Finn Lancaster

Professor Childree

ENC1101 MW 12

22 October 2021

The ‘Socioeconomy’ of China: Impacts of the Great Firewall

Introduction

The internet has changed the way of living in modern times by providing a centralized hub of knowledge and instantaneous communications, but behind these shiny benefits are factors such as politicization, false information, and cyber-terrorism. For many of these reasons, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), through the Golden Shield Project, began the Great Chinese Firewall, a censorship machine for limiting internet content, data, and ideas. While it cannot be denied certain benefits it has given the country, as a whole, the Great Firewall has promoted many of the things it was formed to prevent and has been a limiting factor in the growth of China in the digital frontier. For this reason, the retiring of the Golden Shield Initiative (and Great Firewall therein), as well as the other Chinese censorship machines, would be in the best interests of the state of China, its citizens, and its growth.

Research Problem

The term ‘socioeconomic’ refers to both the society and economy of a given group, and more accurately the intimate connection between these; that is, the impacts of one upon the other, and vice-versa. This paper will explore that connection in the state of China (the “socioeconomy”), introducing the internet to that equation, and explore the questions below.

1. How has the CCP ideology, as well as the culture of China influenced the growth of the internet there?

2. In what ways has the Great Firewall benefited the Chinese socioeconomy?

3. in what ways has the Great Firewall been detrimental to the Chinese socioeconomy?

4. In terms of the global economy, what effect has the Great Firewall had?

5. In terms of global culture(s), how has the Great Firewall benefited or impeded certain aspects?

I.

The Tienanmen Square Massacre of 1989 provides both accurate insight into the CCP, as well as a good comparison to the evolution of the internet in the state. Probably best put by Terril Yue Jones, as quoted in the paper “The Great Firewall of China: Implications of Internet Control for China Post-Tienanmen Square Massacre to Present Day,” the Chinese government fears a unification of citizens as it could cause a “wave of protests that could threaten the stability, even the existence, of the Communist Party.” (*Tilley*)

Similarly, the CCP has taken an active role in the internet, ensuring that only approved sites are accessible to users, and enforcing violations of such through imprisonment, and, in some cases, the disappearance of the offender. Referring back to the said Tienanmen Square Protests, this event is just another example of internet suppression in the country: searches for this event are blocked by the firewall, and each request and user identity are logged in order to punish those who step out of line. To further limit access to these resources, the CCP has in place a specialized network of ISPs (Internet Service Providers), DNS spoofing, IP bans, and even AI that can further “assume” the intents of a user. (*Tilley*)

From this perspective, the many effects of the CCP on the development of the Great Firewall are apparent. As demonstrated through the media suppression following the Tienanmen Square Massacre, the Great Firewall is not in place for the safety of the Chinese citizens, but rather to further the CCP’s political agenda, and to promote CCP propaganda,

II.

Despite the role of the Great Firewall as a political instrument, it has also had innumerable affects on the Chinese domestic socioeconomy. In terms of benefits, MayTech, a specialist in AI and Cloud-based Data, describes in their website the creation of a vibrant Chinese social media landscape, in large part mirroring that of the West, stemming from the firewall.

Platforms such as Baibu, RenRen, and Weibo have all rocketed in popularity in China without competition from the western platforms of Facebook, Twitter, and Google, benefiting the Chinese at-home economy.

Despite these seemed benefits, however, the Chinese Great Firewall has also hurt its socioeconomy. As Amnesty International describes in their article “Pho noodles and pandas: How China’s social media users created a new language to beat government censorship on COVID-19,” these same domestic media sites that were stimulated by the protections of the Great Firewall are also heavily content-censored. For example, terms such as the word “learning,” and “Vietnamese Pho Noodles” are restricted, as one sounds like a derogatory term Chinese President’s name, and the other is a widely used abbreviation for “VPN,” a proxy used to defeat the Great Firewall. To this day, the same source says, any mention of “learning is bad” is instantly removed, not because of the actual meaning, but because of certain meanings its acquired that could threaten the CCP. This ever-expanding list of blacklisted phrases contain decidedly Western ideas such as “Free Speech,” demonstrating just how far the CCP is willing to go, and providing another reason why these censorship machines need to be removed.

Furthermore, as Human Rights Watch (HRW), a “Reporters without Borders” group dedicated to reporting the truth of events, tells, the extent of the Great Firewall, and Chinese censorship in general, has led to a generation of extremely nationalistic young people. For instance, the same source says, the Chinese Author Fang Fang, a moderate in terms of views, was heavily criticized by netizens (a combination of the words “net” and “citizen) when she released her diary providing more clarity to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though she did not criticize anyone in the writing, and made clear that she was sharing only events she had been an eyewitness to, a large group of online social-media uses, in large part consisting of young people, still condemned her for “failing to highlight the Chinese government’s success in containing the outbreak,” says the same source as before.

