

BEIJING'S CYBER WAR

BY ERPING ZHANG

The Chinese government spends vast resources policing the Internet, but it faces a formidable challenge from millions of Internet users who are determined to liberate discourse in cyberspace.

Tang Tai-Zong (626–649 A.D.), perhaps the ablest emperor in all the history of China, left his successor this governing advice, “Listening to both sides, one becomes enlightened. Listening to one side only, one becomes dimmed.” Had leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) followed these words of wisdom, China would have long ago developed into a transparent civil society and saved at least \$800 million devoted to constructing the world’s most sophisticated Internet firewall system—the “Golden Shield Project.” This ambitious undertaking is now manned by some 50,000 cyber police whose sole purpose is to monitor and control the Internet traffic of an estimated 100 million netizens, an online population second only to that of the United States. Current information suggests, however, that in spite of this formidable exercise, the government in Beijing is on the verge of losing its grip over both information and the netizens, especially on some political and social issues.

The Internet & Press Censorship

May 3rd is celebrated each year by the United Nations as World Press Freedom Day. This year the 2005 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano press freedom prize went to a Chinese journalist, Cheng Yizhong. Cheng, the former editor-in-chief of *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, is known for having published some very sensitive articles, including groundbreaking reports on SARS and the fatal beating of a college graduate, Sun Zhigang, in a Guangzhou police station. Cheng’s unusual courage led to his arrest on March 20, 2004. He was freed after five months in custody, but two colleagues who were arrested at the same time, Yu Huafeng and Li Mingying, were sentenced to prison. Chinese authorities prevented Cheng from attending the UN award ceremony in Dakar, Senegal, but Cheng responded to the announcement of the award by saying, “My heart felt comforted, but also saddened. What we did was in accordance with

common sense, but unfortunately insistence on common sense has made us pay an enormous price.”¹

What is the reality of China’s press freedom today? According to the worldwide press freedom index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), China ranks a dismal No. 138 in the world—above only North Korea.² The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a rights watchdog based in New York City, recently described China as the world’s leading jailer of journalists.³ As part of an ongoing campaign to “Sweep away pornography and strike down illegal publications,”⁴ the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) banned 169 newspapers and magazines between 2004 and 2005. The banned publications included titles such as *China Economy, Finance and Technology*, *Chinese and Overseas Legal Systems*, *Modern Teaching & Management*, *World Medical Equipment*, *China Telecommunications* and *Defending Rights*.

The foreign press has also not fared particularly well. The detention of Zhao Yan, a news assistant for *The New York Times*’ Beijing Bureau, alerted the foreign press in China to the fact that the Chinese authorities can take any journalist into police custody whenever they want, and GAPP recently announced that “in order to safeguard China’s periodical publishing order, illegal foreign language publications shall be banned in accordance with the law.”⁵

Dr. Jiao Guobiao, a journalism professor at Peking University, was recently fired for his outspoken views on censorship. In an article posted on the Web site of Voice of America, Dr. Jiao’s describes China’s censorship methods as an “information pigsty” surrounded by “stinking” stones that separate China from the outside world, and the Chinese news media from the Chinese people.⁶

A recent Gallup poll shows that 12 percent of all Chinese aged 18 and older, or more than 100 million people, have used the Internet, and that 85 percent of China’s Web surfers are male, with 40 percent falling into the 21–25 age group. In addition, the population of mobile phone users has reached 300 million. The Internet seems to be a double-edge sword for this transitional stage in China’s history. The authorities wish to utilize the Internet for economic growth and competitiveness and in forming a “knowledge-based economy,” but the fear of political fallout from the free flow of information also appears to be justified in the eyes of the authoritarian government,

especially in light of the recent Orange Revolution in Ukraine, where online forums and messaging helped topple a corrupt regime. Small wonder that according to Xiao Qiang, an expert on China's Internet at University of California, Berkeley, "Since 2000 China's police force has established Internet departments in more than 700 cities and provinces."⁷ Xiao also testified that since 1994, "37 laws and regulations have been implemented to govern the Internet."⁸

