which is to make information easier to understand and transmit, make personal websites more attractive, and then get higher attention rate and click-through rate. That is the classical embodiment of current attention economy whose derivative products include techniques of cover girl and advertisement 3B etc. It is the same case for cyber personal space to absorb and apply images.

#### **1.1.2 Atmosphere Symbols**

Atmosphere symbols are not directly supplementary to understand texts in personal spaces, instead, they are taken to activate space atmosphere, beatify space environment and individualized personal spaces further. Atmosphere symbols cover beautiful sceneries, human body pictures, classic arts, video works, etc. Enjoying these atmospheric pictures and videos, netizens or space intruders can get relaxed, relieved from bad mood and get pressure transferred, etc.. Meanwhile, the space owner could take advantages of these atmospheric symbols to improve the attraction of the space and efficiency of information exchange.

#### **1.1.3 Cover-Up Symbols**

These symbols are images, videos or certain expression symbols that are always used, when it is not easy for the space owner to express clearly during the essay or information issuance, to hide, to cover up or to replace his emotion, his mood or his ideas, etc.. They are similar to the empty words, interjections or expressive symbols, which are to relieve mood or atmosphere, used when people feel awkward, lost or when they have no ideas.

#### **1.1.4 Gimmick Images**

Gimmick images include QQ expression, specialized or funny photographs, drawings or architecture works

etc., which are mostly humorous, funny, vivid and interesting so that they can draw people's attention, relax the atmosphere and make people pleased. The popular technique of Dobe is one of the examples currently.

There is no deny that the selection and application of images are not blind, instead, they result from the structural knowledge, techniques and definite self-consciousness of the space owner and also they represent the owner's purpose, characteristic, taste and literary attainments, etc. In personal cyber space, the owner could select and apply text, image, video and other symbols in a comparative free way. We call it comparative because symbols' application, to a great extent, are limited by the cyber space, information itself, even cyber environment and owner's mind, etc. In order to make it harmonious for the vision of the whole space, the owner always choose proper and good-looking symbols instead of carnal, violent or even extremely strange and horrible symbols to draw people's attention, to be laughed at or criticized or even to be forced out.

Just as Roland Barthes said, every image in the world would be adjusted by social symbols' significance, and then transit from silence to "speaking" status. For the cyber language such as texts, images, videos, they have already been symbolized.

### **1.2 Symbolism of Cyber Symbols**

#### **1.2.1 Virtuality and Sense: Visual Sense Property of Cyber Symbols**

As stated above, following the logic of visual era, current cyber space represents a dazzling view that never appeared before, via eye-catching symbols like images with value added constantly and most of which adopted the rhetoric technique of cover girl, and becomes more and more visual-oriented. The visual sense property features in that the space becomes more and more artistic, direct-perceived, novel, and then becomes more and more virtual and dynamic. Various strange symbols have built a super-reality cyber world, representing a hyper-reality, called as "image world" by Depauw and "imitating or facial phenomenon" by Jean Baudrillard. These images or imitating images are no longer specified basically and become self-simulating or self-referring symbols, which are settled in the story, unlike the symbols in reality that are settled in un-controllable events or logic space of situation. It is as Wittgenstein said that the reality in logic space is the world, and images represent the events in logic space and represent whether the basic event exists or not. Therefore, the significance of images is plane, shallow and temporary. It is also greatly regretted by Guy Debord that in modern society with extensive manufacturing conditions, our whole life is assembled to a huge spectacle. All that existed directly have turned to pure features currently. Cyber culture actually is kind of mosaic culture based on mass media.

### **1.2.2 The Truth of Impossible Existence: The Reference of Cyber Symbols**

Although network brings various unprecedented feeling experiences, its virtuality brings many problems to users' life and thinking.

#### **1.2.2.1 People Are Absent From the Scene**

Medium, an extension to humans, creates a new environment and a new space for us. It is true that the medium as an extension to humans offers new experience of sense, however, this extension, namely added-value, is closely related to so-called amputation put forward by Marshall McLuhan. Taking bicycle as an example, wheels of the bicycle extend the function of people's legs and help them to go around, however, it is the extension of function that separate people's legs from their bodies and deprives legs' basic function of walking, creating new pressure to humans. Similarly, when medium endows humans with power, it disabled the body with functions extended. Therefore we can say that techniques not only extend the function of bodies but also disable body from certain function, enabling turning to disabling.

Cyber space provides a huge or even boundless space for people's life, work and emotion where people can communicate and express ideas in whichever way they like. However, as people are absent from the scene, a lot of sense seems virtual, illusive or even fake. Taking language as an example, other senses related to words from the speaker are lost too at the same time when he is absent from the scene. Language or images are simplified by network as a one of our senses, the visual sense, through which we receive information, however this weakens and deprives subjectivity of information.

