

Chinascape moving beyond the People's Republic

The PRC Internet is exciting not just its middle-class users in China, but the legions of Chinese language speakers who access the Chinese Internet outside of the mainland. It's sparking media interest not just in China but in the West too and there appears to be a common understanding that the Internet is an essential part of China's modernisation and opening up to the world. But what exactly characterises Chinese Internet use? Jens Damm goes in search of the borders of Chinese cyberspace.

Jens Damm

ANY MENTION OF THE CHINESE INTERNET is generally a reference to the Internet of the People's Republic of China (PRC). With more than 250 million users, the PRC has become the 'number one' if comparisons are drawn with other countries and users present on the World Wide Web, although the relative Internet penetration rate in the PRC (19,1%) is still slightly below the world average (CNNIC, 7/2008).

There are, however, other reasons for the prominence of the PRC in discussions on the Chinese Internet: The great success story linked with building an impressive infrastructure (Clark & Harwit, 2006) and the rapid 'informatisation' of Chinese urban society, the rapid growth in users who access the Internet via broadband (84.7%) and the 73.05 million users who access the web with mobile phones. In the context of infrastructure and technical figures, China has been very successful in implementing measures to improve the Net, for example, in building fibre networks to Tibet and other less developed regions in the West. There have also been several ambitious projects in the big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin, the Digital City Zhongguancun, and also in the coastal regions, such as Zhejiang, Guangdong and Fujian. China's international bandwidth – which reached 312,346 Mbit/s in 2007 – and the number of registered domains which now stands at 14.85 million shows that China is fast approaching its goal of becoming the number one in the global Internet.

Not surprisingly, the positive effects of the Internet and ongoing 'informatisation,' are frequently mentioned in the PRC's mass media and in a growing number of academic publications on the importance of the Internet for the development of China. These positive effects include the introduction of e-governance on a wide scale, which has been effective in promoting good governance and anti-corruption measures (Damm, 2006), the possibility of 'leap-frogging' an industrial development phase via informatisation (Xie, 2006), and the impact of the new interactive Web 2.0 applications (Ma, 2007).

The PRC Internet also excites the interests of the Western media, but mostly in relation to issues of censorship and control (Damm, 2007). The different opinions regarding the 2008 Olympic Games may serve as the best example to date: While mainstream journalists described China as an authoritarian and inhumane regime, representatives of the academic world reminded us of the difference between Maoist China and China today. As far as Internet research is concerned, the Western academic world is only slowly moving towards describing a broader and much more multi-faceted picture of the PRC's Internet. At this point I would like to mention, in particular, the efforts of the annual Chinese Internet Research Conference and also of some journalists who have been based in China for longer periods on topics concerning the way the Internet is used in China – whether there are any special characteristics, whether user behaviour differs from 'global' usage and to what extent the Internet has changed Chinese society, despite the existing controls – are seldom mentioned, at least in the West.

This raises a second issue: the lack of attention paid to the large number of people who are accessing the Internet in the Chinese language from outside the PRC and the question of how ethnic Chinese world-wide use the Internet. First, I will outline the topics which could be subsumed under the term 'Chinese Internet' in order to move away from a PRC-centred view. Secondly, I shall examine some specific characteristics of the usage of the 'Chinese Internet' in specific regions; and, finally, I shall evaluate the findings to decide whether it is useful to talk about a common 'Chinese Internet;' whether there are Chinese characteristics (*Zhongguo* or *Zhonghua*) pertaining to Internet use, or whether the geographical boundaries extend so far into cyberspace that to speculate about a culturally defined Chinese cyberspace makes no sense.

Defining 'Chinese cyberspaces' is problematic. The term may refer to cyberspaces which are defined either by language, being either Chinese, English, or any other language of the Chinese diaspora, or by content, that is, cyberspace dealing with cultural questions of Chineseness, history, and – very broadly defined – identity. With respect to language, we encounter the problem that the Chinese world does not employ Chinese as the sole language: while Chinese characters are normally used in the PRC, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, (albeit in two different versions), in Singapore and Malaysia, where Chinese is widely taught within the Chinese community, English is normally used online. The situation within the diaspora varies considerably. There are also huge differences between the language use of the new migrants (*xin yimin*) and the old diaspora. New migrants tend to employ Chinese in their specific blogs and BBS (Bulletin Board System) which restricts the audience to their own group and users coming from the homeland. Websites and blogs of the older Chinese diasporas, however, tend to employ English and/or the respective language of the new homeland, thus reaching out not to a wider, more general audience in the place of settlement.