An official from U.S. Department of State testified at the same hearing:

During 2004, the Government continued to press for compliance with its 2003 'Public Pledge on Self Discipline for China's Internet Industry.' More than 300 companies have signed the pledge, including popular Sina.com and Sohu.com as well as foreign based Yahoo's China division. Those who signed the pledge agreed not to spread information that 'breaks laws or spreads superstition or obscenity.' They also promise to refrain from "producing, posting, or disseminating pernicious information that may jeopardize state security and disrupt social stability."⁹

In 2000, the CCP installed its "Golden Shield Project"—a firewall system that controls the six gateways connecting China to the global Internet. As a result, Chinese surfers are unable to access prohibited Web sites such as those of the BBC and CNN or sensitive sites from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and content relating to topics such as Tibet, Falun Gong and the Tiananmen Square massacre is censored. In 2003, nearly half of China's 200,000 cyber cafés were shut down by Internet police, and the rest were equipped with surveillance and filtering software in the CCP's cyber war against the free flow of information on the Internet.

The CCP vs. the netizens

Although all forms of media (TV, radio and newspapers) in China are state-run, the latest battleground for information control is the Internet. Guo Liang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing told the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2001, "Mao Zedong said that to have power you need two things: the gun and the pen ... The Communist Party has the gun, but the Internet is now the pen. If they lose control of it, something will happen to challenge their authority."¹⁰

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From the CCP's perspective, the Internet should serve as a tool for business development, knowledge transfer and propaganda in order to stabilize the party-state. Netizens, however, tend to use the Internet as a free and quick platform for research, inter-personal communications, business opportuni-

ties and self-expression. The key issue lies in the fact that the CCP wishes to decide what kind of information netizens can access and what they can say on the Internet.

Despite the CCP's rigorous censorship efforts, the Internet has undoubtedly expanded freedom of information and expression in China as the population of netizens grows. Voices and opinions expressed by the public on the Internet are developing into an informal online social network, generating a new breed of social capital that seems to be playing an increasingly important role in shaping policies and social change. The CCP, on the other hand, has been using the Internet to monitor the public pulse through its cyber police. President Hu Jintao reportedly attempted to gauge public sentiment by browsing the Internet during the SARS crisis.

One particular wave of public discontent arose soon after the new leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao rose to power in the fall 2004. Many hoped the new leaders would deliver a freer and more open society, but such expectations were quickly deflated when Hu Jintao called upon the CCP to learn from North Korea and Cuba in its ideological and media control. Indeed, the Hu regime has tightened its grip on the Internet and implemented a crackdown against outspoken intellectuals.¹¹

All the same, recent events have showed the growing potential of the Internet and mobile communications as an agent for social change in China. The SARS crisis in 2003 provided a particularly striking example. Although Beijing succeeded in covering up this deadly epidemic for more than five months (between November 2002 and March 2003), the word of SARS was able to circulate throughout China via the Internet and SMS (short messaging services), ultimately forcing Chinese officials to admit to acknowledge the seriousness of the epidemic and promise better cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO).

Likewise, recent nationalism incited by the Chinese government's efforts to block Japan's entry to the UN Security Council grew out of control as people in Shanghai attempted to organize anti-Japanese protests via the Internet and mobile phones without official consent.¹² The government subsequently cracked down on protest organizers, and anti-Japanese Web sites and chat-rooms were blocked during the week-long May Day holidays to prevent another wave of demonstrations.¹³

Another form of active social participation is online forums and chat-rooms, which allow discussion of a wide range of issues (except for politically sensitive content). The Internet bulletin board services (BBS) of university campuses became especially popular because of the diversity of their content, with the result that by March 2005, the net police felt obliged to take control of them. However, new chat-rooms and online forums have since been created under apolitical titles, and before long their discussions inevitably venture into "sensitive" areas. Such "hide-and-seek" games on the Internet have made it very difficult for the Chinese authorities to silence or shut down all online public forums.

