

Melding Internet: Towards an Analysis of China Threat

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## **Introduction**

The recent visit by the U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld this October, his first visit to China since 2000, has been hailed by media worldwide as a change of the Pentagon ( in fact, the US) conservative thinking towards a rapidly developing China. This is a sharp deviation from the old tune of “China Threat theory,” which was played up again four months ago, known as the “third wave of China Threat,” when the US Defense Department issued its annual report on China's military strength.

The fast waning of the China Threat tune this time has, of course, generally resulted from China’s growing political influence in the world international arena, as demonstrated in its leading role in the Six-Party Talk on the Korean nuclear issue, and its consistent economic development, which has registered an annual GNP growth rate of around 10 percent during the past 20 years and has placed China as one of the largest economic powers in the world, and has thus accelerated the process of China’s integration with the rest parts of the world.

The paper holds that the waning trend of the China Threat concept (CTC) as a whole has, in fact, been accompanied or even affected by the widespread use of internet in the past decade, characterized by its melding relationship between traditional gate-keepers and audience or even among audience, with such unique qualities as easy interactivity, convenient connectivity and relative openness or uncontrolled nature.

This paper aims to analyze the China Threat concept (CTC), a concept mainly originated from and popular in the West and China’s neighboring countries, in relationship with the roles of internet which, the paper holds, with its above mentioned qualities, has somewhat melded international differences or crisis among different cultures and nations, as demonstrated in the following case study of CTC in the past decade.

## **China Threat & Internet**

China Threat or sometimes known as China Threat Theory, is basically a concept that has been used to describe the worries about China’s development or rise in the past

two decades among Western countries and China's neighboring countries. This concept is troublesome for many people in the West, because (1) while the economy in China has developed at an unprecedented speed, China's political system has remained under the one-party reign of the Chinese Communist Party, with a "bad human right record and no political rights for its people." (2) China's military build-up can not only modernize its national defense, but also provide the Chinese military with an offensive capacity beyond China's borders. (3) Although China has been increasingly incorporated into the world economic system as a result of its reform and open policy in the past two decades, many still fear that it has remained an "outsider" in the international system, that refuses to accept some basic norms, such as its firm stand to reject the use of force as a possible means to solve the issue of Taiwan. In a word, China Threat is basically a natural extension of the Cold War-style thinking, even though the Cold War has ended.<sup>1</sup>

China Threat concept was initiated in the West in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup> and echoed later every now and then, but CTC did not really reach its climax until the mid 1990s when this concept started to be regarded as a kind of theory inside China and caught the attention of the Chinese media as well as academics, professor and policy makers. CTC was crystallized in the publication of two books entitled "China Can Say No" and "China Can Still Say No" in the one year of 1996, written by SONG Qiang, ZHANG Zangzang and QIAO Bian etc. The two books recognized the China's growing national consciousness and can be regarded as a refutation against the US containment policy towards China or China Threat concept as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

It is quite a coincidence that internet, which emerged in the early 1970s, started to get widespread and accepted also in the mid 1990s when it rapidly merged with business operations and boomed as the fourth media, after traditional newspaper, radio and television, thus breaking the traditional media monopoly and bringing profound

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Jian, "China Threat" or "China Challenge", <http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/chen21/fore21.html>

<sup>2</sup> CTC was first mentioned by an American military theorist Alfred Mahan in his book on sea power in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, because the author thinks China is big and populous, and China is gradually becoming a modern country.

<sup>3</sup> Song Qiang, ZHANG Zangzang & QIAO Bian etc: "China Can Say No" published by China Industrial & Commercial United Publishing House in May 1996 and "China Can Still Say No" published by China Wenlian Publishing Company.

changes to all the societies in the world. Table 1 shows that the internet penetration has reached 14.9% of the world population as of September 30, 2005 and the internet usage growth is up to 165.3% from 2000 to 2005. So far, much research has been conducted on the internet media itself as well as its roles to promote global understanding, international crisis, flow of ideas and values, threats to national security, intrusion of individual privacy or democratization.<sup>4</sup>

Though China lagged behind from the West in its development of the traditional media in its modern history, this is certainly not true for internet media, which has witnessed fast development in the mid 1990s in China, and is in fact in parallel with Western countries. Almost all major websites (public and private) in China were started in the mid 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Table 2 shows the dramatic changes of the internet from 1997 to 2005: internet users in China increased almost 150 folds and the number of computers logged online increased almost 140 folds during the 8-year period.

