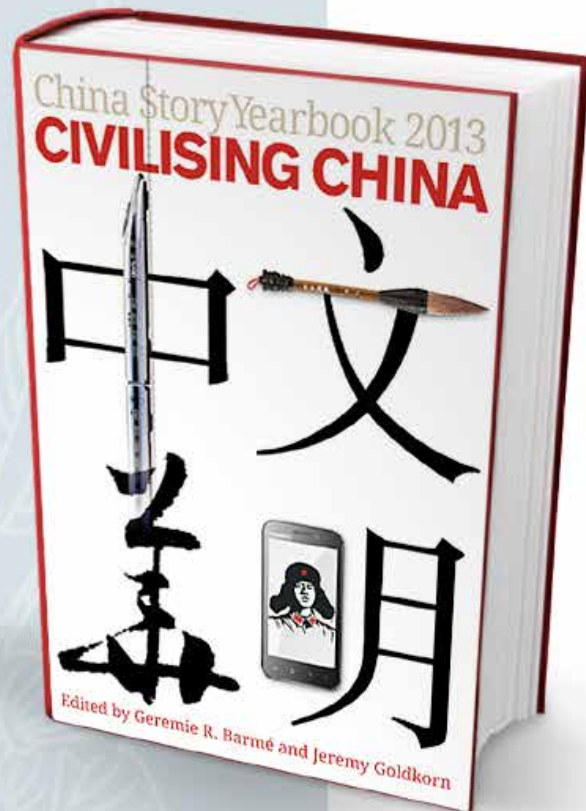


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CHAPTER 6

CHINA'S INTERNET – A CIVILISING PROCESS

Jeremy Goldkorn

Excerpt from

CHINA STORY YEARBOOK 2013

CIVILISING CHINA

文明中华

EDITED BY

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As China becomes wealthier and more confident on the global stage, it also expects to be respected and accommodated as a major global force — and as a formidable civilisation. Through a survey and analysis of China's regional posture, urban change, social activism and law, mores, the Internet, history and thought — in which the concept of 'civilising' plays a prominent role — *China Story Yearbook 2013* offers insights into the country today and its dreams for the future.



Chinese football fans, Guiyang, June 2011.
Source: ImagineChina

6

8月
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2

CHINA'S INTERNET – A CIVILISING PROCESS

Jeremy Goldkorn

17 DECEMBER 2012



BEIJING
EAST
DISTRICT

北京

A scene of a street worker, Chui Jiaozhao, breathing on his partner's hands to warm them after she's been shovel-ling snow goes viral online.



SLOGANS, RHETORIC and management techniques introduced during the Civilised Internet (*wenming banwang* 文明办网) campaign of 2006 have had a lasting influence on the way China manages the Internet, and how the party-state defines what it means to be civilised online. This chapter traces a history of China's Civilised Internet; it looks backs to the rise of blogging and social media a decade ago to illuminate events surrounding the online world in 2012 and 2013.



Part I: Origins of the Civilised Internet

There's a base line for social ethics, and the patience of the public has a limit. If you do not learn to cherish freedom, if you do not learn to respect the rules of society, then in the days to come it may be difficult to avoid external regulation. If bloggers that hurt others at every turn are not alerted to this fact and act responsibly, if they insist on someone else taking out their garbage, then they may well find that there's no place for them anymore.

—from a *People's Daily* editorial published as part of the 2006 Civilised Internet Campaign

THE INTERNET LANDSCAPE

According to a January 2013 report by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the agency responsible for Internet affairs under China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, at the end of 2012 China boasted 564 million Internet users — more than twice the cyber-population of the United States. The typical Chinese Internet user is young (54.4 percent are aged ten to twenty-nine), a student (25.1 percent), urban (72.4 percent), male (55.8 percent) and is on a low-to-no-income (53.2 percent earn 0–2,000 yuan per month).

Most Chinese treat the Internet as a social portal, using it primarily for social applications such as instant messaging, blogging, gaming and social networking, while more traditional applications, such as email and forums have gone into rapid decline. Of particular interest is micro-blogging, which, as we noted in the 2012 *Yearbook*, has become very popular among Chinese as a social media platform. The leading social media sites in China are Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, each with around 200–300 million users. Sina Weibo serves especially well as a barometer of current discussion in China.

Tencent's WeChat mobile messaging app has taken off rapidly since its launch in 2011. In early 2013, the company claimed that the service had 300 million users and was continuing to grow. QQ, the original instant messaging platform that Tencent launched in 1998, still has around 380 million registered users. However, while they have massive user numbers by the standards of any other country, Facebook-like social media sites such as Renren (100 million followers) and Kaixin (forty million followers) have failed to achieve the same level of popularity as microblogs.

Accessing the Internet via desktop or laptop computers remains common practice. But the use of mobile devices has exploded in recent years, following the proliferation of Google's Android and cheaper Chinese smartphones, as well as iPads and other tablet computers in which a mobile phone SIM card can be installed. In 2013, for the first time, 388.3 million Chinese used mobile devices to access the web — more than any other platform.

E-commerce is also growing rapidly in China, with 242 million shoppers spending US\$40.6 trillion annually. The most popular online purchases are electronics and clothing from sites such as Taobao, TMall and Jing Dong.

Information Upchucking and Erudite Guests

In April 1999, Peter Merholz, a web designer in Oakland, California, coined the word 'blog' on his personal website. He later wrote: 'I like that it's roughly onomatopoeic of vomiting. These sites (mine included!) tend to be a kind of information upchucking.' A few months later, a US software company named Pyra released Blogger.com, a website that allowed users to publish blogs easily and without payment. The number of bloggers grew exponentially, particularly in North America. In China people were taking note.

The Chinese Internet

- By end of June 2013: 591 million Internet users (44.1% of total population); 464 million connect via mobile devices
- 26.56 million people went online for the first time in the first half of 2013. Instant messaging netizens hit 497 million, increasing by 29.31 million in the first half of 2013. 397 million used instant messaging via mobile, increasing by 45.2 million in the first half of 2013
- Online payment users reached 244 million, increasing by 23.73 million in the first half of the year, with a growth rate of 10.8%. Specifically, the number of mobile phone online payment users rose by forty-three percent over the year 2012

The Internet and Media Censorship in China

- Any new website in China must obtain an ICP licence, which is granted by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT).
- Apart from MIIT, Internet content is subject to regulation by a number of other overlapping state organisations:
 - General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP)
 - State Administration of Radio, Film and TV (SARFT)
 - Ministry of Culture
 - State Council Information Office
 - Central Publicity Department of the Party (a.k.a. Central Propaganda Department).



