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Hunting corrupt officials online: the human flesh search engine and the search for justice in China

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Citation: GAO, L. and STANYER, J., 2014. Hunting corrupt officials online: the human flesh search engine and the search for justice in China. *Information Communication and Society*, 17 (7), pp.814-829.

Metadata Record: <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/24096>

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Taylor & Francis

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Please cite the published version.

1 **Gao, L. & Stanyer, J. (2014) Hunting Corrupt Officials Online. Human Flesh Search Engines**
2 **and the Search for Justice in China. *Information Communication and Society*, 17 (7): 814-**
3 **829.**

4

5 **Hunting Corrupt Officials Online: The Human Flesh Search Engine and the Search for**
6 **Justice in China**

7 **Abstract**

8 While there is growing research on online politics in China some political uses of the Internet
9 have tended to be overlooked. The focus of this article is on an emerging phenomenon in
10 Chinese cyberspace, the Human Flesh Search Engine (HFSE), a term first used by the
11 Chinese media to refer to the practice of online searching for people or ‘human hunting’.
12 While existing examinations have focused on breaches of individual privacy by these so
13 called online ‘vigilantes’ this study focuses on the ability of HFSE to reveal norms
14 transgressions by public officials and lead to their removal. In order to give readers a
15 comprehensive overview of what an HFSE is, the first section of this article provides basic
16 information about it. In the second part, 20 well-documented HFSE examples are listed to
17 show their varying aims and then HFSEs which focus on local governments and officials are
18 shown to highlight the political dimensions of HFSE. In the third section, four case studies of
19 government/official-focused HFSE are explored in detail to show political HFSEs’ internal
20 processes and underlying mechanisms.

21 **Introduction**

22 The term Human Flesh Search Engine (HFSE) might be more at home in pages of a horror
23 novel but was originally applied by the Chinese media to refer to the practice of online
24 searching for people or ‘human hunting’. The term shot to prominence outside China when
25 the non-Chinese media covered the story of Wang Fei, a Beijing man who was vilified by
26 online mobs after his wife committed suicide, allegedly due to his infidelity (Fletcher 2008).
27 In the UK, a headline in the *Guardian* on this incident noted: ‘Chinese online vigilantes hunt
28 human flesh’, it continued ‘Forget the FBI or Jack Bauer, no one tracks down a miscreant as
29 fast as Chinese vigilantes’ (Branigan 2008a; see also Downey 2010, Ransom 2008). Another
30 article from *The Times Online* noted: ‘Human Flesh Search Engine: Chinese vigilantes that
31 hunt victims on the web’ (Fletcher 2008). The story of online vigilantes hunting down an
32 individual, identifying him, where he lived, and encouraging public condemnation of his

1 behaviour also appeared in the *New York Times*, which observed that HFSE was a ‘form of
2 online vigilante justice where Internet users hunt down and punish people who have attracted
3 their wrath. The goal is to get the targets of a search fired from their jobs, shamed in front of
4 their neighbours, run out of town. It is crowd-sourced detective work, pursued online – with
5 offline results’ (Downey 2010). Examples like this are of course not restricted to China.
6 Solove starts his book *The Future of Reputation* with the example of a Korean girl who was
7 subject to the opprobrium of Internet users after pictures of her refusing to clean-up her dog’s
8 faeces on a subway train emerged online.

9 Within hours, she was labeled as dog shit girl and her pictures and parodies were anywhere. Within
10 days, her identity and her past were revealed. Requests for information about her parents and relatives
11 started popping up and people started to recognize her by the dog and the bag she was carrying as well
12 as her watch, clearly visible in the original picture. All mentions of privacy invasion were shouted
13 down....The common excuse for their behavior was that the girl doesn’t deserve privacy (Solove 2007,
14 p1).

15
16 As a result of embarrassment and pressure caused by the shaming and criticizing, the ‘dog
17 shit girl’ dropped out of her university (see also Shirkey 2008).

18 In the Chinese context there is a concern that this represents a new kind of online collective
19 action that is disturbing. Domestic media, such as the official news agency Xinhua in one
20 article likened HFSE to Internet lynching (Bai and Ji 2008); it noted: ‘The ‘human flesh
21 search engine’ is not the familiar search engine from Baidu and Google, but the idea of a
22 search engine employing thousands of individuals all mobilized with one aim, to dig out facts
23 and expose them to the baleful glare of publicity’. This article argued that the ‘Internet gave
24 people a disguise, enabling power without responsibility’. It also cited the example of the
25 Wang Fei case in which after his personal details were exposed on the Internet, Wang Fei
26 was harassed by people who wrote graffiti on the door of his parent’s house accusing them of
27 killing Wang’s wife, and who phoned his boss asking him to lay off Wang. This incident both
28 in China and abroad was framed in terms of vigilantes and invasion of personal privacy,
29 indeed, Wang sued the Tianya and Daqi (two major online communities in China) for
30 initially allowing circulation of his personal details and infringing his privacy and reputation.
31 This, however, is not the only case of HFSE and concerns about personal privacy and
32 harassment by online mobs overlook an important political dimension of HFSEs, which is to
33 set their sights on misbehaviour by public officials.

