



中国数字时代

CHINA DIGITAL TIMES

# The Human Side of Censorship

## Keyword Filtering and Censorship Directives on the Chinese Internet

Anne Henochowicz - China Digital Times - FOICI '15

“Chinese information security expert Shu Xiaoqiu indicated to a Global Times reporter on April 12 that details on the ‘Great Cannon’ up to this point are not very clear, so he couldn’t directly comment on this highly technical incident. But this incident was in no way an isolated one: it is just the latest in a series of ‘Chinese cyberattacks’ concocted against the backdrop of alternating pressure from American policy and public opinion.” —Global Times, April 13, 2015



Example of propaganda directive (<http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/04/minitruer-do-not-republish-great-cannon-report>)

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Sites must stop republishing the Global Times article “Foreign Media Grabs Chance to Hype China’s ‘Great Cannon’; May Be American Effort to Shift Blame.” Don’t comment on related topics or content, and downplay the story. (April 13, 2015)



Example of propaganda directive (<http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/04/minitrue-do-not-republish-great-cannon-report>)

微博搜索 s.weibo.com 综合 找人 图片 兴趣主页

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根据相关法律法规和政策，“达赖喇嘛”搜索结果未予显示。

建议：  
您可以尝试更换关键词，再次搜索。  
您可以关注萌小搜 @微博搜索 获取搜索技巧。  
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以下是您可能感兴趣的微博

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5. 情侣被闪电击中 	22454
6. 蒋欣 宁泽涛 	18102
7. 应采儿	17625
8. 牙尖妹	15779
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10. 罗晋 虐	13728

我的订阅词

订阅常搜的词，随时跟踪动态!  
点击订阅当前词试试吧。

搜索历史



Example of “sensitive word” blocked from Weibo search results: “Dalai Lama”

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- 情侣被闪电击中 hot! 22454
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以下是您可能感兴趣的微博

杰克波比 **V**  
#新闻贫道# 周立波，这次你错了！  
今天04:03 来自 iPhone 5s

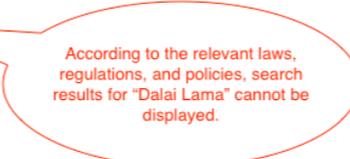
收藏 转发 29445 评论 11102 32764

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订阅常搜的词，随时跟踪动态！  
点击订阅当前词试试吧。

搜索历史 清除



Example of “sensitive word” blocked from Weibo search results: “Dalai Lama”

# The Human Side of Censorship

1. Internet Censorship in China: Staying Clear of the “Red Line”



# The Human Side of Censorship

1. Internet Censorship in China: Staying Clear of the “Red Line”
2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Managing Public Opinion



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1. Internet Censorship in China: Staying Clear of the “Red Line”
2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Managing Public Opinion
3. Sensitive Words: Filtering Weibo Search Results



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1. Internet Censorship in China: Staying Clear of the “Red Line”
2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Managing Public Opinion
3. Sensitive Words: Filtering Weibo Search Results
4. Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon: Resistance Discourse





# 1. Internet Censorship in China



Internet censorship is accomplished not only through technological means, but also through manual controls enforced by the state on the private sector and individuals.

In China, central and local government bodies issue directives to Internet companies concerning information and activity that should be deleted, filtered, or monitored.

All websites in China are legally liable for any content posted on their site, and must obtain a license from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology in order to operate. The threat of repercussions, including the loss of their license, leads website operators to proactively censor content on their sites.

Government directives are often vague, encouraging self-censorship and overcompensation to stay safely away from the invisible “red line.”

# 1. Internet Censorship in China



For instance, Sina has a team manually deleting posts from Weibo, but it also filters search results to keep users from viewing posts containing “sensitive” keywords.

# 1. Internet Censorship in China



Individual users who discuss “sensitive” issues online may find their social media posts are made invisible or removed, and may even have their accounts shut down.

# 1. Internet Censorship in China

What makes something “sensitive”?



What makes a word or phrase “sensitive”?

# 1. Internet Censorship in China

What makes something “sensitive”?

→ Potential for blocking or deletion



“Sensitive” (敏感) means any content that at some point could trigger some form of censorship. A sensitive keyword will not always be filtered or mark a post for deletion.

# 1. Internet Censorship in China

What makes something “sensitive”?

→ Potential for blocking or deletion

ex. “this day” (*zhè yī tiān* 这一天)



For example, China Digital Times (CDT) found on June 4, 2015—the anniversary of the crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square—that “this day” (这一天) was a blocked search term on Weibo. It is not currently blocked (as of August 4, 2015).

# “This Day” (*zhè yī tiān* 这一天)

- 1st block detected May 27, 2014



CDT first detected the keyword block on May 27, 2014.

