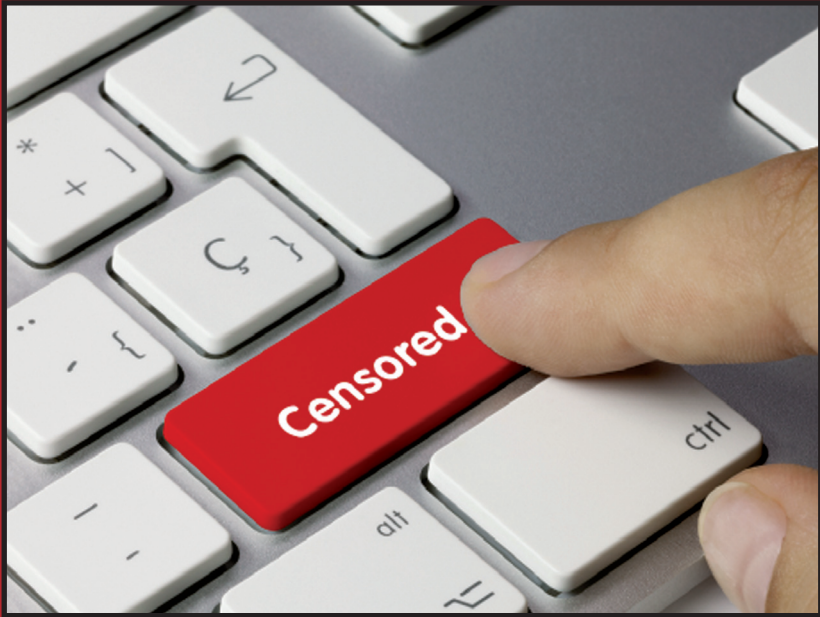


Sergio de Eccher

Escaping from the Great Firewall



**A comparison of the Internet usage
of Chinese migrants in Italy
and Chinese residents in the PRC**

“Escaping from the Great Firewall”
Sergio de Eccher

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RUNA EDITRICE

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Introduction

1 The five gateways for managing the Internet studies in China

Chinese society is a complex and multifaceted entity (Li Feng; 2013), with several contradictions and innumerable nuances. All its peculiarities and conflicts replicate themselves exponentially in its cyberspace, being this virtual zone more contentious than reality (Guobin Yang, 2009). As a result, in the contradictory Chinese cyber-society (Gerstenberg F.; 2008), we can observe a lot of space and possibilities for its cyber-citizens. Furthermore, it is noticeable a shared and unexpected online freedom (Goubin Yang, 2012) greater than the opportunities of the “offline” Chinese society; even though it is remarkable the efficacy of the technical, ideological and legal efforts conceived by the CCP to constrain the Internet’s deliberative effects. Therefore, on the one hand we may superficially hypothesize that this fervent, but fragile, openness might bring about an imminent social change also in the Chinese society. On the flip side, even though we took the side of those commentators who favors the CCP in the management of the Internet machine¹ (Timo Arnall; 2014), it is anyhow imperative that scholars should be aware of five macro aspects, before theorizing any short-sight assumptions concerning the liberating power of the Internet.

¹ In Timo Arnal’s film (2014) the director deals with “the invisible infrastructures of the internet [and] “the hidden materiality of data [which explore] some of the machines through which the cloud is transmitted and transformed”. I have used his work here to emphasize that the management of the Internet in China is not only implemented by the CCP through the path of ideological and legal constraints but also by starting from its primitive and technical architecture as the creation of a peculiar hardware structure. <http://www.elasticspace.com/2014/05/internet-machine>

I shall call them gateways, or, by employing the Actor Network terminology, obligatory passage points (Callon, 1986) through which any researcher has inevitably to pass and to be concerned with them. Primarily, if the purpose of the research is to analyze the Internet and its intersecting repercussions on the PRC and on the life of more than 720 million users (721 m in 2016) ², it is critical to center the investigation not only on the Internet itself but on the manifold processes related to the online environment embedded within an authoritarian State.