34 In December 2008, a Chinese citizen anonymously posted the travel expense claims of
35 government officials accidentally found on a subway train in Shanghai. The documents

1 showed that a group of officials from two local governments had taken lavish ‘study tours’ to
2 the United States and Canada where they spent public money on visiting major tourist
3 attractions. After these documents surfaced, details of these officials were exposed by other
4 Internet users who knew the officials whose names were shown in the documents. Chinese
5 Internet users discussed the alleged corruption in online forums and organized online petition
6 asking the two local governments concerned to penalize their officials. Under public pressure,
7 the two local governments dismissed the exposed officials and a series of inquiries were
8 launched to ensure best practice in the relevant departments (Canaves 2008).

9
10 Here we have an example where HFSE revealed a transgression of the rules, creating
11 pressure on government which led to the removal of public officials for corrupt practices. In
12 other words, there might well have been a breach of individual privacy by these so-called
13 ‘vigilantes’ but the result was that corrupt public officials were held to account. Official
14 corruption is one of the gravest challenges in contemporary China and public officials have
15 been the main perpetrators of corruption in China for the past 20 years (Guo, Y. 2008).
16 According to the data shown on the website of the Ministry of Supervision of The People’s
17 Republic of China, in 30 years from 1982 to 2011, there were about 4.2 million officials who
18 have received different forms of punishment for corrupt practices (e.g. dismissal, inter-party
19 warning, expulsion, jail sentence). According to Koblitz et al. (2012), in 2011, 142,893
20 officials were punished for corruption and disciplinary violations, far exceeding the number
21 of 106,626 in 2009. There may still be countless uncovered cases which are beyond the
22 attention and capability of central government that has been making effort to regulate and
23 supervise its bureaucratic system. In the light of corruption as being a serious problem in
24 China, it is important to examine the way HFSE are being used to hold political officials and
25 local governments to account. Based on a systematic gathering exercise the next section
26 examines 20 incidents of HFSE to establish the extent to which the above political example is
27 a prominent focus for HFSE.

28 **The different types of HFSE**

29 As identified HFSE is more than merely the online bullying of individuals by online
30 vigilantes, it can also take on a political dimension. However, there is no readily available
31 database classifying the different types of HFSE. How many are focused on office holders
32 and how many on members of the public? This section examines 20 well-documented cases

1 of HFSE (between 2001 and 2011) to establish for the first time how many cases have been
2 focused on wrongdoing by public officials. While the issues addressed by HFSE vary widely
3 it can be defined as follows: in simple terms a HFSE involves a group of Internet users
4 working together (in a variety of ways), using their contacts (on and off the Internet) and
5 conventional search engines to achieve a common goal (broadly defined). Often triggered in
6 response to wrongdoing or transgression of generally accepted norms (but not exclusively so)
7 they aim to dig out information and expose it to the public, in order to obtain some form of
8 redress. HFSE involves the pattern of crowdsourcing, which means separately designated
9 tasks in any job are outsourced to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form
10 of an open call (Howe 2006). HFSE is based on the participation of geographically dispersed
11 Internet users who respond to a series of calls publicized in an online forum.

12 The following table shows basic information of 20 cases of HFSE, which have been
13 identified via systematic searching. The search for possible cases started with an Internet
14 search. Google was the most frequently used Internet search engine to look for foreign
15 material on HFSE, and Baidu, a Chinese search engine was used to look for relevant Chinese
16 materials. The main keywords for using searching engines are ‘Human Flesh Search Engine’
17 in English and ‘人肉搜索’ in Chinese. The Nexis database was also used to look for English
18 coverage on HFSE. The Internet searching revealed a wide range of possible cases each of
19 which needed to be checked. Denzin (1978, p. 294-307) extends the idea of triangulation
20 beyond its conventional association with research methods and designs by distinguishing four
21 forms of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theoretical triangulation
22 and methodological triangulation. In this research, data triangulation is employed, which
23 entails gathering information of each single case from multiple sources. The details of each
24 case presented later are mainly based on numerous news articles published in Chinese and
25 English. Information from multiple sources may overlap, but this enables a robust database
26 and confirmation of events. There is also a process of condensing and packaging all the
27 available information to make it fit the story-telling format of each case and better display its
28 internal process.

29

30 [Table 1 about here]

31

32 Empirically, there are more than 20 examples, but only those listed here have been carefully
33 triangulated (Denzin, 1978). These are the ones that have been corroborated through multiple

1 sources. Among the cases listed above, there are 12 non-government/official focused HFSEs
2 and 8 government/official-focused ones. The former have aims varying from tracking down
3 immoral citizens, to fact-checking credibility of an announcement made by a member of the
4 public, the news content of national media, or looking for missing person; for
5 government/official-focused ones the aims range from tracking down corrupt government
6 officials to fact-checking government announcements. The two types of HFSE all depend on
7 the web-based crowdsourcing but have different focus: while the government/official-focused
8 HFSE reflects how the Chinese Internet users respond to and interact with the government,
9 the non-government/official-focused HFSE illustrates more the prevailing social-cultural
10 norms in Chinese society stressed by Confucianism (e.g. loyalty, righteousness, kindness and
11 sincerity), the violation of which incurs public opprobrium.

