

INSIGHT

A watchful eye

George Yeo and Eric Li study the Chinese government's control of the internet and find that it is distinctive in its attempt to combine constant, tight surveillance with judicious intervention

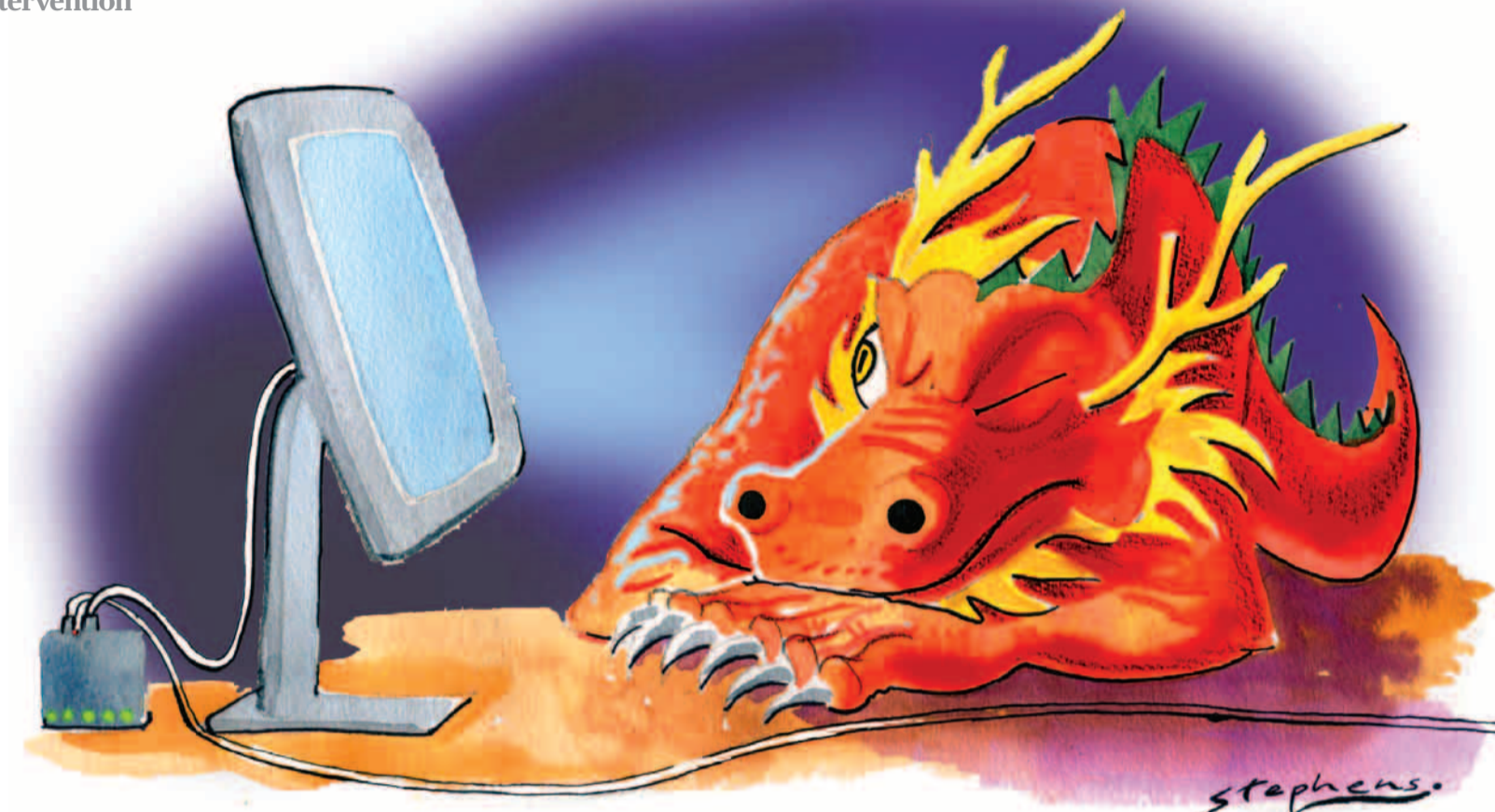
The Chinese government recently issued new rules to strengthen internet regulations. Most notable is the real-name requirement for microblog (weibo) accounts. Some weibo users have attested to an increase in government monitoring and self-censorship by the hosting companies. Many are decrying this as a further violation of freedom of expression. The reality is far more complicated. More than a decade ago, when China's internet was in its infancy with a few million users, the government made it clear that it would exercise political oversight on the nascent cyberspace while allowing it to grow.

