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Online Orientalism:
Great Firewalls, Gold Farmers and Digital Development

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In 2006, my little brother got a job working for China's biggest search engine, Baidu. He moved to Shenzhen, a city Deng Xiaoping designated as the first city to be part of his Reform and Opening Up policy, as many young college graduates do in China. It was not long before he realized many of the other people he came to work with were quitting their jobs with Baidu to start their own business selling products online. At the time, a new website called Taobao offered a very easy way to sell products within China. My brother decided to follow his coworkers and start his own business selling cellphones and cellphone accessories online. While they might have been labeled as "Nokia" or "Sony-Ericson," most of the phones he sold never came out of an official factory. With \$1,000 of our mother's money, my brother started his business and began making at least seven times every month what he made working at Baidu. A year later, his business failed. So many other people started quitting their jobs to open marketplaces in Taobao that my brother could not compete. After coming back to my hometown (because living in Shenzhen is expensive), he decided to try starting a new online business selling local honey on Taobao, this time with a \$2,000 investment from our mother. After three months, he did not sell a drop of honey.

Five years ago in China, it would be unimaginable to think that my brother could start a business himself online or that so many other people would do it that his business would fail. Small businesses in China are very easy to start, but are even easier to fail. This is the reality of what the Internet has done in China. Many Westerners seem incapable of talking about the Internet as anything other than something controlled by a repressive authoritarian government. In 2010, the U.S. Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, gave a very popular speech about how free speech online has the power to end authoritarian regimes. To a happy audience, she declared "A new information curtain is descending across much of the world...And beyond this partition;

viral videos and blog posts are becoming the samizdat of our day.”¹ Contrary to what Hilary Clinton has argued, in China, the Internet has made the Chinese government stronger. In fact, the idea of a “Great Firewall” is not only far too simple to explain Chinese Internet, but also makes people think that all they need to do is get through this firewall to liberate the people living inside. Chinese Internet users already outnumber users from any other country, despite the fact that only a small percentage of people living in China have access to the Internet. However, one survey in 2007 found that more Chinese youth believed that digital technology was essential to their lives than Americans of the same age group. The same study found that Chinese were much more likely to think the Internet “broadened their sex lives” than Americans.² Also, the Chinese versions of Twitter (Weibao), Facebook (Xiaonei), Amazon (Taobao), and Google (Baidu) attract far more users than their American counterparts. However, many Westerners (American especially) think that Chinese would overthrow the government if only they had uncensored access to Twitter. Many people who write about the Internet take China to be the best example of very bad Internet policy.³ However, their intense focus on the Chinese government’s treatment of dissidents or of obvious political censorship makes it difficult for outsiders to see how the Internet has changed the Chinese economy. They do not think about why, if the Internet is so dangerous, the Chinese government does not just turn it all off? The answer is due to Chinese economic development. China’s e-commerce market is likely to soon become the largest in the

¹ Bureau of Public Affairs Department Of State. The Office of Website Management, “Remarks on Internet Freedom,” Remarks|Remarks, *U.S. Department of State*, January 21, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>.

² Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, Reprint (PublicAffairs, 2012), 70.

³ Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle For Internet Freedom*, First Trade Paper Edition (Basic Books, 2013); Lawrence Lessig, *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace, Version 2.0* (Basic Books, 2006); Sherman So and J. Christopher Westland, *Red Wired: China’s Internet Revolution* (Marshall Cavendish Limited, 2009); Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, Reprint (Columbia University Press, 2011); Ronald Deibert et al., eds., *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*, 1st ed. (The MIT Press, 2010).

world, going from \$71 billion in 2010 and projected to \$305 billion in 2015.⁴ Also, China's three top Internet companies (Tencent, Baidu, and Alibaba) are listed on international stock markets. Foreign investors, including people from countries who argue continually for free speech abroad, send huge amounts of money to these companies. If we look past the obvious kinds of censorship the Chinese government does in Chinese Internet, we can see that the idea of a Great Firewall is a myth, Chinese online marketplaces have large effects on peoples' lives in China, and that a new kind of direct labor exploitation has been made possible by the Internet. The Internet has become vital to Chinese economic development and that this development is more important to the Chinese government than simply controlling free speech online.

