

# **The Effects of China's Censorship on its Population**

Japan in Asia

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## INTRODUCTION

The external effects on people has been an area that has interested me since I took sociology and psychology in high school. People's thought processes are so fascinating to learn but what is even more fascinating, is how a small group of people have learned to control the majority. A perfect example of this is China's use of censorship as a tool to contain the outrage and discontent of a population. In China, we can observe many different tactics for maintaining the status quo of the country, but the one that I would like to focus on, is China's use of the "Carrot" and "Stick" tactic of censorship, which defined simply (I will discuss more specific examples in the paper) is the use of intimidation and rewards to balance out fear and rewards to maintain a stable level of content throughout the country.

China also uses a series of distractions to create a sense of apathy towards censorship amongst the people in the way of "I can do what I want to do, and see who I want to see, so why would I care about censorship?" sort of feeling. The biggest tool in implementing this is through the use of the internet. However, within the last couple of years, it has It is a push and pull battle between the Chinese Government and Chinese intellectuals for a push in both directions of complete compliance, and the encouragement of public speech and opinion. The main question that I wanted to answer was, What effects does China's government have on the people in terms of accessibility of information? What are positive and negative aspects of it? Is it better to have less information or all information available? How much is enough? In this paper I will briefly describe the prominent styles of censorship within China, an example of Chinese censorship and its dynamics, why China's government feels the need to censor, and how China's attempt to censor has created opportunities for the development of public speech in the Chinese population. I'll attempt to answer these questions with an analyses of case a few case studies.

## **EXAMPLES OF CHINA'S CENSORSHIP**

### **Introduction to Chinese Censorship**

Censorship has been part of China's governmental procedure since the Chinese Communist party came into power in 1949. Over the course of the CCP's time in power, it has developed a multi-layered system of censorship that goes outside of the boundaries of China. Currently, there are four main types of censorship that the CCP uses: direct action, economic "carrots" and "sticks", indirect pressure and incidents of cyber attacks and physical assaults. Direct action is the form of censorship which is carried out by Chinese diplomats, local officials, security forces, and regulators both inside and outside of China. These individuals are tasked with obstructing newsgathering, preventing publication of undesirable content, and punishing overseas media outlets that don't adhere to the restrictions set in place by the Chinese government. In terms of international media, foreign correspondents are usually stopped from carrying out their tasks by random hired thugs and local officials. The ministry of Foreign Affairs in China will delay Visa renewals as long as they possibly can and government authorities will arbitrarily block websites that they deem unfit for public scrutiny. "Carrots" and "Sticks" censorship is censorship through a mixture of rewards and punishments to maintain an equilibrium of control over the general population. In other words using a hard power intimidation factor to keep the general population in check while giving out rewards for good behavior to prevent a full scale revolt. Indirect pressure is carried out via proxies of the government through mediums such as advertisement and satellite firms, or through foreign governments who prevent publication of information that could harm the image of the CCP. Cyberattacks and physical assaults are the most aggressive forms of censorship in the Chinese arsenal. Often times, the cyberattacks and physical assaults cannot be directly traced to the Chinese

government.<sup>1</sup>

### **Tabe's Permanent Ban**

Within the last couple of years, the American-made game League of Legends has gained critical acclaim worldwide, and just last year, become a nationally recognized sport in the United States, and the most played game in the world. Every year, prize pools as high 2.5 million dollars. This last year, a Chinese team called Royal Club had made it to the world finals. While in the US, the team's captain Pak Kan Wong, or known by his in-game name Tabe, was only player on the team that could speak english. Due to his humility and all around likeable personality, he developed quite a large within the US. They ended up losing during the finals and Tabe had announced that he was going to retire from the professional league of legends scene, and try to get into commentating for professional Chinese League of Legends. A few weeks after the finals, in an interview regarding why he retired, he had said that professional players were paid an almost unlivable wage, roughly 12 thousand dollars a year, and on a few occasions said that the Chinese eSports scene as a whole was terrible. This resulted in a permanent ban in all avenues of Chinese League of Legends including, playing commentating, and coaching. The overarching idea was explained that it hurt the image of the Chinese eSports foundation as a whole.

