The Great Chinese Firewall: A Safeguard or Stop Sign?

Tierney Bensen, *Career Education*
Patrick Henze, *Hutchinson Technologies*
Geoff Farnsworth, *Whitefish Bay Schools*

ABSTRACT

There is a new China on the world stage today. This is a China that is no longer isolated from the rest of the world, a China that has experienced economic and technological booms that have it positioned as a key player in the global economy. Despite this new façade, the ways of old China lie just beneath the surface. For behind this economic engine, is a government clinging to tight control over its people and their networks of communication. This two-sided state has set the stage for a collision course where the conflicting philosophies of old and new clash in a struggle for control. In no other realm have the two philosophies crashed together more directly than in the area of technology. The Chinese government has taken a hard stance on Internet usage. Is this stance a safeguard for a country that finds itself in unchartered waters, or is it a stop sign to future economic gains? This paper will attempt to answer this question by looking at China's historic economic run and the country's developing relationship with the Internet.

CHINA'S ECONOMIC BOOM

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Before the aforementioned question can be answered, it is important to set the stage so that the context can be fully understood. There is no better starting point than the Chinese economy. The Chinese economy and the philosophy behind it have had a large influence on the government's Internet policies. Once that influence is clearly identified, an answer begins to emerge and an argument can be developed.

In the last quarter century, China has experienced an economic resurgence that has catapulted it into one of the top economies in the world. The beginning of the run can be traced back to the economic reforms that began in 1979. From 1979 to 2005 China's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at an average annual rate of 9.6%. In comparison, the pre-reform years of 1960-1978 saw an average annual growth rate of 5.3%. [1]

The drastic difference between the two periods can largely be attributed to a shift in economic philosophies. Prior to 1979, the Chinese government played a very active and dominant role in the economy. A significant portion of the economic output was established and controlled by the state. The state set production goals, regulated prices and dispersed resources throughout most of the economy. A primary goal of the Chinese government, during this period was to make the country self-sufficient to the fullest extent possible. Foreign investment and corporate presence were nearly nonexistent while foreign trade was limited to acquiring those goods that could not be produced or found in

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[1] Wayne M. Morrison, **China's Economic Conditions**
http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IB98014.pdf (January 12, 2006)

China. This general approach can be labeled as a centrally planned economy. This central planning created a very inefficient and stagnant economy where there was little competition and virtually no incentive for innovation. The end result for the people of China was a lower standard of living than most other developing countries. The stage was set for reform, which came in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

Since 1979, the Chinese government has been transforming its economy from the Soviet style centrally planned economy of the previous decades to a mixed economy. In this sense, a mixed economy is a market-oriented economy within the social and political framework set forth by the Communist Party of China.[2] Essentially, it is an economy that combines elements of capitalism with elements of socialism. Transformation was achieved through economic reforms centered on shifting control from the Chinese government to natural market forces. One reform started price and ownership incentives for farmers, allowing them to sell a certain amount of their harvests on the free market. Another called for the creation of four special economic zones along the Chinese coast in the hope of attracting foreign investment, increasing exports and importing high technology products. Additional reforms broke up the central economic policymaking in several sectors, especially trade. Many enterprises were transferred to the care of local governments, which allowed them to operate under free market principles rather than governmental control.[3]

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[2] **Economy of the People's Republic of China**
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_the_People's_Republic_of_China
[3] Wayne M. Morrison, **China's Economic Conditions**

China's philosophical change in the handling of its economy has proven to be very successful over the years and is a key factor in its current economic surge. The impact of this philosophy extends far beyond the economic front and can be seen in the government's approach to the Internet. This idea will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

