

March 8, 2006

The Wild Web of China: Sex and Drugs, Not Reform

By [DAVID BARBOZA](#)

SHANGHAI, March 7 — By some estimates, there are more than 30,000 people patrolling the Web in [China](#), helping to form one of the world's far-reaching Internet filtering systems.

But while China's huge Internet police force is busy deleting annoying phrases like "free speech" and "human rights" from online bulletin boards, specialists say that Wild West capitalism has moved from the real economy in China to the virtual one.

Indeed, the unchecked freedoms that exist on the Web, analysts say, are perhaps unwittingly ushering in an age of startling social change. The Web in China is a thriving marketplace for everyone, including scam artists, snake oil salesmen and hard-core criminals who are only too eager to turn consumers into victims.

Chinese entrepreneurs who started out brazenly selling downloadable pirated music and movies from online storefronts have extended their product lines — peddling drugs and sex, stolen cars, firearms and even organs for transplanting.

Much of this is happening because Internet use has grown so fast, with 110 million Web surfers in China, second only to the United States. Last year, online revenue — which the government defines more broadly than it is in the United States — was valued at \$69 billion, up around 58 percent from the year before, according to a survey by the China Internet Development Research Center.

By 2010, Wall Street analysts say China could have the world's leading online commerce, with revenue coming from advertising, e-commerce and subscription fees, as well as illicit services.

The authorities have vowed to crack down on illegal Web sites and say that more than 2,000 sex and gambling sites have been shut down in recent years. But new sites are eluding them every day.

"It's a wild place," Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet Project at the graduate journalism school of the [University of California](#), Berkeley, said of China's Web. "Outside of politics, China is as free as anywhere. You can find porn just about anywhere on the Internet."

On any of China's leading search engines, enter sensitive political terms like "Tiananmen Square" or "Falun Gong," and the computer is likely to crash or simply offer a list of censored Web sites. But terms like "hot sex" or "illegal drugs" take users to dozens of links to Web sites allowing them to download sex videos, gain entry to online sports gambling dens or even make purchases of heroin. The scams are flourishing.

A small sampling recently turned up these sites:

¶A look-alike Web site pretending to be part of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China asks visitors to enter their account passwords.

¶A Web site that calls itself Honest Company specializes in deception — selling bugging devices, machines to produce fake credit cards and tools that rig casino slot machines.

¶A pornographic Web site asks people to pay \$2 a month to download sex videos and chat with other online customers in the nude.

¶A Web site advertises the sale of gamma hydroxybutyrate, a drug that acts as a relaxant and is thought to reduce inhibitions. Sometimes called a "date rape" drug, it is sold on the Web in China with instructions about how to use it to assault women.

Even the official New China News Agency seems to have gotten into the act. While the top of its news pages carries dispatches like "China Aims to Achieve Balance of Payments in 2006," some at the bottom feature links to soft-porn photographs of Chinese movie stars like Gong Li and Zhou Xun.

"The Internet is a reflection of the real world," says Lu Weigang, an analyst at the China Internet Network Information Center in Beijing. "Everything you have in the real world appears on the Internet."

Countless Web sites peddle police weapons, pepper spray and even machines to siphon electricity from power lines. Earlier this week, an [eBay](#) user in China offered to put up for auction his or her kidney and liver for \$100,000. Reached on Monday, eBay said that selling human organs was forbidden on its site and deleted the entry.

And a Web site called the Patriotic Hacker asserts that an instructor "led and initiated attacks on Japanese Web sites more than 10 times." It says he even managed to shut down the official Web site for the Yasukuni Shrine, dedicated to Japan's World War II military heroes.

There are also Web sites here that sell "miracle drugs" promising to cure cancer or AIDS, sites that say they will create fake government ID cards; some that even promise to break into the national education database to change official records.

Most of the sites are forbidden by law. On paper, the government's Internet regulations forbid the display of any information that damages state security, harms the dignity of the state, promotes pornography and gambling, or "spreads evil cults" and "feudal superstitions."

How does all this get by the Internet patrols in a country where violators risk 3 to 10 years in prison, or in some cases even the death penalty? Analysts say that the growth in the Internet has simply created too many sites to patrol. In contrast, there are too few incentives to close down sites, particularly when government-owned Internet service providers, telecommunications companies and even state-run Web sites are making big profits from them.

"The Chinese government launches campaigns on the Internet to crack down on pornography or the sale of illegal goods once or twice a year, but this is not an efficient way," Mr. Lu at the China Internet Network Information Center said.

What is successful is online entertainment. [Baidu.com](#), a [Google](#)-like search engine, has a daily poll of the top 10 most beautiful women. Sina.com publishes a popular celebrity blog by the actress and director Xu Jinglei.

A social networking Web site, [51.com](#), opened last August, and months later its owner, a Shanghai-based private company, said the site had more than three million registered users, mostly 15 to 25, who create personalized Web pages and meet online. "Most Internet services are about entertainment," said Pang Shengdong, 29, who founded 51.com. "What do people do every day other than make money? They entertain themselves."

Richard Ji, an Internet analyst at [Morgan Stanley](#), said traffic in this country was dominated by young singles, many of them searching for games, dates, entertainment and community. A recent survey found that nearly 38 percent of the nation's Internet users search for entertainment on the Web. The growing enthusiasm for the Internet in China is one reason some of the biggest Internet and technology companies, like [Microsoft](#), [Yahoo](#) and Google, are eager to have a presence here, even if it means submitting to China's stringent censorship rules.

In the view of Dali L. Yang, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago: "It's truly remarkable. This is fundamentally a social revolution."

Mr. Yang says that the social dynamics taking place on the Web might once have been considered political, and certainly marks of a bourgeois lifestyle.

"But now," he said, "the Communist Party realizes that in a market economy and a globalized economy, they don't have the manpower to cover it all. It may be political, but it's not high politics."