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Comparative Ethical Questions on the Quandaries involved in the Contemporary Phenomenon of “Human Flesh Search [Engines]” in the PRC¹

Lauren F. Pfister²

Resumo: Neste artigo, eu exploro os dilemas éticos associados a uma prática online, contemporânea e incomum na República Popular da China: Renrou Sousuo 人肉·搜索 ou “Human Flesh Search [Engines]”. Este tipo de prática é ilegal na maioria dos outros países modernos, mas não na RPC. Eu explico, em parte, o porquê, desde uma clássica origem chinesa, de muitos chineses terem interesse em se envolver com esta forma de vigilância tanto online quanto offline, daí, em seguida, analiso estudos estrangeiros contemporâneos sobre esta prática desenvolvidos por cientistas da computação, os quais não exploram os dilemas éticos que resultam desta prática. Coloco em paralelo esta experiência do começo do século XXI com uma da Dinamarca da década de 1840, experimentada por Soren Kierkegaard, eu argumento que muitas das mais notáveis influências incluem ataque de pânico online e o temor de muitos jovens chineses em acessar a internet, pois eles podem ser perseguidos pelos vigilantes que “Buscam Carne Humana”.

Palavras-chave: ética na internet; Human Flesh Search [Engine]/ renrou sousuo, Zhongyong / A prática do meio; Soren Kierkegaard; ansiedade cultural.

Abstract: In this article I explore the ethical quandaries associated with an unusual online practice in the contemporary People’s Republic of China: Renrou Sousuo 人肉·搜索 or “Human Flesh Search [Engines]”. This kind of practice is illegal in most other modern countries, but not in the PRC. I explain in part why some Chinese persons would be attracted to get involved in this form of on-and-off-line vigilantism from one Chinese classical source, but then delve into contemporary studies of this practice within overseas studies by computer scientists that do not explore the ethical quandaries that result from this practice. Paralleling this early 21st century experience with one in Denmark in the 1840s and experience by Soren Kierkegaard, I argue that some of the very notable influences include online panic attacks and some Chinese youth fearing to go online because they might be stalked by “human flesh search” vigilantism.

Keywords: internet ethics; Human Flesh Search [Engine]/ renrou sousuo, Zhongyong / The Practice of the Mean; Soren Kierkegaard; cultural anxiety.

1 This paper was first presented at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association held in San Diego during April 16-20, 2014, and has been revised and updated to reflect comments received at that time and to indicate new interpretive situations in the PRC in 2017.

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That the use of internet has changed the ways we who engage in the “have” side of the digital divide express ourselves in our daily existence is now well recognized.³ While some digitopian claims continue to laud this social transformation as the newest stage in human evolution,⁴ others are concerned about the unforeseen impact and some relatively new problems⁵ that are associated with the multi-tasking mentalities of the “digitally native”⁶ and those who have adjusted to the “habits of the high-tech heart”.⁷ An unusual feature of cyber-engagement has become a notable phenomenon in mainland China, and though this form of “crowd-powered” cyber activity may be found elsewhere, it appears for a number of reasons to be described below to have a distinctively strong presence among netizens who are active on social networks in the PRC.⁸ Whether this relative freedom online will continue after new internet laws were established in the PRC in 2017 is a matter that we have not been able to assess at this time. What is described here below is a form of active online vigilantism that has previously not been generally constrained by any specific legal restrictions within the PRC.

A good amount of descriptive information has been documented by academics in computer and sociological studies related to these phenomena, but the related ethical questions and even meta-ethical reflections on these relatively new online social experiences generally have not

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- 3 The term “digital divide” is used in current literature as a sociological description of a new form of technical elitism, involving various kinds of biases and troubles that many who originally promoted the use of the internet did not anticipate. For discussions of these matters, consult Linda Leung (2005); cc; Mark Baurlien (2011). An informative and pensive study including considerations of these problems is also provided by James Curran in “Rethinking internet history”, found in (Curran, 2012, pp. 34-65).
 - 4 The digitopian claims that are already imbedded in the descriptive term, “World Wide Web”, had their heyday in the 1980s, as described in Peter Ludlow (2001), but were brought into mainline capitalist ways of conceiving the world as seen in works such as Bill Gates, Nathan Myhrvold and Peter Rinearson’s *The Road Ahead* (Gates; Myhrvold; Rinearson, 1995). This utopian discourse can be located in a good number of works merely by their titles, such as in Christian Crumlish’s tome, *The Power of the Many: How the Living Web is Transforming Politics, Business, and Everyday Life* (Crumlish, 2004) and Michael Chorost (2011)., *World Wide Mind: The Coming Integration of Humanity, Machines and the Internet*. Similarly utopian claims can be found in the texts that appear to be scientific, but embody the full rhetoric of what appears to be the uncritical acceptance of internet phenomena. See for example Huanshuang Ning (2013), *Unit and Ubiquitous Internet of Things*.
 - 5 For example, one very remarkable challenge has recently been made by a contributing writer and editor of the *Scientific American*, who has summarized nearly 30 years of research dealing with some of the subtle shortcomings of those who have been shifting toward “reading on screens” rather than reading items in hard copy paper formats. See Ferris Jabr (2013).
 - 6 Playing with the catchy phrase employed in the work by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (Palfrey; Gasser, 2008).
 - 7 Here I am drawing on the title of the thoughtful work produced by Quentin J. Schultze (2002), *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age*. More critically oriented studies of various phenomena within cyberspaces have grown in number over the past five years. Some of the most revealing deal with the studies of “withdrawn youth” or the hikikomori phenomenon documented in Japan (and observed in other cultural settings as well), along with studies revealing problems related to the compulsive preoccupation with online games, cyberborn, and mobile portal texting. See, for example, this general trend of interpretation in Fred Turner (2006), *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Steward Brand, The Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* and a more popular study of questions dealing with ethical concerns in Sherry Turkle (2011), *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Consult also the studies on withdrawn youth and internet addiction in the following works: Saitō Tamaki (2013), *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*. Trans. Jeffrey Angles and Kimberly S. Young and Christiano Nabuco de Abreu, eds., *Internet Addiction: A Handbook and Guide to Evaluation and Treatment* (Young; Abreu, 2011).
 - 8 The phrase “crowd-powered” appears in studies by Qingpeng Zhang, both in a dissertation as well as an online article. Consult Qingpeng Zhang (2012), “Analyzing Cyber-Enabled Social Movement Organizations: A Case Study with Crowd-Powered Search” and Qingpeng Zhang, Fei-Yue Wang, Daniel Zeng, and Tao Wang, “Understanding Crowd-Powered Search Groups: A Social Network Perspective” (Zhang; Wang; Zeng; Wang, 2012). See also Zhuo Feng (2012), “A Behavioral Study of Chinese Online Human Flesh Communities: Modeling and Analysis with Social Networks”.

been provided.⁹ In this article I will seek to offer an initial attempt from Chinese and European comparative ethical and meta-ethical perspectives to provide some basic concepts and values for advancing analyses and reflections on the impact of these contemporary Chinese phenomena.