The philosophical shift seen in the economic reforms of the 1970s and 1980s were instrumental in changing China's economic landscape. That landscape has continued to evolve today with the openness those reforms established. One of the biggest effects of China's openness has been the dramatic increase in foreign investment and corporate presence. Foreign interest in China seems to be ever increasing and could lead the Chinese economy to new heights. Although the biggest gains in China's economic run came in the early to mid 1990s, evidence hints at a second wind. In recent years the double digit increases of the past decade have reappeared. In July 2006, China announced an 11.3% growth in the second quarter, its fastest economic growth in more than a decade. This announcement comes on the heels of a robust 10.3% first quarter growth rate.[4] On the international scene, China has accounted for one-third of economic growth from 2001-2004.[5]

http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IB98014.pdf (January 12, 2006)
[4] **China Reports Fastest Growth in a Decade**
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13920456/
[5] **The Great Fall of China?**
http://www.economist.com/opinion/displayStory.cfm?story_id=2668015 (May 13, 2004)

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Although the growth rates of the recent past will be hard to sustain, it does not seem like China's forward progress will end anytime in the near future. Economists for global investment bank, Lehman Brothers, predict that China's economy will go from its current position as sixth largest to the second largest by 2030.[6] Others have more aggressive predictions. According to Global Insight, an economic forecasting firm, China's real GDP will likely average 8.0% over the next five years, signifying that China could double the size of its economy in less than 10 years.[7] The Economist Intelligence Unit forecasts that China will become the largest exporter in the world by 2010 and the world's largest economy by 2020.

While there are many positive predictions for China and its streaking economy, there is a large body of literature that raises concerns over China's potential for future economic growth. Most of these articles identify a handful of challenges that the Chinese government must overcome to continue the economy's upward movement. Among the areas cited are the poor performance of state-owned enterprises, an antiquated banking system, lack of the rule of law and social unrest.[8] It is important to note that there is no mention of the Internet and Chinese policies relating to the Internet in these concerns. The reason for this absence is two-fold. First, there are many more important variables to China's economic success than the Internet. Secondly,

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[6] **China Economy Overview**
http://www.china-window.com/china_economy/
[7] **China: Interim Forecast Analysis: Economic Growth**
http://www.globalinsight.com/ (December 15, 2005)
[8] Wayne M. Morrison, **China's Economic Conditions**
http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IB98014.pdf (January 12, 2006)

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the Chinese government will not allow the Internet to be anything other than an asset to its economy. It is with this that we turn our attention to China's relationship with the Internet.

CHINA'S INTERNET POLICIES

Running parallel to the recent economic gains is China's developing relationship with the Internet. From its onset, China has viewed this modern medium as both an asset and a liability. On the one hand, the Internet represents an exciting new layer of technology and commerce that can help to modernize the Chinese economy and establish links to the outside world that would create additional markets for Chinese goods. On the other hand, the Internet represents a sense of informational freedom that poses significant threats to a Communist regime that has a long history of censorship and information suppression. It is at this point where the shadows of China's economic philosophy become visible on the Chinese government's Internet policies. China's response to the Internet dilemma is in many ways a mirror of its answer to the dismal economic conditions of the late 1970s.

A PBS Frontline website entitled, "China in the Red," summarizes the aforementioned issues:

The Internet's evolution in China is in many ways a microcosm of the sweeping economic changes initiated 25 years ago by Deng Xiaoping, which were designed to liberalize China's markets and open them to the world. Just as Deng understood that he could better consolidate power through economic progress than through ideological purity, so the Communist Party leadership today has realized that it needs to embrace the economic potential of the Internet. And yet, while Beijing has taken steps to encourage the growth of its Internet sector -- giving tax breaks to high-tech firms for instance and building low-cost office space for Internet start-ups -- China's leaders also view the Internet as a threat to their authority.[9]

It is with this mindset that the Chinese government introduced China to the World Wide Web. While there was most likely a great deal of apprehension on the part of government officials over the Internet's presence in China, the people of China have embraced the Internet with open arms. Since its first connection was established in 1993, access to the Internet has exploded. According to official Chinese agencies, the number of people who had access to the Internet by the end of 2000 was 22.5 million.[10] Amnesty International sets the number at 45.8 million by June 2002, citing a 72.8% increase over

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[9] **China and the Internet**
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/red/roundtable/internet.html
[10] Shanthi Kalithil and Taylor Boas, **The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes: China, Cuba and the Counterrevolution**
http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=728&prog=zgp (July 2001)

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official numbers given 12 months earlier.[11]   While the number of Chinese people having access to the web has been growing at a torrid pace, the nature of this access has changed. More individuals are accessing the web from home and office computers in addition to the more traditional gateways of Internet cafes and schools. To go along with the growth in web access, there have been tremendous increases in the number of domains and websites. Some experts estimate this growth at 20% per quarter.[12]

This great growth in a medium known for its information dissemination and openness may seem counterintuitive for an authoritarian regime.   In fact, China's approach to control the Internet differs than those of other authoritarian regimes, such as Cuba, which limit access to the medium. Instead, China promotes widespread Internet access but utilizes filtering, monitoring, deterrence and self-censorship to achieve the desired level of control.

