

China eyes 500 million web users

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Customers are seen playing online games at a internet cafe in Beijing. A top Chinese official has said the nation's online population, already the largest in the world, is expected to exceed 500 million in the next two to three years.

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Three-quarters of the web newcomers over the next few years would be from rural areas, the Global Times newspaper quoted Qian Xiaoqian, vice minister in the State Council's press office, as saying.

China already has 384 million online users, according to the latest official figures.

Its spiralling online population has turned the Internet into a forum for

citizens to express their opinions in a way rarely seen in a country where the traditional media is under strict government control.

The growing strength and influence of the web population has prompted concern in Beijing about the Internet's potential as a tool for generating social unrest, and authorities have stepped up surveillance in recent years.

The government blocks web content that it deems politically sensitive in a vast system dubbed the "Great [Firewall](#) of China".

On Monday, Internet giant [Google](#) said it had decided to redirect mainland web search queries to an uncensored site in Hong Kong to try to counter China's [censorship](#) -- a move that triggered an angry response from [Beijing](#).

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