On June 20, 2008, President Hu Jintao marked the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Daily (Renmin ribao 人民日报), the official voice of the Chinese Communist Party, by paying a formal visit to the central offices of the newspaper. Congratulating those assembled for their service to the people, Hu called upon the staff to do an even better job of “performing its function as the organ of the Party’s Central Committee guiding public opinion.” Shortly thereafter, in a move indicative of just how vital new information technologies have become in renegotiating the boundaries between the Chinese state and society, Hu used a computer terminal to hold the first-ever online chat between a reigning president and the Chinese people on the popular online portal of the People’s Daily, the “Strong Nation Forum” (qiangguo luntan 强国论坛).

Hailing the chatroom participants as his “netizen-friends” (wangmin pengyou 网民朋友), the president extended his “sincere regards and best wishes” to all before taking questions. With the floor open, the first question fielded by the secretary-general was if he often had occasion to go online. Hu responded that, despite his demanding work schedule, he tried to find time to go online as often as possible, and that he did frequent the People’s Daily’s “Strong Nation” Forum during his forays on the Web. In response to the second question, Hu revealed that he used the Web primarily to read domestic and international news, to better understand which problems or issues were of concern to his “netizen-friends,” and in hopes of learning their opinions and suggestions regarding the workings of the party-state. Finally, in responding to the last question, Hu reassured his public that the leaders of the party-state “pay extremely close attention” to the opinions and recommendations of “netizen-friends,” because “the people are fundamental:”

We govern in the peoples’ behalf, and consequently in considering problems, implementing policy, and handling issues, we all wish to hear the broad range of the opinions of the masses, and gather together their wisdom. The Internet is one important
channel through which we can understand popular sentiment, and assemble the collective wisdom of the people.¹

Perhaps even more revealing than the exchange itself was the manner in which it was reported, both at home and abroad. Whereas Xinhua’s English language news service proudly proclaimed “Chinese President Holds First Ever Web Chat with Citizens,” and China Daily boasted “Hu Makes History with Online Chat,”² Western news outlets were not only more reserved in their assessment, but openly skeptical as well. In London, The Guardian reported that “‘Boss Hu’ Ducks Tricky Question in Online Chat,” and emphasized the mediated nature of the exchange, pointing out that the forum host doctored the manner in which some of the questions were addressed, and the fact that the president, “who is widely seen as stiff and distant,” did not type his own responses, but dictated them instead.³ The Guardian’s chief rival, The Times, claimed that Hu’s appearance was in fact a public relations attempt “intended to polish Mr. Hu’s rather stilted image,” and summed up the visit with a headline designed to emphasize the social distance between the Chinese party-state and its citizens: “Hu Pokes His Head over ‘Great Firewall’ to Seek the Opinions of 221m Netizens.”⁴

The concept of China’s “Great Firewall,” a term likely first coined by Geremie Barmé and Sang Ye in an article written for Wired magazine in 1997,⁵ has taken on a life of its own among scholars, journalists and pundits. Often connected to the “Golden Shield” program of Web surveillance originally proposed the following year, the “Great Firewall” conjures images of an ill-fated xenophobic regime struggling to erect and maintain technologically advanced barriers of censorship to limit access to information by its perpetually restive subject population. Such references hearken back to the Cold War imagery of iron and/or bamboo curtains, deployed to great effect by Ronald Reagan just after June 4, 1989, when the former president wishfully observed, “The biggest of Big Brothers is increasingly helpless against communications technology. Information is the oxygen of the modern age. It seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire, it wafts across the electrified, booby-trapped borders.... The Goliath of totalitarian control will be brought down by the David of the microchip.”⁶ Just over a decade later, Thomas Friedman of The New York Times likewise boasted that “the Internet and globalization “are acting like nutcrackers to open societies and empower” pro-democracy forces under illiberal regimes by providing them with “artillery” in the form of the Internet.⁷
The belligerent undertones that drive the policy debate over Internet access in mainland China have likewise pervaded popular discussions on the English language Web, triggering angry protests against Western companies like Google and Yahoo that have been accused of cooperating with Chinese censors in order to preserve their access to the vast mainland Chinese market. Wry net activists have launched a downloadable open-source Firefox module that promises users outside the Chinese mainland the opportunity to “take an unforgettable [sic.] virtual trip to China and experience the technical expertise of the Chinese Ministry of Information Industry” to screen and block information in real time on their own computers. One popular site that regularly reports on Web-related developments derisively refers to the booming mainland Chinese blogosphere as “China’s Censoredsphere.” References to China’s “Great Firewall” have even spawned a pop paean to impregnability by the British indie rock band, Honeytrap.