12 **Political dimension of HFSE**

13 The table above identified 8 cases of ‘government/official focused’ HFSE. This section
14 examines these cases in more detail. The following table provides more information about
15 each case.

16

17 [Table 2 about here]

18

19 Basically, the table shows there are two types of government/official-focused HFSE,
20 differentiated according to their aims: one is punishing corrupt officials and another the fact-
21 checking of announcements made by government or the police. For the first type, Internet
22 users tracked down corrupt government officials in the hope of getting them punished. For
23 the second type, Internet users search for evidence to corroborate the announcement made by
24 government or police, and reveal if there was an underlying official deception or a cover-up.
25 In the following section, two cases of target-punishing HFSE and two cases of fact-checking
26 HFSE are examined, which clearly illustrate the internal processes at work in the two types of
27 government/official focused HFSE.

28 While this article is interested in successful manifestations of the HFSE phenomenon it
29 should be noted that it does not look at cases that did not get off the ground, which is beyond
30 the scope of this paper nor at cases that did not end in the punishment or the contradiction of
31 public officials. There are two cases which failed in this latter regard. In case 1 of Table 2,
32 the woman targeted by HFSE denied that she was the person in the evidence presented. The
33 woman’s claims and lack of evidence to the contrary and lack of evidence about the high-

1 level government official she was supposedly having a relationship with seems to have been
2 enough to create some doubt. The HFSE generated visibility of a woman's claims on a
3 sensitive subject but could not find further evidence to substantiate the original claims either
4 because they were bogus or the smoking gun was not attainable and so it came to an end. In
5 the second case, case 7 table 2, it seems that the HFSE was stopped by overwhelming proof
6 that the youngest mayor in China was not appointed due to family connections but rather his
7 capabilities. Both types of HFSE do not necessarily end in punishment or the contradiction of
8 public officials claims, the final stage is dependent on the information that can be uncovered
9 by the HFSE and the response of the offline authorities.

10 **Corrupt official jailed after his careless words lead to evidence of corruption**

11 On 10th December 2008 (Moore 2008), Zhou Jiugeng, the chief of the Real Estate
12 Management Bureau in Jiangning district of Nanjin City (the capital of Jiangsu province, one
13 of the most developed provinces in China), stated when interviewed by journalists that the
14 Real Estate Management Bureau would closely monitor the real estate market in Jiangning
15 and punish real estate developers who sold houses at lower than cost price (due to high house
16 price, in some cities of China such as Jiangning, many houses could not be sold, pushing real
17 estate developers to think about other ways such as lowering house prices to relieve the
18 problem of overstock). After Zhou's statement had been widely reported by the media, he
19 became the target of Internet users who were displeased with his insensitivity to house prices
20 that had greatly exceeded ordinary people's ability to buy - a source of general grievance
21 among the Chinese public (Wang 2011; Wu 2010). People believed that the government
22 should take some measures to lower house prices to a generally affordable level rather than
23 encourage real estate developers to keep the price high. The indignation spread on the
24 Internet immediately after media reporting. On 11th December 2008, an Internet user
25 nicknamed *xiao hua ban li* posted in an online forum, 'Nanjing Focus Estate Net', the article,
26 'Eight questions to the chief of Jiangning Real Estate Management Bureau', which was then
27 republished to other online forums, such as Tianya, Kaidi and Mop, three major Chinese
28 Bulletin Board System (BBS) websites. On the same day, another Internet user *xuan chuan ji*
29 *sheng 9* published in the Kaidi forum an article titled, 'Calling for Internet heroes to track
30 down the chief of the Real Estate Management Bureau: Zhou Jiugeng'. This was then taken
31 as a call to launch an HFSE to target this government official (Zhu 2008). The question on
32 Zhou's remark by traditional media started nearly at the same time as Chinese Internet users

1 started to express their doubt online (Yang 2008), but most of the exposure was done by
2 Internet users.

3 In the following days, more and more information about Zhou Jiugeng was revealed. On 12th
4 December 2008, an Internet user *bao cun 100 nian* revealed in the Kaidi forum that Zhou
5 smoked luxury brand cigarettes worth 1500 Yuan (roughly USD 238) a pack (Zhu 2008).
6 This Internet user uploaded pictures of Zhou attending a government meeting with a pack of
7 luxury brand cigarettes on the table beside him and commented that a government official on
8 a normal salary could not afford the most expensive brand cigarettes in Nanjing. On 15th
9 December, an Internet user *Cheyong007* published a post titled ‘Zhou Jiugeng smokes luxury
10 cigarettes and wears an expensive watch’. *Chenyong007* found some old newspaper pictures
11 which showed Zhou wearing a Vacheron Constantin watch worth 100,000 Yuan (roughly
12 USD 15,891). The following day, an Internet user *Guo Xinpeng* sent an email to the governor
13 of Jiangning District, reporting Zhou Jiugeng’s misbehaviour and requesting a throughout
14 inquiry into him (Zeng 2009).