As a new rising power and also one that lacks effective communication channel to make itself understood and its voices heard in the global arena, dominated by a dubious and sometime hostile attitude of the West toward this country, China wasted no time to recognize the internet as the fourth media and its possible role in easing international crisis or tension for China. As a result, internet got into full swing after the year 2000 when the government designated six leading national websites including xinhuanet, people net and chinadaily net, as part of its global communication strategy, which has since then boosted internet business as a kind of industry in the country. In addition, as Table 3 shows, China's internet strategy can be regarded as correct because the number of Chinese internet users is just next to that of English users. Although English users still exceed Chinese users by more than 50 percent, which demonstrates the English dominance, it is also noticeable that the penetration rate of Chinese users as of its total population is way lower than that of English users (9.3% vs 27.4%), which shows great potential for future increase of Chinese users.

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<sup>4</sup> Chang, Tsan-Kuo & others. (2005). Open Global Networks, Closed International Flows: World System and Political Economy of Links in Cyberspace. Paper presented at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, San Antonio, Texas, August 10-13, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> ZHANG Ping, president of chinadaily.com, phone interview, November 1, 2005.

### **Why Internet Can Help Meld China Threat Concept (CTC)?**

With the above discussions, this paper has found internet is in a unique position to help tune down or meld international differences or crisis among different cultures and nations in today's information age. And it is specially true for China Threat Concept (CTC) in the past decade.

First, both CTC and Internet, which emerged at an earlier time, started to get the attention of the public in the world and in China almost simultaneously in the mid 1990s, therefore it is reasonable to conclude that internet, as the fourth media and given its unique features such as interactivity, connectivity and openness, can help classifying and explaining CTC in a kind of comprehensive and therefore relatively objective approach. The paper's random search of "China Threat" has recorded a total of 5,438 results (news reports or related stories) over the New York Times website, and a number of 3,413 results over the Chinese xinhuanet website and 3,417 results over the English chinadaily.com website.

Although the paper did not further categorize all the news reports into either positive or negative spins and is not in a position to conclude whether internet has negatively or positively contributed to the waning of CTC in recent years, the paper holds that the large number of news reports or related stories available over internet is itself a good proof for its active role in effective global communication and that this kind of communication, whether it is positive or negative to China or the world, is itself constructive towards a comprehensive and objective understanding of such notion among these interested people. And this is really what this paper has meant by the term "melding,"<sup>6</sup> even though Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs may mean differently when they refined their agenda-setting theory into the agenda-melding

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs have refined the agenda-setting theory into agenda-melding, a way to determine which groups cluster around certain types of media and how they respond to the information they receive and have referred it to a constant social process, during which an individual can receive continuous influence from the social environment. (From D. Shaw, M. MaCombs, D. Weaver & B. Hamn, (1999). Individual, Groups, and Agenda Melding: A Theory of Social Dissonance, International Journal of Public Opinion Research, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 21.) This paper would like to borrow the term "melding," but may mean differently as indicated above.

theory in the year of 1999.

Therefore the paper tends to hold the opinion that internet can technically or theoretically play a vital role in melding CTC in the past decade, or at least has been helpful in tuning down such a concept, making it impossible for CTC to become a real issue of international conflicts in the current world politics. Despite the fact that CTC was echoed every now and then in the West, and sometimes even made a loud voice since the mid 1990s, the paper finds the intensity of CTC has been gradually reducing in the international arena and its duration of public attention has been shrinking in the past decade, as is the case mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

Of course, it should also be admitted that the role of internet in melding CTC is in fact inherently related with China Threat Concept itself. In essence, CTC is a kind of western perception toward the potential rise and development of China, a giant and country different from the West, which follows a model also different from the western model. And this has constituted a psychological and sometimes cultural threat among some western elites, who would then often present their internal threat in a form linked with Chinese politics, economics and military affairs, as an evidence for the so-called China Threat. The ultimate purpose of CTC is either to contain China within a certain framework or to guide China into a similar development pattern to the West.

