

future focus

The adage that on the internet no one knows you're a dog is truer now than ever before. With the rise of the web diary, or 'blog', everyone can tell their lives on the internet... even if they're not real. Sumner Lemon samples the allure of virtual life

When Jody Lin kissed Jack outside a Taipei disco on a sultry June evening, it didn't take long for much of Taiwan's expatriate community to find out about it. Or to learn that Jack was, at the time, engaged to be married to his girlfriend Emi – a decision that had been hurried by an unplanned pregnancy, according to Jody's friend Mike.

"You have to promise not to tell anyone. I swear to God, Jack will kill me if he finds out that I told you," Mike said.

Chinese whispers

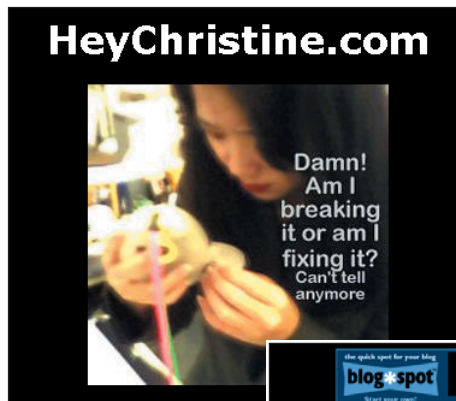
Fat chance. The details of events that transpired on that steamy Taipei night, and the emotional fallout that resulted, were faithfully recorded on Lin's website, *An American in Taipei*. Racy stories like this have helped attract a loyal following of regular readers – and a few vocal critics – to Lin's site.

Amid the local controversy that surrounded Lin there was one catch – she doesn't exist. Nor do Mike and Emi. Rather, they are the creation of a Taiwanese-American woman who lives and works in Taipei

This voyeuristic fascination with Lin's love life bubbled over into a discussion thread on a Taipei-based community website, *Oriented.org*, that blasted Lin for a range of perceived sins, from being a poor writer to being a bad friend.

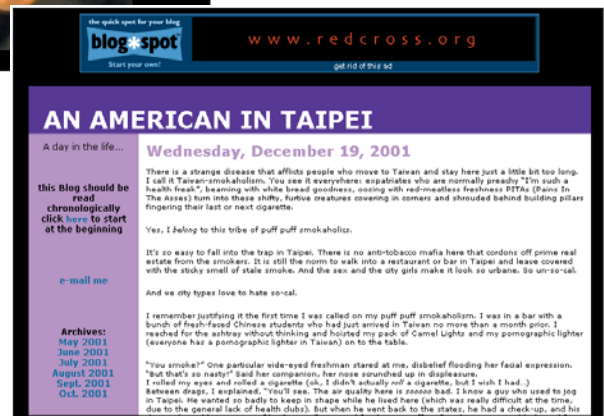


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← HeyChristine.com has copied Judy Lin's popular site by offering a 'personalised' diary live on the internet

→ *An American in Taipei* is a fictional work that has transfixed the Taiwanese expatriate community



Ghost writer

But amid the local controversy that surrounded Lin there was one catch – she doesn't exist. Nor do Mike and Emi. Rather, they are the creation of a Taiwanese-American woman – we'll call her 'Jane' since she prefers not to have her true identity revealed publicly – who lives and works in Taipei.

In recent weeks, Jane has put less effort into maintaining *An American in Taipei*, instead channelling her creative energies into writing a book. The tome is set to be an extension of the ideas she explored through Lin's character, albeit in a more serious manner.

Literary tradition

So how did a modest personal web page become first a tempest in a teapot and then an idea for a novel? The idea for using a website to tell a story through a series of diary entries came to Jane after reading through other online journals. Books by British authors, such as Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, were also a strong influence.

Jane had legitimate concerns about revealing personal information that could lead to harassment from readers. But based on the nature of the feedback Jane has received from her readers, she feels most realise that the life of Jody Lin is a work of fiction. Those that don't have missed the point. "It's the internet," Jane says, "You're supposed to take things with a grain of salt."

An American in Taipei can be found online at www.jodylin.blogspot.com. *Hey Christine* at www.heychristine.com is another such site. The writer claims to keep a personalised diary that will be "a story of who I really am and how I came to be". Just remember not to take them too seriously. ■