Wikipedia Potential Audience Research

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Abstract

This proposal seeks to investigate awareness, engagement, and access to Wikipedia among internet users in mainland China, where direct access to Wikipedia is blocked by state censorship. The project will analyze how Chinese users navigate this barrier through unofficial mirror websites and will compare users' content interests and experiences on Wikipedia (via these mirrors) versus the popular local encyclopedia Baidu Baike. We employ a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative web analytics (from Wikipedia mirror domains) with qualitative insights from user surveys. By examining what topics users seek on mirrors and how they perceive Wikipedia's content and reliability relative to Baidu Baike, we aim to illuminate the knowledge needs of a large, under-served audience.

Introduction

Wikipedia has been completely blocked in all language editions in mainland China since April 2019, following a prolonged period during which the Chinese-language version was selectively restricted starting from 2015.[1][2] Additionally, since 2019, other Wikimedia services, including Wikimedia Commons, Wiktionary, and Wikinews, have become fully inaccessible due to intensified government censorship. This sustained blockage has significantly impeded access to open knowledge for Chinese speakers, who represent approximately 1.2 billion people worldwide—making Chinese the world's second-most widely spoken language.[3] The restrictions severely hamper the exchange of free and unbiased information between mainland China and the global community, creating a pronounced gap within the Wikimedia ecosystem and the broader open knowledge environment.

Since the blockade began, Chinese-language content on Wikipedia has predominantly been maintained by users from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the broader Chinese diaspora. Mainland China, with over one billion internet users, represents a vast yet significantly underserved audience. The Wikimedia Foundation previously attempted to restore access in mainland China,[4] but these efforts were consistently obstructed by government policies.

Our research aims to bridge the knowledge gap created by this censorship by exploring the attitudes, awareness, and interests of potential Wikipedia users in mainland China. Specifically,

[1] Brewster, T. (2015, May 22). *Wikipedia disturbed over fresh China censorship*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2015/05/22/wikipedia-disturbed-over-fresh-china-censorship/

[2] The Verge. (2015, September 4). Jimmy Wales wants Wikipedia to expand in China, but not at the cost of censorship. The Verge. https://www.theverge.com/2015/9/4/9260981/jimmy-wales-wikipedia-china

[3] Wikipedia. (n.d.). List of languages by total number of speakers. Retrieved April 14, 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_total_number_of_speakers

[4] 中央社 CNA. (2018, July 19). 維基百科創辦人：不會為進入中國市場而妥協 [Wikipedia founder: Will not compromise to enter the Chinese market]. 中央社 CNA. https://www.cna.com.tw/news/ait/201807190215.aspx

we intend to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent are individuals in mainland China interested in accessing and contributing to Wikipedia despite the decade-long blockage?
2. What is the current level of awareness regarding Wikipedia among potential mainland Chinese users, and which types of content are most appealing or relevant to them?
3. Can unofficial yet secure and freely accessible channels effectively promote Wikipedia usage within mainland China?
4. How competitively positioned is Wikipedia relative to dominant local wiki platforms, such as Baidu Baike?

Ultimately, this research aims to clearly identify the needs and interests of potential Wikipedia users in mainland China and evaluate alternative, secure methods of providing access. Insights derived from this study will inform strategic approaches to engaging this important demographic, enhancing the global reach and influence of Wikipedia in the Chinese-speaking context, and supporting robust international knowledge exchange in restricted digital environments.

Date: (12 months)
- **Start:** July 1, 2025
- **End:** June 30, 2026

Related work

In 2013, Wikipedia editor Addis Wang implemented an innovative approach using social media to promote Wikipedia in mainland China.[5] Wang and collaborators utilized Weibo, a widely popular Chinese microblogging platform, to share engaging content from Wikipedia and build community interest. Their strategy involved daily posting of abstracts from quirky or intriguing Wikipedia articles, aiming to capture the attention of Weibo's large user base. Some posts gained significant traction, with thousands of views and reposts. The campaign also included interactive community-building efforts, such as encouraging users to share personal experiences of their Wikipedia usage and promoting participation in Wikimedia events like Wikimania conferences. This initiative successfully increased awareness, resulting in nearly 10,000 followers within six months and directly contributing to the Chinese Wikipedia community through new user engagement and content contributions. Wang's project highlights social media's potential to bridge access gaps and engage users in regions with restricted internet access, demonstrating a viable model for outreach in mainland China.

