

Reptilian Democracy

BRANDON CHEW

The Dragon is a remarkable creature, a scaled monster that “possesses the ability to assume diverse, though inscrutable, forms” (Borges 64). In *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Jorge Luis Borges regales readers with descriptions of two very different dragons, each with distinct traits. The Chinese dragon, Borges tells us, “possesses divinity and is like an angel that is also a lion”; it “was the symbol of the [ancient Chinese] Empire,” a transcendent beauty of a monster that had “horns, claws, and scales” (66-67). In stunning contrast, Borges paints a portrait of the Western dragon, “a tall, lumbering serpent with claws and wings” (68). A symbol of the heavens and royalty it was not; “always thought of as evil,” its primary role in European literature and fable seems to be that of a fire-breathing villain waiting to be slain and have its “eyes dried and beaten up with honey” into elixirs (68-69).

We of the 21st century have a gargantuan of our own to contend with. The Internet, with its interminable cascade of information and multifarious appendages splayed across the globe, has in effect become the ideological, social beast of our time; its influence and image span cultures and continents. Like Borges’s pets, the Internet is received and perceived in myriad ways; but unlike the ancient Western and Chinese philosophers, who were content with their own visions, there is an interplay of ideas from all corners of the globe concerning the Internet and how it can best be utilized.

The administration in Beijing, for one, seems to believe that the best way to deal with the Internet is to distil it for popular consumption. The historically punitive Chinese government has now extended its policing to the World Wide Web, blocking access to sensitive “site[s] . . . on the government’s blacklist,” such as the websites of the New York-based Human Rights in China and the controversial Falun Gong spiritual movement (Thompson 2). The cynically dubbed “Great Firewall of China” also blocks seditious weblogs from within the mainland (Thompson 1), and “individuals who attempt to

speak freely” in defiance of these regulations “are frequently imprisoned and tortured” (Smith).

In January 2006, the Internet heavyweight Google officially launched a specialized version of its eponymous search engine in China. The website, Google.cn, was different from the Chinese language version of the original search engine, Google.com, in numerous ways: while the former boasted a markedly superior search speed by virtue of the server’s location within China, it also “had been configured to filter out words that are effectively banned in China, such as ‘Tibet independence,’ ‘Dalai Lama,’ and ‘democracy’” (Macartney). The company had, in effect, relented to pressure from Beijing, censoring itself in return for boosted search speeds in a painful trade-off.

Google’s was the most prominent of a series of encounters by American corporations with the Middle Kingdom and its tight control over the World Wide Web. The Hong Kong branch of online competitor Yahoo! voluntarily “suppl[ied] information to China” that resulted in the incarceration of the journalist Shi Tao; and in 2005, Microsoft “obeyed a government request to delete the writings” of the Chinese blogger Zhao Jing, even though “Microsoft’s blogging service has no servers located in China; the company effectively allowed China’s censors to . . . erase data stored on American territory” (Thompson 8). In a testament to the creeping American presence, some of the “routers” and “fiber-optic switches” that form the nexus of China’s online surveillance network were “made by Cisco systems, an American firm” (Thompson 2).

These companies were subjected to a fiery castigation in a 2006 Congressional hearing; pulling no punches, politicians “compared [the companies] to Nazi collaborators,” and blamed them for contributing to a government that Representative Christopher Smith called “a Stalinist nightmare revived for the 21st century” (Thompson 1); Washington saw the Great Firewall as yet another shackle imposed on Chinese society by a modern dictatorship notorious for its torturing of prisoners, unwarranted arrests, and suppression of anti-Communist opinion (Smith). Guo Quan, a former Chinese university professor who “su[ed] Yahoo! and Google in the United States for blocking his name from search results in China” after he “founded a democratic opposition party,” ironically uses rhetoric commonly associated with Communist propaganda to blast Google, calling it “a servile Pekinese dog wagging its tail at the heels of the Chinese communists” (Macartney). In a separate accusation, Reporters Without Borders invoked the spirit of

Orwell's *1984*, labeling Yahoo! a "police informant" for its role in Shi Tao's incarceration ("Yahoo").

Here, then, was a recognition and summary dismissal of Internet censorship by the dragons on Capitol Hill—but is this resentment towards China justified? The overt references to historical and literary authoritarianism in the anti-Google/China rhetoric are unmistakable, highlighting the unyielding stance of Congress and its supporters. To these "purists," countries that do not have this essential foundation are nothing more than police states (Thompson 9). This "for us or against us" mentality manifests itself in the perception of the Internet as an "empowering and *democratizing* force" ("Net firms"). To the crusaders on Capitol Hill, this behemoth of a phenomenon could and would not be tamed, and any group that tries to do so would be considered anti-democratic. Hence, China, with its "Great Firewall," was politically backward, totalitarian, and draconian, no different from the empires of the USSR, Hitler, and Big Brother. And hence, by doing business on Beijing's terms, Google and friends were no better than sycophants, at worst traitors.

