

Writer walks tightrope of the censors in magazine

Priscilla Jiao

Han Han (韓寒) looked for a publisher for his new magazine for a long time. He said he was trying to put out a product that was censored as little as possible, and he needed a publisher who shared that view.

One publisher said no to a cover of a gun-toting nude man with his private parts covered by a logo of the magazine, placed as such to pass censors.

In a speech he gave at Xiamen (廈門) University, he said the publisher had told him: "Now you've covered up the midriff. That's a deliberate pun on 'Party Central Committee.'" Both are *dangzhongyang* in pinyin.

Han said he remembers thinking of a response like: "It'd be so much better if you invested that brilliant imagination of yours into some literary and artistic creativity instead of censoring."

Needless to say, that publisher isn't the one Han chose, nor three others. When he finally settled on one, *Party* magazine made its debut on July 6. Since then, more than 1.2 million copies have been sold.

It's been 10 years since Han first caught the mainland's attention with *Triple Gate*, a book about a high school student's life. Today his blog is the most popular in China and, by logical extension, probably the world. With a total of 265 entries – not including the censored ones – his 412-million-hit blog is No 1 at Sina.com.

It is as accurate as a surgical knife. It's the result of being an observer ... from the right distance

Ma Yimu, managing editor of *Party* magazine, on Han Han's writing

university, he would have lost his uniqueness.

Han's secret, says Chen, is that crucial ability to mediate.

"As most intellectuals cannot speak to the society in which the media has a trend of becoming tabloid, there's a gap between academics and society," he said. "Han serves as a bridge."

To be sure, he has detractors. Xu Zhiyuan, an intellectual and columnist, wrote that Han's popularity is a tragedy for China and reflects a society full of mediocrity.

Other older commentators see Han as the voice of China's post-1980-born generation, an era of spoilt one-child-family children in an economic boom: apolitical, rebellious and status-obsessed.

"The new generations are more focused on their own problems rather than disturbing social problems," Chen said. "They care very little about things that have nothing to do with themselves."

But Ai sees that generation and Han's stand-out role in it quite differently.

Han's uniqueness was to express himself about social issues in a persistent and convincing way, he said, and his ability to separate truth from falsehood.

Ai says that seems to be a characteristic of those born in 1980 and after. He calls them "the greatest hope for China. No one or no system can stop them once they come to understand".

Han would surely be first to dismiss himself as an "intellectual", but the man ranked No 12 among the 2010 *Time* magazine top-100 most influential leaders, artists, innovators and icons is also clearly nobody's fool.

"I'm a comrade with rather few self-restraints," he told the Xiamen audience. "However, when I write, I still can't help keeping in mind that I have to avoid writing about this policeman, this leader, this policy, this regulation and this legislation; I have



He's still walking that censorship tightrope without a safety net. He told *Time* magazine last year that people constantly ask him how he strikes a balance in his writing without annoying the authorities. Han said: "The answer is, I don't know."

As he told CNN: "We don't have any laws outlining what type of writing is safe and what type of writing is dangerous."

His pithy and witty criticisms of social evils have earned him a reputation as a "public intellectual".

"Han is more influential than Lu Xun (鲁迅) because his writing can reach more people than Lu Xun in this internet age," said friend and artist Ai Weiwei (艾未未), in reference to the Chinese writer of about 100 years ago.

The popularity and influence of the brash 28-year-old Shanghainese high school dropout and race-car driver has sparked countless discussions about the so-called "Han Han phenomenon".

One observer who has changed his mind about Han is Chen Xiaoming, a professor at Peking University and a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Literature.

On the China Central Television show *Dialogue* 10 years ago, Chen said Han risked losing his popularity in three to five years if he didn't go to university as any good writer should. Now he says if Han had gone to

to skip many periods in history, Tibet (西藏), Xinjiang (新疆), demonstrations; I can't touch on fads, pornography, boycotting the arts ... but I'm incapable of such finesse."

Han had hardly blogged at all about social or political issues until 2008, when he wrote about the fabricated south China tiger photo, the Sichuan (四川) earthquake, the Olympics and melamine-tainted milk. Later topics, including the CCTV building fire and the kindergarten killing spree, were all censored after brief popular appearances online.

During the spate of kindergarten stabbings, he recommended that all the police guarding the local governments nationwide be transferred to kindergartens. "A government that cannot even protect children doesn't need so many people protecting them," he wrote on his blog.

Ai said: "He only fires at existing social phenomena, and he reasons very well. His opinion is unthreatening but very independent. The subjects he touches are everyday issues that everyone faces, not necessarily very core issues."

Ma Yimu, the managing editor of *Party*, describes Han as "rebellious, calm and accurate", and he admires his understanding of Chinese society.

"It is as accurate as a surgical knife," Ma said. "It's the result of being an observer of everything that happens in China from the right distance. He doesn't belong to any system and lives in a suburban area, which empowers him with a stance of freedom and sobriety."

"More importantly, his criticism of society is not hysterical, dead serious or full of bitterness or hatred, but light-hearted and humorous while analysing big and heavy issues."

The second issue of *Party* is due out around August 30, and Han's next novel is due next month.