The Myth of a Great Firewall

Among the most confusing of these understandings of Chinese Internet is the so called "Great Firewall" which supposedly prevents Chinese people from being exposed to free information flowing from outside China. Foreign policy, written by people who believe in this wall, becomes obsessed with breaking through this imaginary wall. Western Internet scholars believe that somehow the people in China do not use the Internet to spread ideas, good and bad, or communicate with the outside world. Just as Western travelers were the first to invent the idea of a "Great Wall of China,"⁵ Western observers were the first to create the idea of a "Great Firewall." The myth of the Great Firewall is a new kind of online orientalism which seriously undermines much of American foreign policy in the Internet.

⁴ MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked*, 49.

⁵ Chi Chi Huang, "Deconstructing the Great Wall of China: The Jesuits' and British Encounters," *History in the Making* 1, no. 1 (June 3, 2012): 65–78.

In 1997, Geremie Barme and Sang Ye coined the term “Great Firewall” in an article published in Wired magazine.⁶ In the article, Barme and Ye note that only 150,000 people in China had access to the Internet at the time and that 86 percent of Chinese citizens had ever touched a computer.⁷ For Barme and Ye, China in 1997 was a backward place with only a few people able to truly participate in the global Internet revolution. They wrote “But however small the numbers, for the Chinese government's control freaks - and that means basically everyone in authority - free-flowing information and unauthorized association are profoundly disturbing concepts.”⁸ Most of the article focuses on how tired old Party members prevent cool young people from sharing information online because they are afraid it will weaken their power. They also describe situations in which coded speech is used to covertly discuss politics. They wrote “In conversation, for instance, comments about the weather often carry a political subtext. Low temperatures and storms indicate that the shit has hit the fan; extreme heat can mean that things are precarious for the individual, their company, or inside the government.”⁹ However, they believe that if China is going to continue to develop, businesses will require China to change its Internet policies. In fact, many of the citations used by Barme and Ye are from business leaders, business journals, and commentary from the heads of companies. Even today, a Google search for “Great Firewall” returns several articles and reports from business news sources on the first page of results. When Barme and Ye first named China’s Internet policy the Great Firewall, they clearly had business in mind. They were less concerned with free speech than they were with freeing China for capital investments. Most interesting is their inability to take seriously a Chinese article they quote written by the then head of the State Information Center's Capital

⁶ Geremie Barme and Sang Ye, “The Great Firewall of China,” June 1997, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.06/china.html>.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

Investment Office, Xueshan Yang. They quote from the journal *Strategy and Management* (which is reproduced here because the English translation is good) “Following the end of the Cold War, certain developed nations are determined to protect their own interests by labeling themselves as internationalists. They pretend to be the benefactors of all mankind, while constantly expanding their sphere of influence and attempting to contain the development of others.”¹⁰ Barme and Ye read this article cynically to conclude that “Paranoid nationalism is not just good politics - it's a useful way of garnering support for homegrown solutions.”¹¹

What if Barme and Ye read Yang's statement as a serious criticism of policy, especially U.S. foreign policy, of the Internet after the Cold War? The ideas of the “Iron Curtain” and the policy of “containment” are not far from the idea of a Great Firewall surrounding China today. Evgeny Morozov in *The Net Delusion* demonstrates the clear link that American policy makers have made between the Cold War and the idea of firewalls blocking information from citizens of authoritarian countries.¹² He shows how many of the same people writing policy for President Reagan during the Cold War are the same people writing Internet policy today and that they are just taking those same policies, updating them a little, and they applying them today. Morozov argues that the effect of believing in things like to Great Firewall has huge implications for American foreign policy. He wrote “anyone who takes all these metaphors seriously, whatever the ideology, would inevitably be led to believe that the Internet is a new battleground for freedom and that, as long as Western policymakers could ensure that the old cyber-walls are destroyed and no new ones are erected in their place, authoritarianism is doomed.”¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