## “This Day” (*zhè yī tiān* 这一天)

- 1st block detected May 27, 2014
- 2nd block detected June 4, 2015



We detected the second block on June 4, 2015.

## “This Day” (*zhè yī tiān* 这一天)

- 1st block detected May 27, 2014
- 2nd block detected June 4, 2015
- currently unblocked



The keyword is unblocked as of August 4, 2015.


[综合](#) [找人](#) [图片](#) [兴趣主页](#)

[高级搜索](#) [设置](#) [帮助](#)

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☆ 精选


**梦想家林志颖** ✓  
 2013年的**这一天**开始，7月30号变成了一个有意义的日子，我和kelly的结婚纪念日。流年变幻，爱，让普通的日子变得有意义，也让我们的心年年坚定如那一日。感谢粉丝们的祝福，我们有看到哦，谢谢大家! 😊😊



**林志颖 梦幻浪漫婚禮**

梦幻婚礼视频与你们分享感动的时刻，谢谢你们的祝福，让我们共同...

7月30日 14:15 来自 微博 weibo.com

收藏
转发 4423
评论 6947
👍 94460

相关用户 更多

- 
**这一天**
- 
**这一天的2013** ★  
简介: 支持正义! 相信正义终将战胜邪恶!
- 
**Elan也有告别我桶的这一天**  
简介: PSX Download Helper作者, ACG百科站长, ACGPedia(http://...)
- 
**这一天婚禮定製** ✓  
福州聚力飞扬文化传播有限公司

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☆ 精选

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# “This Day” (*zhè yī tiān* 这一天)

Retrieved on August 9, 2015



Screenshot of search results for “this day” on August 9, 2015. Note that the term is unblocked.

微博搜索 s.weibo.com 综合 找人 图片 兴趣主页

这一天 搜索 高级搜索 设置 帮助

☆ 精选

梦想家林志颖  **林志颖** 

2013年的这一天开始，7月30号变成了一个有意义的日子，我和kelly的结婚纪念日。流年变幻，爱，让普通的日子变得有意义，也让我们的心年年坚定如那一日。感谢粉丝们的祝福，我们有看到哦，谢谢大家！  林志颖 梦...

  **林志颖 梦幻浪漫婚禮**  
梦幻婚礼视频与你们分享感动的时刻，谢谢你们的祝福，让我们共同...   2842

7月30日 14:15 来自 微博 weibo.com

收藏 | 转发 4423 | 评论 6947 |  94460

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相关用户 更多

-  **这一天**
-  **这一天的2013** ★  
简介：支持正义！相信正义终将战胜邪恶！
-  **Elan也有告别我桶的这一天**  
简介：PSX Download Helper作者，ACG百科站长，ACGPedia(http://...)
-  **这一天婚禮定製** ✓  
福州聚力飞扬文化传播有限公司

相关兴趣主页 更多 >

# “This Day” (*zhè yī tiān* 这一天)

Retrieved on August 9, 2015



Screenshot of search results for “this day” on August 9, 2015. Note that the term is unblocked.

## 2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth

### Minitrue: Detention of “Trouble-Making” Lawyers

*The following censorship instructions, issued to the media by government authorities, have been leaked and distributed online. The name of the issuing body has been omitted to protect the source.*

All websites must, without exception, use as the standard official and authoritative media reports with regards to the detention of trouble-making lawyers by the relevant departments. Personnel must take care to find and delete harmful information; do not repost news from non-standard sources. (July 14, 2015) [Chinese]

Over 100 human rights lawyers and activists have been detained or questioned since last week in what state media call an operation against “conspirators” who are “colluding with petitioners to disturb social order and to reach their goals with ulterior motives.” The crackdown has especially targeted the Beijing Fengrui Law Firm, which was searched by the authorities last week, on the grounds that it headed a “major criminal gang” masterminding disruptions to public order and committing “serious” but unspecified crimes. Amnesty reports that 148 lawyers and activists had been swept up by Tuesday, with at least 25 still in custody, under residential surveillance, or missing.

Posted July 14, 2015

[chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/07/minitrue-detention-of-trouble-making-lawyers](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/07/minitrue-detention-of-trouble-making-lawyers)



CDT’s “Directives from the Ministry of Truth” series tracks censorship and propaganda directives issued by central and local government bodies to Internet companies, including news websites and portals.

Directives are not meant to be shared with the public, and are most frequently issued verbally to avoid a paper trail. Still, journalists (and the occasional hacker) continuously leak them. While some leaks are public (on Weibo, a blog, etc.) and include identifying information, CDT typically omits the name of the authority issuing the directive in order to protect our sources.

Common instructions are to delete a particular article and to manage social media discussion of a current event or issue—i.e. to employ “public opinion management” (舆论引导).

