

Hacktivism: a Theoretical and Empirical Exploration of China's Cyber Warriors

Michael Yip

School of Engineering and Computer Science
University of Southampton
Southampton, SO17 1BJ

my2e09@ecs.soton.ac.uk

Craig Webber

School of Social Science
University of Southampton
Southampton, SO17 1BJ

c.webber@soton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

China is frequently reported as the source of many politically motivated cyber-attacks. Yet, there have been very few studies on the people behind such attacks, also known as hacktivists. In this paper, we have taken a step back and studied some of the reasons behind the rise of freelance hacktivism emanating from China. Using various criminological theories, as well as political and sociological approaches, we propose a novel theoretical framework behind Chinese hacktivism. Furthermore, we present an empirical analysis on the membership growth patterns of online Chinese hacktivist forums and use the observed patterns to support our proposed framework.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.2 [Computers and Society]: Abuse and crime involving computers

General Terms

Security, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Hacktivism, National Humiliation, Ressentiment, Relative Deprivation, China

1. INTRODUCTION

Hacktivism is a phenomenon in which hacking converges with political activism (Denning 2001, p. 263). It is a phenomenon which has become even more newsworthy since a loose knit group of politically motivated hackers called "Anonymous" launched a series of high profile cyber-attacks against companies who had cut off services to Wikileaks due to the intense pressure from the US government. These "hacktivists" codenamed their series of attacks "Operation Payback" and this caught the attention of the media who followed the event with increasing interest and hyperbole, with the creation of emotive neologisms such as "cyberwar" and "cybergeddon" effectively captured a wide audience. Discussion about all forms of hacking tends towards the extreme end of the moral panic/cybergeddon rhetoric with state-sponsorship often

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seen as propelling the activity at enemy infrastructures and this has done more to mystify than clarify (Wall 2008).

This reaction highlights a lack of understanding of this phenomenon. Hacktivism is a subject which has been under researched academically and there has been an over-reliance placed on the knowledge "shared" by the various stakeholders who have a vested interest in boosting demand for their products and services. Thus, our aim in this paper is to study the key characteristics of a specific form of hacktivism, both theoretically and empirically. Our focus is on freelance hacktivism emanating from China and the political and emotional triggers for it. We have carried out an extensive empirical study on the Chinese hacktivists spanning from the very first Chinese hacktivist groups to several which are currently in operation. The empirical findings presented in this paper shed light on the operations of the Chinese hacktivists and demonstrates how powerful social and political factors shape and pattern hacktivist attacks. Our focus in this paper is how nationalistic patriotism is engendered by politically-motivated national education programmes which, in turn, lead to a sense of relative deprivation resulting in humiliation that is deep-seated and long-lasting. This emotion has been termed *ressentiment* (Scheler 1915/1998). Our aim is to demonstrate the historical and political motivations of hacktivists and render them intelligible as opposed to the pathological folk devils of popular discourse.

2. TOWARDS A THEORETICAL MODEL OF HACKTIVISM

We do not present in this paper a complete theory for hacktivism, or indeed, certain forms of hacktivism that derive from China. Our more modest aim is to begin to explain some of the patterns in membership of hacktivist forums that we later present and the targets chosen for the attacks. In what follows we discuss two related ideas, *ressentiment* and relative deprivation, that we suggest go some way to explain the pattern and targets of Chinese hacktivism.

2.1 *Ressentiment* and Relative Deprivation

It is our contention that hacktivism in the Chinese context derives from a complex social and emotional mix of factors. At the emotional level, the feelings derive from a position that is more than just resentment. We will argue that humiliation is one of the key variables, but it is an enduring sense of humiliation as opposed to the usual definition of the emotion as short-lived. Many scholars have linked this to the reasons for mass protest and collective action (Lacy 2011; Jasper 2010; Wang 2008). Humiliation can only occur where there is an outgroup that is thought to perceive us in a negative way. Consequently, a theory of ingroup/outgroup comparisons is presented from a social

