Finding Equilibrium on the Internet: How Chinese Netizens and the Regime Navigate Social Media Censorship

Hailey McKee
University of Mississippi, hcmckee@go.olemiss.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis

Part of the Journalism Studies Commons, and the Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons

Recommended Citation
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/1054

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College) at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
FINDING EQUILIBRIUM ON THE INTERNET: HOW CHINESE NETIZENS AND THE REGIME NAVIGATE SOCIAL MEDIA CENSORSHIP

by
Hailey Caroline McKee

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, Mississippi
May 2019

Approved by

_________________________
Advisor: Dr. Weixing Chen

_________________________
Reader: Dr. Debora Wenger

_________________________
Reader: Dr. Mark Dolan
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my advisor and readers, who have all doubled as former professors of mine, thank you for shaping me into the student I am today. Dr. Chen, thank you for sparking my interest on the topic of my thesis and for patiently helping me mold our ideas onto paper. Dr. Wenger, thank you for always keeping an open office door and for consistently encouraging me to shoot for the stars in all my endeavours. Dr. Dolan, thank you for inspiring me to pursue broadcast journalism my freshman year and for serving as my mentor. I look forward to frequently keeping in touch and continuing to learn from each of you well after commencement in May.

To my family and friends who have heard me say “Thesis” when asking what I’m doing more times than I can count, thank you for your encouragement and relentless faith in me. Whether you were asking questions about my progress, surprising me with a Sonic drink, listening to me practice my defense, working on homework at the kitchen table beside me, or just motivating me with a text or phone call, your unwavering support and positivity electrified me to bring this thesis to life. I am truly fortunate and thankful to have all of you in my corner.

In addition to my advisor, readers, family, and friends, I will forever be indebted to the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College for pushing me to write this thesis, for cultivating my curiosities, for broadening my viewpoints, and for introducing me to some of my forever best friends. Though graduation from the University of Mississippi is regrettably inevitable, I will fondly carry memories made through the SMBHC for many years to come.
ABSTRACT
Finding Equilibrium on the Internet: How Chinese Netizens and the Regime Navigate Social Media Censorship
(Under the direction of Dr. Weixing Chen)

China’s current social media landscape consists of the most users in the world operating within the most extensive governmental censorship apparatus in the world, which over time has created a shaky balance between personal expression and institutional order. This thesis attempts to shed light on an understudied, potentially sensitive topic by exploring the multifaceted relationship between Chinese Internet users and the communist regime in terms of content surveillance. By examining the current Internet environment, assessing the opportunities and challenges the web provides users and the regime, implementing a survey with sixteen Chinese netizens, and conducting a literature review, this thesis posits that the previously described current balance works because of the state’s centuries-long history with censorship and the general support of regulation from Internet users. After expounding upon these topics, this thesis finds that the rising influence of Chinese netizens may result in a detrimental shift in the balance between expression and order, in which censorship should eventually diminish.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**PART ONE: INTRODUCTION** ................................................................. 6

**PART TWO: THE CURRENT CHINESE INTERNET LANDSCAPE** ............... 8

**PART THREE: THE INTERNET’S OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR NETIZENS** .............................................................. 20

  Opportunities ................................................................. 21

  Challenges ................................................................. 28

**PART FOUR: THE REGIME’S RESPONSE TO THE INTERNET** .............. 34

  Opportunities ................................................................. 34

  Challenges ................................................................. 39

**PART FIVE: FINDING EQUILIBRIUM ON THE INTERNET** .................. 55

  Past Perspectives .......................................................... 55

  Future Perspectives ......................................................... 59

  Primary Research on Internet Equilibrium Today .......................... 62

    *Regime* ................................................................. 62

    *Netizens* .............................................................. 69

  Methodology ............................................................... 70

  Analysis ................................................................. 74

**PART SIX: ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION** .................................... 83

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ................................................................. 89

**APPENDIX** ........................................................................ 96
PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Deng Xiaoping, an influential leader within the Chinese Communist Party for decades, articulated that “If you leave a window open for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to come in,” meaning negative consequences will inevitably result from uncontrolled expression (Minzner, 2014). Though censorship has been a longstanding component of China’s history largely due to the regime’s appetency for centralized authority, the more recent introductions of Internet and social media into society have diversified the ways in which content regulation exists and affects individuals and organizations.

This research explores the increasingly complex relationship between Chinese netizens and social media censorship that stems from the current communist regime. By examining existing literature and conducting primary research, this thesis will posit that today’s Chinese Internet users and the communist regime have struck a balance between expression and control that renders censorship largely advantageous for society. This statement will be defended based upon the grounds that censorship is historically rooted in Chinese culture to the point in which Internet users would rather have some content
regulation than none. The thesis will furthermore assert that, even though the idea behind China’s world-class censorship apparatus could be exemplary for other countries, the current equilibrium maintains that the justification of social media censorship should not be permanent.

This thesis will open with an analysis of the current social media landscape in China, first discussing the trends of Chinese Internet users and then digging into three of the nation’s leading social media platforms that have significantly impacted the way millions communicate. In order to explore the dual nature of the Internet, the proceeding part will discuss a sample of the opportunities and challenges that the Internet bestows upon Internet users, followed by a section on some of the opportunities and challenges the web provides the communist regime. The major arguments of this thesis with supporting rationale in the forms of secondary research and primary surveys will then be presented. Following the arguments, this thesis will include a literature review that explains findings and theories of scholars on the topics of social media censorship and relations between netizens and the regime. In the concluding section, an overall assessment of the research will be provided.
PART TWO: THE CURRENT CHINESE INTERNET LANDSCAPE

The term ‘netizen’ is often used by individuals, companies, and the regime to describe a Chinese citizen who accesses the Internet. Some Chinese citizens also perceive the meaning of this term to embody one who actively advocates for freedom of speech in cyberspace, thus using the Internet as a means of independent self-expression in the midst of authoritarian governance. As a result, some individuals use this term to translate into a form of pride, while others use it literally, and still others will not use it at all. Regardless of the term’s connotation, the number of Internet users in China has skyrocketed since its 1987 introduction as an email tool for a handful of scholars (Tai, 2012, p. 122).

Netizen demographics over the past twenty years reveal that the Internet has become increasingly inclusive within Chinese society. In 2000, men dominated 79% of the Internet landscape; however, this online gender gap decreased significantly by 2009, in which male users comprised 53% of cyberspace and women totalled 47% (Chi, 2012). Furthermore, 84% of netizens in 2000 either attended junior college or a four-year university, but by 2009, almost 75% of Internet users possessed educations at the high school level or below. In 2009, however, a digital divide of 71.7% urban users as opposed to 28.3% rural users was evident across netizens, which is a trend that still exists
to a much smaller degree. According to the same source, in 2000 and 2009 alike, around 16% of Internet users were ages forty and older.

Data from the past five years alone reveals that the Internet is still mostly common among young, educated adults, as access to the Internet in rural areas and in schools expands (China, 2018). Statistics from January 2012 reveal that China boasted around 500 million netizens, which equates to almost 40 percent of the nation’s population at this time (China, 2018). Predominant users in 2012 were young males, young adults, and high school graduates who access the Internet from mobile devices or desktops. Six years later in August 2018, the number of active Chinese netizens had surpassed 800 million, which accounts for almost 58% of the country’s population, making it the world’s largest Internet user powerhouse (McCarthy, 2018). Not only does China have the biggest Internet base, but it also exemplifies the most active one, with 91% of online users also having social media accounts, in contrast to 67% of Internet users in the United States (Wang, 2016). This trend may be due to the fact that 98% of China’s netizens access the Internet from a mobile device, from where today’s online accounts are mostly utilized (McCarthy, 2018).

Starting with electronic bulletin board systems (BBS) like sina.com and sohu.com, cyberspace has paved the way for social media platforms that allow individuals, organizations, and businesses to be connected with ease and efficiency (Ye, Xu, & Zhang, 2017). According to Ye et al., such basic chatting software was initially used at universities, starting in the late 1990s, and gradually expanded to social groups, which has paved the way for today’s more complex sites that allow photos, blogging,
status updates, music, news, and videos. The same authors assert that social platforms with these functions, such as WeChat, QQ, and Weibo, have grown to create a public sphere, in which “people can exchange ideas freely through meetings, debates, dialogues and discussions” that encourage two-way conversations and exploration of questions (Ye, et al., 2017, p. 8). The advances in Internet and social media thus allow Chinese netizens to contribute to and be members of an even greater shared culture, in which any individual with Internet access can participate.

The purposes of using social media platforms are relatively the same worldwide; for example, Chinese netizens want to build social and professional interconnectivity, or guanxi, just as users outside of China want to create networks and relationships. Users in China desire to “gain face,” or increase a positive viewpoint of oneself through social media, which is similar to the broad netizen drive to gain followers and likes (Wang, 2016, p. 45). An analysis of the distinct domestic platforms WeChat, QQ, and Sina Weibo will demonstrate how netizens in China effectively exercise their free speech and expression within the parameters enforced by the regime.

WeChat, originally called “Weixin,” is a comprehensive service created by the media corporation Tencent, in which users can text, call, send voice messages, share videos and multimedia, read articles, exchange money, order food, and even call taxis through one common application (Wang, 2016). Its 2011 launch attracted Internet users in droves, as the platform allowed individuals to send instant messages free of the charges that are imposed by the state-owned cell phone corporation (Chen, 2018). This platform grew astronomically, totalling 50 million users before the end of its first year
As of 2019, there are over one billion WeChat accounts in China, as users have the ability to create multiple accounts (Yuan, 2019, para. 2), thus quickly proving itself to be the most popular messaging application in the Asia-Pacific region (Wang, 2016). Though this platform expands across China, WeChat is usually used by urban, young adults with relatively higher levels of education, as individuals aged eighteen to thirty-five comprise around 85% of its total user base (Wang, 2016). There are a number of factors that led to its rapid success among Chinese netizens and beyond its borders.

As previously mentioned, WeChat dominated the social media scene within years, which is largely because the application is smartphone-based. Tencent recognized the potential for WeChat to flourish as smartphones began expanding to wider audiences in China; as a result, the application was created to intentionally grow proportionally with the influx of smartphones. Many other applications were based on desktops--including QQ, which will be discussed later in this section--so these companies had to allocate time, funds, and employees to meet demands of the growing smartphone market, which WeChat skipped altogether by launching directly on a mobile platform (Wang, 2016).

WeChat grew in popularity not only because it is smartphone-based, but because it also employs a function uncommon to Chinese netizens: voice messaging. In 2015, almost 85% of its netizens used WeChat specifically for this function, which grew especially among the elderly, disabled, illiterate, semi-illiterate, and foreign populations who may have difficulty expressing themselves in Mandarin (Wang, 2016). This innovation that was made easily available to the public did not come with unanimous support, with some saying it is only appropriate in intimate relationships, others saying it
is downright disturbing, and yet others saying it improves their oratory skills (Wang, 2016). Nevertheless, this function provided the platform a larger user base, as WeChat users totaled around 280 million recorded minutes by 2015 (Wang, 2016). Because WeChat offers many personalized ways to communicate and share money, it also possesses higher privacy and a low degree of anonymity in which real names and the desire to be professional are much more common on WeChat than on other accounts.

In addition to the structure for smartphones and the unique features for including netizens, WeChat is widely attractive because it is visually oriented. In 2012, more features were added to the platform so users could share photos within a Moments category, which is similar to Facebook’s timeline, as well as in a Photo Album (Chen, 2018). While using the Moments feature, netizens can publicize up to nine photos at a time to an unlimited amount of people, to which recipients of this data can respond with links or comments (Chen, 2018). Typically, a sender has to post a photo before a text box pops up to create personal content, so images are widely circulated on this platform, much like the Western applications Instagram or Tumblr. Though updates were created in which users can select a pure text option, thereby opting out of uploading a photo or video and posting only words, very few people use this function or are even aware of its existence. Communicating such visually-oriented information through the Moments and Photo Album features allows individual netizens to send messages to a limitless amount of people, but the messages must be specifically accepted by the sender (Chen, 2018).

Netizens are also drawn to WeChat because it operates within a closed community, in which information can be transferred from an individual to a small group
where there is greater trust and familiarity (Chen, 2018). For example, to add a friend, it is necessary to scan a QR code, enter in someone’s personalized and permanent WeChat ID, or utilize a phone number. WeChat users can also stimulate discussion through the formation of group chats. The size of these chats are limited by Tencent, initially starting out at a maximum of forty people, but these sizes had expanded to a maximum of 500 members by 2016 (Chen, 2018). Through the formation of these chats, netizens are able to unite “to organize and coordinate close-knit group activities that could address issues of great community concern,” such as shaping policies or advocating for civic engagement (Chen, 2018, p. 80). Though there are options in which users can arbitrarily add others based on different parameters—adding nearby users, shaking a device and connecting with someone around the world who is shaking his or her device simultaneously, or sending a “message in a bottle” to someone at random—many people realistically use this application to connect with family, friends, and colleagues (Wang, 2016).

Because of WeChat’s unparalleled consolidation of functions and features, this application has become irreplaceable in the lives of Chinese netizens. Over one-third of WeChat users spend at least four hours a day accessing the platform, which penetrates deeply into their private and professional lives to the point where other forms of interpersonal connection are no longer needed (Yuan, 2019). For example, a technology columnist based in Hong Kong writes that business meetings in China often have “a time when everybody takes out his or her phone and scans the WeChat QR codes of others to become friends,” which has rendered traditional forms of corporate communication, like
email or business cards, almost obsolete (Yuan, 2019, para. 9). Similarly, the platform’s widespread utilization of and adaptation to QR codes allowed Tencent to annex mobile payment methods, which simplifies purchasing experiences for netizens and reduces the need for traditional forms of payment, like cash or cards. As a result of WeChat’s infiltration into the daily lives of Chinese netizens to make their work and play easier, the platform is not likely to lose any traction with its stakeholders in the near future.

