

**CREATING PUBLIC OPINION PRESSURE
IN CHINA: LARGE-SCALE
INTERNET PROTEST**

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Executive Summary

1. By 30 December 2009, the number of Chinese Internet users had reached 384 million. About 29 percent of the population now has internet access. In the meantime, mobile internet users doubled from 117 million in 2008 to 233 million in 2009. The combination of wired internet and wireless cell phones has qualitatively changed the scope of internet coverage in China.
2. Internet access has provided millions of people with a broad public space to have instant communication with other internet users and voice their opinions. It empowers ordinary people to participate in discussions of public concern.
3. As a result, there has been a strong surge in internet opinion groups in recent years. And this new public opinion source has become increasingly effective in exerting its influence over public affairs and public policy making.
4. Large-scale internet mass incident (大型网络群体性事件) refers to internet discussion which is critical of government (including government officials) behavior and with over one million click rate. Large-scale internet mass incidents had had a strong showing in 2009.
5. The main function of internet mass incidents is to wage moral campaigns against government misbehavior. Specifically, these campaigns can be grouped into several types: exposing corruption cases, supervising officials' behavior, interfering with judicial process, and pressing for policy adjustments.
6. The government has not only reacted to the internet public opinions quickly, but also started to take initiatives to utilize the internet as a platform to communicate with the society.
7. Because of the anonymous nature of the internet, internet users are free to issue radical or irresponsible statements. The resonation effect would

radicalize or sensationalize the discussion. Language violence and “human flesh search” are the worst features of these internet protests.

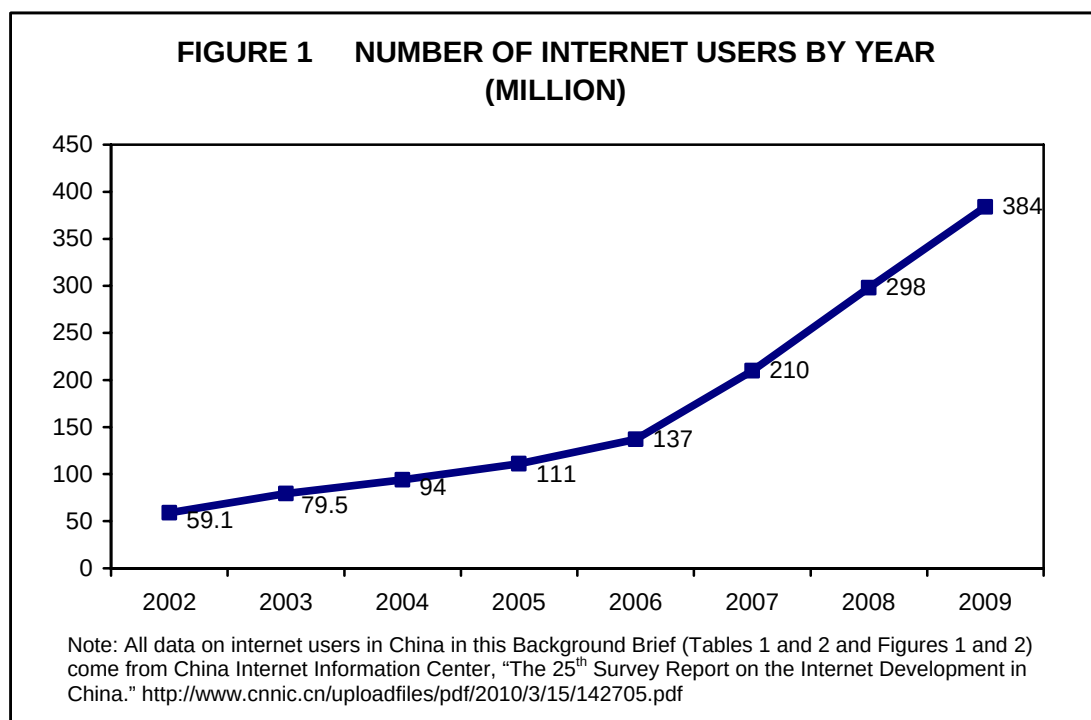
8. The problem for the government is that they are so preoccupied with the concern for stability that at times, it tends to compromise legal procedures and rush solutions to appease public opinion. It is of critical importance that the government establishes and adheres to institutions with stable and consistent procedures, and not simply caves in to public moral pressure.
9. The ability of the internet to generate instant and huge public opinion pressure empowers the society to protest against government misbehavior. However, it also empowers the state to gauge public opinion and make proper policy adjustment. Effective government reactions to the problems exposed by internet public opinions would help to maintain stability that the regime deems so dear.