As a result, while CTC is still more related with such hard powers as political, economic and military factors as far as its contents are concerned, CTC is in reality more a cultural notion than a political and economic and military one. That is to say CTC may be a result of cultural (even ideological) misunderstanding about China on the part of the West and some of China's neighboring countries, and that China Threat concept is more a conceptual term based on information presentation in international communication and the way of information presentation can affect how CTC will be accepted in the international public opinion.

While acknowledging the role of internet in helping meld the cultural and ideological misunderstandings such as CTC in current international relations, the paper does not want to deny that it has also been very important for China to propose such counter-CTC theories as China Peaceful Rise Theory or China Development Theory as

more recently cited. They were considered the Chinese efforts deliberately made to offset the CTC from the West. However, the paper is also of the opinion that it is almost impossible to publicize the Chinese efforts such as China Peaceful Rise Theory or China Development Theory, without their distribution and discussions over internet. These Chinese concepts or theories have been so well known lately that they even became topics of discussions at many international conferences.<sup>7</sup>

To a degree, China's peaceful rise or peaceful development theories have even constituted a part of its harmony theory for global communication when China resorts more to its traditional Confucius philosophy of harmony, which has been quite noticeable in China's recent international public diplomacy and its social management.<sup>8</sup>

### **How Internet Has Helped Meld CTC?**

As stated above, CTC was basically originated from the West (mainly the US) and has been presented in relationship with China's political, economic and military progress and development in recent years, which are mainly concerned with the governmental relationship between the US and China. Therefore, in the past decade, China Threat has always been event-oriented or proposed with a certain political, economic and military event. For instance, in 1996, China fired missiles near Taiwan and the U.S. sent aircraft carriers, which initiated China's military threat; in 1999, the Cox Report alleged Chinese spying, which resulted in China's espionage threat; in 2001, the Chinese forced down a US spy plane, which triggered another round of China military threat. The 9 • 11 Terrorist Attack in 2001 has somewhat brought China and the U.S. into a closer relationship, but the United States has still been practicing a containment plus engagement (or conengagement) policy toward China and the words of

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<sup>7</sup> At the 4<sup>th</sup> Asian Scholars Annual Conference held this August in Shanghai, two panels were specially devoted to China Rise and it is interesting to note that heated discussions were held among scholars from the US and the Europe and parts of the world.

<sup>8</sup> China has always emphasized peaceful co-existence and more recently a harmonious society both inside and outside China. This paper holds this political and social theory or perception may as well be developed into a harmonious theory in the area of international communication and may have far-reaching impact on the current world order and system when terrorism and hegemony have now run into direct conflict in our current world. Recent reports about terrorist bombings and killings in the world, including the warning about a possible terrorist attack from this Conference Executive Committee, seem to have more clearly justified it.

China Threat has been frequently cited whenever the relationship between two countries started to swing down, as demonstrated in the Sino-US relationship in the past decade.

Since CTC has been basically event-oriented, the paper holds that internet is in a good position to play up its effective reporting on these events related with CTC by melding the news selection and treatment processes of news reports. In the news selection process, internet can effectively enhance elements of news values such as truthfulness, timelines and proximity.<sup>9</sup> For the news treatment process, internet can employ traditional news treatment methods (such as editing and backgrounding) and can also play up its technological advantages (such as copy and paste).<sup>10</sup>

### 1. News Selection

Truthfulness is the most important news value element in news selection as a news report should first of all be real and true. Although internet lacks effective gate-keepers and can not technologically filter any information, which includes faked and irresponsible news reports and can thus damage its credibility reputation, news reporting system has become standardized over internet in recent years and it is particularly true for the increasing number of quality news websites in the world, which have made serious efforts to maintain the news truthfulness, just as their traditional media counterparts do. As a result, for reports on such serious events related with CTC in the past decade, internet can always stick to its truthfulness element. Besides, its reports are also much faster.

In fact, timeliness is what internet has made traditional media ashamed and uncomfortable. Specially for news reports on CTC events, internet is always in an advantageous position to surpass traditional counterparts and has thus made itself a prime and timely updated news source for most browsers in the world interested in the CTC issue. To a degree, the timeliness element of internet has demystified such elite concepts as CTC and has thus helped popularize or meld CTC among peoples who may

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<sup>9</sup> MA Ling and GAN Lu, Re-creation of News Values over Internet, cited from Guangming Daily website, December 20, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> PAN Lan, Internet News Treatment: From Pasting to Decoding News, cited from Peopledaily website, December 17, 2004

share different opinions and may have no access to reach a better understanding about CTC if it were not for the internet.