Many experts then predicted that such efforts were doomed to fail. The internet, they said, was a brave new world that could not be controlled. There were only two possible outcomes: a freely expanding internet beyond the reach of political authority, and subverting it, or an internet stifled by government control and unable to realise its social and economic benefits. Rupert Murdoch famously proclaimed that advances in communications technology posed an "unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere".

Confoundingly these experts, neither has happened in China. By any standard, the Chinese internet is one of the most vibrant economic and social cyberspaces in the world. Over 500 million people use it to communicate, transact and entertain. Entrepreneurial companies have created billions of dollars in economic value. China's search engine, e-commerce and online video businesses are among the world's leading companies. On Taobao, China's eBay, millions of mom-and-pop shops are conducting billions of dollars of transactions per month. On QQ and Sina, the two largest weibo services, some 200 million users are active – expressing their views on issues from sex to official corruption.

Concurrently, a massive government-directed monitoring system combined with self-regulation by the hosting companies makes China's internet highly controlled by authority. Facebook and Twitter are banned while their domestic versions flourish. In a well-publicised spat with the government, Google's search presence was curtailed while its other businesses have continued. When social crises occur, key-word barriers are erected to prevent amplifications that threaten stability.

China's size and its centralised governance have enabled the creation of a parallel internet universe connected to but separate from the one outside. But there are leaks, and many virtual private networks are available. Minor leaks are ignored. When leaks become important, they are plugged, sometimes bluntly. When the "jasmine revolution" became an issue, search engines simply blanked out the word "jasmine". However, it is a mistake to think that



all the regulators do is censor. China is pursuing a distinctive response to the internet.

More than half a century ago, at the onset of the information revolution, a pioneering thinker on cyberspace, Norbert Wiener, wrote an influential book, *Cybernetics*. Wiener separated human responses to new challenges into two types: ontogenetic and phylogenetic. Ontogenetic activities are organised and carried out through centrally designed institutions to shape the development of society. The phylogenetic response, on the other hand, is evolutionary. It is analogous to the way bacteria behave without organisational oversight.

The development of human civilisation has always been characterised by the constant struggle between these two opposites – the ontogenetic attempts to control the phylogenetic and the latter's undermining of the former. The relationship is both adversarial and



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sympiotic, much like yin and yang. In today's context, political authority is ontogenetic while cyberspace is phylogenetic. The health of human society depends on the balance between the two. When they are out of balance, the body politic falls sick.

The easy scalability of the internet makes it perhaps the most powerful phylogenetic invasion of the body politic in recent times. Bill Davidow, in his book, *Overconnected: the Promise and Threat of the Internet*, talks about how its "hyper-connection" can spread "contagions" like pandemics. The internet is not an unmitigated force for good.

The approach of the Chinese government is similar to that of Chinese medicine. The emphasis is on the internet being an organic part of the body politic. Too much intervention is as bad as too little. Constant monitoring is necessary so that one knows when and how much to intervene. The word in Chinese is *tiao*, which means continuous tuning of a system.

Social media has enabled Beijing to overcome an age-old problem of poor feedback of problems on the ground to the centre because of too many layers in between, risking explosions due to over-suppression; it brings such problems to the attention of China's leaders. The train accident in Wenzhou (温州) last year was a good example. Like a Chinese physician

feeling the pulse of a patient, leaders were alerted to a serious imbalance and reacted comprehensively. The result will be a safer high-speed rail network.

Economically and socially, the internet is flourishing in China. Politically, it is being used to help maintain stability amid rapid change. Old values have been undermined before new values develop, leading to crass materialism. Regulations have not kept up with the new realities, causing frequent problems of public safety. Social and economic divisions have widened considerably.

Social media provides a safety valve, alerting the government to problems that can get out of control. Both the over-amplification and over-suppression of these problems can make them explode and destabilise the country, which is the last thing China needs after finally leaving behind two centuries of war and revolution.

While China's parallel universe is inevitably being influenced by the outside, the reverse is also happening. India now demands that Facebook and Google remove derogatory material. Other countries will follow. Eventually, as in the real world, cyberspace will not be flat but will have interconnected mountains and valleys.

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Right choice

Edwin Lau says officials must rally Hong Kong to accept the best option for waste charging, and not cave in to the objections of vested interests

Why is Secretary for the Environment Edward Yau Tang-wah taking so long to roll out a legislative proposal on waste charging? After all, he's been the secretary for five years, charged with the priority task of tackling Hong Kong's mounting waste problems.

Some are sceptical about Yau's timing for the recently announced public consultation that will end in April. By the time the government releases the consultation findings, this hot potato will probably have been passed to someone else.

