

# **“The Human Flesh Search Engine: Democracy, Censorship, and Political Participation in Twenty-First Century China”**

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*Based on an undergraduate thesis from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.*

Wang Jue was most likely never aware of the notoriety she would gain after posting an anonymous video on the internet of herself crushing a kitten with her high-heeled shoe. Similarly, she most likely was never aware that her identity would be discovered from the short video or that she would soon become known solely as the “Kitten Killer of Hangzhou.”

Wang Jue was a young woman who took out her anger over a failed relationship by crushing a small kitten and videotaping it. She posted the video on her personal blog on the internet for anyone to see. The video became instantly popular as news about this gruesome act quickly spread across the Chinese internet. Viewers were outraged by the footage and spoke out on various web forums, demanding that the unknown woman be brought to justice for her inhumane act.

From the video alone Chinese netizens, defined as “any Chinese citizen aged six and above who has used the internet in the past half a year”, were able to determine the location where the video was shot.<sup>1</sup> The location was not a well-known area, but because of the sheer number of viewers that watched the video, enough netizens watched the video who were familiar with that location to determine it was filmed in Hangzhou, China.

Netizens were similarly able to determine the woman’s identity by tracing an online purchase of stiletto shoes through eBay.com, the same pair worn by Wang in the video, to a personal website set up under the name “Gainmas”.<sup>2</sup> Through this detective work, netizens were

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<sup>1</sup> CNNIC, “Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 22,” 4

<sup>2</sup> China Daily Online, “Who is the Glamorous Kitten Killer of Hangzhou,” March 4, 2006

able to uncover her QQ profile and her identity.. Through this purchase of the shoes worn in the video, netizens were able to trace the buyer back to a personal website that contained images of Wang Jue and included her personal information.

This phenomenon is startling to imagine: that there are enough Chinese netizens roaming the internet to decipher information with only the tiniest of clues. Web forums, blogs, and entertainment websites become the main source of information that fuels these online witch hunts, and these websites have been collectively called the Human Flesh Search Engine (in Chinese *rénròu sōusuǒ*, 人肉搜索) because of the gathering of netizens who utilize these websites as a means to search for the identity of individuals through the internet.

The term ‘Human Flesh Search Engine’ became widespread among netizens to categorize these online searches after the “Kitten Killer of Hangzhou” story began to circulate and gain notoriety on the Chinese internet in 2006. After this incident, the term became a catch phrase among Chinese netizens.

The growth of the Chinese internet in the past decade has revolutionized the spread of information within China. China’s internet population now surpasses the total population of the United States; however, China has an internet penetration rate of only 20%. With only one fifth of the population plugged into the internet, there is still room for tremendous growth and widespread information sharing.

As the internet expands and more people log on, there is a growing concern over a netizen’s anonymity while browsing the internet. With the rise of social networking websites and websites which present profiles and personal information, it is becoming easier to track down a person’s identity through the internet. In the case of the Human Flesh Search Engine, a person’s identity is uncovered and released on the internet where they become a target for criticism, and

in some cases, offline attacks. Yet while their identity is splashed across web forums and entertainment blogs, their critics remain anonymous, hiding behind web forum usernames and aliases. At present, this anonymity paradox is drawing increasing attention from the Chinese government.

The Chinese Communist Party is growing increasingly alarmed with the freedom of anonymity on the internet. The government is concerned not only over the breakdown of an individual's privacy on the web, but also over the internet's increased role acting as a means for people to organize, gather, and protest. While there is growing apprehension, the government is also utilizing the internet as never before. Chinese officials are using the internet to gauge society through online chat discussions with Chinese netizens. Is this new connection between the Party and the people opening up new forms of democracy for China?

The ability to track a person's identity using the internet in China has both good and bad aspects. Some netizens utilize the power of the Human Flesh Search Engine to find old classmates or missing family members. The web forums used to post information are seen by millions of netizens and the chances are high that your inquiry could be successful. After the Sichuan Earthquake of 2008 the power of the search engine was used to help Chinese track down family members who had been listed as missing as a result of the earthquake.

The positive aspects of the Human Flesh Search Engine seem to be overshadowed by the more negative aspects, which often times prove to have dangerous results and attract the attention of both domestic and foreign media as well as scholars. Anne Cheung, a law professor at the University of Hong Kong who has noted this shift in the use of the internet in China, says

that “the use of the internet to achieve social shaming, monitoring and ostracism, or for private revenge by private citizens, has become prevalent in Chinese society.”<sup>3</sup>

The Human Flesh Search Engine has been used to track down individuals deemed to have committed immoral acts by netizens. Netizens become the voice of justice as they use the search engines to amass personal information against said individuals in an effort to call attention to their wrongdoings.

In most cases the targeted individual has broken no Chinese law, and therefore cannot properly be dealt the justice deemed sufficient by Chinese netizens. Therefore, netizens who create hunts against those targeted seek to enact justice by tarnishing the target’s reputation, which sometimes even prompts actions to be taken in the real world. Since the law cannot touch these individuals, the netizens take the law into their own hands to enact “justice.”

The most notorious cases of the Human Flesh Search Engine fit into three main categories: government corruption, animal cruelty, and traitors against China. In all three categories, netizens have gone to great lengths to discover information about seemingly anonymous individuals in order to enact justice. But the question arises as to what form of justice needs to be given, if any, and whose job is it to grant justice?

Throughout most of the Human Flesh Search Engine cases that will be discussed in further detail, there is a striking similarity between the search engine and the Cultural Revolution era of Chinese history. Web forums have evolved into a new public square where the people can post their grievances and target specific individuals, much as big-character posters were utilized in the Mao era, and have become a means to mobilize the online masses. Netizens use these online forums to speak out on certain topics that are suppressed offline by the government. On

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<sup>3</sup> Sky Canaves, “China’s Internet Culture Goes Unchecked, for Now,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 22, 2009

top of that Chinese netizens judge the morality of these individuals and cry out for punishment to be dealt, when most of the targets have broken no Chinese law. Targets are attacked for their immoral behaviors and attributed to animals. As the Human Flesh Search Engine continues to target individuals, more connections are being drawn by scholars and the online masses between the Cultural Revolution and this technological phenomenon.

**I: The Internet as a Means for Collaboration:**  
*The History of the Human Flesh Search Engine  
and the Growth of the Chinese Internet*

The expansion and invention of new technologies have greatly changed the way people all over the world, in China and the United States alike, live our daily lives. The growth of the internet has placed vast amounts of information at our fingertips, and has brought millions of people from all over the world into our homes, breaking the previous limits of communication. Suddenly, the social sphere of an individual has increased to millions, perhaps even billions, of people worldwide. Those who browse the internet are categorized under a new technological term, a “netizen”, or an individual who actively uses the internet and its various resources. And it is under these circumstances that the Human Flesh Search Engine thrives.

By far one of the most powerful tools of the internet has been the creation of the blog, or an online journal where people can write, edit, and share basically anything they desire, fictional or true. In recent years a blog craze broke out in China and by 2007 a total of 72.8 million blogs existed on the Chinese web. Of these millions of blogs, there are over 47 million blog writers, equaling nearly ¼ of Chinese web users.<sup>4</sup> The blog has greatly transformed the way news is spread, allowing individuals to find and spread news without paying a price. Blogs allow for discussion through a comment section on each entry, and have greatly changed what it means to publish. Blogs act as a means to help spread stories that catch the attention of the Human Flesh Search Engine, and help these stories to gain widespread attention over the internet, and in some cases, media attention. These internet communication tools have grown and expanded on the Chinese internet and reach citizens from all walks of life. Throughout the Human Flesh Search

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<sup>4</sup> CNNIC, “Survey Report on China Weblog Market”

Engine, the blog remains one of the key components which acts as a means to gather individuals together who share similar viewpoints.

The term Human Flesh Search Engine refers to a trend of massive human collaboration using large-scale researching utilizing the internet and its various tools and resources. The internet provides the means for this sort of collaboration because of the convenience and quickness of information sharing, and the ability to find obscure information swiftly. Once sought information is found, it is promptly circulated throughout various websites, blogs, and media forums which spread the information at remarkable speed. Viewers of the media then are allowed to comment and add their own opinions and research into the mix, creating a user-generated blend of information.

In China, most Human Flesh Search Engine websites take the form of entertainment portals, which host web forums, discussion boards, entertainment, news, and online gaming. Many of these websites have been around for over a decade; however their popularity and use as a communication and research tool have grown significantly in recent years.

Websites that help to fuel and promote Human Flesh Search Engine activity are abundant. Most web blogs fall into this category, as they post and re-post controversial news stories and allow netizens to gather and discuss the story, throwing ideas, information, and opinions around. One of the most popular web forums in China, Tianya Club ([tianya.com](http://tianya.com)), helps to contribute to the phenomenon. Founded in 1999, Tianya Club has posted forum discussions on controversial news stories such as the Grace Wang incident and the 2006 rabies scare in China. Another popular web forum and entertainment portal that competes with Tianya Club is MOP ([dzh.mop.com](http://dzh.mop.com)), founded in 1997. A third, and one of the largest websites in China, Sohu.com, founded in 1996, offers news, online gaming, web discussion, and an online search engine

similar to that of Google. These three websites greatly help to fuel research, discussion, and act as a place for Chinese netizens to gather and discuss, all of which provide the necessary fuel to stoke the Human Flesh Search Engine.

These websites differ from popular American websites such as Google or Yahoo. Hosting web forums and news blogs, these websites help mobilize thousands of readers to dig up additional information in order to cover all aspects of a given story. If part of the story is unknown, or a question remains unanswered, these forums allow readers to use both personal knowledge and conventional search engines to answer queries. In some ways, the Human Flesh Search Engine can be thought of as a form of Wikipedia. Similar to Wikipedia, these web forums can be used to expand discussion on a given topic, and the webpage is made up from the answers of readers. However, unlike Wikipedia, they often lack the validity and use of references and citations, and therefore become a haven for misinformation, expressing personal thought and opinion.

The most astonishing aspect of the Human Flesh Search Engine is the anonymity paradox. While social networks which allow users to register using their identity grow more popular and cause a loss of anonymity on the internet, anonymity is still the main force fueling the Human Flesh Search Engine. A netizen could be surfing the website Facebook.com, which requires a user to publish their identity and personal information, and in another window have a web forum open where other users cannot discern their identity.

As social networks grow and expand in China and around the world, the privacy that the internet once maintained begins to break down. Social networking websites continue to grow and new websites are continually founded. Popular examples in the United States include MySpace.com and Facebook.com, founded in 2003 and 2004 respectively. One of China's

forerunning social networking websites includes RenRenWang (人人网, renren.com – or “everyone network”), formerly XiaoNeiWang (校内网), the equivalent of Facebook.com in China, founded in 2005. Like Facebook, RenRenWang began connecting university students together with others from around the country. Users create profiles which include elements of their personal information, such as their real name, their telephone number, e-mail, a photo, and occasionally their address. By creating a profile on these social networking websites, a netizen therefore gains an identity, and becomes instantly searchable.

Unlike social networking websites, a web forum requires a user to create a nickname and provide a valid e-mail address. However, these nicknames do not have to mirror one’s real name in any way. Furthermore, a netizen could create a fake e-mail address to validate their account from, instead of using a more secure e-mail address from a school or business network. Web forums typically ask users to post some of their personal information, such as their hometown, age, and real name; again however there is no way to validate any of this information and it is not always required. Therefore it is evident that most netizens continue to have a great deal of anonymity on the internet.

This concern over the anonymity allowed on the internet has brought forth a myriad of questions over what is considered private information on the internet, and if it can be spread without the individual’s knowledge where it becomes visible to millions of netizens. Are the information and pictures posted on a social networking website private, or does the user lose any right to privacy the moment they publish information or upload an image?

However the secrecy of the internet does hold one large advantage for anonymous netizens. This anonymity on the web provides a safe haven for netizens to speak out against injustices and expand their democratic practices while living in a nation which restricts many

aspects of society, public demonstrations, and the media. Netizens are able to hide behind their anonymity to speak out against what they deem to be unfair. This is evident in the numerous high profile cases of government corruption that came out of the Human Flesh Search Engine. By hiding behind the internet, netizens were able to highlight injustices in these officials' behaviors and push for change.

