

**BEHIND THE “GREEN DAM”:
INTERNET CENSORSHIP IN CHINA**

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Executive Summary

1. In June 2009 the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology required all personal computers sold in China to be pre-installed with the software called “Green Dam” to filter out pornography and other “unhealthy information” from the Internet.
2. The Western media, however, believed that the Chinese government was exercising stricter on-line censorship because the software’s list of banned words was laced with political topics such as “June 4th” and Falun gong.
3. Domestically, Chinese Internet users were rallying against this move, posting anti-“Green Dam” open letters on blogs and forums; software developers even received death threats.
4. The business circles have complained that the software is so poorly designed that it opens computers to not just government snooping, but also hacker attacks.
5. Under both domestic and international pressure, the government suspended the initiative without specifying an alternative date.
6. The case of “Green Dam” demonstrates not only the rise of on-line civil society against state censorship and information control, but also the government departments’ strife for fulfilling self interest in the excuse of public interest.
7. Half of China’s 338 million netizens are young adults aged 20 to 39 who are playing a more and more active role in setting the political, economic and social agenda in China.

8. Although the Chinese government has years of experience in censoring the Internet, online forum as a new form of social space is a headache for the regime that finds traditional media more controllable.
9. Considering the two software developers have strong state background, corruption and collusion between the government and business may exist behind the scene.
10. Internet regulation has increasingly become a common concern for all governments. There is no easy way out for the government to keep a balance between proper regulation and respect for people's civic rights and privacy.

BEHIND THE “GREEN DAM”: INTERNET CENSORSHIP IN CHINA

CHEN Gang & ZHU Jinjing*

The Controversial Web-filtering “Green Dam”

- 1.1 In June 2009 the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) in China issued a sweeping directive requiring all personal computers sold in the country to be pre-installed with the software called “Green Dam-Youth Escort” (绿坝.花季护航), which, according to the MIIT, can filter out pornography and other “unhealthy information” from the Internet.
- 1.2 There has been a growing social concern over online pornography and other negative impacts of Internet on its users especially the youths. However, instead of installing the software only in schools and internet bars, the government required every computer to be installed with this software, sparking off criticism among domestic netizens and international observers.
- 1.3 Key issues such as political censorship, privacy surveillance, institutional interests, technical flaws and intellectual property right infringement have been raised and discussed.
- 1.4 As usual, the Western media believed that by doing so, the Chinese government was exercising stricter on-line censorship, invading people’s privacy and violating human rights. The software list of banned words was laced with political topics such as “June 4th” and Falun gong.

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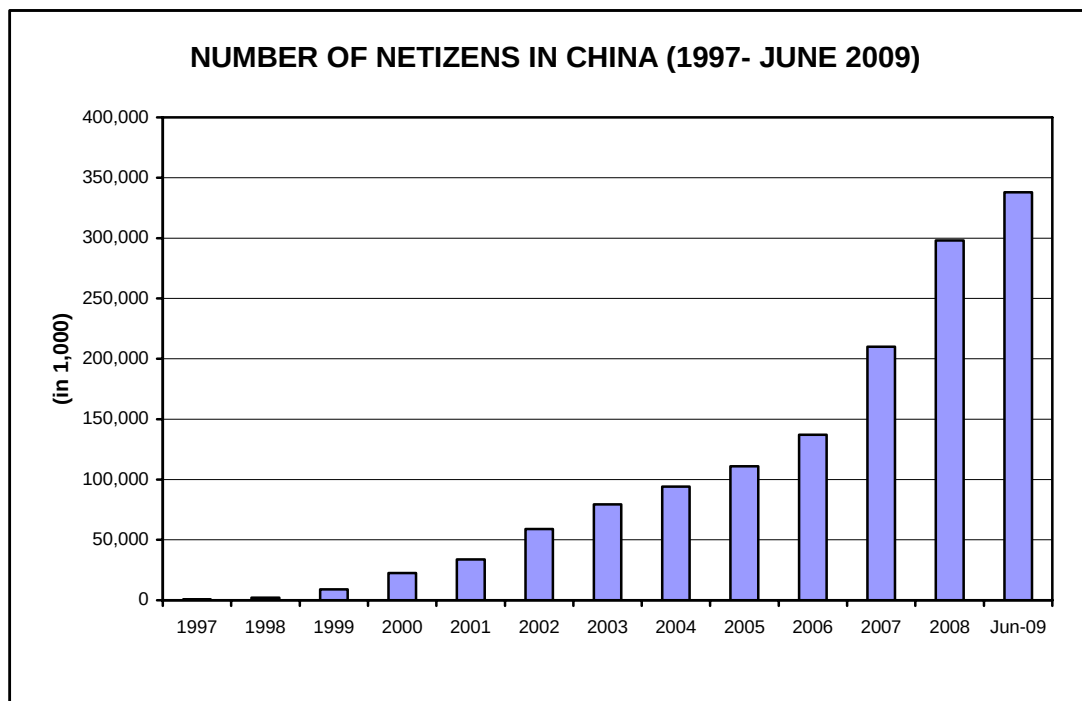
- 1.5 The business circles have complained that the software is so poorly designed that it opens computers not just to government snooping, but also to hacker attacks. According to a California-based Internet filter maker, it had “very solid evidence” to support copyright infringement against the “Green Dam” developers and was threatening to take legal actions.¹
- 1.6 Twenty-two foreign chambers of commerce and trade groups made an appeal to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao urging the abandoning of the software mandate.² The Obama administration has officially warned China that the requirement could violate free-trade agreements, and sent trade officials to Beijing to press the government to rescind its decision.
- 1.7 Domestically, Chinese Internet users were rallying against the government, with anti-“Green Dam” open letters posted on blogs and forums. “Green Dam” developers revealed that they had even received death threats.
- 1.8 On 30 June, under both domestic and international pressure, the government conceded. The MIIT announced through the official Xinhua News Agency that there could be a delay to the pre-installation of the software, without specifying an alternative date.
- 1.9 The “Green Dam” case shows not only the rise of on-line civil society against state censorship and information control, but the government departments’ strife for self interest in the excuse of public interest. Close linkage between the government and the software business also implies that corruption, if any, may be more structural than occasional.