The roiling controversy over Chinese cyberspace is fraught with moral indignation on both sides of the issue. In May 2005 on Slashdot.com, the popular English-language forum that bills itself as “news for nerds,” speculation that Google had agreed to cooperate with Chinese censors stimulated a heated discussion regarding the operation of the “Great Firewall.” One post in English addressed to the “Citizens of China” offered links to five pages presumed to be blocked in China, including speculation regarding genocide in Tibet and a summary of Jasper Becker’s Hungry Ghosts, a book that documents the famine that followed in the wake of communization during the 1958 so-called “Great Leap Forward.” Concluding with a link to the famed photo of the “Tank Man,” a Chinese citizen who faced down a line of PLA tanks near Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, the message concluded with the charge: “Freedom starts with you.” This provoked an immediate response from “HungWeiLo,” a reader who argued that the Chinese people with whom s/he came into frequent contact are already quite knowledgeable about all the information provided in the links above, and most do not hesitate to engage in discussions about such topics over lunch. The fact that you feel all 1.6 billion Chinese are most certainly blind to these pieces of information is a direct result of years of indoctrination of Western (I’m assuming American) propaganda.
In a similar vein, Liu Kang recently observed that “tales of China’s political repression and terror have more to do with the political, ideological, and commercial objectives of the Western media than with what really happens in China today.”

The propensity of the Western media to sensationalize Internet censorship was recently highlighted when two well known Chinese bloggers celebrated for their irreverence, Massage Milk (按摩乳) and Milk Pig (奶猪), posted the following statement on their Webpages: “Due to unavoidable reasons with which everyone is familiar, this blog is temporarily closed.” The BBC’s Sebastian Usher quickly filed a report linking the closures to an upcoming annual session of National People’s Congress, taking an opportunity to observe that the Chinese government “administers the most sophisticated system of Internet censorship and control anywhere in the world,” one that “is tightened even further” during key political junctures.

Within hours, Reporters Without Borders issued a statement condemning the closures. The following day, the two blogs were back on-line: in his first post, Wang Xiaofeng of Massage Milk admitted staging the closure of the blog “to give foreign media a lesson that Chinese affairs are not always the way you think,” and castigated Western media outlets for their “irresponsible” reportage of the ambiguous statement posted on the Web.

Driving much of the hand-wringing that occurs in the West over the Great Firewall is what Joshua Kurlantzick has identified as the “pervasive myth” that “the Internet is a powerful force for democracy,” and the deeply held suspicion that attempts to restrict full access to the Web slows inevitable progress toward political liberalization. Wang Jisi, Director of the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), argues that such predictions likely stem from a persistent “propensity to view Chinese politics (as well as politics in other “undemocratic states”) as a constant division and tension between ‘the authorities,’ which are preconceived as hostile to the West, and ‘the people,’ who must be friendly to the United States and its allies.” Yet empirical evidence is mounting that the link between democracy, political liberalization, and Internet adoption is tenuous at best. First, at the heart of much concern about China’s so-called “Great Firewall” is the suspicion that techniques of censorship and surveillance employed by authoritarian regimes like the CCP discourage Internet use, either directly or indirectly. This is clearly untrue: the most recent statistics released by the Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) show that, by the end of June 2008, the number of netizens, or Internet users, in China reached 253 million, surpassing the number of U.S.-based netizens, and making China the nation with the largest number of Internet users in
the world. Second, despite the rhetoric and speculation to the contrary, the Great Firewall is not impenetrable. While evading surveillance and censorship can be tricky, Internet proxy use in mainland China has risen in recent years. A 2007 CASS survey of Internet users in seven Chinese cities found that over a quarter of Chinese netizens regularly turned to proxy servers in order to surf the Web. Statistics collected by Dynamic Internet Technology, one of the many companies that provide free proxy service to mainland based Web users, show that during momentous events like the SARS outbreak, the number of mainlanders regularly relying on proxies to access Websites normally not available in mainland China rise by at least 50 percent. After the outbreak was contained, traffic on proxies remained high, with the overwhelming majority of proxy users originating in mainland China. Third, popular constructions of the Great Firewall presume that mainland Chinese users, given their druthers, would elect to have uncensored and unfiltered access to the Web. This is also untrue. A 2007 Pew Center survey carried out in mainland China by CASS found that 80 percent of mainland respondents agreed that the Internet should be controlled or managed, and 85 percent of those respondents asserted that the Chinese government should be the entity in charge of controlling or managing it.

With the foregoing caveats in mind, at least some of the assumptions underlying the “Great Firewall” may be open to qualification. Without denying that censorship and surveillance of the Chinese Internet does occur or suggesting that its effects are not significant, some have pointed to the increasingly robust realm of Chinese cyberspace as an “incipient but yet dynamic” form of civil society characterized by a “greater diversity” of online spaces than are readily available in the offline public sphere. Zhao Yuezhi notes that “although one cannot overstate the pervasiveness and draconian nature of this regime, nor its efficacy in social control,” what she finds most striking in her research of traditional and Web-based Chinese media today is “the ever more thunderous drumbeat of opposition” to repression and control, and the impressive variety of forms that such opposition takes.