Internet users at a public library in Shenzhen.
Photo: Robert Scoble

Fang Binxing and the Great Firewall

On 27 June 2013, fifty-three year-old Fang Binxing, President of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications (*Beijing youdian daxue* 北京邮电大学), delivered a speech to students in which he said he was resigning due to poor health. A transcript of the speech was posted to the Internet; it attracted thousands of angry comments on social media sites, cursing Fang and wishing him a swift demise. The ill-wishers were not former students unhappy with his stewardship of the University. They were Internet users enraged by government censorship. They knew Fang as the 'Father of China's Great Firewall' for his work on the blocking and filtering system that denies the country's Internet users access to a number of foreign websites and web pages.



Fang Binxing.
Source:
Ifeng.com

Fang began his career as an academic after earning his PhD in computer science at the Harbin Institute of Technology (*Harbin gongye daxue* 哈尔滨工业大学) in 1989. His work on the Great Firewall began in 1999 when he was appointed Deputy Chief Engineer of the National Internet Emergency Response Centre (*Guojia hulanwang yingji zhongxin* 国家互联网应急中心) — a shadowy government organisation that became responsible for developing key components of the Great Firewall. Fang was clearly talented: just one year later he was appointed Chief Engineer and Director of the Centre, and the following year he received what media reports call a 'special allowance' from the State Council (*Guowuyuan teshu jintie* 国务院特殊津贴), presumably for his work on Internet censorship.

An interview with Fang published in the English-language *Global Times* in February 2011 noted that 'he confirms he was head designer for key parts of the Great Firewall reportedly launched in 1998 but that came online about 2003.' By 2007, when he left the National Internet Emergency Response Centre, the technology behind the Great Firewall as it functions today was firmly in place. That year, he worked as 'information security special advisor to the Ministry of Public Security' according to the *Global Times*, and also took up his position at the Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications. His leadership at the University exposed him to the public gaze, which is when the online abuse against him started.

The first major Internet mob action against Fang was in December 2010, when he tried to open a microblog account on Sina Weibo. Relentless waves of criticism, often written in violent language, led him to delete the account within a few days. In his February 2011 *Global Times* interview, he said: 'I regard the dirty abuse as a sacrifice for my country ... They can't get what they want so they need to blame someone emotionally: like if you fail to get a US visa and you slag off the US visa official afterwards.' He was unrepentant of his role, and while he refused to divulge to the *Global Times* anything about the technology behind the Great Firewall, he made a number of revealing statements:

I have six VPNs [Virtual Private Networks] on my home computer ... but I only try them to test which side wins: the GFW or the VPN ...

I'm not interested in reading messy information like some of that anti-government stuff ...

... It's a ceaseless war between the GFW and VPNs.

So far, the GFW is lagging behind and still needs improvement.

The situation is better described as traffic control.

Drivers just obey the rules and so citizens should just play with what they have.

Not all citizens want to play with what they have: in May 2011, during a speech Fang gave at Wuhan University's School of Computer Science, a student threw eggs and shoes at him. Online, anonymous commentators offered a reward to the shoe and egg thrower. After that, Fang stayed out of the limelight until he made his retirement speech.



Isaac Mao.
Source:
Aftenposten.no



Fang Xindong.
Source:
Sina.com

On 5 August 2002, an Internet entrepreneur named Isaac Mao launched a website at isaacmao.com, announcing in English: 'From today, I'm stepping into the blogosphere' — a simple statement that earned him the reputation as China's first blogger. The same month, another Chinese technology entrepreneur by the name of Fang Xingdong launched a company called BlogChina.com. The company coined a new term, *boke* 博客, the Chinese equivalent of 'blog'. *Boke* is derived from the word '*bo*' as found in the expression *yuanbo* 渊博 (learned or erudite) and *ke* 客, usually translated as 'guest' but also a reference to *heike* 黑客, literally 'dark guest', a transliteration of 'hacker', and so signifying someone who does something shady online. When Twitter-like services started in China, a natural translation was *weibo* 微博, short for *weixing boke* 微型博客, literally 'microblog'. Fang's term *boke* has stood the test of time, but one wonders if he is as idealistic about the medium today as he was then:

We hope that blogging culture can guide China's transformation to become a knowledge society, and that the care shown by bloggers can bring about an era of responsibility.

Back on the other side of the Pacific, in late 2002, US newspaper editors and columnists still routinely derided bloggers as self-obsessed nerds (often caricatured as fat, pyjama-wearing men in basements or pimply youths in their bedrooms), unaware that the newspaper industry was about to face its greatest challenge, thanks in no small part to blogging and other nascent forms of social media.

In January 2003, perhaps proving that Chinese Communist Party officials can be more perceptive than American newspaper editors, China's Great Firewall blocked Blogger.com. In February, Google acquired Blogger.com and the word blog was assured its place in the English lexicon.

SARS, *Southern Weekly* and Sex

Before the blocking of Blogger.com, a small but very active blogging community of several thousand early-adopter geek types had come into being in China. Several companies started to offer blog platforms, including Blogcn.com, Blogdriver.com and Blogbus.com. But blogging remained a minority interest, and government regulators did not interfere much with new local blog companies, which were small, with low user numbers.

Blogs came to China at a time when the information landscape was changing rapidly. The high point of these changes was in 2003, although they had been a decade in the making. In the late 1990s, the General Administration of Press and Publications (*Xinwen chubansongshu* 新闻出版总署) started cutting subsidies to newspapers and periodicals, demanding that they become profitable businesses. This meant that periodicals had to make money from either readers or advertisers. One effect was the rapid increase in the numbers of fashion and lifestyle magazines. These courted brand-name advertisers wanting to sell cars, clothes, gadgets, lotions and potions to newly cashed-up Chinese consumers who were enjoying their second decade of economic growth since the advent of Deng Xiaoping's policy of Reform and Opening Up in the late 1970s. But for newspapers, a better business model (in addition to selling advertising space) was to make money from readers buying or subscribing to the paper. For these publications, the only way to stand out was to publish interesting stories rather than party pabulum. For many provincial city newspapers, this meant

either tabloid sensationalism or 'service journalism' (that is, telling readers where to bank, shop and consume). Some papers, however, saw an opportunity to stand out by giving readers real news and analysis rather than propaganda or lifestyle fluff.