When Barne and Ye wrote their article, the number of people within this Great Firewall was very small. Today, there are more Internet users in China than any other country. In 2012, it was estimated that approximately 538,000,000 people use the Internet in China, or 40.1 percent of the total population in China and 22.4 percent of all Internet users in the world are in China.¹⁴ The United States has less than half that number of users, though 78.1 percent of U.S. citizens have Internet access.¹⁵ As more and more people in China gain access through the Internet through computers and smartphones, it seems likely that soon more people will live inside the Great Firewall than live outside. Morozov argues that the idea of a Great Firewall does not address the rise of self-censorship in China or the expansion of Chinese Internet companies across the whole world.¹⁶ In her book *Consent of the Networked*,¹⁷ Rebecca MacKinnon, who was a CNN journalist in China for many years, also points out how the idea of a Great Firewall does not account for the ways in which “censorship and surveillance [is] carried out not by government agents or ‘Internet police’ but by the private sector” in many countries, including China. However, where Morozov rejects the idea of a Great Firewall, MacKinnon is not willing to throw it away completely.

What all of these articles do not consider is that the idea of a Great Firewall also makes Westerners believe that China is a closed country with very little information about the outside world. They, along with those who believe in the Great Firewall, think of China as being in a fishbowl with themselves being outside. Western people who write about the Internet, especially Americans, seem to continually be saying “our Internet is free and we know that because China’s

¹⁴ “Internet Users - Top 20 Countries - Internet Usage,” accessed May 5, 2013, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 45.

¹⁷ MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked*.

Internet is not free.” Western people, by believing in a Great Firewall, become blind to the many ways in which their own Internet is censored and controlled. Similar to the Cold War policies, Westerners who think of China as being behind a Great Firewall are also led to believe that Chinese Internet is contained safely behind that wall. The edges and boundaries of the Great Firewall, unlike the Great Wall, are not so clearly obvious.

Also surprising to anyone who has lived in China for a long time is the ways in which the U.S. government supports penetrating the Great Firewall, but does not consider this an attack. Recently, several companies in the U.S. revealed that they were the victims of cyberattacks and hacking from somewhere in China. President Obama’s national security adviser, Tom Donilon, made a speech in which he told the Chinese government to block cyberattacks and accused the Chinese military of being behind the attacks.¹⁸ However, the attitude toward these cyberattacks in the U.S. has been mostly concerned with the possible theft of intellectual property. In his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Obama referred to the attacks by saying “We know foreign countries and companies swipe our corporate secrets.”¹⁹ However, the U.S. Department of State, which actively encourages people to develop methods for penetrating the Great Firewall, does not consider this as a cyberattack committed against China. Morozov points out how these policies can actually help build a Great Firewall, even if one does not exist now. He writes in “China and Iran, for example, want to keep tight control over the Internet, not only because they fear that their citizens may discover the real state of affairs in their countries, but also because

¹⁸ “Remarks By Tom Donilon, National Security Advisory to the President: ‘The United States and the Asia-Pacific in 2013’ | The White House,” accessed May 5, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisory-president-united-states-a>.

¹⁹ “State of the Union 2013,” accessed May 5, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2013>.

they believe that the Internet is America's favorite tool of starting antigovernment rebellions.”²⁰ In the U.S., a single confirmed incident of a cyberattack from China becomes the main point of news articles for weeks. In China, there are almost daily reports about cyberattacks on Chinese businesses and infrastructure coming from the U.S. Some of these reports are probably not accurate, but if China had any reason to actually build a Great Firewall, it would be because it is almost constantly under attack from the U.S. and other countries.

MacKinnon and Morozov both write about the expansion of Chinese companies outside of China. The same way that Lawrence Lessig talks about there being a different Internet in the United States only a decade ago,²¹ there has also been many changes to Chinese Internet in the last few years. In 2007 when I left China, Facebook was not yet blocked and Google still had a headquarters in China, even if very few people there used either of them. In 2009, the Chinese government tried to require that all the computers in China have the GreenDam censorship program installed. Many computers in China still have this program installed, but since then the Chinese government has abandoned the idea of blocking too many things on the Internet. But they also do not believe that the Internet is too big or complex for them to control. Morozov argues that “Internet censorship is poised to grow in both depth, looking deeper and deeper into the kinds of things we do online and even offline, and breadth, incorporating more and more information indicators before a decision to censor something is made.”²² In the case of China, the solution has been to move away from blocking URLs or specific keywords, though that still happens, and more toward building Internet services which direct people around subjects the Chinese government does not like. MacKinnon points out that the Chinese government hires

²⁰ Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 234.