psychological perspective that accounts for group interactions and identifications. We will go on to show how these have been linked to theories of relative deprivation (Webber 2007). We also wish to present an argument that locates hacktivism within a longer term emotional state that has been described by the term *ressentiment*. Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment*, elaborated and extended by Max Scheler (1915/1998), refers to an incurable and persistent emotion characterised by hate and despising of selected outgroups. The feeling is one that can be felt at an individual level, as well as at a national or cultural level. An entire nation can be said to suffer *ressentiment*. In Scheler's discussion, *ressentiment* results in an impotent inability to physically and verbally express the feeling. Whereas resentment is usually fleeting and transitory, *ressentiment* lingers often without relief; a form of resignation (Meltzer and Musolf 2002). However, Meltzer and Musolf (2002) have argued that a sense of impotency may characterise *ressentiment*, but it is not inevitable.

"Rather than a necessarily perdurable state, *ressentiment*-related passivity may at times become a lengthy, dynamic, *transitional* stage between treatment defined as wrongful and retaliation or rectification. That is, resentient individuals or groups may come to define the inducing agent as either intolerable or no longer overpowering and, therefore, susceptible to acts of revenge or revolt" (Musolf and Meltzer 2002, p.250-251, *emphasis in original*)

It is the perception that something can be done that may result in individual or collective action. Perhaps the key additional criminological input of the work of Cloward and Ohlin (1960) can help us understand how, with the right opportunities, collective action to overcome and mitigate the feelings of impotent *ressentiment* can be achieved. Elaborating Robert Merton's idea that crime occurs in those who accept the American dream but reject the legitimate means to reach that goal, Cloward and Ohlin added the argument that access to illegitimate opportunities was also necessary to engage in specific criminal acts. Hacktivism is very different from the types of criminal activity Cloward and Ohlin describe. But the notion that certain crimes can only take place if we have access to the right opportunities for their commission is pertinent here. Although Merton's theory of anomie, and the tradition of subcultural theory based on it (Merton 1938; Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960), is deemed by some to be a form of relative deprivation (Lea and Young 1984/1993), it has been argued that we need to look at another theorist, W.G. Runciman, for a more useful account of relative deprivation and group or national conflict (Webber 2007).

The concept of relative deprivation has appeared in many guises and has enjoyed mixed fortunes since W.G. Runciman's book, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* appeared in 1966. This was one of the fullest accounts of the concept up to that time. The following is a summary of the key idea:

"If A, who does not have something but wants it, compares himself to B, who does have it, then A is 'relatively deprived' with reference to B. Similarly, if A's expectations are higher than B's, or if he was better off than B in the past, he may when similarly placed to B feel relatively deprived by comparison with him" (Runciman 1966, p.10)

Importantly, relative deprivation bridges the gap between objective, even structural, forms of deprivation (absolute deprivation) and the subjective, or agent-level, experience of

deprivation, important in this study because of the way that Chinese hacktivists elicit a strong patriotic connection to China.

2.2 Social Identity Theory and Relative Deprivation

It has been argued that relative deprivation, and other negative outcomes of individual and group comparisons, can be included within the social psychological approach known as social identity theory (Webber 2007; 2010). The social psychologist, Henri Tajfel, put forward the suggestion, based on his group experiments, that intergroup conflict could occur without competition for resources (Tajfel and Wilkes 1963). Identification with a group was sufficient to create conflict if comparison with another group took place. This was because a social group had the need to positively distinguish itself from what became known as the outgroup. People needed to create or maintain a positive social identity. More recently, this approach has become more sophisticated by moving out of small group experimental studies, to look at groups undergoing real social upheaval, such as during the negotiations for the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 (Bond and Hewstone 1988). What these studies demonstrate is that in order to understand crime or hacktivism we have to understand the networks and social context in which people operate (Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2011; see also Hobbs 1997 for a review of the literature; Canter and Alison 2000).

