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Internet Use: Behind "The Great Firewall of China"

Internet use exploding in China

by Richard Burkholder, International Bureau Chief

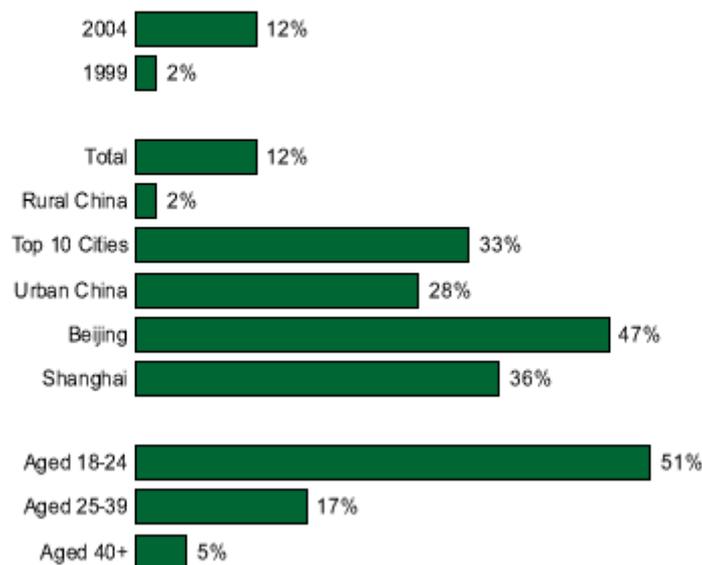
Government censorship notwithstanding, Internet use is exploding in China. Gallup's latest nationwide poll of China indicates 12% of all Chinese aged 18 and older -- or more than 100 million people -- say they have used the Internet. This figure represents an extraordinary increase from the mere 2% in Gallup's 1999 survey who said they had accessed the Internet, and surpasses the 10% of Chinese adults in our 1997 survey who had even *heard of* the Internet. Within the next few years, China appears certain to surpass the United States (which has nearly 140 million Web users) as the world's largest Internet community.

Not surprisingly, Internet use is far more common in urban China (28%) than in rural areas (just 2%), and is especially prevalent in large, developed cities such as Beijing (47%) and Shanghai (36%).

Far more dramatic, however, is the sharp inverse relationship between Internet use and age. Among China's youngest adults, Internet use is quickly becoming the norm rather than the exception. Half (51%) of all Chinese between the ages of 18 and 24 say they have accessed the Internet (74% of 18- to 24-year-olds in urban China; 21% of 18- to 24-year-olds in rural China). Conversely, use of the Internet remains minimal among Chinese aged 40 and older, at just 5%.

Have you, yourself, ever used the Internet?

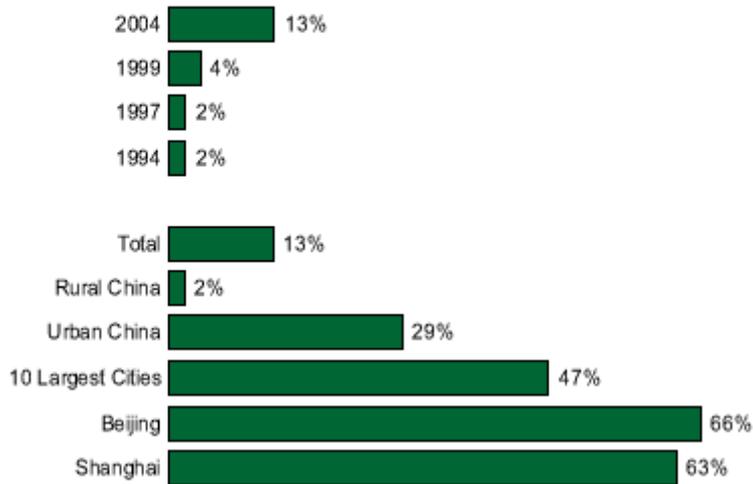
(Chinese adults, aged 18 and older)