The Southern Group of newspapers was one such organisation. Although owned and controlled by the Guangdong provincial government, since the 1990s, the Southern Group has nurtured a generation of idealistic editors and journalists who have

The issue of *Southern Weekly* of 25 April 2003 with the Sun Zhigang report.
Source: nfmmedia.com



seen their role as speaking truth to power. Their work is published across several different papers and magazines, including the *Southern Weekly* (*Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末) and *Southern Metropolis Daily* (*Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报).

In April 2003, the *Southern Weekly* published a daring investigative report about a young migrant named Sun Zhigang, who was beaten to death while in police custody in Guangzhou. The report is widely believed to have been the single most important factor leading to the end of the 'custody and repatriation' (*shourong qiansong* 收容遣送) policy established in 1982. Under this system, the police could detain people in cities if they did not have a local residence or temporary residency permit (*hukou* 户口 or *zanzhuzheng* 暂住证 respectively), and force them to return to the place specified in their *hukou*, usually their village of birth. On 20 June 2003, then Premier Wen Jiabao announced the abolition of custody and repatriation procedures, effective from 1 August. Many observers saw this as a victory for media outspokenness and the freedom of expression.

The *Southern Weekly* also made a name for itself around this time for its reporting on the spread of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) virus. Initially, the authorities had covered up the threat of the virus despite warnings from the World Health Organization about its potential impact on the public. On 4 April 2003, Jiang Yanyong, the chief physician at the No. 301 Military Hospital in Beijing, emailed a letter to Chinese Central Television (CCTV) and Phoenix TV, a marginally more independent broadcaster officially based in Hong Kong. He accused the authorities of under-reporting the numbers of people infected with SARS and concealing the severity of the situation. Neither TV station reported on Jiang's letter, but the text was leaked to the foreign media. On 8 April, *Time* magazine published a translation of Jiang's letter, deeply embarrassing the Chinese government. This led, on 21 April, to the resignations of both the Mayor of Beijing and the Minister of Public Health. Many commentators believed



Sun Zhigang.
Source:
Sina.com



Jiang Yanyong.
Source:
Freeweibo.com



Official SARS and bird flu squad in Beijing, 9 April 2013.
Photo: G. Yulong

that the SARS scandal would have a long-term impact on the government's handling of the media and Internet regulation. Although it did not break the story, the *Southern Weekly* aggressively reported on it and the government's handling of the crisis.

The SARS outbreak was the first test for the new leadership duo of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao appointed by the Sixteenth National Party Congress in November 2002. Despite the initial cover-up, when the new administration did finally react in mid-April, its actions were both transparent and highly effective. Media reports expressed the hope that the government had learned a lesson about openness.

It was in this environment of a perceived loosening of media controls that blogging went mainstream in China. If one can pin down a date that blogs 'arrived' in the People's Republic, it would be 19 June 2003. On that day, Li Li, a journalist working for a glossy magazine in Guangzhou, started a blog about her sex life on Blogchina.com under the pseudonym Muzi Mei. On 5 August, she published a post about a clumsy coupling with the well-known rock musician Wang Lei in an alley behind a bar. The blog post went viral, generating editorials in newspapers across the country that lamented the declining morals of the nation's youth. Every journalist and newspaper editor now knew about blogging.

Unlike their contemporaries in the Western media, who still tended to see blogs as either a threat to their livelihoods or the self-obsessed ranting of individuals, engaged Chinese journalists, who had long been subject to the restrictions imposed on the official media, took to blogging with enthusiasm. At long last, they could publish what they wanted with no interference from censors or editors. Sometimes their stories would be wiped from the Internet almost as soon as they were published (even then small blog companies had to self-censor if they wanted to stay in business), but there was at least some chance that readers would see and circulate the texts before they disappeared.

Although the state media had criticised Muzi Mei's sex blog, online many voices were raised in support. Some applauded her as a feminist visionary, others in the technology industry admired her for being an authentic creature of the Internet. The scandal cost her magazine job, but she was not subjected to any legal persecution or harassment from the authorities. She signed a book deal with a Hong Kong publisher and soon found a new job working for BlogChina.com — the same platform that had originally published her tales of sex.



Muzi Mei.
Source: Xinhua



Wang Lei.
Source: Soundcloud.com

A Slightly More Open Society

Tolerance for Muzi Mei elicited optimism about the openness of the Chinese media. Many commentators and business people within China as well as outside argued that the upcoming 2008 Beijing Olympic Games would force the Chinese government to be more open and transparent by encouraging more liberal information policies. Chinese news media appeared to be flourishing.

On 11 November 2003, a newspaper called *The Beijing News* (*Xinjing bao* 新京报) was launched as a joint venture between the Guangming Press Group and the Southern Group. Cheng Yizhong, the editor responsible for the reporting on the Sun Zhigang scandal earlier in the year, headed up the editorial team. The first issue of *The Beijing News* featured a large photograph of former US President Bill Clinton embracing an HIV-positive boy. The following month, *Menbox* (*Shishang junzi* 时尚君子), China's first openly gay glossy magazine, appeared on newsstands. The magazine was produced in partnership with the prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

Globally and in China, the years 2004 to 2006 were a boom time for social media that gave ordinary people extraordinary powers to publish and broadcast their views. This was when the meaningful (albeit annoying) expression 'Web 2.0' came into use to describe the switch from large companies such as Yahoo! offering their services top down, like a newspaper publisher, to a model where Internet users themselves create, upload and share their own text, photographs and videos. The photo-sharing site Flickr.com launched in 2004, swiftly followed by Chinese clone Yupoo.com. Facebook.com was founded in 2004; a Chinese clone Xiaonei.com (later renamed Renren.com) went live in 2005. YouTube was launched in February 2005, and the Chinese video sharing site Tudou.com came online in April of the same year. Blogging websites proliferated.