However, this method is no longer effective, as censorship on Chinese social media platforms has significantly intensified, restricting much of the Wikipedia-related content on local platforms. [6][7] As of 2025, the Wikipedia (维基百科) account on Weibo still retains over 7,000 followers, but the account has been inactive.[8] On rare occasions, some Weibo users still share information sourced from Chinese Wikipedia on their personal accounts, which are not officially affiliated with Wikipedia.

[5] Wang, A. (2013, December 4). Using social media to engage Wikipedia readers and editors in China. Wikimedia Diff.

https://diff.wikimedia.org/2013/12/04/using-social-media-to-engage-editors-in-china/

[6] FreeWeibo. (n.d.). Search results for "Wikipedia". Retrieved April 1, 2025, from
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[7]FreeWeibo. (n.d.). Search results for "维基百科". Retrieved April 1, 2025, from
https://freeweibo.com/search?q=%E7%BB%B4%E5%9F%BA%E7%99%BE%E7%A7%91

[8] Weibo. (n.d.). 维基百科 (Wikipedia) Weibo profile. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from
https://weibo.com/u/1652324894

Building upon these earlier efforts, in 2023, our team developed and launched an Android mobile application, Wiki-Unblocked,[9] specifically designed to circumvent censorship firewalls and enable access to Wikipedia in restricted regions such as China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Our initial hypothesis was that a dedicated mobile app could substantially enhance global access to Wikipedia content. However, we encountered significant practical challenges. Chief among these was the difficulty of accessing the Google Play Store or even direct download pages, as they were frequently blocked or severely restricted in these regions. Additionally, the requirement for users to download and install a specialized app proved to be a considerable barrier, especially for first-time or casual users unfamiliar with circumvention tools.

To address these barriers, we subsequently developed an alternative solution utilizing domain mirroring. By strategically using domains that are not blocked in restricted regions, particularly targeting mainland China, we successfully created mirrors of Wikipedia. This approach allowed seamless, browser-based access without the need for VPNs, proxies, or software installations. A six-month pilot test of this approach yielded encouraging results, with daily visitor averages reaching from a few hundreds to over two thousands of daily unique users from mainland China accessing Wikipedia via these mirrored domains.

Despite these promising results, there remains a substantial gap in the understanding of mainland Chinese audiences' specific needs, interests, and user behaviors regarding Wikipedia, due to nearly a decade of restricted access. Comprehensive studies on the

awareness, engagement, and content preferences of potential Chinese Wikipedia users are currently lacking. Furthermore, rigorous comparisons of user experience and preference between Wikipedia and the predominant local wiki platforms, especially Baidu Baike, remain limited.

This research aims to close these critical gaps by systematically investigating:

1. The effectiveness and scalability of domain mirroring as an unofficial promotional channel for Wikipedia within mainland China.
2. The specific content interests, preferences, and informational needs of potential Wikipedia users in mainland China, measured through user engagement data.
3. Comparative user experiences and preferences between Wikipedia and local wiki services such as Baidu Baike, assessed via structured surveys and qualitative feedback.

Addressing these research gaps will provide essential insights into effectively engaging users in digitally restricted environments and contribute significantly to expanding Wikipedia's global reach.

Methods

Proposed Research Questions

1. What is the effectiveness of using unofficial mirror domains as a promotion channel for Wikipedia in mainland China?
2. What are the specific interests and informational needs of potential Wikipedia users in mainland China?
3. How does user experience and preference compare between Wikipedia

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[9] GreatFire. (n.d.). Wiki-Unblocked (Version 1.1.2) [Mobile app]. Google Play Store. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.greatfire.wikiunblocked

and the locally dominant platform, Baidu Baike?

Data Collection Methods

1. Analytics from Unofficial Promotion Channels

To address the first research question regarding the effectiveness of unofficial mirror domains, we will employ quantitative web analytics. We will randomly select 1,000 controlled domains accessible within mainland China to host Wikipedia mirror pages from July 1 to December 31, 2025. Domains will undergo thorough vetting to ensure no prior association with illegal activities. User engagement and traffic data will be continuously collected through an existing, secure backend analytics system designed specifically for this project.

We anticipate natural traffic on these domains, given their history as hosts for Chinese-language content. To ensure unbiased evaluation, we will abstain from any additional promotional activities, such as paid advertisements or sponsored search results. Additionally, only traffic originating within mainland China will be analyzed to accurately evaluate local engagement. Despite the potential for indexing by search engines like Google, their influence on traffic will be minimal due to the restricted accessibility of such services within China. If necessary, we can also add a filter to exclude Google traffic from the research statistics.