### The Internet in China

The internet in China has grown at an extraordinary yet steady rate for most of the past decade. In order to track the growth and internet demographic in China, the China Internet Network Information Center (中国互联网络信息中心 or CNNIC) was created. Founded on June 3, 1997 as a non-profit organization yet working beneath the Ministry of Information Industry in China, CNNIC is maintained by the Computer Network Information Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The CNNIC is responsible for the operation and maintenance of China's domain name registry – that is all websites which end with '.cn' – which currently consists of over sixteen million websites. The responsibility of cataloguing the statistics and demographics of China's internet and web population also falls upon the CNNIC.<sup>5</sup>

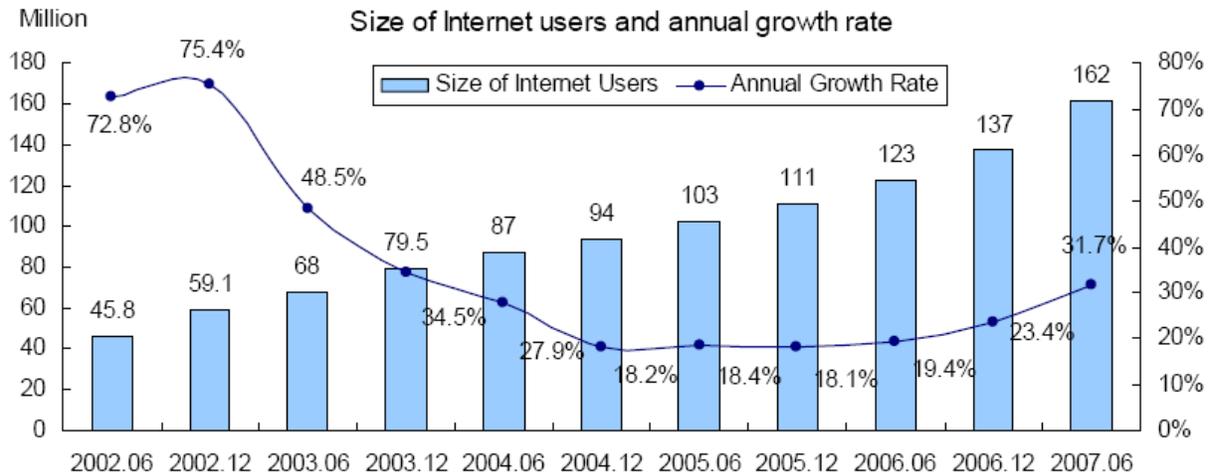
The CNNIC releases a Survey Report on the Development of Internet in China twice a year, which analyzes key internet demographics and website statistics. The survey is issued to a random sampling of Chinese citizens throughout the country by means of telephone and internet surveys. Other statistics are drawn from internet reports, online search statistics and data reporting. The CNNIC also examines the total of Chinese IP addresses, which identifies a

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<sup>5</sup> China Internet Network Information Center

specific network and all the machines that are hosted by said network, and all domain names and websites created and maintained in China.<sup>6</sup>

In its 20<sup>th</sup> Statistical Survey Report on the Development of Internet in China, the CNNIC recorded that by mid-2002 China had a total of 45.8 million internet users.



(Source: CNNIC 20th Report 2007)

By June 2007 that number had nearly quadrupled to over 162 million; 25 million of whom were newly joined to the web in that year alone.<sup>7</sup> The year 2007 had an internet growth rate of 53.3%.<sup>8</sup>

The United States has held the top spot of over 216 million internet users until just this past year when China’s web population overcame the United States. In June 2008 the CNNIC recorded a growth of 91 million users in the period of one year, placing China as the country with the most internet users with over 253 million.<sup>9</sup> Currently the number of Chinese web users is greater than the total population of the United States. Of these millions of web users, the average time spent online each week was reported at 19 hours. This statistic works greatly in favor of the Human Flesh Search Engine. These websites gain their power from the sheer number of web users who

<sup>6</sup> CNNIC, “Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 22,” 6

<sup>7</sup> CNNIC, “Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 20,” 9

<sup>8</sup> CNNIC, “Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 21,” 10

<sup>9</sup> CNNIC, “Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 22,” 10

browse these sites. Therefore there is a greater probability that a posted query will fall upon a knowing individual to help out.

The United States has one of the highest internet penetration rates of 69.7%.<sup>10</sup> The internet in America reaches a large number of the total population of the country and has the most widespread demographic of people, accessible all over the country and to people of various income levels. While China may have the most web users, the internet remains inaccessible to most of the population. In China the internet penetration rate is 19.1%, meaning that a little under 1/5 of the total population of China are web users.<sup>11</sup> In China internet usage is still highly attributed to middle-class, urbanites. The CNNIC reports that 74.9% of users log on in an urban environment, while internet usage in rural settings is relatively low, with a penetration rate of only 7.1%, as compared to the urban penetration rate of 27.3%.<sup>12</sup> From this statistic it can be assumed that internet in China is a luxury. Vast numbers of web bars help bring the internet to the masses. Web bars (网吧) are small places of business all over China where an individual can pay to use a computer with internet access. However peasants with bare minimum incomes most likely would not be able to afford to log on. Therefore the Chinese internet community is a highly biased sphere, representing the wants and needs of the Chinese upper and middle classes, while the voice of the peasants is vastly outnumbered. These statistics are important because throughout the Human Flesh Search Engine cases, the priorities of netizens does not lie in tackling heavy issues such as unemployment or poverty in rural areas. Instead most of the cases focus on small social blips which have no direct consequences for the people, particularly the lower classes.

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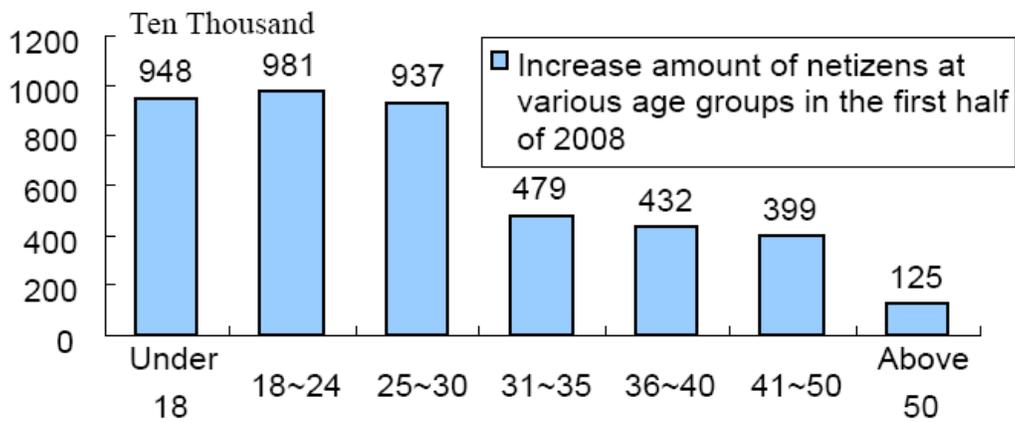
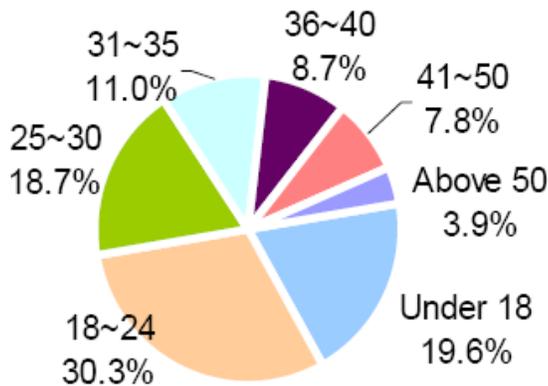
<sup>10</sup> CNNIC, "Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 21," 11

<sup>11</sup> CNNIC, "Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 22," 10

<sup>12</sup> CNNIC, "Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 21," 21

Nonetheless internet growth in China still has a long way to go to become accessible to all. Even with only 20% of the population plugged into the internet, Chinese netizens vastly outnumber most countries and are becoming a significant voice in the international community and in their own country.

Netizens' Age Structure



(Source: CNNIC 22nd Report 2008)

Among China's 253 million web users, nearly 68.6% are under the age of thirty.<sup>13</sup> Of China's web population, 70.2% of users hold a high school diploma or greater, while 30% of those logging on are students.<sup>14</sup> With such a large number of students logging on, the internet is becoming a place to share ideas, knowledge, and opinions. With students making up such a large

<sup>13</sup> CNNIC, "Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 22," 12

<sup>14</sup> CNNIC, "Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 22," 13-14

portion of Chinese netizens, their opinions and viewpoints are best expressed most prominently through the Human Flesh Search Engine. Again many of the themes focus on personal targets and not large-scale issues for the betterment of society. And as thousands of Chinese students study abroad, the flow of information between the mainland and citizens abroad is growing rapidly, and new ideas and thoughts about cultural differences become the topic of debate in many online forums. The internet opens the door to foreign society and lifestyles to Chinese who are in the mainland. This increase in the flow of news between the mainland and Chinese abroad is a strong asset to the Human Flesh Search Engine. News is able to flow more freely than from the government censored news sources and it also provides an outsider's opinion.

In June 2008 the CNNIC reported a total of 1.919 million Chinese websites generated on the mainland.<sup>15</sup> However, a recent study by a professor at City University of Hong Kong showed that of these millions of websites, only 6% of external links access to foreign websites, thus making the internet in China highly domestic.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, while information among Chinese abroad and mainlanders is spreading at an all time high, it is still very difficult for Chinese on the mainland to access foreign news and general websites. While this number is still small, the Chinese internet and the Human Flesh Search Engine are breaking the boundary of censorship within China and the increase of information in and out of the mainland is also increasing.

### Communist Party Officials and the Internet

The Chinese Communist Party has taken notice of this steady growth in the internet and put it to use. By accessing the internet, government officials have tried a variety of media to gain the input of the people and promote "internet democracy." Government officials have been urged by President Hu Jintao at a lecture attended by members of the CPC Central Committee Political

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<sup>15</sup> CNNIC, "Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China 22," 17

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Crampton, "China's Internet Rarely Links...", *Social Media in China*, Oct. 25, 2007

Bureau to improve their internet literacy in order to improve leadership.<sup>17</sup> Top Party leaders have even attended open forum chat sessions in order to get a feel of the social climate. Premier Wen Jiabao held a web chat in February 2009 in order to listen to online voices. He was reported as saying he's "perceived confidence and strength from people's suggestions online."<sup>18</sup> Last June President Hu Jintao similarly logged onto Qiangguo Forum, a web forum hosted under the People's Daily. While he chatted with the public for only four minutes, he said that he was able to hear the people's concerns.<sup>19</sup> This push by government officials is part of an effort to strengthen China, by ending corruption and weeding out bad seeds who cause negative media attention both within the country and on an international level.

Yet, do these rare web episodes from top Party officials actually prove that democracy is growing in the People's Republic of China? Logging into a chat program enables a user to chat with only a select few others, which does not give provide a large demographic who are chosen to enter this chat room. Similarly on this note, who were the users able to chat with these officials? Were they random netizens logged onto the website that just happened to be in the chat room at that time, or were these special people who were selected to attend that particular chat session with the President? Had they been pre-selected to enter the chat room occupied by the President, then perhaps these users were chosen for their loyalty and support of Hu Jintao or Wen Jiabao.

Regardless, officials are continuing to turn to the internet in order to gain a better social understanding, shying away from workers' reports and government documents. "Chinese officials and scholars felt obliged to notice online views because it keeps them informed of the

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<sup>17</sup> People's Daily Online, "Netizens Change China's Political Landscape," Feb. 28, 2009

<sup>18</sup> People's Daily Online, "Netizens Change China's Political Landscape," Feb. 28, 2009

<sup>19</sup> People's Daily Online, "Netizens Change China's Political Landscape," Feb. 28, 2009

social situation,” said Yu Guoming, vice president of the Media College of Beijing-based Renmin University of China.<sup>2021</sup>

As with the rise in blogs, speaking out against social injustices and both challenging and supporting the Chinese government is a useful way to utilize the internet. One such example is the rise of the website Anti-CNN.com, which was created in the aftermath of the March 2008 Tibetan Riots after Chinese netizens attacked western news sources, claiming they mislead and falsify information. Created by twenty-four year old Rao Jin, Anti-CNN.com is a strong example of one type of Human Flesh Search Engine.<sup>22</sup> This website puts to use the efforts of countless netizens to seek out news reports containing biased or falsified information in the western media. While the website does not enable public posting, there are areas to submit biased news stories. After the Tibetan Unrest in March 2008, creator Jin Rao said that he received over one thousand e-mails from netizens volunteering to help spot western media bias.<sup>23</sup> While CNN released a statement condemning such acts singling the corporation out, the Chinese Communist Party, while it doesn't support or fund such creations, did not condemn it.<sup>24</sup> Following the creation of the website in March 2008, in a press conference held on March 27 Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang commented that “it is these irresponsible and unethical [western media reports] that infuriated our people to voice voluntarily their condemnation and criticism.”<sup>25</sup>

With this tremendous growth of the Chinese internet in recent years, the emergence of such trends such as the Human Flesh Search Engine is unsurprising. The growth in the number of people who have access to the internet leads to faster sharing of information, as well as more

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<sup>20</sup> People's Daily Online, “Netizens Change China's Political Landscape,” Feb. 28, 2009

<sup>21</sup> And this move towards increased technology is not just a China-specific phenomenon. Officials in cities around America are utilizing websites such as Facebook.com and Twitter to bring the people and government closer.