In October 2005, Sina.com launched its own blogging platform. Sina itself had been created as a 'portal' website modelled on Yahoo.com in 1996, and had become one of China's dominant Internet companies, with a repu-



Cheng Yizhong.
Source: UNESCO



Inaugural issue of *The Beijing News* on 11 November 2003.
Source: *The Beijing News*



Menbox, China's first gay oriented magazine.
Source: iBoysky.com

tation for lively news coverage. Whereas the existing blog hosts were all small, underfunded start-ups, Sina was the first major compa-

ny to launch a blogging service. Sina invited and sometimes paid celebrities to blog on the new platform. One of these, the actress Xu Jinglei, by publishing a mix of snapshots from her A-list celebrity life and details of her daily goings on that made her seem like the girl next door, soon became the most popular blogger in China. The novelist and race car driver Han Han began blogging on Sina and went on to become one of the country's most prominent writers, gaining a reputation as a caustic social critic. Han Han's rise from relative obscurity to international fame — essentially because of a blog which was often critical of the establishment — was emblematic of the heady possibilities that blogging seemed to offer.

On 5 and 6 November 2005, a group of more than a hundred Internet entrepreneurs, coders and geeks, led by Isaac Mao (see above), met in Shanghai for the first annual CNBloggerCon, or Chinese Bloggers Conference. The conference would convene in a different city every year until 2009. Rebecca MacKinnon, a former Beijing bureau chief for CNN and a scholar of the Internet, was at the conference. She blogged the following:



Xu Jinglei.
Source: Dianying.com



Rebecca MacKinnon.
Source: Internet-dagarna.com

Isaac Mao in his opening keynote talked about the power of many small voices. On the web, 'everybody is somebody.' What's more, Chinese web users are increasingly reacting to events taking place in their lives, in real time, online. 'We are all grassroots. We are all small voices,' he says. 'The combination of all these small voices will make our society smarter.'

Human Flesh Search Engine (*renrou sousuo yinqing* 人肉搜索引擎)

'Human flesh search engine', or simply 'human flesh search', refers to collective efforts by Chinese Internet users to answer questions or search for information about specific people, combining online searches with information obtained offline and posting the results publicly. Most often the objective is to identify individuals suspected of official corruption or questionable social conduct. What frequently prompts these searches, which sometimes become Internet witch-hunts, are photos circulated on social media sites of someone misbehaving. The government seems to tolerate human flesh searches directed against lower-level local officials: punching bags that help relieve popular frustration and discontent. Critics of human flesh searches worry that the phenomenon is a return to the type of public shaming and scapegoating that typified the Maoist era of mass politics and victimisation.

An Overview of Human Flesh Searches

The term was coined in 2001 as the name of a forum on Mop.com — a discussion website popular with Internet users in their teens and early twenties. The forum was intended to allow Internet users to post and answer trivia questions. But the phrase began to take on its current meaning in the last few months of 2001 when a user of the Mop.com forum posted a photograph of a beautiful woman and claimed it was his girlfriend. This aroused the suspicions of other Mop visitors. They discovered that the girl was in fact a model named Chen Ziyao, and they posted her information and photos of her modelling activities as evidence.

The first human flesh search that Chinese and Western news media covered was the 2006 'kitten-killer' incident. Photographs and a video surfaced on the Internet showing a woman in stilettos crushing a kitten to death with her heels. Internet vigilantes worked together to locate the upload server, and identify the location shown in the images. The manhunt was of such a scale and intensity that it immediately became of a topic of interest to national print and

broadcast news media as well. Within six days of the video being posted, the woman was identified, apparently by acquaintances, as Wang Jue. The triumphant searchers published her phone number, address and employer — a hospital where she worked as a nurse. The hospital fired her, and the website of the government of her native Luobei county in Heilongjiang province published an apology from her.

One of the most infamous human flesh searches targeted Wang Fei — a young employee of the Beijing office of the multinational advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi — whose wife Jiang Yan committed suicide in December 2007 after finding out that Wang was having an affair with a younger colleague. When, in January 2008, Jiang Yan's sister published online the diary Jiang Yan had written in her dejected final days, a furore of moral condemnation erupted. Wang's personal details were human flesh searched and published. He received hun-

dreds of indignant phone calls, his parents' house was vandalised, and he was forced out of his job. Interestingly, Wang successfully sued for damages from the Tianya.cn chat forum where much of the human flesh searching had been organised.

After the ethnic riots in Lhasa on 14 March 2008, and in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics, the Party and its propaganda organs whipped up popular sentiment in China against 'unpatriotic' individuals who did not toe the party line on Tibet. Human flesh searchers targeted Grace Wang 王千源, a Chinese student who had spontaneously attempted to act as negotiator between 'pro-China' and 'pro-Tibet' demonstrators at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. As she later wrote in the *Washington Post*: 'I thought I could help try to turn a shouting match into an exchange of ideas.' She was called a 'race traitor' and received death threats serious enough to lead the FBI to become involved. Acting on information about her parents' address published on the Internet, someone defaced the entrance to their apartment in Qingdao, Shandong province, with faeces and wrote 'Kill the whole family' in red letters in the hallway of the apartment building; they were forced to go into hiding.

In October 2008, a grainy video circulating on the Internet showed a fat, possibly drunk man apparently attempting to force a young girl into the men's toilets. Subtitles added to the film said that it was shot at a restaurant in Shenzhen, and that the girl was eleven years old. A human flesh search identified the perpetrator as Lin Jiaxiang, Party Secretary of the Shenzhen Maritime Association. While the tape itself was inconclusive evidence, the groundswell of citizen resentment at the perceived immunity of government cadres caused Lin to lose his party job, even though Shenzhen courts determined he had no criminal case to answer.

More recently, in August 2012, Yang Dacai, a director of the Shaanxi province Safety Supervision Bureau, was photographed grinning at the site of a bus crash that killed thirty-six people. Incensed Internet users started a human flesh search that not only identified him but

uncovered photographs of him wearing expensive watches that could not have been purchased with his nominally meagre salary. The attention that Yang attracted led to him being sacked, expelled from the Party and, in September 2013, jailed for fourteen years on corruption charges.

That same year, the award-winning filmmaker Chen Kaige directed *Caught in the Web* (*Sousuo* 搜索), the title of which literally means 'search' and is a reference to the human flesh search that destroys the life of the female protagonist.

An even more recent example of a human flesh search is the identification and vilification of Ding Jinhao, the teenage tourist who defaced a temple at Luxor in Egypt mentioned in the Introduction to this volume.