15 On 17th December, an Internet user *wei da de ren min* revealed that Zhou’s brother was a real
16 estate developer and stressed that Zhou’s remark on the real estate market was relevant to his
17 brother and intended to protect his family’s interests. It was then shown that Zhou’s son was
18 the owner of a construction company (News Morning 2008). On 20th December, ten days
19 after Zhou’s remark was broadcast, the government of Jiangning District first responded to
20 the online uproar by announcing that they had started an inquiry into Zhou Jiugeng. On 28th
21 December 2008, Zhou was dismissed due to his inappropriate remarks and for misusing
22 public funds to buy luxury goods. As the investigation got more detailed, more evidence of
23 Zhou’s corruption surfaced. According to the investigation result, from 2003 to 2008, Zhou
24 accepted more than 1 million Yuan (roughly USD 158,916) from others. On 10th October
25 2009, Zhou was sentenced to 11 years in jail for corruption (Wang and Cai 2009).

26 Zhou would not have been punished if public attention had focused only on his inappropriate
27 remark, however, it was Internet users angered at his remark, and searching for and finding
28 photos of him, which raised suspicions of corruption. The photographs generated public
29 opprobrium about corruption and led Internet users to work together to find more
30 photographic evidence. The example illustrates the way HFSE is used to hold often
31 unaccountable corrupt officials to account. As noted, official corruption is a major source of
32 public grievance in China, however, it is often unchecked by official sources and official

1 media (Lum 2006). If official channels for removing corrupt officers are not available or not
2 effective, then unofficial channels become an important outlet. The incompetence of the
3 political system in dealing with corruption (Pei 2006) and the strictly censored media
4 environment (Lagerkvist 2005; Zhao 2004) are handicapping official exposure of corruption
5 and encouraging the Chinese public to look for additional outlets to gain justice.

6 **Political officer sacked 24 hours after restaurant cctv footage is exposed online**

7 While the first example focuses on financial malfeasance the second concerns the abuse of
8 power. On the evening of 29th October 2008, Lin Jiayang, then the party secretary and
9 deputy director-general of Shenzhen Maritime Safety Administration (in Guangdong
10 Province), was quarrelling in a restaurant lobby with a young girl's parents who insisted that
11 Lin had assaulted their 11 year old daughter in the corridor leading to the men's toilet. Facing
12 the complaining parents, Lin said: 'I did that, so what? How much money do you want? ...
13 Do you know who I am? I am from the Ministry of Transport. I rank as high as your mayor.
14 How dare you quarrel with me?' A camera in the restaurant lobby filmed the incident and the
15 footage was posted anonymously the next day on an online forum Aoyi (the news portal
16 website founded by the South News Group based in Guangdong). One hour later a journalist
17 of the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* published a report entitled 'A little girl assaulted in a
18 restaurant by a man on the way to toilet'. Until this moment, nobody had known the identity
19 of this man.

20 At around 22:30 pm on the same day after the first media report concerning Lin was
21 published, a posting emerged in the Aoyi online forum with the title 'Human Flesh Search
22 Engine, let's track down the self-called high-level official' (Feng 2008). In the morning of
23 31st October 2008, many news websites and online forums in China reproduced this story and
24 many mainstream media immediately followed as well (Feng 2008). On the same day, an
25 Internet user *osnuigj* revealed the man's identity, and another Internet user provided an audio
26 clip recording the dialogue between the man and the girl's parents in local police station,
27 which showed that the man wanted to pay for his misdeed but that it was refused by the girl's
28 parents.

29 In the afternoon of 31st October 2008, Shenzhen Maritime Safety Administration admitted
30 that the man in the footage was their officer Lin Jiayang. They announced that Lin had been
31 suspended from his position and that a team organized by the Ministry of Transport from
32 Beijing had arrived in Shenzhen to investigate. Many Chinese Internet users were not

1 satisfied with this and insisted that Lin had committed child molestation but was shielded
2 from punishment. On 5th November 2008, the Shenzhen police held a news conference to
3 announce the result of their follow-up investigation. Lin was dismissed from his government
4 position for his inappropriate behaviour in public. It was also announced that there was not
5 sufficient evidence of assault as the camera in that restaurant did not cover the passage
6 leading to toilet, and thus was unable to show if the assault really happened or not. The case
7 against Lin for the charge of child molestation was finally rejected. Meanwhile, persistent
8 Internet users began searching for details of the woman shown in the video having dinner
9 with Lin, who in the view of Chinese Internet users was probably Lin's mistress (Feng 2008).
10 But she was proved later by police investigation to be just Lin's friend.