This chapter seeks to map some of the rich and varied terrain of the online public sphere beyond the so-called “Great Firewall of China,” and to demonstrate that, censorship notwithstanding, mainland Chinese netizens indeed make extensive use of the Internet to reflect upon, debate, and contest political matters. One 2000 survey conducted by Guo Liang and Bu Wei found that nearly 63 percent of the mainland Chinese respondents surveyed regarded the Internet as the best medium for “expressing personal opinions or viewpoints, or publishing self-authored work,” as compared to 22.7 percent and 14.6 percent for newspapers and magazines,
respectively. Following Michael Warner, whose analysis of public discourse focuses on “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation… part of the common repertoire of modern culture,” this chapter seeks to replace the popular conception of a singular “virtual public sphere” tightly bounded by a “Great Firewall,” with a more internally diverse and porous aggregation of shifting groups of netizens that are primarily constituted by their collective attention to a particular text or issue. Likewise, Nancy Fraser points out in her work on the public sphere that, despite assumptions to the contrary, the historically bounded bourgeois public sphere described in the work of Jurgen Habermas was defined in large part by its exclusivity. Nonetheless, Fraser emphasizes the role of collective deliberation in the formation of publics and counter-publics in the public sphere, arguing that it is the process of discursive interaction, and a not unrestricted access, that defines the public sphere as such. The remaining sections of this chapter will focus on a series of recent debates centered in Chinese cyberspace on the nature of the contemporary Chinese state, the ongoing process of market reform, and popular concern about the nature of post-socialist Chinese society.

Debating the State
In late September 2008, on the eve of the PRC’s 59th National Day, one of China’s most popular newspapers, Southern Weekend (Nanjang Zhoumo 南方周末), invited its readers to take the opportunity to “quietly consider” what type of relationship they, as citizens, actually had with their country. The editors noted that the word “country” (guojiā 国家) had two meanings in Chinese: first, one that corresponds roughly to the English meaning of the term, and refers to a land and its people; and, second, a term that signifies the power of the state, and the organs of government. In particular, the editors at Southern Weekend sought answers to four questions from their broad readership: “What do I do for my country? What does my country do for me? What can I do for my country? And, what can my country do for me?”

The selection of responses Southern Weekend published on its Website were by no means uniformly positive. Several of the responses refer directly to contemporary social ills, such as unemployment and the steeply rising cost of school tuition, or to recent scandals that reflect poorly on the regulatory capacity of the state, such as the sale of melamine-tainted milk powder by the Sanlu corporation. A small handful convey a sense of hopelessness, cynicism, or disappointment about rising unemployment, diminishing social welfare benefits, or political corruption.
However, the invitation from *Southern Weekend* elicited a much broader response than appeared on the newspaper’s site. Chinese netizens posted and circulated widely a variety of responses, stimulating frank and sometimes heated exchanges regarding the relationship between the nation and its citizens. Paris-based Xiong Peiyun, author of a widely-read blog and erstwhile contributor to *Southern Weekend*, offered the following on his blog in response to the second and fourth questions:

(What does my country do for me?) Defamation is not [a sign of] sound moral character, I decided before I had any positive recollections I would refuse to answer this type of question. But my conscience is clear: if, in my life I have some beautiful memories, that is by no means due to what the country has done for me, nor is it due to what the country has not done for me.

(What can my country do for me?) The state works too hard, and should take a break. For the past fifty years, the state has fucked up our minds pretty badly (*guojia wei women ba xin dou cao huaile* 国家为我们把心都操坏了). The people of this generation are self-reliant and independent, and in many ways don’t want to burden the country. Since the state doesn’t have a collective stomach with which to digest food for me, I would ask the state not to use the collective brain it doesn’t have to think for me. If this were a lecture hall, I would “politely” exhort the state back to its seat, so that I could finish speaking.32

One of the most frequently cross-posted responses on the Chinese language Web, worth quoting in full, was offered by a netizen who goes by the name Wuyuesanren (五岳散人):

(What have you done for your country?) When I was a student, with respect to my country (and here I should say “the government”), I was an excellent if embryonic little screw,33 that subsequently became scrap metal (*youxin luosi dade chuxing, houlai baofale* 优秀螺丝钉的雏形，后来报废了). In the first six years of my working life as an electrical engineer in a state-owned factory, I think I contributed my meager bit of surplus value. Afterwards, as a reporter, other than paying my taxes, I wrote as much as could be reported about the dark side of things; and about that which I was not allowed to report,
I couldn’t do anything. Now as a commentator, I remit the tax that I genuinely owe in the form of speech—and this I offer to my true country.

To my true country, please allow me this modest boast: I have done what I could, and I plan to keep doing it. And to those few persons who have confused their identities with the country, please also allow me to brag a bit: you have not succeeded, or at least not completely. I also intend to keep it up.

(What has the country done for me?) The country (and here I mean the true nation) gave me the color of my skin, my language, and my cultural foundation: for instance, I always think that Chinese food is the best, and that English tea is dogshit. Aside from these things which are innate, or which I had to accept before I was capable of making my own choices, the country did nothing for me.

But in another sense, the country just did so much for me, giving me piles of textbooks full of dogshit, telling me how to take pride in devoting myself to the state-owned factory, after which I discovered that most of my coworkers who also believed this had been laid off, always looking at the Ministry of Truth documents telling me what I’m not allowed to report, and even so many things that I can’t say on the Internet. And so on, and so on, and so on. And now I just discovered that the milk I have been drinking has a problem. Is that enough for you?