In terms of Chinese cyberspaces in the 'homelands,' Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao are – to varying degrees – forerunners in the new information and communication technologies. Emigration destinations of the 'new migrants', such as North America, Australia, and the Anglo Saxon world in general are among the most wired places on earth. In the case of China, national boundaries and 'Internet boundaries' are separate issues: Within the PRC, there are *de facto* 'national' boundaries which separate the mainland from Hong Kong and Macao, but totally different structures and policies exist in the context of Internet policy. Taiwan a *de facto* independent nation, due to the common international one-China policy, encounters many difficulties with regard to joining international organisations. However, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) assigned domain names such as '.hk' to Hong Kong and '.tw' to Taiwan as this body officially recognises 'countries, territories, and separate economies.'

Case 1: PRC

According to the latest bi-annual survey carried out by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), which was published in July 2008 and refers to data from 2007, several particularities can be observed. Regarding the demographic structure of PRC netizens, the number of females among users has increased to 46.4% of the total, considerably narrowing the gap which has long existed between male and female users. Compared with the other 'Chinese places,' and also with international trends, most of the users in the PRC are young. They tend to be aged 30 and under, which amounts to 68.6% of the netizens in China, and exceeds two thirds of the total number of netizens. This age structure also influences specific behaviour patterns prevalent on the PRC Internet, reflected in, for example, the great importance of entertainment. It would therefore be well worth researching new developments and trends to see whether these patterns remain unchanged as young people grew older and still use the Net. Regarding education, the PRC Internet is still very much dominated by better educated users, but here also the gap has become significantly smaller and, for example, less well educated migrants in the urban areas are using the Internet to stay in contact with their families in the hinterland. Also noteworthy is the rather low number of domestic computers accessible for Internet users in China: this stands at only 84.7 million, which means that many people still either access the Internet via cyber cafes – CNNIC puts this at 40% – or that an increasing number access the internet via mobile phones, which in turn has consequences with regard to how the Internet is used.



Fig 1 (top left) Internet via mobile, Shanghai. Photograph by 'Shanghai Sky'. Courtesy of Flickr.com.



Fig. 2 (centre left) Chinese internet cafe sign warning users not to publish anti-social material online by 'EYG'. Courtesy of Flickr.com.



Fig. 3 (below left) Chinese Cybercops.

Entertainment and communication dominate usage patterns and are the frequently visited content of the Net. Users surveyed by CNNIC replied that online music played the most important role (212 million users), while other often mentioned usages were online videos, search engines, email and online games. Online games come seventh in the ranking of Internet applications in China; in June 2008, this was 58.3%, and the number of users reached 147 million. By way of comparison, the online game-using rate in the US in the same period was 35%.

Instant messaging use is much higher than the worldwide average, but China still lags behind with regard to e-business and e-commerce. Global instant message providers, such as MSN, are popular, but there is also the unique Instant messaging application QQ which is popular in the PRC and almost nowhere else. (Nevertheless, large numbers of Chinese users has made QQ the third largest Instant messaging system worldwide). 77.2% of all Chinese users use Instant Messaging, compared with a figure of 39 % in the US.

Another interesting factor is the increasing number of blogs. This phenomenon may well account for a whole new understanding of news media in China, particularly when considering the strictly censored official news outlets. As one journalist at the annual Chinese Internet Research Conference, which took place at the University of Hong Kong earlier this year commented: In the US when you hear a rumour about an earthquake you start watching TV; in China, nobody bothers to watch CCTV because everybody is convinced it will take hours for them to broadcast the news. People use SMS and go online. A good deal of interest, both in the PRC and the West, has been directed towards the use of blogs and personal space. This new development in China could radically alter the power between state and users, as users are becoming increasingly empowered.