Another social media powerhouse in China is QQ, a personal networking platform also owned by Tencent. Known for its logo displaying a winking penguin wearing a red scarf, this platform is often related to WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, in which users can update statuses, write blogs, make payments, and share photographs, stickers, music, and videos with online contacts. In contrast to those who routinely access WeChat, QQ’s user base consists of a higher number of rural residents, since it does not require a phone number to register (Wang, 2016). Also unlike WeChat, QQ was initially created for desktop computers because it was developed alongside the rise of Internet to be released in 1999 (Tencent, 2019). Though the application was eventually transferred to mobile devices with the influx of the smartphone market, desktops allow QQ netizens to fully engage in the customization that brings many users to the platform. QQ boasts 861 million monthly users that account for its ability to adapt to cultural demands and changes (Tencent, 2019).

The customization that exists on QQ is an enormous component of Asia-Pacific social media culture (Wang, 2016). On this platform, netizens can create their own avatars, categorize their contact lists, and personalize web page models, background
pictures, and music, much like Western MySpace (Tencent, 2019). As a result of these netizens’ desire to customize and create more colorful, rich visuals and profile layouts, QQ demonstrates a high degree of anonymity within netizens’ usernames and photographs. For example, about 95% of QQ netizens do not use their real names but choose to substitute them for phrases, and some do not use a picture of themselves (Wang, 2016). However, regardless of how many times a user customizes his or her profile, every user has a QQ number that never changes and serves to identify and add friends.

Since it was released twenty years ago, QQ employs a convergence culture in which many of its services were the first exposure Chinese netizens experienced to navigating various aspects of the Web. As one of the first widely-used media platforms, scholars assert that “QQ is the starting point of many people in China and their digital life,” whether that be instant messaging, sharing and displaying music programs, accessing gaming channels, and even utilizing shopping forums (Wang, 2016, p. 29). In 2004, a hierarchical structure was launched in which the longer QQ users stayed logged into their accounts accessing any of these networking mechanisms, the higher the ranking users could earn (Wang, 2016). Since netizens want to gain face and see themselves in the most positive light possible, QQ users would stay online for hours a day and develop addictive habits that would limit their productivity. To combat this issue, QQ changed its policy to where users to where two hours of engagement a day counts as an active member. Despite these policy changes, QQ members utilize this platform to exert
creativity and potentially as an outlet to defy rules and boundaries of everyday life (Wang, 2016).

A third example of the social media platforms dominating Chinese cyberspace is Sina Weibo, a personal publication site that is commonly related to Western Twitter. Many of Twitter’s same characteristics apply to Sina Weibo, such as using “@” to tag someone, typing “#” to create a hashtag, and posting a maximum number of characters that can be published to an infinite audience (Wang, 2016). This platform is widely used by rural residents who must span distances to effectively communicate, as well as celebrities who desire to contact large audiences or even netizens that they do not know personally. As previously discussed, this type of social media has been termed “microblogging,” which is a label that is commonly under debate since platforms made solely for blogging, like Western Blogger and WordPress, have been banned entirely within China’s borders.

Though WeChat certainly allows netizens to generate conversations on political or social issues among friends or fellow group members, Weibo provides a better platform for open debate among a much larger, less personal audience. For example, virtually anyone on Weibo can read and respond to posts, whereas comments on WeChat public and personal accounts are only shared with the original poster and, consequently, are much more private (Chen, 2018). Furthermore, unlike WeChat, Weibo lists the number of followers each user possesses, thus insinuating whom Internet users should follow, admire, and heed. By distinguishing this information, Weibo effectively gives the
more popular, influential opinion leaders a louder voice, as opposed to ordinary netizens with fewer followers (Chen, 2018).

Despite the opportunities Weibo presents as a public network that stimulates broad conversations, users of this platform are on the decline. Reasons for this decline include the governmental efforts like censorship that push against microblogging, and the influx of advertisements on the site, and the shift toward communication among close groups (Chen, 2018). After Sina Weibo became a subject of attempts to “clean up” the Internet starting in 2013, people can be jailed for spreading online rumors varying proportionally with how many times the content has been viewed, as previously discussed in this thesis. Since circulation of content on this application is extremely easy, many users do not want to take the risk of incarceration on personal publication platforms Sina Weibo (Wang, 2016, p. 52). Another factor that deters netizens from using Sina Weibo is the difficulty to build guanxi, in that communication on this platform links strangers. Since platforms like WeChat and QQ encourage creating contacts with those in one’s area of study, family, or social circles, netizens tend to shift from Sina Weibo to either of the former platforms where tight-knit relationships are cultivated and encouraged.

The rapid success of these platforms and the companies that produce them has not escaped the attention of the regime. Not only have various methodologies of censorship been implemented on these sites, which will be discussed in a following section, but the government also proposed the idea of purchasing “special management shares” in some of the country’s top communication firms in 2016 to further exert its influence (Yuan,
The concept of special management shares would offer a 1% government stake contingent upon representation on the boards and panels of social media firms to further review content (Zhong & Wee, 2017). While 1% seems like a small number, media moguls like Tencent and Weibo accrue hundreds of billions of dollars in market capitalization annually, so this stake in Tencent alone would cost over $4 billion (Yuan, 2017). This plan has been met with mixed reviews, as some companies believed it would ultimately fade from the government’s agenda (Yuan, 2017). However, as smaller communication companies such as Tiexue and Zaker have offered stakes in accordance with this plan, other opinions hold that this type of government-sponsored deal “is a sign of things to come” in the future of social media and government relations (Zhong & Wee, 2017, para. 4).

An analysis of WeChat, QQ, and Sina Weibo reveals that Chinese netizens are able to perform a variety of functions that tie them to their respective social circles purely through utilizing domestic platforms. The universal communicative functions found on these platforms, such as the abilities to post status updates, add friends, and share photos or videos, allow users to express themselves in a number of ways and to build much-desired guanxi with other Chinese netizens. Though some Western outlets are blocked in their entirety, Chinese Internet users hardly access these platforms unless they travel abroad or purchase a virtual private network because the plethora of domestic platforms provides guanxi in ways superior to international platforms. Not only do millions more Chinese citizens access domestic platforms than those of Western descent to achieve the notion of guanxi, but the Chinese platforms often provide a greater level of
function versatility and integration--such as the ability to pay for a meal, send a voice recording, or call a taxi all in one application--in which international platforms increasingly often use as a model. Though mainstream scholarship often asserts that the censorship of entire social media platforms is an infringement of netizens’ expression, netizens are able to effectively express their viewpoints and opinions through emerging techniques on hundreds of domestic social media sites.

However, the rise of an engaged citizenship operating under the governance of an authoritative regime creates a push and pull force between netizens’ freedom of expression and the party’s desire to remain in control. With such rapid and widespread growth in the technology sector, the party has increased its role in regulating content on all levels of government to the point in which “there has been a reluctance to acknowledge the crucial role played by the central government, and also by local bureaucrats” in regards to censorship (Wang, 2016, p. 27). The Chinese Communist Party, Internet service providers, and netizens thus have a complex, multifaceted relationship in which freedom of online speech often falls into gray area, as the state and Internet providers are seeking their own interests while trying to balance the demands of their stakeholders (Han, 2018). The rise of the Internet in China has inspired collective mobilization and criticism of the regime, to which the government has adapted and developed regulatory apparatuses in an attempt to match the creativity and pluralization of netizens (Han, 2018). Consequently, the Internet has caused various opportunities and challenges for netizens in its roughly three decades of existence in China, which will be detailed in the next section.
PART THREE: THE INTERNET’S OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR NETIZENS

The Internet in China presents itself as a double-edged sword, in which its rapid and widespread development both benefits and sometimes detriments those who utilize it. For example, the expansion of Internet undeniably brings advancements through efficiency and ease to the hundreds of thousands of users who communicate with one other, conduct complex research and exchange findings, and buy, sell, and trade products or services, among other functions. However, the freedom of online expression in a communist regime is inevitably met with regulations and limitations that assert the government’s authority and, consequently, bring various challenges to netizens. To best understand the multifaceted relationship between netizens, the regime, and the Internet, this dual nature of the Internet in China will be discussed in the following section, beginning with an exploration of its opportunities for netizens, including increased political engagement, boosted Internet commerce, and stimulated education. The section will conclude with the Internet’s challenges for netizens, focusing specifically on cybersecurity, censorship, and information quality.
Opportunities

The Internet’s ability to span distances in order to link individuals, be they acquaintances, families, or strangers, allows the web to function as a modern political tool, connecting netizens to all levels of the government regardless of physical location. The Internet can effectively create this opportunity for netizens due to its unique, unprecedented characteristics of “activity, immediacy, extensiveness, openness, and richness” through increasingly creative, immersive platforms and content (Landtsheer et al., 2014, p. 345). The accessibility of cyberspace thus allows netizens to speak their minds through a variety of grassroots methods. For example, largely within the past decade, netizens have formed coalitions to create interactive online columns that offer their opinions, questions, proposals, and advice on policies or current events, such as the widely known “Netizen Hall” or “Questions for the Prime Minister” platforms, perhaps to praise, or perhaps to dissent. It is not uncommon for government officials to seek out content posted on these accounts in order to gauge public opinion and to communicate with citizens, similar to the ways in which officials will monitor and interact with content regarding governmental affairs that is posted on social media microblogs. This ability for netizens to voice their viewpoints on political processes alludes to what Landtsheer et al. refers to as “supervising government,” in which Internet users have a distinct capacity to check governmental authority in hopes of preventing corruption (2014, p. 353).

Not only can netizens express their firsthand political views online, but they can become increasingly politically informed by tapping into the wealth of information already present in cyberspace. For example, Internet users have the ability to access
databases and logs of laws, news, regulations, demographics, geographic trends, and contact information of government authorities that were incomplete or infeasible to gather prior to the expansion of Internet. Furthermore, netizens have the opportunity to investigate the backgrounds, stances, and histories of their politicians and regulatory bodies, as almost 55,000 government websites have been registered as of 2014 (Landtsheer et al., 2014). Because of the availability of pertinent content on the web, some scholars and politicians believe that, while cyberspace certainly has some drawbacks, the Internet is a mostly beneficial tool that links people to politics.

As summarized by Landtsheer et al., there are five main ways the Internet provides political opportunities for netizens: First, civic participation is expanded because the Internet gives individuals easy ways to share their voices through a number of communication channels (2014). Second, it allows netizens to play an active role in shaping the policy-making process, rather than passively observing it. Third, the frequent flow of information on the Internet enhances political transparency, as news pertaining to laws or leaders can quickly be presented publicly. Forth, netizens can become more educated by accessing documents and databases on topics that interest them. Fifth, the Internet boosts socialization as it becomes an even wider used vehicle of political conversation. As a culmination of these trends, the Internet allows netizens to become more politically aware and active, presenting individuals with opportunities to engage with and learn about policies and the people who make them at different levels. A 2005 survey on the Internet and political participation upholds Landtsheer’s arguments, which reveals that approximately 63% of the respondents say citizens better understand politics,
54% assert people have increased opportunities to discuss politics, and 45% believe people have stronger political power as a result of the Internet (Chi, 2012). These arguments and findings thus support the notion that the Internet serves as a link between the government and the people.

Not only does the Internet allow netizens to increase their political engagement, but it also has also paved the way for the current e-commerce platforms that are now integral parts of netizens’ daily operations. As the mobile industry soars in China, nearly one in two Chinese citizens has taken to online buying and selling items and services online, predominantly through the usage of smartphones and tablets, as opposed to desktop computers (Shadbolt, 2014). With over 500 million mobile shoppers in 2018, China’s netizens totalled $1 trillion in online purchasing and accounted for almost 40% of global retail e-commerce, which demonstrates the significant economic influence the Internet provides Chinese netizens (Marinova, 2017). As Western e-commerce sites such as Amazon and eBay are largely unsuccessful in China, the country’s large population pours into thriving domestic platforms that link businesses and customers and that have provided over 3.3 million jobs as of 2017 (China: E-commerce). China’s e-commerce also successfully brings unique opportunities to netizens by essentially capitalizing upon the idea of a “one-stop shop” in forward-thinking ways that specifically tailor to the needs of consumers. To describe some of these opportunities, an analysis of two of China’s top e-commerce providers, Alibaba and JD.com (Jingdong), is provided.

Alibaba and JD.com entered the e-commerce industry roughly twenty years ago, in 1999 and 1998 respectively, which was early enough to experience many of the same
competitive advantages that contribute to their continued success. Together, Alibaba and JD.com comprise more than 85% of China’s e-commerce market (Long, 2018). Both platforms offer netizens the ability to purchase a wide variety of items—ranging from apparel, electronics, luggage, toys, home furnishings, seafood, alcohol, flowers, and even certain minerals and chemicals—that can be ordered from a smartphone, processed through a complex logistics system, and immediately shipped to a netizen’s door, according to the Alibaba homepage. Though the platforms offer the same general buying and purchasing functions, they offer a number of different advantages to netizens.