China controls the Internet with a collection of both proactive and reactive methods. Blocking, filtering, monitoring, self-censoring, third party censoring and supervision, laws and regulations, propaganda and harsh consequences are all utilized in the government's effort to diminish or eliminate the threats inherent to the Internet.

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[11] **People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China**
http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA170072002 (November 26, 2002)
[12] **People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China**
http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA170072002 (November 26, 2002)

The Chinese government began permitting commercial Internet accounts in 1993. Since that time, at least sixty sets of regulations have been issued with the aim of controlling Internet content. In addition to those regulations, eight separate ministries or government agencies, led by the Ministry of Public Security, are involved in Internet monitoring and control. They include the Ministry of Information Industry, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the State Council, the Supreme People's Court, and the State Bureau for the Protection of Secrets, the State Administration for Press and Publications, and the State Copyright Bureau.[13] Throughout these agencies there is an internal Internet police force of some 30,000 individuals patrolling the various aspects of Internet usage.[14]

The government's many regulations dealing with Internet usage are extensive and carry harsh consequences for violators. In January 2001, transmitting "secret" or "reactionary" information over the web became a capital crime.[15] Punishment for disregarding the regulations can include jail time and execution. There have been several widely publicized incidents of individuals being sentenced for Internet violations. It is the government's wish that all of these regulations, consequences and incidents have resulted in a self-censoring that curbs the instances of future violations.

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[13] **Freedom of Expression and the Internet in China**
http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/china-bck-0701.htm
[14] **People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China**
http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA170072002 (November 26, 2002)
[15] **Freedom of Expression and the Internet in China**
http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/china-bck-0701.htm

The government certainly does not rely solely on fear and self-policing to achieve its ends. Two of the government's main weapons against misuse use of the Internet are blocking and filtering. Numerous websites deemed to have politically sensitive or threatening content are inaccessible in China. Common blocked sites include international news sites, banned group sites, religious sites and human rights sites.[16] In September 2002, the Chinese government installed filtering systems based on key words. Amnesty International's website reports "Prohibited words or strings of words on websites, e-mail, foreign news sites and search engines are affected. Users trying to access information which includes key words such as 'human rights', 'Taiwan', 'Tiananmen', 'Falun Gong' and 'Tibet' are blocked and browsers indicate that the 'page cannot be displayed'."[17]

Beyond its own efforts, the government has enlisted the help of Internet content providers (ICPs). In September 2000, China's State Council passed new regulations governing Internet content providers (ICPs).

Following is the text from Article 15 of the measures:

> ICPs shall not produce, reproduce, release, or disseminate information with the following contents:
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> (1) Information that goes against the basic principles set in the constitution;
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> (2) Information that endangers national security, divulges state

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[16] **People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China**
http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA170072002 (November 26, 2002)
[17] **People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China**
http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA170072002 (November 26, 2002)

secrets, subverts the government, or undermines national unification;

(3) Information that is detrimental to the honor and interests of the state;

(4) Information that instigates ethnic hatred or ethnic discrimination, or that undermines national unity;

(5) Information that undermines the state's policy for religions, or that preaches evil cults or feudalistic and superstitious beliefs;

(6) Information that disseminates rumors, disturbs social order, or undermines social stability;

(7) Information that disseminates pornography and other salacious materials; that promotes gambling, violence, homicide, and terror; or that instigates the commission of crimes;

(8) Information that insults or slanders other people, or that infringes upon other people's legitimate rights and interests; and

(9) Other information prohibited by the law or administrative regulations.[18]

As part of their business arrangement, ICPs must follow the guidelines above as well as additional actions called for by the government such as keeping records of activity for a number of days. ICPs are

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[18] **People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China**
http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA170072002 (November 26, 2002)

responsible and liable for any information posted under their watch, thus are very active in monitoring their customers' activities. ICPs hire an internal staff responsible for removing or editing forum comments that might be in violation of government guidelines. Internet cafes also have employees who pace the aisles of computers, looking over shoulders for violations. The requirements for ICPs have significantly extended the government's manpower and resources in their attempt to control Internet activity.