The extreme rhetoric leveled at Google and its peers has forced them to reaffirm their loyalties, as it were, and pledge their commitment to freedom of speech and information. Andrew McLaughlin, senior policy counsel at Google, argues that the company believes in the Internet's potential for "universal information access" but believes that thwarting China's rules will not "effectively contribute to openness and prosperity in the world." Eric Schmidt, chief executive of the same company, defends his company's actions as "unavoidable"; his decision to comply with censorship laws was, Schmidt maintains, a "principled decision" (Yardley). A spokesman from Microsoft conceded that whilst technology conglomerates simply "could not ignore" a nation that was "set to be the world's biggest internet market," they also were driven by an altruistic desire to "bring [their] technology to people around the world to help them realize their full potential" ("Yahoo"). The companies insist that profits were not "a big part of the equation" and that they did not "cave in to Beijing for the sake of profits" ("Net firms"). They were acting "in the belief that merely by improving access to information in an authoritarian country, it would be doing good" (Thompson 7). The companies, then, were trying to "do [their] best within a bad system," essentially changing their stripes without changing their principles (Thompson 9).

Behind the stripes, though, still lurks a Western dragon. This chameleonic behavior belies the fact that Google and its ilk are one with the dragons of

democracy. The corporations believe that they have a kind of civilizing mission in China, just as critics believe America “should put pressure on China to change” (Yardley). Google maintains that their actions were “better than [that of] the local Chinese firms, which acquiesce to the censorship regime with a shrug” (Thompson 7). Google’s apologetic, rational tone is indicative. Although they, like the other companies reaching into China, “had no immediate plans to push for a loosening of restrictions,” they refuse to “rule out” the possibility for political change and appear almost ashamed when “industry executives argue that they ha[d] little leverage to” agitate for it (Yardley). Both sides, then, seek to convert and proselytize, but quarrel on the best method to do so.

This steadfast conviction in freedom of information and democracy is precisely the kind of “retreat[ing] . . . to rigid filters [and] the ‘moral clarity’ of the immature” that David Foster Wallace rails against (xxiii). In his introduction to the 2007 edition of *The Best American Essays*, Wallace expresses his admiration for the “service essay,” a piece of writing that is “clear without being simplistic, comprehensive without being overwhelming” (xxiii). He acknowledges the presence of bias in all things and ideas, but also reminds us that bias should not stop us from “continually discovering new areas of personal ignorance and delusion” (xxiii). When faced with something that runs contrary to our perception of reality, we should not “cherry-pick [facts] . . . in order to advance a pre-set agenda,” as Congress has done by utilizing “dogmatic cant” to equate a complex Chinese polity with the invidious juntas of the past (xxiii), and as Google has done by defending its position in China by appealing to a fixed notion of democracy. We have to remain eternally receptive to the resonance of all facts and opinions, erudite enough, Wallace says, to “address . . . [and] absorb” the ambiguity of our situations (xxiii-xxiv). The Internet companies involved in China are indeed acknowledging the divergence of American and Chinese governance, and are acting accordingly; but they are doing so out of an implicit desire to change the latter while recognizing the primacy of the former. Wallace slams such adherence as “narrow arrogance”—to him, the parochial, prosaic essayist writes to galvanize change in others, but the true visionary, no matter the genre, writes primarily with the knowledge and acceptance that all of us may very well change (xxiii).

Perhaps this was why Borges was able to understand and describe the nuances of both Western and Chinese dragons—he recognized the individuality of each entity. True, he does show a gleam of disdain for the “lumbering” form of the Western dragon, and remains “doubtful[l]” about the harvest-

ing of its body parts for nostrums; but in his articulate descriptions of both variations of the creature, he does not impose implicit value judgment, does not tell us which is the “better” creature (68). By being “critical without being shrill,” Borges demonstrates a propensity to “proces[s] and arrang[e] an immense quantity of fact, opinion, confirmation, and testimony” without allowing his bias to intrude (Wallace xxii).

Borges wrote in this manner because he knew that his was an incomplete understanding of the dragon, and this was why he called his subjects “inscrutable” even as he tried to define them (64). Wallace tells us that “to really try to be informed . . . is to feel stupid nearly all the time, and to need help”; only by developing this “humility to address” problems in one’s own thinking would one be able to transcend the “narrow arrogance” of bias (xxiii-xxiv). Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft are indeed aware of the political and cultural subtleties in China; Google’s CEO Eric Schmidt argues that it would be “‘arrogant’ of [them] to try to change China’s censorship laws”; but mired in this concession is a superiority complex that puts them on the same haughty pedestal as their opponents (Thompson 9). One cannot be a chameleon, for even though the chameleon changes its skin according to the environment around it, it arrogantly remains the same creature beneath, only superficially adapting to its surroundings. By seeking to change China through the piecemeal proliferation of information without contemplating the possibility that China could very well change them, these companies, like the advocates of purist democracy who rally against them, risk becoming “self-indulgent” as they allow their bias to consume them (Wallace xxiv).

