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China’s most chaotic social network survived Beijing’s censors — until now | Rest of World

By Viola Zhou
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> The chaotic Chinese social network Douban never looked for fame; it was designed for people with niche obsessions and an urge to talk about them. It was founded in Beijing in 2005, the same year that two University of Virginia roommates were busily coding the system that would become Reddit, a year before Jack Dorsey would launch a little-known microblogging service, “twttr.”
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> Douban began as a review site for books, film, and music: the interests of its charismatic founder, Ah Bei. It quickly grew into a social network of millions of users. The site’s bulletin board system accelerated into an unpredictable, ever-expanding space for gossipy discussions on everything from life advice — gay dating, dealing with gaslighting parents — to wild eccentricities, like a page where users talk as if they were ants or mushrooms. And while its Chinese and global rivals chased ad-driven monetization**,** Douban shrugged off profit-making and propaganda, instead playing for survival on the fringes of the Chinese internet.
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> “The company is run by a group of idealistic tech workers. That’s extremely rare in an age when traffic numbers mean everything,” said Oscar Zhou, a media studies lecturer with the University of Hertfordshire who has studied Douban communities.
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