

# **Internet Censorship and Economic Growth in China**

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## **Abstract**

China's attitude towards technology in the last decades brought to light compelling realities on how a global power house has adopted a 'need to use basis,' strategy to strengthened censorship of the internet. It has since then been theorized that China's main reasons for such a policy measure is largely attributed to the quest of strengthening national sovereignty, and enhancement of economic prosperity- two contradicting parables that has posed daunting challenges across the economic architecture of the Asian nation. This paper distinctively argues that China's "Open Door Policy" aimed at economic growth and strengthening the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through internet censorship provides an explanation for the Asian nation's economic growth.

**Keywords:** Internet Censorship, Economic Growth, Modernization, Communication, Technology, Sovereignty.

## **Introduction**

The Peoples Republic of China widely called Mainland China is the oldest civilization, and the largest country in the world in terms of population. Since 1980, China has become the fastest growing major power, and home to the World's largest One-Party-State –run by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

China's attitude towards technology in the last decades brought to light compelling realities on how a global power house has adopted a 'need to use basis,' strategy to strengthened censorship of the internet.

It has since then been theorized that China's main reasons for such a policy measure is largely attributed to the quest of strengthening national sovereignty, and enhancement of economic prosperity- two parables that has strengthened China's path to becoming a global economic power.

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, his successor Deng Xiaoping announced the commencement of an "Open-Door" policy, endorsing China's economic engagement of the world, thus becoming the anchor of the Asian nation's economic strategy of our times.

This paper argues that China's "Open -Door Policy, aimed at economic growth and strengthening the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through internet censorship provides an explanation for the Asian nation's economic progress.

Chronologically, the paper proceeds in Part I with a Theoretical Analysis of China's media Censorship. In Part II the impact of media censorship on economic growth in China, and the impact it has on the global economy are theorized. Part III analyzes the theoretical implications of Chinese media censorship. And In Part IV, I conclude. But first, I provided background information of Media Censorship and Economic Reform in China.

### **Background Information: Media Censorship and Economic Reform in China**

Internet Censorship and economic reform in China has come a long way within a short span of time (Wu, 1996). Though China initiated the economic reform and open –door policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the proliferation of the internet did not take shape until in the 1990s (Lu, and Liang, 2010). It was in the late 1980s, China's academia, with the support of foreign partners began to explore internet use, and in September 1987, a symbolic message “Beyond the Great Wall, Joining the World (yueguo Changchun, zouxiang shijie)” was sent from China via email (Qui, 2003). In 1994, China connected its first international dedicated line to the Internet, becoming the 71<sup>st</sup> country to be registered with the global computer network with CN as the highest level domain name (Lu et al., 2002; Taubman, 1998)

China's economic reform stems from the emergence of market oriented economic policies that surfaced across developmental trajectories of our changing world. In a rapidly changing world that realizes technological evolutions as an anchor to economic growth and prosperity, the pivotal role of non-state actors across the rising global phenomenon took the forefront of policy formulation across the world – this ushered in the proliferation of market oriented economies across the world. China realizes that to be a global competitive force, it has to be a part of the growing global trend.

According to Royal Akhavan – Majid, economic reform in China began shortly after the death of Mao Zedon and the rise of Den Xiaoping to China's presidency in 1978. This was a time China was on the verge of famine, and faced not only a severe economic crisis, but also a high level of social and political instability in the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Majid, 2004). During such critical times, reforms aimed at economic reconstruction were argued to be the fundamental tenet of restoring faith in socialism and the Chinese Communist Party. Gordon was justified when he argued that:

*Deng's rise to power led to the development of a new basis of legitimacy: Socialism was redefined to mean raised living standards, with regime overtly appealing to the individualist desire to get rich quick (Gordon, 1997: 30)*

China has since then witnessed series of reforms. Reforms such as production from group lines to family lines, the election of village commissions, engagements in business activities in cooperation with township and village authorities and the growth of Township and Village authorities were the hallmarks of China's economic evolution. These reforms are largely argued to be the irreversible trend of China's adoption of market oriented policies.