(What else can you do for your country?) This question also does well to raise the two divergent meanings of “country” (as a matter of fact, you can refer to my answer to the first question). As long as I have hands that can type, a brain that still works, the things that I am doing now is what I plan to keep on doing. Lian Yue once said, ‘We are the system,’ Li Ao said, ‘This is my country, and I want to make her free.’ I have neither their profundity nor their passion. What I will say is: ‘When I see something wrong, there is no one who can shut me up!’

(What else can the country do for you?) To this country now called the Peoples’ Republic of China, formerly known as the country of the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing [dynasties]: I have the things you have given me, I live on your soil, you have already given me all that you can. That which you cannot give me, I wish to give to you. The best thing about other countries is not what they can do for me, but rather that they understand better what they cannot do to me. If you knew what you cannot do,
that would be doing more for me; and if you do not know that, that is what I will make you understand.34

As the above responses make clear, the public that formed in dialog with the questions posted by *Southern Weekend* increasingly focused on parsing the various meanings associated with the Chinese word for country or nation (*guojia* 国家), and in particular, how to separate the institutions and apparatuses of state power from the more durable and inclusive concept of the nation. Harvard-trained Professor Ding Xueliang addressed precisely this aspect of the emerging debate in his responses to the four “difficult questions” on his blog, observing that the Chinese term for “country” actually combined the meanings of four English words: “state,” “country” “land,” and “nation,” “the differences between which are not easy to discern: the term ‘country’ emphasizes the national territory and its people; whereas ‘state’ primarily refers to the political power of the government.”35 Within days, Chang Ping, a regular commentator in the pages of *Southern Weekend*, composed an essay entitled “What is a Country?” sparked in part by the four questions. Chang noted that, at first, “I felt I didn’t know how to respond, since I didn’t know to what these various [references to] ‘country’ were referring.” Citing Ding’s nuanced response, however, Chang proposed likewise to decouple the concept of the “nation” that encompasses “a sovereign territory and its people” from that of its “ruling institutions,” noting that the latter can clearly act in ways that do not accord with the interests of its citizens. Noting that the esteemed Chinese Academy of Science had just released a National Health Report that ranked the PRC in first place among “responsible nations,” and the U.S. last, Chang expressed his puzzlement at how the concept of “national responsibility” might be addressed in global and historical terms, and to whom the “nation” might be held responsible.36

Censorship notwithstanding, the original invitation by *Southern Weekend* created at least a virtual space within which some frank exchange of views among netizens could and did take place. The cross-posting of particularly critical posts, like that offered by Wuyuesanren, in numerous fora broadened the discussion and likely stimulated other, like-minded contributions and reflections across the Web. Further, Chang Ping’s commentary, building upon Ding Xueliang’s ruminations, illustrates the interpenetrability of cyberpublics, and, as the following example will underscore, the revolutionary capacity of Chinese cyberspace to knit together specialized, academic discussions with popular concerns in a manner that creates recombinant effects across social strata.37
Contesting the Market: Neoliberalism and the “Lang Xianping Storm”

During the summer of 2003, a group of mainland Chinese academics turned their attention the question of neoliberalism and its impact on market reform in China. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) established a Research Group on Neoliberalism, which convened a conference and ultimately produced a 2004 volume entitled *Neoliberalism: Commentaries and Analyses* (*Xin ziyouzhuyi yu pinglun* 新自由主义与评析). The contributors to the volume collectively argued in part that neoliberalism represented nothing less than the “theoretical expression of the ideology of globalization of the international monopoly capitalist class, the essential aim of which is to dismember the nation-state in order to create more space for monopoly capital.”38 Shortly thereafter, in August 2004, *Guangming ribao* published an article, “Beware the Neoliberal Thought Tide,” that was later reposted by interested users on a Xinhua Web site. The article reportedly received 9,800 hits and over 500 tags in a mere three and a half days after its migration to the Xinhua news Web.39

Also in August 2004, Lang Xianping (Larry Lang), a professor of finance at the Chinese University of Hong Kong who holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, gave a lecture at Fudan University in Shanghai in which he charged many state-owned enterprises (SOEs)—including well-known Chinese companies like Greencool, Kelon, and Haier—were using management buyouts (MBOs) to seize state assets and defraud the public. Although similar objections to the stripping of state assets had been raised previously by a small handful of others, Lang presented detailed data that described precisely how Greencool had privatized public assets, publishing the results of his study under the provocative title, “A Bacchanalian Feast as the ‘State Retreats and the People Advance’”40. In a separate article published online on the same day, Lang publicly addressed seven key questions about the leveraged MBOs staged by Greencool, marshalling an impressive series of graphs and tables that raised serious ethical questions about the conglomerate, concluding that if Gu Chujun, the chairman of the board of Greencool, “is a model Chinese entrepreneur, then I genuinely weep for China’s future.”41 Whereas the CEOs of Kelon and Haier remained relatively indifferent to Lang’s attack, Gu responded by threatening to file suit against Lang in a Hong Kong court of law.

