

Watch Your Language! (In China, they really do)

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Scaling the wall. Buying soy sauce. Fifty cents. A mild collision. May 35. Mayor Lymph. River crab.

These words — mild, silly, inoffensive — are part of the subversive lexicon being used by Chinese bloggers to ridicule the government, poke fun at Communist Party leaders and circumvent the heavily censored Internet in China. A popular blog that tracks online political vocabulary, China Digital Times, calls them part of the “resistance discourse” on the mainland. Internet usage in China, of course, is massive. A single microblogging site, Sina Weibo, has more than 300 million users. Nationwide there are some 460 million users of the Internet, and more than 300 million Chinese can access it on their cellphones. No need to mention the numbers on Twitter and Facebook: They’re blocked by the Chinese government.

Internet traffic is examined with a thoroughness and ruthlessness that is almost admirable in its scope. The term “Great Firewall” is appropriate and descriptive — and also banned by the censors. The government prefers its own name for its Internet surveillance program — the Golden Shield Project.

The system ferrets out pornography and commercial scams, but it also blocks certain search terms. Its algorithms sniff out words or names it considers politically odorous. It sometimes deletes offending messages altogether.

More than 16 percent of all messages in China get deleted, according to a study by the Language Technologies Institute at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. The survey, published in the online journal First Monday, analyzed 70 million messages sent last summer, mostly on Sina Weibo.

“Weibo users — whose numbers recently surpassed 300 million — realize the days of unfettered, anonymous criticism may be drawing to a close,” writes Andrew Jacobs, a colleague in the Beijing bureau of The New York Times. “Beginning on March 16, new government regulations will require real-name registration.”

In short, no more anonymity.

“Another rule will require Sina Weibo to review the posts of those who have more than 100,000 followers,” Mr. Jacobs says. “Those ‘harmful’ to national interests, according to the rules, must be summarily deleted within five minutes.”

The Carnegie Mellon team found “295 terms with a high probability of being censored.” China Digital Space has compiled its own impressive dictionary of political slang and terminology, along with etymologies and back stories.

So good luck searching for terms like Tibet, immolation, the Dalai Lama, Falun Gong, democracy movement, Sheng Xue (dissident writer), Ai Weiwei (outspoken artist), Liu Xiaobo (imprisoned Nobel laureate), June 4 (date of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989), and Playboy (the magazine).

From time to time over the past year, the words jasmine, Egypt, Jon Huntsman (the former American ambassador) and Occupy Beijing also have been banned.

And after the Fukushima nuclear disaster last March, online searches for the term “iodized salt” were blocked, presumably to quash the rumor racing across China that eating large quantities of salt would prevent radiation poisoning.

Two of the most pointed online jabs are “grass-mud horse” and “river crab.”

Another colleague in Beijing, Michael Wines, has explicated the origin of grass-mud horse, describing the horse as “a mythical creature whose name, in Chinese, sounds very much like an especially vile obscenity.”

(Interested readers can scale our own well-mannered firewall and find a fuller description of the terminology here.)

“Conceived as an impish protest against censorship,” Mr. Wines writes, “the foul-named little horse has not merely made government censors look ridiculous, although it has surely done that. It has also raised real questions about China’s ability to stanch the flow of information over the Internet — a project on which the Chinese government already has expended untold riches, and written countless software algorithms to weed deviant thought from the world’s largest cyber-community.”

A subtitled video of the gamboling horse (草泥马) is here — they’re actually alpacas — and Ai Weiwei singing the equine anthem in Chinese is here.

Perry Link, the author of “Liu Xiaobo’s Empty Chair,” described the use of code words and Aesopian allegory by Mr. Liu and other popular bloggers like Han Han: “Harmony, for example, is a key word used in the government’s rhetoric, and Internet writers use hexie, or river crab, which is a near-homonym (河蟹) of the Chinese word for harmony, to mean repression.”

To be harmonized, these days, is to be censored.

“Officials are aware, of course, of its barbed meaning on the Internet,” said the Chinese writer Yu Ha in an essay in the IHT Magazine, “but they can hardly ban it, because to do so would outlaw the ‘harmonious society’ they are plugging. Harmony has been hijacked by the public.”

A handful of the underground terms we mentioned earlier, with characters from China Digital Times:

***Getting soy sauce.** “A humorous way for netizens to distance themselves from a sensitive or political topic.” The etymology derives from an on-the-street TV interview about a celebrity scandal. A man interviewed at random, according to China Digital Times, issues a profanity and says he has no connection to the matter, proclaiming, “I was just out buying some soy sauce.” (打酱油)

***Scale the wall.** Bo Xilai, the powerful head of the Communist Party in the megacity of Chongqing, has been entangled in a mysterious political scandal in recent weeks. So his temporary absence from a session of the National People’s Congress last week sent rumors flying online. Many bloggers reported that they were gathering information “over the wall” or were “scaling the wall” — that is, going beyond the Internet firewall, using a tunnel or proxy. At one point, there were mentions of big doings (出大事了) in “the tomato,” (西红柿), which in Mandarin sounds like “western red city,” a new online euphemism for Chongqing. To scale the wall: 翻墙.

***Mayor Lymph.** China Digital Times calls this “a code word for its near homophone, Charter 08,” the democracy manifesto that enraged the government and turned up its paranoia dial to 11. Mr. Liu, the principal author of Charter 08, remains in prison. (淋巴县长)

***Mild collision.** A subway crash in Shanghai last fall injured hundreds of passengers, and the accident occurred shortly after a high-speed rail crash that killed dozens and injured nearly 200. The rail incident outraged many Chinese, and the authorities were on alert for mass protests.

“The evening after the accident, CCTV, Xinhua and a Shanghai television station all reported that ‘a mild collision’ occurred on Shanghai’s Metro Line 10,” according to China Digital Times. “The claim that this was a mild accident elicited the derision of netizens who felt that the reporting was more intended to dampen fears about China’s train system than report what

actually occurred. The phrase 'mild collision' instantly became an Internet buzzword." (轻度追尾)

***Fifty cents.** "Netizens first coined the term 'Fifty Cent Party' to refer to undercover Internet commentators who were paid by the government to sway public opinion" by posting pro-Beijing statements, reputedly for 50 cents a shot, according to China Digital Times. (五毛党)

"Now, however, the term is used to describe anyone who actively and publicly posts opinions online that defend or support government policy. As such, the so-called Fifty Cent Party has become the object of much scorn for many netizens."

***May 35.** In other words, June 4. Also on the censors' blacklist are any consecutive combinations of the numbers 6, 4 and 89. (五月三十五日)

Fonte: The New York Times, New York, 13 Mar. 2012, Internacional, On-line.

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