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ON THE WEB

The Chip on China's Shoulder

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As soon as the two planes hit the World Trade Center, Chinese Internet users logged into online chat rooms to discuss the terror attacks.

"Just one word: cool!" says the first of 6,000 comments on the attacks in a chat room on Sina.com, a leading Chinese-language portal. "Now the day has come for the American dogs."

"Why not the White House?" asks another a moment later. The gleeful declarations continue in a rush:

"Excellent!!!!!!! But the hijacked planes didn't carry a nuclear bomb."

"Just great. Really fantastic. Serves 'em right."

"So cool to see America bombed. Guys, let's use the Internet to wage war on 'em as well. This is the perfect moment for it."

"I'm waiting for the third plane, the fourth plane, the fifth plane, the sixth plane. Ha, ha!"

Not until the 44th message is there a reproach: "Do you people here have no shame?" someone writes. "Do you have no morality?"

The messages are still sitting there in cyberspace on the Sina.com site. A few days ago, I logged on using a Chinese-language computer here in Beijing and read through these messages. To anyone who deeply loves China, as I do, it is devastating to see how the deaths of thousands of Americans left many people here chortling.

I asked Chinese friends whether these online comments were representative of public opinion. Not entirely, they said, but the stories they told left me pained.

One friend who runs a business financed with American money found on Sept. 12 that the company's e-mail message system was full of jokes about the attacks. Another recounted how at the Communist Party School (where officials stayed up late to watch satellite television feeds of the destruction and showed unseemly good cheer), a luncheon for more than 80 top officials echoed with positive comments about the terror attacks.

All this has to be put in perspective. Most Chinese I talked to were appalled by the attacks, and the United States Embassy in Beijing was showered with messages of

sympathy from ordinary Chinese and with cash donations for the victims. Jiang Zemin and other Chinese leaders drafted an immediate message of condolence that they sent to Washington.

Even in the chat rooms, the initial tone of *xing zai le huo* (gloating at the pain of others) faded as the death toll grew.

Yet there is something going on here, something more complex — and, to me, far more worrying — than simply *schadenfreude* at seeing America humbled. It is a rapidly increasing Chinese nationalism.

This nationalism has deep roots in China and results in part from the battering that the country suffered at foreign hands over the last 200 years. But the latest surge in nationalism is the result in particular of “patriotic” campaigns planned by President Jiang since 1990 as a way of knitting together the country, of providing a new “glue” for China to replace the discredited ideology of Communism.

I spent a couple of days at Beijing University talking freely to the nation’s best and brightest. This in itself, along with the relatively free debate in Internet chat rooms, is a sign of real political progress in China.

When I lived here in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, there was no outlet like the Internet to express one’s views, and I could talk to university students only after escaping the goons who routinely tailed me. This time I had no tails to shake.

Yet what I found heartbreaking is that this new openness and political maturity in China is accompanied by a dangerous sign of political immaturity: this booming, aggrieved, chip-on-the-shoulder nationalism among many ordinary people, much more so than even a decade ago.

Why is this a risk? Think of Japan, where nationalism combined with an economic boom to help lead to the Asian half of World War II. Or of Germany, where a similar combination helped cause World War I. Or even — this is an example Americans tend not to recall — the way nationalism and new-found strength in the United States led Washington to provoke the Spanish-American War.

Elsewhere in the world, we were far too late in recognizing the way movements in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan arose to preach intolerance and hatred. In China it is still early enough to reshape this nationalist tide.