Linking this to the discussion of *ressentiment*, and the elaboration by Musolf and Meltzer, and we would argue that the feelings of *ressentiment* that are encouraged by the Chinese government's use of National Humiliation as a motivating force, coupled with the opportunity afforded by the spread of the Web to mitigate these feelings of humiliation through hacktivism, all helps to explain the rise of this activity.

2.3 Nationalism, Patriotism and Hacktivism

Over the last two centuries, national humiliation propaganda has proven to be a very effective, if not the most effective tool for the purpose of national unification and recovery in different locations. Abraham Lincoln declared a "National Humiliation Day" to unify the country during the American Civil War. Gandhi used the same strategy to unify India to rise against the British imperialists in 1919. In China, Mao used it to establish the People's Republic of China and offered a national salvation by telling the world "Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation" (Callahan 2004, p.203). Then in the 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced the "three belief crises": crisis of faith in socialism, Marxism and the party itself. This gradually led to an increasing demand for Western-style democracy which resulted in the Tiananmen movement in 1989. The shocked Chinese rulers perceived the cause to be the lack of ideological and political education and as a result, a patriotic education campaign was launched in 1991 (Wang 2008, p.800), with the goals of "rejuvenating China's national spirit, strengthening the unity of the people of different ethnic groups, reconstructing the sense of national esteem and dignity and building the broadest possible coalition under the leadership of the CCP." (Zhao 1998, p.296)

Initially, the patriotic education campaign was limited to youth education and it was implemented from kindergartens to universities. According to Zhao (1998, p.292), "...by May 1994, more than 95% of primary and middle school students in Beijing were organized to watch the patriotic films recommended by the

State Education Commission". Furthermore, "the authorities launched the 'I am Chinese' program in universities, which taught students to be proud of being Chinese by concentrating on the 'great achievements' of the Chinese people and especially the Communist Party" (Zhao 1998, p.293). However, the campaign gradually targeted almost everyone including soldiers, farmers and workers.

As Callahan (2004, p.202) has summarised, Chinese nationalism is "not just about celebrating the glories of Chinese civilization; it also commemorates China's weakness. This negative image comes out most directly in the discourse of China's Century of National Humiliation. Chinese books on the topic generally tell the tale of China going from being at the centre of the world to being the Sick Man of Asia after the Opium War (1840) only to rise again with the Communist Revolution (1949)...The discourse of national humiliation shows how China's insecurities are not just material, a matter of catching up to the West militarily and economically, but symbolic. Indeed, one of the goals of Chinese foreign policy has been to 'cleanse National Humiliation'"

Indeed, the most relevant part of this patriotic education campaign to hacktivism is the ways in which the campaign "took every opportunity to instigate nationalist resentment against foreign pressures" (Zhao 1998 p.297). The aim is to convince the youths that hostile international forces are doing all they can to undermine China's quest to dominance once again. To achieve this goal, the patriotic education campaign was "designed to present the Chinese youth with detailed information about China's traumatic and humiliating experience in the face of Western and Japanese incursion" (Wang 2008, p.791).

This political creation of a sense of historical relative deprivation towards foreign forces, which we argue is *ressentiment*, through national education programmes, and the coincidence in timing with the availability of the Internet in the mid-90s are what the authors believe to be the fundamental factors behind Chinese hacktivism.

As noted by Lacy (2011, p.89), "A group may have a low status for a considerable period of time, but only when they perceive that to be a degradation will the anger and the need for self-respect lead to violence". The first major instance of eruption of this politically constructed *ressentiment* is evident from Hughes' paper in which he reports the reactions to the Indonesian riots against ethnic Chinese in May 1998 and examines how the Internet was used to mediate information about the events happening in Indonesia. His paper shows that there was a strong reluctance from the Chinese state to act over the May 1998 Indonesian riots in which many Chinese women were reportedly gang raped and murdered. The state banned student protests in China because "the ban should be understood in the context of the clamp-down on independent political activity in the capital that had been in place since the Tiananmen Massacre of 4 June 1989..." (Hughes 2000, p.201). This officially shuts out the traditional physical ways in which the Chinese citizens could voice their anger over political matters. Perhaps most important of all is the paradoxical situation that the Chinese state have found themselves in. On the one hand, they actively promote nationalism to unite the country. Yet, in the political arena, they cannot allow protest in response to political events because any form of protest would subject the state to criticisms and ultimately threaten its legitimacy to rule. As Hughes (2000, p.206) observes, there is an "...increasing need for the state to align itself with the nationalistic outbursts that are

