



An Enduring Tradition: The Interrelation Between Confucianism, Internet, and Chinese Censorship Strategy

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Abstract: *In the West, criticism of Chinese censorship has long prompted extensive research and reporting on the scope, aims, and methods behind the elaborate apparatus. Beyond political motivations, Chinese censorship's stark contrast to the Western emphasis on free speech has also sparked inquiry into the cultural influences shaping the Chinese government's inclination towards stringent censorship. This paper examines the role of Confucianism in influencing Chinese censorship decisions, specifically within the realm of the Chinese Internet over the past decade. It argues that the Chinese government's commitment to creating the image of a harmonious Confucian society has driven an increase in media censorship to counter the perceived disruptive effects of the Internet. Three cases studies of internet censorship—relating to the feminist movement of the 2010s, criticism of health policies during the COVID pandemic, and criticism of economic policy during the economic slowdown of 2023-24—are analyzed to reveal the pervasiveness of Confucian theory in the rationale behind censorship. Though in no way does Confucianism fully explain the nature of the Chinese government and its proclivity for censorship, it continues to have a visible impact on the actions of the Chinese government, proving its enduring centrality in China's identity.*

Keywords: *China, Censorship, Chinese Censorship, Internet Censorship, Chinese Internet, Chinese Government, Internet Governance, Confucianism*

1. INTRODUCTION

When the Internet was launched on April 30th, 1993, it transformed the impact of communication and discourse forever. Not only did it accelerate the spread of information, but it also expanded the freedoms of speech, expression and press in becoming a ubiquitous technology. Countries had to adapt quickly to this change. As Professor Lawrence Lessig of Harvard University emphasized, “Nations wake up to find that their telephone lines are tools of free expression, that email carries news of their repression far beyond their border, that images are no longer the monopoly of state-run television stations but can be transmitted from a simple modem” (Mchangama, 2022). As a new and powerful technology, the Internet forced countries to face the uncharted challenge of Internet policy and consider how the Internet would align with their country's values.

Governmental responses to the internet varied greatly across the globe. On one hand, in 1996 the United States Congress passed the Communications Decency Act, which declared that online intermediaries had “broad immunity from user-generated content” (Mchangama). In short, it allowed online platforms to give voice to their users without fearing lawsuits from “slighted individuals and corporations” (Mchangama). On the other hand, the Chinese government began to police cyberspace. It developed a regulatory system — known as the Golden Shield Project, or more famously, the Great Firewall of China — comprising a mass surveillance apparatus, effusive social media propaganda, and a censorship aspect (Mchangama). This system controlled, blocked, and filtered content, keywords, and websites within the Chinese domestic Internet (Mchangama).

Partly, the Chinese government's censorial attitude towards the Internet reflected a long political tradition of repression and intolerance (Polcumpally & Mishra, 2021). The burning of books and burying of scholars by First Emperor Qin Shi Huang in 213-212 BCE is often seen as the first instance of media censorship in Chinese history, and it set the tone for the rest of Chinese dynastic rule (Mchangama). Even when the government moved away from monarchy following the 1911 revolution, censorship persisted as a favored tool of the government, as seen in the banning of anti-communist and anti-Maoist literature during the Cultural Revolution and the tabooing of the events of Tiananmen Square 1989 (Mchangama). The Chinese government's censorship of the Internet thus

resided within a broader political and cultural context of media regulation as merely the newest incarnation, adapted accordingly to the new landscape of media technology.

But how was this tradition of censorship able to linger so long? The answer to this question is found in the role that Confucianism has played in Chinese culture and the ways in which the government has integrated it into its own political image.

Confucianism appeared in the middle to late 6th century BCE and was a byproduct of the Era of Warring States in China (Richey, n.d.). Its philosophy centered on social harmony and order (Richey). At its crux was the concept of “tian” (天), a heavenly order that the government must bring to the people on earth (Richey). Tian is best described by this quote from Confucius’s analects: “Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, a father a father, and a son a son” (Richey). In having each level of the natural hierarchy be content with its place within the larger order, accepting their corresponding responsibilities, society would be able to run smoothly and peacefully (Richey). In 140 BCE, Emperor Wu made Confucianism the state ideology, yet, even when the government transitioned into a republic, the philosophy maintained its influence on politics, having become ingrained in Chinese national and cultural identity in the past two millennia (Hu, 2007).

Thus, looking at the intersections between Confucianism, censorship and the Internet, it is clear how they support, impact and feed off one another. When social movements and state-critical attitudes were amplified by the Internet, they posed a significant threat in the eyes of the Chinese government to the Confucian ideals of social harmony and respect for authority and hierarchy. For those reasons, the government has applied targeted Internet censorship to areas it perceived to pose the largest threats, namely the feminist movement, COVID pandemic frustrations, and economic criticisms.