The consultation document lists successful overseas examples, along with the pros and cons of four waste-charging options. One of them is a quantity-based charging option, which we believe to be the most effective of the four as it uses financial incentives to encourage the public to produce less waste, under the polluter-pays principle. Yet, officials hesitate to lead the public towards this option.

The first question raised by the media when this document was released was about the range of charges for the quantity-based option. How can the public give sensible feedback without knowing how much they would need to pay?

The public expects the Environment Bureau, with its professional knowledge and insight, to lead them towards the right approach, not to throw us "equal" options to choose from. Moreover, neither the fixed-charge nor the proxy-system option – which offers no financial incentives – can drive behavioural change.

Every proposal that either brings inconvenience or hits a person's pocket is bound to encounter opposition from vested interests. The plastic-bag levy and anti-smoking law are examples of the fight the business sector can put up. Business interests can also be good at projecting worst-case scenarios to scare the public. Yet, despite these scare tactics, we now enjoy more smoke-free places and have established a "bring your own bag" habit on shopping trips to reduce the use of plastic bags.

Friends of the Earth (HK) has, over the past two years, carried out surveys of domestic waste from residential estates. In the 200 bags we looked at, 20 per cent of the waste was recyclable and almost 50 per cent was food waste. We should enhance the current waste separation and recycling systems to facilitate the collection of food and other waste. Then, through waste charging, recyclers will see business opportunities in food waste, glass bottles and other low-value recyclables, and they won't have to be buried in our bulging landfills.

South Korea and Taipei city implemented waste charging in 1995 and 2000, respectively. As a result, their amount of disposed waste per person has dropped by up to 60 per cent, which has saved their governments money and reduced the pressure on expanding landfills and building incinerators. At the same time, the recycling industry has been developed to provide more green jobs in the community.

We have seen that as little as 50 cents can change behaviour in the use of shopping bags, so we do not require high charges to get Hongkongers to reduce, reuse and recycle. Yau should educate the public and legislators to get them to support the right choice, even when faced with opposition from stakeholders.

What is missing is not the technology to "treat" our waste; it is the political will of officials.

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Chance for study and self-discovery in a world where women truly rule

Debora Spar says as long as gender stereotypes and discrimination persist, we need women's colleges

In the US these days, the education sector is receiving more than its usual amount of scrutiny. With budgets constrained and an ever-present argument over the appropriate size and function of government, advocates from all sides of the political spectrum are debating the need for teacher testing, the escalating cost of higher education and the applicability of liberal arts learning today.

In smaller but no less vociferous circles, critics have also posted an even more pointed question: why, in 2012, does anyone still need a women's college?

Indeed, as a recent article in *The New York Times* describes, single-sex education is under attack across the country, with critics suggesting it offers no real benefits over standard co-education. Similar criticism has been lobbed more informally across websites and popular blogs, stressing that, with women now accounting for more than 50 per cent of the student population in American colleges, universities and graduate schools, the rationale for women's colleges has disappeared.

Repeatedly, and consistently, as president of the country's most selective women's college, I disagree. Yes, girls in the US regularly now outperform boys in high school and outnumber them in college. Yet, the proverbially tilted playing field for women has still not fully righted itself, and young women – amazingly – often experience college very differently from their male counterparts.

Top-tier universities like Yale and Duke have been forced to confront these differences very publicly in recent years, and Princeton, to its great credit, recently released a candid and hard-hitting analysis of women's leadership, or lack thereof, on its campus.

In the early years of co-education, the report notes, female students fared quite well at Princeton. Women held a total of 18 major campus positions during the 1980s and 22 in the 1990s. Over time, however, women have begun to slip from leadership positions across campus. Only 12 held prominent campus positions during the 2000s and only six won the Pyne Prize, the university's highest award for general distinction. Men, by contrast, held 58 leadership positions during the 2000s and won 12 Pyne Prizes.

Current female students seem relatively unconcerned about their status, with several suggesting to the report's authors that they were happy to work behind the scenes of the campus hierarchy, or to throw their energies into other, more fulfilling pursuits. Yet there was also a poignancy in some female students' remarks, and a disarming awareness of the extent to which their gender – and sexual attractiveness – shaped their behaviour on campus.

These are concerns that Asian universities, devoted mostly to co-education at the tertiary level, should wrestle with as well. The good news is that women in Hong

Kong and mainland China are entering college in numbers that are roughly equal to their male peers. Women accounted for 41 per cent of all college and university students in 2000 in China, and are close to half today.

The bad news is that, despite these educational advantages, Chinese women are still not achieving full equality in the workforce. In Hong Kong, fewer than one in three legislators, senior officials and managers are women, and women hold only 8 per cent of board seats on the top 42 companies. In mainland China, they account for 34 per cent of senior management positions (a relatively high percentage worldwide), and 19 per cent of those in management are chief executives.

