

Reflections from China

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Introduction

Since its inception in 1995, the ETHICOMP Conference series has provided a forum for scholars and practitioners worldwide to engage in debate and dialogue concerning the social and ethical implications of information and communication technologies. IMIS has always been associated with ETHICOMP. In order to engage with those from other cultures and communities across the world, ETHICOMP 2007 was held at Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan and a new initiative, the ETHICOMP Working Conference 2007, was held at Yunnan University in Kunming, China. In this edition of **ETHicol** we reflect upon our experiences in China, which included the two-day ETHICOMP Working Conference in Kunming, lectures and conversations within the Schools of Computer Science and Business at Zhejiang Wanli University in Ningbo, the Department of Philosophy at Peking University and the Chinese Academy of Social Science. Especially important was a conversation we had with Ke Xiang, Master of the Ningbo Seven Pagoda Temple and Member of the Board of Directors of the China Buddhist Association.

Two Initial Perspectives

While discussing ethics and information and communication technologies at the ETHICOMP Working Conference 2007, it became apparent that the "technologist's perspective" in China was remarkably similar to that of technologists in Europe and North America before computer ethics was fully integrated into university curricula. In both cases, technologists, in general, believed that "technology is technology and ethics is ethics, and the two are not related". This narrow view is problematical because it causes technologists and public policy makers, to ignore the wider social and ethical impacts of technology. Issues like social inclusion, intellectual property ownership and individual privacy, for example, can easily be overlooked with such a narrow outlook.

A broader perspective was expressed by the Buddhist Master, Ke Xiang when he used an analogy between a table and the Internet. Just as coming to the table brings people together, he explained, so using the Internet can have a similar effect, but in a much broader sense. At the same time, he acknowledged that the Internet has many ethical pitfalls. He said that it is not technology that should be central in our thinking, but human beings and how they educate their children. If parents and society properly educate children to become ethically responsible and virtuous citizens, their interaction with and use of technology will be socially appropriate.

In our view, this wise advice should be applied to all levels and areas of education. Therefore, computer science courses at universities should not only address the science, but also the social impacts. In particular, we believe it is paramount that computer ethics be embedded within the computer science curriculum. Indeed, this multidisciplinary education of professional engineers, including those involved with computers, was recommended nearly 20 years ago by a Chinese academic. In an oral history of China, *Portraits of Ordinary Chinese*, edited by Lui Bingwen and Xiong Lei (1990) there is a fascinating insight by Xie Xialing who "... now a lecturer in philosophy at the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai, was once a 'Red Guard' in the early days of the Cultural Revolution" He became disillusioned and outspoken which led to him being imprisoned and then exiled as a 'class enemy'. "Originally he majored in engineering, but his experiences as a Red Guard changed his academic orientation ...". He explains that, "China needs more engineers than philosophers, but it won't do if one knows everything about machines, but nothing about Plato or Kant, literature, or the Cultural Revolutions." This type of approach presents a great challenge to university curriculum leaders and government policy makers in ensuring adequate time and resources for computer ethics instruction. We were heartened by the fact that a number of Chinese academics were very interested in experimenting with the inclusion of computer ethics within their courses.

Computer Ethics Issues in China

The urgent need for this curriculum update is illustrated by the fact that we discovered, by reading just a few issues of the newspaper *China Daily*, that the Chinese people already are experiencing a wide range of complex computer ethics issues. The following examples clearly illustrate this point:

1. In the *China Business Weekly*, April 2-8, 2007, page 9, Li Jing wrote, "China is considering ways to establish its own intellectual property right (IPR) policies and standards for information and communication technology (ICT), to strike a balance

between protecting patent-holder rights and encouraging interoperability among 'islands' of technologies.

"Though standards and IPR are both important for technological progress and improving social welfare, there is an inherent conflict between the two when a patent is integrated within standards, says Zhou Baoxin, Secretary General of China Communications Standards Association (CCSA), which has been drafting IPR strategies for standardization since 2003."

2. In the China Daily, March 31- April 1, 2007, page 9 (quoting the Oriental Daily), it was reported that "The Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data is investigating a blacklist of more than 100 foreign maids that was posted on a Hong Kong parenting web site.