2. THE MODERN FEMINIST MOVEMENT

When the Internet helped give rise to the more outrageous “young feminist” movement in the 2010s, the Chinese government began to censor feminist discourse online. One of the earliest challenges for the Chinese government, the “young feminist” movement of the early 2010s called for protection against sexual harassment and domestic violence (Wang, 2019). In many ways, the internet was vital to their activity. It allowed these activists to overcome the barriers of their youth and to heighten the visibility of their cause. Composed mostly of college students, these feminists had “neither prestigious social status nor available social resources” (Wang). However, the Internet’s being a publicly available resource freely provided them with the means to self-direct. They became very well adapted to the Internet’s information-sharing strengths. Through online forums and social media apps, the “young feminists” organized demonstrations and expanded the membership of their coalitions (Wang). By broadcasting their activity online, the “young feminists” were also quickly able to capture the attention of the masses. One of their main publicity strategies included the documentation of their demonstrations. Their innovative demonstrations prioritized shock factor and involved stunts such as dressing up as bloodied brides, occupying men’s restrooms, and a feminist cross-country march (Wang). Photos of these demonstrations subsequently circulated on *Weibo* and *WeChat*, bringing feminist discourse to the attention of many (Wang). Capitalizing on the Internet’s media-sharing capabilities, the young feminists succeeded in breaking into China’s mainstream (Wang).

However, the growth of the young feminist movement was quickly halted by the Chinese government on March 6th, 2015, two days before International Women’s Day, in a significant altercation. The “Feminist Five” demonstrators were arrested on the grounds of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”, having attempted to carry out a protest against sexual harassment on public transportation (Rui, 2021). They were detained for a month (Rui). With the unusual timing and grounds of the arrest, the statement towards the Chinese feminist movement was clear — that the Chinese government perceived their activities as dangerous and socially disrupting. In a more general sense, the existence of a law to fight specifically against “quarrels” and “trouble” showed how important the veneer of a harmonious society was to the Chinese government. Following the “Feminist Five incident,” the Chinese government employed a new management strategy of targeting feminist discourse online before the Internet incited the movement into a stronger social force with physical manifestations (Zhang, 2023).

Recent feminist censorship incidents displayed the Chinese government’s persistence in said strategy. For instance, the “Tangshan Restaurant Attack” on June 10th, 2022, in which a group of men assaulted four women after they rejected their advances, had footage circulating online and sparked

discourse about gender-based violence (Ni, 2022; Xu, 2024). In fact, the term “feminism” trended on *Weibo* at a historical high due to the incident (Xu). However, two days after the incident, *Weibo* censored the incident, citing a zero-tolerance policy toward posts that “incited gender conflict” (Zhang, 2022). In forty-eight hours, the platform removed more than fourteen thousand posts, suspended eight thousand users, and permanently banned another thousand (Zhang). The phrase “inciting gender conflict” suggested roots in Confucian ideals, since the philosophy touted the idea that the male and female gender’s specific, individual places in society should prevent conflict (Richey). In general, the censorship of the Tangshan Restaurant attack exemplified how the Chinese government saw potential for real social disruption within discussions on the internet. In an increasing show of online censorship, the Chinese government silenced feminist discussions before they could bloom “conflict”.

3. THE COVID PANDEMIC

Preserving the image of Confucian societal peace remained a top priority for the Chinese government, especially in moments of crisis like the COVID pandemic. During the pandemic, the public used the internet to express their many grievances about the situation and about the government. The Chinese government sought to mask this negativity.

In the early days of the outbreak, the public expressed disapproval on the Internet over what they perceived to be the Chinese government’s ineffectual response to the virus. When Li Wenliang, the whistleblower doctor who warned the public of the strange new virus outbreak, died of COVID in February of 2020, Chinese social media saw his death as the result of the Chinese government’s terrible strategy of managing the virus — a censorship beginning in January of health information regarding the infections (Zhong et al., 2020). Immediately, the Chinese public exploded into anger and grief, conceiving Dr. Li as a martyr and a hero for breaking through the censorship (Buckley & Mozur, 2020). Not only did condolences to Dr. Li’s family pervade social media in a barrage of candle emojis, quotes and images of Dr. Li, but denunciations of the government also multiplied (Buckley & Mozur). These criticisms were entwined with, and thus were heightened by, the outpour of emotion, such as one popular illustration which had turned the outlines of Dr. Li’s surgical mask in his video into barbed wire (Buckley & Mozur). The implications of Dr. Li’s death were therefore amplified by the mass grief on the Internet.

Chinese censors immediately acted to tone down the situation. They removed not only intentionally politicized posts about Dr. Li’s death but also expressions of mourning which they perceived as agitating (Zhong et al.). As the *New York Times* reported, these censors relayed special instructions such as “do not use push notifications, do not post commentary, do not stir up speculation. Safely control the fervor in online discussions, do not create hashtags, gradually remove from trending topics, strictly control harmful information” and “pay particular attention to posts with pictures of candles, people wearing masks, an entirely black image or other efforts to escalate or hype the incident” (Zhong et al.). As a result, large numbers of online memorials disappeared, and people who created groups to archive deleted posts were detained by the police (Zhong et al.). Even a video interview of Dr. Li’s mother reminiscing about her son was removed by censors, who deemed it “taking advantage of this incident to stir up public opinion” (Zhong et al.). These directives from the censors and the operation of censorship revealed that the Chinese government perceived the growing grief and anger from its public, intensified by the internet, as threats to societal peace. The public’s questioning of the government’s censorship went against the social hierarchy, which Confucianism emphasized was essential for maintaining a working and peaceful society. Moreover, posts were not considered for their intent but rather measured for their potential to incite further trouble. Thus, it is clear that the illusion of peace was the Chinese government’s objective during the pandemic.