The Chinese government has also gone on the offensive, using the Internet to promote its policies and actions. The government has used the web to circulate propaganda and has established forums to increase national unity and nationalistic feelings. In addition, the government has established websites to specifically address current events and give the government's perspective on those happenings. In addition to distributing propaganda on the global Internet, China is considering the idea of a national Intranet. This network would be used to replace the global Internet by providing web services with approved content to the Chinese masses.[19]

A quick scan of the numerous regulations and measures in place to control Internet activity gives a clear message as to government's

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[19] Shanthi Kalithil and Taylor Boas, **The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes: China, Cuba and the Counterrevolution** http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=728&prog=zgp (July 2001)

intentions with the Internet. The government wants to reap the full benefits of this modern medium while limiting the potential drawbacks. As for the benefits, the government wishes to expand commerce, disseminate propaganda and information it deems appropriate, create efficiencies in society and open beneficial relationships with the outside world. The drawbacks all center on the political and social realms. The Chinese government does not want any activity taking place via the Internet that would loosen its grip on society or negatively impact the state.

On the whole, the wide range of strategies utilized by the Chinese government to control the Internet has been very effective. These results have come despite the widespread predictions by politicians, pundits and academicians that the Internet would revolutionize China's society. The efforts of the Chinese government have not gone without controversy and/or outrage. Human rights groups and a host of others have taken issue with the way China has suppressed the Internet.

SEGMENTS OF CHINESE USER'S OPINIONS ON CENSORSHIP

Censorship of the Internet attracts significant attention around the globe. Many users feel this impedes on the idea of freedom of speech but more media focus should be directed on how the Chinese feel about the censorship and how it will impact the future economy. There are clearly three segments of opinions on the Internet and censorship. The opinions of the Chinese vary as to

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whether censorship provides a value or stunts the growth of the society. Each viewpoint has a degree of validity.

The first segment of the Chinese population feels that the censorship of the Internet is a business debate used to determine whether Internet companies should engage in China.[20] These users indicate that the debate is a greater issue in the West than in China; the users indicated the Chinese need to address the censorship with the government and not allow the Westerner's to become involved in Chinese politics. Companies such as Microsoft and Google "have, through their actions, directly and admittedly contradicted their values and shared policies" by complying with Chinese government censorship policies" which the Chinese feel are only for Western Business purposes. One user indicated "These are regarded as simply Western exercises in self-absorption, self-indulgence and self-flagellation, and completely alien to the Chinese situation," Roland Soong of Hong Kong said on his EastSouthWestNorth blog this week.[21] While these users express their disagreement for United States involvement, some Chinese remain neutral.

Another segment of the Chinese population remains in a neutral position on censorship in China. These Chinese feel that they are not impacted by the censorship of the Internet. "Most Chinese go online for gaming, e-mail, news, weather reports and blogging, and say they rarely encounter signs of

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[20]Rebecca MacKinnon, **China, The Internet & Human Right – a long analysis** http://rconversation.blogs.com/rconversation/2006/07/china_the_inter.html (July 20, 2006)

[21]Tim Johnson, **Many Internet users in China unfazed by government censorship** http://www.realcities.com/mld/krwashington/13880590.htm (February 15, 2006)