Boasting more than 600 million active monthly users, Alibaba emphasizes “e-tailing” by running the majority of its selling operations directly through the web, as opposed to physically retailing in stores (Mourdoukoutas, 2014). With such a large Internet user base, devoting funds and resources to e-tailing allows Alibaba to meet more netizens where they are so individuals can easily use the platform at their own convenience. Additionally, Alibaba has created separate internal sites with the intention of better marketing certain products to specific netizens, thus creating a specialized shopping experience based on an online consumer’s needs. For example, Taobao hosts cheaper products from smaller merchants, whereas Tmall offers brand name products that usually come with a bigger price tag, which allows netizens to see the advantage of accessing diverse products that are organized on inclusive sites.

This platform also provides netizens the opportunity of networking, a traditional value of importance in China. Alibaba makes it easy for merchants to join their platform by relying on revenue sharing as opposed to listing fees, which brings increasing amounts
of merchants desiring to sell their products on the Alibaba website (Mourdoukoutas, 2014). When the online network expands, “the greater the benefits for each merchant, as it attracts a large volume of customer traffic” through exposure and conversation (Mourdoukoutas, 2014, para. 10). Netizens then feel a sense of community by interacting with users of the same products and services across the Alibaba network. Internet users furthermore trust that they can freely interact with fellow customers and merchants on this e-commerce platform due to its positive relationship with the Chinese government, which is “the gatekeeper of the economy, deciding who will be in what business and for how long” (Mourdoukoutas, 2014, para. 11). As gatekeeper, the government allows many domestic e-commerce platforms to thrive and create profitable competition, including JD.com.

JD.com is notorious for utilizing modern technology to best connect with its online customers, who amount to over 300 million per month (Laubscher, 2018). This e-commerce platform has its more than 550 warehouses, same- or next-day shipping logistics, and thousands of brick-and-mortar convenience stores to thank for its $67.2 billion net revenue for 2018, in addition to its thriving online shopping site, according to its corporate blog. Avant-garde technological advancements, like artificial intelligence, big data, and robotics, are incorporated to propel JD.com ahead of other companies and to simplify the shopping process for netizens. For example, drones have been used since 2016 to deliver packages, which effectively speeds shipping and generates conversation and interest among online shoppers (Marr, 2018). The company also uses technology to modernize the customer experience, in which data is used to profile customers by
tracking their tastes, interests, and trends to create a personalized e-commerce experience. While not affecting online shopping just yet, JD.com has also been working on payment through facial recognition model, in which convenience store shoppers would not even have to stop and pay through traditional methods in years to come (Marr, 2018). All of JD.com’s evolving technological implementations demonstrate that the company desires to provide the easiest and safest shopping experience possible for netizens, in which virtually any product can be purchased, shipping is revolutionized, counterfeits are terminated, and customer information is protected. As a result of online shopping platforms like Alibaba and JD.com, netizens have the opportunity to participate in the country’s flourishing e-commerce quite literally at the push of a button.

Not only is the web an informative political instrument and an interactive economic stimulant that simplifies the daily lives of Chinese Internet users, but it also increases access to education and further connects the intellect of netizens across the country. In particular, students at all levels of education are able to experience the various opportunities provided by the Internet, especially after the 2015 introduction of the Internet Plus framework by premier Li Keqiang. According to one of Li’s Reports on the Work of the Government announcements, this policy serves “to integrate mobile Internet, cloud computing big data, and the Internet of Things with modern manufacturing, to encourage the healthy development of e-commerce, industrial networks, and Internet banking, and to get Internet-based companies to increase their presence in the international market,” which has largely been adapted to education within the past four years (Sharwood, 2015, para. 5). Home to the largest education system in the world with
260 million students and 15 million teachers, the Internet has had significant impacts among an influential population.

The Internet has grown exponentially popular in classrooms and curriculum around the country since this legislation. For example, Internet access rates in primary and secondary schools have skyrocketed within the past five years alone, which now registers at an estimated 90% of schools, up from 25% in 2012 (Ying & Wanwei, 2017). Increased Internet access currently allows netizens to conduct more in-depth research, quickly share and publish their scholarship with others, apply for diverse schools, jobs, and scholarships, and take extra classes without a commute (Ying & Wanwei, 2017). Not only do netizens have greater capability than ever to learn from information on the web, but they are also exposed to a more immersive learning experience in the classroom because of the Internet’s adaptations to the needs and interests of students. Around 83% of classrooms now implement multimedia learning techniques, such as video and social media, that engage and resonate with learners, as opposed to the less than 40% in 2012 (Ying & Wanwei, 2017). Responding to demand by students and parents, some schools have been established that combine these characteristics and are completely online, thus offering netizens around the country the ability to acquire an education with more personal authority.

The Internet Plus policy intends for the web to reach wide audiences due to the common social nature of treating education as a “public service” (Ying & Wanwei, 2017). Similarly, Du Zhanyuan, China’s Deputy Minister of Education, has said that the country will not only use the Internet to advance the quality of education, but it will
ensure equitable access to education across varying populations (Ying & Wanwei, 2017). For example, China has expanded the Internet to reach netizens who live in rural or impoverished areas where there are shortages of teachers and resources, providing them with unprecedented access to education through real-time tutoring sessions or online courses (Ying & Wanwei, 2017). The web has also been used to create profiles with personalized reports based on students’ abilities to process, diagnose, and analyze data, thus boosting online learners’ understanding of their own educational progress (Ying & Wanwei, 2017). As a result of these advancements, the Internet is used to create an even playing field with equal opportunities among learners within China’s borders.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that the Internet certainly provides a great number of opportunities for the millions of netizens in China. Some of these benefits include various channels for political engagement and expression, numerous ways to participate in the nation’s thriving e-commerce, and efficient educational methodologies that are increasingly inclusive of China’s diverse citizenry. Though the opportunities for Chinese netizens are substantial, accessing a technically borderless Internet within the parameters set by an authoritarian regime also presents challenges for web users. A sample of these challenges consists of cybersecurity concerns, potential regulation of online content, and the debatable value and quality of information, which will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

**Challenges**

While the rapid expansion of the Internet has undoubtedly advanced Chinese society, sometimes growing pains persist, as “the malevolent side of cyberspace has
increased in hand hand with the growing scale use of the benevolent side” (Lieberthal & Singer, 2012, p. 2). The physical spread of the web and the increasing speed of its operations matched with China’s large population can create challenges for cybersecurity regulators, who are trying to keep in step with constant changes (Fei, 2011). Despite the protective efforts put forth by these regulators, several vulnerabilities and problems exist in China’s cyberspace that present concerns of data safety for netizens. For example, Chinese websites are likely to attract botnets, which can be described as “a group of computers infiltrated by a hacker and infected with malicious software, generally for the purpose of attacking other information systems” (Fei, 2011, p. 186). While millions of these botnets exist in countries across the globe, China was reported to have the largest number of infected computers as recently as 2017 and has lingered in the top three places for approximately the past ten years (Christ, 2017). As netizens share their data on increasing amounts of “smart” devices with Internet connection--such as televisions, watches, and tablets, to name a few--potentially sensitive, personal information is now more susceptible to hacking than ever with botnets continuing to infect, shut down, or exchange sites and servers. As a result, China may struggle to strike the balance between reaping the economic and social benefits of Internet expansion and protecting the personal data privacy of its netizens.

Not only is netizens’ personal data continuously at risk from bots, but malicious attacks also compromise the information found on public accounts. Government websites and accounts in particular are victims of routine hacking, detected at an average rate of around 2,000 infiltrations per month (Fei, 2011). While it is not uncommon for countries
or even governments to experience cybersecurity vulnerabilities, continued hacking of
the Chinese regime’s accounts may compromise the information consumed and trusted
by netizens desiring to be informed. Though it is difficult to find reliable information
regarding the origins of these cyber attacks, it is known that foreign hackers play a large
role in infiltrating China’s sites and servers (Fei, 2011). Scholars predict that international
cyberspace disunities are unlikely to be resolved soon, as the newness of the issue
coupled with the weight of suspicion and threat of espionage it carries “is so
overwhelming that it is unrealistic to seek cooperative arguments” at the time (Lieberthal
& Singer, 2012, p. 32). The lack of mutual trust among nations thus prevents making
significant progress in international cybersecurity cooperation, leaving assurance and
safety of netizens’ data in suspension.

In addition to information and cybersecurity uncertainties, the Internet also brings
challenges to netizens through the censorship of online content. Though the Internet
certainly provides numerous outlets for the free expression that is guaranteed to citizens
in China’s constitution, numerous restrictions apply to the ways in which netizens can
access and utilize the web. Generally, the Communist Party of China regulates Internet
content or platforms that are capable of reaching a wide audience, which includes certain
newspapers, films, music, pornography, games, television, radio, books, search engines,
and online businesses that diverge from the regime’s political and social status quo.

From an international perspective, the censorship of information detriments
Chinese netizens because they are deprived of a wealth of information regarding the
surrounding world and the country in which they live. For example, the blockade of
certain international news outlets limits Chinese netizens’ knowledge of events, ideas, or opinions that may be seen as inappropriate or sensitive by the regime, such as information on the religious Falun Gong movement or the pro-democracy protests at Tiananmen Square. Such a pattern repeats itself in books pertaining to China’s history that may be banned due to the ways in which certain events, such as the deaths resulting from the Great Chinese Famine between 1959 and 1961, were described and represented. The same logic follows in the government’s reasoning for censorship of Western search engines, social media platforms, and international online shopping platforms, thus preventing Chinese netizens from being exposed to global conversations, social norms, and viewpoints that may oppose those of the regime. As a result of its restrictive nature, Western scholarship often condemns Internet censorship as a preeminent challenge upon netizens.

While some Chinese netizens might agree with the common Western viewpoint that censorship of Internet content is rather amoral and disadvantageous, it is common for Chinese citizens and scholars to support censorship and perceive different challenges that are largely technical. For example, simply the general inability to access a website, show, or game is more frustrating for some Internet users than the fact that specific content is being withheld from them. Those Internet users who support censorship are also likely to willingly accept these types of difficulties imposed by censorship because they believe regulation is mostly advantageous for society and worth some drawbacks. Additionally, still other users may be unaware of censorship or its consequences, possibly thinking a
banned site or platform is experiencing internal difficulties and seeing it as more of an inconvenience than an intentional institutional block.

Not only does the Internet present challenges to users that stem from cybersecurity and censorship, but the quality and value of information is also a controversial challenge for netizens. While censorship certainly exists within Chinese cyberspace, in which information is blocked and filtered by pro-regime actors, another challenge for netizens lies in determining whether or not receiving partial information is really equivalent to being truthfully informed. While the regime upholds that censorship allows China to promote what is acceptable and hide what is corruptible, an Internet user might find that the truth will be illuminated through government’s traditional, righteous protection of content. On the other hand, a netizen may believe that access to only acceptable information and restriction from harmful or sensitive information is hardly truthful at all, and still others fall somewhere on the middle of this spectrum. The varying viewpoints on the truth demonstrate the challenge netizens face between determining traditional values within the government’s responsibility and their own personal autonomy online.

Though there are numerous tangible benefits that stem from the cyberspace in China, several challenges are also present for today’s netizens as the Internet continues to expand. The balance between utilizing freedom of speech on the Internet while not straying from the boundaries set by the regime is difficult to achieve, as many comprehensive policies from numerous governing bodies detail abilities and limitations of netizens and content providers but can still be rather ambiguous in practice. As a
result, Chinese netizens may be left asking, how much free speech on the Internet is too much free speech, and where does the line need to be drawn? In attempt to best understand and develop this query, the following section will analyze the regime’s responses to opportunities and challenges created by the Internet.
PART FOUR: THE REGIME’S RESPONSE TO THE INTERNET

Just as the Internet brings opportunities and opposition to Chinese netizens, so the double-edged nature of cyberspace also affects the authoritarian regime itself in both advantageous and challenging ways that often overlap those impacting netizens. Examples of the Internet’s opportunities for the regime include the ability to harness the web as a political communication tool, as an e-commerce stimulant, and as a mechanism of supremacy over netizens. On the other hand, the Internet brings various challenges for the regime that center around the formidable task of implementing the most extensive censorship apparatus in the world. As a result of the push and pull essence of the Internet, it is necessary for the regime to find the balance between the freedom of information access and the country’s historic content control. The responses from the regime to these opportunities and challenges will be provided in this section.

Opportunities

A prominent benefit of Internet expansion is that the regime increasingly uses the web as a political communication tool to engage netizens. Through social media, like WeChat or Weibo in particular, the government can interact with netizens in unprecedented ways by creating accounts for individual politicians, bureaucracies, or
councils to post information on behalf of their respective organizations. In addition to increasing the regime’s access and transparency, the creation of government social media accounts allows the state to become better informed of citizens’ political demands, expectations, questions, or doubts. For example, the regime is able to gauge public opinion by following the “likes” and “shares” of post analytics in order to detect, in real time, what policies or issues netizens currently support or oppose. Similarly, the government can understand the broader viewpoints of netizens by reading--and even responding to--netizens’ conversations and debates on current events with other Internet users. Interacting with netizens on social media also allows the regime to stay abreast of conversations with collective action potential, such as political protests and demonstrations, that may attempt to gain grassroots support across cyberspace. Social media thus allows the state to stay in sync with its constituents and efficiently craft policies and resolutions in response to their interests. In response to these trends, 55% of Chinese believe the government better serves the public and 60% say the regime better appreciates the public’s viewpoints by implementing the Internet into political communication (Chi, 2012, p. 395).