<sup>22</sup> Jill Drew “Protests May Only Harden Chinese Line,” *WashingtonPost.com*, March 23, 2008

<sup>23</sup> Jill Drew “Protests May Only Harden Chinese Line,” *WashingtonPost.com*, March 23, 2008

<sup>24</sup> CNN Online, “CNN Statement on Tibet Coverage”

<sup>25</sup> China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Press Conference 3/27/08”

opinions, comments, and dissenting voices. As more people utilize the internet, the protection of anonymity begins to break down, as there are more eyes and ears on the web, as well as more personal networking websites that can be used to identify a user. A growth in netizens leads to easier methods of gathering people using the internet and more social connections. And all of these components are what give the Human Flesh Search Engine its power.

## **II: The ‘Little People’ Take Aim at Government Corruption: *Netizens Combating Government Corruption through the Internet***

As Chinese Communist Party Officials are better acquainting themselves with the internet, so too are netizens with the private lives of local officials. In fact, the Human Flesh Search Engine is becoming China’s new source for uncovering corruption among officials. And since nearly all of the attacks have been made against local-level officials, there is no perceived threat to the central government, and thus no actions to stop them.

Corruption in China became a widespread problem in the 1990s, causing China to be named one of the world’s most corrupt countries by Transparency International, a global coalition aimed to fight corruption. Even today corruption continues to be one of the biggest threats to China’s economy and the legitimacy of the Communist Party.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the 1990s and into today, Chinese corruption cases are sensationalized through tabloid media. Magazines that run corruption stories are not out to attack the government, as many of them are actually sanctioned by the government itself and many of the stories covered also highlight corporate and private sector corruption.<sup>27</sup> In these cases, exposing corruption instead becomes a way to make money, where magazines run specials highlighting such cases and use corruption as their headlining story. This is very similar to corruption stories found throughout the Human Flesh Search Engine, where reputable websites such as Sohu.com and Tianya use their homepages to showcase officials caught by the search engine for their involvement with corruption scandals. Furthermore, these websites themselves act as tabloid media outlets, and one can see the technological progression from tabloid magazines in the

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Levy, *Popular China – Corruption in Popular Culture* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 39

<sup>27</sup> Richard Levy, *Popular China – Corruption in Popular Culture* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 43-44

1990s exposing corruption to the tabloid websites performing the same task on the Chinese internet today.

Chinese netizens in the post-Mao era seem to be well-read on the salaries of local officials. Netizens dissect stories and images taken about officials and cross-check them against what their salary is and what sort of lifestyle that should accommodate. Zhou Jiugeng, an official from Nanjing fell under this sort of attack. A real estate agent in Nanjing, Zhou, 48, was attacked by netizens after having a photo of him dissected on a Human Flesh Search Engine. In the photograph, Zhou was seen wearing an expensive watch (costing over 100,000RMB) and smoking expensive cigarettes (150RMB a pack). Later, it was discovered that he also drove a Cadillac to work every day. Netizens questioned how someone in his position could afford such luxury items. According to Xin Hua News Agency, Zhou Jiugeng's name was mentioned in over 4,600 blogs after the photo began to circulate. After thousands of comments about the man's lavish lifestyle, the Jiangning district government launched an investigation to look over his assets.<sup>28</sup> He later was fired from his post.<sup>29</sup>

This is not the sole case of an attack by netizens against a corrupt official. However, while it was mentioned that Chinese officials should live a modest lifestyle, it is dangerous to accuse someone of embezzlement or corruption, as the consequences are dire and serious offenses even carry a death penalty.<sup>30</sup> In Zhou's case, how can a single photo alone determine one's lifestyle? Yet the arguments claiming that he could not have honestly earned his luxurious watch and cigarettes were strong enough accusations to catch the eye of the central government and did prove to be true.

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<sup>28</sup> Tan Yingzi, "Nanjing Official Under Investigation," *China Daily*, Dec. 13, 2008

<sup>29</sup> Eric Mu, "Official Fired Over Pricey Cigarettes," *Danwei*, Dec. 29, 2008

<sup>30</sup> Tan Yingzi, "Nanjing Official Under Investigation," *China Daily*, Dec. 13, 2008

Officials who venture overseas have their itineraries come under scrutiny of the internet masses. At the end of 2008, two officials were ousted from their posts after disguising a holiday abroad as a “study tour” and passing the bills on to the Chinese people. According to the People’s Daily, Liu Zhongpin, Party Secretary and Chief of the Office for Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs of Xinyu City in Jiangxi Province, Liu Qun, a deputy of Liu Zhongping’s office, and Xu Dongchun, chief of the administration for Xiannu Lake in Xinyu City were fired from their positions and Liu Qun and Xu also received a “serious warning” from within the Party. The officials were part of an eleven member delegation which traveled to the United States and Canada in April 2008. They were accused of prolonging the trip and using government money to go to tourist attractions and pay for airfare. In total, over 335,880RMB was paid out by the Xinyu counterpart of the official delegation.<sup>31</sup>

This controversy was posted to the web by a netizen who claimed to have found a bag containing the documents and receipts from the trip accidentally left by a travel agent on a Shanghai subway. The author uploaded images of the travel documents to the web. The delegation was supposed to “observe human resources management in Canada and the US”; however, the documents listed examples of public funds paying for excursions to Las Vegas, Niagara Falls, and other resorts.<sup>32</sup>

A similar story made headlines and fell under severe scrutiny when a seventeen-minute video was released on the web, highlighting aspects of Guangdong’s local officials’ fourteen-day trip to Africa and the Middle East in March 2007, paid for by public funds. This resulted with a deputy Party secretary, Tan Rigui of Duanzhou district of Zhaoqing city, being removed from his position. Furthermore, all members of the tour group were to accept responsibility and repay the

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<sup>31</sup> People’s Daily Online, “China Sacks Officials for Holidays Disguised as Study Tours,” Dec. 10, 2008

<sup>32</sup> People’s Daily Online, “China Sacks Officials for Holidays Disguised as Study Tours,” Dec. 10, 2008

450,000RMB cost.<sup>33</sup> The video features the delegation visiting famous landmarks as part of a tour group, taking pictures in natural parks, and viewing street performances.

This video was met with outrage by Chinese netizens. One such blogger under the alias of “Bì Hàn Fēng” (碧翰烽) wrote his reaction from viewing the video in a blog post titled “Fortuitous finds or intentional indulgence? Who can believe that traveling officials are actually going on inspections?” (无意捡到还是有意放纵? 谁还相信官员出国是为了考察)<sup>34</sup>. China Digital Times, an online news website which covers “China’s social and political transition and its emerging role in the world” by providing up-to-the-minute independent reporting and translation from Chinese cyberspace and blogs, translated the blogger’s post:<sup>35</sup>

This video records in detail the 14-day trip of the inspection group. Its degree of luxury is astounding. Once again, the video was a “fortuitous find.” Not only does it start recording from the first expenditure, but it also gives the trip a realistic quality: we can clearly see the inspection team members’ true faces.

But I was left perplexed. Why is it that our netizens are always the ones making these “fortuitous finds” while our political bureaus can’t intentionally uncover them? Is it because of their “intentional indulgence”? It’s really a mystery; I think they’re the only ones who know.

From this 17-minute video, we can distinctly make out the actual itinerary of the observation team: first, the places they’re inspecting are the countries’ famous landmarks and scenic spots. Perhaps they’re going to inspect their tour industry development, then? They went to an ostrich park, then the Cape Town Peninsula, and then a seal preservation zone. Out of the entire trip, there was only one instance that was relevant to the government observation team. Second, the degree of luxury on this trip is flabbergasting. They went on sumptuous tours, visited a gold mine, and a diamond factory. Furthermore, everyone purchased South African Diamonds. Third, I am struck by the trip’s vulgarity. For example, they’re going to see a belly dancing performance, and so on.<sup>36</sup>

From this post of “Bì Hàn Fēng”, it is evident that at least some netizens wonder why it is that they are able to uncover these cases of corruption that seem to slip past the government bureaus. By calling it a “mystery”, this blogger implies there is something going on under the surface that is not apparent to the public. He goes on to question the morality of these officials,

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<sup>33</sup> Paulina Hartono, “Official Sacked for Overseas Trip,” *China Digital Times*, Feb. 25, 2009

<sup>34</sup> 碧翰烽, “无意捡到还是有意放纵?” 碧翰烽的博客, Feb. 20, 2009

<sup>35</sup> China Digital Times, “About China Digital Times”

<sup>36</sup> Paulina Hartono, “Official Sacked for Overseas Trip,” *China Digital Times*, Feb. 25, 2009

commenting on the extravagance of their travels and purchases, and even the type of show – a belly dancing performance – they took in. From this description, the delegation’s activities and actions are negatively portrayed.

The immensely popular Chinese website Sohu.com posted an itinerary of the Middle East delegation, which was translated by China Digital Times.<sup>37</sup> The post received 4,892 angry comments. The website pulled what they believed to be some of the most outraged comments:

“Actually, a lot of cadres are the same. This is only the tip of the iceberg!”

(其实很多干部都一样，这只是冰山一角罢了!)

“The people’s sweat and blood money has been used to help the economy of large deserts.”

(老百姓血汗钱就这样帮助了大沙漠经济增长)

“Externally, he’s had his job removed, but wait a few days — is he just going to get transferred to another position?”

(对外是免职，是否会瞒天过海稍后调职任用呢?)<sup>38</sup>

From this sample of comments a reader can discern that netizens believe that corruption is still widespread, and that they are not confident that punishment that is dealt will ultimately stick. The word choice as well emits strong sentiments, for example referring to the funds spent as the “blood and sweat money” (xuèhán qián, 血汗钱) of the people. Comments such as these and hundreds more could easily induce a strong wave of backlash and media attention, forcing the government to have to take action.

The main argument in this case is that public funds should not pay for entertaining excursions, but the small cost of going to a scenic park is certain not to make a tremendous dent into China’s economy. It’s important to note the political significance of this accusation. Netizens are not arguing a need to save China’s economy from such lavish trips, but are angry about the political implications of corruption.

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<sup>37</sup> SOHU Online, “区长率团“考察”沙漠 网友讨伐声中丢乌纱(图)”

<sup>38</sup> Paulina Hartono, “Official Sacked for Overseas Trip,” *China Digital Times*, Feb. 25, 2009

What is clear throughout these corruption cases is that Chinese netizens do not want Chinese officials to receive any special treatments or avoidance of the law. One case involves Lin Jiexiang, 58, an official from Shenzhen working for the Marine Affairs Bureau. Lin was fired after he was caught on tape assaulting a young girl at a restaurant while intoxicated. While there was insufficient evidence to suggest he molested the child, he was fired from his government post.

On October 8, 2008 Lin Jiexiang was caught on video grabbing an 11-year-old girl by the throat and trying to force her into the men's room with him. However the video that spread across web forums and online communities appears to be rather vague in detail. The surveillance camera does not catch most of the controversy, instead showing only the little girl leading Lin Jiexiang across a dining room presumably to the restroom. A moment later the girl runs back across the dining room to her family, who then walk out and confront Lin Jiexiang. An argument soon ensues between the girl's father and Lin while the wait staff presumably tries to mediate.<sup>39</sup> While the video clearly shows that something occurred to warrant an argument between the two parties, the bulk of what occurred on the way to the bathroom is not shown. The surveillance video does not appear to show anything shocking enough to justify the amount of backlash Lin Jiexiang faced on the internet, and without knowing the full story, a viewer would not be able to discern that any molestation had occurred just from watching the video.