Poster of Chen Kaige's film *Caught in the Web*.
Source: Moonstone Entertainment



'Watch Brother' Yang Dacai, former head of the work safety administration of Shaanxi province, speaks during his trial on charges of corruption at the Xi'an Intermediate People's Court, Shaanxi province, 30 August 2013.
Source: ImagineChina

Sensitive Words

MacKinnon also noted that:

[T]here was a surprisingly frank exchange about the way in which service providers have to police user content and kill everything political. All blog hosting and service providing companies must police their users' content. This is a fact of life which web businesses as well as users accept as part of being Chinese in China. They must naturally bake censorship functions into their software and into their business models ...

What this means is that Web 2.0, just like Web 1.0, is not going to spark a democratic revolution in Chinese politics any time soon.

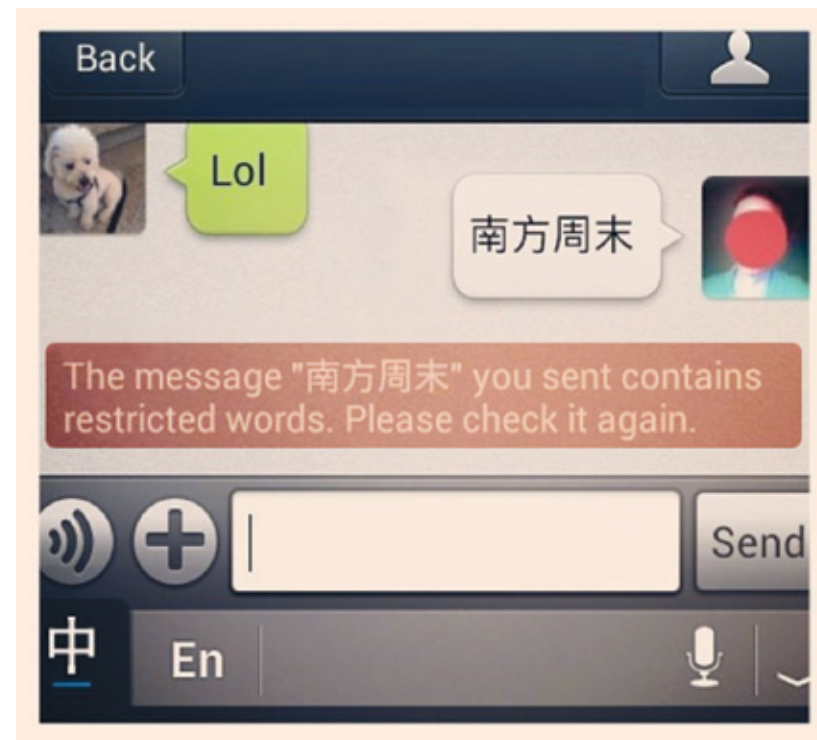
On October 25, just a few weeks before CNBloggerCon 2005, the *Sanlian Life Weekly* (*Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* 三联生活周刊) journalist Wang Xiaofeng published a post on his popular blog, then called *Massage Milk* (*Anmo Ru* 按摩乳), that discussed the techniques Chinese blog-hosting companies were using to self-censor, primarily in the form of filters that stopped users publishing blog posts containing 'sensitive words' (*min'ganci* 敏感词).



Wang Xiaofeng.
Source:
blogs.elcomer-
cio.pe

Nowadays, there are a lot of blog hosts and online forums with something that is really a characteristic of China: 'sensitive words'. It's hard to know whether to laugh or cry about 'sensitive words'. Things that were originally not at all sensitive become highly sensitive because of such 'sensitive words'. The existence of 'sensitive words' continually reminds you: 'You better watch what you fucking say: there are some things that you just can't say' ...

Is the speech of ordinary people that terrifying? I'm reminded of a line from the *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*: 'A revolutionary party does not fear the voice of the masses, it fears the reign of silence.'



Sensitive words: The Chinese name 南方周末 for the outspoken magazine *Southern Weekend* was censored on WeChat in January 2013.
Source: Technasia.com

On the other hand, there are times when you can't let Internet users just do as they please. If there were no controls at all, there would be chaos. The problem is deciding how you prevent the Internet from becoming anarchic.

Forbidding 'sensitive words' is a clumsy, ridiculous and retarded method that does not solve any problems. It's like the ears of a deaf person, or the response of an ostrich to danger. It is just self-deception.

Let's suppose you write the following sentence on a blog host that has 'sensitive-word' controls: 'The viewership rating of CCTV's recent TV series *Moment in Peking* [*Jinghua Yanyun* 京华烟云] has

reached 6.4 percent'. You couldn't publish such a sentence on Blogcn and other blog hosts because it contains 'sensitive words' ['6.4' being shorthand for the Tiananmen Square Incident or Beijing massacre of 4 June 1989].

But does this sentence contravene the Fifth Article of the Computer and Information Network International Internet Safety Protection Regulations? Of course it doesn't. Since it hasn't broken the rules, why the hell are you depriving me of my right to free expression?

Or suppose I write a sentence like this: 'We must see through to the essence of cults like Falungong'. I imagine almost no blog host would allow such a line to be published, because it contains 'sensitive words'. You see, even my rights to criticise a cult have been taken away. Are computers fucking stupid, or are people?

If we accept that there must be some restriction of Internet content, and we absolutely must use the 'sensitive words' method, why can't they publish their list so that everyone knows what to avoid when they write? I think these lists would be very funny; but not even one blog host is willing to make their list public and that's because they'd be spurned by users if they did. Internet users would say: 'So that is what you are damned well scared of!' But if they don't publish the lists, it is a real pain to write because you never know which words will be considered 'sensitive'.

It's like a girl whose whole body is highly sensitive from head to toe. Do you dare to touch her?

(Note: The 'sensitive words' in Wang's blog post were actually published because his blog was hosted on a service called Ycool which had a more tolerant policy towards sensitive words. The post was still online at the time of writing.)

Civilise Your Site, Be Civilised Online

The sense of openness that characterised the Chinese media and Internet in 2003 and 2004 would not last. In an overview of the *Southern Weekly* that covered the decade from 2003 to 2013, the Hong-Kong-based media scholar David Bandurski noted:



David
Bandurski.
Source:
jmsc.hku.hk

The 'media spring' of 2003 was a wake-up call for party leaders, exposing the growing challenges facing media control in China. Commercial media now were challenging the party's dominance of the agenda in subtle but important ways. From 2004 onward, China's leaders pushed actively to reassert control and reverse the gains made by commercial media.

