

Many wired Chinese unfazed at possible Google exit

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In this photo taken Friday, Jan. 22, 2010, the Chinese flag is seen near the Google sign at the Google china headquarters in Beijing, China. Google's future in China is in limbo and observers around the world are carefully tracking its dispute with Beijing. But one group is notably lukewarm on the fate of the Internet giant in the world's most populous online market: many of China's 384 million Internet users. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

(AP) -- A world without Google? They can imagine it just fine in China. After all, it's not like losing "World of Warcraft."

The online giant's threat to pull out of China over censorship has drawn little reaction among the country's 384 million Internet users. No flood of complaints to China's consumer rights agency, like the tens of thousands received in one day when the online fantasy game "World of Warcraft" was yanked last year because of a bureaucratic turf battle. Nor has there been the type of fury that saw 32,000 indignant gamers

participate in an online chat session on the "World of Warcraft."

"If Google leaves China, we'll lose one [search engine](#). But we still have other choices," said 28-year-old Deng Zhiluo, who works in marketing in Beijing. He said while Google's search results are more "international," most of what he wants can be found on Chinese competitor Baidu. "For locals, Baidu is enough."

The indifference of many Chinese points to a telling challenge for Google in the world's most populous Internet market. The Chinese Internet world is youthful, with people under 30 making up 61.5 percent of the online population, and Google's cause isn't generating popular support among China's wired teens and 20-somethings.

"It's like in the U.S. saying, 'You can't use Yahoo search anymore'," said T.R. Harrington, CEO of Shanghai-based Darwin Marketing, which specializes in China's search engines. "What would people say? 'So what? I'll use Google more, and I'll try Bing and I might try a few other ones ... I don't care.'"

Google threatened three weeks ago to shut down its Chinese search engine, Google.cn, citing cyberattacks emanating from China plus attempts to snoop on dissidents.

Some Chinese admire the Mountain View, Calif.-based company's stand and its "don't be evil" image: A few dozen laid flowers outside Google's Beijing headquarters, and a few hundred joined a "Don't Go Google" Web site before it was shut down for unknown reasons.

The trouble Google is having generating support among Chinese underscores how successfully the communist government controls information. While authorities have set up an extensive network of Internet filters, blockades and monitoring - dubbed the "Great Firewall

of China" - that's only part of the picture. China's permissible Internet universe is flooded with choice, with 3.2 million registered Web sites offering politically acceptable news coverage and loads of diversions from shopping to music downloads.

The generation of Chinese currently in their teens and 20s are known for their love of consumerism and disdain for politics. Most aren't interested in scaling the "Great Firewall" by using proxy servers or other technical subterfuges, according to Kaiser Kuo, a Beijing-based technology analyst. Their favorite online activities: listening to music, chatting with friends and playing video games.

For many sites blocked by the government - including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter - there are readily available, government-approved Chinese substitutes: Youku and Tudou for videos, Kaixinwang and Renren for social networking. Sina.com, the largest Internet portal, runs a Twitter-like microblogging site.

"Baidu does the same things as Google," said 30-year-old IT salesman Zheng Hongyi. "And if it leaves there will be more companies coming up to fill this need."

Beijing may be interested in seeking an accommodation. Google is an innovator whose presence could spur innovation by Chinese competitors. Blocking Google sites could encourage more Chinese to seek ways of getting around Internet controls. That's what happened last year when two government agencies prohibited Chinese sites from offering "World of Warcraft" while they battled over the right to regulate the lucrative online game. Local stores started selling access cards that allowed Chinese fans to play the game on Taiwanese servers.

Google's message is resonating with some Chinese. Wen Yunchao, a popular blogger who writes about social issues and the Internet, said the

publicity Google touched off has raised awareness about censorship and Internet access, especially in less worldly cities.

"A lot of people might not normally feel the existence of [censorship](#). This lets more people know, understand and like Google. I've heard in some second and third-tier cities, Google's usage is increasing dramatically," Wen said.

Outside big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, Google's brand recognition is low, said Tangos Chan of Internet and technology blog China Web Radar. When visiting his rural hometown in southeastern Fujian province a year or so ago, Chan found that some of his childhood friends "didn't really know what it was ... they just use Baidu."

While Google is generally seen in China as the go-to site for searching overseas Web sites, Baidu is known for being better at finding Web sites in Chinese, both in China and abroad. The Nasdaq-listed company also runs a popular message board, online encyclopedia and vast digital music library.

Baidu has about 60 percent of China's search engine market, compared with Google's 35 percent, according to Analysys International, a Beijing research firm.

"Baidu has more products that make it a destination for the average user in China," said Harrington, the marketing specialist.

Also hurting Google is the Chinese government's control of the country's news media. State-run media have glossed over the company's allegations about China-based hacking attacks and instead portrayed the affair as a business decision by Google. Many young Chinese believe that Google wants to leave because it's being drubbed by [Baidu](#).

State media recently hardened their stance, accusing the U.S. government of being behind the dispute, particularly after a speech by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Jan. 21 when she called on China to investigate the attacks that led to Google's threat to pull out.

"Right now, a lot of netizens feel the American government was involved. Google's image is becoming more and more negative," said Rao Jin, an online entrepreneur who recently launched google-liar.com. "If Google leaves, we will be losing an Internet tool but we must be aware of national security threats."

Rao has been successful in tapping popular sentiment in [China](#). He is the founder of anti-cnn.com, launched during ethnic rioting in Tibet in March 2008 and aimed at exposing alleged bias in Western media reports. It still receives 1 million page views a day.

The 25-year-old has such influence that he was among bloggers and other Chinese Internet personalities invited to round-table discussions at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing before President Barack Obama's visit in November and after Clinton's speech, in an effort by the State Department to sway Chinese public opinion.

Ironically, some of the anti-Google articles Rao posted on google-liar.com were found with the help of [Google](#). The Internet entrepreneur and his friends even use the company's Gmail e-mail service.

Rao said he's backing up his Gmail account and preparing to switch to a Chinese e-mail provider. He said you can always find a ready Chinese substitute.

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