It results from using cyber language for a long time that netizens gradually perceive less from daily language and grammar so that their ability to express with daily grammar and language are weakened gradually, or even worse, they might confront with obstacle during language intercourse in daily life. The deep and lasting perception in our life is replaced by temporary and shallow excitement or pain obtained from the network, the long-term addiction to which would turn the temporary and shallow excitement to lasting and irresistible taste and experience. Once the taste and experience from virtual world face the reality and complexion of life, people will find it hard to accept the real world. As a result, long-term addition to the network will make people incapable of facing reality. Just as Marshall McLuhan pointed out that Narcissus's destruction were not caused by seeing his own image on the surface of the water (a Greek myth) but caused by the effect of technique anesthesia.

#### **1.2.2.2 The Real Me Is Not Where I Am Now**

Based on Lacan's modern definition to the relationship between subject and the others, The Real Me Is Not Where I Am Now, taking an example, is like that the baby sees himself in the mirror, which is just a mirror image, a

self-righteous image that reflected by outer world and then obtained by the baby, but not the real image and internal image. Since the babyhood, people begin to shape, request or even testify themselves according to the voice, regulations and dreams from the outside. Thus, this sort of need or desire is not what they want, but what others want and others' desires. What Others Want probably originates at the earliest from the views of relatives or partners during the childhood, because others regarded this sort of younger images as their own desires in a dissimilating and non-consciousness way. So, Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach's theory of I Am Here because I Want turns to the theory of I Am Not Here because I Want or He Wants by Lacan's eyes. What I want is always what others want and, furthermore, I also want what others want and want to be wanted by others. It is the same case to the individuals in the cyber world in terms of nature. Desires are no longer what I want fundamentally, but what others want from the first beginning.

Therefore, if without outside expectation and others' desires or definitions, the subject will disappear, this is called Onion Mode and Lancau call it Mummy Wrapped With Cerecloth in Empty Shell. That I receive regulations from others' eyes is the first step in self to be dissimilated pointed out by Lancau. The identity and recognition of every individual come from others' definition and recognition without exception. The existing noumenon of personal subject is a unit and everyone wants to show their existence, subject and individuality, etc.. However, as said by Foucault, the truth is that our self was invented but not found and the self in cyber space is exactly the same. The social intercourse in cyber space can be more exactly regarded as a process to invent a new self, as Foucault said, which is unstable, fragmental and of multiplicity. On one hand, space relation is only the condition of interpersonal relationship. On the other hand, it symbolized the interpersonal relationship. The character of cyber space determines the characters of interpersonal intercourse or even that of netizens. The conception of strangers put forward by Georg Simmel is just to the point when analyzing interpersonal interactions in the network. Due to indefinite factors, intrinsic in cyber intercourse, like virtuality and anonymity etc., people are unable to make correct judgments for many matters, which make paradox-coexistence one of the fundamental characters in cyber intercourse.

In order to better build our life and culture, at the time when all of us get addicted and lost in cyber social intercourse, we need to rethink the tempting network and the irresistible desires in a critical manner, and to face self, subject and public space based on rationality and humanity.

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## **2. TO READ CYBER SYMBOLS**

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Due to cyber symbols' visual character, correspondingly, to read symbols in cyber space is becoming more and

more complex. Read is never simple and it is not only an act of the eyeballs. According to Pierre Bourdieu and other socialists, people's artistic ability is constructed by society, which includes decoding operations, no matter intentional or not. Read is closely related with recognition and virtue in ancient Greek, where read represents recognition, and visual metaphors are always used to refer to knowledge and truth. However today, the meaning of read changes a lot.

Study shows that one-tenth of visual sense is affected by physical or body factors and the other nine-tenth are affected by mental factors.... The reading of visual images relies on preconditioning, intelligence factors and body conditions of the observer. Different people have different feedback to visual stimuli,...because all of them have different experience, attitude, interest and visual angles. (Pauredore, & Pauredore, 2008)

In some sense, we could say that the capability of reading is the function of knowledge, conceptions or words. Reading could identify what we see just like the perceptive programming. As long as an individual possess the capacity of culture, he possesses the code to program the art works which are really significant and interesting in his eyes.

Namely, the subject is constructed in the culture and language environment where he is, and insight is the historical product by educational re-production (Bourdieu). The same as John Berger firmly pointed out that people only see what they want to see. Desire to read is a selection and the way people look at things are deeply affected by what he knows and what he believes in. In fact, just as Kant said, we are in the culture that is in our heart. Read is a part of culture, so read and to be read, from the deep inside, reflects personal visual field of culture and aesthetic psychology. Therefore, in some sense, the cultural history of visual sense is an evolution history of canonical form of visual sense.

