

Crackdown on Internet cafes in China follows Beijing fire

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A fire engulfed the unlicensed “Lanjsu” Internet cafe in the university district of Beijing in the early hours of June 16. Officially 24 people, mostly university or college students spending their Saturday night browsing the web or playing Internet games, were killed. Another 13 suffered injuries, one of whom died on June 20.

Two teenage boys, who were banned from the cafe by the management several weeks ago, have been arrested and charged with starting the blaze. According to the police, the boys have confessed to pouring petrol on the steps leading to the cafe door and lighting it.

A warrant has also been issued for the arrest of the manager. The cafe had no fire exits and, in order to prevent unannounced inspections by the police, the front door was kept locked. The windows were fitted with iron grills. A local resident told the *Washington Post* that he had seen a group of young people pressed against a barred window, waving their arms for help and shouting “Save us! Save us! We don’t want to die!” A retired factory worker saved several youth by unbolting a grill.

Whatever the exact causes, authorities have seized upon the tragedy as a pretext for cracking down on Internet use. The mayor of Beijing has ordered all Internet cafes in the city—both the 200 licenced cafes and an estimated 2,200 unlicensed ones—to close down or face massive legal sanctions. Over the next three months, according to the mayor, safety inspections will be conducted. He declared no new licences would be granted to any Internet cafe, and that those holding licences before the fire would have to be re-certified to “meet relevant requirements”.

Following Beijing’s lead, other major cities such as Shanghai and Tianjin have announced measures against Internet cafes. The *Shanghai Daily* reported on June 18

that city officials were discussing “emergency measures” to shut down the city’s estimated 1,000 illegal operations. In Shandong, inspectors have been sent out to “check” the 6,000 Internet cafes believed to be functioning in the province.

The cause of the high number of deaths in the cafe—locked doors, sealed windows and no fire escapes—is all too common in China. Thousands of people die every year across China in building collapses, fires and other accidents stemming from the failure of officials to insist on elementary building regulations and safety standards. Collusion between business owners and government regulators and corrupt practices are common.

There is no question that the local police were either turning a blind eye, or being paid to ignore, the unlicensed operation of the “Lanjsu” cafe. It was equipped with 95 computers and was frequented at all hours of the day and night by students from some of China’s most prestigious universities, including Beijing University and Qinghua University.

While the widespread crackdown is intended to appease public outrage over the appalling safety standards, the authorities have also seized the opportunities to try and impose far tighter controls on the use of the Internet itself. No comparable measures have been taken against bars, nightclubs, cafes, cinemas and other businesses that operate unlicensed or unsafe facilities. What concerns Chinese authorities about Internet cafes is not the lack of safety but their inability to effectively control what users are able to read and communicate.

There are now an estimated 56 million Internet users in China, 250,000 Chinese language websites and as many as 200,000 Internet cafes—most illegal—around the country. The cafes provide cheap access for millions of

Chinese youth who cannot afford a computer or a regular connection to the Internet. The “Lanjisu” cafe, for example, offered eight hours access, from midnight to 8am, for only \$US1.50.

Sections of the Chinese regime are worried about the popularity of the Internet among youth. Spurning the vetted and stultifying state-controlled TV stations and print media, young Chinese are using the web to access ideas and information from around the world, and are becoming bolder in their demands for a more liberal intellectual environment. Everything from the language, fashion, popular music, moral values and political thinking of Chinese youth are being profoundly affected and changed by their ability to access the Internet. Even more troubling to Beijing, political discontent, such as the protest activities of the Falun Gong religious movement, is being promoted or even organised through the web.

Previous government attempts to control Internet usage by limiting the issuing of licences has failed due to an explosion of unlicensed cafes. A Beijing university student and former user of the “Lanjisu” cafe told the *Washington Post* on June 18: “We knew the cafe didn’t have a licence, but it was cheaper and closer than the others. The government makes it too difficult to open an Internet cafe, so there are only illegal ones around here.” Another commented: “Most of the cafes lock the door. Nobody wants the police just walking in.”

The fact there are 10 illegal cafes for every legal one has also rendered ineffective a series of state regulations. Licensed cafes are forced to record a log of all the websites visited by their customers and turn it over to the police, as well to ensure that all users have an “account number”, which is registered with the authorities. In April, the government imposed a ban on youth under 18 from using Internet cafes on school days and at night. The unlicensed cafes have simply ignored the order as young people are one of their largest client bases.

To justify its anti-democratic measures, the Chinese bureaucracy resorts to crude propaganda against Internet usage. After the Beijing fire, the *People’s Daily*, the main state-run newspaper, published an article with the headline “Don’t let Internet bars destroy kids”. After interviewing the mother of a 12-year-old boy who used Internet cafes to play games,

the article declared: “The Web games were like a drug tormenting the child’s soul. After becoming obsessed with web games at Internet bars, his grades plunged, his health drastically declined and his spirits were dulled. He became an ill-tempered freak, a zombie.”

Such moralising has produced an outpouring of scorn and hostility from young Chinese Internet users on bulletin boards and web forums. Dozens of messages have attacked the state shutdown of the cafes. Far from criticising the Internet or the cafe operators for last weekend’s fire, many youth are blaming the regime, for imposing the draconian restrictions in the first place and forcing the industry underground.



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