Aside from social media, state-run media also presents opportunities for the regime to connect with netizens on political issues. These platforms allow the state to control the language and tone with which news is disseminated, thus resulting in potential modifications to political news coverage in favor of the regime’s agenda. While numerous independent news outlets exist today, examples of these respected, vital state platforms include the Xinhua news agency and the People’s Daily newspaper, which are
two of China’s largest, most accessed media organizations, regardless of ownership. By supplying daily coverage on politics in multiple languages, the state is able to use these websites to reach millions of diverse netizens all over the world on the happenings in Beijing, while often excluding anti-regime sentiment and events from stories. As a result of these influential state-owned multimedia platforms, netizens are exposed to content that the People’s Republic of China deems credible and consequential with the click of a button. The regime thus uses social media and traditional media to maintain political stability by promoting acceptable messages to society (Chi, 2012, p. 396).

In addition to utilizing the Internet as a political communication mechanism, the regime also responds to the influx of cyberspace by capitalizing upon the opportunities of China’s successful internal e-commerce. As previously discussed, China supports the healthy competition between domestic e-commerce platforms, such as Alibaba and JD.com, that provide efficient, personalized shopping experiences for netizens. Perhaps more importantly to the regime, however, this competition has largely weeded out foreign contenders, which leaves China completely dominating its own market for online retailers. The state furthermore reaps the financial benefits that result from this domestic supremacy, with retail e-commerce revenue totalling $636 billion as of 2018 and is projected to cross $1 trillion by 2022 (E-commerce revenue). Though international competitors like Amazon and eBay are available in China, they have been unable to resonate with Chinese consumers, causing Amazon’s market share in China to plummet to 1.3% in 2016 and eBay to be considered by many news outlets as a failure (Lin & Stevens, 2017). Thus, netizens’ neglect of international powerhouses and loyalty to
domestic shopping sites has played a significant role in the acceleration of China’s economy. As these sites soar in revenue and mobile payment grows increasingly popular in China, it is no surprise that the regime has the Internet to thank for becoming one of the world’s commerce leaders in less than a decade (Marinova, 2017).

Not only does the regime experience the Internet’s opportunities in terms of political engagement and e-commerce growth, but it also takes advantage of cyberspace by utilizing the web as an agent of supremacy over netizens and even content providers. As previously mentioned, China has developed extensive methodologies of Internet regulation that permit the state to withhold or mandate certain information from Chinese citizens, which serves as an intentional reminder of government authority. Though these methodologies will be detailed in the following section, some methods include the often required registration of Internet platforms and user data with the government. Since straying from the boundaries set by the regime will likely be met with formal or informal consequences, content providers often participate in asserting self-discipline within the Internet industry, in which they can submit a legal document to pledge allegiance to willingly follow rules in order to find favor with the state. Content providers thus participate in these methods of self-discipline to evade consequences from the regime, which places the power of the Internet in the hands of the Chinese government.

Not only has the regime made complying with regulations appealing to Internet service providers to emphasize its own authority, but it also has extended this mindset to netizens in order to monitor their data. WeChat, for example, dominates China’s social media landscape because it offers essentially every possible function on one application,
as it is “the equivalent of WhatsApp plus Facebook plus PayPal plus Uber plus GrubHub plus many other things,” rendering other platforms insufficient (Yuan, 2019, para. 1). In order to acquire the most optimal experience from these full-service Internet platforms, netizens enter seemingly limitless personal data such as addresses, locations, credit card numbers, dining preferences, voice recordings, political preferences, search histories, and passwords, into the electronic system. However, like WeChat, some Internet platforms “provide the government with an unprecedented glimpse into the lives of Chinese citizens--what they discuss, how they spend money, and where they gather” (McLauchlin, 2017, para. 4). As a result of this relationship, almost a billion netizens willingly offer a consolidation of their personal information to surveillance from the state, which again points to the regime’s supremacy over the Internet.

Though the Internet provides the regime these opportunities and many others, such as accelerated scholarship and cohesion among different levels of government, the regime faces the arduous task of enforcing censorship within cyberspace that serves the highest number of Internet users in the world. The regime therefore faces the challenge of finding the balance between what to censor, what to allow, and what conversations will define Chinese society in its past, present, and future. As the regime has characteristically regulated expression in order to guide the public understanding of news and history, the regime may not see censorship itself as a challenge; rather, the intensive, laborious, and costly enforcement of censorship is undoubtedly challenging when time and resources could potentially be allocated elsewhere. The following section thus describes censorship in the Chinese context, with the challenge for the regime deriving from the strenuous
implementation of Internet censorship and the need to strike a balance between expression and authority.

**Challenges**

China began to utilize the Internet after many Western nations, but regime leadership eventually came to believe that harnessing the potential of the Internet would benefit China domestically and internationally, resulting in the country’s ability to establish an influential economy and a solidified national identity (Tai, 2012). According to Tai, the regime asserted that expanding Internet access would help the country catch up to and potentially even surpass the economies of other countries by providing jobs, generating productivity, and stimulating a continuous notion of self-improvement. As “the Chinese government has supported the development of the Internet as a tool for business, entertainment, education, and information exchange,” methods to control it were almost simultaneously developed from the federal government (MacKinnon, 2008, p. 31). Regardless of surveillance mechanisms, China’s adaptation and commercialization of the Internet among entrepreneurs and corporations led to the nation’s current rank as the fastest-growing economy in the world.

Because the Internet is technically borderless, Tai also writes that the regime wanted to control access to certain information to create an Internet presence that adheres to China’s unique cultural and social views (2012). Since the century of humiliation that officially ended in 1949, which comprised China’s struggle to determine its identity and reach international reputability, party leadership avoids legitimizing means that might compromise its power as a nation or its cohesive identity. Therefore, the regime also
encourages usage of the Internet to create and promote its own national identity as the number of Internet users within the country climbs. As the Internet certainly brings numerous benefits to the regime, like the previously mentioned bolstered economy and upheld unified identity, the expansion of cyberspace has provided challenges for the Chinese regime as Internet access expands.

As previously mentioned, governmental censorship in the People’s Republic of China includes all content with the capability of circulation, whether that be television, broadcast or print journalism, theater, radio, literature, instant messaging, or the Internet. The Communist Party of China holds that censorship of Internet content in particular is a legal duty that does not conflict with recognized rights of the citizenry, such as freedom of press or speech (Wang, 2016). The censorship of netizens’ free expression on social media platforms has unequivocally affected Chinese society in various ways.

In contrast to media in the United States, in which a handful of prominent content providers resemble an oligarchy in the country’s social media landscape, hundreds of local websites comprise China’s Internet presence (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Just as China’s Internet content is fragmented, so the regime’s patrolling of these sites is fragmented across local, provincial, and national levels of authority in response to federal legislation. The Cyberspace Administration of China, the Central Propaganda Office, and the State Council Information Office are three examples of the numerous federal institutions that create censorship policies concerning Chinese netizens and Internet service providers.
When Internet access began to expand to Chinese citizens in the late 1990s, federal policies were quickly promulgated to harness the potential of the Internet. The detailed legislation that provides a large part of the backbone for Chinese Internet censorship is entitled the *Computer Information Network and Internet Security, Protection and Management Regulations*, stemming from the Ministry of Public Security. Since its inception in 1997, the guidelines affect every online network inside the country’s boundaries, specifying what netizens may not utilize the Internet to do, whether acting in groups or as private individuals (Computer, 1997). Directly according to Article 5 of this act, netizens may not intend to damage online networks or generate the following content:

1. Inciting to resist or breaking the Constitution or laws or the implementation of administrative regulations;
2. Inciting to overthrow the government or the socialist system;
3. Inciting division of the country, harming national unification;
4. Inciting hatred or discrimination among nationalities or harming the unity of the nationalities;
5. Making falsehoods or distorting the truth, spreading rumors, destroying the order of society;
6. Promoting feudal superstitions, sexually suggestive material, gambling, violence, murder;
7. Terrorism or inciting others to criminal activity; openly insulting other people or distorting the truth to slander people;
(8) Injuring the reputation of state organs;

(9) Other activities against the Constitution, laws or administrative regulations.”

The act additionally requires Internet service providers to adhere to surveillance and guidance from the governing council and to keep a log of violations on each platform. Furthermore, netizens must register accounts with legitimate identities so content providers can keep an updated record of netizen information to report to the Ministry of Public security if necessary. The Administrative Measures on Information Services, issued by Order Number 292 in 2000, creates more specific guidelines for Internet service providers to follow, such as licensing systems, business plans, and safeguarding measures for netizen safety (Administrative, 2000). Both policies remain influential in providing legal basis for institutional censorship that is subject to the discretion of the regime.

For example, the first piece of legislation includes a rather broad clause that creates a provision for federal Internet censorship, which states that the “Public Security computer management and supervision organization should establish a system for ensuring the security, protection, and good management of the connecting network units, entry point units and users” (Computer, 1997, Article 17). This loose phrase allows the regime to exercise surveillance across the local, provincial, and federal levels through various mechanisms that will later be discussed, such as hand-censorship, keyword blocking and the Great Firewall.

Though federal institutions mandate these policies, King, et al. asserts that intermediary actors such as Internet service providers and educational institutions act as
the enforcing bodies of the regime’s censorship guidelines (2013). According to Han, the state chooses to utilize these agents to divert blame and backlash from regulation away from the party itself (2018). When deciding whether to comply with or resist the regime’s regulations, these bodies must consider and balance the interests of their stakeholders, one of which is the party, with administrative authority over what content stays and what goes; the netizens, who keep a social media platform running; and the organization, which is trying to survive. Han thus suggests that intermediary actors often exercise “discontented compliance,” in which they know it is too costly to resist the regime, but these bodies may involuntarily implement various censorship mechanisms on their platforms (2018, p. 60).

As the Internet evolves into a more necessary and inclusive apparatus that connects individuals, organizations, and global citizens, so the regime has created diverse mechanisms of patrolling China’s expanding cyberspace. Whereas some governments implement a rather laissez-faire approach to the influx of social media, the Chinese regime has effectively combined policy and technological measures in effort to control potential disorder or loss of central authority within society. Common methods of modern censorship include preventative measures, manual censorship, keyword blocking, user surveillance, immersive measures, and self-censorship.

Perhaps the most recognizable example of state control of Chinese Internet is known as the Great Firewall of China, which was officially entitled the Golden Shield Project (McDonald, 2016). With work on the project beginning in 1999, Fang Binxing championed what would become the Great Firewall with the assistance of multiple
agencies; as a result, censorship quickly increased as the number of Internet users skyrocketed after 2002 (The art, 2013). This preventative measure creates a holistic blockade between netizens and entire websites or networks by requiring all content coming through Chinese cyberspace to face strict subject analysis (Tai, 2012). Sites blocked from Chinese Internet include Facebook, Google, Youtube, WordPress, Snapchat, Instagram, Bloomberg, and The New York Times, among others. This preventive form of censorship is largely automatic in that its routers discover sets of blacklisted keywords, causing the Great Firewall to sever connection between the netizen and the site he or she was attempting to access (MacKinnon, 2018, p. 41). After the connection is terminated, users are taken to a screen informing them of that webpage’s unavailability and are frozen on that page for ninety seconds. Content may be blocked if the regime deems it undesirable or unwanted, thus demonstrating China’s intention to proactively shape and create a “management of popular opinion” (Han, 2018, p. 5).

Chinese netizens have thus created and utilized local social media platforms, like RenRen and Sina Weibo among a wealth of others, that offer Chinese netizens relatively the same functions and the ability to express themselves (King et al., 2013).

According to Tai, netizens may utilize technological advances—such as computer applications and virtual private networks like Tor, Freenet, and Triangleboy—in attempt to evade the Great Firewall’s content blockades (2012). The same source states that within the past decade, the regime has greatly restricted access to these underground Internet portals, though any statistical evidence of netizens using such circumvention methods is inaccurate and unreliable.
Though censorship is imposed in a relatively blanket level across the country through the Great Firewall, the regime can exert tightened, specific restriction through manual censorship (Tai, 2012). King, et al. states that manual censorship, or the implementation of humans employed to actively read and filter posts by hand, is the most demanding form of social media regulation, as the media landscape in China is fragmented across hundreds of sites (2013). The same source asserts that these regulating bodies include tens of thousands of Internet police and Internet monitors, as well as around 250,000 patrolling party members. In this censorship mechanism, objectionable posts—which often include but are not limited to comments regarding government criticism, pornography, fraudulent activity, or complaints about social media censorship itself—can be manually deleted or accounts can be locked (McDonald, 2016). McDonald also writes that individuals may experience this type of censorship if a regulatory agent deems the content inappropriate or if it is reported as inappropriate by another user.

In contrast to the comprehensive Great Firewall, rates of manual censorship vary across territory lines in China. For example, highly-populated provinces that boast many speakers, scholars, and singers, such as Xizang and Qinghai, are more likely to face greater Internet monitor censorship to “curtail private resistance” (Tai, 2012, p. 113). Consequently, McDonald states that the Great Firewall is met with more resistance in urban areas (2016). The same source states that, in contrast, rural provinces like Sichuan and Shaanxi have lower post deletion rates due to lack of citizen access to technology and sparse populations, thus reducing the general population’s ability to freely transmit one- or two-way messages. Regardless of geographic location, manual censors delete or filter
posts quickly. A 2011 study by King et. al based on 1,382 Chinese websites reveals that posts considered undesirable by the regime were largely deleted within twenty-four hours of the original publication time, though some material lingered for a few days until deleted (2013).