11 Lin Jiaxiang was finally dismissed from his job. Again we see that under pressure of the
12 HFSE and in this case some media outlets, a public official was held to account for his
13 activities. The media though only became involved after the initial story had emerged online
14 and initiated the search, it would be wrong to suggest that HFSE is the sole means of holding
15 officials to account, but in these carefully substantiated examples they can be seen as a force
16 that can bring some accountability. The goal of these HFSEs outlined is not just to complain
17 but to ensure that there is some form of just outcome. The general grievance of the Chinese
18 public about political malfeasance and the failure of government to discipline officials drives
19 actors to look for justice. The strictly censored media environment (Lagerkvist 2005; Zhao
20 2004) and the poorly functioning judicial system (Ackerman 1999; Shen 2012) mean there
21 are few alternative outlets. Finally, the Internet turns out to be possibly the most convenient
22 and effective channel to enable actors to achieve their goal (there is also online censorship,
23 but not as strict and insurmountable as censorship on conventional media). As noted, HFSE is
24 also used in a fact-checking capacity, which is illustrated by the following two cases.

25

26 **Government credibility and the fake tiger photo**

27 On 12th October 2007, the Provincial Forestry Bureau in Shaanxi province of China
28 publicized via a news conference two South China Tiger photos taken by Zhou Zhenglong, a
29 hunter in Zhenpin county of Shaanxi province (Shan 2007). During this conference, senior
30 officials of the Shaanxi Provincial Forestry Bureau (SPFB) announced that according to the
31 opinion of three zoologists, these photos confirmed the existence of the wild South China
32 Tiger in the forest of Zhenpin County (this place has historically been seen as the main

1 habitat of wild South China Tiger). Immediately after this news conference as well as news
2 coverage on it, the two tiger photos rapidly spread on and offline. However, a posting
3 published on October 15th 2007 in Tianya forum caught people's attention by its title 'South
4 China Tiger, another faked news story?' Its author highlighted six problems with these photos.
5 The emergence of this posting became a turning point, after which more and more
6 questioning voices emerged. On the same day of 15th October, the news about 'the wild South
7 China Tiger was found in Shaanxi' was reproduced by several newspapers and broadcasts,
8 intensifying the public questioning of these tiger photos' credibility (No author 2007).

9 On 23rd October, Zhou and few officials from local government went to the National Forestry
10 Department (NFD) in Beijing to submit these photos, and more importantly, to apply for
11 administrative permission to construct a conservation area for the South China Tiger in
12 Zhenpin County (No author 2007). Commonly, it would be expected that the involvement of
13 central government could bring a convincing conclusion about these photos' authenticity.
14 However, what disappointed the public was that the NFD was unable to tell if these photos
15 were real or not; what it could do, as its spokesman stressed, was to make sure that there was
16 a real population of wild South China Tiger in Zhenpin rather than testing if these photos
17 were real. The response from the central authorities and Zhou and local officials' insistence
18 of the tiger photos being real fuelled Internet users' passion to look for new evidence to
19 disprove their statements. There was a second turning point when an Internet user showed on
20 15th November 2007 that the original image of the tiger may have been copied from an old
21 Chinese lunar year calendar, a screenshot of which was also uploaded (Tan 2007). Then,
22 more and more Internet users joined the online investigation, discussing and analysing how
23 these tiger photos had been faked (Guo 2010).

24 Besides the online uproar, offline investigation was also started. Civic investigation teams
25 were organized by media organizations and professional associations. As the online uproar
26 extended to offline, the NFD finally issued a demand that the Shaanxi Provincial Forestry
27 Bureau should check again carefully the credibility of the tiger photos and publicize the result
28 as soon as possible. The case finally ended with local government's confession that these
29 tiger photos were not real; thirteen officials in the Shaanxi Provincial Forestry Bureau were
30 dismissed for their irresponsibility in photo evaluation and for their holding a news
31 conference without administrative permission; three officials of the Zhenpin County
32 government were dismissed for faking relevant reports; hunter Zhou Zhenlong was also
33 sentenced to 30 months in jail for the charge of faking tiger photos (Ding 2008).

1 **The ‘hide and seek’ event**

2 This example illustrates a fact-checking HFSE that targeted an attempted cover-up of a
3 prisoner’s death in police custody. On February 13th 2009, the Yunnan.cn (the news website
4 sponsored by the Yunnan Daily News Group in Yunnan Province) reported that Li Qiaomin,
5 a 24 year old man, detained in prison for illegal logging, had died of a severe brain injury in
6 hospital (Wang 2009a). Local police explained that Li’s brain injury was due to his head
7 hitting the wall after he was kicked by another prisoner when playing the game ‘hide and
8 seek’ (Li, J. 2009). However, the police’s claim was greeted with scepticism. Many Internet
9 users expressed their doubts over the official claim about Li’s death (Li, J .S. 2009, Wang
10 2009a).