The departments responsible for controlling the Internet did not rest easy either (for details of these departments, see the 2012 *Yearbook* Chapter Seven). In late 2004, the State Council Information Office (the government equivalent to the Party's Propaganda Department) and the Central Guidance Commission for Building Spiritual Civilisation (featured elsewhere in this *Yearbook*) began orchestrating a Civilised Internet campaign aimed at cleaning up the Chinese Internet and wresting back control of it from the masses. The campaign was launched on 9 April 2006 with a series of major stories published in the *People's Daily*, on the Xinhua News Agency's website and on the front pages of all major Internet companies based in Beijing, including Sina, Sohu, Baidu and Netease. The campaign slogan was: 'Civilise Your Site, Be Civilised Online' (*Wenming banwang, wenming shangwang* 文明办网, 文明上网).

On 20 April, the *People's Daily* reported on a Civilised Internet event that targeted bloggers, noting that there were sixteen million of them at the time:

A total of nineteen Chinese websites providing blog service including People.com, Bokee.com and Sina.com as well as representatives



'Civilise Your Site'.
Source: 0101f.com

of bloggers signed a 'self-discipline pact on civilised use of Internet' at a seminar on the construction of Internet civilisation and ethics sponsored by the Internet Society of China and Bokee.com in Beijing [translation by *People's Daily*].

A separate editorial on blogger self-discipline published in Chinese, but not in English, by the *People's Daily* was menacingly titled 'If you want freedom, first discipline yourself' (*Yao xiang ziyou, jiu xian zilü* 要想自由, 就先自律).

Interestingly, Bokee.com, the website that hosted the event, was the new name and URL of BlogChina.com — the company founded by Fang Xingdong (who had coined the term *boke* 博客). Confirming that the days of blogger freedom in China were over, Fang gave a speech in October 2006 in which, as Rebecca Mackinnon reported, he 'warned that while the "invisible hand of the market" may have enabled China's blogosphere to reach its present stage, "from now on the hand of the government will play the biggest role"'.

The possibilities of the Civilised Internet campaign were swiftly communicated to Internet companies across the country. On 26 April, my own website Danwei.org published a video interview with Li Li (Muzi Mei) — the blogger who made the form famous in China. She said:

You know now there is this slogan 'Make a Civilised Internet' [文明办网]? It's very uncomfortable. In the past, the Internet was a different world, very free. But now, I think the authorities are controlling it more and more strictly.

Government Microblogging

In March 2013, the E-Government Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Governance (*Guojia xingzheng xueyuan dianzi zhengwu yanjiu zhongxin* 国家行政学院电子政务研究中心) published the 2012 Chinese Government Microblogging Estimates Report (*2012 nian Zhongguo zhengwu weiboke pinggu baogao* 2012 年中国政务微博客评估报告). The report says that the Chinese government operated a total of 113,382 microblogs — an increase of over 80,000 from 2011. The jump marks a sea change in the government's approach to the platform, from censorship and regulation to active participation and direct engagement.

Although government microblogs in 2012 did not conform to a set standard, exhibiting great diversity in content and quality, a few trends emerged. According to the report, the Chinese government frequently used microblogs to announce news in real-time, enabling it to interact more fluidly with citizens and companies. The report also notes the rise of microblogs by individual officials such as Luo Chongmin, a member of the College Work Committee of the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee. Luo frequently posts about grassroots educational issues, college entrance exams and other topics of interest to ordinary citizens. Government organs are also increasingly using Weibo to release information about weather and traffic emergencies and natural disasters such as the 2012 flood in Beijing. Notably, the type of government organ most active on Weibo is Public Security: thirty-seven percent of all government microblog activity is carried out under the auspices of the police.



Thirty-seven percent of government microblog accounts are managed by Public Security organs.
Photo: Charles Hope



Luo Chongmin.
Source: china-daily.com.cn

Distribution of Microblogs by Party and Government Division

Traffic and Railways	5%	Party Committees	12%
Meteorological organs	3%	News and Propaganda	10%
Judicial organs	2%	Group Supervision	9%
Industry and Commercial	1%	All levels of Government	7%
Sanitation	1%	Tourism	7%
Education	1%	Other	5%
Public Security	37%		

Part II: How to be Civilised

Today there are still tens of millions of active bloggers in China, and if you count Twitter-type microblogs like Weibo, there may be more than five hundred million. From 2009 to 2012, the most vibrant and politically-minded site on the Chinese Internet was Sina Weibo. In late 2012 and early 2013, the most talked about Internet service in China was WeChat (*Weixin* 微信) — an instant messaging service with social networking dimensions run by Tencent.

Xinhua News Agency still maintains a web page for the 2006 Civilised Internet campaign, although the most recent posting dates from 2011. Since 2006, websites and Internet services in China have changed dramatically, however, and the vocabulary and techniques of the Civilised Internet campaign remain in use. Some of its underlying concepts hark back to the anti-Spiritual Pollution and anti-Bourgeois Liberalisation campaigns of the 1980s; some are more recent innovations. The main concepts and methods are listed below together with examples of their use in 2012 and 2013.



WeChat poster advertising 'Official RMB Investment Accounts' aimed at Hong Kong residents in July 2013.
Source: Mslee@Yahoo

• Pledging Self-discipline

'Voluntary' activities organised by crypto-governmental organisations like the China Internet Society (*Zhongguo hulianwang xiehui* 中国互联网协会) often require Internet companies to send senior delegates. At these events, they sign pledges of self-discipline — written documents promising that their websites will be free of pornographic, criminal or politically unacceptable content. The activities are used to communicate the current party line to Internet companies, and to give a participatory patina to forced compliance.

On 11 September 2011, at the Eleventh China Internet Conference, organised by the China Internet Society in Beijing, twenty-nine Internet companies were awarded the 2011–2012 Annual Contributions to Internet Self-Discipline Prize (*2011–2012 niandu Zhongguo lianwang hangye zilü gongxian jiang* 2011-2012年度中国互联网行业自律贡献奖). Winners included commercial giants like Tencent, state organisations like Xinhua News Agency and smaller state and private companies. Sina was noticeably absent from the prizewinners. It would seem the China Internet Society did not think Sina displayed enough self-discipline, perhaps because of intense microblogging activity on Weibo about the Wenzhou train crash of 23 July 2011 as well as the flight of the Chongqing police chief Wang Lijun to the US Consulate in Chengdu on 6 February 2012 and many other such incidents.