By way of response, Lang moved to mobilize public opinion in his favor. With a letter from Gu’s lawyer in hand, on August 17 Lang logged on to one of the most vibrant and popular
chatrooms in Chinese cyberspace, sohu.com, to make his case, triggering what has since become known as the “Lang Xianping Storm” (Lang Xianping jufeng 郎咸平飓风) or “Lang Cyclone” (Lang xuanfeng 郎旋风). On August 30, Sohu established a special site entitled “The Great Debate on SOE Property Rights Reform,” which quickly became the locus of a heated debate among netizens—one count by Sohu claimed as many as 30,000 Internet posts addressing the topic. On August 31, the online financial information portal of Dongnan Morning News (Dongnan zaochen 东南早报) reported that over 40,000 netizens had read Lang’s online critique of the Greencool MBOs, and that 90 percent of them indicated their support for Lang’s position on the perils of privatization. In summing up the online debate in retrospect, the China Daily noted that the “overwhelming majority” of opinions posted supported “the neoleftists headed by Lang.”

A counterpublic soon formed, with a group of defensive mainstream economic analysts and wealthy entrepreneurs at its core. Picking up on the debate in cyberspace, the 21st-Century Business Herald published a trenchant critique of Lang with the headline, “The Direction of SOE Property Right Reform Must Not Be Changed.” Noted Beijing University economist Zhang Weiying offered a heated rebuttal of the “new leftist” camp in an interview with the Economic Observer on August 28. The editorial department of Beijing Youth Daily rushed to defend Zhang and others, charging that “it is unfair for many people to criticize mainstream economists for speaking on behalf of the propertied class or for their own self-interests. If he had not believed in a grand principle, Zhang Weiying could not have braved the tide.” For his part, Zhang continues to argue that economic policymakers need to remain insulated from public opinion, particularly as it is circulated on the Internet, because Chinese netizens are easily misled.

By September 15th, Lang’s trenchant criticism of not only leveraged MBOs, but of neoliberal market reform, had marshaled sufficient public attention that ten well-known mainland Chinese academics issued a formal statement supporting Lang and criticizing the “neoliberal views” that lay behind China’s efforts to restructure SOEs. Within days, three economists—Zuo Dapei, Yang Fan, and Han Deqiang—wrote a letter to the Chinese leadership demanding that an investigation of the three companies researched by Lang, calling for hearings on the attrition of state assets through unmonitored privatization, and urging the leadership to rethink the entire process of state enterprise reform.

However, the public that formed on the Internet to debate the issue continued to widen, ultimately adding an impressive diversity of voices to what had begun chiefly as an academic
exercise. On September 23, 2004, a netizen referring to himself as “Mr. Yundanshuinuan,” a laid-off worker in his fifties, commented that the discussion on the People’s Daily “Strong Nation Forum” struck him as “odd” insofar as “the sole missing voice is that of the workers.” Forum participants responded with the following comments:

- State enterprise workers have no right to speak; their only right is to be laid off.
- Where are the political leaders of the people? Come out and speak a word of justice for the proletariat and do one good thing.
- I appeal, with my blood, to the Central Committee to immediately stop and reexamine a process of state enterprise reform that is dominated by power and money!
- Who is listening even if workers are speaking out?
- Where can workers speak out?
- The reform should enrich workers and farmers. Why not?
- How many super rich individuals have been created through the plundering of state assets?!
- How much say have the masses of workers had in the more than 10 years of SOE reform? Oh, government, who do you represent?
- This is easy to understand. The industrial working class is no longer the leading class today. Their words have no weight. It is not that they are not speaking; it is that nobody listens to them.
- In the eyes of the elite, workers and farmers are superfluous….
- This strange phenomenon clashes with our Constitution and the nature of our state!

Meanwhile, in real time, workers at a former military factory in Chongqing staged a strike that began on August 18, 2004, just as the “Lang Xianping storm” was brewing in cyberspace. The Chongqing 3403 Factory, which workers claimed was worth nearly 200 million yuan, was sold to a private entrepreneur for a mere 22 million yuan, with 20 million of the down payment offered in the form of a loan. Naide, the corporation that made the purchase, was a former SOE that had been privatized and acquired by factory director Lin Chaoyang in 1998 under the Chongqing government’s SOE privatization program. Lin targeted the 3403 Factory, 30 kilometers away. When the 3403 Factory was on the verge of declaring bankruptcy, Lin became its designated
“backdoor” purchaser, in part through colluding with the 3403 factory manager, whom he later rewarded with a handsome sinecure. When the workers learned of the situation, they mobilized to purchase the factory themselves for 30 million yuan, but Chongqing officials dragged their feet in responding to the offer. On August 25, 2004, more than 300 police officers stormed the factory, and, five days later, more than 1,200 police were sent in to put down the strike. On August 28, 2004, *China and the World* published an article signed by “Ordinary Workers at the Chongqing 3403 Factory and Chongqing Naide Industrial Corp.,” that charged mainstream economists and researchers like those attacking Lang Xianping with making false and groundless claims. They were, furthermore, “sucking up the sweat and blood of the people on the one hand and illegally receiving bribes from those who got rich instantly from the reforms on the other.” On the “Protagonist Forum,” one netizen began a new subject thread with the header “Chongqing 3403 Factory: 200 million yuan worth of state assets sold for 22 million yuan; workers demanded democratic management and production for self-salvation, bloody conflict ensues,” which generated the following responses between August 28 and August 31, 2004:

- Can the good leading comrades within the party who are said to exist in large numbers, especially those respected senior leaders, contact the workers in the factory?...
- Why can’t old and new leftists mobilize 10 percent of the energy they mobilized for the petition to commemorate Mao’s anniversary, to support the real struggles of Chongqing workers?
- This issue revealed that after more than several decades of revolution, some people still have answers to questions such as who creates wealth and who sustains whose life upside down. How can such individuals call themselves communists and become leaders?...
- This article was posted at Century Solon Forum. It attracted more than 100 hits within 10 minutes, and the Webmaster quickly deleted it…
- I propose . . . a petition to support 3403 Factory….
- May this material be gathered together and be integrated with our support for Lang Xianping, so as to stop SOE property rights reform?
- I appeal to the entire working class in Chongqing with industrial workers as its core force, to unite and oppose privatization.⁴⁹
As the foregoing comments clearly demonstrate, publics and counterpublics in Chinese cyberspace remain not only fully cognizant of the censorship and surveillance to which they are subjected on the Web, but even openly discuss their frustration with the limitations placed upon public discourse in cyberspace. Yet perhaps even more intriguing, as the next examples demonstrate, is the manner in which the dynamics of censorship have come to be internalized by Chinese netizens, who have banded together over time to exercise their own form of social control by using the Web as a form of grassroots policing of moral conduct.

**Confronting Society: Human Flesh Search Engines**

Perhaps one of the most vibrant foci of recent debates in Chinese cyberspace is the rise of new social forces and social phenomena in the post-Mao era. To the extent that disturbing new trends are seen as the products of market reform and/or the gradual “retreat” of the state, some of these debates have powerful political overtones, and offer implicit critiques of the Party and its current leadership. Equally telling is the extent to which Chinese netizens have been making use of the Internet not merely to engage in public deliberation about such social phenomena, but also to organize, from the bottom up, to exact social justice on those who have been accused of transgressing social norms.

On February 26, 2006, a netizen named “Glass Shard” (cui boli zhazi 碎玻璃渣子) entered a post on the discussion board of Mop magazine (maopu luntan 猫扑论坛) under the heading, “Outrage: bloodthirsty middle-aged hottie slaughters small animal.”. The post included a photo of a provocatively dressed middle-aged woman trampling a kitten to death with her stiletto heels, which the poster said had been excerpted from a longer video. The clip that finally circulated in Chinese cyberspace showed an elegantly dressed woman in a scenic public park who briefly cuddled a small kitten before putting it on the ground and stomping it to death with her stiletto heels. The shocking footage elicited outrage from Chinese netizens, who quickly spread the footage across all of the major fora in Chinese cyberspace, demanding to know who she was. Netizens gathered at the Mop discussion board, not only to express their outrage and disgust, but also to exchange information gleaned from the film clip. Within days, the video was traced back to a user calling herself “Gainmas” registered on the Website of a Hangzhou-based company, www.crushworld.net, who was also found to have used the same name to purchase a pair of high-heeled shoes on eBay the previous year. Enraged netizens launched a denial of service attack that paralyzed the crushworld Website. While the mystery woman in the video was
temporarily dubbed the “Kitten Killer of Hangzhou,” netizens quickly discovered that the public park in which the scene was filmed was in Heilongjiang, and closed in. The name of the cameraman was revealed by a netizen who posed as a potential buyer of the film; other Luobei County residents identified the woman in the video as a nurse who worked at the pharmacy of a local hospital. She had also registered with QQ, a popular mainland Chinese message service, where she posted of herself: “I furiously crush everything to do with you and me.” It took netizens a total of six days to uncover the true identity of the culprit, who issued a lukewarm apology blaming the incident on her despondence following a marital separation. It did little to mollify an enraged cyber-public. Despite the apology and the fact that there was no applicable law in the PRC prohibiting cruel treatment to animals, both she and the cameraman who filmed the episode lost their jobs.

What emerged from the incident was a phenomenon that has since become known as the “human flesh search engine” (renrou sousuo yinqing 人肉搜索引擎), in which self-organized publics of Chinese netizens collectively mobilize their power on the Internet to investigate issues or incidents of interest to them. In the wake of the “kitten killer” incident, a “human flesh search engine” sprang into attack against a 52-year-old farmer, Zhou Zhenglong, who submitted a photo he claimed to have taken in his backyard of the supposedly extinct wild South China tiger. Zhou received 20,000 yuan [Note: Not sure of what should follow 20,000, but I assume it’s “yuan”] from excited officials at the Shaanxi Department of Forestry for the photo, who quickly staged a major press conference to announce the tiger’s discovery. Forums across Chinese cyberspace filled up with posts accusing Zhou of fraud; a few weeks later, netizens traced the photo to an old Lunar New Year poster, leading to Zhou’s arrest. On September 27, 2008, he was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison for fraud.