"A post entitled 'Come in if you want to blacklist a maid' appeared on a forum of the popular website Baby Kingdom and has been viewed more than 15,000 times. The names, photos and passport numbers of the 100 maids who had been accused of stealing, beating children, lying or being lazy had been added to the thread.

"The operator of Baby Kingdom has denied responsibility, saying it would be impossible to monitor every one of the 10,000-plus messages left on the website's forums daily."

3. In the China Daily, April 10, 2007, page 1, Wang Xing reported that, "The government yesterday issued a regulation, which takes effect on April 15, demanding online operators set up a 'game fatigue system' that encourages players under 18 to play less than 3 hours a day.

"Online gamers will also be required to register using real names and identity card numbers to indicate if they are younger than 18.

"Experts said the move reflects government fears over the social impact of popular online games, which have been blamed for the rising numbers of school children playing truant or even committing crimes."

4. In the China Daily, April 12, 2007, page 10, Li Xing discusses Tim O'Reilly's proposal for a code of conduct for bloggers. She writes, "... I believe that such a code is necessary in China, especially to avoid the spread of verbal violence on the Internet.

"We Chinese should be familiar with what havoc verbal violence can wreak on society.

"Some people may argue that a code of conduct not only deprives netizens of their freedom of expression but also discourages criticism, which society needs for healthy development.

"Indeed, criticism is like doses of bitter medicine to help treat the ills and wrongs in society or offer advice for better creative arts and other works.

"But viciousness, slander and disrespect for people's individual choices and private lives are not criticism. They are poisons that harm the freedom of individuals and society harmony, whether they appear on the Internet or in society."

5. In the China Daily, March 31- April 1, 2007, page 4, the Beijing-based scholar A Ying wrote that "In today's world, the spread and retrieval of information no longer suffer from the confines of class. The great mass of grassroots citizens receives information almost at the same time as those in other social strata and therefore enjoys the same opportunities and conditions for reaching their own conclusions, hence the rising value and importance of their opinions and viewpoints.

"Thanks to the public and anonymous nature of the Internet, the political moods of netizens inevitably reflect the overall mood of the society. What the blogs reflect is one side of public opinion, popular culture and social interests, though the practice of attracting visits with sensationalism and low taste is constantly targeted by many netizens. In general, the rise of grassroots web users in China is undoubtedly an important area closest to the world-wide trend in this country's modernization process and a new subject worth studying and close observation." The 'new subject' referred to here is computer ethics.

The Digital Divide

The growing dependence of society upon technology means that citizens who already are disadvantaged, for whatever reason, are likely to become even more disadvantaged. This is what Western scholars have named "the digital divide". An excellent example of this in China was described in the China Daily, April 2, 2007, page 1. There Wang Zhuoqiong reported that illiteracy increased by 30 million between 2000 and 2005 despite government initiatives. Wang noted that "The number of illiterates in China accounted for 11.3 percent of the world's total in 2000 and 15.01 percent in 2005." One reason

offered to explain why this happened was that farmers can earn more money working as laborers in addition to farming, rather than going to school. This explanation was suggested by "Gao Xuegui, director of the illiteracy eradication office of the basic education department of the Ministry of Education".

Being illiterate makes it difficult or impossible to use new technology. As a result a growing number of illiterate citizens become more disadvantaged as society becomes more dependent upon technology. The illiteracy problem in China, as reported in the China Daily, is likely to lead to a wider and more challenging "digital divide". When dealing with a country as large as China, the problem is more complicated and more difficult to resolve.

Concluding Remarks

The above examples of computer ethics issues in China confirm the need for Chinese technologists, business leaders, government officials and public policy makers, as well as Chinese scholars, to be proactive in developing solutions to the complex, technology-generated social and ethical challenges. We were inspired by our conversation with Buddhist Master Ke Xiang, which clearly demonstrated that the ethical wherewithal and wisdom to deal with computer ethics challenges already exist within Chinese society. Just as the social context in which technology is deployed determines how that technology will be used, so also the wisdom and social values of a community provide the wherewithal to address the computer ethics issues that emerge. It is clear that the great traditions and teachings of Chinese philosophers and thinkers will not only enable China to address technology-generated ethical issues within its borders, they also will enable China to make a significant contribution globally.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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