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Internet censorship in modern China: tight control and a flexible settlement system

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Abstract. The article considers the features of Internet censorship in the People's Republic of China, the stages of its formation, origins of specifics and modern problems of controlling information in the media. Material addressed the current theme of the CPC's fight against "anti-historical research" with reference to the new law on the rights and interests of military personnel; at the same time, it gives some examples of "soft" selective censorship of Internet user messages in China. The cultural origins of the phenomenon of Chinese censorship reveal many aspects related to the assessment of the CCP's policy towards the media by Chinese and foreigners. The work used research materials of Russian and foreign specialists in the field of state censorship in China, current information of Chinese news websites and legislation in the field of information control.


Keywords: PRC, media, Internet censorship, control, information, politics, culture

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Интернет-цензура в современном Китае: жесткий контроль и гибкая система урегулирования

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются особенности интернет-цензуры в Китайской Народной Республике, этапы ее формирования, истоки специфики и современные проблемы контроля информации в СМИ. Затрагивается актуальная тема борьбы КПК с «антиисторическими исследованиями» с обращением к новому закону о правах и интересах

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военнослужащих; в то же время приводятся примеры «мягкого» избирательного цензурирования сообщений пользователей Интернета в Китае. Культурологические истоки феномена китайской цензуры позволяют раскрыть многие аспекты, связанные с оценкой политики КПК в отношении СМИ китайцами и иностранцами. В работе использованы материалы исследований российских и зарубежных специалистов в области государственного цензурирования в Китае, актуальные сведения китайских новостных порталов и законопроекты в сфере контроля информации.

Ключевые слова: КНР, СМИ, интернет-цензура, контроль, информация, политика, культура

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Introduction

Modern social reality and international communication are closely connected with advanced information technologies. The mass media play a key role, since it has been functioning for a long time not only on physical media (newspapers, magazines), but also in the virtual space, thereby covering the largest number of readers. So, censorship is implemented most extensively on the Internet, on radio and television. In most countries (mainly in the West) there is a so-called “permissive” liberal press policy: a demanding public needs a wide range of information sources, stimulating competition between publishers and news agendas. Media information distorted or softened by the state is not perceived as reliable either among the intellectual elite or among the civil majority. It’s different in the People’s Republic of China, the determining factor in the field of information policy is the control of the ruling Communist Party of China over all information resources. The information content is supervised by more than ten state and party bodies. One of the most important is the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in cooperation with the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). “The PRC media, functioning in the absence of political competition, are used by the ruling Communist Party as a translator of its ideas, goals, strategic plans and intentions, which determines the specifics of the choice of methods of political influence, the formation of agenda, open political propaganda, hidden information suggestion is dominant, the formation of political stereotypes, the structuring of political myths and images, political advertising” [1. P. 31–32]. In the modern Internet space of China, strict control over published materials prevails, especially with a political and ideological component. However, the latest analytical work on the topic of censorship in China shows the presence of flexible “soft” means of control depending on

social differentiation. The term 疏堵结合 (shū dǔ jiéhé) is increasingly appearing in the Chinese press, characterizing the party's policy in relation to the media and other areas, and denoting the unity (结合) of measures for “blocking, prohibition” (堵塞) and “mediation, regulation” (疏通). In the context of the presented material, the most successful interpretation of this phrase would be “to act with an axe and a scalpel”. The origins of the phenomenon of Chinese censorship relate to its history and fundamental features of culture and philosophy.