As a rule of proximity in journalism, people will pay more attention to what happens nearby because local internet tend to provide more local aspects of an issue, which be boring. However, it is the case with internet. Over the internet, people can easily get the local as well as international perspective over the CTC issue, which tends to become much more diversified and thus add to a comprehensive and objective approach of their understanding of CTC or melding their perceptions about CTC.

Besides, as internet can be two-way communication, people around the world can also make contribution by voicing up their own points of view if they disagree with what is said over internet. Theoretically speaking, this can further diversify the international public opinion about the CTC issue and of course is very helpful and constructive for peoples around the world to reach or meld a more comprehensive and objective understanding of CTC.

This kind of international public opinion has also made it very difficult for some elite people in the West to dominate or even manipulate CTC politically for their own benefits, because peoples around the world may have better or at least sensible judgment over the CTC issue.

Therefore, the melding internet have been able to play its vital role in tuning down or melding the CTC events and as a result, CTC as a whole in the past decade.

## 2. News Treatment

The internet melding function for CTC is also noticeable in its news treatment process.

First of all, internet enjoys technological advantages in its news treatment process and can easily copy and paste news reports about CTC events from other sources (including traditional media) from the around world. The treatment, though simple, is effective to provide sufficient information and comprehensive perspectives on CTC events.

Its unlimited space has allowed internet to make available almost any related texts, pictures, videos and even flashes and thus it is possible for internet to deliberately edit

and organize in-depth news column and to be able to constantly update its news reports about the events related with CTC. Besides, internet can also add as much backgrounding as possible to CTC issues and detail all the development process of a particular CTC event. Furthermore, Internet is also technically unique (in fact advantageous) to set up website links for people to access different and diversified information from different sources about CTC events, if needed.

Therefore, internet can also be as diversified in its treatment of news reports about CTC events and this kind of diversified treatment has surely multiplied the different perspectives on the events related with CTC in the past decade, which has in fact also contributed to its role in melding CTC.

### **Summary**

In his paper “China Threat or China Challenge,” CHEN Jian, an overseas Chinese historian, argues the China Threat thesis is fundamentally flawed, no matter how sophisticated its articulation as it fails to account for the challenges resulting from China’s growth and also it creates a confrontation line between the Chinese people and the rest of the world, making them regard each other as enemies and potential enemies. CHEN Jian thus concludes the China Threat thesis risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>11</sup>

The question is how or why the China Threat concept, basically flawed, can frequently catch the attention of the international public opinion sphere in the past decade? The paper tends to agree that it is a direct result of the Western dominance or monopoly of the international public opinion sphere, because China, whether its government or individual, has been passively responding to China Threat, which has always been initiated from the West.

However, the above discussions have demonstrated that internet is capable of has reverting the flow of information on event-oriented CTC, by simply breaking the dominance or monopoly of the international public opinion sphere by the West. And

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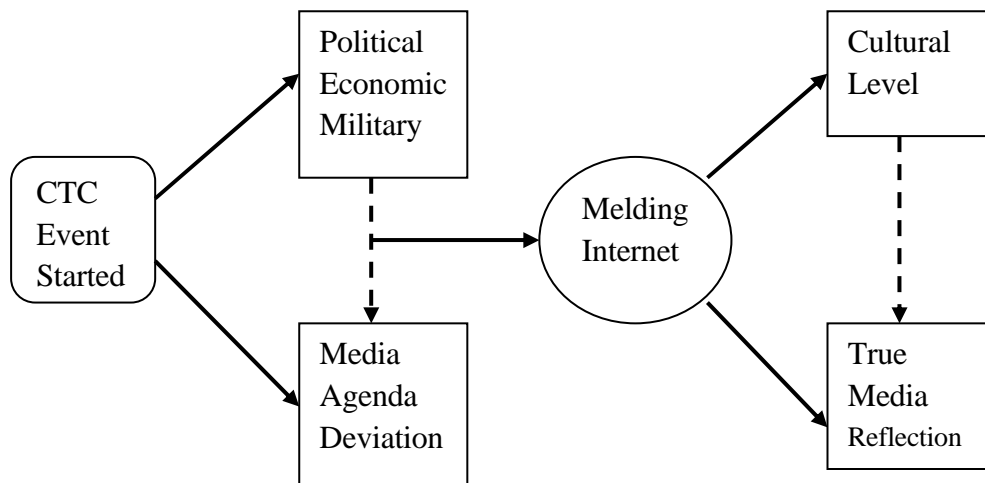
<sup>11</sup> Chen Jian, “China Threat” or “China Challenge”, <http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/chen21/fore21.html>