Sentiments over Dr. Li’s death were not the only instance of surging public grief and disaffection with the government during the pandemic. The Chinese government’s attempts to remove the white paper protests from the public’s view showed how the Chinese government tried to protect its decisions in policy from the criticisms of the public (Allen, 2022). At first, frustrations with zero-COVID policies manifested as small, disjointed protests in urban areas across China (Allen). However, the tragedy of the Ürümqi fire (an apartment fire which led to ten deaths) escalated these smaller protests into the white paper protests (Allen). In the case of the fire, many suspected that the tragedy could have been prevented if not for strict COVID lockdown procedures preventing the residents from escaping and firefighters from reaching them (Allen). Thus, the incident sparked one of the most visible displays of public disapproval of zero-COVID. When the demonstrations grew in size and spread to more cities

calling for change to the excessive zero-COVID policies, China's censorship machine went great lengths to prevent people seeing scenes of protest. Their process included banning keywords, such as “Ürümqi” and “Shanghai” (in reference to the cities where protests were held) from search engines (Allen). When holding up blank pieces of paper began to appear both as a way to circumvent the censorship and to protest the censorship, the terms “A4” and “white paper” were subsequently banned as well (Allen). Censorship ultimately turned tens of millions of results on Chinese social media platforms into only hundreds (Allen). The censorship of the white paper protests showed again a defense by the Chinese government of its policy decisions from the criticisms of the public, in order to maintain the hierarchy between government and public. The intent of the censorship to prevent protest from spreading to other cities also contributed to its campaign of maintaining the image of social harmony.

4. THE ECONOMIC SLOWDOWN OF 2023-24

The Chinese government's efforts to maintain an image of a strong, respected government spiked again with the economic slowdown of 2023-2024. During the slowdown, the Chinese government demonstrated again a similar defense of censorship against an influx of criticisms towards its policies. The censorship of negativity also had pragmatic reasons for the recovery of the economy.

Both humorous mockery and serious analysis on the state of economics became widespread on the Internet as the public sought to both cope with the situation and make their displeasure known. In the week of February 4th 2024 when the Chinese stocks hit multi-year lows, internet users made mocking posts linking the behavior of plunging Chinese stocks to Chinese wins in the sport of diving (Kuo, 2024). In the same week, a US embassy social media post about protecting giraffes in Africa received many comments from Chinese investors asking if Washington could “spare some missiles to bomb the Shanghai stock exchange” (Kuo). Professional economic analysts also shared serious commentary on Chinese economic policy. One such piece included a column by economist Li Xunlei published on January 31st 2024 by Chinese news outlet *Yicai*. Li contended that “insufficient household consumption would persist unless China's leadership took steps to help lower-income families” (Cheng, 2024). He also referred to a study conducted by Beijing Normal University whose data showed the drastic and widespread problem of income inequality (Cheng). In that time of widely felt frustration, the Internet allowed the public to heal through exchanges of humor, venting, and calls for change.

The Chinese government's subsequent censorship of these negative comments added to its larger goal of societal stability in several ways. At the same time censorship directly defended the Chinese government's authority by erasing cutting criticism, it also worked to prevent Chinese society from slipping into chaos as a strategy for economic recovery. In the month of February 2024, the Ministry of State Security noted that “economic security is a key component of national security” (Cheng). This sentiment revealed how the Chinese government perceived the revival of the economy as central to protecting China from the domestic threats of social instability and perhaps even insurrection. In this way, censorship helped recover the economy by helping create an image of spending confidence. Lack of consumer and business confidence was recognized as a significant obstacle in the revival of the Chinese economy. From a Washington Post article published February 6th 2024, economists who were consulted on China's slowing economic growth determined that “one of the biggest impediments to recovery is a crisis of confidence among the public” (Kuo). Apparently thinking the same thing, in that same week Xi Jinping's top lieutenants urged officials to “promote the bright prospects of China's economy” (Cheng). As a result, censorship targeted the negativity surrounding the economy. All kinds of negative news and opinions, from serious economic commentary to general humor found in the situation, were removed within hours of their publication (Cheng). Thus, the Chinese government's increased efforts in censorship served to ensure China's stability on both social and economic levels.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Confucian values presented a culture-based explanation for China's state-driven repression of free thought. With the philosophy continuing to impact governmental decisions in the 21st century, it supported an increase in censorship, particularly of online content generated by public discourse. On one hand, the Internet supported more collective expressions from the Chinese public of their grief, unease, or frustration, especially in times of crisis or social disruption. On the other, the

Chinese government fought back against what they perceived as social disruption with heavy and aggressive censorship. Feminism, the COVID pandemic, and the recent economic slowdown provided case studies of such pattern of reactivity from the government. In its commitment to curtail social mobilization and upheaval, however, the Chinese government must consider whether its strategy of censorship is sustainable for its relationship with its public.

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