History of the Chinese press and censorship

The Chinese press has a very rich history and acts as a fundamental one in the socio-cultural transformations of the country. S.A. Polevoy in his work “Periodical Press in China” (1913) identified several features that determined the development of the press in China [2]. Language differentiation influenced the division of newspapers into literary and colloquial; the growth of literacy led to an interest in social issues; features of the writing style and aesthetic appearance of newspapers – clarity and elegance of the columns, drawings in the text, headings decorated with vignettes, etc. As a features of the press development, the “expansion” of the Chinese language in the 4th–7th centuries, the language integration (adaptation of European concepts) are singled out. The enrichment of the language while using or changing old hieroglyphs to denote new words (for example, status, telephone, protest, ultimatum), led to a deeper pithiness of the language of newspapers, expressiveness and comprehensibility of speech [2. P. 24–27]. This is due to the peculiarities of Chinese culture, language and mentality, the “hieroglyphic thinking method”. In our earlier work “The Chinese language: hieroglyphic writing and its “trace” on consciousness and mentality” we discussed the external influence and enrichment of the Chinese language in the context of its organics: “the multi-layered meaning (or meanings) enclosed in a hieroglyphic symbol is a complex and ethnically determined feature of the Chinese thinking, and therefore any kind of enrichment has always been a process not just of intellectual work (inclusion of concepts by Chinese linguists), but also of serious cultural adaptation” [3. P. 380].

The identified features are directly related not only to the press, but also to the history of its control, that is censorship. As noted by Chinese researchers Yang Zhi and Tian Yuehong, the creative unity and integrity of Chinese journalism are related to its historical, spiritual and cultural roots [4, 22]. Ancient forms of mass communication (folklore, musical and singing art) – folk art and musical forms, can be called “verbal press”. The Emperor of the Han Dynasty Wudi (140–86 BC) established the “Music Chamber” (“Yuefu”), which could function as a kind of sociological institute, whose task was to study and

form the public opinion. This practice existed earlier in 12th century BC at the court of the Zhou rulers. Special officials collected folk songs in order to determine the mood of the masses with their help [4. P. 25]. Another researcher, Lin Yutang, believes that written journalism in the narrow sense of the word originates in China from the chronicle of “Spring and Autumn” (8th century BC). The collection of information by officials throughout the country was a widespread practice; reports on the situation in the country were received by the emperor [5. P. 202]. However, the main conclusion is that in China the press has historically been published, and accordingly controlled from the center (palace). In the period of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), there were printed documents (for example, *Dibao* – Capital News), which can be considered as prototypes of modern newspapers and magazines. In terms of content, they were regular bulletins of news about the work of the governing bodies at the imperial court and his life” [4. P. 26–27].

Linguistic and social differentiation, multi-layered and hierarchical thinking and worldview, specific of perception of foreign culture laid the foundations of the Chinese media. Regarding censorship, it is important to note a few more cultural and philosophical points.

Origins of the Censorship Phenomenon: Chinese Communication Culture

China is one of the oldest governments, which has thousands of years of its formation, possessing even today unavailable cultural environment, a completely different philosophical system (from the point of view of Western categories), a diverse linguistic environment, authentic morality and eventful history. To understand the inhabitants of the Celestial Empire (中国、天下), it is required not only to speak and write the language, to be in the context of the historical canvas, but also to relate to life as Chinese. The Chinese scholar, philosopher and writer Lin Yutang in his work “The Chinese: My Country and My People”, as part of a study of the socio-political life of the Chinese, using simple examples tells about Chinese individualism and the reasons for the lack of “public spirit”. The Chinese are individualistic in the sense that they don’t care about society, only about family. Even though China has the concept of “social event”, they do not have a “public spirit” along with “civic consciousness” and “social service” – these are new terms came from the American worldview. The origins of this omission lead to Confucian socio-political philosophy, in which there was a transition from the family – “jia” (家) to the state – “guo” (国). A term suitable for the concept of “society” is “guojia” 国家 (“state”), which includes the mentioned morphemes. In such a logical addition lies the specific of the Chinese world order. In the essence of the transition, addition or overflow, a specific feature of the structure of consciousness is manifested. Lin Yutang illustrated Chinese individualism and the weakness of public

consciousness with the phenomenon of the Chinese press. Everyone does their own work and does not cooperate with other colleagues, and the reason for this is the lack of awareness of the social significance of their work. The practice of nepotism and ancestral ties stalls various professional processes. And a hypothetical person advocating social reforms will, in addition to looking comical (“a person with a deviation”), in addition, will also become someone who “meddles in other people’s affairs” [5. P. 165–168]. The family produces a clan system, influences the social order, and therefore acts as a determining factor in the minds of the Chinese nation. In its communication features lie such fundamental problems of Chinese society as: “loss of face”, patronage, privilege, “gratitude” of the patronized, rules of conduct and relations with elders, government and other elements. The external structure and specific content of such consciousness are superimposed on social norms, thus mixing morality and politics. The main paradox of this process is that since its founding, the CPC has been shaping the ideas of “public spirit” and “civic consciousness” among the people through the media, acting 疏堵结合, and ordinary citizens prefer to agree with innovations “from above” and “stay aside” from what is happening.