CREATING PUBLIC OPINION PRESSURE IN CHINA: LARGE-SCALE INTERNET PROTEST

TONG Yanqi & LEI Shaohua*

Netizens in China

- 1.1 According to China Internet Information Center (CNNIC), by 30 December 2009, the number of Chinese Internet users had reached 384 million (Figure 1). This is a net increase of 86 million compared with the number at the end of 2008. The internet penetration rate had gone up from 22.6 percent to 28.9 percent in the same period, which means that close to 30 percent of the Chinese population has access to internet. (The world average is 25.6 percent.)



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- 1.2 In the meantime, mobile internet users doubled from 117 million in 2008 to 233 million in 2009. The combination of wired internet and wireless cell phones has qualitatively changed the scope of internet coverage. People now can communicate via the internet while on the go. First-hand information (both in text and in video) delivery is much faster and efficient with mobile phones as the terminal.
- 1.3 The ages of internet users spread from 10 years old (or under) to 80 years old. But the bulk of the users were 10 to 30 years old (Table 1).

TABLE 1 AGE COMPOSITION OF INTERNET USERS (%)

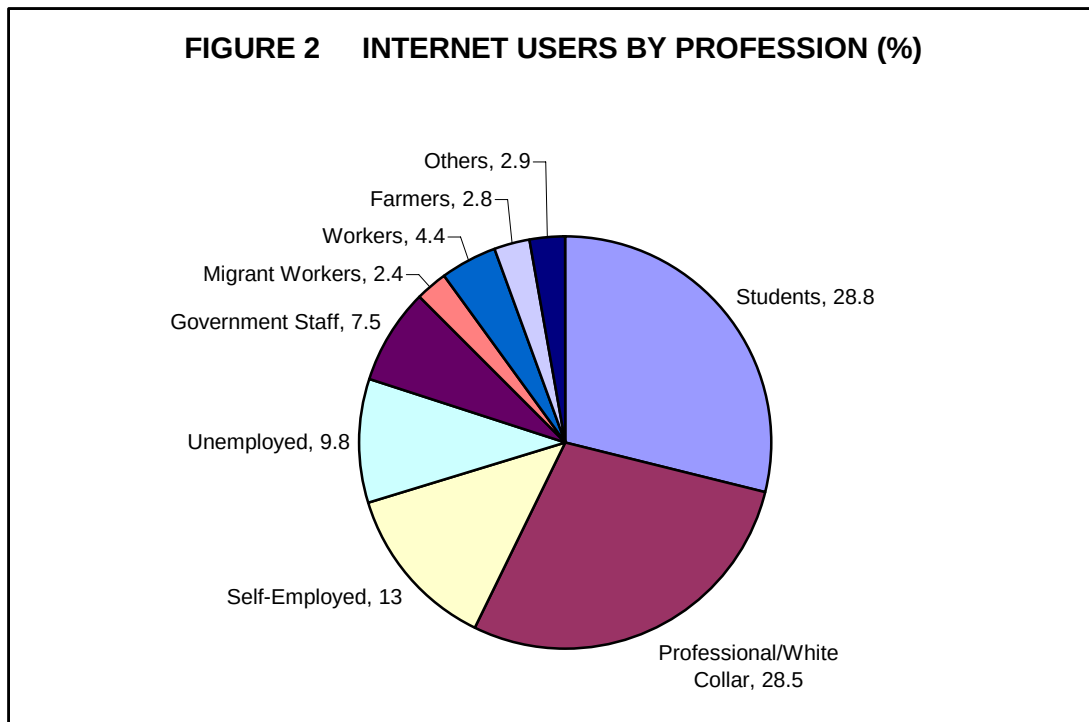
Age Group	%
Under 10	1.1
10-19	31.8
20-29	28.6
30-39	21.5
40-49	10.7
50-59	4.5
60 and over	1.9

- 1.4 Internet users have mostly middle school and high school education (Table 2).

