

ETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE INFORMATION AGE

BY YONGYI SONG

Chinese scholars, writers and activists of various ethnicities and geographic origins met this past November to discuss how to take advantage of the unprecedented strategic space that the Internet has opened for cultural exchange between China's ethnic groups.

The symposium, sponsored jointly by Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut and the Foundation for China in the 21st Century, garnered heated debate over the continued ability of the Chinese Communist Party to exert complete control over the media in today's information age. Other points of debate included the role of an unrestricted Internet in China's struggle for democracy, as well as possible democratic frameworks for China's future.

Compared with similar symposiums in the past, this one was notable for the exceptional quality of its attendees, the participation of new activists and the representation of multiple ethnicities and regions. Attracting 40 China experts, journalists and Internet experts of various ethnic backgrounds from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Tibet, the symposium was hailed by North America's Chinese-language media for gathering so many outstanding individuals for an in-depth exploration and discussion of issues, and for raising debates that continued to reverberate on Internet Web sites and in other media after the meeting's conclusion.

Topics attracting the liveliest discussion included the impact of the Internet on democracy in China, the Internet's role in protecting civil rights, the current situation of ethnic minorities such as Tibetans and Muslim Uighurs, the role of overseas media, feasible frameworks for a democratic China, and the role of the Internet in Hong Kong and Taiwan politics.

The team of presenters included Jiao Guobiao, a professor of Journalism at Peking University, whose teaching duties were suspended as a result of his March 2004 essay, "Denouncing the CCP's Propaganda Department"; Jackie Hung Ling-Yu, a project officer at the Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, who was named an Asian Heroine by *Time* magazine for her role in organizing the mass demonstration in Hong Kong on July 1, 2004; and Wu Guoguang, formerly a political consultant to the deposed Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang, and now an endowed chair professor at Victoria University in Canada.

Other significant attendees included Carma Hinton, pro-

ducer and director of such well-known documentaries as *Tiananmen* and *Morning Sun*, and many Trinity College professors engaged with China issues, including Frank Kirkpatrick, the dean and provost of the college, Michael Niemann, Director of International Research Center, Patricia Thornton, professor of political science, and James Wen, professor of economics. The event marked the first occasion in which the Foundation hosted a conference with such large-scale participation from American academics.

Another important aspect of the conference was its inclusion of Internet activists, a third of whom came directly from mainland China. In addition to Jiao Guobiao, writers included Ding Dong, an independent scholar and renowned publisher; Ren Bumei, host of the Web site *Sleepless Nights Forum* (Bumei Zhiye); Fan Yafeng, a research fellow of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and host of the Web site *Justice Forum*; Wang Guangze, reporter and commentator for China's *21st Century Economic Herald*; Wang Xiucaidan, editor of *The Bulletin of Northeast Nationality University* and host of the Web site *Tibetan Culture*; and Zhang Hongjie, a prominent Mongolian writer. The Foundation for China in the 21st Century has sponsored three previous symposiums, but this was the first to assemble Chinese writers and scholars of Tibetan and Mongolian ethnicities in North America.

One of the more interesting discussions on the interconnections between the Internet and democracy in Taiwan was raised



Journalism professor Jiao Guobiao. Photo: Yongyi Song

when Chou Sheng-hsin and Li Tien-chien, founders of Taiwan's Non-War Homeland Movement, explained their use of the Internet in seeking solutions to the cross-strait conflict. Participants expressed differing views on the feasibility of the "middle ground" approach that Li and Chou proposed, but all supported it in principle. Other participants from Taiwan included Lin Chi-hua of Taiwan's Foundation for Democracy; Chang Tieh-chih, a researcher from a Taiwan think tank; and Jeffery Hsiao Sheng-chung, a visiting scholar at Stanford University and a research fellow of Foundation for Democracy, Taiwan.

In the panel discussion on Tibet, Wang Xiucaidan, a Tibetan professor from mainland China, presented his Web site *Tibetan Cultural Network* as a means of preserving and developing Tibetan culture through the Internet. Three overseas Tibetan representatives also spoke at the symposium, and a prominent Chinese writer, Wang Lixiong, spoke on the "two kinds of imperialism," political and cultural, that Tibetans face.

The Secretary General of the Uyghur-American Association, Alim Seytoff, made a presentation on the deteriorating human rights conditions of China's Muslim minority since the 9/11 tragedy, which has permitted Chinese authorities to use anti-terrorism as a rationale for cracking down on ethnic minorities.

Can Chinese authorities continue to control the media in the information age?

Using official Chinese government documents and speeches, Wu Guoguang analyzed the sophisticated ways in which the Chinese government has consolidated its control over the media. Wu noted that the government no longer insists on the slogan "Socialism is Superior," but the Chinese media still adhere to the "Jiang Zemin News Framework," in which the media are merely Party mouthpieces. Wu observed that the CCP core media and their associated organizations enjoy limited autonomy if their reports are consistent with Party ideology. The CCP then presents this latitude to domestic and international audiences as proof of China's "free press." This false impression assures readers and generates revenues that keep Party newspapers afloat. Wu maintained that the Chinese government not only continues to control the media, but uses

sophisticated propaganda to deceive readers into believing that they are receiving true and factual information.