The emergence and development of journalism in the modern sense occurred in connection with the economic reform of 1978. Until that time, according to experts, propaganda prevailed in China. As with the economy, control of the press was multi-level [6. P. 188, 7]. Corresponding central organs were set up: The Publicity Department of the Central Committee (中共中央宣传部), in charge of controlling ideology, press, television, and education policy; the State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室), which is generally responsible for China’s information security and maintains relations with foreign media. With the advent of the communication channel in the form of the Internet and the birth of a new generation, it became much more difficult to control society, promote the ideology and goals of the ruling party, which led to the creation in 1998 and the full implementation in 2003 of the project of one of the most advanced systems to limit Internet content “Great Firewall of China” (信息防火墙、防火长城), which allows you to block websites, individual phrases, words and even characters (temporarily or permanently). According to the law on state secrets in force in the country, telecommunications and Internet companies are required to assist the police on the Internet [8]. In this regard, such sites as Bing, Google, Yahoo and their other subsidiaries are being reviewed in China. Foreign media are completely blocked, but almost all local analogues of existing world services have been created: an analogue of Facebook (Wechat), Twitter (Weibo), YouTube (Youku), in the same way the analogue search engine Google (Baidu) was developed. The purpose of these actions is to ensure that the bulk of the population consumes content from exclusively local resources controlled by the Communist Party, experiencing the least impact of Westernization.

Internet censorship

In 2010, the Chinese government issued a white paper stating that the Internet is a “crystallization of human wisdom”, but there are a few reasons why citizens cannot fully have access to it [9]. It was noted that the government seeks to combat the harmful consequences for public interests and security that may arise from the dissemination of illegal information. “Laws and regulations clearly prohibit the dissemination of information containing content that undermines state power, undermines national unity or infringes on national honor and interests” [8]. The continuation was the bill on “rumors and speculation” adopted in 2013, according to which a person is responsible for publishing unreliable or false information. It included criticism of the central authorities. Liability up to criminal under this law comes from 500 republications of a posted message or from 5 thousand views [10]. Further, in 2014, The Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室) was founded, which main goals were the expansion of online services, the resolving of Internet security issues, as well as the expansion of jurisdiction over Internet censorship policy.

The Chinese government has consistently promoted this course and in 2017 we trace the trend towards increased “cleansing” of the Internet space: since December 2017, it became known that China has blocked more than 13 thousand websites since 2015. At the same time, the Reuters news agency, citing the state news agency Xinhua (新华), claimed that most Chinese residents support the government’s work to clean up cyberspace. In December 2017, Xinhua published the results of a survey that showed that more than 90% of Chinese support the government’s efforts to control the Internet. 63.5% of respondents reported that the volume of unwanted content in the online space has significantly decreased over several years [11]. However, the list of measures and regulations regarding Internet users and content censorship was not limited to this statistical calculation of blockages: in the same year, Chinese citizen Wu Xiangyang was sentenced to 5.5 years in prison for illegally setting up a VPN network and selling access to it; Deng Jiwei was sentenced to 9 months in prison for “illegal control of computer systems” (sale of VPN software); the introduction by The Cyberspace Administration of mandatory identification of Internet users (not unimportant was the introduction in 2020 of mandatory confirmation of user names of online games); WhatsApp blocking; all Chinese telecom providers, by order of the Chinese government, had until February 1, 2018 (after which a complete VPN ban came) to block users from accessing virtual private networks (VPN). The order concerned three state-owned telecom companies – China Mobile, China Unicom and China Telecom [12]. There were other events, mainly related to business or bearing a narrower nature of changes. The most high-profile events were: the blocking of Wikipedia in all languages

in 2019; the promotion in 2020 of a law banning Chinese citizens from speaking negatively about their country on the Internet (this bill divided online content into three groups: “encouraged”, “negative” and “illegal”); In 2020, against the backdrop of protests, China put forward a law providing for the creation of a National Security Committee in Hong Kong, subordinate to the authorities of the People’s Republic of China and the introduction of life imprisonment for those whose actions are aimed at undermining the government. A forum in Wuzheng in September 2021 was devoted to these and other issues of “slander” on the Internet [13].