TABLE 2 EDUCATION LEVELS OF INTERNET USERS (%)

Education	%
Primary school	8.8
Middle school	26.8
High school	40.2
Technical college	12.2
College and above	12.1

- 1.5 By professions, the two largest groups of internet users are students and professional white collar workers, each taking about 28% share (Figure 2). Self employed and unemployed groups are a distant third and fourth in ranking.



- 1.6 The distributions by age, education, and profession of the internet population indicate the composition of the participants of internet discussions. Internet public opinions are primarily representative of young students (majority of them may be in high school) and professional white collar workers. The portion of self-employed/free lancers and unemployed is also significant.

Large-Scale Internet Mass Incidents

- 2.1 Increasing internet access has provided millions of people with a broad public space to voice their opinions and have instant communication with other internet users. It empowers ordinary people to participate in discussions of public concern. The internet makes it much easier to formulate consensus, ferment emotions, and provoke actions in a short time period. As a result, there has been a strong surge of internet opinion groups in recent years. And this new public opinion source has become increasingly effective in exerting its influence over public affairs and public policy making.

- 2.2 Large-scale internet mass incident (大型网络群体性事件) discussed here refers to internet discussions that are critical of government (including government officials) behavior and with over one million click rate. Table 3 shows the number of large-scale internet mass incidents from 2003 to 2009. There was an upsurging trend of occurrence of these incidents. The strong showing of 2009 probably indicates the growing dependence of netizens on the internet and the deepening social frustration over rampant government corruption and misbehavior.

TABLE 3 NUMBER OF LARGE-SCALE INTERNET MASS INCIDENTS BY YEAR (2003-2009)

2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
2	1	1	0	3	5	12

Note: See appendix for the list of specific incidents.

Development of Internet Protests

- 3.1 The development of internet protests has gone through several stages. The first stage began with *reactive* protests. Usually it starts with the exposure of certain incidents by the traditional news media. Then the internet provides the cyber space for public discussion. Typical cases are the Sun Zhigang incident and the BMW accident in 2003. In both cases, once the traditional media exposed the incidents, the discussion forums on the internet reacted and exploded into heated discussions. In the end, the overwhelming public opinion pressure forced the central government to take action.
- 3.2 The second stage is *initiative* protests. Since the traditional news media has limitations on its news coverage, the publicly accessible internet thus becomes the independent source of revelation. A representative example is the relocation incident in Nanjing downtown district in 2005. It was first reported online by a graduate student from Peking University that the local government was destroying the historical sites, which eventually led to the internet protest campaign.

- 3.3 The current stage is characterized by *interactive* protests. The internet and the traditional news media feed off from each other and shape the public opinion about the incidents. One could start to report an incident with the other joining in and escalating public opinion to new heights. This has become the major pattern of internet involvement in public affairs. Journalists and TV hosts often surf the internet to look for newsworthy clues. Internet opinion leaders are also eager to write columns for newspapers or appear on TV programs.
- 3.4 One example is the “fishing law enforcement” (钓鱼执法) incident in Shanghai in October 2009. In an effort to wipe out unlicensed taxis, plain-clothed police officers pretended to be customers and tricked private car drivers into taking passengers. One victim who fell into this trap put up a protest post on the internet. Then the traditional media got involved and dug out more of such cases. The interactive process immediately created a public opinion storm and forced the government authorities to make public apologies.

Types of Internet Supervision of Government Behavior

- 4.1 The main function of internet mass incidents is to wage moral campaigns against government misbehavior. Specifically, these campaigns can be grouped into several types: exposing corruption cases, supervising officials’ behavior, interfering with judicial process, and pressing for policy adjustment.

Exposing Corruption Cases

- 4.2 Corruption is secretive. Yet the internet enables more watchful eyes on government officials and provides channels to bring corruption cases to light. For example, in December 2008, netizens spotted Zhou Jiugeng, bureau chief of housing management of Jiangning District of Nanjing City, wearing a \$14,500 Vacheron Constantin watch and smoking extremely expensive cigarettes when he appeared on a TV program. This kind of lifestyle is well beyond his means. The videos and photos were circulated online and generated huge public opinion pressure on the Nanjing City government. The

City Disciplinary Committee had to launch an investigation and found that Zhou had indeed taken huge amount of bribes. Zhou was later arrested.