becoming a regular occurrence in Chinese cyberspace. That the PRC state has found itself increasingly held hostage to an ideology that it has itself encouraged since the Tiananmen Massacre was evident when the authorities found themselves having to provide buses to ship demonstrators to the anti-NATO demonstrations held after the Belgrade bombing".

Thus, in his paper, Hughes provides a valuable insight into what drove the Chinese hacktivists, which we argue to be "the generation of patriotic education", to respond since these are the very first examples of Chinese hacktivism and it is these early examples which helped create their symbolic status as patriotic cyber citizen-warriors. In other words, the internet is a relatively safe place for the Chinese government to allow the expression of anger and which would not provoke the same kind of mass physical political movement as happened at Tiananmen and elsewhere in China during 1989. Hacktivism safely vents the *ressentiment* of national humiliation encouraged by the Chinese government through the patriotic education programme.

In the remainder of this paper, we present empirical findings to support our argument.

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY

To find empirical proof to support the argument proposed in this paper, the authors set out to examine the potential correlation between membership growth patterns of the hacktivist online forums and the timing of the political events. As it is proposed in this paper that it is the lack of freedom for physical protests which has driven some Chinese people to express their emotions online, it is then logical to hypothesise that in the event of a major political event that has sparked public outcry, hacktivist groups should experience a surge in membership growth.

3.1 Study Setup

Since the purpose of this study is to examine hacktivism, it was decided that online hacktivist forums (or bulletin board systems, BBS) would be suitable at this stage of the project and without access to those undertaking hacktivism directly. There are two problems with this data.

Firstly, the source of data is critical. The Internet Archive¹ and the Web Infomall² are the two most complete Internet archives available and they are great sources of data when studying old web pages, especially those from domains which no longer exist. Unfortunately, during this study, the Web Infomall was inaccessible for unknown reasons and so all data presented in this study were captured from the Internet Archive by querying the domain names of the hacktivist forums listed in table 1. With regards to the timing of political events, this study uses information primarily from news articles from both the Western and Chinese news agencies, in particular, the timeline of major events in China published by the BBC³.

Secondly, as shown in table 1, there have been quite a number of hacktivist groups which have been formed and disbanded since 1998 (Henderson 2007). Therefore, there was a need to select our target groups. Several factors were considered.

¹<http://web.archive.org>

²<http://www.infomall.cn>

³http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1288392.stm

1. *Availability of data:* the Green Army would be the most ideal subject as they were the earliest group of hacktivists. Unfortunately, the earliest date of data offered by the Internet Archive only dates back to 4th Feb 2001, which is after the group had disbanded. Thus, the Green Army could not be chosen as a test subject.

2. *The relevance of the group:* considering the timing of the group, the China Eagle Union would be an ideal alternative to the Green Army. However, the presentation of the group gives no clear indications about their scope of activities. In other words, there is no clear indication whether the group was a pure hacktivist organisation.