A Comparative Ethical Approach Accompanied by Meta-Ethical Concerns

Though there has been some brief references to historical parallels found in the Bǎojiǎ 保甲 system of community support established first in the Sòng dynasty (c. 11th century C.E.), which was also at times used as the basic unit for communal defensive strategies as well as economic organization, the communicative breadth and social impact of Human Flesh Search and their “engines” suggests that this historical linkage is much weaker than those who would assert this claim.¹⁰ In fact, the very nature of the technical environment¹¹ (in which these internet connections are just one part) actually enable far more complicated forms of communication and coordination, extending to the point of erupting into social shame campaigns in local communities where a “targeted person” is identified.¹² We will describe these phenomena in greater detail later on, but here we would like to point toward some ethical principles which may help to explain the motivations of some of these Human Flesh Search Engines, while also providing a critical framework by which we can address certain ethical and meta-ethical questions from a comparative philosophical perspective.

To initiate some Chinese perspectives related to comparative ethical concerns, I will refer first of all to teachings found in an important text in traditional Ruist (“Confucian”) canonical literature. In the value system of the *Zhōngyōng* 中庸, which we will refer to here as *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony*,¹³ the most central virtuous state for humans is found in “becoming authentic” or *chéng* 誠.¹⁴ Because the text of *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony* became one of

9 In this regard I want to thank my Department of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University, as well as my students over the past five years, for allowing me to explore these issues by creating a course in our General Education offerings entitled “Virtuous Living in a Virtual World” (GCV 1075). This particular problem arose in the context of students’ research papers, which prompted my own further research, and so I am particularly grateful to those digitally born classmates who have revealed something about the nature of these problems to me and others in our class. Nevertheless, the presentation of the ethical and meta-ethical questions related to the Human Flesh Search Engines is my own, and so any misrepresentations or lack of insight into these matters is of my own making.

10 See this comparison mentioned in the “history” section of the article “Human Flesh Search Engine” in the English Wikipedia (2013).

11 Consult works by Jacques Ellul and Hans Jonas in relationship to the transformed nature of the modern “technological environment”. In particular, books by Ellul (1980; 1990) include *The Technological System* and *The Technological Bluff*, with a helpful introduction to that concept found in Jacques Ellul (1989, pp. 99-103; 134-141), *What I Believe*. For a seminal statement by Hans Jonas (2014, pp. 210-223), see “Toward a Philosophy of Technology”.

12 For discussions of some of the harsher dimensions of the Human Flesh Search Engines, consult David Kurt Herold (2011, pp. 127-145), “Human Flesh Search Engines: Carnavalesque Riots as Components of a ‘Chinese Democracy’”.

13 This is the preferred title for the text translated by James Legge (1815-1897) in English, which he first in 1861 called *The Doctrine of the Mean*, but by 1885 he change the title of the “old version” of the text as it is found in *The Record of the Rites* (*Lǐjì* 禮記) to *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony*. See his note about this matter in the 1893 revised version of the text in James Legge (1893, p. 383), trans. *The Chinese Classics*. Subsequently, this text will be referred to simply as CC1. It is this version of the text that is normally reprinted in other forms and under titles, such as the Dover Press which gives the text the title *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean*. Other titles for this same text have been suggested by persons presenting new translations and interpretations of this Ruist scripture in English, as will be seen in what follows.

14 How this term should be rendered is a question debated among contemporary sinologists and translators, including those with philosophical training. The great Scottish missionary-scholar, James Legge, rendered the term as “sincerity” and its superlative *zhìchéng* 至誠 as “the most entire sincerity” (as in CC1, *Zhōngyōng*, Ch. 24, p. 417). In French, the Jesuit missionary-scholar Séraphin Couvreur (1835-1919) presented the denotation of the term as “la vraie perfection” and its superlative as “un homme vraiment parfait” (a person / human [who is] truly perfect). Not to be left aside in this matter, the German (and former Lutheran missionary-scholar), Richard Wilhem (1873-

the key scriptures promoted by the Sòng Ruist, Zhū Xī (1130-1200), as *The Four Books* or *Sìshū* 四書, which Zhū claimed could lead one assuredly on the way toward sagehood, this canonical text and its claims have had an immense significance in traditional culture. Though post-traditional China had already begun to move beyond the previous mainline influences of traditional Ruist values in the early 20th century, the reemergence of Ruism or “Confucianism” as a value system to correct the “moral instability” of social life in the early 21st century within contemporary PRC contexts indicates the way in which this moral value of “becoming authentic” can be one among a number of major contested value systems within contemporary Mainland China.

There is no question that the Human Flesh Search is generally held to be an online social coordination of information in search of “revealing the truth”, and many times, exposing “ugly realities” about certain people and various situations revealed initially through online media.¹⁵ Notably, then, there is a moral motivation moving Chinese netizens to become involved with these “crowd-empowering” events; when they become offline “engines” supporting these searches, they demonstrate that they are driven by a moral sentiment affirming some form of justice or moral uprightness. This leads them either to help those who have requested offline support in responding to a particular situation, or to aid in exposing those who have claimed to have done unrighteous, unethical or illegal actions, especially among those who are considered to be corrupt officials.¹⁶ In other words, these “engines” provide a “free service” for what are perceived to be “righteous moral causes”, replacing what in other cultural and political contexts would require the help of a private detective or an interstate police effort supported by appropriate legal warrants.

