The Great Firewall of China

How to Build and Control an Alternative Version of the Internet.

James Griffiths

Review by Andrew Martin

Chinese Internet users do not search on Google, they use Baidu. Their life story is found not on Facebook, but on WeChat. Purchases come not from Amazon but from Alibaba. If this were merely an accident of history, a development arising from geographical and linguistic isolation, it would be just a footnote in the history of the Internet. But the reality is far more significant, with profound and far-reaching consequences for everyone – whether in China or not.

Griffiths' book documents the history of the Chinese internet through a series of 25 cameos, drawing in the reader through narratives grounded in individual experience. He brings to bear his journalistic skills – both in engaging story-telling and in careful (well-footnoted) research. His special interest is in censorship and human rights, leading him to track down the accounts of (and often personally interview) numerous dissidents and dissenters.

He traces the rise of the internet controls developed by the Chinese Government, starting from a wish to suppress news of the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. The effectiveness of that suppression is poignantly reported in a story of four friends at university who found, 20 years later, quite by accident, a pirate download of a western documentary covering the subject, and watched in tears as the three-hour film unfolded, reporting an incident of their recent history about which they had no inkling previously.

Initially focussed on deleting or blocking specific content – chiefly news and pornography – the clear wider goal of such controls is to prevent and disrupt collective action against the interests of the Party or State. So firewall-style blocking at the national boundary is just the start. More important is preventing dissent and adjudged anti-social attitudes from taking hold. Successive chapters trace the impact on individuals and movements, provinces and peoples.

A mixture of straightforward blocks, shutting down of particular individuals and groups, and disrupting the business models of foreign internet companies has driven Chinese users by a process of attrition towards locally-provided services instead. These are viewed more favourably by the authorities, and are easier to keep compliant. WeChat, for example, may deny being a patsy for surveillance, but its log data has, says Griffiths, been used repeatedly in court to convict those who communicate unacceptable ideas.

Nor have these approaches been limited to China. The book explores how other countries (Russia and Uganda are explored in detail) have been inspired by what China has achieved, and in some cases adopted the same technologies and approaches. Those technologies are also spread by a different kind of soft power: those in the Chinese diaspora who want to communicate with friends and family back home find WeChat to be nearly essential. As Tibetan exiles have taken up use of the app, they have found instances of virus-infected email falling off: the implication being that censors no longer need to resort to malware to keep an eye on what is being communicated.

This spread of influence extends to diplomatic and technical discussions about internet governance: a big ongoing initiative is to spread the Chinese view of cyber-sovereignty which would see each nation control the internet within its own boundaries, and subject traffic to border controls no less stringent than those at physical boundaries.

Within China – and does it portend similar things elsewhere? – a change of gear in the internal controls of media and online services gives rise to the emerging *social credit* system. Herein is potential for total, invasive control of every aspect of life in a country where in some places even cash is vanishing in favour of app-based payment. Services, loans, air and rail tickets are reserved or prioritized for those whose behaviour – and friends – conform to measures of social good. The potential for social control is profound.

In an epilogue, Griffiths warns against complacency: Western internet companies may be free agents to a much greater extent than their Chinese counterparts, but their scope for control is barely less. This is a worthwhile argument – but it's not proven and is not the focus of the book. Indeed, where the author sticks to his expertise – discovering and reporting on how the human rights story is interwoven with the development of the Chinese internet – the account is authoritative and compelling. In a few other places, such as some descriptions of the technology and how it works, the reader would be best advised to move swiftly on.

Despite the “How to build and control an alternative version of the internet” subtitle, the book actually reports not on *how*, but on *what happens when you do*. It is a cautionary tale for us all, because not just in China but worldwide, more control seems to be the inexorable direction of travel: control of the internet, and with it, control of the citizens.