Many Chinese Internet users have gained access to prohibited overseas Web sites through the free anti-censorship know-how of Dynamic Internet Technology, Inc. and Ultrareach

Internet Corporation, U.S.-based software companies that specialize in breaking through China's firewall system. Disgruntled Internet users include not only individuals, but also foreign companies stationed in China, which find business development considerably more challenging with limited Internet access to overseas Web sites. Although these foreign companies have up to now kept their complaints low-key in order to protect their business interests, this may change over time.

The Internet and social change

As observed by Professor Richard Baum of UCLA, the outlook for a Western-style democracy in China is not particularly encouraging in the short run, because China's seismic shift in socioeconomic landscape has not been matched by equally profound changes in the country's dominant political institutions and processes.¹⁴ Political reform from the top or within the CCP, such as the efforts of former premier Zhao Ziyang, have encountered enormous institutional resistance, and in 1989 ended with bloodshed on Tiananmen Square. Pressure from the bottom or the grassroots requires channels for expression, and the Internet has become a relatively safe and convenient means to this end.

The unprecedented economic growth that China is experiencing at present has seen upwards of 100 million migrant farmers roaming the cities in search of employment, where they join tens of millions of urban dwellers who have become

unemployed through the failure of state-run companies in the face of a more efficient and competitive private sector. Daily labor unrest and religious persecution have contributed to the proliferation of dissenting voices. The injection of foreign direct investment and the introduction of foreign technology saved China from economic and political fallout in the 1980s and the 1990s, but may not be enough to sustain China's stability for much longer without eventual political reform.

Despite filtering and censorship, the Internet has provided a platform not only to learn about new ideas from other cultures, but also to discuss and share diverse opinions. The grievances of China's 700 million farmers are seldom addressed by the authorities, but this does not mean a lack of the public interest in their stories. For instance, a married couple, Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, took three years to write *Chinese Peasantry: A Survey*, a book exposing the bleak conditions of rural China. More than 100,000 copies were sold within a month after publication, but the book was taken off the shelves soon afterwards, and Chen and Wu were eventually sued for libel by one of the officials referred to in their book. But the government ban, along with a prestigious award in Germany, has only increased the book's popularity, and it has been widely distributed on the overseas Internet Web sites and through secure email accounts. As a result, the Chinese authorities have come under greater public pressure to address the needs and concerns of peasants.

China's Ministry of Public Security has acknowledged that



An Internet café in Wuhan. Photo: Getty Images

social unrest in the form of riots, inter-ethnic strife, group petitions, rallies, demonstrations, strikes and traffic-blocking are on the increase, with more than 74,000 incidents in 2004, up from 58,000 incidents in 2003, 50,000 in 2002 and 32,000 in 1999.¹⁵ An important factor in the effective organization of group protests is the efficient communication offered by technologies such as cell phones and the Internet. With the 2008 Summer Olympics fast approaching, Chinese authorities are anticipating even more such uprisings as protesters take advantage of international witnesses to their discontent. The government's draconian grip on online information may also raise strong protests from international media and other visitors who make their first personal encounters with the restrictive system.

One notable recent overseas Internet campaign is "The Nine Commentaries on the Chinese Communist Party" published late last year on the Web site of *The Epoch Times*, an independent overseas Chinese newspaper.¹⁶ These nine articles, which detail the Communist Party's acts of oppression and deception, have found their way into China via the Internet and email. The newspaper also initiated a campaign urging Communist Party members to resign from the Party, with organizers claiming four million declared resignations to date. Among those reportedly renouncing their CCP memberships were 46 senior officials, such as Meng Weizai, former director of the Art and Literature Bureau under the Central Propaganda Department.¹⁷ The CCP subsequently launched a campaign of its own called "Maintaining the Advantages of the CCP" on January 24 this year, requiring all Party members to study Communist theory for at least 40 hours within the next year and a half. According to a report released by Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, "The Nine Commentaries" top the list of Web pages banned inside China.¹⁸ A recent arrest indicates that possession of "The Nine Commentaries" now constitutes a crime in China, and can result in arrest and imprisonment.¹⁹