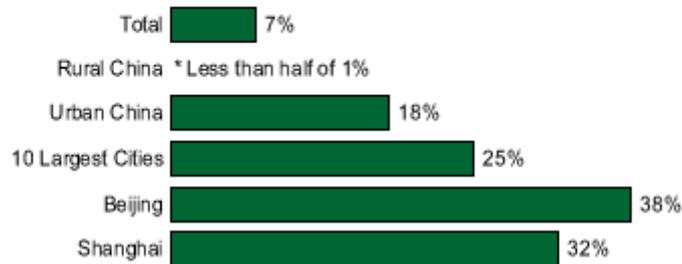
Computer Ownership and Access

How do Chinese access the Internet? Granted not all computers are connected to the Internet, but the rate of computer ownership in Chinese households has also risen sharply in recent years. In our 1997 survey, just 2% of Chinese homes had a computer -- a figure that doubled to 4% just two years later. The latest survey indicates 13% of Chinese households nationwide own at least one computer -- a proportion that rises to 47% in the country's 10 largest cities, and 66% in Beijing. Remarkably, Gallup also found that 7% of China's roughly 400 million households now have in-home broadband service, as do roughly a third of homes in Beijing (38%) and Shanghai (32%).

Households With a Computer in the Home

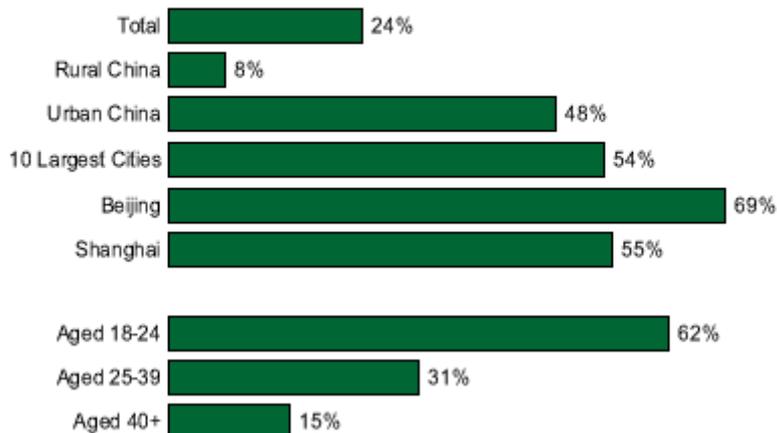


Broadband Reception in the Home

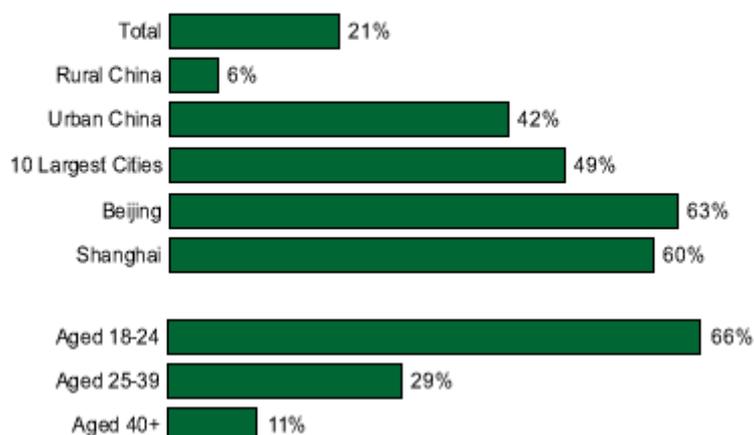


Just one household in eight actually *owns* a computer, but *access* to computers is actually far greater than that figure alone would suggest. Nationwide, one in every four Chinese (24%) say they have some form of regular access to a computer "either at home, at work, at school, or somewhere else." This percentage rises to 62% among Chinese between the ages of 18 and 24. Even more remarkably, two-thirds (66%) of people in this same age cohort have personally used a computer at some point.