According to the same source, another type of social media regulation is keyword blocking, which prevents netizens from posting certain words or phrases that are considered taboo. Similar to content that may be subject to post deletions, the same author finds that examples of taboo topics include commentary on censors and government policies, as well as certain arrests, religious groups, scandals, and protests. However, King et al. states that users can utilize circumvention methods to evade this type of censorship by using satire, analogies, and metaphors to hint at the intended term or phrase (2013). The same source states that netizens may also substitute characters to convey an intended message by using homophones, which are characters that sound alike, or homographs, characters that look alike.

Not only does the regime employ social media censorship through preventative measures like the Great Firewall, manual censorship through post deletions, and keyword blocking, but intermediary actors--the content service providers linking the regime and the netizens--are also charged to keep tabs on users by mandating basic user information. Since censorship is such a large task, “the regime relies more heavily on domestic companies to police their own content” and are then held accountable for what takes place on their own platforms (MacKinnon, 2008, p. 42). When intermediary agents comply with the censorship guidelines set by the regime, there are a few regulatory tools
that are consistent across most bodies. For example, Han states that many content providers provide contact information to authorities, keep user data available for broad uses at the regime’s discretion, surveil online content to prevent objectionable expression, utilize pre-screening technology to filter netizens’ posts, and join forces with reputable local universities to lower chances of violations on their sites (2018).

Many intermediary agents will create site-specific regulations that enforce state policies, such as employing “their own 24-hour cybermanagers to enforce the official rules to varying degrees” (Tai, 2012, p. 101). King et al. finds that Internet service providers often employ up to 1,000 proactive online censors per website to best ensure that the outlet is operating within the regime’s guidelines (2012). Tai furthermore states this movement quickly caught on across the Internet industry, ultimately creating associations of Internet service providers that band together to pledge their self-discipline in accordance with the regime, which began with corporations as early as 1997 (2012).

However, some intermediary actors face censorship with resistance. In order to enforce federally mandated censorship while attempting to meet the needs of netizens, Han finds that some bodies delay censorship or promote debatable discussions on their platforms to resist government Internet regulation (2018). Touching again on Han’s theory of discontent compliance, intermediary agents must find a balance between the demands from the state and from netizens in order for individual platforms to survive (2018).

Because social media can pave the way for groupthink and mobilization, the government also joins the Internet in various immersive measures in attempt to control
the flow of online information. Though the following three methods are not inherently censorship measures, the state uses 1) governmental social media accounts, 2) the “fifty-cent army,” and 3) opinion leaders to evade the social media landscape and add pro-regime content to cyberspace.

Han finds that the 1999 Government Online Project has led to the registration of almost 55,000 government websites that push state-sponsored content out to netizens (2018). Additionally, this source states that government bodies quickly adapted to the rise of social media and have created over 164,000 verified government social pages on Weibo alone. Furthermore, common scholarship asserts that state agencies may publish social media that diverts netizens away from questioning internal issues in China or from expression undesirable emotion online. The regime thus immerses itself into the social media landscape in attempt to shape public opinion in favor of the state’s policies and administration.

Perhaps the most widely known state immersion of the Internet outside of censorship is called the “fifty-cent army” of Internet communicators. The fifty-cent army is largely based off of the Chinese public relations tactic called “astroturfing,” in which actors who are “(often paid) to display apparent grassroots support for a product, policy, or event to shore up wider and more genuine support” (Han, 2018, p. 107). Using this mindset, individual members of the fifty-cent army can create multiple accounts to generate conversation on a topic of choice and shape it in a particular direction. Such individuals are employed to talk like regular Internet users, link government statistics and websites, support members of leadership, and even fabricate political information.
Though there is limited information on these bodies for obvious reasons, it is rumored that the name comes from their initial pay of fifty cents per post (Han, 2018).

This author claims, however, that the fifty-cent army is more useful in pleasing central state leadership than engaging and conniving netizens to adhere to their viewpoints for various reasons. For example, these Internet communicators often lack incentive because they are poorly rewarded for posts, so their work is often ineffectively done. Additionally, in recent years it has become easier to detect the fifty-cent army’s posts by using metadata. These posts often come in bursts from the same geographic location and are repetitive in content. Due to lack of incentive, these paid Internet communicators hardly engage in critical discussions and generally post short, blatant assertions praising the regime.

The third immersive measure the regime uses to shape the social media landscape is targeting opinion leaders of microblogs, whom netizens perceive to be credible. The regime’s attempts to harness the potential of microbloggers because public debates, critical opinions, and social analysis have “weakened the influence of the party media in setting the news agenda” (Li, 2015, p. 18). According to Li, ways in which the government influences these leaders include analyzing their numbers of followers, their attitude to protecting state interests, their ability to promote Chinese ideology and culture, their initiative in following state policies, and their implementation of reputable personal rights. Public opinion leaders meeting these qualifications are encouraged to promote party endeavors and to post information favorable of the regime on microblogs in an
effort to fulfill President Xi Jinping’s “long-term mission” of “guiding public opinion” (Li, 2015, p. 19).

Though the Great Firewall, post deletions, and account lockouts certainly deter netizens from spreading messages, self-censorship is often personally implemented among Chinese netizens. Ying states that self-censorship occurs when individuals or organizations choose to consciously follow Internet regulation guidelines that are promulgated by the regime (2012). Tai asserts that the magnitude of censorship mechanisms primarily exists to enforce this notion of self-regulation among netizens, not to block ideas or criticisms (2012). Whether Internet users are hoping not to cause disruption with the state or if they are simply weary of upsetting friends and family with their opinions, many netizens—especially in rural areas—believe it is better to leave sensitive or objectionable content off of social media (McDonald, 2016).

If netizens or organizations do not adhere to censorship guidelines, “different kinds of expression have different values or prices,” meaning that terms for validating censorship are largely subjective to the platform and to the regime’s discretion (Ying, 2012, p. 77). For example, the 2013 Seven Bottom Line Policy holds that microbloggers, who have the most freedom to post inaccurate information based on the layout of the platform, could face “up to three to five years in prison if the posting is viewed more than 5,000 times or retweeted 500 times” (Li, 2015, p. 17). According to Freedom House (2018), general penalties for violating the regime’s guidelines on the Internet or in physical assembly may include formal punishment, such as fines or incarceration, or
consequences that are less formal and even harder to track, like harassment or intimidation.

Because processes regarding the Great Firewall and censorship in general are largely withheld from the public, it is difficult for scholars to estimate the costs of censorship in China. Regarding the Great Firewall alone, however, cost projections for its creation and implementation begin around the equivalence of $60 million and shoot upward by hundreds of millions of dollars (The art, 2013). On a broader scale, Internet censorship falls under national concern for public security, which receives a comprehensive budget for all levels of government to maintain stability within society. According to the Nikkei Asian Review, in 2018 the expenditure for the sector of public security was 1.24 trillion yuan, or around $193 billion, up from 769 billion yuan in 2014. This surpasses China’s expenditure for national defense by an estimated 19%, a record high gap. Therefore, it can be concluded that the regime places significant value in censoring Internet content and social media effectively, which creates notable effects.

Though it is true that the regime is able to adapt well in the midst of an expanding cyberspace, there are a number of challenges the Internet and its censorship brings to the government. For example, Han asserts that the inevitable differences in agendas and goals across fragmented regulatory authorities can ultimately lead to counterproductivity and inefficiencies in execution (2018). Similarly, just as the government disperses regulation across central, provincial, and local apparatuses, so the use of the Internet has become fragmented across individual websites and netizens. This pluralization of the
Internet has resulted in the emergence of dissident groups of Chinese netizens, who can speak out against the regime or promote their personal agendas online.

By providing opportunities for citizens to connect and mobilize themselves, the Internet inevitably opens the door for expression that is unwelcomed by the regime. Despite attempts to curtail free expression, dissent does still exist in various forms of communication that could pose challenges for the regime. For example, Tai finds that individual netizens can send mass emails to fellow dissidents and post on online bulletin boards that offer more private conversation, rather than taking to the censored social media giants like WeChat, QQ, or Weibo (2012). Additionally, large-scale movements to advocate for the freedom of expression, democracy, and liberalization, such as the Tiananmen Square and Falun Gong demonstrations in the late 1990s, have connected thousands of dissidents across the country in effort to directly challenge the regime.

Though governmental regulations control undesirable content in cyberspace, the Internet nevertheless facilitates conversations among netizens that could effectively challenge the regime.

Often stemming from these dissident groups, the increased awareness of the government’s more immersive censorship tactics decreases netizens’ trust of the regime’s leadership, propaganda, and ideology, according to Han (2018). For example, creating inauthentic posts through the fifty-cent army and encouraging opinion leaders to espouse prescribed viewpoints actually skews citizen feedback, which limits governmental response to citizens’ interests and slows potential adjustments to policy. As censorship results in weakening political trust and social cohesion, Han argues that China’s
censorship of netizen expression has actually delegitimized the regime, rather than maintained its authoritarian power (2018).

Impacts of the party’s censorship do not stop within the borders of China. The United States of America classified the regime’s extensive censorship as a barrier to trade in 2013 since many of the most globally used platforms were blocked, causing businesses to experience negative consequences due to restriction from engaging in many of China’s online markets (Mozur, 2016). For example, government agencies are attempting to ban sales of the Apple iPhone in China, and restricting cellular sales from the largest smartphone market in the world would nonetheless take a toll on this monumental foreign industry in particular. Even though China has banned access to many foreign platforms, China’s own e-commerce is booming. Domestic companies such as Alibaba and Baidu, China’s version of Google, have become some of the largest international organizations on the Web, which repeats the theme of successful internal social media platforms in the country.

The examination of the country’s censorship apparatuses demonstrates that Chinese Internet users certainly have the ability to express their opinions and ideas on acceptable social platforms through legal rights guaranteed by the constitution. However, the Chinese government openly acknowledges that repercussions are likely to ensure if netizens’ expression strays from the parameters of decent content laid out by the regime. In reality, some of the repercussions of China’s Internet censorship can present challenges to the regime itself, such as the possibility of generating dissident mobilization or the general distrust and opposition toward the government’s motives. Such a complex,
often strained relationship between netizens and the regime thus depends upon balancing personal expression with governmental order. The following section analyzes what comprises this balance and how it currently works for China.
PART FIVE: FINDING EQUILIBRIUM ON THE INTERNET

This section describes viewpoints found in literature that attempt to answer why censorship has historically been able to exist in the past and whether or not it should continue in the future.

**Historical Perspectives**

Current scholarship poses diverse theories or reasonings behind the implementation of governmental Internet regulations. One paramount rationale for censorship holds that the Chinese regime expurgates certain material to maintain order and status quo within Chinese society in all spheres (King et al., 2013). Supported widely by current research, this broad theory asserts that the regime seeks to display itself in the most favorable light possible, which extends to its values, its policies, and its history. Potential examples of what content might be censored under this theory include vulgarities and pornography, which are censored at a continuously high rate (King, et al., 2013). Whether pornography exists in its inherent form, is disguised by news, or is mentioned in online literature, the regime typically censors this content at a rate that is almost proportional to the amount that is posted; for example, if ten articles of content involving pornography are uploaded, nearly eight of them would be removed, and if
fifteen similar articles were uploaded in February, nearly thirteen of them would be removed, as was the case in 2011 (King, et al. 2013). Since pornography, obscenity, and vulgarity do not reflect the societal order the Chinese regime desires to perpetuate, much of this content is censored under this theory.

A second hypothesis serving as justification and rationale for China’s authoritarian censorship is termed the state critique theory. Essentially on the flip side of the same coin as the previous theory, the state critique assertion maintains that the party attempts to quash dissent and to refute thoughts and ideas that are not in accordance with the regime, its policies, and its leaders. Rather than removing content that simply does not mesh with society’s values, as in the previous theory, this theory holds that content of condemnatory nature is often filtered. This theory is thus a mechanism used to sustain the stability of the regime by removing threatening content and ultimately making “the sum total of available public expression more favorable to those in power” (King, et al., 2013, p. 2). Examples of potentially censored content include negative assessments of party leaders, policy implications, or, most importantly, criticisms of the human censors sorting through Internet content. A study by the *American Political Science Review* demonstrates that criticism of censors, such as content mentioning throwing shoes at Fang Binxing, Baidu copyright issues, and platforms being hacked, are subject to a relatively high censorship magnitude (King, et al., 2013). Consequently, the deletion of and blockades from certain content leaves the Internet with commentary that is largely in favor of the regime. Similarly, Li suggests that the state desires to create a “monopoly on
information” that grows in direct proportion to the Internet, which is achieved through some of the most sophisticated censorship mechanisms in the world (Li, 2015, p. 15).

On the other hand, the collective action potential theory from the same authors posits that censorship is likely to occur when netizens utilize social media to communicate and generate mass action based on motivations other than those supported by the government, which may lead to political opposition or societal disruption that could challenge the authoritarian government (King et al., 2013). Social media in China has proven to shape and reconfigure netizens’ daily experiences and interactions, including collective action, which the authors describe as “an indicator of social and political change” (Zhao & Liu, 2015, p. 41). King et al. continues to assert that these theories sometimes work hand-in-hand, in that political opposition through collective action is often spurred by posting critiques of the state (2013). This trend results in a circular relationship in which the regime’s reasoning behind post deletions or content blocking can be multifaceted. However, the authors of this study argue that the regime primarily censors to prevent content with collective action material, which tends to face higher censorship rates than state criticism. Because this hypothesis is more specific than the previous theory and is substantially more supported by quantitative research than the second, many scholars support this premises behind the collective action potential theory.

