2. China’s Great Firewall

China has a population of over 1.4 billion people, and more than 700 million of its citizens are Internet users. Given those statistics, it is perhaps not surprising that China is the world’s leader in e-commerce, with 40 percent of global sales volume—double that of the United States. China is also the home of 4 of the world’s top 12 Internet companies ranked by market capitalization: e-commerce giant Alibaba, social-media and gaming company Tencent, search specialist Baidu, and smartphone maker Xiaomi. China has accomplished all this while implementing a system of Internet censorship and surveillance measures, dubbed the Golden Shield Project and the Great Firewall, which are some of the strictest in the world.

China’s attempt to control access and limit content available to its citizens began shortly after the Internet’s introduction in China. The country’s Golden Shield Project and the Great Firewall are part of an immense, multifaceted Internet surveillance and content control system that is augmented by workers who delete and add posts to spin any debate in favor of the government’s stance. The goal of the Chinese government is to block all content it deems undesirable, particularly news stor- ies that are unfavorable to China or its leaders, as well as references to infamous events, such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. While the Golden Shield Project is focused on domestic sites, the Great Firewall stands at the international gateways, keeping out unwanted foreign sites using a sophisticated and multitiered system. According to Simon Denyer, the Washington Post’s bureau chief in China, “The Great Firewall is an attempt to bridge one of the country’s most funda- mental contradictions—to have an economy intricately connected to the outside world but a political culture closed off from such ‘Western values’ as free speech and democracy.”

Chinese Internet users have their own censored versions of popular services, including Baidu (instead of Google), Weibo (instead of Twitter), WeChat (instead of Facebook), and Youku (instead of YouTube). In addition, the Great Firewall blocks roughly 25 percent of all Internet sites, including the Chinese and English news websites of the Reuters news agency, Bloomberg LP, the Guardian, and the New York Times so that they are inaccessible in China.

Some Chinese Internet users are able to gain access to restricted content through the use of virtual private networks (VPNs), which help users elude the restrictions of the Great Firewall by changing the IP address on their computer, laptop, or mobile device into one of many offered by the VPN provider. So, while a user may be accessing the Internet from a city within China, the VPN makes it look like the user is in Japan or some other country where Internet access is unrestricted. In addition, once users activate their VPN, they are connected to one of its servers via a dedicated, encrypted link, ensuring all of the data flowing back and forth between their device and the VPN server are private. However, VPNs exist at the pleasure of the Chinese Communist Party and can be shut down at any time. Indeed, the government recently began blocking VPNs on which thou- sands relied to circumvent the Great Firewall. Even with the option of using VPN, many Chinese are content to stay within the state-controlled version of the Internet. A recent study indicated that less than 3 percent of Chinese try to jump the Great Firewall to browse the open Internet.

According to the nationalist state-owned Global Times newspaper, “It requires a sophisticated capability to keep out harmful ideas without damaging the nation’s global connectivity. It enables China to communicate with the outside world, meanwhile Western opinion cannot easily penetrate as ideological tools.”

Critical Thinking Questions

1. It is estimated that by 2024, roughly five billion people will be connected to the Internet, with the biggest increases in societies that are severely censored. Many observers are concerned that the Chinese Internet-sovereignty model—where the government controls the flow of information and access to the Internet within its borders—will become much more prevalent in many of these countries. Can you describe an alternative Internet- sovereignty model that might be acceptable for these countries yet still allow some modi- cum of freedom of expression?
2. Some freedom of expression advocates are concerned that U.S.-based technology firms will do whatever it takes to gain a foothold in the Chinese market, even going so far as to implement surveillance and censorship measures in their products and services in order to meet the demands of the Chinese government. How might global Internet users react to a Facebook or YouTube that censors its users’ posts and monitors its users to comply with laws in China? What ethical and economic factors should an information technology company weigh when considering whether to enter the Chinese marketplace?
3. Can you identify any barriers to freedom of expression on the Internet that not only are acceptable to you but you would like to see implemented?