Investigators said it appeared as though he was holding her lightly on the nape of the neck, and that because she got away so easily that he couldn't have been holding on too tightly. Yet, despite this finding Lin was removed from his position.<sup>40</sup> This act agrees with the

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<sup>39</sup> Xiao Qiang, "Government Official Attacks 11-Year-Old Girl," *China Digital Times*, Nov. 1, 2008

<sup>40</sup> Hong Chen, "Shenzhen Official Cleared of Child Molestation Charge," *China Daily*, Nov. 6, 2008

suggestion that the government removes anyone remotely accused of corrupt and indecent acts from positions of power, especially when their story is spread quickly over the search engine.

Chinese netizens are racking up small victories bringing them closer to raising awareness of a need of more democratic ideals. The government, faced with this public pressure, responds in the favor of the people. No story illuminates this theme better than that of Deng Yujiao, a 21-year old waitress of a karaoke bar in Hubei Province who fatally stabbed a Communist Party official in early summer 2009. Deng was transformed into a national celebrity, praised for her triumph over a “corrupt official” when she stabbed Huang Weida, a local official of Badong Country, after the man and his two friends assaulted her.<sup>41</sup> She was arrested for voluntary manslaughter. However, Hubei officials were put under pressure when an online blogger Wu Gan publicized her case on the internet resulting in an outpouring of rage from netizens demanding a fair trial. In a government censor crackdown, Wu’s blog was shut down and reporters were unable to even enter the town of the incident. But Deng was released on bail and given an attorney to represent her.<sup>42</sup> The story ended in victory for Deng who was found not guilty by the Hubei court, who said she acted in self defense. It is uncertain what Deng Yujiao’s fate would be had the public not turned her story into an act of courage through the internet and the Human Flesh Search Engine.

Yet, why are these serious cases of corruption being uncovered by common people and not the government? As the “bì hàn fēng” blogger commented on the Middle East trip, “Why is it that our netizens are always the ones making these “fortuitous finds” while our political bureaus can’t intentionally uncover them?”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps it’s because these sorts of actions are commonplace amongst government officials traveling abroad and it is common for international delegations

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Wines, “Civic-Minded Chinese Find a Voice Online,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2009

<sup>42</sup> Michael Wines, “Civic-Minded Chinese Find a Voice Online,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2009

<sup>43</sup> Paulina Hartono, “Official Sacked for Overseas Trip,” *China Digital Times*, Feb. 25, 2009

from any country to take in some sights and culture when traveling on the public's dime. Perhaps the only reason the government apprehended these officials is because of the splash these cases made on the internet, and as such the government was forced to appease the masses.

In the article "Corruption in Popular Culture", Richard Levy interviewed Chinese citizens concerning their thoughts on corruption in China in the 1990s. On the issue of combating corruption, Levy found that "many of those interviewed said that the issue [of corruption] was too big for a 'little person' such as myself."<sup>44</sup> And what the Human Flesh Search Engine shows is that this sentiment is still ringing true to some degree. On the web forums, corruption is uncovered by the few – such as the case of one netizen picking out the luxurious watch of an official and posting it to the internet – but it takes many to circulate the story and turn it into a Human Flesh Search Engine phenomena.

In the post-Mao era the Chinese central government has increasingly transferred responsibility for local economic conditions to local officials. What was once a state-driven socialist economy has given way to the market economy that fuels China today. The central government leaves it up to local authorities to generate revenue for meeting local needs, and in the process often turns a blind eye to the behavior of local officials. By doing so, this allows hotbed issues such as environmental pollution, corruption, and embezzlement to thrive.

The key to development in the 1990s was to split fiscal planning and allow local governments to take the initiative in stimulating their own economies by cutting spending and generating revenue. This plan was termed "dividing the kitchen to cook meals separately" (*fen zao chi fan*).<sup>45</sup> But unlike the controlled economy of the Mao era, there were few checks from

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Levy, *Popular China – Corruption in Popular Culture* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 48

<sup>45</sup> Li Changping, "The Crisis in the Countryside," *One China Many Paths* (Pan, 1999), 206

above and financial situations were a tightly guarded secret.<sup>46</sup> Upper level government agencies would in turn pass down revenue quotas to the local governments that were near to impossible for them to meet.<sup>47</sup> In addition to these quotas, there was little or no supervision by the central authorities within the People's Congress, which led to local level corruption, especially in rural areas.<sup>48</sup>

In his article "Crisis in the Countryside", author Li Changping argues that the most efficient way to deal with local level corruption is not entrust authority to the people. He argues that this could be achieved by granting the people a system of democratic supervision and administration that can exercise effective control over the power of officials. In order to restructure the government, it is crucial to "make sure the masses are in charge."<sup>49</sup> Li goes on to argue that "we should trust peasants, advance their consciousness, mobilize and rely on them to lend wings to the political construction of democracy in the countryside."<sup>50</sup>

Li's argument is very similar to the ideals at work within the Human Flesh Search Engine, in which the authority is placed within the hands of the netizens when weeding out corruption. As is evident throughout the search engine, often times the people see the corruption and harm to society and target the local officials. However when these cases gain too much publicity and media attention, the central government steps in and realizes they must do something in order to appease the people. The central government has no reservations about showing a hard line stance on corruption by firing officials targeted for corruption, and in certain cases, bring about executions. By doing so, the central government comes out favorably in the eyes of the people for their crackdown on corruption and for righting the wrongs of the local governments.

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<sup>46</sup> Li Changping, "The Crisis in the Countryside," *One China Many Paths* (Pan, 1999), 206

<sup>47</sup> Li Changping, "The Crisis in the Countryside," *One China Many Paths* (Pan, 1999), 207

<sup>48</sup> Li Changping, "The Crisis in the Countryside," *One China Many Paths* (Pan, 1999), 217-8

<sup>49</sup> Li Changping, "The Crisis in the Countryside," *One China Many Paths* (Pan, 1999), 217-8

<sup>50</sup> Li Changping, "The Crisis in the Countryside," *One China Many Paths* (Pan, 1999), 217-8

Therefore as the Human Flesh Search Engine targets what netizens believe to be corrupt officials, the phenomenon remains no threat to the central government. In actuality, the central government has much to gain from the search engine. By listening to the online will of the people and phasing out corruption, the central government appears to hold a high standard for government ethics and in the eyes of the people it comes out strong. Furthermore, many of these tabloid stories concerning corrupt officials tend to focus on corrupt officials who have been brought to justice by investigators, thus proving that the system indeed works.<sup>51</sup>

In recent years government corruption in China has been a hot issue of discussion among the world, especially in the United States, and many countries pressure China to crack down on embezzlement and corrupt officials. By utilizing the Human Flesh Search Engine to identify cases of possible corruption, the central government gets good publicity points in the eyes of the foreign media. Therefore, as of present, there is no reason for the central government not to endorse the targeting of corrupt officials by means of the Human Flesh Search Engine.

What can be said about the Chinese Communist Party utilizing the internet and the Human Flesh Search Engine to their own benefit? In Chinese society, political speech and dissent is heavily restricted, yet the internet has become a hotbed for criticizing low-level officials and speaking out against government corruption. In turn, Communist Party officials recognize these web forums and discussion boards as the best way to access the thoughts and sentiments of the people. The question of ‘what sort of reputation do web forums and discussion boards carry in China?’ then arises. For instance, in the United States a common feeling among people is that blogs and web forums often times showcase a very extreme point of view, and many people do not hold these online communities in high regard, nor do they regard them as

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Levy, *Popular China – Corruption in Popular Culture* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 44

places of intellectual discussion. However in China, the role and place of the web forum in society is very unlike its reputation in America.

As Chinese officials use the internet to weed out corruption, will this detection ultimately help China to curb corruption and embezzlement? Or will it just prompt government officials to take greater precautions and seek protection from the prying eyes and ears of the net community? For example, will officials go to greater lengths to assure they are not photographed in decadent situations in order to fend off becoming a target? And for all of these corruption cases that turn out to be successful, one wonders how many officials, if any, are targeted by the web community and the accusations turn out to be false? Furthermore, could the Communist Party be inflicting punishment even if the charges turn out to be false in order to appease the masses? If an accusation turns out to be untrue, would the government go to the lengths necessary to quell the rumors of said official's corruption, or would they just take a shortcut and fire said official from their post? After all, headlines of the Communist Party heeding the people's concerns and weeding out corruption would certainly bode well with the international community. But, the Human Flesh Search Engine being used as a means to curb corruption raises more questions than it solves.

### **III: Defending the Defenseless** *Netizens Condemn Acts of Animal Cruelty*

The Human Flesh Search Engine targets those who commit inexcusable acts for fame, most notably acts of harm against animals. While the government's state-owned newspapers and media outlets praise the good deeds of the Communist Party, the Human Flesh Search Engine gives insight into the real public view of events going on in China, and how the people view the government that represents them. One case involving the search engine that caught international news in summer 2006 was a rabies scare that shook the country and saw the extermination of thousands of dogs. This event was met with questions of validity from Chinese netizens, who questioned what type of government would commit such acts.

In Yunnan Province in South China, the death of three people in Mouding Country by rabies prompted an extermination of over 54,000 dogs. Stray dogs and pets alike were captured and clubbed on the spot by vigilantes and government workers. While the sheer numbers and acts alone seem deplorable, dog owners themselves were forced to hang their dogs to trees in some parts of the country.<sup>52</sup>

As these acts began to spread throughout various areas of the country, they created an outpouring from netizens of sympathy for the dogs and outrage at the government. Some netizens questioned how this sort of act fit into China's plan for a "harmonious" growth. Online petitions immediately began circulating calling for an end to the terror, where dogs were being rounded up and brutally killed regardless of licensure or vaccination records.<sup>53</sup>

The New York Times pulled comments from both MOP and Tianya, two popular Human Flesh Search Engine forums. "This is just another stupid decision by several foolish officials

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<sup>52</sup> Howard French, "A Chinese Outcry: Doesn't a Dog Have Rights?" *The New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2006

<sup>53</sup> Howard French, "A Chinese Outcry: Doesn't a Dog Have Rights?" *The New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2006

taken in a small room, totally unreflective of the people's will," read one comment.<sup>54</sup> This rabies scare and dog extermination goes to point out that the people are not going to sit idly by and allow the Communist Party to do whatever it pleases to try and fix preventable problems, especially in such an inhumane way. And the internet, growing with more and more Chinese web users by the day, is becoming the go-to place for citizens to question the acts of the government.

When the Human Flesh Search Engine spoke out against the Chinese Communist Party's actions against dogs with rabies, an outcry of rage from netizens is quick to materialize. This is apparent in the case of Wang Jue, or as she's better known the "Kitten Killer of Hangzhou." What is interesting about her case is the length that netizens went in order to find out her identity.

Wang Jue wanted to distance herself from anything reminding her of her failed marriage. She had been quoted on her QQ space (a popular website in China which allows user to create a personal webpage to post information, images, and blogs) as saying, "I furiously crush everything to do with you and me."<sup>55</sup> She took a video which features her crushing a kitten with the heel of her shoe, shocking netizens across the country. Outraged, viewers lashed back and demanded she be identified and punished for her cruelty to animals.

While China has lenient laws concerning the welfare and treatment of animals, both Wang Jue and the man credited with taking the video were promptly fired from their jobs.<sup>56</sup> This is a very common occurrence with those targeted by the Human Flesh Search Engines – where bad publicity and fame alone are enough for your employer to sack you. Regardless of innocence employers will promptly let an employee targeted by the web go or force resignation in order to keep their own name clean.

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<sup>54</sup> Howard French, "A Chinese Outcry: Doesn't a Dog Have Rights?" *The New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2006

<sup>55</sup> China Daily Online, "Who is the Glamorous Kitten Killer of Hangzhou," March 4, 2006

<sup>56</sup> China Daily Online, "High-Heeled Kitten Killer Apologizes," March 16, 2006

Apart from losing one's job, another added fear of becoming a victim is becoming a target of the government. While in America Wang Jue's act of animal cruelty would have caught the attention of groups such as PETA and gotten her arrested, chances are she would not have been spotlighted by the government. But in China, following her identity being uncovered, government officials posted an apology by Wang Jue and her cameraman on the county government's website.<sup>57</sup> Because of the government's unnecessary involvement in the case, it acts as evidence that there is a strong tie forged between the Human Flesh Search Engine and the Communist Party. Wang Jue had broken no law and was not arrested by the authorities. However, she was relieved of her position and highlighted by the government. Her case proves that she was not singled out for breaking a law, but the actions against her by the government, such as her forced apology, was a public relations move aimed to appease the hordes of netizens amassed against her.

