China and the Internet, Part 2: Is China a Threat?

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China and the Internet, Part 2: Is China a Threat?

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For the first installment of this series see: “China and the Internet, Part 1: My Life as a Pirate” <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/09/edit.php>

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.01 Introduction (return to index)

A little over a month after my return from six weeks working and researching in China, I still find myself somewhat confused, a state that the Chinese call “horse horse, tiger tiger”, neither here nor there, at 7’s and 8s, all mixed up. As someone who studies the Internet, with both intellectual interest and passion, I find China fascinating. As the citizen of a country other than China, however, I also find myself somewhat threatened.

.02 American Attitudes Toward China (return to index)

Most Americans would find my feelings of threat instantly understandable. The United States, over my lifetime, has always kept China in reserve as the potential enemy of the moment, if not the actual enemy. From this perspective, China is a looming giant, “Red China,” “Communist
China," “Maoist China.” This China oppresses its citizens, represses religion, and cheats on international trade practices and hence, is almost single-handedly responsible for the U.S. trade deficit.

But there is another side to the image of China in the American mind at present, and that is its undeniable progress, economic strength and much more sophisticated representation internationally of its culture and economy since the Deng Xiaoping years ushered in rapid reform. In my experience, Americans today, like Chinese themselves, are not quite certain in what sense China is communist, or to the use the preferred Chinese term, socialist.

Using the Internet as a tool to roughly assess attitudes toward China, as expressed in a very wide but still limited universe of data, I ran the following searches with these results on Google [1]:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Term</th>
<th>Number of hits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China threat</td>
<td>1,870,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red China</td>
<td>4,820,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China progress</td>
<td>2,670,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China reform</td>
<td>2,190,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China trade</td>
<td>5,480,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China trade good</td>
<td>3,280,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China trade bad</td>
<td>1,220,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Christianity</td>
<td>612,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are we to make of this welter of “horse horse tiger tiger” data? It is noteworthy at the outset, I think, that the largest category of pages [2] is in response to the query “China Trade.” When clumsily broken down by adding “good” or “bad” to the pages the two set of data seem to show a generally positive feeling, but plenty of anxiety, too.

As a student of Sino-American relations, I could not resist running the “China Christianity” query. For the 19th and early 20th centuries, the focus of both American knowledge of China and interest in China lay largely in religious concerns. More Americans probably heard first-hand reports of China at the grass-roots level than do now, because a largely church-going population heard constant messages from missionaries on home-leave. These occurred every several years and were usually focused on raising money by barnstorming churches with “magic lantern shows.” Historians invariably mention the missionary family backgrounds of such political figures as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Clare Booth Luce as an important influence on their attitudes toward China. Their shaping of American public opinion as the American President and
the wife of the baron of the Time-Life Empire respectively is also duly noted.

Historians have long debated whether the American flag in China followed “trade or the cross.” These Google searches seem to suggest that at least our concern, if not the flag, now marches solidly behind the dollar, and perhaps, behind the fear of the loss of American jobs.

.03 Chinese Control Over the Internet (return to index)

The past, then, as the above figures suggest, is only a rough guide to American concerns about China. Things are changing very rapidly. We do, however, have a new set of concerns. One of these is that China is seeking to censor or subvert the Internet, in order to control the flow of information within its borders. [3]

My own recent stay in China, with almost daily investigations of Chinese Internet use suggests, as does the above article, that things are loosening up. Individuals are still being charged on the basis of evidentiary trails left on the Internet of various forms of subversion. However, in my understanding, their crimes are criminal ones for their actions against the state, not for misuse of the Internet per se. [4]

In general, however, there seems to be very little concern about using the Internet in China, or in practicing much more than the self-monitoring that Americans do in their own homes and offices. Spam is now the greatest concern of most Chinese users it would seem, and the government is moving to blacklist 685 spam servers worldwide. [5]

In an interview in December 2003 with Ms. Austin Sommers, the very knowledgeable webmaster of the U.S. embassy in Beijing, I learned that most Chinese users of the Internet are now no longer in the large highly developed cities, but increasingly in smaller cities, towns, and rural areas. Recent figures suggest a total of eighty million users. [6] Many of these are communicating with others in chatrooms or with other Internet enabled means of communication, and if browsing, do so largely in search of useful information rather than entertainment. Educational purposes are particularly important to Chinese users.