Deng's rise to Chinese presidency marked the abandoning of Communist ideological orthodoxy and the adoption of the pragmatic approach to economic development, with the use of technology as a fundamental driving mechanism to growth. It might also be argued that poor countries such as China did not have a lot of choice when the growth model followed by the industrialized countries and largely based on industrialization does not allow for sustainable growth particularly when market oriented economic models was adopted by emerging or developing countries ( Information Society Forum, 1999: 9). This was a major challenge that China had to face, especially when there was an emerging scholarly consensus that access to digital communications networks or the internet should be broadened to help people at all economic levels meet their basic needs (Hammond, 2001).

Against that background, China's openness to technological advancements, such as Satellite dishes, and the Internet enhanced by its global accessibility, channel capacity, interactivity and decentralized structure, played an important role in China's media liberalization and economic growth (Chen and Chan, 1998; Lee, 2000). More than ever before – with exception of Hong Kong – the Chinese have alternative information sources and websites, with the internet posing difficulties for absolute control, thus making the media freer from Party-state monopoly (Chen and Chan, 1998).

Today, while some scholars view the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as having been successful in keeping the media (Internet) within its orbit (Zhao, 2000:3-25; see also Gordon, 1997: 32), others emphasized that the tug of war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the liberating forces of the market economy are causing the Chinese state a loss of control over the media (Internet) (Chu, 1994: 12; Hao et al., 1998: 35-8; Huang, Y., 1994: 217 -41; Huang and Yu, 1997: 17-22; Lynch, 1999). These economic reforms in China are what led to the emergence of the rich theoretical literature that characterizes media censorship in the former communist strong hold.

## **Part I – Theoretical Analysis of Media Censorship in China**

China's Cyber Strategy over the years has brought to light varying realities on how it intends to maintain mainstream communist ideologies without thwarting economic growth. The proliferation of the internet in the global political, economical and social fronts indeed triggered China to pay a close attention on internet usage in her territories. Not only does the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) hailed the Internet's vast commercial potentials, but it have also successfully exerted state control over Chinese Web and its usage (Zhang, 2004). Recognizing that an unregulated network would shift power from the state to citizens by providing an extensive forum for discussion and collaboration, Beijing has taken care to prevent this commercial goldmine from becoming political quicksand (Hachigan, 2004). This in part was largely due to the economic turmoil of the 1960 Cultural Revolution.

Leaders of the 1970 and 1980's central government were quick to realize that domestic telecommunications infrastructure and equipment could not meet the needs of a growing economy (Harwit, 2005). With complaints of scarcity and connection issues from a growing crop of foreign businesses, the Communist Party Leadership took the first policy moves to strengthen the country's telecommunication and manufacturing equipments. This policy move was largely argued to be the backbone for the proliferation of the internet as a progressive economic tool. Since its first internet connections with the global computer network in 1994, china has witnessed explosive internet development, and by the end of 2008, China replaced the United States as the Largest Internet user of the world. Although China enjoyed tremendous economic progress from the Internet, the Chinese government has tried to maintain tight control over the telecommunications industry and public Internet use, and fight increasing cyber crimes (Lu, and Liang 2010). Bin Liang and Hong Lu were therefore justified when they argued that China's Internet development has been bound to its overall economic development in general and the growth of its telecommunications industry in particular over the years.

In comparison to other nations (Abott, 2001; Fan, 2005; Srikantaiah & Dong, 1998; Xue, 2005), the intervention and domination by the Chinese government has been the major distinctive feature of China's Internet Development (Lu and Liang 2010). The boom in Chinese Internet Industry was therefore made possible largely as a result of a "State Centric Strategy for comprehensive informationization" (Hartford, 2000). Thus, it has become recognizable that the internet has also strengthened the ideals of the Chinese Communist Party.

With economic growth as a developmental priority policy of the Chinese Communist Party, its leaders are safer with the Internet than without it. And their three- part strategy for maintaining authority in a networked society – by providing economic growth and some personal freedoms, managing the Internet's risks, and harnessing its potentials - will be effective for some time (Hachigan, 2001). The power shifts wrought by the Internet will surface clearly only during an economic and political crisis in a

future China where the Internet is far more pervasive. When that time lands across global horizons, the Internet could very likely fuel discontent, becoming the linchpin to a successful challenge to party rule (Cullen, Choy, 2004). According to China Internet Network Information Center, China's on-line population has mushroomed from fewer than one million users in 1997 to more than 22 million today, and some predicted that number will rise to more than 120 million.