Table 1: list of famous hacktivist groups

Name	Founder	Domain name	Duration
Green Army	“Goodwill”	ibase.net	1998-2000
China Eagle Union	Wan Tao	chinawill.com chinaeagle.org	2000-2005
H.U.C. (1 st gen)	“lion”	cnhonker.com cnhonker.net cnhonker.org	2000-2004
H.U.C. (2 nd gen)	“Binger ⁴ ”	chinahonker.com	2005
H.U.C. (3 rd gen)	“Lyon”	honker.net	2010 - present
H.U.C. (3 th gen)	“Binger”	cnhonkerarmy.com	2010 - present

On the other hand, the relevance of the Honker Union of China (H. U. C.) is clear. The H. U. C. was first created by a famous Chinese hacktivist known as “lion” in late 2000. It is clear that this is a hacktivist group purely dedicated to protecting China because they refer to themselves as the “honkers”, which means “red hackers”, where red is the national colour. Furthermore, the group also has a strict code of conduct⁵ which includes the following rules:

- Love your country
- Strictly forbid attacks against any legitimate institutes within the country
- Treat other honkers as your colleagues and share your knowledge
- Uniformly defend the country and respond to defiant acts by foreign countries

Members of the H. U. C. are encouraged to adhere to those rules by the different generations⁶ of H. U. C., which are as listed in table 2. Therefore, this study focuses on the membership growth of the different generations of the H. U. C. from 2001 to 2010.

⁴Phonetic translation of the hacker’s user name “冰儿”

⁵<http://replay.web.archive.org/20010405092345/http://www.cnhonker.com/cnhonker.htm>

⁶<http://cnhonkerarmy.com/purpose.htm>

3.2 Hacktivist Forum Membership Growth

In this section, the membership growth patterns of each generation of the Honker Union of China (H. U. C.) are presented and correlated with the timing of key political events which occurred in China.

3.2.1 First generation of H.U.C. (2001- 2004)

As already mentioned, there are three generations of the H. U. C. and the first generation was created by “lion” in 2000. Unfortunately, membership data for the group in 2000 is not available on the Internet Archive and data for 2001 is relatively incomplete. Figure 1 shows the membership growth of the hacktivist forum in 2001.

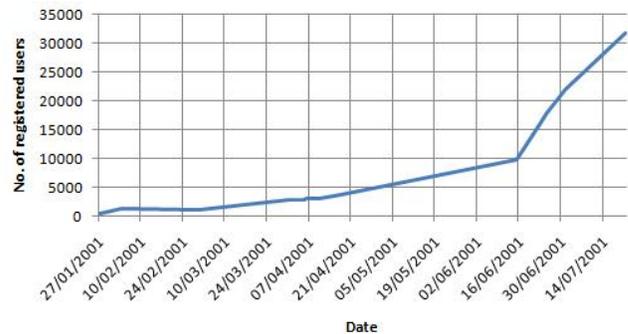


Figure 1: Membership growth of H. U. C. (2001)

From figure 1, it can be seen the group’s membership had a relatively steady growth from January to April and a slight increase followed before a sudden surge in mid-June which continued beyond July. Unfortunately, the data is the least complete out of all of that presented in this paper and so, it is difficult to understand this observation accurately. More precisely, between 15th June 2001 and 23rd June 2001, it was found that the groups’ membership surged from 9814 to 16099 and from then on, the growth rate became much sharper than before.

Although it is not possible to pinpoint the exact reason for the surge between 15th to 23rd June, the authors attribute some of the reasons behind the increase in growth to a major international incident. In early April 2001, a U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter which killed the Chinese pilot. This sparked outrage across China and subsequently, this led to a hacker war⁷ between U.S. hackers and the Honker Union of China. This was widely reported on the news and on 6th May, the popular news portal sina.com published an interview⁸ with “lion”.

The authors believe that this is the key moment for the honkers as it was the first time they became known to the general public and that this is the moment when the label “honkers” became associated with online proactive patriots. Naturally, this led to a membership growth. Clearly, these are people who are aware of hacktivism, and are sufficiently motivated to either join, or partake in hacktivist attacks. It is beyond the scope of the present study to outline the demographic characteristics and motivations of these members.

