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Where an Internet Joke Is Not Just a Joke

By BROOK LARMER

The cellphone vibrated softly, insistently, echoing off the whitewashed walls of the artist's studio. It was a Sunday morning in early April, and Wang Bo — an Internet animator better known to his legions of online fans by his nickname, Pi San — ignored the call at first. He wanted no intrusions. A compact 40-year-old with short-cropped hair and arched eyebrows that give him a look of permanent bemusement, Pi San is most famous for creating a mischievous cartoon character named Kuang Kuang, but he earns money by making animations for corporations, and he was on a deadline. Pi San had bicycled to his studio in a defunct factory building on the outskirts of Beijing that morning, hoping to finish up some work in peace. But the buzzing of the phone didn't stop.

The moment Pi San picked up, the caller blurted out the news: State security agents had [just detained Ai Weiwei](#), China's most famous contemporary artist and a government critic. Pi San spat out a profanity. Over the previous six weeks, hundreds of bloggers — lawyers, activists, journalists — had vanished into police custody in one of the harshest assaults on social activism in decades. Now they had Ai — fat, brilliant, bombastic and internationally renowned. If Ai could be arrested, was any independent thinker in China safe?

Pi San had reason to be scared. He and Ai were friends. A few weeks earlier, over lunch, the two artists talked about collaborating on a satirical Internet animation. Though a bit wary of Ai's Web activism, Pi San admired his daring solo exhibitions in New York, Berlin and London. The most recent show had consisted of [100 million sunflower seeds made of porcelain](#), laid out across the floor of the Tate Modern, which visitors were invited to walk upon. Some considered the seeds to be symbols of the downtrodden Chinese people.

Despite his fear, Pi San quickly posted the news about Ai's detention on Sina Weibo, China's closely monitored equivalent of Twitter and the fastest-growing Internet platform in the world. An invisible censor deleted the message in seconds. He then tried posting, without comment, a cartoon drawing of Ai, the better to evade China's word-sensitive filtering software. But the image disappeared, too — a sign that a human being, not computer software, had deleted the drawing. Pi San told his Weibo followers: "Again I was 'harmonized.' It's just a picture!"

Now the creative synapses started firing. "I had to do something to lift the fear," Pi San told me later. "Others might write or protest; I make animations." He and a colleague worked feverishly through the night on a 54-second flash animation entitled "[Crack Sunflower Seeds.](#)" The animation takes place in Kuang Kuang's school, where a little girl is speaking over the loudspeakers. "Once upon a time," she begins, "there was a Chinese man selling sunflower seeds." Suddenly, a black cartoon hand yanks her off the set. A succession of trembling announcers tries to tell the same story, but the black hand pulls them off too, each time more quickly than the last.

Finally, it is Kuang Kuang's turn. The boy hems and haws and, giving up, sighs in exasperation: "Ai." A word bubble appears with the Chinese character for the sigh (哎), virtually the same as Ai's surname (艾). Kuang Kuang is hauled off, screaming. In the next frame, the black hand sweeps away sunflower seeds arranged in the same "Ai." Then we hear a grating sound — teeth meeting porcelain — followed by an off-screen scream: "Damn it! Who sold us these fake sunflower seeds?"

Pi San finished the animation before dawn on April 4, less than 24 hours after Ai was detained. "I hesitated for a second before posting it online," he told me. "But then I thought, If I don't put it up, that would be like self-castration." With a few clicks, he sent "Crack Sunflower Seeds" into cyberspace, posting it onto China's top video Web sites. In just a few hours, a million or more netizens watched the animation online. Then the video began disappearing from Chinese Web sites one by one, just like the announcers in his animation. Pi San lashed out directly at the censors in a Weibo post: "You're like the eunuch who gets worried before the emperor does!" There was no response. Even in his anger, Pi San was left wondering if the black hand would come for him.