Supervising Government Behavior

4.3 In a similar fashion, government officials' behavior and words are closely scrutinized. Misbehaviors or "slip of the tongue" would be quickly disseminated online. In November 2008, several documents surfaced on the internet showing that local government officials from Jiangxi, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu were using public money to fund their "foreign country exploration tour" (出国考察). The pressure of internet opinion propelled official investigations and the relevant officials were disciplined. The central government has also passed new regulations to withdraw the approval power of local governments on such "foreign country exploration tours."

4.4 In June 2009, Lu Jun, the chief of planning bureau of Zhengzhou City, participated in a TV program. When answering the question about why the land that was originally appropriated for affordable housing was turned into building expensive villas, he retorted, "Are you speaking for the Party, or are you speaking for the masses?" His comment caused a mighty uproar on the internet. The government of Zhengzhou City was forced to suspend Lu.

Interfering with Judicial Process

4.5 In February 2009, the police in Danfeng County, Shaanxi Province arrested a high school student for the death of his girlfriend. The suspect died during the interrogation. Internet opinion pressure forced the arrest of police officers involved and all received 1-2 years jail sentences after a speedy trial.

4.6 In May 2009, Deng Yujiao, a karaoke parlor waitress, fatally stabbed one of the three local government officials who were forcefully demanding for her sexual service. She was arrested for involuntary manslaughter. As the news broke out online, a cascade of posts overwhelmingly supported Deng as if she was a national hero. The internet frenzy drove a quick ruling and Deng was

released. Many believe that without the landslide internet support, Deng might have to languish in prison for life.

Pressing for Institutional Adjustment

- 4.7 Individual cases may result in the fall of certain officials. The more lasting impacts in fact would come from institutional changes. Some large-scale internet mass incidents have achieved such goals. The typical case is the Sun Zhigang incident. In 2003, a college graduate from Hubei who was seeking job opportunities in Guangzhou was sent to the detention center because he did not have a temporary resident permit. He was beaten to death by other inmates there. The internet uproar ignited a debate on the plight of migrants who were unable to obtain a proper urban *hukou* and the inequity of the long-standing Custody and Repatriation system. The system was subsequently abolished.
- 4.8 Two prison incidents occurred in February 2009. In one case, a prisoner was killed by fellow inmates and the other case is the aforementioned death of a suspect during police interrogation. Both triggered heated internet reaction, especially the former where the prison authority first claimed that the person died when he was playing peek-a-boo with other inmates. “Playing peek-a-boo” thus became one of the popular online phrases in a sarcastic fashion. Under public opinion pressure, the police officers involved received prison terms. But more importantly, the government has also started to overhaul prison systems and investigate systematic police abusive practice.
- 4.9 In an effort to tighten internet control, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology announced that all personal computers sold in China were required to install a filtering software “Green Dam-Youth Escort” (绿坝.花季护航) starting 1 July 2009. Internet users rallied against this move and finally forced the infinite suspension of the initiative.

Government Responses

- 5.1 Internet mass protests have functioned as a means of public supervision of government behavior. If opinions are only uttered online and not on the street, the government is unable to apply force to repress, except for a couple of dissident cases. On many occasions, the enormous scale of the public opinion has effectively forced the government to adjust policies.
- 5.2 Of the 24 large-scale internet mass incidents, twenty-two ended with punitive actions against related government officials. This is a stunning 90 over percent efficiency rate. Among them, nineteen cases led to the dismissal or arrest or sentencing of government officials. Four cases resulted in either the abolition of the existing policies or the overhaul of the system or the initiation of new policies. The reason for the high efficiency rate may well be the selection bias of the cases—the scale of the public opinion pressure. Protests that have lower public attention may not produce the same result. The concern for stability plays a big factor in the calculation on the government side.
- 5.3 One of the two internet mass protests that did not go anywhere is the closure of a bulletin board system (BBS) at Peking University in 2004. As it signaled the tightening of internet control, the government simply ignored all the furor against the closure. The other ignored case is the so-called photo of the “toughest nail household” in Chongqing. As the incident did not put much pressure on government behavior, it passed without much notice despite much online fanfare.
- 5.4 Governments at various levels have learned a lesson from the Shanxi Hongdong County illegal brick kiln case. During the incident, the local officials were totally unaware of the internet exposure and discussions. Only until the central government sent in the investigation group after much internet opinion pressure did the officials realize that they had been “famous” on the internet for a long while.