¹ “Green Dam developers face copyright suit,” *China Daily*, 17 June 2009, http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-06/17/content_8295180.htm

² “China delays Green Dam Internet filter,” *CNN News*, 1 July 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TECH/07/01/china.filtering.software/index.html>

Rising Online Community and Its Influence on Agenda Setting

- 2.1 The protest against “Green Dam,” together with the prevailing online nationalism in China against the western media triggered by the Olympics last year, manifested the strong role played by China’s fast-growing online community in setting the political, economic and social agendas. The government, facing intractable challenges from independent and populist voices on the Internet, always has the incentive to tighten control over on-line information flow by high-tech means.
- 2.2 China boasts of the world’s largest Internet population. As of the end of June 2009 China had 338 million Internet users, an increase of 13.4% from half a year ago³ and surpassing the U.S. total population in number. China had not been connected to the Internet until 1994, and in 1997 there were only 670,000 Internet users.



³ China Internet Network Information Center: *Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China* (中国互联网络发展状况统计报告), July 2009, p. 3 <http://research.cnnic.cn/img/h000/h11/attach200907161306340.pdf>

- 2.3 Currently 25.5% of China's total population has become netizens. The number of broadband netizens reached 320 million, accounting for 94.3% of total netizens.⁴ In 2008 the number of netizens in less-developed rural and western regions grew much faster than those in affluent urban and eastern regions.⁵
- 2.4 In June 2009, about half of China's netizens (50.5%) are young adults aged 20 to 39, whereas those above the age of 50 comprised only 5.7%.⁶
- 2.5 With the Internet becoming more popular among the Chinese especially the youths, on-line activism has become politically influential. Some cases exposed corruption of government officials, while others led to a change or withdrawal of controversial policies or expressed protests against social injustices.⁷
- 2.6 The rising online community is playing a more and more influential role in setting the political, economic and social agenda in China; this could sometimes become a headache for the government who finds traditional media more manageable.
- 2.7 In 2009 a horrifying Internet video of two Uighurs being beaten to death in front of hundreds of onlookers in Guangdong Province triggered the deadliest ethnic violence in Xinjiang in decades. Immediately after the riots, China clamped down on the Internet in the hope of stemming the flow of information

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The number of rural netizens grew 60.8% year on year to reach 84.6 million by the end of 2008, while the number of netizens in western provinces grew 52%, far exceeding that in the central region (40.6%) and that in the eastern region (39.3%), See China Internet Network Information Center: *Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China* (中国互联网络发展状况统计报告), Jan. 2009, p.3

⁶ China Internet Network Information Center: *Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China* (中国互联网络发展状况统计报告), July 2009, p. 17

⁷ For details of Internet activism in China, please refer to Yang Guobin, "The Rise of Internet Activists in China," *EAI Background Brief No. 388*, 25 June 2008.

about ethnic unrest. Some residents in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, were told there would be no Internet access for 48 hours.⁸

2.8 The power of Internet for social mobilization was also evident in such cases as online nationalism against “biased” western media before the Olympics, online protest against the government’s cover-up of corruption related to substandard buildings which collapsed in the Sichuan earthquake, and online outrage over the tragedy of Sun Zhigang, a college graduate who was beaten to death while in police custody in Guangzhou.⁹

2.9 Online communities and forums are new forms of social space. Chinese netizens are prolific content-producers and uploaders. By the end of June 2009, the number of blog authors in China had reached 181 million.¹⁰

2.10 Immediately after the country was connected to the Internet in 1990s, the Chinese government started its control and passed regulations on computer network security. Since 2000, the state control of the Internet has been tightened due to the soaring number of netizens.

