

The 20-Year-Old Crime That's Blowing Up on Chinese Social Media

by Emily Parker | May 4, 2013

On May 4, the popular Chinese actress Yao Chen posted the following message to her 45 million followers on the microblogging site Sina Weibo: “Nineteen years ago, the young Zhu Ling was poisoned. Nineteen years later, this name has again been poisoned.”

Yao Chen is referring to a nearly two-decades old attempted murder mystery. The case has again become so blazing hot on Chinese social media that as of Saturday, the name of the victim, Zhu Ling, was censored in Weibo search results. But it's too late: The case has now been brought to the attention of tens of millions of Chinese people.

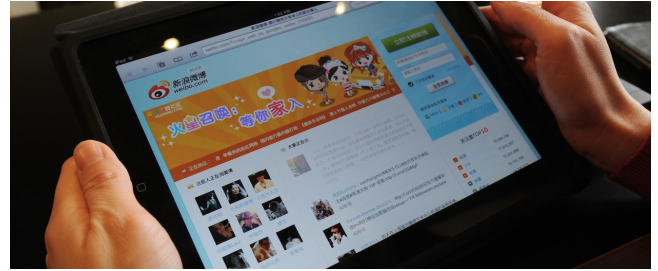


photo credit: Mark Ralston/AFP/Getty Images

The saga goes back to 1994, when Zhu Ling, a pretty and able chemistry student at China's prestigious Tsinghua University, was poisoned by thallium. Zhu Ling survived, but remains paralyzed and dependent on her parents for care. Nobody knows for sure why she was poisoned, and nobody has been convicted of the crime. Of course, Chinese netizens have formed their own opinions. Many have long believed that Sun Wei, Zhu Ling's roommate and only major suspect in the case got off scot free because her [uncle and grandfather](#) were powerful communist officials. For many Chinese, this just confirms a widespread belief that officials are above the law.

Interest in Zhu Ling's case was reignited by an unrelated story at Shanghai's [Fudan University](#), where a postgraduate was poisoned, also possibly by his roommate. But over the years, online interest in Zhu Ling's case has never quite vanished. In fact, from the very beginning Zhu Ling's story has illustrated the power of the Internet to transform Chinese lives. Zhu Ling is in bad shape today. But if it weren't for the Internet, she likely would have died.

In 1995, Bei Zhicheng was a 21-year-old student at Peking University, where he studied mechanics. He heard that his former high school classmate, Zhu Ling, had been struck by a mysterious illness. She had been feeling sick and her hair had fallen out. Eventually she became completely bald. Zhu was being treated at the prestigious Peking Union Medical College Hospital, but local doctors were mystified. They couldn't determine the cause of her symptoms.

One day, Bei and other students went to see Zhu in the hospital. They could only enter her room one person at a time. When it was Bei's turn, he found Zhu lying in bed, half naked, with tubes protruding from her body. He wanted to escape but couldn't move. At 21, the death of a peer was the furthest thing from his mind. Bei observed the desperation of Zhu's parents. The doctors were confounded. Bei remembered someone in his dormitory talking about this thing called the Internet, via which you could communicate with people from all over the world. China at that time had very little connectivity. But Bei's dorm mate Cai Quanqing had access to Bitnet and Usenet, computer networks that would allow him to reach out to the

medical community abroad.

Bei and Cai sat down to pen a letter to the outside world seeking help for the sick Zhu. The letter began, in slightly shaky English: "This is Peking University in China, a place those dreams of freedom and democracy. However, a young, 21-year old student has become very sick and is dying. The illness is very rare. Though they have tried, doctors at the best hospitals in Beijing cannot cure her; may do not even know what illness it is. So now we are asking the world—can somebody help us?"

The letter proceeded to describe Zhu's symptoms in detail. It listed the tests that the doctors had done as well as their results. They went to the university computer room and located several "sci.med" newsgroups in an online directory. They then posted the letter on Bitnet and Usenet. The letter was transmitted via satellites and telephone circuits to computers at hospitals and universities all over the world. Before long, responses arrived to Cai's mail account.

Bei says that in total, he received thousands of messages. Many of them said that Zhu had likely been poisoned by Thallium, a highly toxic heavy metal. People recommended Prussian Blue, a kind of dye, as an antidote. Prussian Blue was administered to Zhu, and she eventually showed signs of recovery.

Bei, who later went on to start a software development company, for the first time realized that the Internet was going to be a game-changer. "Before that you could not imagine there are nearly, I think, 200 doctors all over the world who can join together to diagnose this girl, and make the right diagnosis, and give treatment advice. It's impossible to imagine, it's like a dream," he told me.

Unfortunately, this story has far from a happy ending. Over the years there has been intense netizen speculation that Sun Wei, Zhu's roommate, was saved from prosecution by her family connections. Sun Wei was reportedly the only person in Zhu's circle with access to thallium. (Sun Wei denies this.) One theory is that she was motivated by jealousy. Online bulletin board sites were flooded with rumors, accusations of guilt and attempts to even hunt down Sun Wei.

We may never know what really happened. But as a satisfying verdict was never reached in Chinese courts, someone appearing to be Sun Wei ended up testifying in the court of online opinion. The pressure grew so fierce that in 2005, Sun Wei issued a statement on the popular Tianya bulletin board site. "I am innocent," she wrote. "I am also a victim of the Zhu Ling case." She claimed that she had been questioned by police and subsequently cleared of suspicion. Sun Wei even went as far as to scold Chinese netizens for their behavior: "On the Internet, even though everyone is just a virtual ID, one should still be rational and objective, and responsible for his own words and actions."

Netizens, of course, were far from convinced. Now many believe that Sun Wei has left China, and is residing in the United States. There is even a petition on the [White House](#) Web site demanding the deportation of Sun Wei. It already has thousands of signatures. And now, making matters worse, netizens suspect that weibo is covering something up. As of May 4, when you searched for Zhu Ling's name on Sina weibo you learn that according to Chinese law, the results cannot be displayed. Even "thallium" has become a sensitive word, as are other words connected to the case.

This level of Zhu Ling-related censorship is new. Zhu Ling's story has been floating around the Internet for years, and has even been covered by Chinese state media. But now censors are getting worried, in large part because at the end of the day, people are not simply angry about one unsolved crime. Rather, anger over this case reflects a widespread lack of trust in China's rule of law. As long as the truth of Zhu Ling's case hasn't come to light and nobody has been brought to justice, one netizen wrote, "the Chinese dream can only be the powerful officials' dream."

Weibo censorship has only made people more angry and suspicious. One netizen wrote, "A lot of

information about Zhu Ling has been censored. So we can then see that Sun Wei is the murderer.” Another said, “You can delete Weibo and the two characters for Zhu Ling. Can you [also] delete the truth?” One person encouraged microbloggers to continue inundating weibo with comments related to the crime. That way, short of Sina shutting down weibo itself, it would be impossible to erase the people’s pursuit of justice.

Of course, it would be far better if this pursuit took place through the actual legal system, rather than on the Internet. The silver lining is that intense interest on weibo is yet another sign of increasing rights awareness among ordinary Chinese, as well as a collective desire for a fairer system. From the beginning of the Zhu Ling drama, the Internet has helped ordinary citizens form networks to solve problems. It helped to save Zhu Ling’s life, and now it is ensuring that her case is not forgotten. Nor is this online activism in pursuit of an abstract notion of justice. If we don’t stand up for Zhu Ling, people reason, who will stand up for me?

That's why so many people remain fascinated by Zhu Ling's case. Bei Zhicheng puts it best: “Many of our generation have successful careers and comfortable lives,” he said. “Zhu Ling should have been one of us.”

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