- 5.5 The governments have learned to react to internet protests swiftly. For example, on 7 October 2009, the news of “the most powerful wife of a military commander” (最牛团长夫人) appeared online. She reportedly attacked a staff member of Dunhuang museum who asked her not to touch the exhibits. On 10 October, the leadership of Xinjiang Construction Corps (where her husband worked) ordered the investigation and communicated with the internet community. On 12 October, only 5 days after the original incident, the commander was demoted.
- 5.6 The government has not only reacted to internet public opinions quickly, but also started to take initiatives to utilize the internet as a platform to communicate with the society. Since 2006, major policies and legislation have been posted online for public feedback. The responses have been overwhelming. For example, there were 170 million on-line feedback on the draft of the Labor Contract Law, and the government had to organize a group of 20-30 staff members to handle them.
- 5.7 As another example, the Beijing municipal government now has set up an office that collects online complaints about local government agencies and edits them into a daily summary. Once the complaints have been verified, relevant government agencies or officials will be held accountable.
- 5.8 It should be noted that the government still exerts sweeping and sophisticated control over the internet. Thousands of internet cops are deployed to monitor internet traffic for sensitive materials or key words that hint at subversion. The editors of internet communities would also lock up certain posts if they deem the discussion as potentially destructive. Despite these voluntary or involuntary censorships, large-scale internet mass incidents continue to erupt because of the strong moral appeals of the protests.

A Not-So-Civil Society

- 6.1 Large-scale internet mass incidents have accomplished a great deal with regard to generating public opinion pressure and supervising government

behavior. Some scholars believe that the internet community is a new type of civil society. Yet it is a civil society without much order and civility. The majority of the netizens are more interested in venting their frustrations than in pursuing social justice. Language violence is the common feature in these protests. Rumors travel very far.

- 6.2 Because of the anonymous nature of the internet, internet users are free to issue radical or irresponsible statements. The resonance effect would radicalize or sensationalize the discussion. As a result, internet public opinion tends to be intolerant. For example, during the Tonggang incident when the general manager appointed by the private company was beaten to death by workers, almost all the online comments cheered, commenting that the “working class is the greatest!” and “so what if a couple of capitalists were killed?”
- 6.3 The intolerance also spills over to the real world. The worst consequence of the internet mass incident is the so-called “human flesh search.” The virtue mobs would identify the “offenders,” publicize their personal information, and call for their harassment.
- 6.4 The polarization effect of internet protest may be attributed to the fact that the majority of the netizens are under 30 years old. They are the most volatile group in society. They are open to outside influences and easy to become radicalized during any movement. This may explain the irresponsible attitudes of some internet users.
- 6.5 The problem for the government is that they are so concerned about stability that they tend to compromise legal procedures and rush solutions to appease public opinion.
- 6.6 Some scholars are worried that the rushed solutions driven by emotional campaigns may not serve ultimate justice. For example, when millions praised Deng Yujiao as a hero, nobody cared that the one she killed was not the one who forced himself on her. As far as moral justice was achieved, who

cares about legal justice? The same goes for the Shaanxi Danfeng County case. After the police officers who abused the suspect received punishment, netizens were satisfied and believed that justice was served. Yet nobody is actually interested in catching the person who killed the girl in the first place. The real murderer remains at large (if he is not the deceased suspect).

- 6.7 In these two cases, the courts seemed to cave in to tremendous public opinion pressure and rushed their rulings. Also in the “most powerful wife of a military commander” case, a quick demotion of the husband for his wife’s misbehavior hardly seems an appropriate solution.