Have Access to a Computer "at Home, at Work, at School, or Somewhere Else"



Have Personally Used a Computer

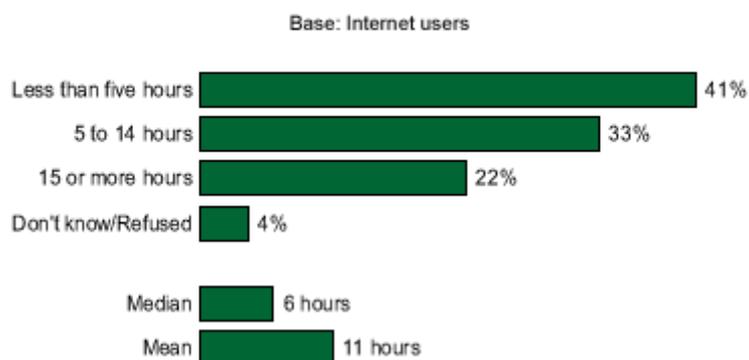


China has at least 100,000 Internet cafes that provide another option for those who do not own computers. They are particularly popular with young people, although only those aged 16 and older may go online in such establishments.

Chinese Internet Habits

China's Internet users report spending an average (median) of nearly an hour a day online -- about six hours a week. However, a significant minority (22%) are frequent users, and average more than two hours a day online. Thirty-eight percent of Internet users in Shanghai and 35% of those in Beijing average two hours a day online.

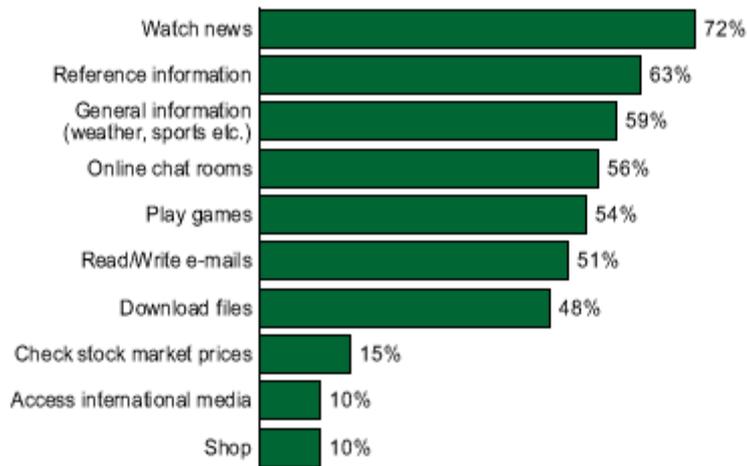
On average, approximately how many hours do you spend on the Internet each week?



What do China's Internet users do online? The single most common response is to access news (72%). Slightly smaller percentages access it for reference information (63%), or other general information such as sports and weather (59%). Online chat rooms (56%), games (54%), e-mail (51%), and file downloading (48%) are other common online activities.

What do you usually do on the Internet?

Base: Internet users



Other uses of the Internet provide additional indications of how quickly certain segments of China are changing. Fifteen percent of the country's Internet users say they access the Internet to check stock prices. And although e-commerce is still relatively new to China, a tenth of all Chinese Internet users say they shop online -- as do a quarter of all Internet users in Shanghai and Beijing.

It's perhaps even more remarkable that 10% of all users say they use the Internet to "access international media." Yet the Internet content available via the country's Internet service providers is extensively screened and censored by the government. Web sites of many key foreign news sources -- such as BBC News Online -- are routinely blocked from Chinese Internet users and available only to those willing and able to break the law by accessing these sites via overseas "proxy servers." Other major sites, such as CNN and *TIME* magazine, are generally available only on a content-filtered basis.

China now has dozens of laws restricting online content that block access to sites pertaining to human rights organizations, dissident groups, and "evil cults." One extensive survey by Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society found nearly 19,000 of the roughly 204,000 distinct Web sites it tested from within China were blocked -- including all the top 10 sites produced by using the search keywords "Tibet," "Taiwan," and "equality." China's state censors thus take a very broad view of what poses a threat to the country's territorial integrity and unity.

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