More recently, Jiang Yan blogged privately about her devastation after discovering her husband’s infidelity shortly before jumping to her death from the couple’s 24th-floor apartment. Following the dramatic suicide, a friend of the victim established a memorial Website to which she uploaded the diary posts, and some photographs of the once-happily married couple. Outraged Chinese netizens determined that they would seek a form of posthumous justice for Jiang. Within only days, photos of the unfaithful husband, an advertising executive at Saatchi & Saatchi in Beijing, along with his mistress, were posted on various Internet sites, along with their phone numbers, addresses and national ID numbers. Enraged netizens surrounded both his
home and the home of his parents with slogans accusing him of causing his wife’s death, and flooded Saatchi & Saatchi with harassing phone calls until the firm decided to fire him.

Last spring, Wang sued Zhang Leiyi, the friend of his deceased wife, for uploading her diary. He also sued leading Chinese Internet portals Tianya and Daqi for violation of his privacy and defamation of character. In December 2008, the Chaoyang District Court in Beijing fined Daqi.com and Zhang Leyi [NOTE: Above you have Leiyi and here it is Leyi; not sure which is correct] a total of 8,000 yuan (about US$1,100).51

In April 2008, a 21-year-old Duke University student from Shandong province named Grace Wang tried to mediate between rival groups on the Duke campus engaged in a “Free Tibet” protest. Wang’s involvement was posted to the Internet, where she was quickly labeled a “race traitor.” “Human flesh search engines” quickly uncovered her address and phone number in the U.S., as well as her parents’ address in Shandong, resulting in a stream of death threats to all involved, and an incident of vandalism in which a pot of human excrement was left on her parents’ doorstep.52

As the foregoing case suggests, “human flesh search engines” have the capacity to train their collective attention on policing not only social mores, but on political issues as well. In October 2008, Lin Jiaxiang, a party secretary in the Shenzhen Maritime Administration, was caught on the closed-circuit security camera at a restaurant asking an eleven-year old girl, who was dining with her parents at the time, for directions to the washroom. When Lin appeared confused by the directions, she offered to escort him. The young girl claims that when they got to the door of the washroom, Lin grabbed her by the neck and forced her into the room in an apparent attempt to molest her. The restaurant camera shows that moments later the girl ran back to her parents to report the incident. During the argument that ensued between Lin, the child’s parents and restaurant staff, Lin is clearly heard to exclaim: “Do you know who I am? I was sent here by the Beijing Ministry of Transportation, my rank is the same as your mayor. So what if I pinched a little child’s neck? Who the fuck are you people to me?! Do you dare fuck with me? Just watch how I am going to deal with you!” After the story appeared online, and the footage of the incident was posted on YouTube,53 netizens identified Lin and his position within the Shenzhen Maritime Administration. Lin was subsequently fired from his job and it was reported that he would be “severely punished.”54

Two months later, Nanjing city Jiangning district Housing Administration director Zhou Jiugeng was relieved from duty for “expressing inappropriate opinions to the media without
On January 18, 2009, the Jiangsu People’s Congress Standing Committee approved the Xuzhou City “Computer Information System Security Protection Regulations,” a set of local ordinances designed to delimit some of the potentially harmful effects of human flesh search engines. The regulations criminalize the disclosure and sharing of private information about others on the Internet without their permission. Both originators and propagators may face a fine of up to 5,000 yuan, and, in more serious cases, offenders may be barred from using a computer or accessing the Internet for six months. Not surprisingly, news of the regulation triggered an avalanche of commentary on the Web, with an estimated 90 percent of the posters on “People’s Net” opposed, because they claimed such restrictions “worked against the monitoring of government officials by grassroots citizens.” One netizen commented that “corrupt officials must love this piece of legislation.” NetEase ran a survey on the same day, asking, “Are you worried about being the target of a human flesh search?” More than 80 percent of the netizens selected the response, “I am not worried because I haven’t done anything wrong.” Another 15 percent, however, expressed concern, and wanted laws banning the activity.

The following day, the leader of the Xuzhou People’s Congress Standing Committee clarified that the law was not intended to be a total ban on “human flesh search engines,” because state law permitted “netizens… [to] expose bad social behavior, or report the illegal activities of leaders and cadres, or criticize uncivilized behavior in society.” Furthermore, “it is the right of the public to monitor the government.” Citing the case of the former Quanshan district party secretary, Dong Feng, who was denounced on the Internet such that the party disciplinary committee was alerted and he was ultimately prosecuted, the representative pointed out that the regulations were not intended to ban public reporting of illegal conduct on the part of officials.

On QQ.com, news of the regulations elicited a wave of comments from netizens, one of whom noted,
This type of corrosive behavior falls in the space between law and morality, which, when deliberately used to exert influence, [shows] our society is devoid of a value system based upon genuine justice. This is also a kind of mob action that can cast a permanent shadow on a victim. Therefore, presently among a people whose moral thought lacks sufficient quality (*suzhi* 素质), the appearance of this law will certainly have a positive use. Only the manner of its execution begs improvement.\(^\text{58}\)

