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Changes in the Chinese Language via the Internet

For my thesis I would like to address recent changes in the Chinese language set in motion first through the advent of computers and more recently by the growing popularity and availability of Internet use. These changes include adaptations of the ancient character writing system of Chinese, specifically with the invention of computer input systems, the use of a character as an emoticon, etc. as well as the increasing use of English words and the Latin alphabet in tandem with Chinese in casual writing, and the role of homophones in creating slang and subversive language. In pursuing these topics I would like to explore the origins of some of these examples and examine their pervasiveness.

The Chinese writing system has existed for over three thousand years, from the first inscriptions on "oracle bones" (used for divination) in the Shang Dynasty, (~1600-1046 BCE) and has undergone countless changes in form and style since then which render most ancient characters unintelligible to modern readers of Chinese. Though it might seem as though the standardization of Chinese is now complete (Simplified in Mainland China and Traditional in Hong Kong and Taiwan), computers and the internet have been in recent decades, and are continuing to, catalyze further change. For one, the invention of character input systems to allow for computer typing provided further standardization and change.

I would also like to research the ways in which English, as an international language, comes to affect Chinese in terms of the generation of slang terms, typed abbreviations, and so called 'chat-

speak.' In some cases, Chinese chatspeak can include combinations of abbreviated Chinese romanization side by side with English abbreviations which often wind up being indistinguishable.

My work will then culminate in an examination of the role of homophones in Chinese over history and the ways that they are being adapted today to modern needs. Primary among these examples is a popular internet meme relating to the "Grass Mud Horse." The Chinese characters representing this creature's name are used homophonically to represent a common Chinese profanity. This homophone based meme exploded over the Chinese internet and came to represent dissidence against the Communist Party. The graphic on this poster is a piece by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei whose nudity aside from a stuffed "Grass Mud Horse" toy represents his feelings of discontent toward the Chinese government. In my thesis I would like to describe the story of the Grass Mud Horse and consider both its social implications and the aspects of the Chinese language which allowed for its creation and popularity.