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censorship. "I can find all that I want," said Chen Zhao, 24, a Tsinghua University doctoral student. "I seldom find pages I can't open."" These users indicate that the censorship protects users from content that is pornographic or contains terrorist content.[22] The Chinese Government does not publish a list denoting the websites that are specifically blocked from the Internet but this group does not seek the information from the government. These users indicate a view of acceptance on censorship and have modified their everyday Internet life to work around the restrictions. The segmented group voices the opinion that the censorship impedes the freedom of speech and is a concurrent with many Westerners. Human rights interest groups such as "Amnesty International is concerned that the range of information prohibited by this regulation allows the authorities to restrict freedom of expression over the Internet in a broad and sweeping manner which goes far beyond what would be regarded as legitimate restrictions under international standards." The international declaration of human rights indicates *"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."*[23] Some Chinese Writers like Liu Xiabo are frustrated with the way the government is presenting the censorship and filtering their independent writing.[24]

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[22] Tim Johnson. **Many Internet users in China unfazed by government censorship** http://www.realcities.com/mld/krwashington/13880590.htm (February 15, 2006)
[23] http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html
[24] **Liu Xiaobo,** Communist Internet Censorship an "Internationally Common Practice"? http://www.theepochtimes.com/news/6-2-20/38388.html **(February 20, 2006)**

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Chinese users are governed by Article 15, which provides descriptions of the content that is blocked by the Golden shield, and reduce the total number of search results compared to the United States Search engines. Information filtered by the Golden Shield includes information that goes against the basic principles of China, national security, sites detrimental to the honor or interest of the states, religious websites, gambling, and pornographic websites.[25] Users have been imprisoned for improper use of the Internet when not following the government laws.

While censorship does affect the Chinese users' daily lives with regard to viewing specific content according to Article 15, the question "Will censorship impact the economic growth of businesses?" is not directly related. The "Great Firewall" may be used to filter information, however there is no research to indicate that the business offering online products in accordance with Article 15 are limited and therefore are not detrimental to Chinese Ecommerce.

ADDRESSING THE REAL CHALLENGE

Growth in China's economy is not solely dependant on the censorship of the Internet to impact China's growing economy. In exploring the position of whether or not the Chinese are preventing future economic growth, the authors feel that the need to address challenges such as state owned enterprises, banking systems, government corruption, rule of law, and social stability will have a more significant impact on the Chinese economy. In addition, articles have not noted the Internet as an impact to the economy. The Chinese

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[25] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_in_mainland_China#Local_businesses

government will use the Internet to be an asset to its economy by allowing users access to business related content that benefits ecommerce.

Each challenge presents a hardship on the economy; state owned enterprises, which constitute one third of all businesses, are not performing well and reduction in the trade barriers could result in bankruptcy. Another challenging feature is the banking system which supports the state owned enterprises and are insolvent. If China addresses the banking system and corrects the challenge of banking corruption for loans based on political connections the banking industry will reduce the amount of bad loans.

Successful societies demand a higher quality of life; the Chinese continue to face social unrest, which related to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, basic needs must be addressed by the government.[26] The most basic needs are physiological needs such as the right to breathe, sleep, and eat. The air pollution, water supply and environment in China continue to spiral out of control despite Chinese environmental laws. The neglect of the environment for economic growth is a short-term benefit which will provide long-term damage to the economy and the health of the Chinese population. Maslow's second level of safety needs is also a concern for the future economic growth of China. In 2005 the United Nation identified that the income gap between urban and rural areas was the highest in the world, threatening social stability. The government will need to address health care and education for the rural

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[26] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs

poor to prevent protests and views of inequality among classes while promoting growth in the economy.[27]

Lastly, laws must be written and enforced to provide equal opportunities for investors to participate in China. A clear definition of laws and rules must be applied to all businesses to prevent corruption and favoritism. By correcting these challenges, China can continue to positively impact its future economy and provide a better quality of life for its people.

In conclusion, it is the opinion of the authors that the Chinese government is impacting the Internet by filtering social and political information instead of stunting the economic potential of China. China promotes widespread Internet access but utilizes filtering, monitoring, deterrence and self-censorship to achieve the desired level of control promoting the political ideas and moral values set by the Chinese government. China will continue to see exponential growth in the number of users active on the Internet and must harness the economic benefits of the Internet to continue economic growth.

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[27] http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IB98014.pdf

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[17] **People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China**
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[27] http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IB98014.pdf