This is typical of the Chinese government, but what makes this case so special is that due to his large following in the US and China, there is a survey going around in both the US and China asking who was in the wrong and whether or not Tabe should get his permanent ban lifted. In the survey, eighty percent on all the votes support Tabe and his choices. China does its best to censor information that they don't want to surface, but usually, if there is an overwhelming support or majority opinion in a matter, the Chinese government will usually give the people what they want. This incident suggests that

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<sup>1</sup> Cook, S. Center for International Media Assistance, (2013). *The long shadow of chinese censorship*. Retrieved from website: [http://ignucius.bd.ub.es:8180/jspui/bitstream/123456789/787/1/CIMA-China\\_Sarah\\_Cook\\_10\\_22\\_13.pdf](http://ignucius.bd.ub.es:8180/jspui/bitstream/123456789/787/1/CIMA-China_Sarah_Cook_10_22_13.pdf)

while China tries their best to keep information they don't want public a secret, they will try their best to keep peace amongst the population so long that it doesn't harm the government and it's plans. By giving the Chinese people what they want, they do two things: they quell the outcry of the people in a non-violent manner as to not paint themselves in a negative light, and to distract the people from the bigger problems within China, and cast the illusion that the Chinese people are being heard. Whether or not one Chinese citizen gets back into the eSports scene and gets his low paying wage back is nothing compared to other things on China's agenda.

### **Why Censorship? What does China have to hide?**

The main reason of censorship is to maintain a status quo that China, but why do they need to maintain that status quo? I believe that there are two main reasons to look at. One is that China wants to maintain the idea that Communism is the tried and true political ideology, and that it has no problems. So when people try to search for things like Tiananmen Square It will be blocked, or no search results will show up based on what search engine they use. I did a search on Baidu.com, one of China's most popular search portals, for Tiananmen Square Massacre. The main results that came up were about the square, but not about what happened in 1989. A couple of results came up about the massacre, which surprised me. When I clicked on them however, it had said the that the URL was unavailable (at least, that's what google translate said.)

The other reason China needs to censor information is that China is fearful of what can happen if an overwhelming amount of the population gathers. After rural communities received the internet, tens of thousands protests occurred due to the communities finding out about the corruption within the local government. Government corruption is not a new thing for China, or any other government for that matter. Corruption in China ranges from The government employing rich, wealthy elite into the CCP to

local officials embezzling money that was meant to be used to irrigate the desert areas of China. Situations like the latter semi-frequently surface to the public, which forces the government to take action. The key trigger for China to take action against itself is overwhelming public disapproval. So what can China do if censorship is becoming less viable on the population? This is a two part answer: the first is to reward people for self-censorship, predicated on the residual fear demonstrated through public examples, and the second is to create a desirable status quo by giving people just enough for them to be happy. Both of these things can be easily attained through the wonders of the internet.

## **THE STATUS QUO OF CENSORSHIP IN CHINA: RISE OF THE INTERNET**

### **Introduction**

One of the biggest dilemmas in the realm of censorship in the past couple of decades was the emergence of the internet. China's government supports the internet for the fact that it can be used as a tool for business, entertainment, education and information exchange. On the other hand, it serves as a great pain, because the vastness of information available on the internet. While China praises the internet for all the aforementioned reasons it has also "succeeded in preventing people from using the internet to organize any kind of viable political opposition."<sup>2</sup> Steve Guo aptly writes that "If left unchecked, the internet could easily turn into an outlet for the undercurrent of ideological resistance to surface, undermining the meticulously crafted veneer of social harmony."<sup>3</sup> When the Internet entered the Chinese mainstream in 1994, China utilized it in ways more than just propelling business and the like forward.

