

2012

# Digital Chinese Whispers: Death Threats and Rumors Inside China's Online Marketplace of Ideas

James Leibold  
*La Trobe University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

---

Leibold, James, "Digital Chinese Whispers: Death Threats and Rumors Inside China's Online Marketplace of Ideas" (2012). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 28.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/28>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# [Digital Chinese Whispers: Death Threats and Rumors Inside China's Online Marketplace of Ideas](#)

January 17, 2012 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#)

By James Leibold

The Chinese internet is a wonderfully raucous and interesting place. It has greatly expanded the scope of public discourse and activity, despite the party-state's extensive censorship regime. Not surprisingly, the world's largest cyber-community exhibits tremendous depth and diversity: progressive cyber-activists and professional agitators; navel-gazing starlets and steam-venting gamers; mundane infotainment and the banal waxing of quotidian life; and, sadly, dark corners of fear, hatred and paranoia. It's all there; it simply depends on where one looks. Like other technologies before it, the internet is normatively neutral, and thus can be put to good, bad and anodyne uses: individuals—not tools—shape the contours of different societies and their cultures.

Yet, to date, Anglophone literature on the Chinese internet has tended to celebrate its liberating, subversive potential. The focus here is on those brave dissent-bloggers (Ai Weiwei, Murong Xuecun, Pi San, Zola, and others) who dare to speak truth to power while cleverly poking holes in the "Great Firewall of China." In recently published books and articles, one finds numerous examples of whimsical yet biting digital parodies (grass-mud horses, river crabs, and steamed buns), online environmental and community activism (the PX and Green Dam incidents), cyber-attacks on local corruption and vested interests (Li Gang Gate and human-flesh search engines), and even occasional open criticism of the Party and its leaders. These are examples of the "blog revolution" that Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet Project at the University of California at Berkeley and its widely read [China Digital Times \(CDT\) website](#), claims is sweeping China, and "shaking up the power balance between the people and the government of the world's most populous nation."

In the latest issue of the [Journal of Asian Studies](#), I put forward an alternative scenario (see "[Blogging Alone](#)" and Guobin Yang's reply "[Technology and Its Contents](#)"). Without denying the significance of the above examples, I offer an outsider's critique: an intervention informed by, but positioned outside, the burgeoning field of Chinese internet studies, and instead rooted in my own research on Han cyber-nationalism. In the article, I argue that the Sinophone internet is producing the same shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos it has created elsewhere in the world, and these more prosaic elements need to be considered alongside the Chinese internet's potential for creating new forms of civic activism and socio-political change.

☺☺☺

Here I want to take up one concrete example from the "dark side," a tale which due to space limitations wasn't included in my JAS article but provides some of the "content and context" that Guobin Yang rightfully suggests is missing from my article. It demonstrates, I would argue, the limits of the Chinese internet as a progressive, bottom-up "marketplace of ideas." The sort of

dynamic “online carnival” that Guobin Yang and others argue is increasing the transparency, accountability and “grassroots, citizen democracy” of Chinese society.

Over the past four years, I have been engaged in a type of digital ethnography, which has taken me deep inside one of the small corners of the Chinese internet—a rather dark, sobering periphery inhabited by an increasingly truculent community of Han nationalists. As I have pointed out [elsewhere](#), this community of several thousand hardcore members is extremely diverse, crossing both national and ideological barriers, but also passionately convinced that the Chinese party-state and its allies are intentionally undermining Han power and privilege. In seeking to draw attention to a regime of government policies that are rendering the once mighty Han race “second-class citizens,” Han cyber-nationalists have created a network of weblogs and BBS forums. Yet the deeper one probes into their online discussions and activism, the murkier truth and reality becomes.

As part of my ongoing research, I published [a short essay](#) on China Beat analysing the group’s reaction to the immensely popular 2004 novel *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng* 狼图腾). In the article, I described how Hanists view the novel as a despicable celebration of uncivilised and parasitic nomadic culture, which in the words of one of its leading members, was “actually preparing public opinion for the carrying out of racial genocide against the Han.” I also posited that this sort of cyber-racism seemed to be spilling over into Chinese streets, with the 2008-09 race riots in Lhasa, Shaoguan, and Ürümqi serving as an important reminder of how internet rage can whip the marginalized and socially dispossessed into bloody action.