This slide shows a directive to delete certain types of information.

## 2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth

### Minitrue: Manage Opinion on Abductee Turned Teacher

*The following censorship instructions, issued to the media by government authorities, have been leaked and distributed online. The name of the issuing body has been omitted to protect the source.*

Regarding the old story "Gao Yanmin: From Kidnapped Girl to Most Beautiful Rural Teacher," all websites must pay close attention to and manage public opinion. Resolutely delete any malicious remarks attacking the government or the social system.  
(July 30, 2015) [Chinese]

In 1994, Gao Yanmin, an 18-year-old woman from Henan, was kidnapped in Shijiazhuang, Hebei after being lured to a train station there under the false pretense of employment. She was sold three times in four days before being forcibly settled with a husband in rural Hebei, where she was subject to intense physical and sexual abuse. After a series of thwarted escape and suicide attempts, Gao resigned herself to her fate. Being the only village resident to have finished middle school, she became a teacher and devoted herself to her students. In 2006 local media dubbed her "the most beautiful rural teacher" (最美乡村教师) in an article on her tragic story, and she was later given a provincial award. Her story reverberated nationally, inciting public outrage over official inaction on human trafficking. In 2009 her story was turned into the motion picture "Story of an Abducted Woman" (《嫁给大山的女人》).

Posted July 30, 2015

[chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/07/minitrue-manage-public-opinion-on-abductee-turned-model-teacher](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/07/minitrue-manage-public-opinion-on-abductee-turned-model-teacher)



Example of directive to enforce "public opinion management."



### 3. Sensitive Words



CDT's Sensitive Words series records keywords filtered from the search results of the popular microblogging platform Sina Weibo (Weibo).

Over 3,000 blocked search terms archived since April 2011, through trial-and-error and crowdsourcing.



敏感词	Sensitive Word	CDT English Post	第一次测试日期/结果 Date/Result of Test 1		第二次测试日期/结果 Date/Result of Test 2	第三次测试日期/结果 Date/Result of Test 3	第四次测试日期/结果 Date/Result of Test 4
北戴河 + 敏感	Beidaihe + sensitive	--	2015.08.06	Y			
反对 + 冬奥会	oppose + Winter Olympics	--	2015.08.06	Y			
fqrouter2	fqrouter2	--	2015.08.06	Y			
地下教会	house church	--	2015.08.06	Y			
被 + 黑历史	[passive marker] + black history	--	2015.08.06	Y			
蔡耀昌	Cai Yaochang	--	2015.08.06	Y			
周世峰 + 律师	Zhou Shifeng + lawyer	--	2015.08.06	Y			
红色权贵	red nobility	--	2015.08.06	Y			
江世俊	Jiang Shijun	--	2015.08.06	Y			
康 + 李春城	[Zhou Yong]kang + Li Chuncheng	--	2015.08.06	Y			
(吴)官正 + 王林	[Wu] Guanzheng + Wang Lin	--	2015.08.06	Y			
厅长 + 王林	department chief + Wang Lin	--	2015.08.06	Y			
Wu er kai xi	Wu'erkaixi	--	2015.08.06	Y			
习近平 + 坦克	Xi Jinping + tank	--	2015.08.06	Y			
535	May 35th (June 4th)	--	2015.08.06	Y			

### 3. Sensitive Words



Terms saved to bilingual spreadsheet, includes links to posts explaining why certain terms are sensitive: [https://docs.google.com/a/chinadigitaltimes.net/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aqe87wrWj9w\\_dFpJWjZoM19BNkFv2JrWS1pMEtYcEE#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/a/chinadigitaltimes.net/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aqe87wrWj9w_dFpJWjZoM19BNkFv2JrWS1pMEtYcEE#gid=0)

# 3. Sensitive Words

## Sensitive Words: Corruption Crackdown After Zhou

*Sensitive Words highlights keywords that are blocked from Sina Weibo search results. CDT independently tests the keywords before posting them, but some searches later become accessible again. We welcome readers to contribute to this project so that we can include the most up-to-date information. Use the form at the bottom of this post to help us crowd source sensitive words. You can also browse our archive of sensitive words.*

The announcement of the corruption investigation into former security chief Zhou Yongkang last July unleashed a flood of coverage in China's domestic media. By comparison, the news last week of his trial and sentencing to life in prison was heavily muted. This orchestrated hush extended to social media, with a number of related search terms blocked on Sina Weibo as of June 19th. These include **Zhou's name** (周永康) paired with **inspect** (视察); **death sentence** (死刑); **shuanggui** (双规) (the Party's notorious internal investigation system); **arrested** (被抓); and **Jiang Jiemin** (蒋洁敏), a prominent former Zhou ally who came under investigation for corruption in 2013 and faced a one-day trial in April.