Conclusion

Transparency is only possible in an open civil society governed by rule of law. An army of 100 million netizens in China are now quietly engaging in a bitterly-fought war against the Chinese authorities' control of cyberspace. With the population of Internet users growing at an estimated annual rate of 30 percent, the Chinese government could find itself facing similarly increasing opposition to its control over the Internet. Many scholars believe that the manipulation of information is such a crucial element in the identity and survival of the CCP that without media control and censorship, the Party would quickly cease to exist in its current form. This is because once the Chinese people and the world can take a good, hard look at the skeletons in the CCP's closet and the degree to which the Party serves its own interests to the detriment of the Chinese people, the very existence of the Party could well be called into question. Thus the Internet, a neutral communication technology, has become a powerful agent for social change in this age of globalization, instigating a quiet revolution in all aspects of life in China today.

Emperor Tang Tai-Zong once described his people as water, which could make the royal ship either float or sink. A prosperous China requires a transparent civil society where people can freely exercise their right to freedom of conscience, expression and association. If Chinese leaders wish to act in the interest of their country, and secure their own positions, they should listen to the people and allow long-awaited political reform to join pace with economic progress.

NOTES

1. "Cheng Yizhong won UN World Press Freedom Award," BBC, April 7, 2005. http://news.bbc.co.uk/chinese/simp/hi/newsid_4420000/newsid_4422200/4422257.stm.
2. Reporters Without Borders, "First Worldwide Press Freedom Index," http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=4116.
3. Frank Smyth (The Committee to Protect Journalists), Testimony at US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 14, 2005.
4. "GAPP Banned 60 Illegal Publications," *The People's Daily*, April 28, 2005.
5. "Multiple Foreign Publications Will Be Banned," Xinhua News Agency, April 27, 2005.
6. Editor's note: See Jiao Guobiao, "China's Information Pigsty," elsewhere in this issue of CRF.
7. Xiao Qiang, Testimony at U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 14, 2005.
8. Ibid.
9. Susan W. O'Sullivan, Testimony at US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 14, 2005.
10. "The Great Firewall," A. Lin Neumann, briefing by Committee to Protect Journalists, January 2001.
11. Jonathan Krim, "Web censors find success—Falun Gong, Dalai Lama Among Blocked Topics," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2005.
12. Jim Yardley, "A Hundred Cellphones Bloom, And Chinese Take to the Streets," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2005.
13. AFP, "Anti-Japan sites blocked for May Day holiday," May 3, 2005.
14. Richard Baum, Testimony at US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 14, 2005.
15. Murray Scot Tanner, Testimony at US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 14, 2005.
16. The articles can be accessed at <http://www.theepochtimes.com/jiuping.asp>. The "Nine Commentaries" won the top National Journalism Award in the category of Asian American Issues—Online at the 2005 annual convention of the Asian American Journalists Association in August: <http://english.epochtimes.com/tools/printer.asp?id=31392>.
17. Editor's note: Reports of Meng Weizai's resignation from the Party on December 6, 2004 caused considerable controversy, with subsequent statements purportedly written by Meng variously denying and confirming his resignation. On December 12, Voice of America reported that the facts remained unclear: "Meng Weizai has not been interviewed in person by the media, and so outsiders have no way to know the truth. Xinhua said that their announcement is accurate, but certain China watchers say that the Meng Weizai resignation statement is more believable." (translated on the EastSouthWestNorth blog: http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20050710_1.htm.)
18. Derek Bambauer, Testimony at US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 14, 2005.
19. "Shenzhen IT Engineer Arrested for Downloading 'Nine Commentaries,'" June 1, 2005, <http://www.dajiyuan.com/gb/5/6/1/n940700.htm>. According to the article, Fang Dan, 30, was detained on April 14, 2005 after downloading the Nine Commentaries and providing the articles to a Falun Gong practitioner. According to reports, Fang himself is not a Falun Gong practitioner.