First Gateway: everything is connected. In China, more than in other authoritarian countries, it is not possible, nor suggested to separate the Internet from the economy sphere, the Internet from politics, the Internet from the evolution of the Chinese society, even the Internet from the enrichment and the modernization of the language/communication/culture dimensions. For example, the term “*egao*”, which can be translated with “digitized parody”, is a modern expression which encompasses various, non-separable, interdisciplinary realities, in which, as Yang and Gong (2010) argue, “issues of power struggle, class reconsolidation, social stratification, online community formation, and cultural intervention, along with the transformative power of digital technologies intersect” (Xin Yang and Haomin Gong; 2010, 3-4). This clearly suggests how the Internet can easily merge its effects with different, intermingling aspects of the Chinese society. Scholars and researchers have, as a result, to consider that in China the Internet is often the unique output towards the external world for

² <http://www.internetlvestats.com/internet-users/china/>
<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/03/world/china-internet-growth-2014/>

netizens³, commercial companies and organizations of various kinds in order to enjoy, communicate, do business as censorship has dominated and still dominates the Chinese public discourse and many other aspects of life since decades. We have to point out that public – offline – protests and collective meetings are strongly restricted in the PRC (King G., Pan J., Roberts M. E.; 2013) and, therefore, the Internet is reasonably the only instrument able to overcome the Chinese cyber-iron curtain. As a consequence, the ramifications of the Internet are immediately visible in several human activities within the Chinese society and words such as social media or cyberspace have become some of the essential dependent variables on which to base any analysis on politics, international relations, social sciences, economics, on the evolution of the modern language and so on ad infinitum. Nowadays, everything is connected and intertwined and, even more, in China. As an effect, every element of the Chinese society, economy and politics is able to peremptorily influence many other elements/actors involved or even the entire network, as the Internet is the hyphen able to connect all the different spheres.

Second Gateway: the peculiar Chinese regime. Scholars should not forget that any cause and effect coming from the Chinese society, Chinese cyberspace or Chinese economy are always filtered at the source by a strainer built with an invasive Leninist political structure. It is not possible, nor suggested and neither fruitful to carry out a research on Chinese matters

³ Netizen: Usually *netizen* is an active participant in the online community of the Internet (From ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA). For Michael and Ronda Hauben, netizens are people who “work towards building the cooperative and collective nature which benefits the larger world. These are people who work towards developing the Net”

<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/606/527>

forgetting that a political magnifying glass is necessary, able to focus on the ubiquitous presence of the CCP in every aspect of this nuanced society,. Above all the Internet - that nowadays is going viral within various fields of human activities - is strongly managed by the CCP through its peculiar authoritarianism (Baogang He, 2006). Every exploration on new technologies in China should necessarily start from the analysis of the Chinese government, of its structure and organization. Besides, it will be methodologically mandatory to dwell on the main laws/regulations regarding the control of the Internet in this country, by building, firstly, a solid political and legal framework from which every research on this field will come to life with a greater sense of scientific completeness.

Third Gateway: following the pendulum. The exploration of the Internet in China is like trying to follow a pendulum that swings from some logical aspects to many contradictions, from a certainty to the next paradox, from a little breach in the regime to a sudden closure of every communication between the State and its population. Therefore, this movement is often disorientating for any analyst on Chinese society as it can bring the most skilled scholar to a path, but then it makes him/her leave out other equally important perspectives, if researchers shall not use a focused but multidisciplinary analysis. Here below some short but sharp examples:

1) At the end of 2016, China had more than 700 million Internet users, a 2.2 % increase over the year before and a penetration rate of 52.2 %; further, Chinese netizens spent an average of almost 20 hours online per week (<http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/china/>). Concurrently, albeit the fundamental role of the Internet within the life of millions of

Chinese users so crucial now for their need to express ideas, feelings and viewpoints after centuries of pervasive censorship in every media (newspapers, radios, TVs), the “Great Firewall” is heavily spoiling their web-experience (Richard Clayton, Steven J. Murdoch, Robert N. M. Watson, 2007). For example, the Internet censorship system built by the CCP is one of the most sophisticated array of techniques and means for the Internet control; further, its pervasive effects on the Chinese cyberspace include words-filtering, cyber-attacks, deletion of sensitive blog-posts and prohibition of many western websites. (OpenNet Initiative, 2012). Why this contradiction? Why is this precarious equilibrium working and Chinese users do not protest in the street for these “e-constraints”? Why is another Arab Spring not foreseeable in China?