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<sup>2</sup> MacKinnon, R. (2007). Flatter world and thicker walls? blogs, censorship and civic discourse in china. *Public Choice*, (134), 31-46. Retrieved from [http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/703/art%3A10.1007%2Fs11127-007-9199-0.pdf?auth66=1386360784\\_e7bbd13e580a9ba73c9f015a378c6a4a&ext=.pdf](http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/703/art%3A10.1007%2Fs11127-007-9199-0.pdf?auth66=1386360784_e7bbd13e580a9ba73c9f015a378c6a4a&ext=.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Guo, S., & Feng, G. (2011). *Understanding support for internet censorship in china: An elaboration of the theory of reasoned action*. Informally published manuscript, Journalism, School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong. Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11366-011-9177-8/fulltext.html>

The internet was an opportunity for the Chinese government to strengthen the image of the Communist Party while censoring any sources of information that would hurt the image of the party. However, so long as it didn't start real life protests, China's government would allow bloggers to write anti-Japan and US sentiments as much as they wished<sup>4</sup> With the explosive rise in popularity of blogging from 2002 to 2006, it was getting too difficult for the Chinese government to easily find and punish bloggers that posted sensitive or undesirable information. So in 2005, the government had required all people hosting blogs to register their identities and domain names to a registration number which would be required by law to be shown on the blogger's site. This didn't end up working because people were still able to post on unregistered blog sites. As time went on, stricter regulations continued to show up, adding more variables to what one could not say under penalty of law. Post 2006, censoring sites got more costly than the Chinese government cared to spend. To deal with this problem, they outsourced this duty to all the blog-hosting businesses, which integrate censorship into their own businesses to stay on the good side of the government.<sup>5</sup>

This is what "Carrot" and "Sticks" form of censorship is. The government builds a foundation of intimidation through federal laws and regulations on what people can and can't say and laws making bloggers constantly identify themselves. They then pass on the duty of regulations to the blog sites themselves with the residual intimidation factor, which then coerces them in a way to uphold those regulations for fear of what the government might do, or in this case, to stay on the government's "good" side. By creating an air of fear just by giving a responsibility to a company and having that company have the desire to stay on the government's good side is an apt example of the skilled use of censorship to maintain the status quo in a way that is desirable to China; all without too many catastrophic hiccups

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<sup>4</sup> MacKinnon 33

<sup>5</sup> MacKinnon 38



along the way. However, in the few instances that we've noticed of China conceding to the people, is China losing its grip on the people?

### **Clive Thompson's Report of Google's Work in China**

In 2006, Clive Thompson wrote a comprehensive report for the New York Times about Google's, as well as Yahoo's and Microsoft's inception in China. He had spent a significant amount of time and interviewed several prominent people within the subculture of the internet. Around the time where Google became the worldwide superpower that it is, it looked to spread its influence abroad. He started his report by talking about the first person he interviewed. This person was Kai Fu Lee, the head of operations of Google in China, and national celebrity in China. Thompson described him as someone that could easily fill up entire university auditoriums. He reported that Lee had an optimistic outlook on Google's birth in China. Lee believed that the internet would "Level the playing field for the China's enormous rural underclass."<sup>6</sup> While censorship had lightened up during the time that Google was setting up its roots, we can definitely see China's resistance at work.

For China, the most popular part of the internet was not the search engine of Google, but online chat rooms and internet blogs. These mediums gave the Chinese people an avenue for them to voice their opinions. According to Thompson, China's chat rooms didn't start out as avenues for public opinion in terms of political opinion but rather "flame wars" about things such as sports.<sup>7</sup> China picked up on these trends and the Online search portal Baidu was created. While it gave worse search results than Google, it allowed people to make message boards based on popular searches. I believe that this was the next step for China in terms of people voicing their opinions. Like anything, learning a new skill

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson, C. (2006, April 23). Google's china problem (and china's google problem). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.d.umn.edu/~jford/phil3242/Google's China Problem \(and China's Google Problem\) - New York Times.pdf](http://www.d.umn.edu/~jford/phil3242/Google's%20China%20Problem%20and%20China's%20Google%20Problem%20-%20New%20York%20Times.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p. 3

had to take time, but China was able to greatly progress their skills in terms of public speech, even though it was about things like basketball. Baidu led to the birth of Pro-Chinese news sites like Sina and Sohu.com which blocked and removed anything that was anti-China, but left and evidence of public opinion that denounced Capitalism or democracy. I would say that this coupled with the fact that these Chinese run search engines made features that made piracy easier encourages the disregard of western law and society. China once again uses a medium that a large population of Chinese use to sort of ingrain this anti-western sentiment into the minds of the people using the internet.