²¹ Lessig, *Code*, 26.

²² Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 98.

people called fifty-cent bloggers (wumao) to counter negative comments about the government and write good things about them. If people think that the Great Firewall contains Chinese Internet policy, they are wrong. As China's economy and Internet continues to develop the way it has in the last decade, we can expect that more and more of the Internet will come under control of Chinese Internet policies.

In 2010, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) finally allowed Internet URLs and addresses to be written in Chinese characters. Before 2010, to use the Internet in China required that you know how to at least type some Roman characters into the address bar. MacKinnon describes the situation as “all domain names were in Roman letters only—if your native language was Chinese or Arabic, tough luck, you still needed to be sufficiently familiar with the Roman alphabet and know how to type Roman letters or you couldn't use the Internet.”²³ After ICANN, which is based in the U.S., decided to allow non-Roman characters to be used in address names, the Internet stopped being available to everyone in the world. MacKinnon is critical of ICANN, and thinks its decision making process should be more democratic and transparent, but she does not realize how ICANN's decision to allow non-Roman characters practically means that the keyboard a user uses to type in a web address now decides what websites they can access. This is especially important since the two dominant languages on the Internet are Chinese and English. While Americans continue to believe in a Great Firewall separating them from Chinese citizens, they also enact policies which break the web into different language groups. The vast majority of English speakers and writers will never access Chinese websites and services if the addresses used to find them cannot be entered from their keyboard. At the same time, most of the keyboards used in China have Chinese and Roman

²³ MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked*, 213.

characters. Even if many Chinese cannot write in English or use Pinyin characters, there are still many more Chinese who can find websites with Roman addresses than there are Americans or Europeans who can type and find websites with Chinese characters. Morozov is correct when he says the idea of a “global village” first written by Marshall McLuhan seems less and less likely in the future.²⁴ If there is a Great Firewall, it is not separating China from the rest of the world, but is Roman character countries separating themselves from the Chinese or Arabic writing world. The Chinese government petition ICANN to allow Chinese characters in addresses. They also petitioned the U.N. to take control of creating Internet addresses from ICANN, but were unsuccessful. Recently, ICANN allowed countries to have special country addresses instead of .com addresses. For example, Google in China changed from Google.com to Google.cn. Even more recently, companies like Apple have been pushing ICANN to allow them to use their company’s name as part of the address. For example, Apple would like the address “ipad.apple” or “iphone.apple.” ICANN has not decided yet whether they will allow this, but it is important to know that it took over 3 years of pushing from China to get ICANN to allow for Chinese characters and the campaign to add company names to addresses has only been going for six months and is likely to pass.²⁵ This was done despite the fact that many more people in China, who do not know how to type Roman characters, needed Chinese addresses. Chinese businesses needed them too, but Apple’s headquarters in California are just down the street from ICANN.

Additionally, many new online businesses have started in China. It is fairly easy and inexpensive to buy things in China from Chinese online businesses like Taobao. However, products from the United States or Europe are very desirable in China. For example, when my

²⁴ Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 201.

²⁵ “ICANN Allows Hundreds of New Internet Domain Suffixes,” *CNET*, accessed May 8, 2013, http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-57571245-93/icann-allows-hundreds-of-new-internet-domain-suffixes/.

brother and my sister both had babies, they begged me to order bottles and binkies for their babies from American companies and then mail them to China. American products have much more safety regulations than Chinese products and are generally thought to be of a higher quality than Chinese products. Even if my brother and my sister could order these products themselves and have them shipped to China, the import taxes and shipping fees make it impossible for them to afford. Even products like the Apple iPhone, which are built in China, must be shipped outside of China in order to be purchased in China online. The Chinese government does have an interest in making sure the books and videos people can buy online are not critical of its function, but it also has a strong interest in making sure that the growing Chinese Internet companies are protected from foreign trade. If there is a Great Firewall, it is much more like a Great Paywall which prevents foreign companies from stifling growing industries in China, but also allows for cheap Chinese goods to flow out its many openings.

