“Little Rabbit, Be Good,” begins as a soothing nursery rhyme about happy bunny rabbits—a celebration of the coming Year of the Rabbit. Kuang Kuang, the impish boy who stars in many of Pi San’s animations, opens a book whose text reads: “Far far in the future, there was a beautiful forest...”
PORTFOLIO

Little Rabbit, Be Good

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PI SAN
TEXT BY BROOK LARMER
BEIJING—Nobody patrols the Internet more vigorously than the Chinese government. Yet despite its vast army of censors and software filters—or, rather, because of them—the web is the most creative space for self-expression in China. The satirical animations of Wang Bo, a 41-year-old artist better known to his Internet fans as Pi San, offer a glimpse into this seeming contradiction. To evade censors and reach his audience—some of China’s 500 million Internet users—Pi San has become a master of comic subterfuge, cloaking his ideas in a bubble-wrap of irony and satire.

Pi San’s gift for subversive humor comes naturally. “I’ve had a lifetime of experience eluding censors,” he says with a laugh. When Pi San was a young boy growing up in China’s equivalent of Appalachia, his parents used to rap his knuckles with a ruler every time they found cartoons doodled onto his homework. The thumpings didn’t have the desired effect. Pi San continued to draw despite the censure—a pattern that endures today. He eventually turned his passion for cartoons into a career, founding an Internet animation company, Hutoon, in 2006.

Hutoon occupies the top floor of a defunct military electronics factory in “798,” a chic zone of art studios and galleries on the outskirts of Beijing. By day, Pi San and his staff produce music videos and Internet ads for Fortune 500 companies, along with a stylish animated Web series known as Ms.

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As Kuang Kuang drifts off to sleep, the animation turns into a horror story. The rabbits—representing the Chinese people—suffer abuses from their rulers, the tigers. Here, Kuang Kuang and his family watch a child get violently ill after drinking infant formula—a reference to the melamine-tainted milk scandal of 2010.
The melamine milk scandal sparked furious protests that started with the families of sick children and spread quickly over the Internet. Here, Kuang Kuang holds aloft a bottle of “San Hu” (“Three Tiger” milk), a play on the name of the most prominent company in the scandal.
让兔妈放心的好虎奶
Pi San's first Kuang Kuang satire, in 2009, was an irreverent swipe at the education system called “Blow Up the School.” Using a childlike style reminiscent of “South Park”—Kuang Kuang’s circular head often transforms into a thought bubble—the animation was an instant sensation among Chinese youth, generating three million hits on its first day online. Government officials forced Pi San to pay a small fine for “inappropriate content,” but they didn’t seem to notice as more pointed Kuang Kuang animations appeared, spawning Pi San fan clubs on the Internet in nearly every Chinese province. “The government still tends to look at what I do as just cartoons, something funny for kids,” he says.

His videos, however, have many layers of meanings. A year ago, in response to the sudden detention of his friend, the internationally renowned artist and government critic Ai Weiwei, Pi San produced a Kuang Kuang animation that subtly skewered Ai’s arrest and the corrosive influence of censorship on language and society. Within hours of being posted online, “Crack Sunflower Seeds” received more than a million hits. Then the video disappeared from Chinese websites—its victim a victim of censorship. Pi San wondered if he might be next. It wasn’t until Ai was released after 81 days in secret detention that Pi San began to breathe more easily. “I just want the freedom to think independently,” he told me. “Why shouldn’t we be able to express ourselves creatively?”

Pi San sees himself as an artist, not an activist. He makes no statements about the need for democracy or social change. Yet his work homes in on China’s social ills, none more devastatingly than “Little Rabbit, Be Good,” a January 2011 animation whose frames are featured in these pages. A four-minute “greeting card” to mark the Chinese Year of the Rabbit, it begins as a soothing bedtime story about bunny rabbits. But as Kuang Kuang drifts off to sleep, the music screeches into heavy metal and his dream morphs into a nightmare. The poor rabbits suffer all sorts of abuse from the ruling tigers (the outgoing zodiac sign). The animated allegory is based on real events—the 2008 scandal when milk and infant formula were adulterated with the chemical melamine that sickened some 300,000 Chinese, sparking outrage on the Internet. Its ending, however, is sheer fantasy. Instead of accepting their fate, the rabbits rise up in violent revolt.

“Little Rabbit” landed just as popular revolutions fueled by social media were toppling dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. A few weeks later, Chinese bloggers who alluded to a potential “jasmine” revolution in China would be put in jail. Pi San consulted a fortuneteller before putting “Little Rabbit” online. “I wanted to know if this would put me in danger,” he said. The prediction was hazy, so Pi San posted it to a few obscure websites after midnight. Even so, an estimated three to four million people saw the video before censors deleted all versions some two days later.

Pi San has still heard nothing from the authorities—no knock on the door, no visit in the night. Still, when he’s pressed about the video’s political message, it’s easy to forgive him when he responds coyly: “It’s just a fairy tale!” •
This scene, a replay of a tragic theater fire a few years ago, shows rabbits being forced to wait before escaping the flames in the tiger cave. “Don’t move. Let the leaders go first,” they are told. The banner on the wall reads, “Build a harmonious forest”—a direct jab at President Hu Jintao’s favorite catchphrase, “Build a harmonious society.”
Tigers pummel a rabbit who apparently escaped from the fire in the tiger cave. The sign on the wall behind them reads, “Serve the Rabbits”—a riff on the Communist Party slogan, “Serve the People.”

The slot machine represents the arbitrary game that determines which neighborhoods get torn down to make way for new high-rises and shopping malls. Developers hit the jackpot when all three symbols come up with the same character: “Chai, chai, chai,” meaning “Demolish, demolish, demolish.”
Throughout China, this character, “chai,” is painted on buildings in old neighborhoods slated for destruction. In recent years, the Internet has buzzed with stories of citizens fighting forced eviction, refusing to leave their homes—and, in a few tragic cases, immolating themselves in a final act of protest.

A tiger, who has just run over two rabbits in his car, proclaims, “My Father is Tiger Gang”—a reference to a real-life incident when a young man ran over two women in his SUV and supposedly taunted people by shouting his father was a deputy police chief. “My Father is Li Gang” became one of the most popular satirical memes on the Internet in 2010.
In real life, protests against the abuse of power in China are usually brief, isolated, and ineffectual. But in “Little Rabbit, Be Good,” Pi San imagines the rabbits reaching a point where their frustration boils over.
The leading tigers are seemingly oblivious to the rabbits’ impending revolt, in part because they are busy carousing in night clubs—a reference to the fast living and lavish spending of corrupt officials and their families.
Red-eyed with rage, the rabbits go on a rampage. The scene has no basis in real events, but because of its timing during the Arab Spring, Pi San’s admirers worried for his safety.

The animation ends with a catharsis of South Park-style violence, as the hordes of rabbits rip apart their tiger overlords with their bare teeth.
The uprising ends with a warning splashed across the screen: “The Year of the Rabbit has arrived. Even rabbits bite when they are pushed.”