Chinese Evade Censors To Discuss Police Assault

Sometimes Veiled, News Spreads Online

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HONG KONG, Dec. 16 -- At first glance, it looked like a spirited online discussion about an essay written nearly 80 years ago by modern China's greatest author. But then again, the exchange on a popular Chinese bulletin board site seemed a bit emotional, given the subject.

"In Memory of Ms. Liu Hezhen," which Lu Xun wrote in 1926 after warlord forces opened fire on protesters in Beijing and killed one of his students, is a classic of Chinese literature. But why did thousands of people read or post notes in an online forum devoted to the essay last week?

A close look suggests an answer that China's governing Communist Party might find disturbing: They were using Lu's essay about the 1926 massacre as a pretext to discuss a more current and politically sensitive event -- the Dec. 6 police shooting of rural protesters in the southern town of Dongzhou in Guangdong province.

In the 10 days since the shooting, which witnesses said resulted in the deaths of as many as 20 farmers protesting land seizures, the Chinese government has tried to maintain a blackout on the news, barring almost all newspapers and broadcasters from reporting it and ordering major Internet sites to censor any mention of it. Most Chinese still know nothing of the incident.

But it is also clear that many Chinese have already learned about the violence and are finding ways to spread and discuss the news on the Internet, circumventing state controls with e-mail and instant messaging, blogs and bulletin board forums.

The government maintains enough control over the flow of information to prevent an event like the Dongzhou shooting from causing a major public backlash or triggering more demonstrations. But the Internet appears to be weakening a key pillar of the party's rule -- its ability to control news and public opinion.

"I learned about it on the 7th," one bulletin board user wrote Monday of the Dongzhou shooting. "Some day, I believe, this incident will be exposed and condemned. Let us pay tribute to the villagers . . . and silently mourn the dead."

At Kdnet, a large bulletin board site based in Hainan province, users flooded forums with more than 30,000 messages of protest and sorrow in the days after the shooting. The site deleted almost all of the messages Sunday night, but a top editor felt compelled to post a note pleading for forgiveness.

"Please understand, what other Web sites cannot do, Kdnet also cannot do," he wrote to the site's users, promising to convey their anger over the shooting to "the authorities in charge."

The party relies on private Internet firms to monitor and censor their own sites, and can shut down those that don't. But officials at these companies often look the other way or drag their feet when they think they can get away with it, because they know customers are drawn to Web sites with less censorship.

Even after the purge of messages on Kdnet, people continued expressing their views on the site by disguising their comments. More than 140 notes and poems were posted in one forum on Lu Xun's essay, for example, almost all of them without any explicit reference to the shooting in Dongzhou, a coastal town about 125 miles northeast of Hong Kong.

"I heard about it a few days ago, but I wasn't surprised. I think it's because I'm already numb," wrote one Internet user. "But now that so many other Internet friends know about it, I am able to feel grief and indignation together with everyone."

Another Kdnet forum set up as a "silent memorial" to the victims of the shooting drew nearly 30,000 visits. And in a third forum, users from across the country posted a series of short messages containing variations of a simple protest against censorship: "I know."

"They don't want me to know, but I know."

"It's useless that I know, but I still know."

"Though I pretend not to know, I know."

"We express ourselves this way not because we're trying to hide from the authorities, but because we don't want them to delete what we're saying," said one of the participants, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "In fact, they probably know what we're doing, but they can't do anything about it. It's not a crime to talk about Lu Xun. But it's a form of protest."

Elsewhere in Chinese cyberspace, people have evaded censors by writing on smaller bulletin board sites that often escape official scrutiny or by creating blogs on overseas services with weaker filtering methods than mainland blog companies use.

Wang Yi, a well-known blogger in Sichuan province, was among eight prominent dissidents who issued an open letter condemning the Dongzhou shooting as the deadliest use of force against ordinary Chinese since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. China's largest blogging site, Bokee, deleted the letter from his blog less than 12 hours after he posted it, he said.
But then Wang posted just the title of the letter -- "A Statement Regarding the Murder Case in Dongzhou, Shanwei city, Guangdong" -- and a list of all the people who had signed it. Bokee officials, who have been wary of alienating users and losing market share to competitors, decided to leave it alone.

"Although I couldn't post the whole letter, people can see that the text is missing and go find it somewhere else," Wang said. "And if they haven't heard about the shooting, they'll go look for information about that, too."

Those who turn to China's main Web portals and search engines for news about the shooting will get mixed results, because the companies that run them generally comply with orders from the government to filter out what censors call "harmful information."

On Friday in Beijing, for example, a search on the popular Sina site using the name of the city that sent police to confront the protesters returned no results at all. Basic searches on other major sites, including China's top search engine, Baidu, also produced few relevant results, although some returned links to the government's official account of the clash, which said three protesters were killed. It was published only in newspapers in Guangdong.

People who added words like "shooting" and "clash" to their searches, though, or used Google, were directed to sites containing more complete reports by overseas media.

Among the results were several smaller bulletin boards openly hosting discussions of the shooting, including Zhongguancun Online, a popular site targeting the Chinese high-tech industry; Bai-xing, a site established by an obscure magazine owned by the Agriculture Ministry, and Yijian Rugu, a forum set up after the government closed a popular student-run site at Beijing University.

One thread on the high-tech industry site, for example, began with an abbreviated version of Wang's open letter. It was followed by a series of messages in which users first expressed shock and disbelief -- "It can't be!" -- then pleaded for more information -- "If you have photos, please post them!" -- and then expressed anger, both about the shooting and the efforts to censor the news.

"I've posted on several Web sites that have been shut down," one user said. "Will this Web site be shut down now, too!?"

Industry officials say the government focuses its resources on monitoring China's largest Web sites and often ignores these smaller sites, which have multiplied rapidly because they are relatively inexpensive to open and maintain. But if the authorities notice a lot of traffic going to a site with sensitive content, they will often close it down.

By Thursday night, for example, hundreds had posted comments about the shooting on Yunhu, a small discussion board leased from an online gaming firm in Hubei province. On Friday night, the site was no longer accessible.

The main source of information for all these Web sites are overseas news services that publish in Chinese, including media in Hong Kong and Taiwan, government-funded services such as Radio Free Asia and the BBC, and a variety of sites run by exiled dissidents or the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement.

The authorities try to block these sites, and mainland users who attempt to visit them usually get an error message. But free software becoming widely available helps tens of thousands of Chinese Web surfers get around the blocking every day, according to the firms that run these "proxy" services.

The government is directing ever more financial, technical and human resources toward controlling the Internet, including hiring agents to post messages defending the party and undermining its critics, according to Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet Project at the University of California at Berkeley.

"But the cost of control is getting higher and higher, and the pressure is building on the other side, as more and more people get online," he said. "The question is, when does the pressure become too great and the cost become too high?"

"I don't think they can keep this up indefinitely," he added. "Things are not looking good for the censors."

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