The collective action theory may include netizens using language that verbally support or even pave the way toward group formation in events, advocacy, or protests, in which the latter “is often thought to be the death knell of authoritarian regimes” (King et al., 2013). Though relatively small protests are acceptable and even welcome in China,
expression regarding large-scale protests that are not motivated by the state can become highly censored. For example, speech on social media concerning protests in Inner Mongolia, the Zengcheng protests, the pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, and the independence protests in Tibet and Taiwan hold some of the highest censorship in the history of Internet in China (King et al., 2013).

In complete contrast to the previous three theories, other scholarship holds that mainstream studies overlook the benefits censorship brings to Chinese society. According to Ying (2012), censorship brings productivity, collectivity, and nobility by linking individuals to networks through discourse and acceptable Internet content. The author states that censorship was traditionally defined as “direct forms of political intervention mostly by the state” that act in response to the growing knowledge of netizens (Ying, 2012, p. 68). As today’s social media platforms expand and develop, however, censorship has become less direct and more fragmented, operating on a beneficial case-by-case basis, in which some content on a particular topic may be allowed and other content may not. According to Ying, the notion of state censorship can contemporarily be considered an effect of rising power from Chinese citizens, rather than a holistic means of imposing impermeable power over the people.

Just as scholarship provides various methodologies behind the existence of censorship, so modern theories also present diverging viewpoints on the basis of its continuance for future generations. Authors who cannot justify the future of content regulation often base their arguments on the deprivation of human rights and the developmental limitations upon society that censorship bestows. In contrast to the
viewpoints in these articles, some literature supports the future of governmental
censorship based on its ability to protect young or other vulnerable populations from
exposure to sensitive content. The remainder of this section will be devoted to examining
examples of these arguments.

**Future Perspectives**

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei writes in *The New York Times* that “censorship in China
places limits on knowledge and values, which is the key to imposing ideological slavery”
upon Chinese citizens (Weiwei, 2017, para. 19). As victims of this slavery, he asserts that
Internet users receive information that is cherry-picked and force-fed by the state, thus
robbing individuals of their ability to intellectually and naturally think for themselves. To
this violation of human rights, the author posits that many Chinese netizens often “feign
ignorance and speak in ambiguities,” opting to passively self-censor their own content,
silence their personal opinions, and willingly become inferior to the regime (Weiwei,
2017, para. 2). According to the author, this mindset of surrender that is so encouraged by
the government eliminates Chinese netizens’ ability to choose independence and
happiness in life. Because censorship directly violates the basic rights of humans, this
author hopes for a future without expression of regulation (Weiwei, 2017, para. 20).

Not only do some think that censorship should not be prolonged because it
infringes upon netizens’ basic human rights, but other authors believe the idea behind
content regulation hinders social development. According to Tkacheva, Schwartz,
Libicki, Taylor, Martini, & Baxter, attempting to confine a limitless arena like cyberspace
does not work to provide an optimal society (2013). The basic functions of the Internet
are designed to empower people through instantaneous communication and the exchange of ideas, “which are antithetical to regimes that seek to manage and control political discourse” and powerful social mobilization (Tkacheva et. al, 2013, p. 203). Thus, by stimulating the expansion of the cyberspace but creating virtual parameters within which users must operate, the authors would argue that the Chinese regime is “[struggling] against the underlying nature of the Internet itself” and limiting its own societal development (Tkacheva et. al, 2013, p. 203). Because of this multifaceted, juxtapositional relationship, Tkacheva et. al writes that censorship has potentially detrimental effects on the Chinese authoritarian regime itself, such as the willingness of netizens to “hide their true attitudes out of fear of retribution” online, that could possibly be resolved through release of technological restrictions and a gradual acceptance of increased Internet freedom (2013, p. 209). Despite the international push for free expression in China, however, the authors recognize that censorship of online information has become almost characteristic of authoritarian regimes and is likely to define China’s cyberspace in days to come.

In contrast to these anti-censorship viewpoints, other scholarship holds that censorship is an integral part of China’s future because it protects some of the country’s defenseless or naive citizens from interacting with inappropriate or fake content. For example, some scholars believe that the availability of pornographic or violent content on the web would lead to the destruction of the children who witness it, as well as a potential rise in sex crimes due to predators luring in children through websites. Xin Li writes that these younger, less mature populations “do not have strong judgement to [distinguish]
good or bad, so they are easily influenced to follow improper activities from online sources” and potentially repeat the offenses they observe through screens (2013, p. 4). In addition to protecting children, the author also asserts that censorship is necessary in order to protect China’s more vulnerable, less informed citizens from fake information planted by terrorists. Though the regime does not guarantee the complete restriction of all sensitive material on the Internet, the author believes that “society would be more terrifying without censorship” (Li 2013, p. 5). As a result of these potential dangers from a borderless cyberspace, the author believes China’s limitation of malicious content is justified and recommends that other governments follow suit if the web is ever used to impede society.

While literature on social media and Internet censorship in China is rather limited, many diverse viewpoints on its causes and its justification for the future exist. Many common theories of censorship methodology stem from the government’s desire to maintain supremacy over Chinese netizens; for example, the previously mentioned theories focus on the needs of upholding the national status quo, sifting out dissent from the public, and filtering content with collective action potential. However, an opposing, less common theory behind content regulation holds that censorship is a practice that has always been accepted in China because its benefits outweigh its consequences. Current scholarship also offers different stances regarding whether or not censorship should continue in China’s future, with opponents saying it degrades human rights and stunts the growth of society, and proponents asserting that it rightfully protects citizens from inappropriate or false information. Combining this literature review with the proceeding
information in this section, this comprehensive part serves as a presentation of the equilibrium argument.

**Primary Research on Internet Equilibrium Today**

Today’s forms of online expression in China are contingent upon the cooperation of the both the state and the people. For example, if the state wanted to quash all criticism of party leaders and every protest of policies, the authoritarian regime could justify doing so through its technological advancements and fragmented censorship mechanisms across all levels of government. Likewise, if citizens of China desired to completely rebel against the regulatory apparatuses on social media by flooding the web with sensitive content or allusions to forbidden words and phrases, netizens have the means of attempting to make these actions a reality. However, neither of these circumstances have occurred because the regime and netizens have struck a balance that renders censorship largely advantageous for society, in which netizens are willing to trade the drawbacks of content removal to protect what is prosperous. The current balance thus lies in the historical context of censorship and the relatively supportive viewpoints of netizens. In order to further explain this equilibrium, this section will describe how the regime has implemented censorship over time and how Chinese netizens currently respond.

**Regime**

In order to explore China’s social media and Internet landscape, it is essential to first understand the broader culture and environment in which the country operates. Though there is little scholarship stemming from China on this topic, recognized international scholarship often rebukes Chinese censorship when comparing its
boundaries on free expression to those existing in other countries. Two recent studies, compiled by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders respectively, highlight the detriments of censorship by lowly ranking Chinese citizens’ political and civil liberties, as well as freedom of expression. Freedom House posits that, though China has historically monitored Internet content, President Xi Jinping’s claim of the office in 2012 led to tightened regulation, restricted social movements, and inhibited flow of expression on social media platforms (2018). Similarly, the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders asserts that the president has increasingly enforced policies that utilize China’s encompassing technology to censor and control the flow of information through printed and mobile news, thus restricting the state’s unencumbered expression (2018).

To explore the complex interpersonal climates in China, Freedom House first examines the state’s governing processes, finding that Chinese citizens have little to no political rights in modern society. For example, the current head of the government and national legislative representatives were not elected through free and fair elections; rather, elections are continuously left to the discretion and investigation of the Chinese Communist Party leadership, and candidates with necessary prerequisites are often bribed, coerced, or forced off the ballot. Similarly, dissenting individuals or groups who desire to organize different political parties, or more drastically, to overthrow China’s one-party system, may be silenced or punished with incarceration.

As power is increasingly consolidated in the hands of prominent party leaders, Chinese citizens and independent media have the ability to express their curiosities
regarding the validity of the regime’s control according to the nation’s Constitution; however, the state’s feedback and reactions are infrequently transparent. For example, party officials have recently resisted to disclosing budgets at federal, provincial, and local levels and have incarcerated citizens joining in collective action to challenge the regime’s ambiguity. Moreover, individuals theoretically have the ability to question and even speak out against the regime, but those who choose this course of action should be prepared to face potential consequences or punishments.

Individuals and groups additionally face limitations in their ability to relocate their homes abroad or to other areas of the country and to gather in strikes and protests. Though these actions are lawfully permitted, many assemblies, especially those motivated by forces other than the government, realistically do not occur without government approval. Not only can Chinese regulations hinder citizens from relocating, but censorship in China has also prevented foreign individuals and organizations from spreading messages in the mainland. Violating the status quo of regulation often results in consequences; for example, Reporters Without Borders’ summary of China’s Internet regulation mentions individuals detained for making objectionable comments or sharing dissidents’ posts that may be undesirable to the regime (2018). As China’s online presence grows through both mobile news outlets and social media platforms, the study cites that more than 50 journalists and bloggers are currently living in uninhabitable conditions for defying the regime’s regulatory rules.

Reporters Without Borders takes these factors into account when calculating the World Press Freedom Index to rank each country’s freedom of expression, which also
assesses pluralism of opinions in media, independence of news and information outlets, self-censorship from netizens or from Internet service providers, existing legislation that restricts or encourages information-sharing, transparency of governing bodies and service providers, infrastructure involved in circulating information, and the level of abuses or violence. The indicators are scored individually and are entered into formulas that produce grades ranging from zero to 100, with 100 being the worst. China’s score for 2018 is 78.29, which is an increase of 0.63 points from the previous year. Out of the 180 countries studied by Reporters Without Borders, 20 nations are categorized as “very bad,” including China, which ranks 176 out 180. Similarly, the OpenNet Initiative classified the regime’s censorship as “pervasive” in political spheres and “substantial” regarding social language (MacKinnon, 2008, p. 37).

From these comprehensive studies it is can be determined that the authoritarian regime’s policies expand past the parameters of cyberspace and contribute to the greater restrictive social and political climates spanning China’s borders. This trend has existed long before the inception of today’s People’s Republic of China, in which various forms of regulatory apparatuses have extensively limited the freedom of expression in comparison to the rest of the world, even as Internet access in China expands. As social media has gained momentum in the country within the last couple of decades, different methods of censorship have evolved in order to keep up with the constant flow of online information and expression.

In contrast to these viewpoints, Ying posits that the Chinese largely do not abhor censorship today because it is not new to China, dating back thousands of years prior to
the current regime when multiple dynasties fought to build an encompassing empire (2012). Of these Warring States was the “barbarous,” dominant Qin dynasty, from which then-prince Ying Zheng arose and proclaimed himself the First Emperor of Qin, or Qin Shi Huang, in the mid-250s BC (Fang, 2015, p. 54). In the year 213 BC, Qin Shi Huang spearheaded what is now widely known as the first recorded censorship mechanism in Chinese history, in which hand-written accounts, such as books and historical records, before his reign were burned “to make the common people ignorant and to see to it that no one in the empire used the past to criticize the present” (Fang, 2015, p. 55). In addition to Qin Shi Huang’s book-burning escapade, which prevented unacceptable or sensitive knowledge from spreading to ordinary citizens, he viciously silenced and punished scholars who voiced or demonstrated dissent against his reign or policies. To this end, the First Emperor buried alive hundreds of Confucian scholars who voiced criticism against his rule--or whom he assumed could potentially voice criticism--in another well-known campaign. Though these actions are now widely perceived as some “of the most pernicious and hated acts in all of Chinese history” and evidence of their occurrences is almost nonexistent, these early acts of censorship began the trend of monitoring the circulation of information that is prevalent within China’s past and present (Fang, 2015 p. 55).

In order to stimulate his authority and credibility, Qin Shi Huang also flooded primitive methods of communication with his own praises. With the workings of scholars and accounts of history now burned, he was free to rewrite history in ways that glorified his legitimacy as a ruler, which consisted of stories that were often fabricated. For
example, Qin Shi Huang ordered testaments of his accomplishments, abilities, and aspirations, such as his strong descendancy and his tales of conquest, to be inscribed on mountain ridges for all to read (Fang, 2015). To effectively disseminate these claims and his political orders, he created the first consistent form of writing that removed an estimated 25% of existing characters and served to “counter all diversity, [eliminate] obsolete and offensive characters, [simplify] others and [standardize] each and every one” (Fang, 2015, p. 57). This comprehensive, government-mandated language reinforced the empire’s authority as it “erased the last excuse for misunderstanding or misinterpreting the law” (Fang, 2015, p. 57).

While Qin Shi Huang’s mandates were rather extreme, this mindset of controlling content with the potential for circulation remained prevalent among Chinese leaders well into the Song Dynasty, which ascended to power in the year 960 AD (Ying, 2012). When movable type was invented in the 1040s during the Song reign, literature and expression flourished at exponential rates, to which leaders began to implement rudimentary censorship mechanisms that guided and limited their publication and circulation. These early regulations were “designed simply for the government’s benefit” and ultimately provided the inspiration for censorship policy in the dynasties to come based on the ideas of protecting the state’s interests in sharing information and enforcing state security through surveillance (Ying, 2012, p. 65). These policies were later expanded, notably in the Qing Dynasty beginning in 1644, in which the increasing ability for printing to connect people was viewed as “potentially subversive and to be feared” (Ying, 2012, p. 65). Resulting from this growing opinion, more books were banned, specific words were
prohibited, and scholars--and sometimes their families--were killed for publishing undesirable content that may have contained as much as one offensive word.