Challenges Ahead

- 7.1 Internet public opinions are likely to gain prominence in public policy making. Effective government reactions to the problems exposed by internet public opinions would help to maintain stability that the regime deems so dear.
- 7.2 Yet the government needs to be aware that internet opinions are generated by moral furors. Netizens do not care if their demands have interfered with legal considerations or crossed procedural boundaries. It is of critical importance that the government establishes and adheres to institutions with stable and consistent procedures, and not simply caves in to public moral pressure.
- 7.3 One of the causes of internet mass incidents is the lack of trust of government at all levels. The rule of thumb nowadays is that “if you are an official, you must be corrupt; if you are wealthy, you must have obtained your wealth through illegal means.” With such logic in mind, emotional judgments have replaced rational reasoning. The ultimate solution is in the improvement of governance, especially at the local levels.
- 7.4 The ability to generate instant and huge public opinion pressure by the internet empowers the society to protest against government misbehavior. At the same time, the internet would also empower the state to gauge public opinion and make proper policy adjustments.

- 7.5 Rigid restriction on internet public sphere by filtering sensitive words and blocking unwanted websites serves nobody's interests. It is ridiculous as well as awkward if people have to create codes for the simple mentioning of the "Communist Party" or "Liberation Army."
- 7.6 A more effective way to battle unwanted opinions is to train one's own opinion leaders to engage in cyberspace discussions and debates, influence public opinion by rational persuasion and not by banning everything. "Pretending it is clean as far as you don't see it" is a self deceiving approach.

APPENDIX

LIST OF LARGE-SCALE INTERNET MASS INCIDENTS (2003-2009)

1. April 2003, Sun Zhigang incident (孙志刚事件)

Description: A college graduate from Hubei, Sun Zhigang, was sent to the detention center in Guangzhou because he did not have temporary resident permit was beaten to death by the inmates.

Result: Twenty-three relevant officials were disciplined and 12 of them given prison terms. The custody and repatriation system was later abolished.

2. October 2003, BMW accident (黑龙江宝马撞人事件)

Description: A car incident involving a BMW and farm-using vehicle resulted in one death and 12 injuries. The rumor started online that the BMW driver was a relative of a high ranking official (which turned out to be untrue).

Result: The driver of the BMW was sentenced. During the investigation, some other corruption cases were disclosed.

3. September 2004, closure of “Yitahutu” BBS at Peking University (一塌糊涂网站关闭事件)

Description: Yitahutu BBS was one of the influential internet communities in China. It was forced to close on 13 September 2004.

Result: None.

4. 2005, relocation of Nanjing old district incident (南京旧城改造拆迁事件)

Description: A graduate student from Peking University posted online about the re-construction and relocation of the old district of Nanjing.

Result: Premier Wen Jiabao issued instructions and the Deputy Mayor who was in charge of the matter was dismissed. A similar project in Chongwen District of Beijing was halted as well.

5. 2007, Huanan tiger photo incident (陕西华南虎照片事件)

Description: The forest bureau of Shaanxi Province announced that a villager had taken a photo of Huanan tiger (an extinct species). After the scrutiny of the netizens, the photo was determined to be a fake.

Result: The villager was arrested for fraud and the director of the information center of the forest bureau was dismissed.
6. April 2007, the toughest nail household in Chongqing (重庆最牛钉子户)

Description: A photo of the house whose owner had refused to be relocated surfaced online. The title of the photo was “the toughest nail household in Chongqing.”

Result: None.
7. July 2007, “black” brick kiln incident in Shanxi (山西洪洞县黑砖窑事件)

Description: It was exposed that a brick kiln factory had been employing retarded and abducted child labor.

Result: Altogether 95 government staff members were disciplined.
8. July 2008, Weng’an incident (贵州瓮安事件)

Description: Overwhelming online reaction to the Guizhou Weng’an mass incident.

Result: The Party secretary and mayor of the Weng’an County were dismissed.
9. July 2008, Henan Xinyang villas incident (河南信阳别墅群事件)

Description: It was exposed that the government officials of Xinyang city were building villas for themselves.

Result: The moving in procedure was suspended and relevant officials were disciplined.

