Is the Internet Changing China, or Is China Changing the Internet?

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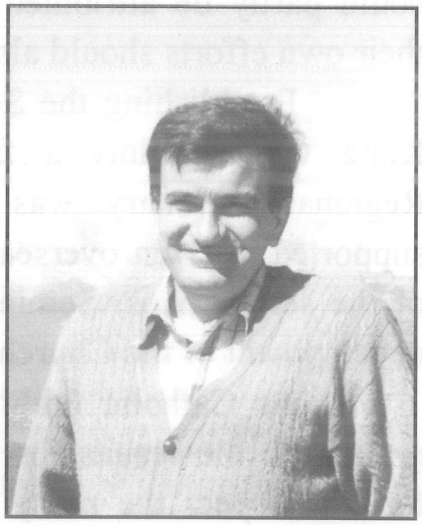

For years many people have been saying that the Internet would change China. But, up to now, just the opposite is true: it is China that has changed the Internet. This was confirmed on February 15, 2006, when four Internet providers: Yahoo, Microsoft, Google and Cisco were called before the Committee for International Relations of the United States Congress. Tom Lantos, a Democrat and a Holocaust survivor, summarized the feelings of his colleagues as follows: "Your repugnant activities in China are shameful. I cannot understand how the heads of your organizations can sleep at night." When these groups justified their actions by saying that they had to obey local laws, the members of the Congressional committee objected, saying they were no better than firms like IBM that had actively collaborated with the Nazi regime.

Giant net providers under accusation

Since May 2004, 81 persons have been arrested in China for expressing political opinions on the Internet. This is the largest number of any country in the entire world. China is also the country with the most efficient system of E-mail interception and Internet

censorship, thanks to the technology sold to China by Cisco and Microsoft, and to the collaboration of Yahoo and Google. During the confrontations Christopher Smith, one of the American congressman, said, "Men and women are sent to the gulag and tortured, as a direct result of the information you have given to Chinese officials."

Up to that time the heads of the multinational corporations had failed to give an account of their collaboration with the Beijing government. Last November Yahoo handed over to the Chinese police and to their prisons, at least four young cyber-dissidents. They also ignored the politely worded invitation from the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents Club to come to that venue to discuss the difficulties of operating freely in China.

Li Zhi, 35, a civil servant, was confined to 8 years of imprisonment for having criticized local officials (Dazhou, Sichuan Province) for corruption in a group discussion on the Internet. Li Zhi had also been in contact with another dissident on the Internet, Xie Wanjun, who had tried to set up a democratic party in China. The sentencing took place in December 2003, but it was only on February 8, 2006 that Yahoo's decisive role in the sentencing was revealed with the reading of the text of the sentence.

The second unfortunate Yahoo client was Shi Tao, 37 years old, a journalist and poet from Changsha, Hunan Province. He is serving a 10-year prison sentence imposed in 2005. According to information from "Reporters without Frontiers," Shi Tao is being held in a maximum-security prison in Chishan (Hunan), undergoing a regimentation of particularly rigorous hard labor. He is living with sick prisoners, and he himself is presently suffering from pneumonia and a skin infection.

The other two dissidents are Jiang Lijun, sentenced to four years in prison in 2003 for writing a series of pro-democracy articles, and Wang Xiaoming, sentenced the same year to ten years in prison. In articles sent from his e-mail address he had called China an 'authoritarian dictatorship,' and had advocated the establishment of a multi-party political system and free elections.

A painful haggle

Here I would like to record the embarrassing and disturbing exchange between the American congressman, Tom Lantos, and Michael Callahan, Yahoo's general counselor, during a tense hearing in Congress on February 15, 2006:

Lantos: Has anyone in your companies reached out to these families and asked if you could be of any help to them?

Yahoo: Congressman, we have expressed our strong views on this subject to the Chinese government.

Lantos: No, have you reached out to the families offering assistance?

Yahoo: We have expressed our condemnation of the persecution of this person (Shi Tao). We have expressed our views to the Chinese government. And we believe that the best way to handle this is as a government-to-government issue.

Lantos: Have you reached out to the family?

Yahoo: We have approached the Chinese government on this issue, and we look forward to working with the United States government.

Lantos: Have you reached out to the families of the people who are in prison?

Yahoo: Congressman, we believe the best way to address this issue is to focus on…

Lantos: I can ask you 10 more times if you refuse to answer it. You are under oath. Have you reached out to the families?

Yahoo: We have not reached out to the families.

Lantos: That was my question.

Yahoo's defense

Yahoo's line of reasoning cannot be defended either morally or legally. In fact, Yahoo and its president, Jerry Yang, say that they are only obeying the law. Yahoo's legal seat in China is in Hong Kong, in that the juridical name of the company is Yahoo! Hong Kong Ltd. The protection of the personal data of the electronic mail of the American company is also located in Hong Kong, and is the same as for the rest of the world.