Nearly 300 years later, the Nationalist Party attempted to gain total control over individual and group expression. Though this group wanted the public to think they would receive democratic civil liberties, such as freedom of publication, that were promised by the previously-overthrown revolution led by Sun Yat-sen, the Nationalist Party actually enforced greater regulatory laws (Ying, 2012). In reality, the party suppressed political opposition and created the requirement for content providers to register with the state. Still later, when the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949 under the leadership of a communist regime, Mao Zedong’s government almost completely controlled the daily actions of Chinese individuals, groups, organizations and businesses “disguised by nationalism and Mao’s mythic image” (Ying, 2012, p. 66).

Today, it is often said in international scholarship that President Xi Jinping is increasing regulations to make the Great Firewall taller than ever before. The current regime has expanded its censorship apparatus in a number of ways; for example, the leadership is creating technological advancements through which social media can be better monitored, private information can be easily accessed, and online communication can be frequently observed (Forbidden, 2018, p. 4). The regime has also legally expanded the regulatory policies that define modern communication, thereby giving leaders a broader scope in which to operate. Lastly, the president is attempting to garner ideological support for cyber sovereignty, a national viewpoint positing that it is the “state’s sovereign right to shape and control the online space within its borders, including
through its own determination of what constitutes harmful or unwelcome speech” (Forbidden, 2018, p. 17). This framework would justify the concepts behind centralized censorship into almost every sector netizens’ daily lives, which is already being seen with the rise of social media platforms. However, as a result of China’s long, developing history with censorship and content regulation, Ying argues that the majority of Chinese citizens do not challenge the social media surveillance that occurs today (2012).

Censorship has always existed in order to paint a positive picture of the regime. Since the most rudimentary forms of censorship, however, the methodologies of publication surveillance have become less drastic. For example, there has been a shift from holistically destroying forms of expression to creating today’s blockades or partial filters of content that can still be accessed through purchasing virtual private networks or using various circumvention methods. Therefore, undesirable content certainly may be difficult to access, but it is not completely gone forever, as in centuries past. Rather than existing purely to withhold information from citizens, today’s fragmentation of censorship is likely in response to the growing power and capability of netizens to generate reformatory conversations. Though methods of censorship are diversifying due to the expansion of the Internet, content regulation is nothing new to the Chinese, who have experienced some forms of censorship since the first unifying governmental presence in China thousands of years ago.

Netizens

Since social media censorship in China is a potentially sensitive topic, existing research and theories based on the firsthand opinions of Chinese citizens on different
facets of this subject is rather limited. In attempt to investigate and understand the attitudes and viewpoints of Chinese citizens on the state’s censorship apparatuses, a brief survey consisting of various qualitative and quantitative questions was created and executed by the author of this thesis. Consequently and most importantly, this survey was created to contribute research to the field directly from Chinese netizens, rather than from the regime or from international scholars.

Methodology

The survey was administered in two separate environments. In the first session, eight students enrolled in a college in Beijing, The People’s Republic of China’s capital city with population of roughly 21.5 million, were visiting the University of Mississippi for two weeks as participants of an educational program, and they had the option to fill out the printed surveys by hand. These eight surveys were administered in a classroom setting on the University of Mississippi campus in the presence of an instructor on January 18, 2019. Though every student could speak and write in English, the questions were individually read aloud by the author of this thesis to best ensure effective communication. The author remained present before, during, and after the entire survey session to answer any questions, such as term clarification or topical inquiries about the research in general. Each participant had his or her own printed survey and returned it to the author upon completion, which took around 30 minutes on average.

In the second session, the author emailed the survey to a Chinese student seeking an undergraduate degree at the University of Mississippi on January 24, 2019. The student volunteered to share the survey with other Chinese students in Oxford, a college
town in North Mississippi with a population of nearly 24,000. Each student is seeking a degree at the University of Mississippi and has been enrolled in the institution for at least one semester. Because the author could not be physically present for these eight online surveys, the author placed an emphasis on utilizing her provided phone number and email address should the participants have any questions about their responses or the research in general. By January 29, 2019, the student had responded with eight voluntary surveys that were completed by Chinese students at the University of Mississippi.

The untimed survey, consisting of fifteen questions, was approved by the University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board and was completed by sixteen total Chinese students. An informational cover sheet outlined the details of the survey, and the contents of the document are summarized in this paragraph. The students were assured a high degree of confidentiality, in which only their ages would be recorded, and any other identifying information, such as their personal names, genders, or the names of their universities, would be omitted due to the potential sensitivity of the subject matter. Because of the students’ anonymity, no financial, economic, or personal risks for taking the survey were foreseeable. No form of compensation was granted for taking this survey. Furthermore, each student was made aware of his or her right to skip questions and the freedom to withdraw from the survey at any time, which no student did.

The survey is comprised of two sections that were designed to determine the opinions, experiences, behaviors, and preferences of Chinese netizens regarding social media and censorship. As previously mentioned, participants were only asked to provide their ages, and no other identifying information was recorded. The following six
questions were open-ended and qualitative, which allowed participants to freely write or type their own responses based on individual perceptions, emotions, and viewpoints. In this section, respondents were asked to describe their viewpoints on censorship and explain their interactions with social media. The latter nine questions allowed participants to express their responses through comparable quantitative methods, such as selecting a number on a Likert scale, choosing a letter in multiple choice, or selecting numerous options that might apply to them. By answering the final questions, participants analyzed the impacts censorship has on themselves as private individuals and their surrounding society. The complete list of interview questions is included in Appendix I.

Though this study provides insight into the ways in which Chinese netizens view social media censorship, various weaknesses of the survey must be highlighted in order to provide a transparent analysis of data. The survey is first limited due to the small sample size of survey participants, as sixteen individuals may not accurately provide a holistic representation of hundreds of millions of Chinese netizens. The survey is also limited in that the sixteen participants are fairly young, with the vast majority of respondents’ ages ranging from nineteen to twenty-two years old, and the two outlier ages, twenty-six and twenty-nine, could still provide rather youthful perspectives on the topic. In addition to their shared youth, the participants in this survey are all educated members of society with the individual abilities to participate in postsecondary scholarship programs at accredited universities. Since the basic demographics of this small population are relatively similar, viewpoints and responses from these individuals have the potential to
significantly differ from other Chinese netizens, such as older generations or less educated individuals.

Despite the study’s apparent weaknesses, however, the results from this survey reveal viewpoints directly from netizens on a topic about which research is severely limited due to its potentially dangerous, sensitive nature. Therefore, this data can serve as a microcosm of the greater opinions on censorship that derive from the individuals who use social media most as revealed in the literature review: young, educated Chinese citizens. This group of people is so influential that the Chinese government views them as opinion leaders with expression to be harnessed, stemming from their unique ability to sway the stances, actions, and emotions of others purely through social media platforms. As a result of this group’s power on the Internet, responses from these sixteen young, educated individuals can offer critical insight on how the concept of censorship is currently received by netizens and what the future relationship between Internet users and censorship may look like as this prominent population grows older.

In order to analyze the data from the sixteen surveys, each participant’s responses were recorded in a word processing document. The individual pieces of feedback were organized by question, with responses from the Chinese citizens who temporarily travelled to Mississippi grouped consecutively, immediately followed by the responses from the Chinese students enrolled at the University of Mississippi. Significant differences and common ties between responses were recorded in order to detect comprehensive themes across the primary research.
Analysis

After describing the methodology behind the survey as well as its strengths and weaknesses, an analysis of the survey responses gathered from the sixteen Chinese netizens is provided. This analysis will first holistically analyze the data to reveal attitudes and viewpoints on social media censorship from the perspective of the young, educated members of Chinese society in general. However, this examination will also go a step further to intricately study responses from the students who permanently live in China as compared to those who are enrolled full-time at the University of Mississippi. This more specific analysis will highlight differences that might exist based on living within the regime’s jurisdiction and, conversely, living on the other side of the world in a nation where freedom of expression is highly defended. An overview of the survey results follows this introductory paragraph.

The participants are active communicators, with eleven of the sixteen individuals reporting that they use more than one social media platform at least sometimes. Though there are a couple of outlier platforms, such as Douban and WhatsApp, each participant asserts that he or she mainly uses QQ, WeChat, Sina Weibo, or a combination of these three platforms in China. On these platforms, all sixteen of the survey participants are likely to utilize a common variety of functions, which includes sharing photos and videos, making payments, reading the news, posting status updates, sending voice recordings, creating microblogs, and connecting with friends, family, and strangers alike. However, the number of respondents who reportedly use social media for governmental purposes is staunchly lower than those who use it for general communication. For
example, five individuals say they use social media to discuss politics or current culture, five use it to engage in debates, four use it to follow government accounts, and three use it to contact government leadership. Regardless of the motives behind netizens’ social media usage, the Chinese government is prevalent across social media through its diverse regulatory apparatuses.

When discussing the general topic of censorship in China, all sixteen individuals assert that content regulation certainly exists on current social media platforms. Respondents offer a wealth of reasons to support their assertions, such as netizens’ inability to access Facebook, Google, or Instagram in China, the evident trend of post deletions, the publishing restrictions for content providers, and the intensifying governmental inspection in response to the rapid growth of social media. The majority of the respondents furthermore believe that not only does censorship exist, but it rightfully should exist on social media. Thirteen individuals posit that censorship has many societal benefits, such as filtering out rumors and fake news, preventing national terror, prohibiting brainwashing, and protecting children from inappropriate content, that warrant its existence. However, three respondents assert that social media content should not be censored because its implementation disregards individual freedom and privacy.

Participants were then asked their perceptions of the primary function of social media censorship within China’s borders, to which seven individuals answered that they were unaware of its purpose. On the opposite end of the spectrum, other individuals responded that censorship exists mainly to prevent negative or potentially hurtful information, such as content pertaining to terrorism, drugs, violence, or pornography,
from reaching citizens. Another viewpoint holds that censorship acts more in the state’s interest than that of the people. To this point, two participants answered that the social media censorship apparatus exists to uphold the goals of the state by promoting national unity and by protecting the communist ideology from foreign influence.

Though just over half of the respondents could provide reasoning for the concept of content regulation, the participants allude that society is widely cognizant of censorship. Six individuals respond that censorship is often discussed in China, while seven report that it is sometimes a topic of conversation. Two participants say it is not often discussed, and one says it is never discussed. From this sample population, three individuals relay that they had various personal experiences with censorship, citing instances of inability to access Instagram and Twitter in China, as well as automatic post deletions and direct banning of content. Though thirteen individuals reported no history of personal censorship interactions, one of these participants mentioned that he or she knows content regulation is a reality for members of surrounding communities. Many of the respondents’ answers centered around these trends of censorship when asked about improvements they would like to see on Internet platforms.

In response to this query, five participants gave answers alluding to a desire for less social media censorship. One of these respondents suggests the best improvement to social media would be less censorship verbatim, and two other participants mention that they wish information would not be controlled by influential formal leaders of the communist party. Similarly, another individual states that he or she wants the government to let netizens know the truth about certain topics, rather than censor information across
platforms that is deemed unfavorable to the regime. Such bureaucratic censorship of social media may skew content largely in support of the regime’s leadership and policies, which leads one participant to desire the preservation of authenticity and diversity of information, rather than a one-sided flow of opinions and conversations. In contrast to these responses, two individuals believe improvements to social media center around the enforcement of censorship. For example, one respondent believes the social media landscape would benefit from increased detection and deletion of accounts, while another participant wishes viewing and positing of sensitive information could be restricted by age level.

While the previously discussed individuals believe improvements to social media stem from less censorship or the maintenance of censorship respectively, three participants respond that social media could benefit from the increased personal freedoms of netizens. For example, one respondent wishes for more freedom of speech, while the two others desire more personal reason, judgement, and fairness across platforms. In response to the same question, three other respondents believe the structure and operations of social media must improve to create more organized, efficient communications. The final three individuals offer vague improvements to social media, such as wishing for “lots” of changes or “more positive” content.

Though every member of this netizen group acknowledges the existence of governmental censorship of social media, quantitative data reveals that individuals offer different viewpoints regarding its effects on posted content. Eight participants say that censorship imposes numerous changes on the information received across Internet
platforms, while four say there are no changes, and another four say there are only minimal changes to content. As a result of these perceived changes, individuals also view the reliability of information on social media differently. For example, ten individuals believe censorship makes social media content somewhat reliable, two say it is mostly reliable, two say it is mostly unreliable, one says it is reliable, and one says it is very unreliable.

Because these individuals are all plugged into social media to perform a multitude of functions, the respondents have various viewpoints regarding online activism. Seven participants have a neutral attitude toward commenting about social media censorship on an online platform, while three say they are likely to make such a comment. On the opposite end of the spectrum, four people say they are not likely to comment on censorship, and two say they never would. When asked about the likelihood of voicing criticism about the regime on social media, six were neutral, while two were likely and another two were extremely likely to criticize the regime online. However, one individual reported to be unlikely to voice criticism, while five say they never would.

The responses from these quantitative questions, as well as from the previous qualitative inquiries, culminate to shape the participants’ opinions toward China’s censorship of social media content. Six individuals are indifferent toward censorship, while three like and two strongly like the government’s regulatory apparatuses. In contrast to these opinions, four participants dislike and one strongly dislikes social media censorship. Consequently, the participants can loosely be grouped into thirds, in which
one group is indifferent toward social media censorship, one third generally dislikes it, and the other third generally likes it.