10. October 2008, Lin Jiaxiang incident (深圳林嘉祥事件)
- Description: Lin Jiaxiang, Party secretary of the Maritime Bureau of Shenzhen City, allegedly molested young girls.
- Result: Lin was dismissed.
11. December 2008, Jiangxi, Jiangsu and Zhejiang government officials using official funds for travelling abroad (公款出国考察事件)
- Description: Documents surfaced online indicating that officials from Jiangxi, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang were using public money to fund their “foreign country exploration tour.”
- Result: Relevant officials were disciplined. The Central government passed new regulation on official “foreign country exploration tours.”
12. December 2008, Zhou Jiugeng incident (南京周久耕事件)
- Description: Zhou Jiugeng, the chief of housing bureau of Jiangning District of Nanjing City, was spotted wearing luxury watches and smoking expensive cigarettes.
- Result: Zhou was arrested for corruption.
13. February 2009, Yunnan “peek-a-boo” incident (云南晋宁县躲猫猫事件)
- Description: A prisoner was beaten to death by the inmates. The prison authority claimed that he hit a wall while playing peek-a-boo with other inmates.
- Result: Relevant prison guards were given prison terms. The Ministry of Justice started an overhaul of the prison system.
14. February 2009, Shaanxi Danfeng County extorting confessions by torture incident (陕西丹凤县刑讯逼供致死事件)
- Description: The police in Danfeng County, Shaanxi Province arrested a high school student for the death of his girlfriend. The suspect died during the interrogation.
- Result: Involved police officers received 1-2 years sentences after a speedy trial.

15. March 2009, Wang Shuai incident (河南灵宝县王帅事件)
- Description: Wang Shuai posted online that Lingbao County of Henan Province was forcing land requisition. The Lingbao police then went to Shanghai and have him arrested.
- Result: Lingbao government made a public apology and the deputy chief of the public security bureau was suspended.
16. March 2009, Luo Caixia incident (湖南罗彩霞事件)
- Description: The commissioner of public security bureau of Longhui County of Hunan Province forged his daughter's identity so that she could go to college in somebody else's name.
- Result: The commissioner was dismissed and arrested.
17. April 2009, Guizhou officials' sexual scandal with teenage prostitutes (贵州习水县公职人员参与嫖宿幼女事件)
- Description: As stated.
- Result: All were arrested.
18. May 2009, Green Dam software incident (绿坝事件)
- Description: The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology announced that all personal computers sold in China were required to install a filtering software "Green Dam-Youth Escort" (绿坝.花季护航) starting 1 July 2009.
- Result: Internet users rallied against this move and finally forced the infinite suspension of the initiative.
19. May 2009, Deng Yujiao incident (湖北巴东县邓玉姣事件)
- Description: Deng Yujiao, a karaoke parlor waitress, fatally stabbed one of the three local government officials who were forcefully demanding for her sexual service.
- Result: Deng was released a free person.

20. June 2009, Lu Jun incident (河南郑州逯军事件)
- Description: Lu Jun, the chief of planning bureau of Zhengzhou City, participated in a TV program. When answering the question about why the land that was originally appropriated for affordable housing was turned into building expensive villas, he retorted, “Are you speaking for the Party, or are you speaking for the masses?”
- Result: The government of Zhengzhou City was forced to suspend Lu.
21. June 2009, Henan migrant worker’s “open chest” incident (河南农民工开胸验肺事件)
- Description: A migrant worker, Zhang Haichao, was diagnosed as having pneumocomosis; however he was unable to obtain a certified diagnose from legally designated hospitals and could not receive proper compensation. So he insisted having an open chest surgery to prove his illness.
- Result: The Ministry of Health started to investigate all work related diseases and Zhang was finally compensated.
22. July 2009, Hubei Shishou incident (湖北石首事件)
- Description: Overwhelming online reaction to the Shishou large-scale mass riot. Internet was the major mobilizational force.
- Result: Party Secretary and Mayor were dismissed.
23. October 2009, Shanghai “fishing” law enforcement incident (上海钓鱼执法事件)
- Description: In an effort to wipe out unlicensed taxis, plain-clothed police officers pretended to be customers and tricked private car drivers into taking passengers.
- Result: The relevant government authorities made public apologies.
24. October 2009, the most powerful wife of a military commander (最牛团长夫人事件)
- Description: The wife of a military commander reportedly attacked a staff member at Dunhuang museum who asked her not to touch the exhibits.
- Result: The commander was demoted.