If we continue exploring other layers of the Chinese cyberspace, we can notice another swinging of the pendulum because we can observe a further paradox in this process as 2) “the majority of Chinese netizens are either unaware of the Great Firewall or unconcerned by it” (Damm 2007, 282-28; see also, Fengshu Liu, 2010). Additionally, in China the Internet censorship – even when it is sometimes perceived by those netizens with a higher level of education - is quite accepted as the majority of Chinese users agree with the government policies about the Internet regulations and even support its vision of control over the domestic Internet (Guo Z., Feng C. 2012; Li Y. 2009). Besides, if we go deeper through other layers of the Chinese cyberspace by analyzing manifold contradictions, we can find a further surprising singularity.

3) Albeit the pervasive effects of the Internet restrictions and considering 600 million netizens active every day, the majority of scholars might expect that the Chinese common attitude would be a regular employ of circumvention tools in order to overtake the GFW and to benefit from the full access to free information by connecting to the rest of the world. However, again, another paradox and hence another swinging, as a research in 2011 (Hal Roberts et al, 2011) established that almost the 95% of web page requests in China are towards websites that are hosted within China's borders. Additionally, in another study by Hal Roberts in 2010, it was demonstrated that, "at most, only 3% of users in countries with pervasive Internet filtering, including China, regularly use circumvention tools" (Hal Roberts et al., 2010, 1-2). We probably could proceed in this way ad infinitum and find out thousands of contradictions, but let us take into account another pivotal example. If we consider the sophistication of the Internet censorship system, it is problematic to explain even for a beginner researcher the reasons why the CCP is employing the Internet as the milestone on which to base any future step of the country (Hachigian, 2015) as the government is actually doing, instead of shutting off this dangerous threat as Egypt did in 2011. The strategy of blocking the Internet in China might be logical in order to avoid dissidents to organize protests in the streets through the possibilities of SNS⁴. In the Egyptian case, the regime actually achieved the opposite result, as Hassanpour has demonstrated. In

⁴ A social networking website is an online platform that allows users to create a public profile and interact with other users on the website. Social networking websites usually have a new user input a list of people with whom they share a connection and then allow the people on the list to confirm or deny the connection. After connections are established, the new user can search the networks of his connections to make more connections. A social networking site may also be known as a social website or a social networking website. (From Tecnopedia, <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/4956/social-networking-site-sns>)

his remarks, he points out that often a sudden interruption of mass communication “accelerates revolutionary mobilization and proliferates decentralized contention” (Hassanpour N., 2011; 1-2). Hassanpour, has argued that social media often “act against grass roots mobilization, discouraging face-to-face communication and mass presence in the streets” (Hassanpour N., 2011; 3-4) because they deflate the protest into a virtual political stage. CCP leaders have proved that they have been attentive in adapting their policies and strategies to the continuous social and political developments occurring outside the PRC, by facing social instability with a tight Leninist regime but upgraded with deliberative practices (Baogang He, 2011). Therefore, Chinese authorities have probably refined their tactics by taking into account the riots in Egypt; thus by allowing Chinese users to continue benefiting from a filtered and controlled Internet, but conceding some online democratic practices. Concurrently, they have continued prohibiting other habits, as the connection towards some foreign websites but, through another oscillation, without shutting off completely the Internet. The main strategy of the CCP is the offering of a combination of rewards and punishment to induce a particular behavior. On the one hand, the acceptance of the regime (this part is associated with the “command” attitude of an authoritarian government). On the other, social and economic improvements with better life’s condition and a domestic Internet with restrictive features but that are peculiar to the Chinese culture (language, style, online preferences typical of the Chinese urban youth (and, in this part, we can observe the peculiar deliberative process in action).