2.11 In October 2000, the Ministry of Information Industry, predecessor of MIIT, announced regulations on electronic bulletin boards. In November 2000 the State Council regulated that commercial websites can only reprint news items from official news agencies and are prohibited from independently producing news.¹¹

⁸ “China tightens Web screws after Xinjiang riot,” *Reuters News*, 6 July 2009

⁹ Lacking a temporary resident permit, Sun had been taken into custody as a vagrant in 2003. After Sun’s death, due to huge pressure from the on-line community, suspects involved in Sun’s death were convicted and outdated measures for internment and deportation of urban vagrants and beggars were revoked.

¹⁰ China Internet Network Information Center, *Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China* (中国互联网络发展状况统计报告), July 2009, p. 3

¹¹ Yang Guobin, “The Rise of Internet Activists in China,” *EAI Background Brief No. 388*, 25 June 2008, p. 5

- 2.12 The Chinese government has been trying to curb anti-government voices and online pornography through technological means such as Internet blocking and filtering, but the effect is not satisfactory. In 2003, the Ministry of Public Security launched the Golden Shield Project (金盾), also known as the Great Firewall of China (防火长城), an internet filtering system that can be used for censorship and surveillance.
- 2.13 The project deploys firewalls to block access to unhealthy internet information such as pornography and politically sensitive content, e.g. independence of Tibet, 4th June, or Falun gong. It also blocks some renowned international media websites, e.g. Voice of America. This filtering system, however, runs at the network level, which could be bypassed by some internet service providers.

What is Special about the “Green Dam”?

- 3.1 Compared with previous Internet filtering systems used by the government, the “Green Dam” filtering software, running at the end user level, was designed to be more effective in blocking undesirable Internet content.
- 3.2 According to the Chinese government, the software only protects youth from pornography, without any political intention. If the government had only required schools and Internet bars to be installed with the software, it would have greater legitimacy. However, the Chinese government required every computer in the mainland to be installed with the software. This had raised the question of possible political censorship. The *Wall Street Journal* said this software may filter politically sensitive information,¹² while the BBC suggested that the software may track netizens’ private information such as their online habitual behavior.¹³

¹² Loretta Chao, “China tightening its control over the Internet” (Chinese Version), *The Wall Street Journal online*, 8 June 2009, <http://chinese.wsj.com/big5/20090608/chw085100.asp> access on 2009/06/20 .

¹³ Jonathan Fildes, “China’s Computers at Hacking Risk,” *BBC News*, 10 June 2009 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8094026.stm>.

- 3.3 The Green Dam software has video filtering and keyword filtering functions, as well as IP address blocking. The key filtering word database for Green Dam reportedly only has 2,700 words related to pornography, while a much larger pool of 6,500 words are related to politically related content, e.g. “Communist Party’s brutality,” “tyranny,” “deceit,” “history of killing,” “depravity,” etc.¹⁴
- 3.4 The software has also been criticised for its poor design. According to researchers at the University of Michigan, once the software is installed, any website user can exploit the technical vulnerability of the software and take control of the computer. This allows malicious sites to steal private data, send spam, etc.
- 3.5 Moreover, the software is only compatible with the Microsoft Operating System, but not the Mac or Linux system. Specifically, the software only targets Internet Explorer and Google, but not other internet browsers such as Mozilla Firefox.
- 3.6 Domestic media and netizens were debating intensively about the Green Dam issue, showing increased tension between the government and the civil society. The propaganda department urged the domestic media to strongly support the introduction of the software and not to publish negative criticism.¹⁵ However, even the official media *China Daily* in an article titled “Let people decide on Green Dam” stated that “respect for an individual’s right to choice is an important indicator of a free society, depriving them of which is gross transgression.”¹⁶

¹⁴ “Regime’s ‘Anti-Pornography’ Software Targets Falun Gong,” *The Epoch Times*, 13 June 2009, <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/18096>

¹⁵ Cao Guoxing, “Ministry of Propaganda requires media not to doubt internet censor software,” *Radio France Internationale*, 12 June 2009, <http://www.rfi.fr/chinois/actu/articles/114/article14265.asp>.

¹⁶ “Let people decide on Green Dam,” *China Daily*, 13 June 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2009-06/13/content_8280899.htm.

- 3.7 According to surveys conducted by China's major internet portals such as sina.com and sohu.com, over 75% of netizens participating in the poll said they were against the "Green Dam."
- 3.8 The proposed introduction of the software may possibly have increased the younger generation's social and political awareness. Those born after 1980s and 1990s are likely to feel annoyed by the government's direct intervention and influence in their life, and become more politically active. The relationship between the government and online civil society is likely to get tenser as a result.