As for Internet content, we also note that some topics on the Chinese Internet that were initially banned. These are topics related to separatism, issues of independence of Tibet and Xinjiang, the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and the Falun Gong movement. According to the China Digital Times Internet project, created at the University of California, in the constantly replenishing “blacklist” of the Great Firewall of China over the past seven years, about 3.5 thousand words, abbreviations, expressions have been accumulated (and continue to be), for example: “cultural revolution”, “slave system”, “cult of personality”, “long live the emperor”, “inherit the throne”, “emigration”, “disagree”, “Ai Weiwei”, “1984”, even the phrase “boarding the plane” is in blacklisted, as it sounds like “inherit the throne” (登机 vs 登基) [14]. In this connection, Chinese Internet users have learned very skillfully, allegorically, ambiguously and ironically, as well as using euphemisms, homophones, memes to communicate on political topics or topics with negative content for a certain time before they are blocked on the network [15, 16]. Now content moderation thanks to modern technologies, “Internet policemen” and censors of the largest social networks is carried out promptly and pointwise. For example, with the dramatic development of streaming services against the background of a pandemic caused by a coronavirus infection, Chinese Internet users switched to the online broadcast format with the greatest zeal, which eventually led to the sudden ban of the new Clubhouse application and increased restrictive measures against the activities of numerous live streamers and the consumption of their content by fellow citizens.

These examples indicate the tightening of the censorship policy against both organizations and individual Internet users. However, there are studies showing a “soft” selective impact of surveillance in different areas. For example, some foreign books are prohibited from publication on the Internet, but in print they are still available (for example, D. Orwell’s “Animal Farm” and “1984”). Yang Lianke’s book “To Serve the People” was banned in China, but no sanctions were applied to the author [17].

In 2013 American scientists conducted an experimental study in which residents from different countries left opinions and judgments in Chinese social networks, and then analyzed which messages were deleted by censors, which

ones were not, and which ones were edited. As a result, it turned out that messages criticizing the leadership and policies of the Communist Party were almost untouched, but any attempts to find like-minded people were suppressed and blocked [18]. Experts see the reasons for such selectivity and flexibility of censorship in different attitudes to the perception of information by ordinary residents of the country and the intellectuals. Since information on the Internet is more accessible than printed products, it is controlled more precisely. As a result of the experiment, the authors concluded that the main task of censorship is not to isolate people from information, but to control selected topics and their dissemination in certain circles, the aim to “reduce the likelihood of collective action by cutting off social ties” [18].

A large statistical study by Qiuqing Tai from Yale University clearly shows which techniques and methods are used by Chinese censors on the Internet depending on the conditions and goals [6. P. 187]. The main features of censorship of the press and other Internet content in modern China are the following: 1) the control of the CPC is quite flexible, varies from strict prohibition to encouragement depending on the situation; 2) adapts in accordance with new realities, propaganda departments prohibit and block news reports and opinions less, “explain”, “correct” and “guide” them more; 3) the flexibility of the censorship strategy allows the CPC to maintain legitimacy regardless of the degree of informatization of society. Thus, the actions of the relevant control bodies on the Internet over time and the development of technology become more flexible, possibly following the concept of “soft power”. Strictly limiting the access of the country’s residents to information and blocking all negative comments of the existing political system, it is impossible to see the full picture of popular opinion and sentiment. The CPC is gradually adjusting the course of censorship from restrictions and prohibitions to conditional leadership of public opinion, or to a combination of these actions 疏堵结合.