Then on 20th June 2001, Taiwan test-fired the Patriot anti-missile defence system while in the same month, China held a military exercise simulating island invasions. There was a growing

⁷<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1322839.stm>

⁸<http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/c/65747.shtml>

concern that China would invade Taiwan. The authors speculate that this tension added further to the *ressentiment* already built up in the Chinese people during the conflict with the U.S. and with the knowledge of the existence of a hacktivist forum on which people take a proactive approach towards political matters, it would have been natural for them to start flocking to the site in order to express their emotions.

Oddly, the group was temporarily closed between the end of 2002 and early 2003 but was re-launched from May 2003 to end of 2004. The interesting aspect of this second launch of the H. U. C. by “lion” is that unlike in 2001, the membership growth of group remained relatively steady throughout 2003 - 2004, as represented by the straight line graph shown in figure 2.

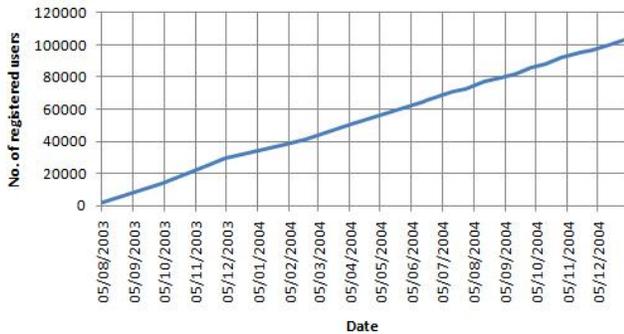


Figure 2: Membership growth of cnhonker.com (2003-2004)

The relatively steady and slower growth during the period from 2003 to 2004 can be explained by the fact that China’s foreign relations were relatively stable and that domestic events dominated, including the Sars virus outbreak and the first Chinese moon landing.

On 31st Dec 2004, “lion” disbanded the H. U. C. and this was the end of the first generation.

3.2.2 Second generation of H.U.C. (2005)

Soon after “lion” disbanded the first generation of the H.U.C., it was then regrouped by another person known as “Binger” in early 2005. The membership growth of this group is shown in figure 3.

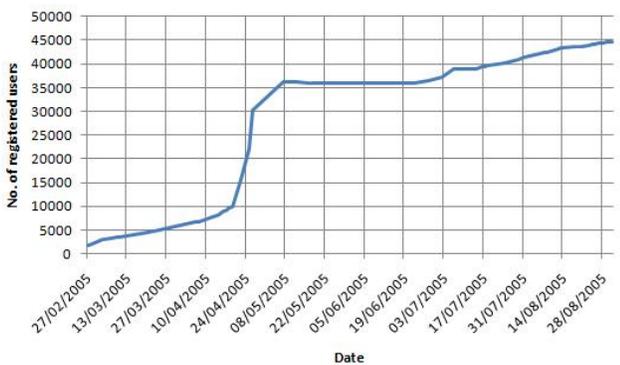


Figure 3: Membership growth of chinahonker.com

As evident from figure 3, this second generation experienced a sudden surge in membership in April. In detail, the membership surged from 9945 on 19th Apr 2005 to 30151 on 26th Apr 2005, a 203% increase in 17 days.

This surge is also reflected by Google Trends, as shown in figure 4. This figure shows the volume of searches for the search terms “honkers” and “honkers union” in China in 2005.

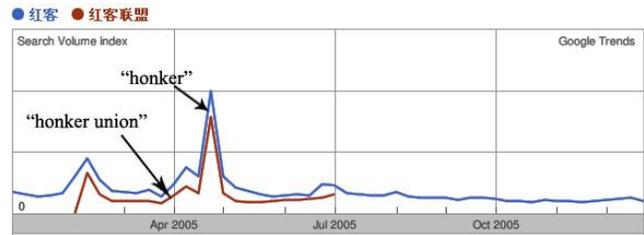


Figure 4: Google Trends for search terms “honker” and “honker union” in China in 2005

Thus, it has been shown that there was a sudden increase in demand for the hacktivists from mid-April to late April. The authors believe that there were two reasons for this. Firstly, there was a mass outcry happening at the time over the Japanese Education Ministry’s attempt to omit the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army in WWII from textbooks. Thus, there was a surge in *ressentiment*. Secondly, on 22nd April, a popular portal, qq.com reported⁹ that the Honkers Union of China had in fact already regrouped after its disbandment at the end of 2004.