11 The prisoner’s death then became a public hot topic and the Chinese phrase ‘躲猫猫’ (‘hide
12 and seek’) became one of the most popular online phrases in Chinese cyberspace in 2009
13 (Wang 2009b). In online forums and chat groups, there were intense discussions on the ‘hide
14 and seek’ event. In the afternoon on 13th February 2009, only a few hours after the official
15 claim was publicized, a local online forum devoted to the discussion proposed launching
16 HFSE to uncover the truth underlying Li’s death (Zhou 2009). Facing intensified online
17 outrage and growing media question, on 19th February 2009, the Yunnan Provincial
18 Propaganda Department published an announcement on its website about recruiting members
19 of a civic investigation team dedicated to investigate Li’s death (Xie, L. D. 2009). One day
20 after, the civic team was established and started its investigation; in the morning of 21st
21 February 2009, the civic team publicized its report, which however produced more questions
22 (Dong 2009).

23 The proposal of organizing a civic investigation team by the Yunnan government was
24 initially aimed to calm down the online uproar concerning Li’s death and prevent its
25 reputation from being questioned and damaged by public discussion. However, its failure to
26 uncover the ‘truth’ raised the question of an official cover-up. The team members were
27 labelled ‘insiders’ who allegedly kept the truth hidden intentionally. Thus Chinese Internet
28 users launched HFSE to search for the real identities of the team members, who were found
29 to be mainly journalists and webmasters and were further shamed by Internet users insisting
30 they were ‘insiders’ (Zhang 2009). On 24th February 2009, the website of Jinning government
31 (the county where the prison was located) was hacked by Chinese Internet users who changed
32 all the contents shown on its homepage into one term ‘躲猫猫’ (‘hide and seek’) (Guan 2009).

1 Pressured by on and offline questioning, on 27th February 2009, the Yunnan provincial
2 government held a news conference, announcing that instead of accepting the investigation
3 result given by the Jinning County Public Security Bureau (from which the initial official
4 claim that Li died of ‘hide and seek’ came), the Yunnan Provincial Public Security Bureau
5 concluded Li had been beaten to death by other prisoners. Meanwhile, it was also announced
6 that the vice-director of the Jinning Public Security Bureau and the chief of Jinning County
7 Prison were dismissed; two prison guards were sentenced to jail for the charge of
8 malfeasance (Luo 2009).

9 There are offline factors that need to be considered, which could explain why Chinese
10 citizens chose to question rather than accept official claims. The Internet enables online
11 cooperation but has no default capability of indicating what is suspicious and should be
12 questioned. One alternative explanation might be the public distrustfulness of the Chinese
13 political system, the result of a series of actions of local and regional governments, such as
14 building chemical plants with potential environment damage (Yuan 2011), using public funds
15 to construct luxury government building (Xiao 2011), land acquisition without reasonable
16 compensation for peasants (Tan 2012) and forced house demolition without properly
17 resettling residents (Tian 2010). These examples, along with similar others unmentioned here,
18 have made Chinese citizens automatically regard government statements and actions as
19 pursuing political interest rather than public interest. The cases of ‘South China Tiger’ and
20 ‘Hide and Seek’ are based on such a general distrust of government. The application of
21 Internet in these two cases aired and amplified the distrust as well as the embarrassment
22 caused by those official claims, pushing the Shaanxi and Yunnan provincial governments to
23 confess their local departments’ deception.

24 **Discussion and Conclusion**

25 The four cases elaborated above highlight the internal processes of the target-punishing and
26 fact-checking government/official focused HFSEs. At each stage there is a gathering of
27 information and exposure. Although each does not share the same number of stages a basic
28 sequential structure can be identified. Each starts with a trigger that emerged offline,
29 presenting a certain kind of transgressive behaviour, followed by the revelation of
30 transgression – this is usually some form of hard evidence, a sound recording, photograph,
31 document – or a questionable statement by an official. This initial revelation might be partial
32 or seen as questionable. This provokes the *second phase* - a response from Internet users. If

1 the corrupt official is still unnamed the second phase initiates the hunt to identify the culprit,
2 if the official is known it may provoke a trawling for further information. Evidence that might
3 undermine a government claim is sought out. This phase may well vary in time scale but
4 involves frequent requests for information amongst online community members. The move to
5 the *third phase* is triggered by the exposure of more contextualizing information, a name, a
6 rank, the names of others involved who know the official, or evidence that contradicts the
7 government official's claim. The case can no longer be ignored by officials; they have to
8 respond. This response might well bring the incident to an end but if justice is not seen to be
9 done it might provoke further opprobrium and calls for justice.

10 The article has shown that the Internet role in Chinese politics has stretched beyond issues of
11 liberation and the public sphere. HFSEs are being used to hold corrupt officials to account
12 and check out government claims. These developments are driven by a complex series of
13 factors. All HFSEs have a trigger which is key to understanding their motivation. A key
14 trigger of these government/official-focused HFSEs is the on-going endemic official
15 corruption and low government credibility. The existing regulatory system often fails to
16 identify and/or punish corrupt political officials (He 2000), leading to a certain number of
17 government officials' misdeeds going unpunished. According to Pei, on average, 140,000
18 party officials and members were caught in corruption scandals each year in the 1990s, and
19 5.6 percentage of these were criminally prosecuted; in 2004, 170,850 party officials and
20 members were implicated, but only 4,915 (or 2.9 per cent) were subject to criminal
21 prosecution (2006, p.5). Corruption is the major (if not the only) concern of the Chinese
22 public with the political system in China, even the new Chinese president Xi Jinping states
23 that the Chinese Communist Party faces a serious problem of corruption that could kill the
24 party and ruin the country if it remains unresolved (No author 2012). While the culture of
25 official impunity is thriving in China (Pei 2006), another major concern is also reflected by
26 HFSE, namely the credibility of official claims, due to the fact that local governments usually
27 put expediency ahead of transparency (Fu 2012).