To set oneself right and so be right with others – this basic moral orientation of a person within Human Flesh Search “communities” – is also at the heart of the teaching about authenticity within *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony*. Within the long 20th chapter of this well-known Ruist scripture within *The Four Books*,¹⁷ it is stated that any persons who “do not understand what is good” cannot become authentic, and will not be able to achieve this moral orientation in any of

1930) offered instead the option “Die Wahrheit”, that is, “the truth”. At the beginning of the 21st century, Roger Ames and David Hall suggested in 2001 that the term should be translated as “creativity”, while admitting that the previous renderings of “integrity” and “sincerity” were also suitable alternatives. Andrew Plaks bold translation preferred to reveal the terms meaning in the phrase, “the perfect state of integral wholeness”, suggesting the specific kind of anthropocosmic vision which served as the interpretive framework for his rendering of the whole text. Being so contested in translation, Johnston and Wang in their renderings of the old and new text of the *Zhōngyōng* (that is, the text as found in the *Lǐjì*, and the reorganized text promoted much later by Zhu Xi) have left the term only in transcription as “cheng” and “perfect cheng”. My preferred rendering for *chéng* is “becoming authentic,” and for *zhìchéng* is “complete authenticity”, as will be seen in this essay. Find these various renderings in the citations of the 20th and 24th chapters of the new text of the *Zhōngyōng* or in their explanatory notes in the following works referred to above: Séraphin Couvreur (1895, p. 51), trans., *Les quatre livres*; Richard Wilhelm (1930, p. 13), trans. *Li Gi: Das Buch der Sitte des Älteren und Jüngerer Dai – Aufzeichnungen über Kultur und Religion des Alten China*; consult the glossary where an essay on the rendering of this term appears in Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, trans., *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong* (Ames; Hall, 2001, pp. 61-63); Andrew Plaks (2003, pp. 43; 45), trans., *Ta Hsüeh* and *Chung Yung (The Highest Order of Cultivation and On the Practice of the Mean)*; Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, trans. and annot., *Daxue and Zhongyong: Bilingual Edition* (Johnston; Ping, 2012, pp. 457; 467).

15 It is notable that in the general account of RRSS presented in Rui Chen and Sushil K. Sharma’s article entitled “Human Flesh Search – Facts and Issues”, the first “key benefit” they cite (out of five) which the RRSS provides is that people involved seek to “reveal the truth”. Taking this to be the case, and that this is generally the highest goal of those who get involved with these events, I assert that this is actually the moral core of the RRSS / HFS phenomenon in contemporary China. Find this claim in Rui Chen and Sushil K. Sharma, “Human Flesh Search – Facts and Issues” (Chen; Sharma, 2011, p. 56).

16 The revealing of damaging evidence against corrupt officials in the PRC is noted as one of the main functions of RRSS in David Kurt Herold (2011, pp.136-139), “Human Flesh Search Engines”.

17 Here as well as in what follows we will be referring to the “new text” edited and employed by Zhū Xī, and not the “old text” as found in *The Record of the Rites*.

the key relationships that traditional Ruist-inspired culture upholds, that is, in the relationships with one's parents, one's friends, and one's political sovereign.¹⁸ There is evidence that in the contemporary PRC setting, persons who become involved with Human Flesh Searches are perceived as moral and upright persons, and sometimes are even lauded as "moral heroes" and "righteous knights";¹⁹ this being so, these basic moral claims of *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony* appear to be even more pertinent.

Yet there is still more to reveal here from the Ruist canonical text. It also suggests some principles for moral practice, many of which are also at work – mostly unconsciously among post-traditional 21st century Chinese persons – involved as Human Flesh Search Engines. As a consequence, we will be able to identify some meta-ethical problems within these teachings that lead to some genuine public quandaries about certain documented cases where the Human Flesh Searches Engines have failed to achieve their intended righteous goals.

Within *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony* there is a recognition that "common people" may not easily attain to authenticity, and so there is an inherent moral elitism involved in its teachings. Notably, it is stated in the 7th Chapter:²⁰

The Master said, 'Humans all say, "We are wise", but being driven forward and taken in a net, a trap, or a pitfall, they do not know how to escape. Humans all say, "We are wise", but happening to choose the course of the Mean, they are not able to maintain their moral orientation even for a month.'

Obviously, this is a perceptive comment about those who share well-intended actions, but end up failing to achieve their intended goals. In some cases where persons become "engines" for a particular Human Flesh Search, they are actually unable to solve the problems they intended to address because the original situation is more complicated than what they had originally surmised from online information. Though these situations may not be precisely parallel to the concerns addressed above in this section of *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony* – claiming to be "wise", but failing to realize that wisdom in normal living conditions – these teachings do suggest that there is a need for moral discernment even in these online situations that may require more insight and practical wisdom than persons have previously claimed to possess.

This contrast between the desire to become authentic and the attainment of authenticity is also part of the discussion in latter part of Chapter 20 of *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony*. Those who have already become authentic are sages who "without any special effort identify what is right and apprehend the situation without any need to exercise their thoughts".²¹ Those who face situations where they need to study relevant materials, also should ask appropriate questions and consider the overall situation, scrutinizing the details, so that when they recognize that a particular approach can

18 As described in (CC1, Ch. 20, para. 17, p. 412-413).

19 Guobin Yang cites a case which started in September 2005 when a young woman claimed her mother was dying of liver cancer, and that because she could not cover the cost of the medical bills, her mother was dying. Many persons began to get involved, including offering funds (217 persons donating funds to a designated bank account that reached a sum of RMB 114,550). Subsequently, two men from one of the networks decided to travel at their own expense to meet the woman and her mother, and they uncovered the fact that, generally speaking, the mother was sick, but that the young woman had overstated the case. Once this was reported, the donations quickly stopped being offered. Those two men were subsequently hailed as "knight-errants" or "righteous knights", because they helped to clarify the situation and verify the actual need. See the full description of this example of a Human Flesh Search in Guobin Yang (2009, pp. 175-178), *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*.

20 Here using the basic text of Legge, but changing its claims in certain places. See CC1, *Zhōngyōng*, Ch. 7, p. 388.

21 Based on CC1, *Zhōngyōng*, Ch. 20, p. 413. Plaks renders the same passage as follows: "[Being authentic] means a state of centred [sic] balance requiring no striving, complete attainment requiring no mental effort." See Plaks (2003, p. 42).

be taken, they should do so with “all earnestness”.²² This suggests how moral assertiveness must be applied even for sages who do not have immediate insights into those situations. This being the case, these requirements become all the more pertinent for those who have not yet become fully authentic. The concern to commit oneself unwaveringly to a cause to which one is committed – even if one is not as strong, informed, or wise as others – is made even more explicit when a subsequent scriptural passage urges persons on with the following words:²³

What other men may master in a single try, you yourself must strive to attain with efforts increased a hundredfold; and what others may master in ten tries, you must strive to attain a thousand times over.

This voluntaristic appeal to moral attainment in authenticity is capped by the final paragraph of this same chapter:²⁴

Let a person proceed in this way, and, though dull, s[he] will surely become intelligent; though weak, s[he] will surely become strong.

Needless to say, such a promise would and does inspire many Chinese students, even though they do not self-consciously know and reflect on these ancient teachings, so that they are encouraged to persevere in their academic efforts. In the same way, this teaching put into a popular cultural expression emboldens otherwise passive Chinese netizens to take up a request and become an “engine” for a particular Human Flesh Search. Yet, anyone experienced in whole person cultivation (*xiūshēn* 修身) understands that if one does not have the appropriate moral, intellectual and spiritual orientation for certain ethically motivated creative tasks placed before them, it is not uncommon for them to face problems in seeking to realize authenticity during the processes of pursuing those tasks. In this regard, there may also be a question of “moral luck” that should be considered,²⁵ but here instead we will consider some other related meta-ethical concerns, focusing on what happens when there is a painful realization that one’s moral commitments have been misguided.