Therefore, it is the authors’ belief that the surge is attributable to the strong *ressentiment* over Japan at the time and the news of the regroup drove those in need of expressing their emotions to the H. U. C. as they already knew about the group’s proactive patriotism from 2001.

This generation of the H. U. C. disbanded at the end of August 2004.

3.2.3 Third generation of H.U.C. (2010 – present)

In 2010, there were two separate groups claiming to be the Honkers Union of China: honker.net (previous domain name was chinesehonker.org) was launched in June 2009 and cnhonkerarmy.com was launched in June 2010.



Figure 5 - Percentage of daily global reach to the forums [Source: Alexa Internet (www.alexa.com)]

On the 7th September, the Chinese captain of a fishing trawler was detained by the Japanese navy near the Diaoyu Islands. Almost predictably, this caused a public outcry in China. Thus, the authors hypothesised that this event should also lead to a surge in membership for the two hacktivist forums. Unfortunately, the Internet Archive could not provide the archived pages for either of

⁹ <http://tech.qq.com/a/20050422/000071.htm>

the forums and so the authors had no choice but to turn to Alexa¹⁰ and studied the Web traffic data instead. The data on the percentage of daily global reach of both forums is as shown in figure 5.

It is evident from the figure that during mid-September, there was an unusually sharp surge in reach for both forums and this surge is found to have coincided with a hacktivist rallying call¹¹ published on the 11th September, on a forum dedicated to China's fight for sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands. This rallying call was made by someone proclaiming to be one of the founding members of honker.net and asked people to participate in a forthcoming cyberattack on Japan planned for the 18th September. 18th September 2001 was also the date which marked the 79th anniversary of the "Manchurian Incident" which is said to be staged by the Japanese as the pretext to the invasion of China.

However, what does this surge in daily reach mean?

Figures 6 and 7 present some interesting insights into the sudden surge in daily reach. Although honker.net received the highest surge in traffic, figure 6 shows that it was cnhonkerarmy.com which experienced the highest surge in the average time visitors spent on the site. Similarly, figure 7 shows that it was cnhonkerarmy.com which experienced the highest increase in the number of daily unique page views by the visitors.



Figure 6: Average time spent on site (minutes) on Chinese hacktivist forums in the last twelve months [Source: Alexa Internet (www.alexa.com)]

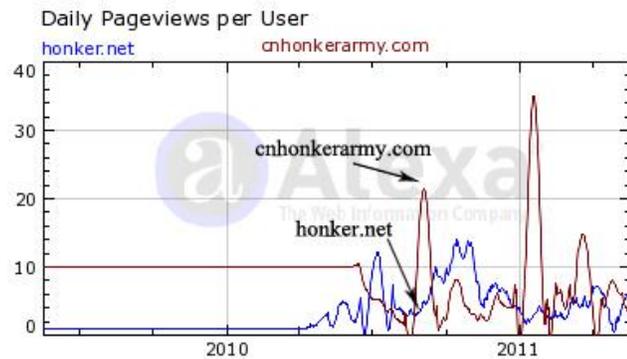


Figure 7: Average daily unique page views per user on Chinese hacktivist sites over the last twelve months. [Source: Alexa Internet (www.alexa.com)]

There are two reasons for honker.net's greater surge in daily reach: firstly, the Web address of the forum was featured on the rallying call. Secondly, on 13th Sept, the founder of honker.net "Lyon" published an official notice saying that the rallying call had nothing to do with honker.net and that he believes such attacks add no value to the country¹². Subsequently on the 15th September, this notice by "Lyon" featured in the news¹³ on sina.com. As honker.net has had such wide exposure, it is not surprising to find that it had experience a surge in reach.