The Human Flesh Search Engines targets even children. On January 11, 2009 a young boy was sought after a Hebei University Industrial and Commercial campus student came upon the dead body of a beloved stray cat named Garfield. A post titled "Deviant Boy Brutally Kills Garfield" was posted to MOP.com with a detailed description of the boy.<sup>58</sup> The student recalled walking by a popular resting spot for Garfield when he heard a loud explosion. Turning around he was able to make out a description of the boy:

He thought that no one would notice his immoral act, but "thanks" to the body movement of this sadistic boy, it allowed me to again take a deeper look at his appearance: body height between 165 to 170 cm, wears glasses, back slightly bent, but probably bent because he committed this crime, wore grey-black down fill clothing. We are alarmed to encounter such a sadistic act. The sadistic boy ran from a small road next to the grass landscape towards Jingguan Road.<sup>59</sup>

The student goes on to curse the little boy:

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<sup>57</sup> China Daily Online, "High-Heeled Kitten Killer Apologizes," March 16, 2006

<sup>58</sup> MOP, "猫扑大杂烩 - 体验年轻 - 猫扑互动中心"

<sup>59</sup> chinaSMACK.com, "Human Flesh Search For Hebei University Cat Killer"

I really want to ask this male student, when you were born, did your parents not put you to death because they didn't know that you are an animal? Or your parents are animals themselves and they put a little animal like you into our school ground to commit such a despicable crime? Do you know that we feel disgusted to have you on our school ground? We shockingly have to share a place with you and use the same class room? Why won't you just die?<sup>60</sup>

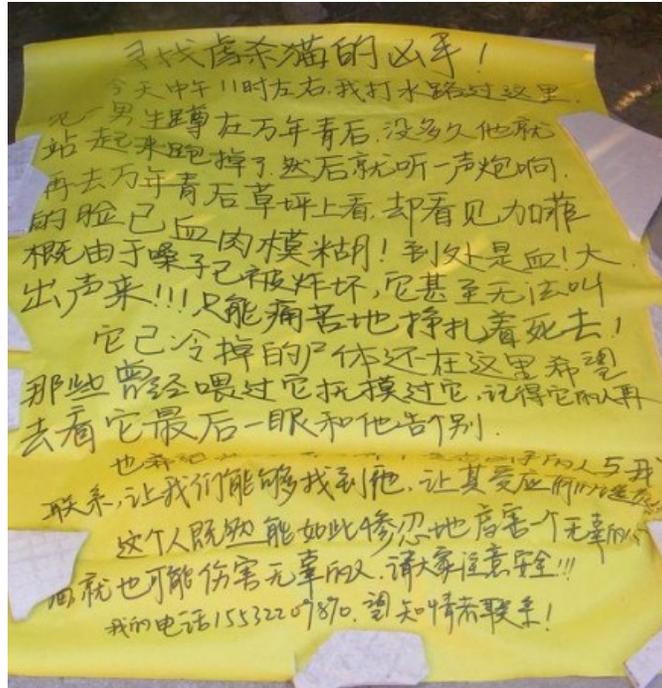
The description of the little boy is peppered with strong and suggestive language towards his “immoral act”. Numerous times the boy is referred to as “sadistic” and has a “bent back” which the writer attributes to his act of crime, but nevertheless creates a picture of an evil child.

Several pictures of the boy were posted to the website, presumably identified by the anonymous student writer.<sup>61</sup> These images, possibly stolen from the boy's own personal networking website profile, clearly show his face and features, making for easy identification. These pictures call the boy the “suspect” and do not show his name. However, the website is still unsure whether or not this is actually the boy. If it is not the boy, the implications of his images being used on the listing as the target of a cat killing could have great consequences. The student could be endangering this child by mistakenly showing his picture on the web as being wanted for a crime. And if this is indeed the same student who harmed the cat, the implications of having one's identity splashed across the internet is more serious than the childish act he committed.

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<sup>60</sup> chinaSMACK.com, “Human Flesh Search For Hebei University Cat Killer”

<sup>61</sup> chinaSMACK.com, “Human Flesh Search For Hebei University Cat Killer”



(chinaSMACK.com, “Human Flesh Search for Hebei University Cat Killer”)

Also on the listing was an image of a big yellow poster calling for people to help track down the “cat killer”. This poster in some ways resembles a Big-Character Poster (dàzì bào, 大字报) of China’s Cultural Revolution days. These Big-Character Posters were used as a means to attack and criticize others, or to speak out against injustices. Similarly, the poster attacking the “cat killer” outlines the crime committed and calls for punishment to be dealt:

I ran into a boy who was hiding behind XXX when I got hot water at nearly 11:00am. After a short while, he ran away and a loud exploding noise was heard. Then I hurried to the back of the lawn of XXX and tried to find out what had happened, and to my surprise Garfield (the cat) was laying there with a bloody face. Its blood was everywhere. It couldn’t even give a little meow, as it’s throat was hurt by the blast. Finally it died with great pain.

Its stiff body is still there. Hopefully those who used to feed, pet it, or know it can see it once more and say goodbye.

(The next section is not legible due to the image)

Also I hope that those who get any information about the killer can get in touch with me. Let’s investigate together and give the killer the punishment he deserves.

Since this guy could be so cruel and rude to an innocent cat, he can surely be dangerous to innocent people. So watch out and take care of yourselves. My telephone: 15532209890 – contact us if you know anything.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Translation by Vincent Capone

In the conclusion of the poster the student calls for anyone with information to reach out so that they can “give the killer the punishment he deserves.” Yet what sort of punishment, if any, does this boy deserve? Therefore this poster mirrors a common theme seen throughout the Human Flesh Search Engine, of who determines what justice is?

What is especially distinctive concerning cases dealing with animal cruelty is that netizens responding to these acts show remorse for the animals and cry out for justice against the perpetrator. However, at the same time, they lash out violently against the victim, often comparing them to animals and even calling out for them to “just die.”<sup>63</sup> The animals abused and killed in the cases are upheld as being powerless and defenseless. Yet when targeted by the Human Flesh Search Engine, the victims of these crimes in turn become defenseless against the allegations and when their personal information is posted on web forums, they become prey to abuse and backlash.

In the case of the Garfield Cat Killer, the student who made the post titled “Deviant Boy Brutally Kills Garfield” on a MOP forum post relates the young boy to an animal:

I really want to ask this male student, when you were born, did your parents not put you to death because they didn't know that you are an animal? Or your parents are animals themselves and they put a little animal like you into our school ground to commit such a despicable crime? ... Why won't you just die?<sup>64</sup>

He refers to the little boy and his family as animals, even going so far to wonder why his parents didn't “put him to death” because he is such an animal.

What becomes apparent is a theme where people take their anger out on animals, both in real life and on the internet. From the various search engine cases, we have seen real people who take their anger and frustration out on defenseless animals, such as the Kitten Killer of Hangzhou

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<sup>63</sup> chinaSMACK.com, “Human Flesh Search For Hebei University Cat Killer”

<sup>64</sup> chinaSMACK.com, “Human Flesh Search For Hebei University Cat Killer”

and the Garfield Cat Killer. However, from the outpouring of anger stimulated from these cases, netizens lash out against the targets and refer to them as animals and degenerates of society. Therefore the netizens become no better than the ones they are attacking, and the real question becomes, just who is hunting who?

#### **IV: Weeding out the ‘Bad Seeds’** *Netizens Target Individuals Deemed “Race Traitors”*

Human Flesh Search Engines do not pertain just to actions of the Chinese people or their government, as seen through the targeting of a blogger by the name of “ChinaBounder”.

“ChinaBounder” or David Marriot as he was later revealed, is a thirty-year-old British man who recorded his sexual escapades while teaching English in Shanghai in a blog. His blog titled “Sex and Shanghai” (欲望上海), which has logged over 570,000 hits since 2006, came under heavy attack by Chinese netizens after viewing his numerous posts describing his sexual conquests and nights spent sleeping with his young students.<sup>65</sup> His blog entries were met with mixed review. Some netizens argued that Marriot was “scum” and were so outraged at his low morals they wanted to get him expelled from China. Others disagreed and argued that the actions of some Chinese men are no better than his. At the blog’s onset, the author did not release his identity, and hid behind his blog personality “ChinaBounder”.

However, readers of ChinaBounder’s blog were eager to “weed him out” and even went so far as to create a “Who is Chinabounder?” blog of their own.<sup>66</sup> While this blog consists of a mere four posts, it is written and commented on entirely in English. This could mean that either western expats living in China were concerned enough about ChinaBounder’s sexual exploits to comment, or that English-speaking Chinese, who would most likely be urban students, were using English to appeal to a more western audience. The blog’s first entry, titled “Who is that masked man?” has over 327 comments posted. Most of the comments seem to be netizens posing guesses as to ChinaBounder’s identity, but they also feature back and forth “east vs. west supremacy” arguments.

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<sup>65</sup> David Marriot, Sex and Shanghai (欲望上海) Blog

<sup>66</sup> “Joebu,” Who is Chinabounder? Blog

A professor of psychology at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Zhang Jiehai called Marriot a “piece of garbage” and “an immoral foreigner”. He went on to say that “Netizens and compatriots, if you are a Chinese man with guts and if you respect Chinese women, please join this ‘internet hunt for the immoral foreigner.’”<sup>67</sup> After all the scrutiny of his blog died down, Marriot admitted that the instant fame and notoriety given to him by his blog helped him use his fifteen minutes of fame to publish a book titled *Fault Lines on the Face of China: 50 Reasons Why China May Never Be Great*. This case is a great example of the degree of notoriety that is placed upon a Human Flesh Search Engine target.

The Human Flesh Search Engine’s targets also do not solely pertain to someone living on the Chinese mainland, as is the case of Lobsang Gendun, a 44-year-old Tibetan man residing in the United States who was mistakenly accused of being an Olympic torch relay protester. As the torch relay made its way through Paris leading up to the games in 2008, protesters assaulted the parade and even tried to extinguish the torch from a handicapped young girl named Jin Jing. These protesters were singled out as being part of a “Free Tibet” organization and as such, enemies of China’s unity. Lobsang Gendun’s life changed after this event when he was mistakenly targeted as the man who tried to make a grab for the torch away from Jin Jing in Paris. Gendun was mistakenly identified as such because of his ties to pro-Tibet groups in the San Francisco area and their involvement at various events during the international leg of the torch relay. Gendun was subsequently harassed and his life was put in danger.<sup>68</sup> His case is distinctive due to the amount of information the netizens were able to uncover about him, and signifies the sheer power of the search engine.

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<sup>67</sup> Clifford Coonan, “China's Internet Vigilantes Target British Ex-pat Cad,” *The Independent*, Sept. 4, 2006

<sup>68</sup> Mike Stark “Wrong Man Fingered as Olympic Torch Snatcher,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, April 16, 2008

Gendun coincidentally did protest the Olympic torch relay, but not in Paris; he was in San Francisco. Furthermore he has been quoted as saying, “I totally support the Olympics. I want the Olympics to be held in China so that Chinese people will be exposed to the outside world.”<sup>69</sup> His peaceful group appeared in San Francisco and he never even saw the torch. A few days after Gendun returned from San Francisco, the telephone in his Salt Lake City home rang at 2:00AM. It continued to ring six more times before he unplugged the phone. His e-mail inbox similarly was quickly filled with angry messages and pro-China sentiments. Quickly Gendun became the target of Chinese national anger, was called a terrorist and netizens demanded his employers get rid of him. A reporter from Hong Kong got in touch with him and said, “You need to be very careful, anything could happen to you in your life.” Gendun then realized that this was a very serious matter.<sup>70</sup>

What is remarkable about this case is the amount of personal information that became available on the internet about Lobsang Gendun. The MOP.com listing for his search, with over 25,000 comments criticizing Gendun and supporting China, listed his home address, telephone number, employer, and his e-mail. Netizens even went to the extreme of using a satellite imaging program to find a photo of his house, as well as a bird’s eye view of the surrounding neighborhood.<sup>71</sup> With nothing left private to him, Gendun and his family were moved into a hotel for their safety.