The selection of reading determines the characteristics of the group who focus on the cyber space, and for some cyber space the surfer and the communicator are always fixed. For observer, reading itself is a process with selections. Brenda Partauin points out in his essay *Eyes of the Brain: Images and Visual Sense Share Brain Mechanism* that scientists found the nerve cell in the brain could sort out various images specifically based on researches on animals for a period of time. For example, some cells are active only to the pictures of famous persons, some are active to pictures of animals, and some are active only to food, which ensure people that our brains and organisms feedback to visual stimulus in a most effective and possible way via stimulating those nerve cells that could recognize specific objects.<sup>8</sup> Hence, visual sense perception is never a passive process to record the stimulus, but an active process in the brain to focus. Positive selection is one of the basic characteristics of the visual sense.

### 3. CONSTRUCTION OF CYBER SYMBOLS AND CYBER PUBLIC SPACE

#### 3.1 Characteristics of Cyber Public Space

Media identify the real world with a secret but strong power, becoming one of the living necessities many people live on and unable to give up. In networks, there forms a new relation mode of interpersonal interaction and new and specific public spaces.

In the public space proposed by Habermas, people communicate in an equal, free and rational manner. However, Montesquieu still states with confidence that there is no absolute equality in the society and what we can do is to pursue the maximum equality. Surely, everyone is equal in the autarchy politics because they are all on their knees, when Solzhenitsyn thought the world was submerged by unashamed beliefs that authority is almighty but justice ends up in smoke. Today, the cyber world seems free but still authority is insidious anywhere. Certainly, what we should abandon is the insidious cyber autocracy and cyber politics and perhaps what we could do is to pursue maximum equality with all efforts since absolute freedom and equality seems far behind to catch up.

In Habermas's opinion, a real public space should be constructed with rationality and equality, that is to say, equal dialogue is crucial to construct public space. Of course, the premise is how the dialogue becomes equal. Most of the time, people focus on personal space by ridiculing, saying little words or glancing hurriedly and cursorily only, which is unable to form a real dialogue. According to Bourdieu's concept of field, similar fields are required to form a dialogue. Or as Weber said, similar groups and identity property are the preconditions required. The interactivity of cyber space can't be denied so that many scholars identify cyber space as a public and social space. Cyber socialist Howard Rheingold identify cyber public space as virtual community, namely, a group of people forms personal relation network in the cyber space. A. R. Stone regards cyber space as a social space, an imaginary place formed by consensus for communication. In cyber space, a new social structure was shaped where politics, economy, culture, interpersonal relations, etc. are shaped to a sort of existence different from the real life. The existence depends on the real society but it differs from the living space of human's real life. Cyber space is not a simulation or duplication of the real society, instead, it is a new space for livelihood and culture. As a space in specific form, cyber space has the characteristics of dramatic-oriented, dynamic-oriented, idealistic-oriented, situation-oriented, time and place oriented, etc..

Different from various intercourse styles in daily life, intercourse in cyber space represents the coexistence between public and private, virtuality and situation,

reaction and isolation, synchrony and diachrony, instantaneity and postponement, freedom and shackle, equality and difference, etc. in terms of interpersonal intercourse, it provides people opportunities and spaces to shape, to show, to achieve themselves again, and it also provides people with a new platform, creating a new mode for interpersonal intercourse. For instance, in the cyber intercourse, Howard Rheingold thinks that the interpersonal interaction in cyber communities follows a gift economy, namely, people provides mutual help or information without direct repayment, which reflects the humanity of cyber intercourse. However, if the cycle of non-repayment continues, the original egoism may lead to the vanishing of altruism. Due to the virtual property of network, we can find trust and doubt deep-rooted in the intercourse from the start to the end. However fortunately, the emergence of IM communication tool avoided this problem to some extent. With the wide spreading of IM communication tool, how to better realize the rational intercourse in personal space so as to build a more civilized cyber public space has become one of the critical thesis to focus on and study.

### 3.2 Intercourse Rationality and Rational Intercourse

Habermas put forward four types of behavior for the subject in society, they are instrumental behavior, regulated and adjusted behavior, dramatic behavior and communication behavior, among which communication behavior is a behavior that focuses on understanding and is a shared process by different behavioral subjects to start language behavior. Regarding the intercourse in cyber space, with the guidance of cyber rules, network users enter into human's language world through interaction of languages or cyber symbols coordination so as to communicate and understand each other based on the medium of language and cyber dialogues.