While a general analysis of the survey results certainly reveals useful information regarding social media censorship, various themes emerge from a deeper comparison of the data from the Beijing students and the University of Mississippi students. For example, the two groups of Chinese individuals find common ground in that they largely perceive social media content to be somewhat reliable, which is likely partly due to their assertions that censorship imposes numerous changes upon what is posted online. Additionally, the participants would agree that the topic of social media censorship is occasionally discussed in China, rather than being completely taboo or, conversely, a common conversation starter.

Similarities can also be detected when analyzing the social media platforms used by both groups of participants. For example, even though netizens of diverse backgrounds in America have the opportunity to create accounts on any Western Internet platform, such as Facebook or Twitter, the Chinese students seeking degrees at the University of Mississippi still predominantly utilize Chinese social media outlets over international platforms. The majority of respondents from both Beijing and Mississippi respond that they perform similar functions on these platforms, like sharing photos and videos, posting status updates, connecting with people they know, and making payments. However, though these functions can be completed on Western platforms, only one respondent mentions using Instagram at least sometimes. It can be concluded from this data that these Chinese netizens are looking for function, community, and
interconnectivity rather than the ability to access a specific platform that is restricted in China.

Though valid similarities certainly exist between the respondents from Beijing and Mississippi, differences between the two groups are evident based on their respective cultural surroundings. For example, in the United States, the freedoms of speech and press have historically been supported by the people and have been upheld and reinforced by the courts in notable decisions like *Yates v. United States* and *New York Times Company v. United States*. Perhaps this expressive culture is why the Chinese students enrolled at the University of Mississippi offer responses that symbolize such personal freedoms; for example, these students are more likely to discuss common culture, to engage in debates, to follow government accounts, to contact government leadership, and are less likely to desire to be anonymous on social media.

Furthermore, the survey reveals that Chinese respondents from the University of Mississippi perceive the regime’s censorship to be more prevalent across the social media landscape than do the respondents from Beijing. Where seven out of eight University of Mississippi participants say censorship is common within China’s borders, five Beijing participants say it is occasional, two find it common, and one finds censorship extremely common within the nation’s cyberspace. Just as individuals from the University of Mississippi are more likely to put censorship on a larger national scale, so respondents from this state were more likely to provide a reason for the primary function of censorship, as previously discussed, whereas six of the Beijing participants gave answers such as “I don’t know,” “I am not familiar with it,” or “I have no idea.”
The Beijing participants’ responses generally reflect more support for censorship of sensitive and inappropriate content as compared to the Chinese students enrolled full-time at the University of Mississippi. Though three Beijing participants did respond that social media should not be censored due to lack of personal freedoms, there is a greater number of Beijing individuals who like or strongly like censorship than Mississippi students, as derived from the quantitative data. In addition, even though the majority of individuals from Beijing are neutral about publishing comments regarding social media censorship, they are less likely to voice criticism of the regime on social media than are the respondents attending school in Mississippi. Such loyalty to the regime from the Beijing netizens may correlate with the absence of any of these respondents revealing a personal experience with censorship.

An analysis of these surveys offers insight into the trends, opinions, and viewpoints of young, educated Chinese netizens—the demographic that most often uses social media. From these results, it can be concluded that these Chinese netizens openly acknowledge the existence of China’s diverse censorship mechanisms on social media. Though certain platforms may be inaccessible and specific posts may be blocked, netizens are loyal to Chinese platforms that allow them to perform universal communication functions. Few respondents assert that social media should be less censored because individuals deserve to have their own freedoms of privacy and speech respected, not because Chinese netizens feel they are receiving inadequate information or incomplete access to the Internet. As a result of these trends, the surveyed netizens generally support the regime’s censorship apparatuses because they value the regime’s
efforts of preventing sensitive, inaccurate, or dangerous information from negatively impacting members of society and can still express their voices to their satisfaction on other platforms.

From analyzing the regime’s historical approach to censorship and netizens’ responses to it, it is evident that censorship has become an almost integral part of society with which the majority of netizens have become accustomed. Because of the ways in which content regulation has immersed itself in the daily lives of Chinese citizens well before the People’s Republic of China was even established, it can be concluded that netizens are generally satisfied with or at least indifferent toward censorship’s filtrations of inappropriate content since it does offer some benefit toward society. To dig even deeper into this topic, an analysis is provided in the following section to shed light on the subject of whether or not censorship should exist in the years to come and the implications it may cause.
PART SIX: ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

As one of the first countries to seriously invest in intensive Internet censorship mechanisms, China continues its centuries-long history of being a world leader on this front. Because content regulation has certainly brought various benefits to the state, such as previously discussed increased e-commerce, political cohesion, and social order, other countries may be inclined to follow in China’s footsteps and institute forms of regulatory apparatuses within their own borders. This concluding section will overview some reasons that the ideals behind censorship may potentially be adopted in other countries, as well as the implications content regulation may impose on these nations and China itself. Following this analysis, this section will discuss whether or not censorship presents a problem for Chinese society, in which the current balance between expression and order could waver in the future. Improvements and corrections to the regime’s current censorship apparatus will be provided in this section, as well as suggestions for future research on this multifaceted topic.

Though Chinese censorship is often contested by mainstream scholarship, there are certain altruistic ideals behind content regulation that may be appealing to other countries, causing extensive regulation to potentially spread past China’s borders. One of
these ideals follows that the screening of unacceptable content prevents harmful information from negatively affecting citizens. For example, the ability to filter out false information of domestic or foreign descent could generally be beneficial for society, especially in response to the current international trend of fighting fake political news. Following this mindset, the removal of inaccurate or fraudulent claims from cyberspace would put greater focus on information that is actually reliable, thus likely creating a better-informed, more patriotic citizenry. Similarly, the sifting of Internet content could reduce national security risks by cracking down on cyberterrorism that spreads through viruses and malware. By filtering content that is deliberately intended to cause social panic, regulating bodies could play an important role in maintaining peace and cohesion if a disaster were rumored. In addition to preventing the spread of fake news and cyberterrorism, filtering online information could also protect younger populations from sensitive information, such as pornographic or violent material, that is almost completely accessible in countries without Internet borders. Moreover, the ideals behind censorship and partial screening of content may be adopted by other countries because it sends a strong message to both other nations and its own citizens regarding what the country will and will not tolerate.

China and other countries that may choose to implement similar censorship apparatuses will have to face certain implications of content regulation, starting with discovering where to draw the line between the free flow of opinions and content control. For instance, other governments may elect to utilize censorship to filter only national security threats or sexual content, which seems at least somewhat altruistic, but they then
must decide where censorship should stop, if it should at all. Furthermore, the large-scale spread of censorship could result in a continuous wave of information filtration stemming from other authoritarian regimes that might even spread to dismantle democracies, or on the other hand, create tensions between countries with free flows of information. Such tensions could--and do currently--present themselves in the forms of barriers to trade, scholarship, and communication with the outside world.

As a result of these implications from censorship, it is necessary to question whether or not the current balance between online expression and social order, as well as government superiority and human rights, in present-day China is problematic. Though the authoritarian regime may justify Internet censorship through its history entrenched with benefits it brings society, such as filtering out violent or pornographic content or creating domestic e-commerce sites and social media platforms that increase the nation’s ability to be self-serving, Chinese citizens are realistically living in information darkness, in which almost a billion users’ innate abilities to make objectively informed personal decisions are limited. The restraints placed on communication and research are unacceptable and detrimental to growth, as the largest and potentially most influential netizen base in the world is unaware of the breadth of information surrounding them and is blocked from entering a global conversation. The withdrawal of ideas, thoughts, news, and events from cyberspace, each with the unborn potential to advance and diversify Chinese society, is an issue because censorship provides netizens with only partial access to information, which cannot be considered the complete truth. As censorship tightens under the current leadership while Internet users increasingly desire the privacy and
freedom with which they can speak their minds, this separation from truth will likely cause a break in China’s current balance between netizens’ expression and governmental order.

As a result of the foreseeable disruption to the current Internet equilibrium, it is logical to conclude that censorship should not be a part of Chinese society forever, responding to the influx of netizens who challenge the substantial communication and information standards set by the regime. To this end, covering up netizens who are brave enough to be vocal now will not last forever; in the years to come, they will likely begin demanding change in magnitudes that cannot be ignored or subdued. Just as censorship has holistically become less extreme with time, ranging from the complete destruction of books and records to today’s partial banning of content that can still be accessed on the web outside of the country’s borders, censorship should phase out, or at least become less extensive, as netizens become more outspoken and influential.

Though extensive censorship should not be a permanent facet of Chinese society, the current balance between expression and order is likely to continue in the immediate future. This present-day equilibrium can be corrected and improved by genuinely listening to the voices of netizens, rather than blatantly silencing or hiding them, as it should never be ignored that many netizens do genuinely advocate for regulation while others oppose it. Returning to the primary survey feedback from the sixteen Chinese netizens, for example, many individuals support some ideals behind censorship but wish it could be scaled down to respect their personal freedoms, such as leaving private conversations private and giving users more reason and judgment to acquire diverse
information within their social media experiences. Netizens in this survey also suggest age level restrictions on potentially sensitive, graphic, or explicit information but support the wholesale deletion of fake accounts and fraudulent news articles. In general, however, as most Chinese netizens are aware of censorship and the ways in which it impacts their daily lives, the regime needs to increase the reliability of information Internet users receive. To this end, the government should increase discussion of social media and Internet censorship in China, not only clarifying what is acceptable to post or publish and what is not, but also thoroughly explaining and offering justification as to why content is being censored from reaching netizens.

To build on the research and assertions presented in this thesis, succeeding scholarship should focus on further detecting the viewpoints of Chinese netizens and the regime toward the future of censorship on social media. Research stemming directly from Chinese netizens is the only way to determine their true attitudes on the topic because Western literature is likely going to be biased toward increasing the personal freedoms of expression, privacy, and human rights on the Internet. To further contribute to this field, a potential study of anonymous anecdotal evidence of netizens’ censorship experiences, ranging from the Great Firewall or individual post deletions, would be useful in determining their understanding of what happened and why they thought it happened. However, issues with conducting this research mainly center around censorship itself, which will likely block content of this nature from publication or very likely intimidate Chinese netizens from sharing their viewpoints in the first place.
Furthermore, research that implements feedback from the Chinese regime itself, such as interviews with members of the government on any level who can explain what happens when content is regulated and for what reason, would increase transparency and international comprehension on the topic of censorship. As in the case with netizens, however, the sensitivity of this topic may likely result in hesitancy or extreme opposition to participate in such a study. In general, since there is such limited existing literature in this field, any scholarship that shines light on a single facet of the content regulation apparatus would be useful in better understanding the relationship between Chinese netizens and social media censorship.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2018

Administrative Measures for Internet Information Services. Retrieved from


http://www.jstor.org/stable/42704798

China | Freedom House. (2019, March 11). Retrieved from

China: E-commerce sector employees 2017 | Statistic. Retrieved from


http://cnnic.com.cn/PublicS/hyzl/hlwdzzyfwhyzlgy/201208/t20120830_35721.htm


New Study Reveals Chinese Consumers Demand Speed and Authenticity. (2018, November 7). Retrieved from


http://english.gov.cn/premier/news/2018/06/05/content_281476172937960.htm


https://www.theregister.co.uk/2015/03/09/china_reveals_internet_plus_plan_to_modernise_and_go_cloudy/


https://www.jstor.org/stable/43392964?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents


https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/business/china-online-stakes-control.html
APPENDIX

Interview Questions for Sixteen Chinese Netizens

Age: _____

Please answer questions #1-6 based on your own opinion and experiences. There is no right or wrong answer.

1. Do you think there is social media censorship in China? Why or why not?
2. Do you think social media should or should not be censored? Why or why not?
3. What do you think is the primary function of social media censorship in China?
4. Do you have a personal experiences with censorship on a social media platform? If so, what happened?
5. What improvements would you like to see on social media platforms?
6. Write any social media platforms that you use at least sometimes in China.

Please answer survey questions #7-15.

7. Which of the following functions do you perform on social media? Put “X” by multiple choices if needed.
   ___ Share photos and/or videos
   ___ Post status updates
   ___ Send voice recordings
   ___ Make payments
   ___ Play games
   ___ To be anonymous
   ___ Connect with people you know
   ___ Connect with people you do not know
   ___ Create blogs/microblogs
   ___ Read the news
   ___ Engage in debates
   ___ Discuss politics or current culture
   ___ Contact government leadership
   ___ Follow government accounts
   ___ Other (please describe here):

8. Rank the reliability of information you feel you receive on Chinese social media platforms. Please choose one answer.

   1  2  3  4  5
   Very unreliable  Mostly unreliable  Somewhat reliable  Mostly reliable  Reliable
9. How much, if any, do you believe that censorship changes the information you receive on social media? Please choose one answer.

1. No changes
2. Minimal changes
3. Numerous changes
4. Extreme changes

10. How often are you exposed to international social media outlets in China (ex. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)?

1. Never
2. Occasionally
3. Often

11. What is your opinion toward China’s censorship of social media?

1
2
3
4
5
Strongly dislike
Dislike
Indifferent
Like
Strongly like

12. How common is censorship across the Chinese social media landscape?

1
2
3
4
5
Nonexistent
Not common
Occasional
Common
Extremely common

13. How often is social media censorship discussed in China?

1
2
3
4
5
Never
Not often
Sometimes
Often
Extremely often

14. How likely are you to voice any criticism about the regime on Chinese social media platforms (ex. policies, leaders)?

1
2
3
4
5
Never
Not likely
Neutral
Likely
Extremely likely

15. How likely are you to comment about social media censorship on a social media platform?

1
2
3
4
5
Never
Not likely
Neutral
Likely
Extremely likely