On the other hand, cnhonkerarmy.com did not feature in the media and yet it also experienced a surge in traffic. This indicates that those who were more familiar with hacktivism were also seeking out websites that were not mentioned in the media. This eliminates a potential counter-argument that the surge in global reach was due to mere hype at the time. In addition, the surge in the length of time spent on the site and the average number of pages viewed by its visitors as well as the surge in daily reach may be attributed to the fact that cnhonkerarmy.com had announced details of their own set of attacks on Japan, as shown in figure 8.

Therefore, it may be argued that cnhonkerarmy.com's general growth in all three Web traffic benchmarks reflects the users' need to express their emotions in the form of symbolic cyber attacks. This supports Nietzsche and Scheler's view of *ressentiment* "as embodying an intense desire for revenge...Both also stressed the inability of those experiencing *ressentiment* to rebel against the agents of their unjust treatment, who are more powerful. Imaginary or symbolic revenge, however, may often take the place of actual retaliation." (Meltzer and Musolf 2002, p.248).



Figure 8: Screenshot of a defaced Japanese website published on cnhonkerarmy.com

Furthermore, figures 6 and 7 also provide crucial insights into the behavior of the users on hacktivist forums at the time of major political events. The sharp increase in both the average time spent and the average daily unique pageviews per visitor demonstrate that during a major political event, the members of the hacktivist forums would become more active on the forums. Thus, this serves as evidence for Jasper's claim that "Emotions are part of a flow of action and interaction, not simply the prior motivations to engage or the outcomes that follow." (Jasper 2010, p.16).

¹⁰ <http://www.alexa.com>

¹¹ <http://www.cfdd.org.cn/bbs/thread-71680-1-1.html>

¹² <http://www.honker.net/News/Notice/2010-09-13/4908.html>

¹³ <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2010-09-15/17134659907.shtml>

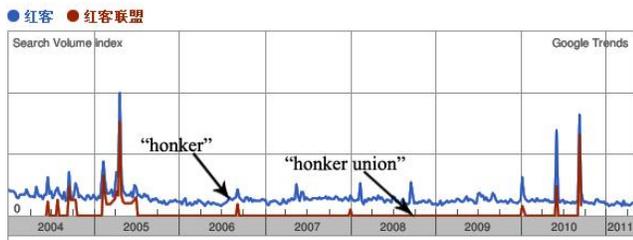


Figure 9: Google Trends for terms "honker" and "honker union" in China over the last six years

Lastly, figure 9 shows the search volume for the terms “honkers” and “honkers union” over the last six years. As shown, the search volumes surges in around April in 2005, then around June in 2010 and September in 2010. While the surges in April 2005 and September 2010 are linked to political events happening at the time, the surge in June 2010 can be attributed to the news that *cnhonkerarmy.com* was formed. Therefore, figure 9 serves as further proof to the argument presented in this paper that people are driven to hacktivist forums at the times of major political events due to their need to express their *ressentiment*.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have taken a novel approach to a phenomenon that has hitherto been rendered as a moral panic, with hacktivists as folk devils intent on global Armageddon. We have argued that the form that hacktivism takes in China is bounded and shaped by social and historical influences, and these have accelerated since the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. We have found a fit with various criminological theories, as well as political and sociological approaches. Political demonstrations against the ruling communist party in 1989 led the government to create a national patriotic education programme highlighting the way that China had suffered national humiliation. This sense of social *ressentiment* becomes piqued when an incident occurs that threatens the national identity. The paradox is that the patriotic education programme encourages in-group solidarity and antipathy towards the out-group, but this can rarely be expressed in demonstrations because the government fears a new Tiananmen. Hacktivism in China developed at about the same time as the education programme started to be rolled out, and in order to demonstrate that this is not just a coincidence, we have also shown how activity on hacktivist forums rises and falls during incidents of perceived national threat. Hacktivism therefore becomes a safe outlet to vent patriotic anger, and so hacktivism is not encouraged by the state, but tolerated.

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