Coal Miner’s Daughter

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One of the most recent targets of China’s self-appointed net detectives—practitioners of the pernicious phenomenon known as the “human flesh search” (ren rou sou sou)—is not an unfaithful husband, a kitten killer, or a Tibet-friendly Chinese student. Instead she is someone who is, supposedly, a comely young woman whose father owns a coal mine and who recently immigrated to Seattle, cash, flashy cars, and Louis Vuitton luggage in hand. Definitely not from Butcher Holler. And, as it turns out, a fake.

The human flesh searchers, who mete out internet justice and facilitate the harassment of those who fail their moral and political tests, have been active this year. Though some bloggers have traced the practice as far back as 2001, it has come under greater scrutiny this year as the first human flesh search case winds its way through the courts. The case has been brought by that unfaithful husband, Wang Fei, whose wife threw herself off their 24th floor Beijing balcony after posting to her blog about her husband’s cheating ways. In search of vengeance, netizens tracked down Wang’s information, harrying him with threatening emails, phone calls, and even a net-organized posse who showed up on his doorstep. In the Western media, human flesh searching gained increased attention after Grace Wang, a Chinese student at Duke University, received death threats (and her family in China was forced into hiding) after she was captured on film attempting to mediate between pro-Tibet and pro-China protestors on campus. In both cases, searchers first discovered their target’s identity and then published their personal information on the web. Virtual and physical harassment followed.

In early September, the video of the coal mine boss’s daughter started to make the rounds. In it, a young woman in bug-eyed sunglasses issues a proclamation, written in bubbly characters, that cuts to the heart of current Chinese anxieties over increasing economic inequality and the shallowness of rampant consumerism:

“Recently spreading on the Internet have been a lot of domestic Chinese girls showing off their wealth...These domestic Chinese wealthy girls normally revel in vulgar tastes...This kind of nouvelle riche showing off, I completely do not take seriously, and to compete with them would be lowering myself to their level. I post these pictures not to show off anything, but only to let those girls see clearly that the most important thing is having high tastes.” (translation from chinaSMACK)

The response from netizens was immediate. By mid-September, the video had garnered tens of thousands of comments. Commentators made comparisons between the coal mine boss’s daughter’s lifestyle and that of the coal miners themselves. With 70 percent of Chinese energy from coal, the industry is a national staple, but is also one of the most dangerous with thousands of deaths per year. And Shanxi, China’s West Virginia, has been ravaged by the extractive industry. For many viewers, the glossy pictures and self-satisfied tone confirmed fears that a new generation of wealthy twenty-something Chinese, pampered by their hard-working parents, would simply take their money and run from the poverty and environmental degradation that are the cornerstones of their wealth.

The video, which supposedly showed images of the woman’s Seattle house, cars, designer handbag collection, stacks of US currency, even her sneaker collection, was ripped apart by searchers who sensed that the video was a fake. One net detective proved that the photos of her Seattle mansion were actually pictures of Yao Ming’s pad. Another found the stills of “her” BMW on another website.

Eventually, searchers traced the video back to its original source. Roland Soong at EastSouthWestNorth reprinted (and translated) the account, originally from Shanxi News Net, in which the reporter notes that:

“On September 6, the netizen ‘Huanweichen’ was identified as the first one to post the video. Through the clues provided by the netizens, this reporter was able to contact here via QQ. She is a 22-year-old girl who claims to be a student at a certain university in Beijing. She is also the planner for a DV club. Concerning the many condemnations, she said indifferently: ‘How much is real on the Internet? Isn’t it
more fun to have real and fake stuff? If you believe it, then it is real!’ She said that she uploads videos almost weekly for video websites. So far she had made almost 2,000 videos. Most of them are re-posts from elsewhere but some of them are her own creations. She does so for fun as well as the training experience in video production.” (for the original story, see 6park)

The duper Huanweichen’s response at being found out—“If you believe it, then it is real!”—embodies an increasing blurring between reality and fiction. In asking whether the distinction even matters Huanweichen not only engages a debate that has raged elsewhere on the internet—as it did in the US two years ago when the doe-eyed teen vlogger (video blogger) “Lonelygirl15” turned out to be a twenty-something graduate of the New York Film Academy—but she also questions the very desire that drives the human flesh searchers to such extreme ends.

In his book on the moral conundrums of another moment of unprecedented wealth in Chinese history, Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China, Timothy Brook writes that “as the prospect of wealth fueled avarice, the moral order that had held society together gave way” (2). Brook makes the connection between today and the late Ming, when the economy grew at a staggering pace, the silver trade drew China into global exchange, and elite culture was increasingly distinct from that of the peasants. The human flesh searchers insist that they will hold the line against the avarice they perceive has resulted from today’s massive social transformation and dislocation; Huanweichen, on the other hand, asks why we should bother at all, since in the Internet fantasy world we can all be the coal mine boss’s daughter.