With the evolution of the Internet in China, the capital Shanghai has emerged as the most dynamic urban centre, with an annual GDP growth from 1984 – 2002 averaged nearly 16 percent – annual income reached more than 14 000 yuan (US\$1700) in 2002, doubling the national average for China's city dwellers of 8200 yuan (US\$990) and so far higher than national rural incomes of only 2500 yuan (US\$300) (Harwit, 2005). Thus, it has become eminent that development of the Telecommunications and Internet sector in Shanghai has closely followed the rapid economic progress characterizing the city.

In view of the rapid global impact, the fast development of the Internet in China created a significant dilemma for the Chinese government. Nina Hachigan was justified to argue that Beijing's, involvement in the Internet resembles a "love- hate" relationship. On the one hand, due to practical necessity, the Chinese government understands very well that powerful communication possibilities of the Internet are crucial in helping China: a) to communicate internally with other parts of the world; b) to enhance economic growth; c) to strengthen its government administration. On the other hand China is concern about the potential political backlash to the Communist administration.

Against that backdrop the Chinese government has established a complicated regulatory framework that controls the Internet Industry. Although numerous government and quasi-government bodies are included in this regulatory framework, the Chinese government has since 1966 promulgated a series of regulations governing all the persons involved in China's Internet (including Internet users, Internet Service Providers, Internet Content Providers, and entities providing international network connections)(Cullen,

Choy, 2004). It is therefore eminent that the growth of Internet in China is caught up in a tug-of-war between the forces of economic prosperity and political controls.

With the Internet's potential radical transformation of the Chinese economic and political landscape, the Chinese Communist Party is working very hard to maintain its traditional attitude towards new technologies- that is strengthening sovereignty and enhancing economic prosperity, whilst minimizing a negative political impact. How sustainable that strategy will work remains to be seen. What is certain is that modern scholars of contemporary developmental theory suggests that mass communication can make a substantial contribution to a nations economic and social goals when used adequately and well (Schramm, 1964).

Others opined that such developmental efforts bring about social and material advancement and enables people to gain more control over their environment (Rogers, 1976). It also leads to and triggers self-sustaining growth, modernization, technical advancement, political participation, and a change in the modernization process (Lerner, 1958). Such developments further suggest that economic and political growths are interrelated. Thus, it could be contended that Chinese media censorship policy was crafted in expectation of an optimum economic growth from the expansion of the internet without the tolerance of a significant information flow.

Following an in-depth theoretical analysis of Media (Internet) Censorship in China, two major questions arise in the case of Beijing. First, what are the impacts of Media Censorship on Economic Growth in China? Secondly, what implications does the theoretical and empirical finding have on Chinese Media Censorship?

## **Part II - The Impact of Media Censorship on Economic Growth in China.**

Amidst tight – knit rules that regulate the media across one of the world’s most secretive societies, several theories on the extent to which the Chinese economy could be impacted emerged over the years. Whilst some scholars argued on the negative outcomes in an inter-connected world of our times, many others theorized that Chinese Media Censorship has a national economic interest that is deeply rooted in a historical context. These show that the impact of Media Censorship on Chinese economy is both multifaceted and complex, whilst applying unique characteristics to Chinese socio-political and socio-economical trajectories. In retrospective it’s worth noting that while the western industrialized economies maintain leadership in an emerging global information economy, countries such as China have embarked upon economic policies aimed at catching up through its multifaceted approach.

With a multifaceted approach of adopting a media policy propelling economic growth and protecting national sovereignty, China has since then embraced neo-liberal and open market reforms that laid the foundation for integration into the global economic system. Growth across the Chinese economic landscape became the hall mark of development for the Asian power house. Although a common consensus on Chinese economy is difficult to attain, it is widely accepted that its most important feature is either stronger non-inflationary growth linked to the rising influence of Information Communications Technologies, or sustainable growth in labor productivity as a result of the production or deployment of information technology (Dai, 2002). The proliferation of Chinese investments in developing nations of Africa, Latin America and others could largely be attributed to information flow, bringing to light China’s potentials of contributing to development and prosperity to the development agenda of those nations.