History and propaganda

In December 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping addressed cultural figures and recalled the role they play in “renewing the great Chinese nation” and “reflecting the great Chinese history”. “It is necessary to unite patriotic and dedicated figures of literature and art under the leadership of the party,” Xi Jinping said. “Art and culture should stay away from money, not become slaves of the market and not consider “works of art as a commodity” [19]. Xi Jinping stressed that “bad behavior” of cultural figures, including artists, writers, artists, will not be tolerated, and that they should “practice morality and decency.” “Those who do not respect themselves will not be respected,” state television quoted Xi Jinping’s words [19]. In foreign media, we are faced

with information that the Chinese government is very sensitive to the creation and distribution of materials related to history. A striking example is the censorship of historical documents about the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government today officially condemns the Cultural Revolution, but Chinese citizens do not have the opportunity to discuss neither the deprivations of that period nor the policy of the authorities in this regard in a diverse way.

In this vein, it is important to emphasize the topic of “anti-historical insinuations” in the Chinese press. In June 2021, China passed a law that banned defamation against military personnel. According to it, no organizations or individuals can defame and encroach on the honor of military personnel as well as insult and undermine their reputation in any way [20, 21]. Also, people’s procuratorates will be able to bring lawsuits against those who defile the honor or reputation of military personnel, violate their legitimate rights and interests, and negatively affect the performance of their duties, which harms public interests. This draft law has a rather militaristic bias and maintains a tendency in the field of restricting freedom of speech: conditions are outlined for what can be discussed and what cannot. Even before the end of the year, the media covered the situation in which this bill “worked”. In the fall of 2021, the Chinese film “Battle of Chosin Reservoir” (长津湖战役 drama, history) was released, which tells about Chinese volunteers who helped South Korean soldiers fight against the American “imperialists” during the Korean War. Most viewers liked the film, but those who did not like had to be convicted under the article. One Chinese businessman wrote on his social network that China’s participation in the Korean War may not have been a deliberate decision, thereby calling into question the decisions of the Chinese leadership during the battle of the Chosin Reservoir. After the statement, China Central Television released an angry story saying that some people still doubt the need for China’s participation in the Korean War, allowing them to question the “glorious pages of history” of the PRC with their “anti-historical insinuations” [22]. After that, the businessman’s post was deleted, the account was blocked, and he faced up to 3 years in prison in accordance with the law on the status and rights of military personnel.

There is a tendency to “cleanse” the space of the Internet network and television from negative points of view. Organizations and individuals should not “meddle in other people’s affairs”, which are better understood by people directly related to such issues. Against this background, the developing censorship machine has demonstrated that it not only blocks unnecessary information, “cleans” the Internet and television space from “incorrect” points of view, but reacts accordingly to it, tries to form public opinion and fosters a patriotic attitude [23]. Over the past 10 years, there has been a noticeable increase in the relevant bills. This topic has a lot of weight in today’s realities, since such socio-political innovations do not concern abstract entities,

corporations, it is about real cultural figures, journalists or officials, who are most often affected by such measures.

Conclusion

A complex system of restricting access to unwanted content has been introduced in China's Internet space, considering the peculiarities of the worldview of different groups of citizens. If for the category of ordinary users, the purpose of censorship is to suppress the collective support of negative ideas, then for cultural figures and other persons occupying a prominent position in society, the measures of restraint can be extremely strict. For today the Chinese government has a huge resource as channels of influence (police, army) against any unplanned changes. Therefore any forecasts for the coming years would be possible only after raising the question: what next step will the Communist Party of China take?

In the course of considering the specific of the formation and modern aspects of media censorship in the PRC, we came to the significant conclusions: the phenomenon of Chinese-type censorship is inextricably linked with the historical, cultural and philosophical values of the Chinese people; information control is not necessarily extremely strict, it varies and quickly adapts in accordance with the changing conditions of modernity, external influence; at the same time, the preserved influence of the central government is traced, especially regarding the sacralization of military and historical values of the People's Republic of China. The coverage of such topics as individual rights and freedoms is relevant in our time due to globalization and the humanistic rethinking of society, which dictate new rules in the field of morality, the interaction of people and social institutions, as well as the interaction of states and peoples.

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