Online Marketplaces in China

In 2003, eBay bought the top online auction site in China called Eachnet for \$180 million U.S. dollars.²⁶ In response, with backing from the Chinese government, one of the top Chinese websites Alibaba launched Taobao to compete with eBay's new market. In order to compete with eBay, Taobao did not charge sellers any fees and offered some services for local consumers that eBay did not, such as instant messaging and easy connections with Alipay (like PayPal). In two years, Taobao increased its market share from 8% to 59% while eBay went from 79% to 36%.²⁷ A little while later, eBay shut down its site in China, though eBay.com in English is still

²⁶ "eBay China Rumors - Search Engine Journal," *Search Engine Journal*, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.searchenginejournal.com/ebay-china-rumors/3839/>.

²⁷ "Face Value: China's Pied Piper," *The Economist*, September 21, 2006, http://www.economist.com/node/7942225?story_id=7942225.

available there. In 2012, Taobao made the giant leap onto the international market and started accepting payments from Visa and Mastercard instead of only domestic banks in China.²⁸ Today, Taobao is the 10th most visited website in the world and it is estimated to be worth about \$814 million U.S. dollars. More interesting is that Taobao claims at least \$65 billion U.S. dollars in goods were traded on Taobao last year.²⁹

The case of Taobao demonstrates how the Chinese government can use trade protections to drive out American companies and encourage Chinese companies to take their place. Many Western authors who write about American Internet companies leaving China focus mostly on Google in 2010.³⁰ Many also think Google's decision to leave mainland China and run their site from Hong Kong was because the company did not like China's Internet censorship policies or human rights record. In fact, the official statement from Google does not talk about either of these issues. It is true that the Chinese government tried to hack into some activists' Gmail account, but Google's official response was that "we detected a highly sophisticated and targeted attack on our corporate infrastructure originating from China that resulted in the theft of intellectual property from Google...As part of our investigation we have discovered that at least twenty other large companies from a wide range of businesses--including the Internet, finance, technology, media and chemical sectors--have been similarly targeted."³¹ By their official statement, Google makes it obvious that its decision to leave mainland China was financial.

²⁸ "淘宝全面接受海外信用卡付款," accessed May 8, 2013,

http://www.taobao.com/go/chn/oversea/taobao_accept_oversea_credit_card_2012.php.

²⁹ "Trade Intelligence, Gain Valuable Business Insights from Our Searchable Database of Thousands of Articles and Reports.," accessed May 8, 2013, <http://news.alibaba.com/article/detail/alibaba/100237896-1-taobao-launches-new-taobao-app.html>.

³⁰ MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked*; Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything*., 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2011); Miguel Helft and David Barboza, "Google Shuts China Site in Dispute Over Censorship," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2010, sec. Technology, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/23/technology/23google.html>.

³¹ "Official Blog: A New Approach to China," accessed May 8, 2013, <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/01/new-approach-to-china.html>.

Google has never worked very well in China and has always been censored there, just like every other search engine. Because so many Western writers focus so much on Chinese Internet censorship, they have a hard time considering that Google's decision to move to Hong Kong may be a lot like eBay's decision to leave China. The Chinese market was not good for them and Chinese Internet companies are supported by the Chinese government, have better service for people living in China, and are not going to simply leave over censorship or hacking issues.

Taobao has changed many of the ways people in China do business offline too. For example, all the buying and selling that happens online in China has caused many new private postal companies to be formed, such as Shentong and Shunfeng. For the first time, people living in rural parts of China can easily buy goods online made in another part of China and have them shipped to their house. My aunt, who lives in a rural town in China, buys almost all her clothing from Taobao and my sister buys all her baby toys there. In America, people have been buying things online and from catalogs for a long time, but in China this is very new. The local economies my aunt and my sister live in do not get much benefit from their purchases, but many people in their towns also sell things on Taobao.