However, Gendun was reported as looking to the bright side and seeing this as a way for the Tibetan cause to gain attention. “This is a very good thing to happen to me,” he said. “I get a

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<sup>69</sup> Sandra Yi, “Utah Man Receiving Threats After Case of Mistaken Identity,” *KSL.com*, April 13, 2008

<sup>70</sup> Mike Stark “Wrong Man Fingered as Olympic Torch Snatcher,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, April 16, 2008

<sup>71</sup> MOP, “猫扑大杂烩 - 体验年轻 - 猫扑互动中心”

chance to say what I have to say. This is a free land, and if you follow the rules and regulations, you can express your opinion whenever you want.”<sup>72</sup>

As Lobsang Gendun was being targeted for his alleged attack on Jin Jing, the twenty eight year old woman was cast into the national spotlight as a hero. Jin Jing, who had lost her leg to an ankle tumor as a young girl and was confined to a wheelchair, was carrying the torch proudly in her arms as it passed through Paris on April 7, 2008. As she took the torch and started on her route, Pro-Tibet protestors literally threw themselves at her in an effort to take the torch from her. During the ordeal, Jin Jing clung to the torch and shielded it with her body, refusing to let go. French police tackled many assailants to the ground and she was wheeled away with scratches and bruises to her arms and face. As a result of this incident, Jin Jing was immortalized as a Chinese hero and promoter of the Olympic ideal.<sup>73</sup> The People’s Daily hailed Jin Jing in an article written in December 2008 as “the most beautiful Chinese girl of 2008” (2008 中国最美丽的女子).<sup>74</sup>

Shortly after the Paris torch relay incident, Chinese netizens began a campaign to boycott anything that carried a French name or connotation. Their main target was the French retailer Carrefour, a Wal-Mart-type chain that carries both home items and produce, which has over 112 stores on the Chinese mainland.<sup>75</sup> Less than a week after the incident, Chinese netizens began a campaign urging everyone to boycott Carrefour stores starting on May 1. The message was spread through text messages, e-mails, and between friends and relatives, calling for support on a

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<sup>72</sup> Mike Stark “Wrong Man Fingering as Olympic Torch Snatcher,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, April 16, 2008

<sup>73</sup> China Daily Online, “Officials, Media Denounce Disruption of Olympic Torch Run,” April 9, 2008

<sup>74</sup> 王兆鹏. “2008 , 中国人的爱国表情,” *The People’s Daily*

<sup>75</sup> Zhu Zhe, “Valor in a Wheelchair,” *China Daily*, April 11, 2008

boycott.<sup>76</sup> Many Chinese felt that this outlet was their way to show their anger towards the events that transpired in France.

However, after word of the boycott began to spread across the Chinese internet and media, Jin Jing made a public statement urging netizens to reconsider the boycott. Her main reasoning was fear that the thousands of Chinese employees at Carrefour stores across China could be affected.<sup>77</sup> Almost instantly Jin Jing found herself on the other end of the Human Flesh Search Engine spectrum.

Angered that the heroine herself would not promote the boycott, Chinese netizens began a vicious campaign against her. EastWestSouthNorth, a blog that collects Chinese news links, compiled a sampling of comments against Jin Jing from NetEase forum:

“What kinda fart is Jin Jing! She is helping Carrefour. I think that she is a Chinese traitor.”  
“The interests of a number of Chinese employees cannot be as important as the interests of a nation. There is no need to worry about them. It is important to let the world that China cannot be bullied.”  
“Many workers who got laid off get new jobs immediately. What is the difference? People who work there are abetting the enemy.”  
“She went to France just once and now she thinks that she is French. Jin Jing speaks like a Chinese traitor with no brain. No wonder she got fired from her job.”  
“Chinese traitor Jin Jing, your cancerous cells must have moved to your brain!”<sup>78</sup>

Now portrayed as a Chinese traitor, Jin Jing found herself thrown in with the likes of the French government and Carrefour – where netizens believed they were all against the Chinese people. What’s interesting about these comments is that while the netizens are speaking up for China to be heard as a nation amidst international protests, they have a complete disregard for their own people employed by these stores. Furthermore, the word choice against Jin Jing is similar to that of the animal cruelty cases, where she is treated as subhuman. Within the span of a week Jin Jing went from being a national hero in the face of a cruel world to a Chinese traitor.

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<sup>76</sup> China Daily Online, “Netizens Urge Carrefour Boycott after Torch Relay Incident,” April 16, 2008

<sup>77</sup> Li Zhaohua, “Hero to Traitor: The Difference a Day Makes,” *China Digital Times*, April 19, 2008

<sup>78</sup> EastSouthWestNorth Blog, “April 2008”

## “The Most Ugly Exchange Student”

Grace Wang, a Duke University and Chinese exchange student who got mixed up in a Free Tibet rally and was labeled by Chinese netizens as a traitor to her country, was a case that made headlines across the globe. Her story was brought into the media spotlight in America, and is also an example of the speed of information being sent between Chinese living abroad and those on the mainland – as well as the misinformation that is also spread. Grace Wang’s case also takes the online threats and brings them offline.

As Grace Wang walked out of the Duke University dining hall one day, she was caught in the middle of a Free Tibet vigil and a Pro-China counterdemonstration. With friends on both sides, Wang tried to act as a level-headed mediator to get the two sides to sit down and discuss their differences. She even went so far as to write “Free Tibet” on the back of one student, on the grounds that he sit down with the Pro-China demonstrators.<sup>79</sup> She felt that both sides didn’t see the big picture, and that if they discussed their differences they could find a common ground. This small involvement would change her life.

The following day a photo of Grace Wang writing ‘Free Tibet’ on a friend’s back at the demonstration was posted to the internet and she was called a “traitor to her country”. Alongside the photo were Wang’s contact information, her identification number, and her parent’s home address in Qingdao, China.<sup>80</sup> Yet the netizens, with only one photo as evidence, assumed she was taking a “Free Tibet” stance against her own people.

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<sup>79</sup> Shaila Dewan, “Chinese Student in US Caught in Confrontation,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2008

<sup>80</sup> Shaila Dewan, “Chinese Student in US Caught in Confrontation,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2008

Days after the rally the home of Wang's parents in Qingdao was attacked with feces. Soon after, rocks were thrown at the house causing her parents to go into hiding. The Federal Bureau of Investigation got involved after Grace Wang received offline threats.<sup>81</sup>

The website Global Voices Online took an interest in the case of Grace Wang in relations to the Human Flesh Search Engines targeting her.<sup>82</sup> The website translated various comments on the Tianya web posting of Grace Wang, and posted them in the order of which they were originally posted, allowing the viewer to see the methods that were taken to discern her identity and the threats against her. Various comments begin by posting the girl's photo on the web forum, followed by other comments asking how she can be dealt with and wondering if the Chinese government has read up on the story. Quickly the comments begin to turn angry and reason is left behind:

1. "That foreign toady face of yours will always be a shameless one to the Chinese people!"
2. "Heavens..Qingdao #2 Middle School. Makes us lose so much face. Shoot her where she stands."
3. "No way!! Is she really from Qingdao? This is way too much, haha, good old Tianya human flesh search engines!! Haha!! Strong strong!! Didn't her parents know their kid would get lost being abroad and nobody looking after her!"
4. "Race traitor! Traitor! Absolutely unacceptable! Sooner or later your whole family will have to pay!"
5. "You're saying this but you don't have any proof! At least put up a photo, right...? Everyone calm down, don't be so drastic, there's nothing to base this on, yelling and shouting like this is wrong~"
6. "You never know she might be being used by someone with something big against her, slandering her, getting netizens to curse her to vent their anger!!!"

(Source: Tianya.com)

(Translated into English by Global Voices Online)<sup>83</sup>

The Tianya web post concerning Grace Wang includes thousands of comments, yet from this small sample above one can see different sentiments among netizens. Some strongly express

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<sup>81</sup> Jeremy Goldkorn, "Grace Wang," *Danwei*, April 18, 2008

<sup>82</sup> Founded in 2005, Global Voices Online is a website made up of over two hundred bloggers worldwide working together to bring translations and reports from blogs and citizen media, with emphasis on voices not ordinarily heard in the mainstream media.

<sup>83</sup> John Kennedy, "China: Fallout from the Free Tibet Protests," *Global Voices Online*, April 13, 2008

their Pro-China nationalism, with comments such as “shoot her where she stands” and calling her a “race traitor”. However, there are also some more sympathetic comments which question the validity of the charges against her – for example the last two comments which try to use reason instead of overreacting.

Grace Wang, a “race traitor” in China, became outlined as a hero in the American media, despite having only written a word on a friend’s back. “She stood her ground; she’s a really brave girl,” said Adam Weiss, the student on whose back Ms. Wang wrote ‘Free Tibet.’ “You have 200 of your own fellow nationalists yelling at you and calling you a traitor and even threatening to kill you.” A fellow Chinese student at Duke called the backlash against Grace Wang “horrible” and even said that Pro-China demonstrators at the rally were not very angry with her, and that they felt the actions taken against her were too extreme.<sup>84</sup>

However to Chinese netizens, regardless of what her involvement in the rally truly was, she is still looked down upon, even by her own parents. In the New York Times article covering the backlash, Wang mentions that “they were really disappointed in me for a long time, and I persuaded them to think differently.” The Duke Chinese Students and Scholars Association, albu which Wang belonged to. felt no shame after sending out an e-mail calling Wang’s actions at the rally “troubling and heinous” along with throwing in her personal information from the group’s mailing list.<sup>85</sup>

Ultimately Grace Wang is ashamed of the response that quickly amassed against her. The New York Times quoted her as saying “those people who attack me so severely were the ones who hurt China’s image even more.”<sup>86</sup> She was quoted as saying “Take away your anger and your heads will become clear, your minds will become sharper, and then your judgments

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<sup>84</sup> Shaila Dewan, “Chinese Student in US Caught in Confrontation,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2008

<sup>85</sup> Shaila Dewan, “Chinese Student in US Caught in Confrontation,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2008

<sup>86</sup> Shaila Dewan, “Chinese Student in US Caught in Confrontation,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2008

correct.”<sup>87</sup> In the western media Grace Wang comes across as a level-headed girl capable of free thought and speech, and at the same time China’s image is greatly damaged by the online and offline threats against her, and the response that came about.

What some of these cases show is the tone of Chinese professionals and professional organizations. As in the Marriot case of “ChinaBouncer”, psychology professor Zhang Jiehai called for a manhunt to locate “ChinaBouncer’s” identity and was quoted in news reports referring to Marriot as a “piece of garbage” and “an immoral foreigner.”<sup>88</sup> In the Grace Wang case, the CCTV main homepage showed a photo of the young girl above the caption “the most ugly exchange student” (最丑陋的留学生). The website, CReaders.net<sup>89</sup>, which re-posted the image of the CCTV homepage, used this criticism of Grace Wang to allude to a seemingly return to Cultural Revolution mentality (文革再现? CCTV 网站首页: “最丑陋的留学生”).<sup>90</sup>



(cReaders.net, “文革再现? CCTV 网站首页: “最丑陋的留学生””)

Furthermore, following the incident with Grace Wang, a new editorial was published on Sohu.com attacking Grace Wang for her lack of ethics in her involvement with Pro-Tibet groups

<sup>87</sup> Jeremy Goldkorn, “Grace Wang,” *Danwei*, April 18, 2008

<sup>88</sup> Clifford Coonan, “China's Internet Vigilantes Target British Ex-pat Cad,” *The Independent*, Sept. 4, 2006

<sup>89</sup> CReaders.net, while a Chinese entertainment website, is not run out of the mainland and was set up in Vancouver, Canada as an outsource of news for Chinese nationals overseas.

<sup>90</sup> cReaders.net, “文革再现? CCTV 网站首页: “最丑陋的留学生””

at Duke University. The article, which held up Wang as a traitor to her people, also made her an example as to how important a strong moral education is for future generations (“从王千源看下一代道德教育”). The author criticizes Wang for “humiliating all Chinese people” and proclaims that the Chinese people in turn “will be always shamed because of people like her” (“你这样的崇洋媚外的嘴脸是要永远被中国人民所不耻!”). Wang is used as an example of the reasons why parents cannot forgo instilling an ethical morality within their children. The article calls Wang a bright girl, but remarks that because of her lack of an ethical education, her intelligence becomes useless. Without strong ethics, Wang is “like a robot without any judgment... anyone can operate her... anyone can command her” (“就像一个没有是非能力的机器人.谁都可以操作,谁都可以输入命令...”).<sup>91</sup>

Apart from these attacks on Grace Wang’s morality, there is also much disparity between the stories released by the Chinese news media and those picked up by western counterparts. In the cases where Xinhua or the People’s Daily issued press releases and news stories (such as the cases of the Kitten Killer of Hangzhou and cases regarding government corruption), the articles could be read in a way that commends the government or the authorities for taking these individuals out of society. The same can be said for the articles that were chosen to be translated into English by Xinhua or used in English-language newspapers such as the China Daily. In these news articles there is a clear enemy and a hero, often times the Chinese government. When looking at the story covered concerning the “Kitten Killer of Hangzhou”, the woman in the video is clearly depicted as an immoral woman who takes out her frustrations and abuses animals. The hero in the story is both the government, and the Chinese netizens. The government is commended because she was dealt with and forced to release a public apology, demonstrating

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<sup>91</sup>朴珺,“从王千源看下一代道德教育”

that the system works and this immoral woman was brought to justice. The netizens are commended for helping the authorities to track down the woman's identity which in turn led to her arrest. In the corruption cases the government authorities are seen as the hero against shady low-level officials, and once again netizens are praised for their help in identifying corruption.