Much of what is holding women back, admittedly, lies with what they face after college: discrimination in the workforce, embedded stereotypes of the appropriate role for women and the struggle to balance work and family concerns. Universities cannot address these concerns directly. But they can and should wrestle with the thorny question of why young women at some of the world's best universities are still having educational experiences that are subtly different from those of their male colleagues, and are still facing options that are shaped and squeezed by their gender.

In the meantime – and perhaps for a long time – the world still vitally needs some place for all-women's

education. Some place where, for four precious years of their lives, young women inhabit a world where girls truly rule; where women lead by definition and habit, and where female role models abound. For four years, women at a single-sex college can enjoy being smart without worrying whether that means they're not sexy. They can speak their minds without wondering if they're meant to represent the "woman's point of view". And then, four years later, they can leave – stronger, more confident, and bound to a sisterhood that will support them forever.

Thankfully, women across most of Asia have educational opportunities that would have stunned their great-grandmothers. Bright girls can go to whatever universities they select, and then on to whatever careers they choose to pursue. But they can also choose an option that is increasingly rare and precious – four years of study and self-discovery, and a brief window of time when, for once, gender truly doesn't matter.

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Beware the pull of identity politics in Hong Kong

Lau Nai-keung questions the purpose of a poll tracking our multiple identities

National identity has never been a problem among people my age, the so-called post-war babies. I was born Chinese, I am Chinese. No alternative has ever crossed my mind.

But then, probably around the late 1970s, we suddenly found that, in our identity cards, we were labelled British. That came with a British passport for easy travelling, and if you insisted you were Chinese, you got something else that was extremely inconvenient – a certificate of identity that was not recognised elsewhere. As most Chinese are pragmatists, we just went along with things. The Basic Law reflects this pragmatism and regards foreign passports as travel documents, not proof of nationality. Even when our generation emigrated – the situation got so bad that we had to leave – we still thought of ourselves as Chinese. We stuck to our old lifestyle, watching TVB programmes and singing Chinese songs.

Generation X grew up in this environment, where up to a quarter of the Hong Kong population took up a new nationality. To them, national identity was not inborn, but a matter of choice. Many chose to swear allegiance to the Canadian flag, but then they moved back to Hong Kong. Nothing seemed to have changed, and they somehow still managed to obtain a home return permit and travel freely in and out of mainland China as Chinese.

Until now, this generation has

been very confused. They can be, say, Australian, Chinese and Hong Kong citizens at the same time. Many maintain that they are Chinese. They are adamant that they love China's culture, history, food and so on, but it is the current regime and the 1.3 billion people that they can't stand.

Well, not exactly: they would naturally cheer for Chinese athletes in international competitions – as long as the opponents were not the Hong Kong team. They feel proud seeing Chinese astronauts orbiting in space, but will be quick to point out in the same breath that they are 40 years behind the Americans. Chinese from across the Shenzhen River are corrupt, dirty, greedy, and they flock to Hong Kong to snap up everything precious, notably hospital beds, apartments and baby formula.

Obviously, this generation takes an outsider's view of China. In effect, this has degenerated into an us-against-them attitude. To Generation X, this is natural.

Now we have the Generation Ys, those born in the 1980s and 1990s. On the whole, they don't have an identity problem. They grew up knowing Hong Kong is part of China, and they have nowhere else to go. Those who previously deserted Hong Kong returned with their parents, because this part of the world is where the opportunities are.

But Hong Kong is very different from any other part of China. Even now, when other mainland cities have caught up with Hong Kong in

their modern outlook, culturally, Hong Kong is still unique. For that matter, all Chinese cities have their own cultural characteristics. But, in Hong Kong, some of the confused Generation X members have chosen to inflate these matters and, gradually, a strand of indigenous culture has evolved that wants to exclude Hong Kong from China. A very small minority even openly advocates independence.

One of the tactics they use is to conduct regular polls asking people whether they think they are Chinese, Hongkonger, Chinese Hongkonger or Hong Kong Chinese. Thinly disguised as "academic", in fact these polls are anything but; the point is not the trends of each survey, but to repeatedly highlight that Chinese and Hongkongers are separate and distinct groups, like Martians and earthlings, or Americans and Brazilians. In short, it's a spin-doctor trick.

But this serves the inclination of most of our dissidents and their journalist sympathisers, many of them belonging to Generation X. As a result, when Hao Tiechuan, of the central government's liaison office, pointed out the obvious, he was publicly vilified. Bear in mind that whether or not a statement is true has nothing to do with how loudly it is said. In the long run, the truth will invariably prevail.

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