It is especially with those various matters in mind that I would like to consider claims made by the Danish Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). During one part of his relatively short but prolific life, Kierkegaard became the target of social criticism and public sarcasm. He was attacked in essays and images published in the tabloid-like journal named *The Corsair*,²⁶ a journal that constituted a new form of mass medium created at that time. That public shame campaign has become a major area of discussion in Kierkegaardian studies, and is normally referred to as “The Corsair Affair” of 1846 (Please see Appendix 1).

22 Summarizing the text in CC1, *Zhōngyōng*, Ch. 20, paragraphs 19-20, pp. 413-414. The quoted phrase is cited from Plaks (2003, p. 42) rendering.

23 Citing from very close to the end of Chapter 20 of *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony*, Plaks’ rendering, (2003 p. 43). Legge puts the same passage in the following way: “In another man succeed by one effort, [the committed person] will use a hundred efforts [to achieve the same goal]; if another man succeed by ten efforts, he will use a thousand.” Citing CC1, *Zhōngyōng*, Ch. 20, para. 20, p. 414.

24 Citing CC1, *Zhōngyōng*, Ch. 20, para. 21, p. 414, with emendations made by this author. Ames and Hall offer something quite similar, but with a more modern phrasing: “If in the end people are able to advance on this way, even the dull are sure to become bright; even the weak are sure to become strong” (*Focusing the Familiar*) (Ames; Hall, 2001, p. 104).

25 Here I am thinking of the argument provided in the award winning paper by Jesse Ciccotti, “The Mengzi and Moral Uncertainty: A Ruist Philosophical Treatment of Moral Luck”. This essay won the Charles Wei-hsun Fu Foundation prize and was presented at the meeting of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy in Buffalo, New York, 21-24 July 2013. I understand that it is scheduled to be published in the *International Philosophical Quarterly*, but do not currently have the details of that forthcoming publication.

26 Notably, the “public entertainment” provided by the tabloid as a form of public mass media was a new technological advance made possible by develops of the so-called “Industrial Revolution”, and so the sense of the newness of the media and its impact on particular lives suggests that it serves as a mid-19th century parallel to the advent of the WWW in the late 20th century.

Kierkegaard's reflections about this painful experience in his life revealed a number of factors in "crowd behavior" related to the mass media involved in that 19th century Danish context. These provide some interesting and disturbing insights into the moralistic²⁷ and vigilanti-style attitudes that can be supported by those who appear to be ethically-minded, but end up producing anxiety in the general public and embodying various forms of personal despair in their own lives. In his own pseudonymous accounts of what he referred to as "stages in life's way", Kierkegaard has indicated how a principled ethical life that seeks to achieve moral perfection on its own necessarily falls into despair, precisely because of its inability to achieve this goal; it is only in this context that a form of anxiety may arise that will allow for what Kierkegaard describes within his Christian writings as a more humble and consistent form of religiously-inspired moral living.²⁸ While anxiety and despair are not the same personal or social phenomena within Kierkegaard's writings, they do refer to states of mind that touch on basic elements within human existence.²⁹ They function differently due to the various possibilities of a person's relationship to oneself as well as one's relationship to other selves,³⁰ including the divine.³¹ What I find conceptually helpful here is the way in which an ethical form of life can take on an overbearing moralism that ultimately – and quite ironically – generally creates a very unethical situation. As a consequence, it also creates destructively chaotic despair within the actor's consciousness. This occurs, according to Kierkegaard, because those actors are driven to justify their moral assertions about things in which they are ultimately misinformed, or they are proudly resistant to admitting that they themselves are in the wrong. This is also what is suggested as occurring in the passages of *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony* seen above, but is developed with far more psychological depth and social power in Kierkegaard's writings.

Characterizing the Recent Phenomena of Chinese "Human Flesh Search [Engines]"

In our introductory statements we have already briefly described what in Chinese is referred to as *rénròu sōusuǒ* 人肉搜索 (subsequently RRSS, lit. "human flesh search" and so also abbreviated as HFS).³² Though it is described as a "Web-facilitated crowd behavior" that employs a "crowd-powered searching method", the meta-ethical questions that arise immediately from this description involve defining exactly what kind of "crowd" or "community" the online searches actually engage.³³ Phenomenologically speaking, those who get on line with the purpose of looking through requests put up in RRSS websites do not belong to any face-to-face community,

27 Reflections on "moralism" have been garnished for a set of three articles produced in the August 2005 issues of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. These are Julia Driver (2005, pp. 138-151), "Moralism"; Craig Taylor (2005, pp. 153-160), "Moralism and Morally Accountable Beings", and Benjamin Lovett (2005, pp. 161-170), "A Defense of Prudential Moralism".

28 The difference between these two stages of ethical life is described as "first and second ethics" in Kierkegaard's writings. See this elaborated in Arne Grøn (1994, pp. 135-142), *The Concept of Anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard*.

29 As described insightfully in Dan Magurshak's article, "Despair and Everydayness: Kierkegaard's Corrective Contribution to Heidegger's Notion of Fallen Everydayness" (Magurshak, 1987, pp. 209-237).

30 In this regard, some may be surprised that Kierkegaard's highly individualistic conceptualizations of anxiety and despair could in fact have a social interpretation, yet this has also been convincingly addressed by others, especially as it is developed in his Christian discourses. For discussions of these aspects of Kierkegaard's ethical and religious works, see Stephen Crites (2001, pp. 35-48) "*The Sickness Unto Death: A Social Interpretation*".

31 I have been helped in dealing with this theme by the discussions found in three articles: first, Gregory Beabout's article, "Drawing out the Relationship between Anxiety and Despair in Kierkegaard's Writings" (Beabout, 2002, pp. 51-66); then Alastair Hannay's piece, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair" (Hannay, 1998, pp. 329-348), and then Philip L. Quinn's elaboration in "Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics" (Quinn, 1998, pp. 349-375), both found in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*.

32 A general account of this phenomenon is presented in the article already cited by Rui Chen and Sushil K. Sharma, "Human Flesh Search – Facts and Issues" (Chen; Sharma, 2011, pp. 50-70).