No government in the world pours more resources into patrolling the Web than China's, tracking down unwanted content and supposed miscreants among the online population of 500 million with an army of more than 50,000 censors and vast networks of advanced filtering software. Yet despite these restrictions — or precisely because of them — the Internet is flourishing as the wittiest space in China. "Censorship warps us in many ways, but it is also the mother of creativity," says Hu Yong, an Internet expert and associate professor at Peking University. "It forces people to invent indirect ways to get their meaning across, and humor works as a natural form of encryption."

To slip past censors, Chinese bloggers have become masters of comic subterfuge, cloaking their messages in protective layers of irony and satire. This is not a new concept, but it has erupted so powerfully that it now defines the ethos of the Internet in China. Coded language has become part of mainstream culture, with the most contagious memes tapping into widely shared feelings about issues that cannot be openly discussed, from corruption and economic inequality to censorship itself. "Beyond its comic value, this humor shows where netizens are pushing against the boundaries of the state," says Xiao Qiang, an adjunct professor at the University of California, Berkeley, whose Web site, [China Digital Times](#), maintains [an entertaining lexicon of coded Internet terms](#). "Nothing else gives us a clearer view of the pressure points in Chinese society."

So pervasive is this irreverent subculture that the Chinese have a name for it: *egao*, meaning "evil works" or, more roughly, "mischievous mockery." In its simplest form, *egao* (pronounced "EUH-gow") lampoons the powerful without being overtly rebellious. President Hu Jintao's favorite buzz word, "harmony," which he deploys constantly when urging social stability, is hijacked to signify censorship itself, as in, "My blog's been harmonized." June 4, the censored date of the 1989 massacre of pro-democracy protesters, is rendered as May 35 — or "535." There are also more complex forms of *egao*, like Hu Ge's 2010 film spoof, ["Animal World."](#) in which a rare species of Internet users is "saved" from "compulsive thinking disorder," i.e., the urge to think freely.

Satire is sometimes a safety valve that government might grudgingly permit. Better a virtual laugh, after all, than a real protest. But being laughed at, as Orwell found during his stint as a colonial police officer in Burma, can also be a ruler's greatest fear. And the Chinese government, which last year [sentenced a woman to a year of hard labor for a sarcastic three-word tweet](#), appears to suffer from an acute case of humor deficiency. "Jokes that mock the abuse of power do more than let off steam; they mobilize people's emotions," says [Wen Yunchao](#), an outspoken blogger who often mounts sardonic Internet campaigns in defense of free speech. "Every time a joke takes off," Wen says, "it chips away at the so-called authority of an authoritarian regime."

Satirical threads sweeping across the Internet can often seem like brush fires whose origins are lost in the conflagration. But behind every outbreak are individuals probing the limits of self-expression, flirting, often perilously, with the blurry line between the permissible and the punishable. Over the past several months I followed two individuals — the animator Pi San and the blogger Wen Yunchao — in an effort to understand the dynamics of "mischievous mockery" and the increasingly serious game of cat-and-mouse taking place along China's digital front lines.

Pi San and Wen are perfect counterpoints — a northerner and a southerner who approach *egao* from different angles. One specializes in visual images, the other mainly in words. Pi San shudders at being considered an activist; he sees satire as an artistic way to vent personal frustration. Wen wears the activist label proudly; he views humor as a "weapon of the weak" to mobilize civil society. As the government crackdown intensified, each man was forced to adjust his calculations of danger and opportunity: How far could they go before they crossed the invisible line?

Wen learned the true power of Internet humor not from a joke but from a cry for help from a police interrogation room. Early one morning in July 2009, Wen, who is 39, woke up in his apartment in the southern city of Guangzhou to find a startling message on his Twitter feed: "[I have been arrested by Mawei police, SOS.](#)" The jailhouse tweet was from Guo Baofeng, a young friend and fellow blogger, referring to a district in the coastal city Xiamen, some 300 miles away. Minutes later came another tweet from Guo, also in English: "Pls help me, I grasped the phone during police sleep."

Then there was nothing.

Wen knew how easily people could disappear into the labyrinths of China's prison system. Guo, who was then a 25-year-old English-language translator, had reposted a video in which the mother of a gang-raped murder victim accused local Xiamen authorities of a cover-up. Now Wen wondered how far the police would go to muzzle the messenger.