In 2002 Google went offline in China and was suspected that Baidu was the cause. Thompson said that while there is no official verdict of the reason why China pulled the plug, he said that his inside sources in China suggested that Baidu may have used Google to search for hundreds of blacklisted words, compiled them into a list and took it to the Chinese government as proof that Google was undermining Chinese authority. In this case, Google's termination in China is another demonstration of China's "no tolerance" policy when it comes to undermining the Chinese government. Things were getting out of hand for the Chinese government in term of China censoring everything. So as mentioned in the introductory paragraph of this section, China started outsourcing the responsibility to the Internet portals that hosted the search engines and chat rooms. This is where the "Carrot" and "Stick" version of censorship come into play. At the Internet Society for China annual award ceremony, they give away plaques to 10 companies for excellence in self censorship. Thompson reported that a source of his, an American businessman, had described censorship as a "benevolent police function".<sup>8</sup> Here we have the carrot. The reward that encourages people to continue to do what they're doing. However the rewards alone can't keep the internet firms on the right path. Thompson also reported that another one his

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid p. 5

sources had been working as a public assistant for a firm when the Chinese police came into the office and dragged the C.E.O into a conference room and berated him for not censoring some things that he should have censored. The sources described that the man was white with fear after the fact. Thompson offers some interesting insight into the matter:

As a result, Internet executives in China most likely censor far more material than they need to. The Chinese system relies on a classic psychological truth: self-censorship is always far more comprehensive than formal censorship. By having each private company assume responsibility for its corner of the Internet, the government effectively outsources the otherwise unmanageable task of monitoring the billions of e-mail messages, news stories and chat postings that circulate every day in China. The government's preferred method seems to be to leave the companies guessing, then to call up occasionally with angry demands that a Web page be taken down in 24 hours. "It's the panopticon," says James Mulvenon, a China specialist who is the head of a Washington policy group called the Center for Intelligence Research and Analysis. "There's a randomness to their enforcement, and that creates a sense that they're looking at everything."<sup>9</sup>

China attempts to make a balance of both intimidation and reward to keep the internet guessing, and try extra hard to stay on the good side of the government. What is interesting is that a good population of the people of China know that all these things are censored, but not very many of them care. A series of Chinese businessmen paralleled Chinese censorship to American censorship in the way that there are many things that are taboo to talk about in the United States. As far as I know, there is not a network of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid p. 6

bureaus that devotes all its time to censoring the Internet. I will make a concession statement and admit that there are people that monitor what we do on the internet. However, these people monitoring the continuous use of buzzwords, and don't monitor every individual in the United States. Most people aren't that important.

## CONCLUSION

The second most recurring motif of Thompson's report is that the Chinese people know about the censorship that the government puts in place, but doesn't really mind it. There is the general idea that as long as people can access the music, movies or games that they want to play, the status quo of things is maintained. I can't say that this is too different from other places in the western world. Of course, while countries like the US are allowed to protest, there is such a miniscule amount of organization that actually does something the current social issues within the country. Granted, this is more than China does, mainly based on the fact that China has ingrained a fear within its people to act out against the government. With things like piracy being so easy in China, it creates a nice blanket of distraction to put over the bed of gradual suggestion that censorship is a good thing. Things like the national self-censorship awards are just another method of reinforcing the fact that censorship is something that is worth keeping around. However, I believe that a seed has been planted in the garden of social movement. Thompson mentioned that the Chinese government harshly quells any spark of political action or call for organization, but tends to leave public speech alone. He suggests that there will not be one person that leads the revolution to free information, but rather continuous, daily public speech.<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, it has become apparent that China is steadily losing its grasp on the people.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid p. 13

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