33 Herold points out that Google in the PRC has its own website dedicated to RRSS, and the "largest and most popular RRSS in China" is found in Mop.com. See Herold (2011, p. 128), "Human Flesh Search Engines".

and generally will not know the persons they are contacting by this means, or even know if these persons are using aliases or other means to hide their identities. Though there are groups of people who may be mobilized by these HFS through the online communication of specific requests, complaints or criticisms, normally they do not belong to any locally identifiable community, nor do they belong to any identifiable social circle where the participants are mutually recognizable to each other.³⁴ This is part of the “anonymity” of the online “crowd” that parallels what Kierkegaard called the “facelessness” and “anonymity” of the “public” that repeated barbed comments made initially with malevolent intent by those who represented the “impersonal authority” of “The Press” (as in “The Corsair Affair”, described in Appendix 1).

If the RRSS “community” in fact is not any normal gathering of friends or people sharing a shared geographical space in real-time, what is it that the RRSS manages to achieve in spite of these shortcomings inherent to the virtual environment? Generally speaking, the RRSS is an online forum where inquiries (most likely made by previously unknown persons) can be made, inquiries which regularly appeal to the moral interests of those who are members of that particular social network. They seek to ignite a shared sense of moral conviction or even outrage among those netizens, so that some will respond to requests to locate and identify “targeted persons” by means of offline searches. These so-called “human flesh search engines” are online members of the website, who willingly take up these specific requests and perform the offline searches for the sake of the inquirer.

The larger social and political context of the PRC makes this kind of alternative method for overcoming complexities in personal situations very attractive. It has been public knowledge that many PRC citizens have sought to appeal to government officials writing in letters lengthy complaints about particular problems, and having very little opportunity to have these situations addressed in any public setting, not to mention in a court of law. So the RRSS also serves effectively as an outlet for public frustrations over the lack of governmental response to felt needs, providing what remains a legal way to seek out redress of perceived wrongs, or help in specific cases where people have limited means to achieve what they consider to be legitimate and even morally upright goals. That public officials are now very aware of these actions taken by citizens, and are required to be aware of them, is an indirect indication that the government is allowing these phenomena (at least until 2017) to continue serving their own stated purposes in spite of some of the negative social impacts that they also create.³⁵

Normally, if requests made by means of RRSS websites are fueled by an anger against the “targeted person” who hurt the inquirer in some way, and the request is seen as a justified claim by those who read the online posts describing the illegal or immoral activities of that “targeted person”, the netizens who become “engines” for this investigation do more than just locate that person. Regularly they will post many personal details locating the person in an offline community, and sometimes will go further (whether by themselves or with others who become similarly involved through online connections) in seeking to fulfill “personal requests for vengeance or punishment.” These kind of RRSS requests may consequently stimulate the coordinated amalgamation of “large mobs of Chinese netizens” who start to “hunt” for the targeted person, and end up creating extremely uncomfortable social smear campaigns in offline settings where the targeted persons live and work.³⁶

34 Having made this assertion, it is also clear that some netizens involved in these RRSS websites do come to know some of these persons as a consequence of being involved in numerous of these HFS activities, and so whether they end up forming offline communities as a consequence of their online activities after participating in such events is a matter worth investigating. So far, I have not seen any study indicating whether this is the case or not.

35 This is the emphasis of the end of the article by Herold. See Herold (2011, p. 139-140) “Human Flesh Search Engines”.

36 Quoting from statements in Herold (2011, p. 130) “Human Flesh Search Engines”.

Notably, those who seek to promote the positive values inherent in the RRSS refer to some “key benefits” that it provides. These benefits include “revealing the truth” about various questionable situations, offering netizens the chance to “fight illegal behavior”, and so to “deter unethical and yet lawful behavior,” such as expressed in animal cruelty and adulterous promiscuity.³⁷ What they tend to overlook or neglect to point out is that due to privacy laws that have been enacted in other national contexts, the RRSS would be illegal in those other venues as offenses against personal privacy, but laws of this sort are not yet being applied in the PRC.³⁸ This is because those who become mobilized by this means and serve as “human flesh search engines” for a particular request regularly will locate the personal information of a targeted person – their ID number, residential address, place of work, phone numbers, and other information – and post it all back onto the RRSS website for the sake of others who may go offline to vent their anger, displeasure, and criticisms against the targeted person.³⁹ It is important to note, then, that there are “primary engines” that initiate these offline searches, but oftentimes there are different persons who become “secondary engines” and engage in further offline harassment of the targeted person, sometimes extending their actions to affect the lives of family members, friends and coworkers of the targeted persons. As a consequence, the RRSS does have its own peculiar status and role in the contemporary PRC, particularly, but not only, because of its effect on revealing corruption among government officials.⁴⁰ As far as I am aware, there has been no legal judgment or political effort by Beijing officials to hinder this online form of “Chinese democracy” to search out, find and help others, or in some cases to expose and shame targeted persons.

Some Poignant Examples of Human Flesh Search Engines in the PRC

Some cases of the impact of the RRSS which do not deal necessarily with public officials are worth considering, in order to further our discussion of the ethical and meta-ethical questions related to some rather ponderous problems that are associated with this phenomenon. A few well attested cases will be referred to initially, and then a more focused discussion of a particular case will be presented. This is a case that occurred in July 2007 in Hunan, dealing with what was referred to as “the worst step-mother in history”.

Chen and Sharma have listed 21 cases of aggressive RRSS campaigns occurring between 2006 to 2010, and then focused on four of those cases to indicate the impact made on the lives of targeted persons.⁴¹ These cases involve alleged extramarital scandals, drunk drivers hitting and hurting pedestrians (but caught on surveillance cameras or by personal videos made on hand-held phones), images of child molestation, and animal cruelty. In an early case involving the killing of a kitten by a woman named Wang, the outrage shown by netizens against her cruelty to this animal

37 Summarizing from (Chen; Sharma, 2011, p. 56) “Human Flesh Search”.

38 Herold claims that the RRSS “would be a cause for legal action in most other countries but are an acceptable (and almost mainstream) part of the Chinese Internet”. Cited from Herold (2011, p. 128), “Human Flesh Search Engines”. More elaborate discussion of this point appears in “Human Flesh Search” (Chen; Sharma, 2011, p. 62-63), where it is pointed out that privacy laws in the USA, UK, France and Germany, among other places, have restrained this form of Human Flesh Search activity, even though there are some notable cases where even private information was put up on line for a short period of time, and then deleted afterwards. Whether the new internet laws established in 2017 do add some new conditions to these situations is a matter worth knowing, but I have not been able to confirm details about those new laws at the time of this writing.

39 See discussion of these various kinds of forceful offline techniques associated with RRSS in Jinglan Wu (2011), “Angel or Demon: An Examination of the Development and Impact of the Online ‘Human Flesh Search’ in China”.