China itself seems to be channeling the spirit of Wallace, adopting hitherto anti-Communist elements and becoming more amenable to change. The Chinese unit of currency, the Renminbi, for decades pegged closely to the US dollar, was allowed to float and revalue according to the vagaries of international trade and the capitalist free market in 2005. The decision to allow foreign companies to enter and compete in a previously protectionist economy is in itself a significant move. And, in the American Idol-esque singing competition “Super Girl,” viewers are allowed to “vote for their favorite competitor via text message” in a contest reminiscent of a “presidential election campaign” (Thompson 10). Initiatives like these suggest that Beijing has become more of a Communist chimera than a dragon, changing and drawing from a variety of practices to paradoxically enhance its own model of governance.

Although this socio-political synthesis by no means mitigates the human rights crimes and other deleterious acts sanctioned by Beijing, it nonetheless

remains that the regime is slowly breaking away from its staunch, purist, Communist approach to governance. Can Google be as mutable, or even more so? By expanding into China, and subjecting themselves to its caveats, companies are laudably exercising social responsibility; but contrary to the opinions of Christopher Smith, Andrew McLaughlin, or Clive Thompson, who see the “start” of a gradual “revolution” in China, this social responsibility transcends political ethos (Thompson 10). As a business, Google cannot and should not act as a beacon for democracy and enter China with a Messiah complex, be their actions profit-driven, altruistic, or otherwise. Washington compounds the issue by trying to turn businesses into White House envoys, even as it castigates them for becoming Beijing’s lapdogs; but the corporations themselves should concentrate on “secur[ing] a profitable market” and bringing their services to the greatest number of people possible (Thompson 10) and not enter China hoping to instigate political change, no matter how gradual the timetable. But this does not mean both sides should not wave the banner of democracy and freedom of information; they need to perform Borges’s delicate balancing act of recognizing their own political inclinations while admitting that these inclinations aren’t always best.

In his description of the Chinese dragon, Borges ends with a tale of “a persevering man who after three laborious years mastered the art of dragon-slaying. For the rest of his days, he had not a single opportunity to test his skills”—a warning about the futility of attempting to destroy a monolithic reptile, regardless of its origin (67). The Internet, indeed, can be an “empowering and democratizing force”—but that’s just the American version (“Net firms”). In China, the Internet naturally takes on a different form; but that alone is not reason enough for its critics to try to quash it in a bout of “personal ignorance and delusion” (Wallace xxiii). Google, Congress and their respective clans have to be genuinely protean, not changing but accepting the *possibility* of change, and the presence of a completely divergent shape that is neither better nor worse than theirs. Borges did not attempt to slay either of his dragons; it would have been impossible to do so. The players in the controversy might do well to follow in his stead and embrace the complexity of the Internet and its dissonant implications, and in doing so, become multifaceted themselves.

Only by being chimeric can one become both dragons.

WORKS CITED

- Borges, Jorge Luis. *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. 1967. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- “Google censors itself for China.” *BBC*. 25 Jan. 2006. 7 Mar. 2008 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4645596.stm>>.
- Macartney, Jane. “Dissident Chinese professor to sue Yahoo! and Google for erasing his name.” *Times Online* 6 Feb. 2008. 7 Mar. 2008 <http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article3319051.ece>.
- McLaughlin, Andrew. “Google in China.” *The Official Google Blog*. 27 Jan. 2006. 7 Mar. 2008 <<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2006/01/google-in-china.html>>.
- “Net firms criticized over China.” *BBC*. 15 Feb. 2006. 11 Mar. 2008 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4699242.stm>>.
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: Harcourt: 1949.
- Smith, Christopher. “OP-ED: Google . . . China . . . and Us: Moral Challenges We Face.” *National Review Online*. 20 Apr. 2006. 11 Mar. 2008 <http://www.house.gov/list/press/nj04_smith/opedChinaMoral.html>.
- Thompson, Clive. “Google’s China Problem (and China’s Google Problem).” *New York Times* 23 Apr. 2006. 7 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/23/magazine/23google.html?pagewanted=8&fei=5090&en=972002761056363f&ex=1303444800>>.
- Wallace, David Foster. “Introduction: Deciderization 2007—a Special Report.” *The Best American Essays 2007*. Ed. Robert Atwan and David Foster Wallace. New York: Houghton, 2007. xii-xxiv.
- “Yahoo ‘helped jail China writer’.” *BBC*. 7 Sep. 2005. 7 Mar. 2008 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4221538.stm>>.
- Yardley, Jim. “Google Chief Rejects Putting Pressure on China.” *New York Times* 13 Apr. 2006. 7 Mar. 2008 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F04E2D91F30F930A25757C0A9609C8B63&scp=1&sq=yardley+google&st=nyt>>.

190 - MERCER STREET