28 Another key trigger is the lack of alternative means for holding corrupt officials to account or
29 questioning official claims. This is the main reason why Chinese citizens resorted to the
30 Internet to expose and punish government officials misdoings. The media environment in
31 China, which has not been totally opened up due to strict censorship, is unable to be an
32 alternative channel of exposing in the first place. The cases above show that mass media were
33 involved not at the start but once the story was running. In a non-democratic setting such as

1 China, the strictly censored media environment makes journalists carefully select their topic
2 and they are required to comply with the party line, even though there has been a widespread
3 marketization of the media (Tang and Sampson 2012, p.458). With regard to sensitive
4 political issues, Chinese journalists, when facing restrictions, regard tapping into public
5 opinion expressed on the Internet as a tactic to cater for a wider audience while bypassing
6 potential political danger (de Burgh 2003; Tong and Sparks 2009). Therefore, we are able to
7 see that the traditional media, although not doing much initial exposure, were actively
8 engaging in the government/official focused HFSE in terms of mainly reporting and
9 sometimes investigating after the Internet users had set the agenda ahead of journalists. Their
10 involvement actually intensified the public discussion on particular issues and acted as a
11 ‘pressure cooker’, working with the online population jointly pushing the target to provide
12 redress.

13 HFSE is an online phenomenon but also one that cannot be divorced from the political
14 environment. They need to be seen alongside the offline protests that have occurred in China.
15 The number of protests in China, in urban and rural areas, ranging from rebellion, riot, and
16 demonstration to petition, strike, has been increasing (Yang 2009). The issues involved
17 include house demolition, land acquisition, environment protection, labour welfare, policy
18 enforcement, village elections, etc., which all have constituted the main sources of conflict in
19 Chinese offline protests. Moreover, the political environment means that the HFSE has been
20 given a space to target local governments and individual officials but a line seems to be
21 drawn at central government at least no cases we could find focused on central government.
22 In other words, even though there is strict control in Chinese cyberspace the Internet policy in
23 China is fluid and calculating; the Chinese central government generally lets HFSE occur
24 because it views the Internet as a channel to monitor and discipline its local departments and
25 cadres. Of course if its legitimacy and stability are challenged by an HFSE then its response
26 would be different and it is hard think that HFSE actor’s anonymity could be maintained.
27 Drawing on Andrejevic (2005) one could argue that HFSE participants are little more than
28 ‘the eyes and ears’ of central government co-opted into the sousveillance of local government
29 officials. However, we would argue, based on the HFSE we examined and as far we can tell,
30 HFSE were not organised by central government and participants were not enlisted in
31 response to a central government call for action. Underlying them is a genuine citizen anger
32 and resentment at the transgression of particular norms by public officials and a desire to
33 bring about some resolution.

1 The HFSE demonstrates the power of the citizens using the internet to mobilize and form
2 groups in response to a particular claim or transgression. But the Internet is a necessary but
3 not sufficient condition: the occurrence of HFSE is the result of a combination of online and
4 offline factors, such as the lack of formal channels for holding corrupt officials to account,
5 low government credibility that pushes Chinese citizens to question rather than accept official
6 claims, the strictly censored traditional media making the Internet become an additional and
7 desirable channel to expose in the first place, as well as probably the most basic one, namely
8 the imperfect Chinese political system that has brought about and also failed to deal with
9 official corruption and public distrustfulness. HFSE's 'being online' characteristic makes the
10 politically-focused HFSE difficult for Chinese authority to control (due to online anonymity
11 making the identification of particular person online much more complicated than offline),
12 and its existence is also temporary, which emerges after a specific trigger and then stops once
13 some kind of response has been solicited. Giving the growing access to the Internet and the
14 fundamental political challenges China faces HFSE is a phenomenon of online politics that is
15 set to continue.