• Rumours

'Rumours' are persistently cited in Internet clean-up campaigns as constituting a serious threat to society. However, many observers interpret a 'rumour' as meaning any kind of information that the government does not want made public.

On 30 December 2012, the *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo qingnian bao* 中国青年报) published a strongly worded editorial titled 'A Flood of Internet Rumors — How Can We Stand By and Do Nothing?' (*Wangluo yaoyan fanlan, qineng xiushou panguan* 网络谣言泛滥 岂能袖手

旁观). The article was one of dozens of similar screeds published by state news organisations. Rumors were in abundance during the 2012–2013 leadership transition and with regard to the dramatic fall of Chongqing party boss Bo Xilai and the murder of Englishman Neil Heywood, making it difficult to tell salacious gossip from political and historical fact.

• *Pornography, violence, crime, fraud and copyright infringement*

This cluster of unseemly topics is often in the vocabulary of regulators who worry about ‘uncivilised’ aspects of the Chinese Internet. The government deems the proliferation of pornographic, criminal, fraudulent and pirated material so endemic in general that it has established a dedicated Eliminate Pornography and Strike at Crime Office (*Saohuang dafei xiaozu bangongshi* 扫黄打非小组办公室). Co-ordinating resources from no fewer than twenty-nine government departments including the police, propaganda organisations and the customs authorities, the office targets pirated films and books and illegally imported media as well as any website that the government wants to close down. The office was set up between July and August 1989, a fact that hints at its true motivation and scope.

• *Rule of Law*

Promotion and protection of the ‘rule of law’ (*fazhi* 法治) is perhaps the most Orwellian of China’s Civilised Internet catchphrases. This rubric is used to legitimate a wide range of government controls over and interdictions of Internet users and what they can say online or offline. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons often deflect foreign objections to the incarceration of dissidents such as Liu Xiaobo and Ai Weiwei with the simple assertion that ‘China is a country under rule of law’.

Many of the propaganda articles published in April 2006 as part of the Civilised Internet campaign invoked the ‘rule of law’. For example, ‘Righteous websites respond to the Civilised Internet proposal by enthusiastically promoting the concept of rule of law’ (*zhengyi wang deng xiangying wenming banwang changyi jiji chuanbo fazhi linian* 正义网等响应文明办网倡议积极传播法治理念). Likewise, a *People’s Daily* editorial about protecting the healthy environment of the Internet published in December 2012 (translated at the end of the chapter) sees rule of law as a shackle that must be used to tightly bind the Internet.

• *Real Name Registration*

Although there had been rumblings in the state press for several years about forcing mobile phone users and Internet game players to register their online activities using their real names, providing addresses, contact numbers and their ID, the 2006 Civilised Internet campaign was the first time the idea was mooted for bloggers and even for all Internet users. Interestingly, real name registration, known in Chinese as *shiming zhi* 实名制 has never been successfully implemented, even for mobile phones. The state media called for real name registration of Weibo users in the aftermath of the 2011 Wenzhou train crash. In February 2012, the government publicised a new regulation requiring Sina Weibo and other providers of microblogs to ensure real name registration. The regulations have not been enforced and it is still possible to sign up for microblog services without using a real name or ID number. In 2013, it was still possible to buy a SIM card for a mobile phone anonymously, without showing identification.

• *Vilification*

In November 2004, the Shanghai-based *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang ribao* 解放日报) published an editorial attacking ‘public intellectuals’ (*gong-gong zhishifenzi* 公共知识分子 or *gongzhi* 公知 for short) — in other words, non-state-sanctioned writers and thinkers who make public

Hacking: Who is the Biggest Villain?

Although politicians and security consultants in the US have for years accused the Chinese government of hacking and cyberespionage, they've presented little concrete proof or information to the public about the alleged attacks. On 18 February 2013, the *New York Times* published a report tying a very active Chinese hacking group to a specific People's Liberation Army (PLA) unit in Shanghai. The newspaper based its story on a report published by Mandiant, a security firm in Washington DC. The firm was founded by Kevin Mandia, a US Air Force veteran and former computer security officer with the 7th Communications Group at the Pentagon.

The Mandiant report on Chinese hacking was unusually detailed. It tracked individual members of the hacking group, identified their headquarters as a building in Pudong district, Shanghai, that was occupied by PLA Unit 61398. Stating that the group's attacks targeted mostly corporate and infrastructure computer systems, the report claimed that the hackers had stolen technology blueprints, negotiating strategies and manufacturing processes from more than one hundred companies, mostly American, in a variety of industries. On 27 February, the *New York Times* published another report saying that 'Chinese-speaking users and amateur hackers' had scoured the Internet and found new evidence that 'while circumstantial, adds to the signs suggesting Chinese military efforts to hack into American corporate computer systems'. The Chinese Foreign Ministry dismissed the accusations in the Mandiant report as 'groundless' and lacking 'hard evidence'.

On 12 March, James Clapper, the Director of US National Intelligence, testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee that cyberattacks have replaced terrorism as the number one threat against the US. Two days later, on 14 March, US President Obama, in an interview with ABC News, said that some, but not all, hacking originating from China was state-sponsored. He also cautioned about the need to avoid 'war rhetoric' when discussing cyberattacks.

On 5 May 2013, the Pentagon released its annual report to Congress on Chinese military capabilities. The report described the primary goal of China's state-affiliated hackers as stealing industrial technology, but said many intrusions also seemed aimed at obtaining insights into the thinking of American policy makers. It warned that the same information gathering could easily be used for 'building a picture of US network defense networks, logistics, and related military capabilities that could be exploited during a crisis.'

In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry reiterated that China opposes cyberattacks as well as 'all groundless accusations and hyping' that could harm prospects for co-operation. Xinhua News Agency published a report quoting Wang Xinjun, a researcher with the Academy of Military Sciences of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, who called the Pentagon's accusations 'irresponsible ... as the Chinese government and armed forces have never sanctioned hacking activities'. Both China and the US are victims of cybercrimes and should work together to tackle the issue, Wang said.