therefore it is possible for internet to offer a more comprehensive and objective perspective about the news events of CTC and has thus melded the possible the international conflicts or differences resulting from CTC in the past decade.

To some degree, the paper is of the opinion that that the Western dominance of the international public opinion sphere and its tendency to initiate CTC and Internet with its melding function in international news reports and thus the international public opinion sphere have been two key opposing factors that have kept CTC swinging as a clock pendulum in the past decade.

However, the general trend is that the swinging of this clock pendulum (rapidity and frequencies) has been geared down in the past five years and has kept or melded within a certain framework, which is what this paper has referred to as the waning trend of CTC in recent years.

Besides, the paper has found another interesting model about the development of CTC: When CTC is first initiated with a related event, the event tends to be interpreted or reported more at China's political, economic and military level, and the international public opinion or media agenda may be deviated from what it is truthful about this event. Sometimes, even faked information is reported. However, as time moves or when internet starts to meld the agenda about this CTC event, the event is normally examined more at a cultural level and the media agenda and international public opinion also tend to more accurately mirror the practice in the real world. This melding model of internet can be best illustrated in the following chart:



Despite the melding function and the waning trend of CTC in the past decade, this paper does not predict that the China Threat phenomenon will disappear itself in the near future. In fact, CTC may accompany the whole development process of China as WU Jianming, a retired famous diplomat, has said, because CTC may still be very popular among those who are ideologically biased and those who regard China Rise as a threat to their own interest.<sup>12</sup>

That is to say CTC will continue to follow the above swinging model in the future. The pattern or the frequency of the CTC swing will depend how the Western and neighboring countries (particularly the United States) view China Rise now and in the future. If the US can learn from the experience of the Europe that generously and also painfully faced the rise of the US as a new power a hundred years ago, CTC should not become a major issue in the Sino-US relationship in the new century, even though CTC may be constantly discussed among the public and over media. Of course, during this process, it is also important for China to readjust its international strategy and public diplomacy and efficiently learn the international rules so as to incorporate more effectively into the world system and diminish the doubts of China Threat in the international political stage and public opinion sphere.

Given its technical advantages, the paper holds that Internet will continue to play its role in melding or easing international conflicts, particularly effective for cultural issues like CTC which is basically more cultural than political in essence.

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<sup>12</sup> WU Jianming, *China Threat Will Not Disappear in the Near Future*, Reader's Digest (Shanghai), front page, September 19, 2005

**Table 1: WORLD INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS**

World Regions	Population ( 2005 Est.)	Population % of World	Internet Usage, Latest Data	Usage Growth 2000-2005	% Population ( Penetration )	World Users %
<a href="#">Africa</a>	896,721,874	14.0 %	<b>23,867,500</b>	428.7 %	2.7 %	2.5 %
<a href="#">Asia</a>	3,622,994,130	56.4 %	<b>327,066,713</b>	186.1 %	9.0 %	34.2 %
<a href="#">Europe</a>	731,018,523	11.4 %	<b>273,262,955</b>	165.1 %	37.4 %	28.5 %
<a href="#">Middle East</a>	260,814,179	4.1 %	<b>21,422,500</b>	305.4 %	8.2 %	2.2 %
<a href="#">North America</a>	328,387,059	5.1 %	<b>223,779,183</b>	107.0 %	68.1 %	23.4 %
<a href="#">Latin America/Caribbean</a>	546,723,509	8.5 %	<b>70,699,084</b>	291.31 %	12.9 %	7.4 %
<a href="#">Oceania / Australia</a>	33,443,448	0.5 %	<b>17,655,737</b>	131.7 %	52.8 %	1.8 %
<b>WORLD TOTAL</b>	<b>6,420,102,722</b>	<b>100.0 %</b>	<b>957,753,672</b>	<b>165.3 %</b>	<b>14.9 %</b>	<b>100.0 %</b>