When looking at the western media and the Human Flesh Search Engine cases they chose to report on, only a few stories covered here come to attention. The most significant written about in the American media was the story of Grace Wang. While her story was one of the few to occur in the United States, her story is upheld that she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. To a western audience she comes off as the victim and she is praised as a hero, and a symbol of the power of free speech and democracy at work. Furthermore the US media uses cases such as Grace Wang and Deng Yujiao (the girl attacked by Lin Jiexiang in Hebei Province) to highlight the lack of human rights in China. While in the Chinese media Grace Wang is portrayed as a "race traitor" and a student who went off to study abroad in the United States and forgot her ties to her homeland.

The story of Grace Wang shows many similarities with the language and actions that swept China throughout the Cultural Revolution era. Her case was also hailed on CReaders.net questioning a possible return of Cultural Revolution rhetoric. As the Human Flesh Search Engine continues to target individuals who commit immoral acts, scholars are beginning to notice more ties between this phenomenon and the Cultural Revolution.

## **V: “Raise Their Political Consciousness”:** *The Human Flesh Search Engine and the Cultural Revolution*

Events of the Human Flesh Search Engine strongly resemble the Cultural Revolution era of Chinese history. Throughout these cases there is evidence of similar language and rhetoric in attacks against individuals. Web forums on the internet bear a striking resemblance to big-character posters which became widespread during the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, the Human Flesh Search Engine questions the concept of social morality and acts as a means to mobilize the masses, much like big-character posters and the mentality of the Cultural Revolution.

Big-character posters (dàzì bào, 大字报) were the main method of communication and protest during the Cultural Revolution. Posters with messages written on them in large Chinese characters, these big-character posters were hung all over public areas for all citizens to read, and carried messages ranging from news stories and propaganda to attacks against individuals. In many ways these big-character posters resemble the internet web forums that make up the backbone of the Human Flesh Search Engine.

The first poster to be put up during the Cultural Revolution was placed by seven teachers at the philosophy department at Peking University on May 25, 1966. Their poster attacked the university’s leadership and emulated Mao Zedong’s desire for the people to struggle against Party leaders “taking the capitalist road.”<sup>92</sup> After this incident, the use of big-character posters spread throughout China like wildfire reaching urban and rural areas alike. The success of these posters during this era was great, and they were “ascribed supernatural powers.” The People’s Daily said they were “magic mirrors which reveal all monsters for what they are” and “the most

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<sup>92</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 58

effective means of freely mobilizing the masses” using the posters as “the most powerful new-type of weapon to expose the enemies.”<sup>93</sup>

While big-character posters thrived as a means for spurring revolution during the Cultural Revolution, the trend surfaced again in the late 1970s during the New Democracy Movement. In downtown Beijing, a Democracy Wall was set up which began a place for citizens to hang posters which called for democratic reforms. The most famous poster during this movement was called “the Fifth Modernization” by Wei Jingsheng. This poster played on the wording of the Four Modernizations, which were four goals that categorized the Deng Xiaoping era of reform that directly followed the Mao era. “The Fifth Modernization” was a poster that stressed that the most important modernization, even above economic stability, were more democratic freedoms for the people. In order to make an effort to modernize and become a competitor in the global sphere, Wei Jingsheng argued that China had to embrace democracy as its most important modernization. The Democracy Wall was shut down by the end of 1979 after wall posters began to target Communist Party leaders, the system, and failed mistakes of the past.

One reason big-character posters appealed to the masses was that it was a very inexpensive medium. Posters were handwritten on old pieces of paper and were much less expensive than newspapers and other forms of traditional media.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, the online web forums of the Human Flesh Search Engine are also an inexpensive way to spread information and news without the need of newsprint or a media outlet. Web forums are free for netizens to use and actually generate income through advertisements for the host website. Because of the low cost nature of these two information media, both became widespread and popular as a form of spreading news and allowing for one’s voice to be broadcast.

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<sup>93</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 61

<sup>94</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 237

Much like the Human Flesh Search Engine of the Chinese internet, the big-character poster movement was accessed by a very large audience from all walks of Chinese society. Because posters were inexpensive to create, they were available to the whole population. On the other hand, the internet in China does not reach out to a large enough number of the rural population, and therefore is a medium used primarily by middle-class urbanites. As with the types of websites that make up the Human Flesh Search Engine, the area where a given poster was posted would determine what types of people would read them.<sup>95</sup> For example, a poster hanging at a university campus would most likely target academics while a poster put up near a factory would focus on the criticisms of workers. Big-character posters were made to be visible to all Chinese citizens, as they were posted in public areas for any passer-by to see. This mirrors the websites that make up the Human Flesh Search Engine, in that these web forums are components of popular websites that are accessed by a wide range of Chinese netizens.

Big-character posters of the Mao era allowed people to express sentiments that had been forbidden since the founding of the People's Republic. One student at Peking University called this new movement "a feast of criticism."<sup>96</sup> Godwin Chu, a China scholar, attributes four different functions to big-character posters during the Cultural Revolution. First is the cognitive function in order to clarify new norms. The second used writing as a means of role performance, which demonstrated conformity to new social expectations. The instrumental function helped writers to gain recognition and distinction. And last was the emotive function which allowed big-character posters to be used for airing petty grievances.<sup>97</sup>

These functions of big-character posters can be attributed to cases seen throughout the Human Flesh Search Engine. For example, the web forums target individuals who seem to go

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<sup>95</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 67

<sup>96</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 61

<sup>97</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 67-8

against the expectations of society. This can be seen in cases of animal abuse and adultery. The individuals targeted do not act in what netizens feel are the standards of society, therefore the search engine helps to clarify social norms. The instrumental function is apparent throughout this phenomenon as well; however it occurs on the opposite side as well, where those who become targets of the search engine are actually using the internet for recognition and distinction. This is apparent in the cases of the “Kitten Killer of Hangzhou” and “Chinabounder” where both used the internet to gain fame and notoriety, and by doing so became targets of the Chinese netizen population. And last, the emotive function is seen clearly through the myriad of web forum posts used to air grievances of all different levels: from anger over corrupt officials to help searching for a boy who abused an alley cat.

Big-character posters were supported by the Party’s Central Committee, as well as Mao Zedong himself. In a statement made by Mao in 1958, the great Chairman hailed the big-character poster as a useful new tool that could be used to liberate the masses:

The big-character poster is a very useful new weapon, which can be used in cities and the rural areas, in factories, co-operatives, shops, government institutions, schools, army units and streets – in short, wherever the masses are to be found. It has been widely used and should always be used.<sup>98</sup>

Chairman Mao emphasizes the big-character poster as an effective means for citizens from all walks of society. And due to the inexpensive nature, big-character posters were able to become as widespread as Mao foresaw. Written later, Mao’s Sixteen Points document, supporting the freedom of the masses to criticize, went on to say:

Make the fullest use of big-character posters and great debates to argue matters out, so that the masses can clarify the correct views, criticize the wrong views and expose all the ghosts and monsters. In this way the masses will be able to raise their political consciousness in the course of the struggle...<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Richard Cut Kraus, *Brushes with Power* (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1991), 96

<sup>99</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 63

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong “appealed to ordinary students and workers for support against Party bureaucrats and encouraged them to write big-character posters.”<sup>100</sup> This support from top Party leaders is also evident within the Human Flesh Search Engine of the technological era.

Big-character poster use intensified after Mao Zedong himself posted his own big-character poster in August 1966. Mao’s poster, titled “Bombard the Headquarters – My First Big-Character Poster” was widely received by the masses, and his unique writing style and script were emulated all over China.<sup>101</sup> Online netizens at present receive similar support from top Party leaders, such as China’s President Hu Jintao. Hu has begun to utilize the internet to better reach the masses, and has encouraged the people to speak out and use the internet as a tool to improve China. His efforts are shown through the web chat room talks he participated in last year. Chinese officials today also use the internet to gauge public opinion, cracking down on corruption cases that cause a stir on the internet.

Much like the cases of corrupt officials being brought to justice through the Human Flesh Search Engine, big-character posters during the Cultural Revolution also helped to see the downfall of officials and Party cadres. During the Cultural Revolution, most of these cadres were targeted solely for opposing Mao Zedong’s policy. Over two hundred and fifty leading newspaper editors, propagandists, and leaders of the arts were removed from their posts.<sup>102</sup> Much like the posters, web forums today help to bring down low-level officials who are accused of being wrapped up in corruption scandals. In both eras these officials allegedly caused harm to the Party and became targets of the masses which ultimately led to their downfall.

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<sup>100</sup>Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 71

<sup>101</sup> Richard Cut Kraus, *Brushes with Power* (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1991), 99-100

<sup>102</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 70

What was it about the big-character poster that allowed it to become such a widely received phenomenon that was unique to China? In China, for centuries writing has been seen as a unique and powerful tool. Chinese characters can display meaning with fewer characters than needed in other languages, such as English. Calligraphy is both a means of writing and an art form. Every stroke has a different meaning and one person's calligraphy differs from the next.<sup>103</sup> In the past only the privileged could read and write, and therefore writing soon became associated with the elites of society. In the past, those in control of the state made characters more difficult to read in order to preserve their power over the lower classes. However, during times of revolution, such as the Cultural Revolution, writing was brought to the people. During this era Chinese characters were simplified, and it soon became known that it was “the masses, not any god or upper-class gentleman, whom had invented characters.”<sup>104</sup> While during the Cultural Revolution characters were again simplified, these characters were never widely used and by 1986 had disappeared.<sup>105</sup>

However soon the big-character posters of the Cultural Revolution began to get out of hand, and led to a period of poster struggles and violent turmoil.<sup>106</sup> The big-character posters of Cultural Revolution and post-Mao era have evolved into the technological tools that have led to the creation of the Human Flesh Search Engine. These tools come in many forms, such as web forums, blogs, and entertainment websites in which netizens regularly visit and are allowed to post information, stories, and opinions on. Web forums, unlike big-character posters, allow for instant communication, allowing thoughts to be published much faster than a poster. Thoughts posted to the internet also have a much larger audience than a poster, and can reach people

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Cut Kraus, *Brushes with Power* (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1991), 7-9

<sup>104</sup> Richard Cut Kraus, *Brushes with Power* (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1991), 108

<sup>105</sup> Richard Cut Kraus, *Brushes with Power* (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1991), 108

<sup>106</sup> Goran Leijonhufvud, *Going Against the Tide* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1990), 65

throughout the country and from all walks of life. Therefore the scope and range of the internet far exceeds that of the big-character poster.

As seen with some instances of the Human Flesh Search Engine, this technological phenomenon is also beginning to head in new and unknown directions. As the Human Flesh Search Engine becomes more widespread and its targets gain increased media attention, scholars and the media alike are beginning to find more similarities between the Cultural Revolution and the search engine. One journalist, Rebecca MacKinnon,<sup>107</sup> compared Chinese netizens caught up in the Human Flesh Search Engines to Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution era. On February 27, 2009, MacKinnon posted an article on her blog “RConversation” titled “From Red Guards to cyber-vigilantism to where next?”<sup>108</sup> In the blog article MacKinnon poses the question as to where this increase in public vigilantism will lead:

Like the Red Guards, the intent of today’s cyber-vigilantes is idealistic; they believe in their absolute moral righteousness. Sometimes they expose corrupt and venal officials who deserve to go to jail. Other times they conduct moral witch hunts against people whose behavior may not be very admirable but what crime did they commit exactly and who is to be the judge?