III.

Overseas, the Chinese Great Firewall has just as many minuses, including trade limitations, as well as leading to social and digital divides.

Angela Wu’s study “How Does the Great Firewall of China Affect Online User Behavior Isolated Internets as Culturally Defined Markets on the WWW” determines a direct correlation between language, hyperlinks, and relevance of a website, and also finds that Chinese websites (called the C-cluster in the paper), have become isolated as a result of factors such as the Great Firewall. However, the paper also mentions that, because of other factors such as website language, it can be hard to speculate the level of isolation Chinese sites face directly *from* these censorship machines.

Another source, The Diplomat, an online Asian news agency based in Washington DC, analyzes the impacts of the Great Firewall on international trade, citing several cases in which it has restricted American e-commerce through blockage of their site, either accidental or on-purpose.

Amazon, who has long had a shifting relationship with China regarding site content and services, has finally had to bow to China’s demand, limiting access to it’s AWS (Amazon Web Services) program in the state by selling the Chinese branch of it to a local Chinese agency, and advising citizens to not work on bypassing the Great Firewall, according to Amazon itself.

Conclusion

As researched, the Chinese Great Firewall, as opposed to being in the interests of the Chinese people, is actually a tool of suppression and propaganda, and a threat to both China and the wider world. Through the fostering of this program, the CCP has been able to influence Chinese media to the point where irreparable damage has been done to their country’s economy and society.

Demonstrated in parts I, II, and III, these impacts exist both domestically and internationally, and have changed entire generations of Chinese children. The Great Firewall also limited widely-used sites such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook, in turn crippling big-tech business in the country, and fracturing relations with the West.

Because of this, for China to truly grow further, significant actions *must* be taken to re-work, or even outright remove, the Great Firewall. By doing so, these damages could be reversed, then promoting the Chinese economy and society without fear of censorship.

Works Cited

Balding, Christopher. “How Badly Is China's Great Firewall Hurting the Country's Economy?” *Foreign Policy*, 18 July 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/18/how-badly-is-chinas-great-firewall-hurting-the-countrys-economy/.

“How the Great Firewall of China Affects Chinese Innovation.” *Maytech*, 17 Mar. 2020, https://www.maytech.net/blog/how-the-great-firewall-of-china-affects-chinese-innovation.

Qiang, Xiao, et al. “Hearing on ‘China’s Information Controls, Global Media Influence, and Cyber Warfare Strategy’ Access to Information in the People’s Republic of China.” *Catch Me If You Can: Political Satire and Criticism of the State in the Chinese Blogosphere*, 4 May 2017, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Xiao%20Qiang%20May%204th%202017%20USCC%20Testimony.pdf.

Roberts, E. “Free Speech vs. Social Cohesion.” *Chinese Opinions on the Firewall*, Stanford University, 2011, https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs201/projects/2010-11/FreeExpressionVsSocialCohesion/china\_sentiment.html.

Taneja, Harsh, and Angela Xiao Wu. “Does the Great Firewall Really Isolate the Chinese ...” *How-Does-the-Great-Firewall-of-China-Affect-Online-User-Behavior-Isolated-Internets-as-Culturally-Defined-Markets-on-the-WWW.pdf*, Researchgate.net, May 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Angela-Wu-7/publication/236834531\_How\_Does\_the\_Great\_Firewall\_of\_China\_Affect\_Online\_User\_Behavior\_Isolated\_%27Internets%27\_as\_Culturally\_Defined\_Markets\_on\_the\_WWW/links/598a7bdea6fdcc7cf91c630c/How-Does-the-Great-Firewall-of-China-Affect-Online-User-Behavior-Isolated-Internets-as-Culturally-Defined-Markets-on-the-WWW.pdf.

Wang, Yaqiu. “In China, the 'Great Firewall' Is Changing a Generation.” *Human Rights Watch*, 28 Oct. 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/01/china-great-firewall-changing-generation.

“How China's Social Media Users Created a New Language to Beat Censorship on Covid-19.” *Amnesty International*, 11 Oct. 2021, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/china-social-media-language-government-censorship-covid/.

Tilley, Marissa. “The Great Firewall of China: Implications of Internet Control for China Post-Tiananmen Square Massacre to Present Day.” *DASH - Harvard University*, 1 Jan. 1970, https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/37945137.

Hsu, Sara. “Is China's Great Firewall a Trade Barrier?” – *The Diplomat*, For The Diplomat, 14 Apr. 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/is-chinas-great-firewall-a-trade-barrier/.

“Amazon Web Services in China.” *Amazon Web Services, Inc.*, https://www.amazonaws.cn/en/about-aws/china/.