40 Herold tends to emphasize this aspect of the RRSS, especially in his conclusion, which Chen and Sharma as well as Guobin Yang describe and underscore the diversity of the cases found online in Chinese settings, starting in 2005 and 2006.

41 See (Chen; Sharma, 2011, pp. 53-54), “Human Flesh Search”.

resulted in both her and the photographer being suspended from their work.⁴² What is not mentioned in the summary of the case provided by Chen and Sharma, but revealed by Herold, is that the woman was a nurse and was acting out her frustrations over her failed marriage.⁴³ In another case, a male inquirer named Lin described “his ex-girlfriend” named Zhou as “an unrighteous person” and requested public assistance in locating her. In the end, Lin used this means to find her and murder her. Though he was apparently later put in jail for his crime, those involved in this RRSS event were not considered to be legally culpable of assisting in the crime.⁴⁴ Online “mob criticisms” and offline shame tactics lead sometimes to persons who have committed crimes being charged and taken to jail, while other offline criticisms – by phone, complaints sent to workplaces or schools, and even posters put up on the doors of residences that declare those persons to be “evil” and “immoral” – may lead to disciplinary actions taken at the targeted persons’ workplace or school.⁴⁵

A more tragic case involves a situation where a woman in Hunan was claimed in July 2007 to be “the worst step-mother in history” (*shì shàng zuì dú de hòu mā* 史上最毒的後媽, literally “the most poisonous step-mother in [human] history”).⁴⁶ The whole process of this particular RRSS was initiated by posting pictures of a young girl on a website, showing her body to be severely bruised, and at one point also coughing up blood.⁴⁷ Apparently, one hospital official had noted down on an earlier report that this might involve “a case of family violence”; the netizen who found the materials assumed this to be the case. Outrage resulted in offline attacks of the parents of the child, but stimulated a subsequent online video prepared by the father / husband to deny that these claims against his wife were true. Later on, neighbors also joined in these online counterclaims, but netizens remained skeptical; not only did those vigilant netizens refuse to believe the husband or neighbors, they also began criticizing all those who supported the mother as people colluding in the abusive behavior. After some further inquiries were done at the local hospital, it ended up being demonstrated that the young girl was a hemophiliac, that is, a person with an unusual physical condition that made it very easy for her to be bruised and to bleed. Nevertheless, even this information was not enough to stop the “carnevalesque riot” of Human Flesh Search Engines that had been initiated by the claim that the step-mother had inhumanely beaten the girl. Finally, the mother herself taped a video where she was on her knees, crying and begging others online to stop the cruel harassment she and her family had received by vigilant “engines”, insisting once again that she was innocent. Only at that point in time did the situation begin to subside, and the social shame tactics were voluntarily stopped.

Ethical and Meta-Ethical Quandaries Created by RRSS in the PRC

As the above summary of this unusual case of “the worst step-mother in history” has sought to indicate, a basic irony regarding some elements of RRSS engagement is revealed. Essentially, the moral irony can be described in the following way: those who wanted to protect a young girl from abuse became abusive themselves, causing social instability within the family and community of the step-mother who was the targeted person in their RRSS.

42 Described in (Chen; Sharma, 2011, p. 54), “Human Flesh Search”.

43 As described in Herold (2011, p. 133), “Human Flesh Search Engines”.

44 Described in part in (Chen; Sharma, 2011, p. 57), “Human Flesh Search”.

45 As summarized in charts found in (Chen; Sharma, 2011, p. 54), “Human Flesh Search”.

46 Cited in the Chinese press in 刘静 著 〈史上最毒后妈〉载《羊城晚报》(2007年7月24日) 头版。

47 Images, a video and written discussion of this case in Chinese can be viewed and read at (Xinhua, 2007), while a series of images taken from relevant sources can be reviewed by means of (Google, 2017).

Though Chen and Sharma rank among the “major drawbacks” of RRSS the invasion of privacy and the moralistic violence that it sometimes perpetrates, they include only later in their list concerns about the “low information quality” and “discouragement” felt by other PRC citizens in adopting the internet for their own daily uses.⁴⁸ In our ethical and meta-ethical reflections, we concur with the moral concerns related to the loss of personal privacy and the vigilanti-style attacks rendered by RRSS “engines” in the PRC. Nevertheless, the former problem is really part of a larger problem related to governance: this is a situation created because there are not yet enshrined in law protection for these basic human rights in the PRC.⁴⁹ The fact that the more vicious forms of social shame tactics have been generally permitted in the recent past by government officials, along with all the other revelations that occur by means of RRSS, is also ultimately a matter of balancing certain kinds of “freedom of speech” with justice for the innocent. These do involve concerns that should be addressed at the level of legal development backed by ethical and philosophical reflections on the special nature of the internet, as well as the personal and social impact of RRSS when they fail to achieve their intended goals for one reason or another. As a consequence, then, we will pursue some of these ethical and philosophical reflections in our concluding statements, hoping that these might become stimuli for further discussions leading to those legal developments.

In commenting on the specific case of “the most evil step-mother in history”, we should remember that it is still the case that the majority of the general populace in the PRC have not received an education that would be equivalent to a high-school diploma. This adds to the quandary that some of those who are netizens willing to become “engines” for RRSS may not have had much education, and so they may lack a self-conscious awareness of the complexities of the internet environment in which they are taking part. Though this should be taken not as a general criticism of all PRC netizens, since a good number of them are also university graduates, it would be important to consider and know more precisely in contemporary China the level of education of those who are regularly involved in RRSS activities. It may be precisely for this reason that some of the misinformation created by the case under consideration was able to spread online without further empirical investigations to prove whether or not the claims were substantial.

We see how the low level of the quality of online information could cause further problems in clarifying the true nature of some RRSS cases. Because of this factor, some information could be misread, especially when a netizen who comes across a hospital document suggesting that “there might be family violence” takes this as a statement of fact. There apparently was no special effort on the part of involved Chinese netizens, who probably also knew of no other authoritative means to verify these matters within the governing institutions in the PRC context, to confirm whether the suspicion was in fact a true assessment of the whole situation. Nevertheless, rather than taking up moral restraint in such a case, Chinese netizens leapt to the conclusion that family violence was involved. Having come to this conclusion, the problem became how to prove conclusively by means of online information that there was in fact no family violence involved in this case. The ethical quandary that resulted is worth reconsidering in some detail.

As was noted in the summary statement above about this case, there were direct online assertions claiming that the charges made against the step-mother were untrue. Nevertheless, since netizens had already “determined” that family violence was involved, counter-claims made

48 As found in (Chen; Sharma, 2011, pp. 56-57), “Human Flesh Search”. They site six “major drawbacks”, the first two being “privacy invasion” and “violence”, while placing the other two items as the fifth and sixth drawbacks.

