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The Steamed Bun Revolution ^[1]

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In December 2005, famed Chinese filmmaker Chen Kaige's latest work "The Promise" opened to tepid reviews from his fellow countrymen. With production costs exceeding \$35 million, the film failed to capture the hearts of a traditionally accepting audience. While Chinese have come to expect sub-par films in the past, a more market-driven movie industry seemed to have promise, just not the Promise.

Such a film would expect to be lambasted in the international market, but within China, public criticism of ones personal work, especially that of a nationally celebrated director, is nearly unheard of. The rule is simple: don't rock the boat -- or more closely, the yacht -- of a prestigious public figure.

Thus, we have "The Bloody Case that Started from a Steamed Bun," or rather the case of the "The Case." When small-time blogger Hu Ge made a satirical net video ridiculing the mythical epic, he never expected the sudden national attention he received, or the legal repercussions of his little spoof.

Outraged by such "defamation of character," Chen decided to take personal action against Hu. "We have determined to sue and solve the problem completely," said Chen to the Xinhua Daily on February 14. "He has lost any sense of morality."

Chen further scorned Hu: "I think human beings could never be that cheeky." Yet the internet short continued to flood cyberspace, and soon a large public following came to Hus defense.

As the People's Daily reported on February 17, internet users criticized the internationally-acclaimed director as narrow-minded. Chen's ex-wife even chimed in: "He is too petty-minded to tolerate a little bun." Hu's widespread and web-based support eventually forced Chen to drop the lawsuit.

This is China's new revolution. This sticky bun situation is the first manifestation of a new public unity now developing among China's citizens. Called "E-Gao," the term was imported from Taiwan and literally means "to fiercely criticize" in Mandarin. E-Gao was first used to slyly mock the politicians and ironic dealings of the Chen administration, but has been adopted by modern netizens to describe their own criticisms.

Netizens across the country are turning to weblogs, podcasts, and YouTube-style videos to get their voices heard, all with a sarcastic twist aimed at challenging some cultural taboo. From late Communist heroes to current hot issues, E-Gao webfiles continue to confront "forbidden" topics everyday. Average Chinese have for the first time criticized corruption,

lagging education, public housing laws and even copyright infringement in a public arena.

Now the people are gathering to tackle that one "socially unacceptable" practice in China: government dissention. It has proved to be the starting point of a true grassroots movement. The purpose of grassroots culture is to bolster opposing views of the current political administration and elite culture. For China, these developments have proved next to impossible. Not since Mao's movement in the late 1940s has a true peoples movement been able to gather steam.

Now with the internet connecting people from the city to the countryside, Chinese citizens have finally found their voice. The internet is a free arena for these netizens to use their peculiar E-Gao methods to explore, criticize, condemn, or simply discuss underground or sensitive cultural topics. Different from the past, Chinese netizens are now unwilling to accept the things elite culture and government officials feed them. They put out their own opinions and evaluate and challenge traditional attitudes.

Exemplary of these changing attitudes is the E-Gao version of Mao Zedong's famous quote "Serve for the People," modified by the entertainment business to be "Serve for the Joy of the People." Conservative leaders see the quip as an attempt to blacken the Communist leader's name, and definitely during the Cultural Revolution, such "arrogance" would be worthy of reeducation. But times have changed. Informatization and globalization have provided the Chinese netizen with a new method of challenging the system, with a healthy support team of millions of others now online.

The tide of netizens and E-Gao culture is now the characteristic of the online world in China, and demonstrates an entirely new level of social responsibility and participation taken on by a growing number of citizens. Through their imagination and creativity, these are the pioneers of a new age, and they are now shaping the future of an open society.

Even more astonishing, these pioneers are looking to their own history for inspiration. Written during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, China's four great novels (Romance of the Three Kingdoms, All Men are Brothers, Journey to the West, and Dream of the Red Mansions) all confronted explosive cultural and political issues in their time. Fearing retribution from those in power, Ming and Qing authors used fairy tales and legends of previous dynasties to indirectly express their "subversive" messages. Now the E-Gao netizen looks to these authors and their stories to challenge their society. Such is the gift of ancient Chinese wisdom.

So score one for the people. China is changing, or at least its citizens are. The country has found a new way to challenge tradition and buck the status-quo. The internet has now become a point of national unification, a place where those seeking to change their country can gather and plan. Take it as the modern day Yan'an, where Communist forces planned their uprising. Perhaps this is a nation whose next great revolution is just a click away.