It is very exciting that the Internet is making it increasingly difficult for Chinese government officials to behave irresponsibly, abuse taxpayer funds, or commit crimes without being exposed. The question is, where is this all headed?<sup>109</sup>

MacKinnon makes an interesting point that the search engine and rise of internet use has forced government officials to be more accountable for their actions. She also touches upon the importance of who becomes the moral judge on the internet. Once the masses begin to set their own standards for society and target those who go against these standards, she believes there will be trouble.

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<sup>107</sup> MacKinnon is an assistant professor at the University of Hong Kong, MacKinnon is working on a book titled “Internet Freedom and Control: Lessons from China for the World.” She was co-founder of Global Voices Online.

<sup>108</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon, “From Red Guards to Cyber Vigilantism to Where Next?” Feb. 27, 2009

<sup>109</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon, “From Red Guards to Cyber Vigilantism to Where Next?” Feb. 27, 2009

Similar to those targeted during the Cultural Revolution, targets of the Human Flesh Search Engine become swept up in the ensuing drama and cannot hope to defend themselves. Those denounced during the Cultural Revolution became a target of the masses and faced large groups of people criticizing their actions or choices. Many had to accept the charges against them and bear the humility. For many, defense was not a viable option.

With those targeted on web forums for immoral acts, the sheer outcry of replies and comments far exceeds any defense this one individual could make. The search engine creates an atmosphere of one individual vs. millions of netizens. It's near to impossible for a victim of the search engine to defend himself amidst the thousands of angry comments generated by netizens. And after being targeted as immoral or a traitor of the Chinese people, it is unlikely that these individuals would be able to count on the media to clear up their stories.

As the image of Grace Wang writing 'Free Tibet' on a classmate's back made its way onto the internet, the events of that day had begun to dissipate. However by the next day netizens were outraged by what they saw and began online attacks criticizing Wang. Within days her parents home was attacked and Grace Wang was receiving threatening e-mails from Chinese nationals and students at Duke University. The Chinese media never gave her a chance to defend herself, and instead she was deemed a traitor of the Chinese people.

## **VI: “On the Internet, Everyone Knows You’re a Dog”:** *The Need for Regulation and the Future of the Chinese Internet*

When Grace Wang became involved in the scuffle between Free Tibet and Pro-China groups she never knew the consequences such a trivial act would create. As her case gained popularity, Chinese classmates of Wang surfaced decrying her actions in America. Bringing together different elements of the internet, these young people were able to compile all of Grace Wang’s private information, including her educational background, her government identification number, photos of her, and the address of her parents’ home in Qingdao.

What Grace Wang’s case and the Human Flesh Search Engine in general shows is the power and authority of youth on the internet. During the Cultural Revolution and democracy movements of the post-Mao era, youth and college students played a leading role in pushing for revolutionary change and increasing democracy. And throughout these movements, there remained a strong sense of patriotism promoted. Therefore it is no surprise that the main actors of the Human Flesh Search Engine, which has been proven to promote patriotism and the strengthening of Chinese moral society, remain youth and recent college graduates.

Chinese-American writer and observer Xujun Eberlein believes the Human Flesh Search Engine is a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, and that it owes its success to recent college graduates entering the workforce and middle class youth who are the largest demographic accessing the internet. He argues that China’s population “makes it easy to mobilize a large number of netizens to participate in such a search, especially considering that there are many smart and reasonably well-educated people in China who are intellectually under-employed.”<sup>110</sup> The search engine shows that netizens rally behind strengthening Chinese morality and weeding out government corruption. However these same netizens do not gather behind the aspects of

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<sup>110</sup> Hannah Fletcher, “Human Flesh Search Engines: Chinese Vigilantes...” *Times Online*, June 25, 2008

society that are impeding their employment and placing intense levels of competition into the academic sphere and the workplace.

In the past it fell upon the shoulders of the state to provide jobs for the people under the benefits of socialism, which gave the people rights to general welfare. But today the state has no responsibility for the employment of the people except in the effort to create additional jobs. This drastic shift from socialism, mixed with the competition caused by such a high national population, could be a rallying point for these intellectually underemployed. Instead we see middle class youth who use the internet as a means to speak out against immoral aspects of Chinese society rather than making progress towards movements that could directly affect themselves.

As the internet in China continues to expand and become accessible to the remaining four-fifths of the population, the role of the Human Flesh Search Engine in China's future is an uncertain one. As many of these cases have shown, there is a concern over the control of anonymity on the internet. On July 5, 1993 the New Yorker ran a cartoon by Peter Steiner of two dogs sitting by a computer. The one dog using the computer says another dog standing nearby "on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog" alluding to the fact that on the internet, it is extremely difficult to discern someone's true identity, and that it is a relatively simple task to remain anonymous while browsing the web. In China this phrase has been flipped around, turning it into "on the internet, everybody knows you're a dog" (人人都知道你是一条狗) to show that even a person's anonymity is not protected anymore by the internet, as has been proven through these Human Flesh Search Engine cases. This new phrase has been used in reference to a recent push for a real-name registration system on the internet.



*"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."*  
(Source: The New Yorker, July 5, 1993)

This issue is becoming very heated within the scholarly community in China. Hu Yong wrote about the complexity of the anonymity argument in an article published in 2006 in the Chinese journal *Dúshū* (读书). Hu has become one of the first users of this phrase in his article which discusses why the thought of real-name registration disturbs many netizens. He argues that in order to determine if registration is necessary, one must first look at the history of anonymity on the internet, the freedoms it brings, and also the troubles it causes (“网络匿名并不是一个简单的东西，对它的来龙去脉，它的解放性力量与毁坏性特征，很有必要进行彻底的梳理”). Hu concludes that anonymity on the internet should be restricted in some cases, but must have a clear-cut definition if this is to occur.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>Hu Yong, “人人都知道你是一条狗,” 读书 (*Dúshū*)

As scholars discuss the idea of real-name registration and the problem of compromised anonymity on the internet, the Chinese government has made some strides to show their stance. Recently the Chinese courts have been introduced to the growing concern over personal information being shared throughout the internet. China's first landmark case on this matter was brought about by a man named Wang Fei, whose wife Jiang Yan committed suicide after discovering her husband was having an affair. What made Wang Fei a target of the Human Flesh Search Engine was the fact that his wife had begun a blog in which she wrote about his affair and her own fall into depression for the two months leading up to her suicide. Along with her blog entries, she also posted her husband's personal information, giving viewers to her blog an outlet to release their anger and sympathy.<sup>112</sup>

Wang Fei's life forever changed because of the leak of his personal information. He was fired from his job after netizens called his colleagues and boss and told the story of his affair. Furthermore, obscenities were painted on the door of his parents' home. Wang Fei has reportedly said that these attacks "have seriously hampered [his] normal life." As a result, he sued the websites Daqi.com and Tianya.com, and an individual netizen named Zhang Leyi, for helping to spread his personal information and story across the internet. The court ruled that Daqi.com had to pay Wang 3,000 RMB (\$439.29) for emotional distress, while Zhang Leyi was made to pay 5,000 RMB (\$732.15). Tianya.com was not found at fault because representatives for the website testified that they had tried to delete posts pertaining to Wang.<sup>113</sup>

The judge ruled that Wang Fei's personal privacy had been invaded by posting personal information by releasing names and photos on the internet. However, while this may seem a victory against the attacks of the Human Flesh Search Engine, the judge upheld the morals of

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<sup>112</sup> Deng Shasha, "Website Ordered to Pay Damages..." *China View News*, Dec. 18, 2008

<sup>113</sup> Deng Shasha, "Website Ordered to Pay Damages..." *China View News*, Dec. 18, 2008

society by supporting the fact that the Chinese marriage law demands couples remain faithful to one another, and claiming that Wang Fei's behavior "not only broke the law, but also offended the moral standard of the society."<sup>114</sup> By making this claim, the Chinese government supports the sentiments expressed by netizens in outrage to this extramarital affair, but does not condone the methods they went through in order to punish the offender.

This debate over privacy versus anonymity on the internet remains blurred. On one hand, there are individuals such as Wang Fei who become targets of the search engine and have the court system in China ruling that they have a right for their privacy to be upheld. But at the same time, Wang's private life is being scrutinized and he remains under moral attack from the court system itself when the judge ruled that his affair went against the moral standards of Chinese society.

Similarly in the case of netizens who make these personal attacks, their online privacy is being threatened. On the one hand their anonymity will be restricted, making their online actions more accountable, but also allowing their online lives to become public knowledge. And at the same time, this loss of anonymity would make it much less possible for netizens to invade the privacy of others by posting their personal information and images to the internet, and putting themselves into the affairs of individuals that they do not know. However, should more strides be taken by the Chinese government to restrict the amount of anonymity allowed on the internet, and calling for a process in which to introduce a real-name registration system on the web, the Human Flesh Search Engine as it is known today will greatly change. Netizens may not feel comfortable displaying their words of outrage and anger over immoral acts if their real name and possibly even more information, such as their location, is stamped onto their response.

Furthermore, as of now the Human Flesh Search Engine thrives on an anonymous voice calling

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<sup>114</sup> Deng Shasha, "Website Ordered to Pay Damages..." *China View News*, Dec. 18, 2008

out for justice or punishment against an individual. Yet if registration becomes the norm, it would put a face to the attacker and give the target someone to launch back at. This could lead to more court cases over online personal attacks and information being shared on the internet. From this vantage point, it would be a strong hypothesis to say that should real-name registration or stronger internet privacy laws come about, the Human Flesh Search Engine would deteriorate and would be stripped it of the key elements that comprise the backbone of its power.

If anonymity on the Internet is stamped out in China, the people may be less likely to speak their minds, having their newfound open forum taken away. Censorship in China is an issue that is continuously receiving international attention. The Human Flesh Search Engine in a way is making changes to the government's censor hold by providing democracy online. This new political participation is found through outlets such as the ability to chat online with officials and the freedom to anonymously post one's thoughts on a web forum. And it's been shown through cases such as the Rabies Outlash in 2006 and various cases of government corruption that enough bad publicity and a large online voice have been able to force change within China. But will the Human Flesh Search Engine help to expand this freedom of the internet, or will it be decided that this information and liberty to protest online is better left hidden?

At the same time, netizens are choosing to strengthen China by their actions in fueling the search engine. Instead of targeting the government over issues such as unemployment, environmental pollution, or restricted democracy, the people are choosing to target corrupt officials and weed out "traitors" which in turn strengthen China and create a new sense of nationalism on the Internet. It seems as though netizens target issues that they are positive they can make a difference toward. And this leads to the question of where the priorities of Chinese netizens lie? If one uses the Human Flesh Search Engine as a means to look into this topic, issues

such as environmentalism and unemployment are absent. Instead most of the resources of netizens are being used on small social blips that hold no direct consequences for the people.

And to some degree the government has the power to control the direction of the Human Flesh Search Engine, and in turn direct the issues that are pushed forward by netizens. From an outsider's perspective it may appear that the Human Flesh Search Engine is Internet chaos with no one directing it, when in essence the government has a strong control and the ability to pull the plug on issues deemed subversive. However, the government can also keep fueling sentiments that work in its favor.

In summer 2009, a Twitter account titled "fall of the wall" (FOTW) was set up to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>115</sup> Netizens were able to visit the website and post comments and sentiments. Many Chinese netizens found their way to the Twitter page and began commenting for a fall to the "Great Chinese Firewall", a nickname to the Internet regulation and censorship machine in China. Before long the Chinese government pulled the plug and blocked access to the Twitter page on the Chinese mainland. In this case the government was quick to shut down a website that posed a threat to the Party's stability, whereas issues such as "race traitors" and low-level corruption are kept to thrive on the search engine because they actually benefit the government.

Yet regardless of the growth of internet technologies and the spread of the internet throughout China, these cases throughout history all boil down to the power of words in Chinese society. By posting words to a public space, individuals are able to attack someone else's reputation and invade their privacy. Through their choice of words they are able to cast a certain image over a targeted individual, often using powerful words that evoke feelings of anger which degrade the target under scrutiny. From the Cultural Revolution to the technological era it is

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<sup>115</sup> Twitter.com, "Fall of the Wall"

evident that words posted to a public space greatly help to mobilize people. By reading these posters groups are able to form behind common ideals that bind them. These ideals could be revolutionary ideals to strengthen a nation as evident during the Mao era, or they could be moral standards that should not be broken as evident throughout the Human Flesh Search Engine. Amidst these changes in society and technology, words and language continue to be the basis to galvanize Chinese society.

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