**Conclusion**

When Deng Xiaoping famously shut the door on debating reform in 1992,\(^\text{59}\) the introduction of the Internet to the PRC two years later opened a small but widening window through which sporadic “contentious conversations” over a wide variety of issues—political, economic, and social—do take place. Western concern over the power and prevalence of the PRC’s vast Internet censorship regime—which is now said by some to employ at least 30,000 full-time cybertops to monitor online conversations and delete “offensive” and “inappropriate” messages\(^\text{60}\)—is by no means unjustified. The recent spate of arrests over the circulation of “Charter 08,” which calls for greater freedom of expression and free elections, and the publication of which was timed to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, attests to the validity of such concerns. Even more troubling is the possibility that Chinese authorities may be enticing netizens seeking to circumvent censorship into using bogus proxy servers, known as “honey pots,” allowing Internet censors to not only monitor viewing patterns, but also to entrap would-be cyberdissidents before banned content is distributed or, in some cases, actually downloaded.\(^\text{61}\) Official monitoring of TOM-Skype, a Web-based communications tool established as a joint venture involving a Chinese high tech firm and eBay, has already been uncovered.\(^\text{62}\)

Yet, as the preceding examples have demonstrated, it is misleading to imagine that Chinese netizens have been paralyzed or silenced by the operation of Chinese censors. Instead, the Chinese language Web has emerged as a vital node for not only popular contention and far-ranging debate about a variety of political topics, the progress of market reform, and decline of social mores, but even as a vehicle through which Chinese netizens police social conduct on the part of ordinary citizens as well as that of authorities. Moreover, the extent and nature of Internet censorship itself is a frequent topic of discussion on the Web; as of early 2009, at least
one high-ranking official in the Beijing Internet Propaganda Management Office found himself targeted by a “human flesh search engine” for allegedly receiving bribes.\textsuperscript{63}  
Western fascination with the existence and operations of the “Great Firewall” has tended to enhance the perceived division between the censorial power of the party-state on the one hand, and the discursive power of the Chinese cyberpublic on the other. Yet, as we begin to contemplate the implications of new research on the historical emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in the West that shows it to have been both more exclusive and more internally heterogeneous than some have imagined,\textsuperscript{64} we may end up coming around to a fuller appreciation of how public spheres may develop in other contexts and in other times, even those that appear to thrive beneath the censor’s gaze.
Notes


4 Jeremy Page, “Hu pokes his head over ‘Great Firewall’ to seek the opinions of 221m netizens,” *The Times* (London), June 24, 2008, p. 29.


8 Cisco Systems, Silicon Valley’s largest company and a supplier of hardware to China, recently faced an investor revolt when 29 per cent of shareholders voted for a motion that demanded that it should report on how its products were being used to limit free speech. Rhys Blakely, “How long can Great Firewall of China last?,” *The Times* (London), May 18, 2007, p. 71. Paul Buchheit, former Google employee and inventor of Gmail, is also credited with initiating the “Google, don’t be evil” campaign, inspired in part as an employee protest against Google’s cooperation with Chinese censors in 2001.


Xiaofeng’s (王耀峰) blog “Massage Milk 按摩乳” can viewed at http://lydon.ycool.com/; Yuan Lei’s (袁蕾) blog, “Milk Pig 乳猪”, is at http://milkpig.ycool.com/.


22 Center for Social Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “Surveying Internet Usage and its Impact in Seven Chinese Cities.”


28 Walter Lippman famously argued, “the public is not …a fixed body of individuals. It is merely those persons who are interested an affair…The membership is not fixed…it changes with the issue.” See The Phantom Public (New York: MacMillian, 1925), pp. 77, 110.


31 Selected responses to the three questions can be viewed at http://www.infzm.com/content/18049, http://www.infzm.com/content/18053, and http://www.infzm.com/content/18050, respectively (accessed January 28, 2009). Posted responses to the first and second questions have been translated into English on the blog http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20081004_1.htm and http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20081002_1.htm, respectively, accessed January 28, 2009.

33 Here the author refers a oft-repeated phrase from the campaign to emulate Lei Feng, a Mao-era model soldier who purportedly wrote in his diary that he modestly sought to have only the “spirit of a screw”螺丝钉的精神 in service to the vast machinery of the Party-state.


45 Zhao Yuezhi, Communications in China, pp. 317-18.

46 Personal communication with Professor Zhang Weiying, January 12, 2009.


48 Zhao Yuezhi, Communications in China, pp. 307-309.


51 Peh Shing Huei, “Cyber hunters in for crash landing; Online harassment and exposure of ‘public enemies’ may soon be made illegal in China,” The Straits Times (January 3, 2009); see also “People at the mercy of an online mob,” South China Morning Post (September 08, 2008), both accessed via Nexis UK.

53 Last accessed February 03, 2009 at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noRiR4ZzXgQ


55 Last accessed February 03, 2009 at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noRiR4ZzXgQ

56 “深圳海事局书记涉猥亵女童被停职”南方都市报, 2008年11月01日, last accessed February 02, 2009, at http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/epaper/nfds/content/20081101/ArticelA01002FM.htm

57 “人肉搜索禁令保民不保官,” 南方都市报 (2009年1月21日).


60 This number is an oft-cited and much-disputed figure. See, for example, Nicholas D. Kristof, “In China It’s ******* vs. Netizens,” The New York Times (June 20, 2006); but also Tim Johnson, “Misconceptions about China’s Internet,” Knight Ridder Washington Bureau (September 28, 2007), both accessed via NexisUK.