In March 2010, my China Beat article was translated on the Hanwang 汉网 BBS community ([www.hanminzu.com](http://www.hanminzu.com)), under the title: [“Western article suggests: Hanwang incited the bloody attack on minorities during the Tibetan and Xinjiang riots.”](#) and immediately elicited a flurry of discussion, with now over one hundred replies and cross-postings across the Sinophone internet. The seven year-old Hanwang community has over [120,000 registered members](#) and attracts on average 2 million unique visitors per month, although this number tends to fluctuate wildly and was as high as 7 million in April 2010.

I half-expected the sort of unreflective vitriol and spleen-venting that saw me labelled a “white skinned pig” (*baipizhu* 白皮猪) on [Baidu Tieba](#) 百度贴吧 and suggested elsewhere that I allow “the nomadic, war-like and democratic lupine culture,” which I clearly worshipped, “to trample on the naked belly of my wife.” But what really surprised me were the hollow death threats—I received two such warnings—and the way these threads quickly slipped into the realm of bogus babble and absurd conspiracy theories.

Within hours of its translation, Hanwang members were already referring to my article as “the result of collusion between domestic tartars and Western Nazis.” This quickly led to extensive speculation about my ethnic heritage. Someone speculated that I was a Manchu sympathizer seeking to inflame Hanwang members. Noting that I was an academic in Australia, one blogger argued that my surname seemed German and the large number of Turkish migrants in Germany could help to explain my nomadic affinities. Others asserted that Leibold was actually a Muslim surname: “This tool is quite likely a Turk.” Another member piped in: “Although he is German, I bet he’s a minority,” and later asked: “Does anyone think that this guy has a Germanic

demeanor?” Another contributor posted up a link to my La Trobe University webpage and photo, stating: “Leibold seems like a fairly common surname in Germany, but this doesn’t mean he is German as there are a large number of German migrants in America and Canada, as seems to also be the case in Australia.”

Based on my photo and suggestions that I was trying to link Han nationalism with Nazi-style racism, another blogger concluded that I must be Jewish. This then led to further speculation about my nose, with one member declaring it was not high enough like the typical Jewish and Palestinian noses. Others disagreed: “In my opinion, Middle Eastern people have beak-like noses, the bridge of the nose is not too high like Albert Einstein and Yassar Arafat.”

For most Hanwang members, I represented yet another foreigner who hates the Chinese, especially its Han majority. Posts that moved beyond my physical appearance speculated instead on my connections with domestic and international forces opposing the Han. According to the translator of my article, I was part of a complex, international conspiracy ring that linked former Mongolian prince and failed independence leader Demchugdongrub with Harvard Professor John King Fairbank, and George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld of all people.

In an attempt to reassure Hanwang members of my scholarly intentions while engaging them in a bit of honest dialogue, I posted a Chinese language reply to their comments on 3 June 2010. In my response, I pointed out (tactfully, I hope) that many of their comments reinforced my rather dim view of the Hanwang community, and its tendency to “spin conspiracy theories that are often wrapped in racial language.” But I also praised the Chinese internet’s ability to expand the scope of public discourse on issues as sensitive as ethnic relations, and acknowledged the legitimacy of some of their grievances.

Despite some initial discussion about the PRC’s ethnic-based affirmative action policies, the thread once again descended into hysteria and name calling, with Hanwang members suggesting that—among other things—I was “insincere,” “crazy,” “savage-hearted,” and a “stupid liar” who was doing the dirty work of some spy agency. Admitting that he did not have any proof of my links with anti-China spy agencies, one blogger called on me to “please clarify the source of your research funding and why this funding body is willing to spend money so that you can understand our non-mainstream speech on the internet?”