Many people in my hometown, for example, quit working for the Haier factory making refrigerators and washing machines, to open Taobao businesses and sell handicrafts or local food. Also, many people who cannot find work in China simply start a business on Taobao, especially people with low education. My cousin, for example, only finished junior high school and could not find a job in the town she lives in, so she opened a Taobao business selling dates online. Recently, Taobao included the ability to sell services there. People planning a wedding can hire a wedding planner or photographer online. People who used to work in factories have moved to something like the British "cottage industry" style work, which typically is not the way

countries have developed industrially. People still work in local stores, but many times those local stores also have a Taobao store. Factory workers make products, but they also buy other products online from people who may have built them in their home. Online economic development in China happens at the large scale with companies like Taobao taking over companies like eBay, but they also happen at the small scale where people can buy and sell from their houses. For those that can read English, eBay lets people in the U.S. and other countries buy things directly from Chinese sellers. Recently, I purchased some products from Chinese sellers on eBay and did not pay any U.S. tax or import tax. Just a few days ago, the U.S. Congress passed a law which lets states tax online businesses,³² but so far there is no tax (or very little) for eBay purchases in the U.S. from China. Online marketplaces have become an increasingly important place for Chinese economic development. However, the Internet has also had a strange effect on the ability of industrialized countries to exploit Chinese labor directly. This is strange, because the Chinese laborers work to play for people living in rich countries.

The Chinese Gold Farmer

In his recent book, *The Interface Effect*, the political scientist Alexander Galloway talks about the Chinese gold farmer the way Marx talked about communism. He writes “A specter haunts the world of digital games, the specter of the ‘Chinese gold farmer.’ But who is this shadowy figure? The Chinese gold farmer is a gamer who plays online video games day and night in order to earn virtual gold and sell it for real money. Journalists and researchers have stalked this elusive pirate around the world, uncovering computer rooms in China stocked with

³² Stephen Ohlemacher, “Senate Passes Bill Letting States Tax Internet Purchases, Siding with Traditional Retailers,” *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2013, sec. Politics, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/congress/senate-to-pass-online-sales-tax-bill-in-victory-for-national-retailers-house-fate-uncertain/2013/05/06/a0f487ee-b61d-11e2-b568-6917f6ac6d9d_story.html.

young gamers toiling in meager conditions for inferior pay.”³³ What Galloway describes sounds surprisingly a lot like the way Marx criticized capitalism’s exploitation of labor, though Galloway does not talk about that directly. This is strange because what he describes is not happening in Britain’s industrial factories, it is happening in the communist state of China! Nothing shows the imbalance between rich Western countries and poor countries better than the hiring of Chinese labor to play a game online. Cybercafés have become sweatshops in China, but people also work from home playing “massively multiplayer online games” like World of Warcraft.³⁴ By doing some menial and repetitive task over and over, they earn virtual money which players can use to buy virtual goods. The Chinese player-workers then sell this virtual money online for real money. Players in rich countries who want to save hours of playing time take advantage of economic inequality and pay real money for virtual work in developing countries.

The practice of gold farming probably started in Korea, with people working in cybercafés and selling their virtual gold within Korea, but it spread quickly to China. It is not easy to say how many people in China work as gold farmers, but in 2005 the *New York Times* estimated that about 150,000 people worked as gold farmers in China making about \$145 U.S. dollars a week.³⁵ In 2006, the sale of this virtual gold was estimated to be no less than \$200 million U.S. dollars a year³⁶ and in 2008 the Chinese government estimated it to be at least \$300

³³ Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 1st ed. (Polity, 2012), 121.

³⁴ Julian Dibbell, “The Life of the Chinese Gold Farmer,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 2007, sec. Magazine, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/17/magazine/17lootfarmers-t.html>.

³⁵ David Barboza, “Ogre to Slay? Outsource It to Chinese,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2005, sec. Technology, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/09/technology/09gaming.html>.

³⁶ “The High Cost of Playing Warcraft,” *BBC*, September 24, 2007, sec. Technology, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/7007026.stm>.

million U.S. dollars a year.³⁷ As a result, many of the game builders put sections in their terms of service agreements to ban the use of virtual currency exchange for real money, but they do not actively try to catch people doing it and it is practically impossible for them to enforce their agreement. In 2009, the Chinese government made it illegal to buy physical goods with virtual currency, but did not make it illegal to buy virtual currency with physical goods or real money. It is hard to figure out just how many people are currently involved in gold farming in China, but in 2011, reporters discovered that prisoners in Chinese labor camps were being forced to work as gold farmers for the benefit of the prison operators.³⁸ The Chinese government has not officially sanctioned or encouraged the spread of gold farming, but it has not stopped it either. With at least \$300 million dollars a year coming into China from rich countries every year, it is easy to see why the Chinese government does not worry the way American game companies do about the practice.