Protest voices even came from the interior of China. For example, Liu Xiaobo, president of the Chinese section of PEN International (the oldest organization for writers' rights), is one of the best-known Chinese dissidents, who has been arrested many times, and is always under surveillance. On October 7, 2005, he wrote a long, spirited letter to Jerry Yang, president of Yahoo, bitterly condemning "the complicity of Yahoo" with the Chinese regime. This document, was published last October in *Guancha* (*Observation*), the Chinese dissident review in the United States, and in the review *Micromega* (No. 2, 2006, pp. 65-75) in Italy. On May 1, 2005, five independent Chinese writers, Yu Jie, Lao Cun, Bei Cun, Yu Shicun and Wang Yi jointly wrote an open letter of protest and support for Shi Tao.

The loss of reputation for these Internet giants is considerable, even if the awareness of the gravity of their behavior reaches only a small group of people. For this reason the campaigns to boycott these companies' products, especially Yahoo's, have increased and won support.

An important international group of China specialists representing many sectors of the academic world, of communication, of cooperation, and of labor rights recently (end of March 2006) sent Yahoo the following letter:

> Long ago we created a WEB page and a mailing list using Yahoo. Now, we have taken on a different server, a non-commercial one. We did this because we object to your collaboration with China in the identification of dissidents; some of these are now in prison. We do not accept your explanation, that it is only a matter of

business. You could have refused to collaborate, and if necessary, refused the contract. Would you have collaborated with the Nazis to identify Anne Frank?

The mega contracts between the big electronic communications company and the Chinese government constitute one of the worst dangers and obstacles to freedom. We are in the presence of a gigantic manipulation, whose victims, in great part, do not have the means to know what is going on. It is schizophrenic that on the one hand freedom is exalted even to justifying a wrongful, tragic war, with no end in sight; and on the other hand, condoning the alliance of powerful economists with dictatorial regimes to reinforce repressive technology.

Intellectual repression

The fact that censorship and repression have not diminished, but are more frequent *and* sophisticated is the result of other examples of serious intellectual repression. On February 22, 2006, in Beijing, the police arrested Hao Wu, a director of documentaries, and a frequent contributor to the blog, *Global Voices,* an association of bloggers (writers of blogs) belonging to *Reporters without Frontiers*. Hao Wu, who writes in English, having spent ten years in the United States, was arrested when he was participating in a meeting with members of an unofficial Protestant church, on whom he was preparing a document.

In January 2006, the *Bingdian* (Freezing Point) review, a weekly supplement to the *China Youth Daily,* was suppressed following the publication of a long article of a historical character, signed by Yuan Weishi. Accompanying this was a courageous editorial by the director Li Datong, later dismissed together with the editor in chief, Lu Yuegang. The two defended the right to publish "non politically correct" opinions.

The article was particularly encouraging in that it proposed a re-reading of the period in modern Chinese history that resulted in the Boxer Revolt. It touched particularly, on the negative aspect of

the works of the Boxers, no longer considered as "patriotic champions," but rather as fanatic enemies of progress. Author Yuan Weishi acknowledged that the Boxers massacred thousands of innocent Christians with the complicity of some cruel officials of the Qing government, interested in using the furor created by the Boxers for their own political advantage. The reader was also impressed by the author's request to free history textbooks from nationalistic rhetoric. According to Yuan, such rhetoric has caused much harm to the nation. History, the author noted, should be studied objectively.

The violent polemics of the government and the Chinese media against John Paul II's canonization of 120 China martyrs (October 1, 2000) were the result of a nationalistic and ideologically biased reading of the events that led to the Boxer Revolt, an interpretation put under severe scrutiny in the *Bingdian* article condemned by the authorities. Following this incident, 13 intellectuals linked to the communist party wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Wen Jiabao stressing that the suppression of the freedom of research carries great danger for the country, hindering its modernization. Unfortunately, the closure of this review is not an isolated case: in 2005, some 79 newspapers were suppressed and millions of copies of illegal books were confiscated.

Intellectual ferment

The incidents mentioned above raise fears and call us to serious reflection. They are evidence of the intellectual restlessness in a segment of Chinese society now confronting official ideology. The most recent issues of *Mondo et Missione* have highlighted another element of novelty and change: the large number of party members that are affiliated to religions.

Letters of protest to the authorities, the publication of articles critical of official history, the attempts to give space to the press and the Internet for free debate are hopeful signs: Not all have immersed themselves in the economic frenzy and nationalistic

rhetoric. There is an intellectual minority developing autonomously outside the dictates of the regime. This alternative cultural world is not developing thanks to the regime, or to its silent assent. Rather, it grows in spite of the regime and its repression, a repression that unfortunately succeeds in minimizing the capabilities and the effects of dissent.