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1 **Table 1: The Twenty cases of HFSE**

Types of HFSE	Number	Date	The Aim
Non-government/official focused HFSE	12	2001	Fact checking of an announcement by an Internet user in Mop online forum (Wang and Zhang 2008a)
		Feb.2006	Tracking down a kitten abuser (Chen 2006; Cai 2006)
		April 2006	Tracking down an online gamer with nickname <i>tong xu men</i> for committing infidelity (No author 2006)
		Aug. 2006	Tracking down pornography-photo maker (Dong and Liu 2006; Song 2006)
		April 2007	Tracking down a man Qian Jun for insulting an old man on street (Wang and Zhang 2008a)
		Aug. 2006	Tracking down a foreigner for hurling insults at Chinese people (Xu 2008)
		2007	Fact checking the credibility of news by national TV station (Wang 2008; Zhong and Guo 2008)
		Jan.2008	Tracking down a man Wang Fei for committing infidelity (Downey 2010)
		Mar. 2008	Tracking down an online-shopping cheat (Wang and Zhang 2008b)
		Mar. 2008	Tracking down a barbershop owner in Zhengzhou city of Henan province, who charged unreasonable prices to his customers (Zhang et al. 2008)
		May 2008	Tracking down a girl Gao Qianhui (her online nickname is Zhang Ya) insulting earthquake victims (Fletcher 2008)
		Oct. 2008	Tracking down a girl Guo Ziyin sold by her father to pay off his debt (Guo, Z. W. 2008)
Government/official focused HFSE	8	Oct. 2007	Fact checking the credibility of Shaanxi government's announcement about existence of the South China tiger (Shan 2007)
		June 2008	Tracking down a woman with her online nickname <i>ju hua xiang xiang</i> allegedly having affair with government officer (Wu 2008)
		Nov. 2008	Tracking down a corrupt government officer Zhou Jiugeng evidenced by online photos (Xi 2009)
		Nov. 2008	Tracking down a government officer Lin Jiexiang shown in an online footage suspicious of assaulting a little girl (Feng 2008)
		Dec. 2009	Tracking down government officers whose names were shown in a document recording details of a luxury trip by a group of government officers (Hartono 2009)
		Feb. 2009	Fact checking police's announcement about the investigation on the death of a prisoner Li Minqiao in Jinning county prison in Yunnan province (Zhang 2009)
		June 2009	Fact checking government's announcement about the appointment of a young man Zhou Senfeng as the mayor of a city in Hubei province (Wang, H. Z. 2009)
		June 2009	Fact checking police's announcement about a young woman Deng Yujiao sentenced to jail for her having stabbed a local official to death (Herold 2011)

1 **Table 2: Cases of ‘government/official focused’ HFSE**

Types of government/official focused HFSE	Case	Date	Trigger	Target	Outcome
Target punishing	Case 1	Jun.2008	A woman posted on the Tianya forum a series of photos, showing her luxury life and messages about her relationship with a high-level government official.	The woman in the series of photos.	The woman shown in these photos was identified but she denied this and asserted she had been played by someone else
	Case 2	Nov.2008	A news programme showing a public official saying that the government would punish real estate developers who sold houses at lower than cost price, which incurred public outrage due to the reality of unaffordable house prices in the region.	Zhou Jiugeng, an official who received public criticism because of his inappropriate remark on house prices in an interview	Evidence of Zhou’s corruption was found by Internet users, he was dismissed and jailed for corruption (Moore 2008)
	Case 3	Nov.2008	A cctv footage showing a quarrel about an assault on a little girl with a man claiming loudly he was high-level government official and nobody could touch him.	Lin Jiexiang, the official who was filmed by the restaurant’s cctv	Lin was identified by Internet users and dismissed due to his public words and deeds (Branigan 2008b)
	Case 4	Dec. 2009	Documents found by a Shanghai citizen showing the costs of a trip by a group of government officials and posed it on the Internet	Government officials who took luxury trips to foreign attractions.	Officials in this luxury trip were all identified by Internet users, two of them were dismissed and others were given disciplinary warnings
Fact-checking	Case 5	Oct.2007	Shaanxi government announced via a news conference that the South China Tiger still existed in its wild areas	Online photos of the South China tiger that had been officially declared extinct in Shaanxi where these tiger photos originally emerged.	Photos were found to be faked and the photo maker Zhou Zhenglong was thus put in prison.
	Case 6	Feb. 2009	Local police’s unconvincing explanation of a prisoner’s death (Allegedly, he died when playing ‘Hide and Seek’ with other prisoners)	The group members organized by Yunan government to investigate the cause of one prisoner’s death (Internet users wanted to find out if these members were	Public’s question speeded up the investigation on this prisoner’s death, two prison guards were charged for malpractice and the death’s family got compensation

				'insider', which may prevent the truth from being covered)	
	Case 7	Jun.2009	A male masters graduate was reported as the youngest mayor in China, which incurred online discussion about whether the young man was appointed due to his family connections rather than his capabilities (Xie, L. B. 2009)	The newly appointed mayor of Yicheng city in Hubei province of China	It was proved by both media and Internet users that there was nothing wrong with the mayor's appointment.
	Case 8	Jun. 2009	A female witness Deng Yujiao had been sentenced to jail for having stabbed a local official to death, which triggered online discussion about her right to violently defend herself from sexual assault by local government officials	Local officials who were reported to have sexually assaulted a female waiter Deng Yujiao in a hotel	Facing the pressure from online uproar and media's question, local police re-evaluated Deng's case and finally released her after the charge on her was changed from murder to excessive self-defence and also due to it was medically proved that Deng had mental illness

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