49 Once again, I would want to indicate that I have not been able to peruse the changes to internet laws made in the PRC in 2017, and so this situation should be investigated further by those who are interested in the current situation.

by the husband of the step-mother and father of the child were considered unconvincing. It was apparently believed that the father had reasons to cover up the case, and so could be lying. When further counter-claims were made also by neighbors of the couple, the online netizens involved in the RRSS as “secondary engines” could simply reply (and with what appeared to be sufficient warrant for their claims) that all those people were simply colluding in order to protect themselves and their village interests. In other words, their counter-claims could only prove that there were questions to be raised, but it could not provide conclusive evidence that there was no family violence involved.

When a more precise medical diagnosis was reported, it is not completely clear that all those who were online would understand what hemophilia is, but it is notable that this information still did not bring adequate counter-evidence to the public arena in order to conclude that there had been no family violence. Some might even argue that precisely because the child had this physical condition, she suffered all the more because of the family violence that had putatively been occurring in her home against her.

This sets up an epistemological quandary that has been referred to as “low information quality” by those studying the RRSS phenomena, but it has an ethical dimension to it that is both startling and frustrating. Those serving as RRSS engines were adopting a form of moralistic insistence based upon their assumption that family violence had been involved. They could always justify their own shame tactics by claiming that all of these counter-evidence that has been gathered online by the husband, neighbors and hospital staff were only part of the story; in fact, they could claim that these counter-claims were camouflaging the real problem, which was the physical abuse of the child by the “evil step-mother”.

Ultimately, only when the step-mother debased herself in an online video, begging others to stop the unjustified criticisms against her and her family, and appealing to them to prove her righteousness, did the chaos begin to subside. Here there seems to be an ethical breakthrough, but it came at the cost of taping a humiliating scene of crying and begging, and only after there had been some weeks of intense social criticism experienced by the woman, her family and the neighborhood around her.

Here the meta-ethical matters we have considered become all the more important, and can now be extended into realms that draw upon the Kierkegaardian reflections on the cruelty that may be perpetrated by certain forms of anonymous mass media.

The impact of such a failed RRSS is (at the very least) twofold. First of all, it produces a major wave of social anxiety, filling other netizens with concerns that they might become illegitimate targets of some future RRSS actions. To them, these actions appear to be more like cyber-stalking and cyber-bullying than a righteous public outrage about a justified cause. As a consequence, rather than promoting virtuous living, these RRSS actions ironically result in a greater amount of social instability. At the same time, they reveal some of the ethical limitations tied to assessment of information posted on RRSS websites, and the need to be more caution in initiating and carrying out Human Flesh Searches by means of offline “engines”.

As I have also indicated earlier, the very nature of the “crowd” or “community” that becomes involved in RRSS should be reconsidered. Most of the time these are not persons who are living in the same venue, or persons who know each other in offline real-life situations within the same geographical setting. As a consequence, their “mob-action” appears to be more like a coordinated anarchistic event, rather than a communal (or even democratic) judgment that is guided by moral principles such as those found in *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony*.

In addition to these social impacts, there is also the despairing attitudes that can overwhelm those who served as Human Flesh Search Engines in cases where the RRSS has actually failed to serve righteousness or morally upright values. Having become aware that their moral campaigns had in the end become unjust and evil actions in themselves, the impact on their lives of those who supported these actions as either “first engines” or “secondary engines” should not be overlooked. Having become sources of social unrest and ethically questionable activities, their subsequent self-reflections could lead them into a form of moral despair, and otherwise have a deleterious effect on any morally-sensitive persons (which we assume is the case for those involved with RRSS activities).

Here we should underscore what Kierkegaard was particularly aware of regarding these possibilities. It is not only the case that these perpetrators of RRSS offline shame campaigns may themselves fall into a debilitating despair due to the misjudgments and failures of their actions. Other possibilities also could be conceived. Persons who have served as “engines” for RRSS could become hardened to the fact that such things might happen as a matter of lacking moral luck in a particular situation. As a consequence, they may simply continue to do what they have done before, leaving in their wake a larger realm of social anxiety that would be fully justified because such vigilante moralism would continue to threaten anyone who might be unnerved by such online “crowd-powered” investigations.

All these ethical and meta-ethical reflections suggest that there are indeed needs for developing legal guidelines for the protection of basic human rights related to personal privacy within the PRC, because these would most likely have a positive result in deterring the excessive offline social smear campaigns that accompany some of the most notorious cases of RRSS. How the PRC government handles the principled claims related to balancing freedom of expression with protection for personal privacy online and offline, as well as protecting those who are wrongly attacked by RRSS engines, is a matter we would consequently be very glad to see addressed in future legal developments.

Appendix

A Historical Account and Brief Meditation on 'The Corsair Affair of 1846

Being a sharp observer of people, and being able to create colorful portraits and even caricatures of persons by means of his witty prose and poignant sarcasm, Søren Kierkegaard during the first part of his authorship also initiated a vast project of “indirect communication” produced under the guise of pseudonyms.⁵⁰ One of the consequences of this multifaceted perspectival authorship was that it was highly possible to misinterpret what he had presented; another consequence was that it could easily provoke opposition, not only due to misunderstanding the significance of his writings, but also in response to sharply worded criticisms Kierkegaard (often masked by a pseudonym) published within newspapers and tabloid-like journals produced in Copenhagen. Such was the case in 1846 with what has been referred to as “The *Corsair Affair*”.⁵¹

In the words of Joakim Garff, this public “affair” engaged in by three relatively young and heady Danish literary intellectuals set off “the great reversal”⁵² in Kierkegaard’s life as an author

50 This is the focal point of the study by Roger Poole (1993), *Kierkegaard: Indirect Communication*.

51 The whole set of articles produced in the tabloid journal, the *Corsair*, as well as elsewhere in the printed media of the day, along with suitable explanations and historical notes, has been described in Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds. and trans., *The Corsair Affair and Articles Related to The Writings* (Hong; Hong, 1982).

