

Chinese government backs development of Linux operating system

Mike Ingram
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Similar reports have emerged several times this year. In January, Jon Hall, Linux International executive director, said that it was government policy in China to use the operating system across all ministries. Speaking at the Linux World Asia conference, Hall said Wu Jichuan, China's Minister of Information Industries, had told him this during a visit to Beijing in July 1999.

The issue has been revived by the *Times* in the context of the current anti-trust case against Microsoft in the US. The article declares, "Janet Reno is not the only one worried about Bill Gates' software monopoly: China's leaders are too."

The article cites Chen Chong, a deputy Minister of Information Industries who oversees China's computer sector, saying, "We don't want one company to monopolise the software market." He added that, with Linux, "we can control the security, we can control our own destiny."

Security concerns no doubt play a big part in the considerations of the Beijing regime. Last year a cryptographer for a Canadian software firm working in the US said he found a feature in Windows called an NSAKey. This heightened speculation over whether Microsoft software contains a back-door key that could be operated by the National Security Agency, which gathers intelligence for the US government from around the world. Though Microsoft said the key was innocuous and no evidence has been found of its use, the discovery has left many in China and elsewhere suspicious.

Liu Bo is a former Microsoft executive who is now chief executive of Red Flag, a Chinese government-backed company set up to create software based on Linux. Liu said, "no one can guarantee that Windows does not have back doors."

The *Times* cites a warning of the security risks posed

by reliance on Microsoft, posted in an editorial in the *People's Liberation Army Daily* earlier this year. "Without information security, there is no national security in politics, economics and military affairs," the article declared.

As well as security concerns, Chinese interest in Linux is driven by commercial considerations. In China as elsewhere, one of the most attractive features of the Linux operating system is that unlike Windows, whose source code is kept secret, the code for Linux is freely available on the Internet. Any computer programmer is free to modify Linux's code, as long as their modifications are made freely available. Not only can Chinese businesses avoid the enormous licensing fees associated with Microsoft software, by utilising the work of volunteer programmers they can also avoid a large part of development costs as well.

The *Times* article comments, "The almost communistic 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need' approach appeals to China's Marxist leaders." It is the drive for increased profitability in the world market that fuels China's interest in Linux, rather than any considerations of the free development of computer software. It does not stand in the tradition of Marxist socialism but of counterrevolutionary Stalinism. The Beijing bureaucracy embarked on a program of restoring capitalist property relations long before its Soviet and Eastern European counterparts. The regime has created an internal capitalist market, based upon the most exploitative working conditions, including child and convict labour.

Neither the *Times*, nor anyone else, are suggesting that Microsoft is finished in China. Without providing specific figures, the company has said its software sales in China surged 80 percent last year and continue to

grow. However, Microsoft is becoming increasingly unpopular within the country. It received a hostile response from the news media after suing a Chinese company last year over the sale of pirated software, which, according to the non-profit trade group Business Software Alliance, accounts for 95 percent of all software available in the country. Asking for \$200,000 in damages, Microsoft lost the case when the court ruled that it had sued the wrong company.

Government backing in China will give a huge boost to the Linux platform throughout the region. Chinese-language versions of the Linux operating systems have been developed by San Francisco-based TurboLinux and Red Flag, the Chinese company backed by President Jiang's son Jiang Mianhang. Several other companies have also started to provide software and services for China's growing base of Linux users.

The Chinese government has attempted to build its own operating system for more than a decade, but has been unable to keep pace with the rapid changes in the industry. With an army of volunteer programmers, Linux now gives them the tools required to do this, posing a major threat to US penetration of the world's largest potential computer market. The *Times* notes, "By the end of the next year, the country may well be the third-largest PC market in the world, and software sales are expected to grow more than 30 percent a year for the foreseeable future." One of China's biggest PC makers, Great Wall Computers, has already shipped over 200,000 desktop computers with Linux installed.

It is this threat to the position of the US in the world market that is the driving force behind the proposed break-up of Microsoft. Its near monopoly position has left the US computer and information technology industry unable to diversify in the manner required to conquer emerging markets such as China.



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