I think that Chinese concerns about the Internet are slackening somewhat, for a number of reasons. One is that Chinese experience with it is now substantial, and just as in the early days of American usage we had continual scare stories of Internet addiction to everything from cybersex to game playing, Chinese have gone through a similar cycle. Most of them, like Americans, understand that these are issues but that they are manageable ones.

Another factor is also similar to the U.S. experience: Chinese understand that the Internet is an increasingly important tool for personal communication, commerce, and for education. They are willing to bear with some problems in order to benefit from it, in the belief that the advantages well outweigh the disadvantages. [7]
Another factor, more difficult to assess, is that Chinese people are not very concerned about censorship issues because most of them have found ways to reliably access external information by simple work-arounds to frustrate governmental attempts to control certain sites. An attempt to access such a page [8] if unsuccessful simply turns up the Chinese version of the familiar 404 “page not found” message.

This is not to say that it is easy to post critical information in China itself. It is not; local operators of chatrooms, Bulletin Boards, Threaded Discussions or Blogs constantly search their sites for inappropriate sentiments and act to remove them with dispatch, sometimes within minutes. [9] This amounts to self-censorship and is the traditional Chinese approach (as opposed to the more authoritarian or totalitarian ones of the Maoist regime) to social control.

This sort of censorship, however, is a very complex issue for any country. The Chinese may well define crime or terrorism in a way of which we do not approve, but we are unlikely to dispute their right and need to control criminals and terrorists, even if, as in the U.S., this results in narrowing everybody’s freedoms. Our attitudes as Americans are much altered by our reshaped perceptions since 9/11. Many of us now seem more tolerant of the desires of governments to control information. [10]

.04 Where is China Going (Electronically) (return to index)

My observations on Internet usage in China persuades me that giant leaps are in China’s near future. At present, PDAs (such as the Palm series) and wireless are almost never encountered. I heard, for example, of wireless nets in airports and public places, but constant checking with my Palm Tungsten | C did not identify one in six weeks. I was told in one shop that most wireless nets are corporate intranets and that I was unlikely to detect these.

Cell phones, however, are ubiquitous (Taiwan now has more cell phones than people!) and texting is quite common. It may well be that the next stage in China will look much more like Japan, where Internet enabled cell phones are the dominant mode of accessing the World Wide Web than like the United States’ experience.

In educational institutions, students are, in my experience, all familiar with the Internet, but consider access difficult. At Wenzhou Medical College (WMC), where I taught for three weeks, students are forbidden to have access in their dorm, I was told, because browsing and game playing was thought to interfere with study. Machines were available in public spaces and in the library, but my students certainly complained that a web-enabled classroom was difficult to access for them.

Nonetheless, they did seem to access regularly and took very readily to the use of a BBS as a medium for the exchange of information. We are currently discussing a shared interactive classroom environment for two classes to be taught in the fall, 2004, shared between Pacific University and WMC. With an instructor at each end, students would share common readings.
and view lectures and conduct discussions in real time over an Internet protocol-based system.

A difference between China and other countries is that the Chinese economy is in comfortable surplus, and the government thinks of investment in public sectors as not only a tool for managing development, but also a duty. WMC, for example, now admits 70% of applicants, made possible by the constant rapid construction of new classrooms, dormitories, and other facilities with public funds.

If (better—when) the Chinese government decides that the development of wireless broadband is in the public interest, the transformation will occur very rapidly. All of the necessary technology is cheaply available, because although Chinese use very little wireless technology at present, they manufacture virtually all of it.

Americans concerned with expanding trade are well aware of this market. On CCTV (Chinese Central Television; An English-speaking channel modeled on CNN.) viewers were treated on December 17, 2003, to two extensive reports with lengthy interviews concerning the visits of two American governors: Gary Locke of Washington state, and Mark Sanford of South Carolina. Each of these men emphasized the readiness of their states to assist China with its development. Locke touted the services of Washington manufacturers to Chinese telecom. Sanford invited Chinese textile firms to locate in South Carolina. Sanford also hinted at American anger with job losses and more or less presented such investment, which would create American jobs, as a sound approach to reducing trade tensions.