Return to ideology

The communist regime is on the alert and has equipped itself to rebut innovative thrusts point by point. The authorities do not intend to inaugurate anytime soon an era of liberty and of civil rights. More attentive observers have noted that in the last year the problem of human rights has worsened. And to the surprise of quite a few commentators, the political leadership has seriously brought ideological discourse back into circulation, and again has set about discussing the connection between Chinese socialism and the market economy. The advocates of an ideological reaffirmation of the primacy of socialism have, after 15 years of marginalization, made a remarkable comeback. There was a clear echo of this at the Assembly of the National People's Congress in March 2006, when a law in favor of private property was blocked for ideological reasons.

This law could have helped in protecting the rights of small property holders, especially, peasants, who see officials confiscating their property without scruples, and compensating them with paltry sums. But this same property, after falling into the hands of "developers," yields immense riches. Because of this massive thievery on the part of officials of the communist party, thousands of popular revolts have taken place. There were some 87,000 of these in 2005 alone, an amazing number! Suppressing these protests, which constitute China's most serious incidents of social instability, sometimes end up in bloodshed. This was the case in Dongzhou, near Shanwei (Guangdong Province) in December 2005, when several persons died. The recent cases of the beating of the Sisters

in Xi'an and the priests in Tianjin fall within this context. Thanks to resumption of the ideology against private property, the robbed victims have little legal possibility of defending their rights.

Restore Marxism

Last November (2005) the government launched the *Marxist Theory and Construction Project.* After 20 years of focusing on justifying the introduction of a market economy, the government has decided that unlimited funds would be made available for the renewal of Marxism. All sectors of the country are involved in this massive campaign to re-establish the fundamental ideological concepts of the Marxist doctrine. The plan envisions the involvement of 3000 academics in the selection of more than 100 Marxist books, the Chinese translation of international Marxist literature, and the organization of international meetings on Marxist thought. Research institutes must form a new set of intellectual Marxists. Meanwhile it has been emphatically confirmed that all university students must attend classes in Marxism. Students must also pass an examination in Marxism before being admitted to university,

In March 2006, Hu Jintao, in his capacity as Secretary General of the Communist Party, published an eight point ethical code, in a Maoist style, in which citizens are invited to practice virtuous social behavior. The novelty about the maxims of the Maoist political campaign is in the schema of the formula. "The commandments," are first expressed positively, and then negatively. For example, the most famous Maoist maxim, "Serve the People," becomes "Serve the people, and do not disserve the people." Such updating reflects the need to correct the corrupt behavior of public officials, and of the need for "re-education." It seems that Hu's code of civic morality is part of his plan to provide serious content to Marxist rhetoric, and is his recipe for opposing the corrupt drift of the party and of society.

Rhetoric and repression

The obvious contradiction between economic capitalism and communism has not surfaced at all, nor are there any signs of an approaching crisis. On the contrary, the power group is safely in command of politics, the economy, the army and mass communications. Potentially dangerous crises are managed and overcome successfully, wherever they happen, with ruthless repression. This has been the case with the Falungong, Tibet, various dissenters, and at times also with leaders of the underground church.

Control and repression are concentrated on confronting groups and individuals capable of thinking independently. Methods are more specific and sophisticated, but are no less effective. Intellectuals, artists, journalists, lawyers, political and human rights activists, religious groups not regulated by the power structure are kept under strict control. With its powerful propaganda machine, the regime plays the nationalism card by denigrating dissident groups and individuals. Dissidents are labeled as "troublemakers," lacking love for the country, and as being corrupted by foreign influences.

In China the repressive system is healthy because the instruments that uphold the entire dictatorship: propaganda, and the secret police, are still fully functioning. Propaganda appeases the masses and the secret police take care of discovering and repressing dissidents. And the internet, as the press, radio and television formerly did, has become a useful instrument for this purpose.

Panem et circenses (Bread and Circuses)

Unfortunately, most Internet users are not aware of the censoring and filtering devices. In these cases, Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft are the sources. The regime wins its battles before fighting them, such as in the case of the prestigious British BBC. The BBC web page, both English and Chinese, is blacked out by Chinese censorship. Still, the giant British media has decided to set

foot in the Chinese electronic market. The BBC has, therefore, launched a new Web site, in English and in Chinese, (www.bbcchina.com.cn) without any tie or link with its own official site. And Beijing this time has no objection: the site excludes, from the outset, all discussion and considered objectionable to the regime. The BBC affirms that with its 'lively and attractive' (but absolutely innocuous) product, it intends to attract young Chinese interested in learning English.

We cannot expect young Chinese navigating the net to worry about censorship filters as they search for alternative information. The Internet has not only become an instrument of propaganda, but above all, an instrument of relaxation and of distraction for the masses. In the numerous crowded internet-cafes throughout all of China, the great majority of the users are now mostly involved in playing exciting video games. Is this not a case of *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses)?