The diplomatic tit-for-tat took an unexpected turn, however, on 23 June, when the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* published details of US hacking operations in Hong Kong and mainland China as provided by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden. According to the report:

Snowden said that according to unverified documents seen by the *Post*, the NSA had been hacking computers in Hong Kong and on the mainland since 2009... 'We hack network backbones — like huge internet routers, basically — that give us access to the communications of hundreds of thousands of computers without having to hack every single one,' he said.

statements or offer candid analyses of politics and society. Such attacks are not usually explicitly associated with Internet clampdowns, and they are found in state media as well as the Weibo postings of self-styled 'patriots'.

In the last two years, the considerable popularity of some liberal online writers — such as the venture capitalist Li Kaifu, who has almost fifty million followers on Weibo — has drawn frequent criticism. The *Global Times* columnist Dai Xu accused Li Kaifu of being an agent for the CIA; he regularly calls public intellectuals 'dailudang'



Li Kaifu.
Source:
ITXinwen.com

帶路黨 — that is, people who guide invading foreign armies. Sympathisers of public intellectuals often call their critics *wumao* 五毛, or *wumaodang*, meaning 'Fifty-cent Gang' — people allegedly paid by the government for positive online postings at the apocryphal rate of fifty Chinese cents a post (see the 2012 *Yearbook*, p.131).

The allegations prompted Xinhua News Agency to publish a report accusing the US of playing 'innocent victim' while in fact being the 'biggest villain in our age'.

President Obama tried to differentiate between US and Chinese cyberespionage, saying 'every country in the world, large and small, engages in intelligence gathering... [But] a hacker directly connected with the Chinese government ... breaking into Apple's software systems to see if they can obtain the designs for the latest Apple product' is 'theft'. Many observers would agree that there is a difference. But to a perhaps equally large number of unsympathetic observers in China, not all of whom write for the *People's Daily*, the Snowden affair has undermined the American moral high ground when it comes to hacking and surveillance.



Rally in Hong Kong in support of Edward Snowden, 15 June 2013.
Photo: See-ming Lee 李思明

Small Voices in a Cave

The Chinese Bloggers Conference survived the Civilised Internet campaign. After the first conference in Shanghai in 2005, the eclectic group of technologists, entrepreneurs, activists, citizen journalists and hobbyists met in Hangzhou, Beijing and then in Guangzhou. The final CNBloggerCon was held in 2009 in the entrance to a cave in a nature reserve near Lianzhou — a small town in the remote far west of Guangdong province. The choice of location was partly determined by concerns that the police would have shut it down if it were held in a larger city, whereas local municipal government officials in Lianzhou saw the gathering as a boon to tourism and were less concerned about potential risks. The theme of CNBloggerCon 2009 was 'Micro-actions, Macro-effects' (*Wei dongli Guang tiandi* 微动力 广天地) — the word *wei* referring both to Weibo and other microblogs including Twitter.

The 2010 conference was scheduled to return to Shanghai, but just before the conference, the owners of the proposed venue informed the organisers that the authorities had expressed their displeasure with the event and the conference was cancelled. There hasn't been a Chinese bloggers' conference since then.

Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down

Of course, the end of the Chinese Bloggers Conference did not mean the end of blogging in China: from 2010 to 2103, Sina Weibo became a part of mainstream culture, remaining the most dynamic space for public expression in China. The Internet continues to serve as a nascent Fourth Estate, and it is where news about corruption, government malfeasance and abuses frequently breaks. The Internet culture of China remains varied and vital.

But the last word on the Chinese Internet always belongs to the state, which is why it seems fitting to conclude with a translation of a commentary published on the *People's Daily* website on 24 December 2012.

Let the Rule of Law Tightly Shackle the Internet 给网络世界套上法治紧箍咒

Ma Bi 马碧

Today, for many people, the Internet is as vital as the air they breathe. But amid the flow of 'positive energy' and constructive and healthy information, there are also rumours, fraud and slander. People are deeply moved by [examples of] 'positive energy' such as the scene of a street worker warming his partner's hands with his breath after she has finished shoveling snow [a series of photographs that went viral on Weibo]. They panic at 'negative energy' such as rumours of an impending apocalypse. Moreover, 'negative forces' like the sale of personal information online are a threat to public safety and damage the interests of ordinary people.

The Internet is a free and open arena. It is precisely because of this freedom that the energetic few can gather around themselves a large number of fanatical followers. There is no such thing as absolute online freedom. The Internet needs clear demarcation to avoid damaging the freedom of others; it must accept moral constraints and respect the relevant laws and regulations. After all, no one wants to live in a real world in which there are no rules and no order; no one wants to live in a virtual world like that either.

The real world and the virtual world are inseparable, and harm done to individuals online does not simply remain in the virtual world. People who are cheated, whose rights are infringed or who are attacked feel as much pain as they would if they were hurt in traditional ways. Online criminals use the power of information to target ordinary Internet users for phishing scams, viewing them as mere grist for the mill. Today, when the whole world is interconnected, it is absolutely necessary to strengthen the supervision and management of the Internet.

The Internet is a public space. Public order and good behavior require the collective effort of all Internet users, and all users must 'purify themselves', recognising from the bottom of their hearts that the Internet is not a 'Utopia' in which they can wilfully satisfy any appetite, or a 'Shangri-La' beyond the reach of the law. On a vast Internet platform with 538 million web users and more than a billion mobile users, relying on self-discipline will not achieve regulation and order, or stop evil-doers with ulterior motives.

Without wings, the bird of freedom cannot soar. Without the rule of law, a free Internet cannot get very far. Today we revere the rule of law, and just as our real society needs the rule of law, so does our virtual society. Purifying the online world requires the self-discipline and restraint of Internet users, but it requires the discipline imposed by the rule of law even more. Only by placing the 'tight shackles' [*jingu* 紧箍, literally, 'tight band' or 'tight ring'] of the rule of law onto the Internet, by defining the boundaries of acceptable behavior, through legal oversight and by making perpetrators of illegal acts online feel the full weight of the law in the real world, can we put an end to irresponsible rumours, plug up the seeping out of private information and cleanse the atmosphere of the Internet.

'It is the most vibrant and the noisiest... ' This way of describing the Internet is how many people feel. An open China needs an Internet world that is civilised, one that operates under the rule of law and that is healthy. Only with the 'tight shackles' of the rule of law can our Internet become more civilised, healthier and safer. Only then can we increase the 'positive energy', purge the filth and wash in clean water.