With an understanding of the Internet’s impact on the European, American and other Asian economies, China realizes that the using information technology will only contribute towards a sustained economic growth and market competitiveness. Sustained regulatory measures could lead to limited or no access to market information and a risk of being completely shut –out of Internet – Based supply chains of foreign

buyers. Hachigan was justified to argue that the internet industry is promising precisely on Chinese economy, because it attracts economy – fueling Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of some \$150 million to date, which is welcome because China lacks a venture – capital tradition. Gilboy (2004) explains that:

Since it launched reforms in 1978, China has taken ten times the total stock of FDI Japan accumulated between 1945 and 2000. According to China's Ministry of Commerce, US firms have invested more than \$40 billion in more than 40, 000 projects in China. Given its openness to FDI, China cannot maintain its domestic market as a protected bastion for domestic firms, something both Japan and South Korea did during periods of rapid growth. Instead, it has allowed US and other foreign firms to develop new markets for their goods and services, especially high value- added products such as aircraft, software, industrial design, advanced machinery, and components such as semiconductors and integrated circuits. (pp. 36 -7)

Today it is indisputable that contributions by Transnational Corporations (TNCs) foreign to the Chinese economic miracle have been enormous (Schiler, 2005). Export growth has been remarkably strong not only for its scale - from \$26 billion in volume in 1985 to \$380 billion in 2003 – but also, as we saw, for its strong linkages to foreign direct investment (Hale, 2003: 47). Today, more than a dozen Chinese companies rank in the fortune 500 list of leading global enterprises by revenue (Ahmad, 2004d: 14 – 15). A survey of around 100 investment promotion agencies by the United Nations Commission on Trade and Development also revealed that China Ranks fifth in the world –ahead of sixth place Japan- as a prospective source of investment capital (William, 2004: 5).

Apart from the impact on Foreign Development Investment (FDI), censorship of the internet in China paved the way for a promotion of indigenous technological development as a hallmark of economic growth. In spite of the international outcry on regulatory measures imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it has also been argued that the Chinese having seen some of their market potentials subsequently overshadowed by foreign firms came up with policy measures enabling competitiveness in the global market. For example amidst the dangers of losing the cell phone industry to competitors in the market, the Chinese government created its own 3G (3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mobile communications) standard

centered on Chinese Technologies (Dai, 2002). This was theorized as the major reasoning behind the birth of the TD-SCMA, which was subsequently adopted by the International Telecommunications Union as a technology that can compete with other 3G standards in the global market. In the midst of a growing international agony against Chinese internet censorship, it is important to note that economic growth strengthened a domestic market for the Video Compact Disc. According to Xiudian Daia, although foreign suppliers of VCD/Super VCD such as Philips and various Japanese firms do have a presence in China, native manufacturers such as Xianxe and Xinxe have been more competitive due to their low production cost(Majid, 2004).

Trade policies over the years further complemented the promotion of indigenous technologies through a radical sectoral reform of the information technology infrastructure. Through such reforms, the Chinese Communist Party introduced changes that replaced the previous system of monopoly with a duopoly between China Telecom and China Unicom. Xiudian Dia was therefore justified when she argued that it has long been Chinese government strategy that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the importation of foreign products in the ICT should lead to technology transfer from foreign firms to Chinese firms. Such policy moves further increased competition as more carriers entered the market

In a quest of enhancing effective governance, the Chinese government has also taken sweeping institutional reforms of mergers across the Chinese information society. This was visible when, in March 1998, the government merged the previously warring Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), The Ministry of Electronic Industry (MEI) and the communications networks of the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT), China Aerospace Industry Corp, and China Aviation Corp (Majid, 2004). The merger resulted to the creation of super ministry, namely the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), widely regarded as a bold measure to address the challenges of technological convergence of the digital age. Despite China's centralized approach of the internet singling it from the decentralized approach of other economic powers, Internet Censorship could widely be argued to be more of a developmental policy

for the Asian power house. Thus, the findings on China's media censorship on economic policies form the core of the literature echoed in the theoretical implications.