He Qinglian, a visiting scholar at Princeton University who spent many years as a journalist and economist in China, elaborated on China's Golden Shield project, aimed at strengthening official control of the Internet. At an estimated cost of \$1 billion, this project is already helping Chinese authorities monitor Internet use, thereby controlling the thoughts of Chinese citizens. He Qinglian disparaged major corporations from the U.S., Canada and UK that have betrayed their business ethics for the sake of grabbing a slice of the telecom pie that now makes up a quarter of the world's telecom business. Some participants in the Golden Shield project, driven by their consciences, have begun writing exposés of behind-the-scene dealings.

Chen Kuide, editor-in-chief of the Internet magazine *Observe China* and president of Princeton University's "China Initiative," took a more hopeful line. Despite the tight control over the Chinese media, he believes that civil rights activism on the Internet and support from the overseas press have compelled the Chinese government to make some quiet concessions of late, leading to more lenient treatment of dissidents who were arrested because of their online commentaries.

The role of an unrestricted Internet in China's struggle for democracy

As symposium organizer and Acting Executive Director of the Foundation for China in the 21st Century, I emphasized in my opening remarks the unprecedented strategic space the World Wide Web has brought to China: "If you consider the reality that nearly 100 million people use the Internet in China, and that they have a minimum of middle school education, you will know the strategic significance of this space in the next ten to twenty years." I emphasized in particular the extraordinary historical opportunity to promote democracy and protect human rights, as well as the chance to disseminate information and ideas and promote cultural exchange.

Wang Guangze, a commentator and reporter for Beijing's *21st Century Economic Herald*, believes that the Internet has brought the Chinese people unprecedented freedom despite the government's expenditure of huge amounts of taxpayer dollars on firewalls and surveillance of Internet cafés. Wang noted that some Web sites have managed to bypass the firewall and directly access overseas information that should be blocked by the Golden Shield project. In a way, Wang said, Chinese Internet users have already broken the Chinese government's "Party stranglehold" and "newspaper stranglehold." Through the virtual world, they have begun to enjoy some freedom of expression and assembly. The traditional print media have become little more than a forum for the CCP to talk to itself, while the Internet has reduced Party slogans such as "The Three Represents" to a joke. Wang concluded that Internet liberalization will assist the liberalization of China, and that the future of today's "Internet China" is a democratic China.

Two Internet/computer engineers, Jack He and Bill Xia, similarly described the dissemination of information through the Internet as ultimately unstoppable. Professor Patricia



Tibetan participants. Photo: Yongyi Song



Paul Lin animates discussion at the conference. Photo: Yongyi Song

Thornton, a Chinese politics specialist, made special mention of the Falun Gong spiritual movement's accomplishments in Internet communication.

Ren Bumei, independent writer and former host of the *Sleepless Nights Forum* Web site, was less optimistic. He observed that although the growth of the Internet has made it possible for people in mainland China to obtain previously inaccessible information, the Chinese government continues to control the Internet through ten types of tactics: Internet-related laws, Internet police, informants, domestic Internet monitoring stations, overseas Web site blocking mechanisms, censorship of Internet cafés, word filtering systems, electronic surveillance, reporting systems, official Web sites to guide public opinion, and self-censorship. The authorities shut down Ren Bumei's own electronic forum 53 times in a three-year period—sometimes several times in one day. Ren remarked that what has happened to his Web site is typical of the roadblocks encountered by China's unofficial Web sites. He lamented that few domestic Chinese Web sites continue to fight the government on the grounds of morals and principles, with many compromising for the sake of survival. Apart from his own Web site, Ren mentioned *Free China* and *The Spring of Northern Country* among the few that continue to defy government control.

Fan Yafeng, a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and founder of the Web site *Justice Forum*, analyzed the impact of the civil rights movement on social transformation, and on the integration of society, nation and culture. He believes that China's civil rights movement can promote the integration of three social forces, namely the Internet, house churches and liberalism. This alliance may eventually serve as a "quasi-political party" that could pave the way for multi-party rule, promote the maturation of a rational Chinese society and facilitate the gener-

ation of a Chinese-style constitutional framework. Fan further argued that the civil rights movement could play a positive role in resolving the crises of national and state identities and in generating social and cultural symbols conducive to national integration and a growing liberalism.

Fan suggested that the people of China are in great need of confucianization, christianization and de-marxization, in addition to introspection into personal culpability and limitations. He felt that China learned little from the 2003 SARS epidemic and that the Chinese government's control of information has in fact become stricter in the post-SARS period. He maintained that constitutional democracy is the best solution to China's crisis over organizational principles.

There were heated discussions concerning what type of democratic system would best resolve the problems of Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet, and the concerns of other ethnic minorities. Political commentator Paul Lin argued that the European Union was the most fitting model for China. Wu Guoguang, on the other hand, leaned strongly towards a county-based government system providing for county-level self-rule and direct elections. Fan Yafeng and other scholars preferred the commonwealth model, while Michael To, an independent writer and scholar from Canada, explored the possibility of applying Canada's federal model to China and Tibet.

The limited time frame of the symposium required the premature termination of many animated discussions and debates. But the greatest accomplishment of this symposium would be for its delegates to carry these ideas and arguments back to their homes in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other parts of the world, extending discussion of these critical issues to even larger circles.