

The Story of China's First Email Link and How it Got Corrected
by Jay Hauben (Jan 12, 2010)

I feel honored to speak briefly as part of this launching of the new School of Global Journalism and Communications in Chongqing.¹

I want to tell you a little bit about the link between the internet and China and between the internet and journalism.

In the early 1990s, I sought to find and document where the internet came from, how it was developing and how it was spreading. I found substantial evidence that the internet developed as an open, scientific and engineering collaboration. All the evidence was that the process was international from the very beginning and was guided by a vision of a big advance to human society from a new universal, inexpensive communications system.²

But this historically accurate picture was not reflected in any reporting about the internet in the main US media. The dominant media story was that the internet was a side result from a project of the US military. That myth persists even until today. Why?

Of the many US journalists who report about the internet or IT industry it appears that almost none have independently investigated the history of what they write about. It also appears that few editors require such investigation and accuracy of their reporters. Like most else in the US mainstream media, a story about or reference to a mythical military origin is propagated rather than the truth of the public and scientific and open origin of the internet.

In 2004, Ronda Hauben and I were in Germany. Ronda had heard that the first permanent email link between China and the rest of the world was connected to the University of Karlsruhe in Germany. While in Germany, we were told if you want to know about the Germany-China link see Werner Zorn.

We located and interviewed Professor Zorn in Berlin. He shared his memories from 1983 to 1987. He told us that during those 4 years a Chinese-German international collaboration prepared the link so that China would be part of a worldwide email system called CSNET. Prof. Zorn supported his memories with documents from that period. He gave us copies of some documents. He particularly gave credit on the Chinese side to Professor Wang Yunfeng who was the general director of the Institute for Computer Applications (ICA) in Beijing. The ICA became the node of the email link.

I took up to write an article for the Amateur Computerist, an online news journal, about this history. My online research for the article took me mostly to web sites in China. The story told there gave most credit for the China-CSNET connection to a Chinese engineer, Qian Tianbai whom Zorn had hardly mentioned. Mostly missing from the history on the websites in China I found was any credit to Professor Wang or to the international component which Professor Zorn had stressed.

I sent email to Professor Zorn asking him about the discrepancy. I also sent email asking the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) if there was any evidence for citing on the CNNIC website that Qian Tianbai was responsible for the first email message. Prof. Zorn sent me via email more documents and the email addresses for two Chinese scientists, Dr. Li Cheng Chiung and Ruan Ren Cheng, who had signed the first email message. Dr. Li Cheng Chiung was the Director of the ICA from 1980 to 1990. A copy of the first email message was online. I saw that Qian Tianbai's name was not among the 13 signatures.

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(Message # 50: 1532 bytes, KEEP, Forwarded)
Received: from unikal by irau11.germany.csnet id an21216; 20 Sep 87 17:36 MET
Received: from Peking by unikal; Sun, 20 Sep 87 16:55 (MET dst)
Date: Mon, 14 Sep 87 21:07 China Time
From: Mail Administration for China <MAIL@ze1>
To: Zorn@germany, Rotert@germany, Wacker@germany, Finken@unikal
CC: lhl@parmesan.wisc.edu, farber@udel.edu,
jennings%airlean.bitnet@germany, cic%relay.cs.net@germany, Wang@ze1,
RZLI@ze1
Subject: First Electronic Mail from China to Germany

*Ueber die Grosse Mauer erreichen wie alle Ecken der Welt*
*Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner in the world*
Dies ist die erste ELECTRONIC MAIL, die von China aus ueber Rechnerkopplung
in die internationalen Wissenschaftsnetze geschickt wird.
This is the first ELECTRONIC MAIL, supposed to be sent from China into the
international scientific networks via computer interconnection between
Beijing and Karlsruhe, West Germany (using CSNET/PMDF BS2000 Version)
  University of Karlsruhe      Institute for Computer Application of
-Informatik Rechnerabteilung-  State Commission of Machine Industry
  (IRA)                       (ICA)
Prof. Werner Zorn              Prof. Wang Yuen Fung
Michael Finken                 Dr. Li Cheng Chiung
Stefan Paulisch               Qiu Lei Nan
Michael Rotert                 Ruan Ren Cheng
Gerhard Wacker                Wei Bao Xian
Hans Lackner                  Zhu Jiang
                               Zhao Li Hua
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The First Email Message to CSNET from China

The two Chinese scientists answered with more information about the September 1987 email message and about Qian Tianbai. Particularly they both answered that Qian Tianbai was not in China at the time of the opening of the link in 1987 and that Qian Tianbai had not participated in this project. I found no evidence otherwise.

Through further digging and via email correspondence with Dr. Li Cheng Chiung and Ruan Ren Cheng, I was able to confirm to my satisfaction Prof. Zorn's story of the events.

I wrote my article³ and it was published in the Amateur Computerist⁴ giving justified credit to Professors Wang and Zorn and their teams and to Lawrence Landweber of the CSNET and Stephen Wolff. My article appeared online and I sent copies to CNNIC and other contacts I had made in China. Encouraged by my journalism, Professor Zorn intensified his efforts to get the story corrected in China.

A bit later Prof. Zorn was invited by Ronda Hauben to tell the story at a panel planned in conjunction with the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) for Nov 2005 in Tunis in North Africa.