.05 Conclusion: Is China a Threat? (return to index)

As must be apparent, I believe that China is not a threat in the conventional, cold war sense. The pace of reform and progress of all sorts in China is dazzling. If it is a threat, it is because too many of us fail to see this progress, but are still bound by our preconceptions of a poor, totalitarian China. In this dated version of China, it is hard to imagine a booming consumer market, rapidly expanding public access, and a government prepared to expand selected sectors virtually instantaneously.

For those of us still embracing these shibboleths, a Chinese threat must necessarily be met with military spending, with federal research and development funding aimed at reducing our vulnerabilities (First and foremost among such projects, of course, “Starwars”.), and constant opposition to anything resembling trade with the Chinese. These preoccupations of the traditional right dovetail neatly, of course, with the concerns for the loss of blue and white-collar jobs of the traditional left. This ensures that the table of Google search patterns shown above will probably not change markedly anytime soon; China will continue to present threats and opportunities.

And at the risk of angering some readers, I must add that, in my opinion, current American policies toward trade, investment, an ever-increasing preoccupation with security-related research and development, and continually diminishing investment in education, all make it
difficult for us to meet this sort of challenge. When I began my studies of China decades ago, I came from the world’s most powerful and open nation to study a society run by ideologues attempting to guide a stagnant economy with irrelevant policies. Americans were optimistic and forward-looking; Chinese were depressed and anxious. It sometimes seems to me that in the last decade, there has emerged the danger that we are switching places.

.06 NOTES (return to index)

[1] Accessed February 29, 2004. These searches are suggestive at best. Chinese English language pages are mixed in with American ones, as well as a wide variety of foreign sites. But these search terms are nonetheless indicative of underlying attitudes. The “Red China” search term seems to turn up largely hostile references; the “China Progress” largely positive ones.

[2] Google is a full-text search engine, so I presume that these pages are sorted on the occurrence of the terms “good” and “bad” in the actual text, and there may well be some overlap, though the fact that the two sets of numbers add up to less than the total “China Trade” responses suggest that neutrality may be elusive in this area.


[4] I welcome information to the contrary on this point; it is an important distinction in tracing Chinese attitudes toward the Internet. At present, there are some specific laws against Internet use in the United States, and in general Chinese laws seem to me to be similar ones: intended to regulate upon the Internet acts that are illegal in other environments.


[7] I was particularly impressed during my stay in China with the widespread availability of books dealing in some way with the economic opportunities afforded by the Internet, what we might loosely call e-commerce. A very unscientific survey in one of Beijing’s largest bookstores revealed a total of perhaps 60 linear feet of different titles. Among them was a very sophisticated guide, Zhongguo Dianzi Zhengwu (Beijing 2003) (This term is difficult to translate precisely; the cover has a phrase in English, “E-Government,” but I think a more accurate translation might be The
Administration of Electronic (Affairs) in China." Produced by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the book clearly carries a lot of weight as a guide to Chinese government policies with regard to what we would probably call information technology. The book is both introductory and very detailed. It is the equivalent of a rather thorough college textbook. It deals with both highly technical issues and social concerns. The tone is a very positive one throughout, continually emphasizing the economic importance of the Internet.

[8] My test was usually to try to access elements of my own materials with which I was very familiar, or to run searches on such politically sensitive topics as “Fa Lun Gong”, the very internet-savvy Buddhist group, to my mind as much a pyramid scheme as a religion. I was able to see that the censors were particularly concerned about materials touching upon Taiwan, but even this coverage was very uneven. Many pages that I would have thought very sensitive loaded immediately. On the other hand, a search on Fa Lun Gong turned up an old message of mine in which I had voiced some doubts about the religiosity of this organization in an archive, This suggests to me that many other more favorable mentions of Fa Lun Gong on the Internet, usually in the context of religious freedom in China, had been censored. I felt this way because my message was relatively high on the search list, although very difficult to find and few search engines would have catalogued it at all, given its obscure location. (A Google search here, for example, does not turn it up at all.)

[9] See: Andrew Stroehlein, “Internet Censors in China Loosening Their Grip” USC Annenberg Online Journalism Review,

http://www.ojr.org/ojr/world_reports/1053660077.php


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ONE THOUGHT ON “CHINA AND THE INTERNET, PART 2: IS CHINA A THREAT?”

c christian ministries lincolnton Nc
on February 6, 2014 at 4:18 AM said:

Incredible story there. What occurred after? Take care!