In January 2013, Verizon Communications Company did a test of its company security. Their test revealed that a top software engineer, only known as “Developer Bob,” had hired a software development firm in Shenyang China to do his job for him. Verizon reported “It looked like he earned several hundred thousand dollars a year, and only had to pay the Chinese consulting firm about fifty grand annually.”³⁹ They also reported that Developer Bob would go to work and spend a lot of his day looking at cat videos online or checking Facebook. The response in American media is very interesting. In a *Times* article about Developer Bob, David Futrelle argues “But I’m hardly the only American worker who has spent precious moments of

³⁷ “China Limits Use Of Virtual Currency -- InformationWeek,” *Informationweek*, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.informationweek.com/news/internet/ebusiness/218101859>.

³⁸ Danny Vincent, “China Used Prisoners in Lucrative Internet Gaming Work,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2011, sec. World news, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/25/china-prisoners-internet-gaming-scam>.

³⁹ Kristene Quan, “Developer Outsources Job to China so He Can Watch Cat Videos,” *Time*, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/01/17/developer-outsources-job-to-china-so-he-can-watch-cat-videos/>.

work time in the past few days fantasizing about outsourcing his or her job. If you take a few moments to look at the comments appearing on the news accounts of Developer Bob's adventure in laziness, you'll see a lot of people hailing him as a sort of 21st century labor hero."⁴⁰ In his book, Galloway's title for the chapter on gold farmers is titled "We Are the Gold Farmers" and he points out that many people in industrialized countries work in almost the same way as Chinese gold farmers. Both sit in front of a computer all day long. He even says that people in rich countries are constantly working for free by checking their work emails on their phones or making connections on LinkedIn. Galloway may be right about that, but he does not talk enough about why it is the Chinese gold farmer that is so interesting to American media.

In the game World of Warcraft, players choose their game avatar by picking through different races and classes. Races in the game are different by physical characteristics, like height or color, and by personality traits like voice or speaking accent. For example, the troll race in the game is short and speaks with a Jamaican accent.⁴¹ Classes are more like jobs in the game and each class has different abilities. The most important thing is that races do not change, but classes can be different and learned. This is a mirror of the way society thinks about race and class in the real world. However, if people represented other races in the way they do in World of Warcraft in the real world, we would call them racists. Digital technology has allowed for racism to exist in the virtual world. Internet technology has allowed for people to farm virtual gold and sell it for real money. One of the reasons Western media is so interested in gold farming is not because the practice is new or weird (it has been around for at least 10 years), but because the gold farmer is "Chinese." Just as any kind of Internet censorship in China would make

⁴⁰ David Futrelle, "'Developer Bob' and His Illicit Work-Around: What's Wrong with Outsourcing Your Job to China?," *Time*, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://business.time.com/2013/01/18/developer-bob-and-his-illicit-work-around-whats-wrong-with-outsourcing-your-own-job-to-china/>.

⁴¹ Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 130.

Westerners believe there was a Great Firewall surrounding the country, the interest in the Chinese gold farmer is a product of online orientalism as much as it is a product of economic imbalance. Gold farming is seen as an exotic kind of behavior done by exotic people. Western Internet scholars and journalists become so focused on how bizarre Chinese Internet policy can be and how alien Chinese people must be that they do not value this as a form of economic development they helped build.

Conclusion

The Internet has become more important to Chinese economic development than the censorship of dissidents. Western Internet scholars often do not see the Internet in China as a tool of economic development and instead focus almost entirely on the Chinese government's censorship there. This focus has caused Westerners, and Americans especially, to create a myth of the Great Firewall which thinks that China exists within an information bubble and is a mentality left over from the Cold War. The Great Firewall is a much too simple way to think about Chinese Internet and makes people believe they can liberate the Chinese people simply by breaking through the firewall. In reality, Chinese Internet policies and Internet companies are spreading across the global Internet and are becoming a key part of global economics. Western Internet scholars should stop assuming that their Internet is free while China's is not. Their online orientalism prevents them from seeing how China is creating a new model for economic development.

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