In Habermas's opinion, understanding is the nature and purpose of intercourse by saying that the task of general pragmatics is to confirm and restore the general conditions about possible understanding (called general consumption premise in other situations) (Habermas, 1989, p.1). Habermas thinks that the purpose of understanding is self-identity which comes from mutual understanding, mutual knowledge and mutual trust. "When an individual joins an intercourse activity, taking language as a medium and understanding as aim, he has to undertake below effective requirements inevitably—understandable, true, honest and correct." (Li, 2006, pp.210-211) Habermas summarizes by saying that

speaker must choose understandable expressive forms so that speaker and listener could understand each other; speaker must provide a statement with real intention so that listener could share the information of the speaker; speaker must express his ideas sincerely so that listener could trust what he said; the last but not the least, speaker must select the language that is correct itself so that listeners could accept it and both speaker

and listener could reach to agreement with acknowledged and normative language. (Habermas, 1989, p.3)

The effect mentioned above is not compulsory, but a rational conversation norm. Only in rational intercourse could be idealistic and civilized conversation context be provided so as to build idealistic intercourse community, which is the precondition to accomplish intercourse and build a real public space. The idealistic conversation context is necessary and should be put in the first place. Intercourse subject will be formed only in the intercourse interaction platform, which is the definition of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity replacing subjectivity makes it come true to break through and exceed traditional philosophy of consciousness. This critical paradigm revolution is significant and makes it possible to revive the significance and rebuild the ideal. Constructing natural intercourse environment, basing on intersubjectivity, trying best to understand communication with explanation and studying how to understand strategies to ensure the effectiveness of understanding during intercourses are the basic methods to accomplish cyber space humanity.

With the help of Habermas's public field concept, the public space amongst cyber world, living world and the politics system is formed because of netizens' autonomous intercourse. Such a public space is based on the real living world and connected with the politics system, becoming one of the methods for cyber space to affect the politics system.

Different from the base of Habermas's public field, both Chinese culture and cyber space have their own characteristics. There is no deny that many problems exist in Chinese cyber space, regarding which China hasn't established a clear and systematic space construction mechanism yet. Hence, it lacks of effective mechanism for symbol design and application, for cyber big data's significance and strategies to talents' development, for relevant network-using comments, which makes it impossible to ensure the effective space construction and operation with persuasive standards and scales in a scientific, regular, systematical way. Many factors like authority relations, intersubjectivity, symbol application, space intercourse etc. make it far behind to catch up to accomplish the ideal paradigm of cyber public space, but the united concern on many social factors, the parallelism and revision of critical schema, the critical rethink of Habermas to modern artistic public problems and the exploration to reconstruct public fields are of significant reference to Chinese cyber public space construction no matter in theories and in practice.

Regarding above mentioned problems, I herewith propose a few strategic suggestions.

First of all, build a more closely, lasting and effective cyber social community, cooperate closely with national network supervision and other related departments of various levels to promote the positive development of cyber space from different aspects and angles, establish

professional supervision and assessment mechanism for media community, and establish interactive and gaming governmental coordination mechanism set for cyber space problems. Fundamentally, certain culture's formation has to be accepted and practiced by the society at the end. The study on cyber culture and cyber public space is substantially sort of significant political science, social aesthetics and social criticism theory. The united cooperation of various social factors makes it possible for the study's effectiveness.

Secondly, take advantages of cyber symbol users' self-consciousness and mutual supervision to build deep culture value gradually, to highlight visual beauty and to express cyber symbols required by individuals, so as to guide cyber space to become more equal, more rational and more civilized fundamentally and then to rebuild or strengthen individuals' images and values in cyber system just like self-orientation and self-accomplishment in real life, finally to represent a rational, humanized and artistic cyber public space.

Thirdly, viewing from the study level, we should mainly base on the materialist conception of history regarding the research methods of cyber symbols and public space and try the best to break through the alternative models between challenges and feedback, tradition and modern, private and public, eastern and western. We should try the best to break the limit of science and method, to exceed historic narration and viewpoint edit, to view the development of cyber public space as a dynamic construction activity with multivariant power interacted, to discuss the reliance of

cyber public space on many a social conditions including cyber symbols and to disclose many hidden problems with care and effort.

Humans are the subject of space, so the key to build a rational, humanized, artistic cyber public space is to build the subjectivity of individual consciousness and the subjectivity of culture, to think about who I am, what I want finally and how can I make it. Also, we should rethink just like Foucault that how do we look like today, what kind of history makes that and is there any possibility to change the way we look like today?

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