The tweets from detention — and the silence that followed — unsettled Wen. But what could he do? Any direct protest would be shut down immediately, even if people could overcome their fear to participate. Then he noticed [a phrase that was going viral on the Internet](#): "Jia Junpeng, your mother is calling you home for dinner!"

The line's origins were a mystery, but the online masses latched onto it as a joking commentary on their Web-addicted generation — lost in cyberspace, unreachable by the outside world. That very day, millions retweeted the phrase. Wen, though, gave it a new twist. He urged his tens of thousands of microblog followers to [send postcards to the Mawei police station and post photos of them online](#), all with the same words: “Guo Baofeng, your mother is calling you home for dinner!”

Nobody can know if the Internet campaign made a difference. But instead of being lost in the prison system — four other bloggers arrested for reposting the same video were sentenced to one to two years in prison — Guo was released after 16 days. For Wen, the incident crystallized his thinking. “Humor can amplify the power of the social media,” he told me. “If it hits a nerve, like a case of injustice or abuse, it can be contagious. It's indirect — just a joke, right? — so people lose their fear of getting involved.”

Growing up as the oldest child in a poor family in rural Guangdong Province, Wen wasn't always keen to get involved himself. When army tanks crushed the 1989 pro-democracy movement in Beijing, Wen, who was then a middle-school student prone to skipping class, applauded the crackdown. “I agreed with the government that it was necessary to prevent chaos,” he recalls. Wen's most daring act in college — he was assigned to study machine welding at a technical institute in Harbin, a city in China's icy far north — was to smuggle in Cantonese pornography and pop music to help him endure the long winters.

His Internet “awakening,” as he calls it, came years later, when he toiled at a power station near Guangzhou. One night after clocking out, Wen watched a television special beamed in from nearby Hong Kong that contradicted the official story of the 1989 massacre. Finding a trove of information online to confirm its veracity — this was before the Great Firewall, erected in 2003, blocked such terms as “June 4” — he emerged with a new conviction: “The Internet will open the door of democracy.”

Hungry to learn more, Wen transformed himself over the next decade into an information machine, first as a journalist and then as a blogger. Covering events for state-run newspapers and, later, for government television, he produced reports and commentaries that toed the official line. On the Internet, though, he adopted a more freewheeling persona, writing a popular blog called [Ramblings of a Drunkard](#) under a pseudonym. Soon, Wen moved full time online, working for the Chinese Internet company Netease and moonlighting as one of the country's earliest citizen journalists. His first article, typed into his cellphone, chronicled the 2007 street protests in Xiamen that succeeded in halting construction of a chemical plant.

The censors were never far behind, turning Wen's life into a perpetual game of hide-and-seek. First a few posts were blocked, then his entire blog, then the Chinese Internet portal he used. An overseas Web server worked until the Great Firewall shut it out too. Riding the next wave of technology, Wen began typing out 140-character blasts on Twitter and China's fast-growing microblogging sites. Weibo, a Twitter equivalent that barely existed two years ago, now has

200 million users, churning out some 40 million messages a day. The government, hard-pressed to keep up, leans on Web companies to censor their own content in return for “self-discipline” points needed to renew licenses. “No place is safe anymore,” Wen says. “But whenever censorship grows, so do the opportunities for sarcasm and satire.”

Not long ago, Wen even dared to target China’s most unassailable icon: Mao Zedong. The chairman has been dead for 35 years, but his massive portrait still presides over Tiananmen Square. It is just one sign of what Wen calls the “awful influence” wielded by the founder of the People’s Republic. Ridiculing Mao is almost unthinkable in China today. Even so, on the anniversary of Mao’s death in 2009, Wen urged his online followers to join a devious [“de-Maoification” campaign](#). Since “mao” is also the Chinese word for “hair,” he suggested posting before-and-after shots of shaved body parts — people literally “getting rid of mao.”

Wen is a beer-bellied man with a thick Abraham Lincoln-style beard. Among the hundreds of images of shorn beards and hair-free legs that flashed across the Web that day was Wen’s own contribution: a photo of his rotund belly with its hair in a topiary of the “t” of the Twitter logo. Wen’s abdominal salute was funny, but it was also a manifesto for a more open China — and a dangerous move in his showdown with Chinese authorities.