NOTES: (1) Internet Usage and World Population Statistics were updated on September 30, 2005. (2) For regional information, click on each world region. (3) Demographic (Population) numbers are based on data contained in the [world-gazetteer](#) website. (4) Internet usage information comes from data published by [Nielsen/NetRatings](#), by the [International Telecommunications Union](#), by local NICs, and by other other reliable sources. (5) For definitions, disclaimer, and navigation help, see the. (6) The information above is cited from [www.internetworldstats.com](#).

**Table 2: The Top Ten Languages Used in the Web**  
( Number of Users of the Internet by Language )

<b>TOP TEN LANGUAGES IN THE INTERNET</b>	<b>Internet Users, by Language</b>	<b>Penetration (% Population)</b>	<b>World Population Estimate for Language</b>	<b>Language as % of Total Internet Users</b>
<u>English</u>	303,132,279	27.4 %	1,107,807,851	31.7 %
<u>Chinese</u>	124,301,513	9.3 %	1,329,801,131	13.0 %
<u>Japanese</u>	78,050,000	60.9 %	128,137,485	8.1 %
<u>Spanish</u>	60,865,718	15.6 %	389,587,559	6.4 %
<u>German</u>	55,183,395	57.4 %	96,141,368	5.8 %
<u>French</u>	39,964,100	10.7 %	374,555,140	4.2 %
<u>Korean</u>	32,570,000	44.6 %	73,044,495	3.4 %
<u>Italian</u>	28,870,000	49.3 %	58,608,565	3.0 %
<u>Portuguese</u>	28,792,000	12.6 %	227,628,673	3.0 %
<u>Dutch</u>	14,655,328	60.5 %	24,224,721	1.6 %
<b>TOP TEN LANGUAGES</b>	<b>766,384,333</b>	<b>20.1 %</b>	<b>3,809,536,987</b>	<b>80.0 %</b>
Rest of the Languages	191,369,339	7.3 %	2,610,565,735	20.0 %
<b>WORLD TOTAL</b>	<b>957,753,672</b>	<b>14.9 %</b>	<b>6,420,102,722</b>	<b>100.0 %</b>

(\*) NOTES: (1) Internet Top Ten Languages Usage Stats were updated on September 30, 2005. (2) Average Penetration is the ratio between the sum of Internet users speaking a language and the total population estimate that speaks that referred language. (3) The most recent Internet usage information comes from data published by [Nielsen//NetRatings](#), [International Telecommunications Union](#), and other reliable sources. (4) The population information comes from [world gazetteer](#). (5) For definitions and navigation help, see the [Site Surfing Guide](#). (6) The information above is cited from [www.internetworldstats.com](#).

<b>Table 3: CNNIC Internet Usage Statistical Data In Ten Years</b>					
<b>Release Time</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Online Computer</b>	<b>CN Domain</b>	<b>Wideband Users</b>	<b>拨号用户</b>
January 19 2005	94,000,000	41,600,000	432,077	42,800,000	52,400,000
July 20, 2004	87,000,000	36,300,000	380,000	31,100,000	51,550,000
January 15 2004	79,500,000	30,890,000	340,000	17,400,000	49,160,000
July 21 2003	68,000,000	25,720,000	250,000	9,800,000	45,010,000
January 16 2003	59,100,000	20,830,000	179,000	6,600,000	40,800,000
July 22 2002	45,800,000	16,130,000	126,000	2,000,000	26,820,000
January 15 2002	33,700,000	12,540,000	127,000	NA	21,330,000
July 17 2001	26,500,000	10,020,000	128,000	NA	17,930,000
January 17 2001	22,500,000	8,920,000	122,000	NA	15,430,000
July 27 2000	16,900,000	6,500,000	99,000	NA	11,760,000
January 18 2000	8,900,000	3,500,000	48,000	NA	6,660,000
December 5 1999	4,000,000	1,460,000	29,000	NA	2,560,000
June 30 1998	1,175,000	542,000	9,415	NA	460,000
October 31 1997	630,000	299,000	4,066	NA	250,000

Source: Sina Technology