52 Find this poignant phrase at the head of a section indicating how at the end of this public polemic, Kierkegaard in early March 1846 also started a new series of journals, indicating to a large extent how he realized that his life had entered into a new and seemingly unalterable stage of public abuse. Consult Joakim Garff (2005, pp. 411-418), *Søren*

during the “Golden Age” of 19th century Denmark.⁵³ Historically speaking, the event involved a vicious triangle created out of apparent envy and wounded egos:⁵⁴ Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the “eccentric” and “genius”; Peder Ludvig Møller (1814-1865), an “eroticist and child of the proletariat”, whose polyamorous relationships led to a fatal venereal disease;⁵⁵ and Meir Aron Goldschmidt (1819-1887), the founder and editor of *The Corsair*, an “ambitious Jew” who “hated” Kierkegaard’s “arrogance” and “patronizing manner”.⁵⁶ The affair itself was constituted by a series of articles that descended from literary criticism into personal attacks, ultimately crossing lines of contemporary literary courtesy by revealing private secrets about the two key interlocutors (Kierkegaard and Møller) including Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship. More devastating for Kierkegaard, it led to his being characterized publicly as an awkward genius-idiot with a few distinctive physical deformities and a megalomaniacal personality.⁵⁷ In fact, it was Goldschmidt who decided in favor of producing caricatures of Kierkegaard;⁵⁸ these led to the public mockery of Kierkegaard that continued long after the *Corsair* affair had taken place.⁵⁹ Ironically enough, under the pseudonym of “Frater Taciturnus”,⁶⁰ Kierkegaard had complained sarcastically in January 1846 that “it is really too much to be made immortal by *The Corsair*”, and so he fed the fires of personal attack by pleading, “Please throw abuse on me!” As Alastair Hannay summarily comments, “*The Corsair* did so with a vengeance.”⁶¹

Kierkegaard later became much more painfully aware of how “The Press” (which was his indirect way of referring to *The Corsair* and other tabloid newspapers who took up a pitiless attack on his person and character) attracted readers primarily on the basis of the “creation of opinions”. What Kierkegaard had not previously anticipated was how his own involvement in that process would backfire on himself in very personal ways. In this sense, then, the playful creativity of his pseudonymous efforts in “indirect communication”, which had a deeper seriousness in confronting the lack of human authenticity in various spheres of Danish cultural and religious life during that period of vast modernization and change (including the so-called Industrial Revolution and its cultural impacts), was exposed and distorted by the tabloid press. In spite of his own intentions,

Kierkegaard: A Biography.

53 The phrase describing this period in Danish history is drawn from Bruce H. Kirmmse (1990), *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*. Poole (1993, p. 201) describes this challenge to Kierkegaard’s previous mode of life, an indirection communication which Kierkegaard himself felt had been “functioning more or less perfectly”, as the “gravest crisis that [his] authorship even had to endure”.

54 Summarized with quotations from Garff (2005, p. 406), *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*.

55 Find a contemporary image of Møller in photograph 19, located in Garff (2005, pp. 519; 522), *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*. He is described there by a contemporary as an “unsympathetic personality”, “Kierkegaard’s demonic *doppelgänger*” and “was known for his malicious tongue – and for his insatiable desire for women”.

56 See an image of the young Goldschmidt in photograph 20, located in Garff (2005, pp. 519; 523) *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*.

57 A historical sequence of this series of the writings and articles that constitute “The *Corsair* affair”, starting in December 1845 and ending in March 1846, is presented as part of the larger chronology found in Hong and Hong, eds. and trans., *The Corsair Affair* (Hong; Hong, 1982, p. xliii).

58 Five of the caricatures are found in located in Garff (2005, pp. 521-523), *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*. These personal attacks through caricature became the precedent which made Kierkegaard the butt of public mockery and jokes in Copenhagen, with references occurring in writings from many sources years following these events.

59 In more recent times one can recall the impact of the twelve caricatures of the prophet Mohammad produced in a Danish newspaper in September 30, 2005, and the cross-cultural controversy regarding the role of media and religious values that erupted as a result. See discussion related to these and Kierkegaardian themes in Jennifer Elisa Veninga, “The Danish Cartoon Controversy as Viewed by Kierkegaard and Appadurai: The Social Imagination and the Numerical” in Robert L. Perkins (2009, p. 253-282; esp. 269ss), ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary*.

60 This pseudonym is ironically portraying by its name a monkish person who would be known as “Brother Silence”.

61 All previous quotations come from original sources and the author’s comment in Alastair Hannay (2001, pp. 320-321), *Kierkegaard: A Biography*.

Kierkegaard's efforts in literary creativity were being essentially derided, revealing that through the institutions created by modernization (including the tabloid media in which he had willfully participated as an author), a new inhumane and impersonal environment had been created that reinforced the cultural superficiality of "the crowd".⁶²

Though Kierkegaard realized the elitism inherent in the "literate crowd", which did not embrace "the whole of humanity" even within Denmark, he saw that it created a seemingly unquestioned gap between the "common man" (who was generally illiterate) and the educated elite of his day (of which SK was clearly also a member). What we should emphasize here (as elaborated also in the film by the Danish filmmaker, Anne Wivel, entitled simply *Søren Kierkegaard* (1994)) is that "the crowd" or "the public" was not the equivalent of the Marxian laborer or "common man": this was a literate and educated crowd, those belonging to an educated elite who were primarily also *petite bourgeois* in status, much like Kierkegaard himself. When he later began to claim that he was identifying himself with the "common man", this was an effort within his own propagandistic concerns as editor and writer of *The Moment* (another journal he created during the last year of his life to become the institution which would attack the Danish state church) to embrace all persons in Denmark, and especially those who were semi-literate or uneducated. In this sense he was moving beyond an authorship that addressed literary elites in order to promote a particular form of Christian practice. He knew that it was being done within the very media he realized could be misused for other elitist interests, but he had hope that his messages might still be spread by other means (primarily by verbal summaries passed among others) to those who would not otherwise purchase or read such materials.

In this sense, then, the phenomena linking "the press" to "the crowd" not only smacks of the problem of moralism, but also produced the conditions noted by Kierkegaard in the volume entitled *Stages on Life's Way* (and discussed subsequently by philosophers and cultural critics) that led to a moralistic wallowing in cultural *Angst*, a deep existential despair on the part of those attacking, as well as profound agony and anxiety on those who are victimized by these attacks. Kierkegaard knew this very well, because he was at times both the victim and the perpetrator (as some have tried to argue about his attack on Danish Christendom during the last years of his life).

It is this form of cultural *Angst* that we have sought to explore within the vigilanti chaos caused by Human Flesh Searches at times, what Herold has referred to as "carnivaliesque riots" within an unsettling kind of "Chinese democracy" he sees arising through the promotion and relatively unrestricted social platforms which contain venues where Human Flesh Searches are initiated.⁶³

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62 Here I am using the sense of "environment" described by Jacques Ellul (1989, pp. 100-103) in his book, *What I Believe*. What this suggests is that Kierkegaard became aware that social and institutional changes had taken place that were destructive of past forms of life, including the civil traditions of a face-to-face society that now was being replaced by "the crowd" and the opinion makers like Goldschmidt who "taught" the crowd what they should think.

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