Case 2: Taiwan

In Taiwan, the Taiwan Network Information Center (<http://www.twnic.net>) provides some specific surveys which not only cover statistical data regarding users and broadband access, but which also look into user behaviour. While these surveys are undertaken on a more ad hoc basis than those of the PRC/CNNIC, they are very well documented and offer valuable insights into the methodology and the research. The last two surveys – partly in Chinese, partly in English – dealt in particular with users employing either broadband or wireless access to



'Instant messaging use is much higher than the worldwide average, but China still lags behind with regard to e-business and e-commerce'



Fig. 4 (left)
Chinese youths on internet.

Fig 5 (above)
Chinese internet cafe in Shanghai. Photograph by 'Exo'. Courtesy of Flickr.com.

Fig. 6 (below)
www.qq.com



Fig. 7 (Right)
Zongchuangchun Plaza.

References

Cairncross, Frances. 1997. *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution will Change our Lives*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.

Clark, Duncan, & Harwit, Eric. 2006. Government Policy and Political Control over China's Internet. In Jens Damm & Simona Thomas (Eds.), *Chinese Cyberspaces: Technological Changes and Political Effects*. London and New York: Routledge.

CNNIC. 7/2008. Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China (January 2008). *China Internet Network Information Center*, <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2008/2/29/104126.pdf>, accessed 10 Sep 2008.

Damm, Jens. 2006. China's E-policy: Examples of Local E-government in Guangdong and Fujian. In Jens Damm & Simona Thomas (Eds.), *Chinese Cyberspaces: Technological Changes and Political Effects*. London and New York: Routledge.

Damm, Jens. 2007. The Internet and the Fragmentation of Chinese Society. *Critical Asian Studies*.

Harding, Harry. 1995. The Concept of 'Greater China': Themes, Variations and Reservations. In David L. Shambaugh (Ed.), *Greater China: the Next Superpower?* Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Lessig, Lawrence. 1999. *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books.

Liu, Chun-chou, Day, Wan-wen, Sun, Se-wen Sun, & Wang, Georgette. 2002. User Behavior and the 'Globalness' of Internet: From a Taiwan Users' Perspective. *JCMC*, 7 (2), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue2/taiwan.html>, accessed 10 May 2007).

Ma, Weigong 馬為公. 2007. *Hulianwang de xin shidai 互聯網的新時代 (The new era of the Internet)*: Zhongguo guoji guangbo chubanshe 中國國際廣播出版社.

Meyer-Clement, Elena, & Schubert, Gunter. 2004. Greater China – Idee. Konzept. Forschungsprogramm. Zur Einführung in einen neuen Arbeitsschwerpunkt am Seminar für Sinologie und Koreanistik der Universität Tübingen. *Greater China Occasional Papers* (1, <http://www.gcs.uni-tuebingen.de/index.php?id=34>, accessed 10 May 2007).

Pan, Lynn. 1999. *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rheingold, Howard. 2000. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Rev. ed.). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Tu, Weiming. 1994. Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center. In *The Living Tree: the Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (pp. 1-34). Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Tu, Weiming. 1996. Cultural Identity and the Politics of Recognition in Contemporary Taiwan. *The China Quarterly* (148).

TWNIC. 7/2008. Jiushiqi niandu Taiwan wuxian wanglu shiyong zhuangkuang diaocha – zhaiyao fenxi 九十七年度台灣無線網路使用狀況調查 – 摘要分析. *Taiwan Network Information Center* www.twnic.net.tw/download/200307/96305b.pdf, accessed 10 Sep 2008.

TWNIC. 2007. Internet Broadband Usage in Taiwan – A Summary Report of the Jan Survey of 2007. *Taiwan Network Information Center* www.twnic.net.tw/download/200307/96305b.pdf, accessed 10 Sep 2008.

Wong, Loong. 2003. Belonging and Diaspora: The Chinese and the Internet. *First Monday*, 8 (4, http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue8_4/wong/index.html, accessed 10 May 2007).

