

GOD'S GIFT TO CHINA

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PRAISE THE LORD AND KEEP ON BLOGGING

Today, there are more than 100 million Internet users in China. The Chinese Communist government is ambivalent in its attitude towards the Internet, and is showing many signs of awkwardness. On one hand, their lame-footed reforms require high economic growth and the main benefit of the Internet is that it is a tool for making money. On the other hand, dictators are afraid of open information and free expression and, therefore, are afraid of the political effects of the Internet. In recent years, particularly, the Internet has played a major role in the awakening of ideas on rights and the defence of civil rights among the Chinese people. This has seriously worried the current government. In the interests of maintaining its ideological control over the people, it places great importance on controlling speech and blocking information on the Internet. It invested huge amounts of capital in the Golden Shield project [a highly sophisticated and all-embracing surveillance system built with the aid of western telecoms companies Ed] and hired many Internet police. It used economic incentives to force western Internet companies in China to cooperate with their Internet control.

Yet, as far as my personal experience is concerned, the effect of the Internet in improving the state of free expression in China cannot be underestimated. Even under the present reality with increasingly severe censorship and more cases of persecution for expression, the Internet has still helped the mainland people.

On 7 October 1999, after three years in jail, I returned home. There was a computer at home. A friend gave it to my wife, and she was learning to type and get on the Internet. After I returned, the computer rapidly became my writing tool and my wife rarely touched it. As someone who writes for a living and who participated in the 1989 movement – I joined the democracy movement on 4 June [the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre Ed] – my gratitude toward the Internet for personal and public reasons cannot easily be expressed.

With the censorship here, my essays can only be published overseas. Before using the computer, my handwritten essays were difficult to correct and the cost of shipping was high. In order to prevent the essays being intercepted, I often crossed the entire city from west to east, where I had a foreign friend who owned a fax machine.

But now the Internet connects the whole world; with a computer, my personal information space has expanded on a scale previously unimaginable. It has given me access to information as well as connecting me to the outside world. As for the public sphere, the Internet provides an information channel that the

Chinese dictators cannot completely censor: it allows people to speak and communicate and it offers a platform for spontaneous civilian organisations. Ever since China entered the Internet era, civilian voices have the sort of technical support that is difficult to block completely.

The Internet has enabled the emergence of rights protection. Compared to rights protection activities conducted over the telephone or the collection of signatures by bicycling around that characterised the letter-signing movements of the days before and after the 1989 democracy movement, we have made a quantum leap thanks to the Internet. The ability of civilians to mobilise expanded rapidly – both quantity and quality have improved – because the Internet was cheap, speedy, convenient and borderless; it also reduced costs enormously. Now the drafting, discussion, editing and printing of open letters can all be done on computers. At the click of a mouse you can collect signatures from around China and the rest of the world simultaneously, creating a continuous and broad Internet rights protection movement as demonstrated by a website such as gmwq.org.

The ease, openness and freedom of Internet speech have enabled civilian opinion to become very lively in recent years. Internet opinion has gradually become the main force monitoring and supervising events. Whenever there is a major public disaster, the broad range of opinions expressed on the Internet will influence, to a greater or lesser extent, the attitudes of the traditional media and the government. Internet opinion is pressing the other media to be more open and diverse in providing information. An important indicator of the degree of openness of any media is whether it can keep up with Internet information and opinion. Further, the government can control the traditional media but it cannot totally control the Internet. The scandals that are censored in the traditional media are disseminated through the Internet and form a powerful Internet opinion. Since the government must be concerned with the hearts and minds of the people, it has to open up the release of information in certain areas, and scandal-affected officials may be forced to appear in public to apologise to the victims' families and society as a whole. The first senior official to apologise was in March 2001 when the Fanglincun elementary school explosion caused the deaths of 41 people and there was a huge surge of Internet opinion. Then prime minister Zhu Rongji appeared and apologised to the families of the victims and society as a whole. Thereafter, officials were seen to apologise regularly. At the same time, under the impact of massive Internet opinion, the authorities had to make certain officials scapegoats when things such as Sars, major mining accidents or the contamination of the Songhua River became public.

The Internet facilitates the exchange of information and the gathering together of people. It has provided an easy and convenient platform for civilian

organisations. A civilian website, or BBS [Bulletin Board Systems are much used in China Ed], is a self-organised platform for like-minded people to exchange ideas and debate. Furthermore, when it comes to specific cases or major social incidents, the Internet has been a powerful aid in mobilising and organising civilian opinion. An apparently minor incident such as the Heilongjiang BMW case [in 2003, when a well-connected woman killed a peasant with her car and got off very lightly Ed], or the oppression of and resistance by an apparently insignificant individual such as Liu Di, Du Daobing, Lu Xuesong etc, can initiate a huge swell of opinion once the information has been disseminated on the Internet; and this, in turn, may develop into another instance of Internet rights defence. In the end, it may become a public incident that receives broad attention and support inside and outside China.

Related to this, the freedom and efficacy of the Internet have the extraordinary ability to 'create stars'. Not only can the Internet produce entertainment stars such as Furong Jiejie [self-promoting and much derided Chinese blogger Ed], it can also create, one after another, a 'Civil Rights Defence Star', an 'opinion leader', 'moral example' or 'truth-speaking hero'. Famous middle-aged intellectuals can rapidly expand the influence of their ideas and public commentary: for instance, Li Junning, Xu Youyu, Qin Hui, Cui Weiping, Zhang Zuhua etc. Indeed, the Internet also allowed a new generation of intellectuals to emerge: such as the influential Yu Jie, Wang Yi and others. It has also created folk heroes: the military doctor Jiang Yanyong, regarded as the truth-speaking hero; rural entrepreneur Sun Dawu; rights defender Feng Bingxian; excellent media people such as Cheng Yizhong, Lu Yuegang, Li Datong and others; university teachers Jiao Guobiao and Lu Xuesong and so on. All of them became famous through their defence of rights on the Internet. Finally, in recent years, a group of rights defenders have become famous public figures through the Internet. These are the human rights lawyers represented by such as Zhang Sizhi, Mo Xiaoping, Pu Zhiqiang, Zhu Jiuhu, Gao Zhisheng, Guo Feixiong, Teng Biao, Xu Zhiyong, Li Baiguang, Li Heping, Li Jianqiang.

Chinese Christians have a saying: the Chinese lack any sense of religion and most of them do not believe in the western God, yet the universal benefaction of God will not forsake the suffering Chinese people. The Internet is God's present to China. It provided the best tool for the Chinese people in their project to cast off slavery and strive for freedom. □

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