4) One more example, the Chinese economy is growing by 7/8% a year and it is one of the largest in the world, but we can observe another

contradiction because the 18.5% of the population lives on less than a dollar a day (World Bank, World Development Report 2002). 5) Lastly, if we consider not only the Internet, but also politics. The Chinese authoritarianism is based, for instance, on the One Party system and on its preservation. Therefore, unequivocally, no democratic turn is foreseeable in the next years but, with another swinging, the regime concedes some deliberative online spaces (e-consultations and e-polls, for example) similar to some practices of the Western democracies in order to be legitimated to survive and to avoid protests (Baogang He, 2006; Min Jiang 2010). In fact, as Gilley (2008), Yih-Jye Hwang and Florian Schneider (2011) have pointed out, scholars are continuously surprised by the extent by which the CCP apparatus is accepting the opening up of the Chinese public discourse and a growing social maturation of its citizens by allowing deliberative offline and online spaces. Further, although Chinese leaders continue to reject Western-style political reforms, it is anyhow astonishing that simultaneously they are liberalizing Chinese economy with a semi-capitalistic approach. Why these political and economic attempts of openness within a State which remains authoritarian?

Fourth Gateway: who is holding the pendulum and how? Unequivocally, in order to explore the Chinese Internet censorship system and the contradictions of the Chinese cyber-society, it is imperative not only to follow the oscillations of the pendulum, but, primarily, to understand who is holding it, who is so efficient to manage its oscillations with the purpose to maintain the status quo and the social stability. This is the key issue in order to understand the reasons why within China nowadays it is possible to notice a rich and contentious - but high controlled - cyberspace with the

pervasive presence of the State and, concurrently, the acceptance by the majority of the population of the Internet regulations imposed by the CCP. (Guo Z., Feng C. 2012; Li Y. 2009). This is the key issue to comprehend the reason why, although the Great Firewall is so sophisticated to avoid Chinese users to connect, for example, to Facebook, YouTube or to search for unfiltered information within the Chinese search engines, at the same time, it has been reported that “89% of Chinese Internet users strongly believe that they have full access to the information that is available on the Internet”. (From the Global Internet User Survey - Internet Society 2012).

Fifth Gateway: the individual unit. If, on the one hand, it is imperative to focus the exploration of the Internet in China by starting from the analysis of role of the State in managing the online information, therefore at a macro-level analysis, concurrently, as methodological crucial strategy, we have to take into account the individual unit. Firstly, because the large number of users in China might become soon a mass difficult to restrain. Secondly, a few studies are centered on the individual and the related potentialities. The exploration of the Internet at an individual level might let scholars glimpse imminent changes, as an effect, on the macro layers of the Chinese society as the economy, or, for example, the way of accessing to open information. This could alter the structure of the Chinese political system as it has always been based on a strong control of information thanks to the articulated organization of the Chinese propaganda system (Shambaugh, 1995).

2 Review of the Literature

A controversy: cyber-utopians and realists. This research is set within the literature that explores the relationship between Internet's usage and civic engagement within an authoritarian regime. Scholars and researchers have tended to adopt a dichotomous vision of the field, by emphasizing, on the one hand, the revolutionary role of the Internet or, on the other hand, totally minimizing its weight. Therefore, with the advent of this field of research, two schools of thought started being predominant in studying new technologies, social and political change in authoritarian countries. On the one hand, the so-called cyber-realists are those researchers skeptical about the real weight of social media in the political and social change (for example, Morozov, 2009, 2011, 2012; Gladwell, 2010, 2011; Zuckerman, 2011; Palfrey, Etling and Faris, 2009). They consider social technologies (social media like Twitter and Facebook, blogs, bulletin boards, forums) irrelevant gadgets, more useful for authoritarian regimes in order to control dissident leaders and discordant opinions. Alternatively, if new technologies are even able to have some influences, they act as a safety valve as these e-platforms can relieve pressure for political change by allowing dissident people, troublemakers or simple netizens eager for a social and/or political change "to vent frustrations into a marginal medium" (Hassid, 2012). Therefore, the dissent can melt its drives of freedom into a virtual, controllable environment.