Xie, Kang. 2006. Industrialization Supported by Informatization: the Economic Effects of the Internet in China. In Jens Damm & Simona Thomas (Eds.), *Chinese Cyberspaces: Technological Changes and Political Effects*. London and New York: Routledge.

the Internet (TWNIC, 7/2008, 2007). 79% of households in Taiwan owned computers, 71% of households had Internet access, 69% of households had broadband access and 96% of online households were using broadband connections. Thus, a rather impressive two thirds of Taiwanese are netizens. Mobile phones also play an important role and the penetration rate in Taiwan is 105%. In general, the user behaviour of Taiwanese netizens, resembles international user behaviour. For example, the use of search engines (searching 57.48% and browsing 46.76%) plays an important role and the use of email (26.96%) is more common than the use of instant messaging (17.41%). Online games are played by one fifth of Taiwanese users, which is more or less the global average.

Unlike their PRC counterparts, Taiwanese users are less dependent on the Internet for getting news. Only 11.76% of the users read online news and blogs are also less important (5.18%). One explanation for this, of course, could be the free and uncensored media in Taiwan. E-shopping – an area in which the PRC lags behind places such as the US and the EU – is much more popular in Taiwan, while e-communities play a significantly lesser role.

Case 3: Hong Kong

Hong Kong is, as a city-state, hardly comparable to Taiwan and the PRC. An e-infrastructure is usually much easier to establish in areas with a high population density. Thus, the household broadband penetration rate (February 2008) was 76.7%; while the mobile phone penetration rate (February 2008) reached 154%. And, as is the case with Japan, mobile devices play a very important role in enabling Web access: a quarter of the time spent on the Internet is via mobile devices. A recent survey (2008 Digital 21 Strategy <http://www.info.gov.hk/digital21/eng/statistics/stat.html>) of Hong Kong users found that the most important features were communication with others 83.3% and browsing/surfing web pages (excluding Government websites) 81.3%; users also cited features such as searching for and downloading information online (excluding Government information) 60.3% and reading magazines / newspapers online 55.9%. Lower than the global average was the use of electronic business services online 37.8%, while online digital entertainment 37.5% played a significant, but not really outstanding role.

Conclusions

Firstly, it has been shown that the Chinese Internet, however this may be defined, is much larger than the PRC Internet. Secondly, there is certainly a large minority of Chinese speakers

using the Internet outside the PRC proper. Regarding the mutual possibilities of accessing the Chinese Internet especially across the Taiwan strait, a contradictory observation can be made: despite the obvious censorship and blocking measures of the PRC, the Chinese language Internet can be widely accessed in both directions, that is, the Chinese language Internet outside the PRC is accessible to users from the PRC, while the PRC Internet is open to all users from outside the PRC. However, the technical limitations and laws present obstacles to a free and borderless Internet: the PRC, in particular, hinders communication between either side of the Taiwan Strait by blocking not only all the official Taiwanese websites, but also the Taiwanese pro-communist websites engaging in cross-Strait issues. Sensitive and political issues and discussions simply do not travel across the Taiwan Strait. Thirdly, cultural boundaries seem to exist: people surf the places where they feel comfortable. Empirical research carried out in Taiwan (Liu, Day, Sun, & Wang, 2002) mentions the fact that 85% of Taiwanese users remain almost exclusively within the Taiwanese cyberspace, and that the number of users visiting foreign websites (English and Japanese) is still greater than the number visiting other Chinese cyberspaces (5.9%). This questions the results of earlier research on the Internet and the Chinese Diaspora and, for example, Long Wong's claim that 'The Internet has become a new global phenomenon, enlarging new democratic discourse and has helped to foster new empowerment and learning experiences' (Wong, 2003) cannot be substantiated. Fourthly, regarding the specifics, the picture is very mixed: the PRC Internet is shaped, in particular, by interactive formats and a high degree of entertainment, while in Hong Kong mobile access plays a very significant role. Taiwan, on the other hand, follows international trends much more closely than the other two regions.

In sum, the existence of a Chinese cyberspace without borders or boundaries cannot be confirmed. My analysis reveals the deficiencies in existing theories, such as the once popular proclamation of the Internet as a borderless space (Cairncross, 1997; Rheingold, 2000). While in many respects the Chinese cyberspace is global and reaches out, to some extent, beyond national borders, it is characterised by various constraints (Lessig, 1999), such as PRC censorship and by different patterns of usage.

Jens Damm
Freie Universität, Berlin
jens.damm@fu-berlin.de