When Pi San was a young boy — around the same age as his impish creation, Kuang Kuang — his parents used to smack his hand with a ruler every time they caught him drawing cartoons in the margins of his school books. “I was a mediocre student,” says Pi San, whose family lived in a bleak copper-mining town in the hills of Shanxi Province. “My parents thought my doodling doomed me to a life in the mine.”

Despite the punishment, Pi San kept drawing, even selling caricatures of Kung Fu heroes to his friends. Nearly two decades later, Pi San runs Hutoon, the animation company he founded in 2005. Hutoon’s staff of 50 young designers fills most of a floor in “798,” a trendy district of art galleries, studios and cafes built on the remnants of a military electronics factory in northeastern Beijing. The young men and women — most dressed in black, like their boss — huddle over banks of computers, the clicketyclack of keyboards resounding in the high-ceilinged industrial space.

When I first visited his fourth-floor studio in early March, Pi San seemed to move easily between his roles as entrepreneur and provocateur, a reflection of what he jokingly calls his multiple-personality disorder. A few years ago, Hutoon produced an animated series for China Central Television — the government’s main propaganda arm — but Pi San chafed at the lack of creative freedom. “Even CCTV’s cartoons are all about indoctrination, not entertainment,” he said. Now he and his staff crank out animated Internet ads and videos for clients including rock stars and Fortune 500 firms like Motorola and Samsung.

In mid-April, I watched Pi San and his crew work on an episode of [“Ms. Puff,”](#) Hutoon’s most lucrative animation series. Centered on a risqué but apolitical female character — censors notice Puff only when the strap on her camisole slips — the series is the first original animated content commissioned by [Youku](#), the Chinese equivalent of YouTube. Two weeks earlier, Youku had been one of the first Web sites to delete his anti-censorship satire, “Crack Sunflower

Seeds.” This didn’t matter to Pi San. Hutoon’s financial future depended on the success of “Ms. Puff.” “You have to have a split personality to succeed in China,” he told me. “With some animations, I make money. With others, I just make fun.”

That afternoon, though, the boss was preoccupied. There was no news of Ai Weiwei, and Pi San’s thoughts about the future — that of his wife and their 7-year-old son — cycled between anger, fear and resignation. Leaving Hutoon’s main studio, he led me to a back room filled with heaps of corrugated cardboard, which were the miniature sets used in the Kuang Kuang animations. “This is where I come when my emotions are running high,” Pi San said, bending down to examine the eight-inch-tall room that loomed large in “Crack Sunflower Seeds.”

Nearby was a tiny school building featured in Pi San’s first Kuang Kuang satire in 2009, a mordant swipe at the education system called “Blow Up the School.” An instant Internet sensation among Chinese youth, the animation generated a few million hits on its first day and so angered officials that they slapped him with a fine for “inappropriate content.” As more irreverent Kuang Kuang videos appeared, Internet fan clubs formed in nearly every Chinese province, turning the bubbleheaded boy and his creator into minor cult figures.

None of Pi San’s work has evoked China’s social ills more provocatively than “Little Rabbit, Be Good,” made last January. The four-minute “greeting card” to mark the Chinese Year of the Rabbit begins as a soothing bedtime story about bunny rabbits. But as Kuang Kuang drifts off to sleep, the story morphs into a nightmare. Ruled by tigers (the outgoing zodiac sign) who promise to “build a harmonious forest” — a pointed jab at Hu Jintao’s catchphrase — the rabbits suffer an endless series of abuses. Babies die from drinking poisoned milk. A protester fighting forced eviction gets crushed under a tiger’s car. A reckless driver kills a rabbit in a hit-and-run and boasts about his high-level police protection.

The thinly disguised allegory is based on real-life events that sparked outrage on the Internet. The ending, however, is sheer fantasy. Instead of accepting their fate, the rabbits rise up in revolt, ripping their tiger overlords apart with their bare teeth in a catharsis of “South Park”-style violence. The uprising ends with a warning: “Even rabbits bite when they are pushed.”