Posted June 20, 2015

[chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/06/sensitive-words-corruption-crackdown-after-zhou](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/06/sensitive-words-corruption-crackdown-after-zhou)



Over the past year or so, we have increasingly encountered keyword combinations that are blocked, while the keywords in the combination are individually searchable. Examples of blocked keyword combinations are shown here.

# 3. Sensitive Words

## Sensitive Words: June 4th, 2015

On this 26th anniversary of the June 4, 1989 military crackdown on protesters in the vicinity of Tiananmen Square in Beijing (which coincided with several other [crackdowns on pro-democracy demonstrations in China](#)), several terms related to the event are unsearchable on Sina Weibo. Many of the blocked searches listed below have been blocked before. See our [Sensitive Words posts from June 2012 and June 2013](#), and searches banned on [May 22](#), [May 27](#), and [June 4](#) of last year.

For an extensive list of June 4-related terms currently blocked, see the words highlighted in grey on CDT's regularly updated [spreadsheet](#) database of sensitive words. Among the terms forbidden from searches today:

### Sensitive Numbers and Dates:

Several related numbers are currently sensitive, a fact highlighted this week in a cartoon by Rebel Pepper. Unsurprisingly and consistent with previous years, "64," is blocked, as are several other ways of numerically denoting the fourth of June, including: "63+1," "6four," "six+four," "six4," "liusi," "viiv," and "六四" (64), and "8的平方" (the square of 8, i.e. 64). Similarly, many ways of referring to 1989 are unsearchable, for example "八九" (89), "捌玖" (89 in banker's anti-fraud characters), "8jiu," and others. However, at the time of this posting, searches for "1989" and "89," as well as "6/4" do yield results.

Posted June 4, 2015  
[chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/06/sensitive-words-june-4th-2015](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/06/sensitive-words-june-4th-2015)



Certain keywords are blocked cyclically, such as around the anniversary of June 4th.

## 4. Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon



CDT's Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon is a wiki of creative, subversive Chinese Internet language created to skirt censorship and mock propaganda. Image is of artist Ai Weiwei with a "grass-mud horse" stuffed animal.

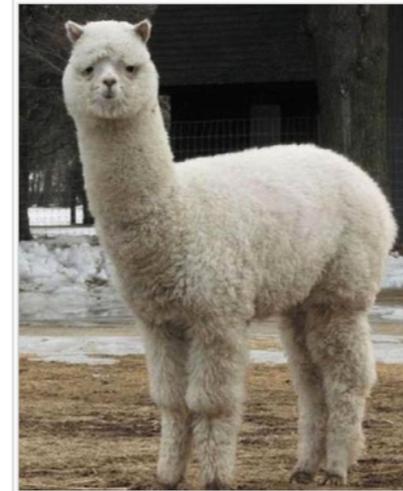
# 4. Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon

## Grass-mud horse

草泥马 (cǎonímǎ): grass-mud horse

De facto mascot of Chinese netizens fighting for free expression, symbolizing defiance of Internet censorship. The grass-mud horse, whose name sounds nearly the same as “fuck your mother” (禽你妈 cào nǐ mā), was originally created to skirt government censorship of vulgar content. Film scholar [Cui Weiping](#) draws a direct connection between the launch of the “Special Campaign to Rectify Vulgar Content on the Internet” in early 2009 and the appearance of the [Song of the Grass-Mud Horse](#) in February of that year. The idea caught fire after netizens made a video depicting the grass-mud horse defeating the [river crab](#) (河蟹 héxiè), a homonym for the propaganda catchword “harmony” (和谐 héxié). Netizens continually expanded the lore of the grass-mud horse by composing [catchy songs](#), [photo albums of its natural habitat](#), and [fake nature documentaries](#).

The Communist Party is often described as “the mother” of the people, so “fuck your mother” also suggests “fuck the Party.” The grass-mud horse is one of many



Originally conceived as a zebra, the grass-mud horse is now an alpaca. (Source: [shanti-phula.net](#))

[chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-mud\\_horse](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-mud_horse)



Why the grass-mud horse: alpaca born from the policing of dirty words in 2009; grass-mud horse music video from the time reveals the true meaning of its name. Tones are not sung, so “grass-mud horse” (cǎonímǎ 草泥马) in song is indistinguishable from “fuck your mom” (cào nǐ mā 禽你妈).

# Decoding the Chinese Internet:

A Glossary of Political Slang



2015 Edition

A CHINA DIGITAL TIMES E-BOOK  
中国数字时代电子书



Our ebook of classic terms and latest memes from the Lexicon is available for pay-what-you-want: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/07/decoding-the-chinese-internet-ebook-2015-edition>



中国数字时代

CHINA DIGITAL TIMES

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Thank You

谢谢

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