### **Part III- Theoretical Implications of Chinese Media Censorship**

This paper largely gave an analysis of the different theories and hypothesis on the Impact of Chinese Internet censorship, open door policy of enhancing economic prosperity and national sovereignty, and how a multifaceted approach of controlled technological convergence, trade policies, a competitive domestic and foreign market, and a successful indigenous technological development validated Chinese media policy as a beacon of economic growth.

From the study, we are able to understand that both Hachigan and Daia made compelling arguments on sustainable growth in labor productivity of China as a result of the production or deployment of information technology. In spite of the entire international outcry, the study unveils that Chinese government views new communication technologies as vital to economic growth.

Using the empirical findings of the study China understands that to remain competitive in the both the national and global markets, becoming a key player in the global information economy must be a central feature of all her economic policies. Thus the study explains how the Chinese government is meeting that challenge, and contributing to the argument that internet and media censorship must not deter governments in the developing world to adopt information technology, and help spread IT skills and computer literacy programs (Barshefsky, 2001: 146).

The study also argues that despite the Chinese government's awareness of the political risk around promoting the spread of the internet, it realizes that power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) depends on its ability to improve standard of living for citizens. As Hachigan pointed out, so far this assessment of the pros and cons of the internet by the Chinese authorities is supported by a number of developments, thus providing evidence of economic potentials in the midst of government censorship.

We have also learnt that China provides an example of a unique media transition amid a vigorous capitalist economic revival while at the same time continuing a communist political system (Winfield, Peng, 2005), thus faced with a dilemma of maintaining a financial vitality without compromising sovereignty ( Zi, 2003).

From the study, it came to light that two lines of structural change has converged on a vital entry point for an analysis of the Chinese contemporary political economy: First , despite the bursting of the high-tech financial bubble, a worldwide communications and information industry continues to function as a fountainhead of economic development; Second, with its embrace of capitalist social relations, China has become the fastest growing large economy and , therewith, an engine market renewal (Schiler, 2005). Thus, one could arguable contend that communications and information have not compromise a vital economic sector, whose rapid expansion attests to capital's underlying need to arrest stagnation and profit decline. The study therefore shows a second growth engine materialized around China's reinsertion into the transnational market system.

We are also able to understand from the study that even though China maintain censorship of the media, the Internet provides an opportunity to delve into Chinese society to get a better understanding of the Asian giant, and to engage China as a global economic partner of the international system. Given China's sustained economic growth and the ongoing 'go global' policy, the study ascertained that China's economy will continue to expand in the years ahead (Ku, 2008). Chinese initiatives in communications and information are best apprehended neither as a developing country's attempt to redress global imbalances in the global communications system, nor as a current threat to the global dominance of the United States. China is rather seen here as contributing to the ongoing structural reconfiguration of the political economy of transnational capitalism (Schiller, 2005).

While it is descriptive, the aim of the study is to provide theoretical findings on the impact of China's Internet and media censorship. In a nutshell, Winfield and Peng were justified when they argued that while

media commercialization challenges orthodoxy of the Communist Party by initiating a redistribution of power and interests, the western model of a libertarian press is hardly a possibility. Rather, there appears to be a convolution of the Party line. The bottom line is that the Chinese Media system is moving from totalitarianism to market authoritarianism. As Castells (1998: 289) wrote, 'China's Internet Censorship and open door policy modernization is a deliberate state policy, designed and controlled to enhance economic prosperity and protect national sovereignty.'

#### **Part IV - Conclusion**

The paper has shown that whilst China's attitude towards technology in the last decades has been a need to use basis, through a censorship policy, its strategy for economic development in the information age is proving to be one unique experience of modern times. At the very least it provides an analytical exposition of China's open door policy through control mechanisms. It has further theorized that China's main reasons for such a policy measure are largely attributed to the quest of strengthening national sovereignty, and enhancement of economic prosperity.

Nonetheless, China's economic success amid such control measures was largely attributed to the effective combination of mergers across the information architecture, trade policies promoting indigenous technologies, promoting competition both at the local and national level, sustained Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and protecting sovereignty as a hallmark of economic prosperity.

Despite being a developing nation and a starter in the modern information world, China is progressively and aggressively pursuing information technologies that have the Asian power house well positioned in a competitive global economy. The evidence provided is both suggestive and comprehensive. It also provides an analytical framework of the ongoing impact of internet censorship on Chinese economic growth.

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