

Chinese loved to hate their space program -- until

its mascot became a talking, web-savvy bunny. BY RACHEL LU for FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hello, is anyone there?" With these words on Sina Weibo, a microblogging platform, the Chinese lunar rover Yutu -- named after a jade rabbit of Chinese folklore that lives on the moon with a beautiful goddess -- resurfaced on Feb. 13 after a two-week hiatus. In its last Weibo appearance on Jan. 25, Yutu had announced to its followers, which now number more than 430,000, that it had "a little problem" and might not survive another dark and freezing lunar night. Its seeming last words: "Goodnight, world." (At night, temperatures on the moon can plummet to negative 279 degrees Fahrenheit.)

Yutu's social media debut, which began the day before the rover's Dec. 2, 2013 launch, has been a smash hit in China: Yutu has garnered more than 9 million Weibo mentions, and of those sampled by FP, most are positive. Staid state-owned media like news service Xinhua have published Yutu's Weibo tweets as if they were the official announcements from mission control. One Weibo user wrote that when he learned from a BBC report that Yutu had ceased operation, it was "the first time that national Chinese news had ever made me cry." Among the outpouring of support for Yutu on China's Internet, the few voices questioning the lunar mission have been effectively drowned out. Yutu's savvy social media run is a surprising success for a Chinese space program that has endured years of failed efforts to sell space exploration to a skeptical public. It's rather clear by now that the Chinese government sees Weibo, a microblogging platform that permits a single user to broadcast a message to millions, as a threat as well as an opportunity; starting in September 2013, authorities cracked down on the platform by arresting hundreds of microbloggers. But now the government can score two recent social media wins, the other being President Xi Jinping's December 2013 lunch outing at a Beijing bun shop, which has transformed the humble eatery into something of a pilgrimage site.

That's quite a turnabout for the Chinese National Space Administration (CNSA), which made its first manned space flight in 2003 and has sent ten taikonauts into space over five missions. Authorities have made every effort to whip up patriotism and rally public support behind these missions, including frequent front-page coverage in state-run papers. In June 2013, the attractive Wang Yaping, China's second female taikonaut, beamed back science classes delivered from space, replete with nifty tricks like a suspended water ball. In addition to giving blow-by-blow coverage of the missions, China's state-owned media wrote up detailed, humanizing profiles of each taikonaut. The smiling, clapping, and flag-waving passengers on China's Shenzhou 9

spacecraft, launched in June 2012, even toured the country after their return, also visiting former colonial outposts Hong Kong and Macau.

None of it seemed to work. The manned missions were technological successes, but publicity flops. The heavily stage-managed taikonauts did not connect with ordinary people, and discussions on China's Internet forums and social media often focused on why the government of a developing country had chosen to spend billions of dollars' worth of taxpayer money firing rockets into space while many Chinese citizens struggled in poverty. In June 2012, respected liberal outlet Beijing News ran a widely-shared report about the exhaustive safety checks for the taikonauts' food supply -- including a dedicated fresh-water reservoir for fish, and individual tracking numbers for each milk-producing cow -- an infuriating contrast to the frequent food safety scares which bedevil average Chinese. Even the launch of China's first space-bound woman in June 2012 was clouded by discussions of another woman from central China named Feng Jianmei, then 23 years old, who two weeks earlier aborted her seven-month fetus under pressure from local authorities because the birth would have violated China's one-child policy. The salvation of CNSA's public image is likely thanks to the insights of a group of young people with a Weibo account, whoever they may be. On Dec. 2, 2013, the account started to report the Yutu lunar mission in the first person, anthropomorphic voice of a brave rabbit explorer, who often interacted with ordinary Internet users using the latest web slang. As a result, while Chinese taikonauts -- likely heavily coached by members of state-run media -- have come off as robotic, the purported Weibo voice of what's assuredly a robot has paradoxically seemed deeply human. En route skyward, the Yutu avatar wrote that it stole one last look at Earth: It was "really blue," which made him "a bit sad." The account lamented forgetting to "strike a pose" when the United States' Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter flew by to take a picture. Occasionally, Yutu's account retweeted images of actual rabbits.

One possible explanation for Yutu's unusually savvy campaign is that its architects are not in fact employed by Chinese authorities. The identity of Yutu's Weibo handlers remains a mystery; although U.S. outlets including CNN and news satire The Daily Show have referred to Yutu's Weibo comments as if they hail directly from state media, the account generating the quotes is not actually verified as the official account of CNSA's mission control, although it seems to have inside knowledge of Yutu's latest comings and goings. Internet users have speculated that the account is actually managed by Guokr, an online community site dedicated to explaining popular

science. (Guokr is one of only three accounts that Yutu follows and there are frequent interactions between them.) In other words, if the government is behind this social media success, many can't believe it. Regardless of the identity of its ultimate mastermind, the successful effort to personalize China's Yutu mission shows a path to PR success for a Chinese space program that has been searching for one for more than a decade. Since taking power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has usually been able to manipulate media by fiat. But Chinese social media provides new space for public reaction to coalesce, and backlashes against official narratives of all kind are now common, with censorship alone proving insufficient to stop them. China's government is having to learn new tricks in response. Ultimately, the project of managing opinion at home may prove even more difficult than piercing the stratosphere.