Pi San knew “Little Rabbit” might have crossed the line. After consulting a fortuneteller — “I wanted to know if this would cause me trouble,” he said — he hedged his bets, uploading the video to a few small fan Web sites in the middle of the night. “Little Rabbit” still received more than 70,000 hits within two hours, he says. By the time censors deleted the versions proliferating across the Internet two days later, an estimated three to four million people had seen it. Local media didn’t touch the story, but foreign journalists pressed him on the video’s political message. His coy response: “I only made a fairy tale.”

Pi San’s dark satire landed just as popular revolutions fueled by social media in Tunisia and Egypt were beginning to topple dictators. A few weeks later, Chinese bloggers who alluded online to the possibilities of a similar “jasmine”

revolution in China would be detained. “I was worried,” Pi San admitted. “The line moves all the time, so we never know where we stand.”

Most Chinese Internet users don’t give the invisible line between acceptable satire and detainable offense a second thought. They may know it exists, but their online activities — shopping, blogging, gaming, networking — remain safely within the confines of the Great Firewall. But the boundary is of the utmost concern for a growing number of artists and activists. “The government’s primary means of control is the fuzzy line,” says David Bandurski, a researcher at the [China Media Project](#) at Hong Kong University. “No one ever knows exactly where the line is. The control apparatus is built on uncertainty and self-censorship, on creating this atmosphere of fear.”

Wen felt the line shift a year ago, after judges in Oslo awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to the jailed Chinese writer [Liu Xiaobo](#). Few Chinese had ever heard of the man behind [Charter 08](#), the human-rights declaration that, like Liu’s name, was banned inside the Great Firewall. But the government was apoplectic. Chinese officials smeared the “criminal” Liu in the press, pressured foreign countries to boycott the ceremony and blocked a raft of new words on the Internet, even “Norway” and “Nobel.”

When the banned words extended to the phrase “empty chair” — the most conspicuous sign of [Liu’s absence at the Nobel ceremony](#) — Wen hit on an idea. If the words were not allowed, why not post photos of empty chairs as a tribute to Liu? “Everyone has an empty chair,” Wen pleaded with his 40,000-plus followers on Twitter and Weibo. “If we only watch, then one day [the empty chair] might appear by your family’s dining table as well.” At his urging, [bloggers posted dozens of seemingly innocuous pictures online](#), from an empty chair in a Van Gogh painting to a magazine ad for an Ikea lounge. The censors eventually caught on to the joke, but not before Wen had turned a bit of microblog mischief into a human rights statement.

Three months later came the broad crackdown seeming to stem from Beijing’s paranoia about the possible domestic repercussions from the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Wen was visiting Hong Kong when he received an e-mail warning from Chinese public-security agents: “Don’t come home. You’ll be arrested before you even see your wife and son.” His was now the empty chair. Wen decided to wait out the threats in Hong Kong, which is governed by different laws than the rest of China. Wen’s absence may have spared him detention or prison, but now he was in limbo.

When I visited Wen in Hong Kong in April, he was living in a temporary apartment with a row of shirts drip-drying in the window. Dinner consisted of a six-pack of beer followed by sausages fried up at 1 a.m. At one point, he pulled out his BlackBerry. “Gone, gone, gone,” Wen said, as he scrolled down a list of friends who had vanished, most likely into police custody.

Wen’s Twitter account was now swarming with the gadflies of the 50-Cent Party, which is the nickname for commentators who reportedly get paid 50 Chinese cents for every pro-government post. He showed me the barrage of

disparaging tweets he had received, along with two fake Twitter accounts the 50-Centers had set up to look like his. More menacing were the text warnings from anonymous senders who seemed to know everything about him: his identification number, his travel itineraries, even details about his wife, his 10-year-old son and his parents.

Early in the evening, Wen scoffed at the intimidation attempts. “The government has too much invested in the Internet financially to shut it down, so all it can do is resort to scare tactics,” he said. But as the night wore on and the beer cans piled up, he confided: “I’m worried they might pick me up even here in Hong Kong. I’m even more frightened for my family.”