But before I could reply, I found myself banished from Hanwang. On 12 June 2010, Hanwang’s chief administrator intervened, stating that my original post triggered an attack on Hanwang by the censors and its closure to mainland-based netizens. “For the benefit of everyone that likes to browse, I’m afraid I can’t permit Mr Leibold to post any more comments on Hanwang. If Mr Leibold wants to post further explanations, I invite him to do so elsewhere.” In response to a plea from one overseas-based member about upholding freedom of speech on Hanwang, the administrator asserted: “Hanwang isn’t a place where ‘free discussion can occur’,” and that overseas members could not possibly understand the difficulties faced by those living and writing inside “the shield.” “In order to make sure that other netizens don’t lose out,” he concluded, “I ask you to go elsewhere to explain yourself. Thanks for your cooperation.”

Rumors and conspiracy theories have long been a part of the fabric of human society. Yet in the era of instant communication—emails, SMS, and tweets—they can spread like wildfire throughout our communities, and produce disastrous consequences. This type of “counter-knowledge” can easily damage markets, people, and institutions. On one level, the online musings of Han cyber-nationalists can be dismissed as outside the mainstream but innocuous. After all, we are talking about only a handful of China’s half a billion netizens. But rumors and hate speak can prove a toxic combination. Take the way in which [online rumors](#) touched off one of modern China’s deadliest race riots in Ürümqi. As [Cass Sunstein has argued](#), misinformation spreads through two distinct yet interconnected processes—social cascades and group polarization—with both of these phenomena rampant on the Sinophone internet.

The flow of information on the internet can resemble a game of Chinese whispers, with a story breaking in one corner before being tweeted, cross-posted and flamed across virtual networks. And when we lack any independent source of information, we tend to believe the views of others, especially if they come from those that share a similar ideological disposition or worldview as us. One can point to numerous examples of rumors on the Sinophone internet: there was [the bizarre run on salt and iodine products](#) following the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and the [online hyping](#) of the Li Gang incident last year. In terms of the latter, a recent investigative report by two Chinese journalists pinned the popular internet meme “Sue me if you can – my father is Li Gang” to an anonymous thread on the Tianya BBS Forum, and argues that a terrified, drunk and visibly shaken Li Qiming never uttered these now infamous words after running over two students on the campus of Hebei University.

The problem of internet rumors is compounded by group polarization. Social psychologists have long identified the human tendency towards [homophily](#), the seeking out of like-minded individuals in social spaces ranging from friendships, neighborhoods, playgrounds, and online communities. The filtering and point-casting power of the internet makes it even easier for us to live in information cocoons. And the biased ways in which we all process information means that the opinions of homophilic social circles tend to harden over time, allowing even the most preposterous rumors and conspiracy theories to find widespread acceptance. How else can we explain why a quarter of Americans still think President Obama [wasn’t born in the United States](#) and/or [is a Muslim](#)? Again, there are plenty of examples of group polarization on the Sinophone internet—from pop-star fan clubs to religious cults—and the popularity of anonymous BBS and micro-blogging communities intensifies this phenomenon in China.

Internet rumors, of course, are not unique to China. But the authoritarian, tightly controlled nature of PRC society and official media makes them more dangerous. When I surf the internet and encounter the latest meme, I can crosscheck information against any number of generally reliable and authoritative sources. Inside the PRC, citizens have come to rightly distrust the mainstream media, leaving them few options—other than scaling the firewall—to verify information. Yet, sadly, only a tiny minority of Chinese netizens possess either the skill or the desire to access information outside the Chinese intranet.

There are various scenarios available here. But let me end with two possible (arguably extreme) alternatives: 1) an informational cascade, either false or true, spreads rapidly throughout Chinese society, and like a virtual prairie fire, undermines the authority and control of the party-state,

resulting in a mass revolt or political revolution; or 2) the social cascades and filtering power of the internet continues to polarize Chinese society, with different social and discourse communities walling themselves off from one another, and thus allowing the party-state to easily isolate and stamp out any spot fires of dissent. One might hope for the former, but are we not already witnessing the latter?

*[James Leibold](#) is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and Asian Studies at La Trobe University in Australia and one of the co-editors of the forthcoming [Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation and Identity of China's Majority](#) (University of California Press).*