In the Pursuit of Institutional Interest

- 4.1 Serious doubts have been raised regarding institutional interest and possible corruption behind the scene. On 20 May 2008, the MIIT procured the Green Dam software at 41.7 million *Yuan* (US\$ 6.1 million) from two companies, namely Zhengzhou Jinhui Computer System Engineering Ltd. for core filtering processing, and Beijing Dazheng Human Language Technology Academy Ltd. for input processing.
- 4.2 It was announced that until 20 May 2010, downloading of the software would be free of charge for users. However, there is increasing suspicion that the software will not be free after that and this will bring huge profit to the companies.
- 4.3 Corruption and collusion between the government and business may exist. On 1 January 2008, MIIT invited public bidding of green Internet filtering software with deadline only 10 days after the announcement. The lack of transparency and proper market competition in the procurement process led to serious doubts about whether the MIIT had abused taxes collected from citizens.

- 4.4 The two software companies reportedly had cooperated with China's military and security departments before.¹⁷ Beijing Zhengda Ltd. was said to have assisted the College of the Armor Force of People's Liberation Army (解放军装甲兵专案学院) in developing a system for extracting confidential documentaries in 2005, whereas Zhengzhou Jinhui Ltd. has long-term cooperation program with the University of Consultation and Case for PLA (解放军咨询专案大学). Yet Zhengzhou Jinhui Ltd. denied any cooperation with the military, and only admitted to having assisted the Ministry of Public Security in curbing online pornography.
- 4.5 Online sources revealed that there is very close relationship between the management and R&D team in Jinhui Ltd and the R&D team in the military universities; the allegation is that Zhengzhou Jinhui Ltd. could have made use of the R&D results from the military universities and brand them as the company's proprietary product sold to the government.¹⁸
- 4.6 The MIIT could be another beneficiary of the Green Dam installation. If approved, the minister of the MIIT will have this to his credit, thus increasing his possibility of being further promoted.
- 4.7 The pursuance of parochial interest did not have the support of the other ministries. On 24 June the Ministry of Finance (MOF) declared that the MIIT was the only purchaser of the software, and the MOF was not involved in the procurement.¹⁹ The MOF's clarification refuted the MIIT's earlier statement that the procurement was financed by the MOF, implying that the "Green Dam" order may more or less represent one ministry's interest rather than the whole Cabinet's will.

¹⁷ "China tightening its control over the Internet" (Chinese Version), *The Wall Street Journal online*, 8 June 2009, <http://chinese.wsj.com/big5/20090608/chw085100.asp>

¹⁸ "The invisible people behind the Green Dam: How Jinhui Ltd. sold and benefited from R&D result of military university," sina.com personal blog, 12 June 2009, http://blog.sina.com.cn/blog_53a407dc0100djfv.html.

¹⁹ "Ministry of Finance claims that it was not involved in the Green Dam Procurement," *Caijing Magazine online*, 24 June 2009, <http://www.caijing.com.cn/2009-06-24/110188842.html>.

- 4.8 It is thus likely that the proposed “Green Dam” installation is an administrative edict by the MIIT with the acquiescence of the top leadership. It apparently did not have the consensus of government ministries, and the Chinese government as a whole.²⁰

Challenges for China’s Internet Censorship

- 5.1 The “Green Dam” case can be seen as another attempt by certain governmental departments to control information flow on the Internet in the face of a rising online civic society. Such Internet filtering is bound to encounter intractable challenges including technological obstacles, pressure from foreign governments and businesses and strong objection from domestic netizens.
- 5.2 Technically speaking, due to its multi-media and broadcaster-recipient interaction characteristics, the Internet is different from traditional media in that sufficient censorship is almost infeasible and filtering may have loop holes.
- 5.3 Politically, however, in such a rapidly changing society tagged with unstable elements, the party-state has intensive desire to control the Internet. The Ministry of Public Security and MIIT are thus eager to strengthen such control in the hope that they may be credited as political achievement by top leadership.
- 5.4 Economically speaking, the synergy between online community and web/computer businesses has placed the government in a quandary. Sensitive online contents and critical comments often generate high volumes of web traffic. Both online businesses and personal computer sales will be affected if Internet filtering is strengthened. This is not what the top leadership wants to

²⁰ If the software installation has the strong backing of top leadership, the directive should come from the General Office of the CCP Central Committee or the General Office of the State Council and not the MIIT; the procurement should also be financed by the MOF.

see, especially in the context of the economic slowdown and consumption downturn.

- 5.5 Internet regulation has increasingly become a great concern to the Chinese government in particular, and to other governments in general, be they democratic or authoritarian. Keeping a balance between proper regulation and respect for people's civic rights and privacy is a difficult and delicate act to accomplish.