The following day, I joined Wen on an excursion to Lingnan University, along Hong Kong’s border with mainland China, where he was to give a talk about Internet activism. On the train ride out, he spoke about his tenuous life in Hong Kong. A local satellite television company had hired him to develop a show that would beam propaganda-free reports into China. At night, Wen still tweeted prodigiously, launching jokes and spoofs over the Great Firewall, like a medieval catapult outside the castle ramparts. His wife and son would join him in Hong Kong months later, but Wen’s inability to return freely to his homeland left him depressed. “I got angry the other day when a friend called me a *liuwang*, an exile,” he told me. “It’s such a sad word. I never thought it would apply to me.”

At the university that evening, a table covered in red velvet had been set up on a small outdoor stage. Wen was handed a microphone, but it proved unnecessary. Fewer than a dozen students stopped to listen. The train home skirted within a few hundred yards of the mainland Chinese border. Hurling through the darkness, Wen looked up from his BlackBerry and gazed out toward the border, the one line he may never cross again.

As a cocoon of heat and smog enveloped Beijing last June, Pi San began to wilt. Two months had passed since Ai Weiwei was detained, and the artist’s fate and whereabouts were still unknown. The police had also detained another close friend of Pi San’s, the rock musician [Zuoxiao Zuzhou](#), just days after a live performance in which the words “Free Ai Weiwei!” appeared on a giant screen above him. The musician was released within a day, but Pi San was spooked. He shelved an idea for another Kuang Kuang satire and began, for the first time, to consider seriously his friends’ advice to leave the country.

Then, on June 22, came a surprise: Ai reappeared at his home after 81 days in detention. The artist provocateur, much thinner now, was uncharacteristically silent. Though not formally charged with a crime, he was still under a form of house arrest “pending further investigation” into tax fraud. Two days later, Pi San rode his electric bicycle to the blue door of Ai’s studio — “like a delivery boy,” he said. High-spirited as ever, Ai marched back and forth across the small room, showing Pi San how he had lost so much weight. The two friends talked for hours. Given Ai’s house arrest, their plan to collaborate on a satirical animation would have to wait. When Pi San was about to leave, Ai gave him a memento from his days in custody: a couple of stale biscuits, part of his “detention diet.”

Many artists and bloggers interpreted Ai's release as merely a face-saving measure to help Premier Wen Jiabao avoid embarrassment when he traveled to Europe a few days later. Dozens of other lawyers and Internet activists were still held in detention without formal charges, while the harassment of others continued unabated. "I can't say if anything has changed," Pi San said, "but it was a big relief" to see Ai back in his home.

I dropped by Pi San's studio again in July. This time, I found his 7-year-old son, his head shaved for summer, sitting at his father's wooden desk and playing a game on an iPad. Pi San shuffled around in shorts and sandals, relaxed and happy. His wife, a fellow painter whom he met at college, worked on accounting ledgers at a table nearby.

Business had never been better. The first 10 episodes of "Ms. Puff" had pulled in an average of two million viewers, more than half of them women between 18 and 30. The Youku series's success raised ad rates, Hutoon's largest source of revenue, and several other Web portals had approached Pi San with offers, eager to entice his young viewers to their sites too.

In his darkest moments, Pi San vowed never to make another satire again. Shadowboxing with censors and security agents was too nerve-racking, and the risks to his family were too high. Now, in the wake of Ai's release, his fear was subsiding. "I think the government still looks at what I do as just cartoons, child's play," he said, struggling to explain why other artists and bloggers were detained or forced into exile while he escaped unscathed. It is a misconception Pi San is happy to embrace, even if, as he put it, "animated cartoons may be the most realistic way to capture the absurdity of our country."

Not long ago, Pi San started gravitating, once again, to the back room filled with miniature cardboard sets. "I think I have a few moves left," he said. He has already mapped out three new Kuang Kuang episodes. The theme of the next one? Pi San flashed a little grin. "It's a game of hide-and-seek."

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