In Tunis, Prof. Zorn presented his story of the international effort and collaboration especially between himself and his team in Germany and Prof. Wang and Dr. Li and the team in Beijing. Prof. Zorn put up many slides showing the Chinese and German teams during the period and he put up one slide which said:

“The official time lines contain some seriously mistaken information and are also omitting important facts. They cause hereby fatal misinformation meanwhile spread all over the world.”

In the audience in Tunis was Madame Hu Qiheng, Vice President, China Association for Science & Technology, and Chair of Internet Society of China. She rose and spoke of her friendship with Qian Tianbai but said she would investigate why the story told in China differed from the one Prof. Zorn told. I gave her a copy of my article and Prof. Zorn gave her copies of some of the documents he had given me.

I do not know how it happened⁵, but eighteen months later, entries on the official CNNIC website Internet time line were changed to give proper credit to the work of Professors Zorn and Wang, their teams and the international effort that made the first email link between China and the world via CSNET possible. The first entry of the CNNIC Internet Time Line now reads:

“In September 1987, with the support from a scientific research group led by Professor Werner Zorn of Karlsruhe University in Germany, a working group led by Professor Wang Yunfeng and Doctor Li Chengjiong built up an Email node in ICA, and successfully sent out an Email to Germany on Sep 20th. The Email title was "Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner in the world."

Later, when Prof. Zorn organized a celebration in October 2007 of the 20th anniversary of the success of the opening of the China-CSNET link he invited many of the pioneers who helped spread the internet and he invited Mdm. Hu because she had helped spread the truth about that link. For me, the celebration was both for the success of the email link and for the success of helping correct how the history was being told in China. At the celebration Mdm. Hu presented an award from China to Prof. Zorn and in her presentation said,

The international collaboration in science and technology is the driving force for computer networking across the country borders and facilitating the early Internet development in China.



Mdm Hu Qiheng presenting the award to Prof Werner Zorn in 2007 in Potsdam

But this is not the end of the story.

In late 2008, the Internet Society of China asked online users what date would they chose for a National Netizens (Net Citizens) Cultural Festival? It is reported that about 500.000 users voted. The largest number of those voting chose September 14. That is the day in 1987 when the first message to be sent on the China-CSNET link was composed. When Mdm. Hu organized the first in the world Net Citizens (Netizens) Cultural Festival Day she invited Prof. Zorn. She also invited Ronda Hauben and me for our work about netizenship and about the international collaboration that made the internet possible.

The first Netizens Cultural Festival day was held this past September 14 in Beijing at the CCTV Tower. It was a lively event with speeches and awards for some bloggers. An oral history panel was held discussing some of the problems of opening an internet link to China in 1994 so the Chinese people could have full internet connectivity. This first net citizens' day was not yet well known among the public or even the 350,000,000 net users. It was like a baby being born, small but of a big potential.

Instead of seeing that potential, on a Wall Street Journal blog the event was framed as an "official day" that "didn't seem to muster much enthusiasm."⁶ But the Wall Street Journal was not the only media covering the events. About 40 online media journalists attended and reported on the celebration. They did live online blogging of the events and put up text, photo and video reports so that online users could see and judge the event for themselves.⁷

On the panel of oral history at the CCTV Tower, Chief Scientist and Vice President of the Internet Society of China Qian Hualin said that:

"Just as Germany was helpful with China establishing an email link with the CSNET in 1987, today China is offering its experience to Vietnam in network construction and to the DPRK in setting up and managing the domain name system of dot KP."

Here is the lead for another story, how the internet is getting to the DPRK.

As a conclusion from my story I would urge that journalism education include a strong requirement that all students learn and practice research methods. A journalist must be part historian, part detective, part intelligence agent, part scholar. Also, journalists must be encouraged and supported to be brave and follow trails to the truth.

I wish this new school and its students good luck in achieving the high level of journalism at which you will aim.

Thank you for your attention and I thank student guides Dolly and Litane for showing me Chongqing and for becoming my friend.

(1) This talk was presented at the International Conference on Media Education and Global Agendas, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing, China, January 12-13, 2010. See http://202.202.80.9/mweb/xwxy/showcontent_en.asp?anclassid=8

(2) See for example, "J.C.R. Licklider And The Universal Network" by William Stewart, http://www.livinginternet.com/i/ii_licklider.htm; "Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet" by Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/netbook/>, and "A Brief History of the Internet" by Barry M. Leiner, Vinton G. Cerf, David D. Clark, Robert E. Kahn, Leonard Kleinrock, Daniel C. Lynch, Jon Postel, Larry G. Roberts, Stephen Wolff, <http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.shtml>

(3) "'Across the Great Wall': The China-Germany Email Connection 1987-1994." See <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/china-email.doc>

(4) <http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/>

(5) After I gave this presentation, I learned that it was at the conference in Tunis that Mdm Hu heard for the first time the details of the email link which opened in 1987. After the session, Prof. Zorn gave her some material on the early collaborations and a copy of the email message. Once back in China, she asked CNNIC to study the materials that Prof. Zorn had given her and make some follow up investigations. Afterward, when they got more evidence and were convinced that it is true, they made provision to the "milestone events of the Internet in China" according to the historical truth. She concluded: "Respect to the truth, to the history, helps us in establishing a comfortable world."

(6) "China's Netizens Day Gets Scant Attention" by Juliet Ye. See <http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2009/09/15/chinas-netizens-day-gets-scant-attention/tab/article/>

(7) See for example, http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTE5MTY3OTUy.html, <http://v.tech.163.com/video/2009/9/H/P/V5I96L9HP.html>

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