For the second research question, detailed user interaction data will be analyzed from these mirrored pages, including search queries and page visits. This data, collected concurrently (July 1 – December 31, 2025), will be systematically reviewed and categorized into prominent thematic areas to elucidate user interests and content preferences. The findings will inform targeted strategies for user engagement and content promotion.

2. User Experience Survey

To address the third research question, we will conduct a structured survey comparing user experiences and preferences between Wikipedia and Baidu Baike. The survey questions will be carefully developed, drawing on prior studies related to web service usability, market potential, and comparative analysis of digital platforms. Insights derived from initial data analytics and user interaction analyses will directly inform question formulation.

The survey will target users located in mainland China and be provided in Simplified Chinese. The survey will consist of approximately ten questions, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including:

- Likert scale (1–5) questions to measure user satisfaction and overall user experience with Wikipedia mirror domains versus Baidu Baike.
- Multiple-choice questions to clearly identify preferred topics and content categories.
- Open-ended questions designed to gather detailed qualitative feedback, suggestions for improvement, and deeper insights into user experiences.

Participants will be recruited organically from visitors accessing the 1,000 randomly selected mirrored domains. The survey will only appear for users with mainland Chinese IP addresses during a three-month period, from January 1 to March 31, 2026. Our target is to obtain 500 to 1,000 complete survey responses. We will utilize an online survey platform with rigorous user privacy and data policies for creating, managing, and initially analyzing the survey responses.

The quantitative survey data will be initially analyzed through the survey platform's analytical tools, providing descriptive statistical summaries. The qualitative responses (open-ended questions) will undergo thematic analysis to identify prevalent themes, distinctive feedback patterns, and recurring suggestions or critiques.

This research design explicitly avoids collecting personally identifiable information, ensuring compliance with ethical standards and protecting user privacy and safety throughout the study.

Expected output

The primary intended audience for these outputs includes the Wikimedia Foundation, its affiliates, trusted partner groups, researchers, and supporters of open knowledge initiatives.

1. Datasets

We will generate comprehensive datasets derived from the analytics collected through the mirror domains and survey responses. While initially, these datasets will be shared exclusively with the Wikimedia Foundation and trusted partner groups, they will also be made available upon request to academic researchers or other entities working towards public benefit objectives. These datasets will be carefully anonymized to ensure privacy and compliance with ethical research standards.

2. Internal Report with Actionable Insights

We will produce an internal report that provides detailed insights and clear recommendations to inform decision-making at the Wikimedia Foundation and among its trusted partners. This report will summarize key findings from our analyses, highlighting the effectiveness of the unofficial mirror domain strategy, identifying

content interests and needs among Chinese users, and detailing comparative user experiences. Additionally, we aim to disseminate key insights by presenting our findings at relevant conferences such as Wikimania, provided virtual participation opportunities are available.

3. Unofficial Promotion Channel for Wikipedia

A practical and significant outcome of our research will be the establishment and validation of an unofficial yet secure channel for promoting and accessing Wikipedia in mainland China. The direct beneficiaries of this output are the research participants and broader potential audience within mainland China, providing them free and safe access to Wikipedia content. This channel will serve as a sustainable tool to raise awareness, enhance engagement, and facilitate the growth of Wikimedia's presence in a highly restricted digital environment.

Risks

1. Passive User Discovery

One primary challenge is the passive nature of the promotion channels. These mirrored domains will not actively seek users through advertisements or direct outreach; rather, they rely on natural discovery by users within mainland China. Although users might organically discover and share these channels privately, public sharing of the links significantly increases the risk of quick detection and subsequent blocking by authorities.

To mitigate this challenge, we will continuously monitor the traffic and domain status closely and maintain a reserve pool of domains for rapid deployment if necessary.

2. Detection and Blocking by Authorities

The most significant risk is the potential detection and subsequent blocking of the mirrored domains by government authorities in mainland China. In the worst-case scenario, all 1,000 initially selected domains could be blocked, severely disrupting data collection and consistency in our research. Such an event would lead to the loss of financial resources spent on these domains and diminish the reliability of data.

To mitigate this risk, we have prepared contingency measures, including having backup domains ready for immediate deployment and establishing monitoring protocols to rapidly detect blockages. Despite these precautions, the risk of interruptions in data collection remains inherent and must be clearly acknowledged.

Community impact plan

1. Raising Awareness of Wikimedia Projects in Mainland China

To safeguard user privacy and mitigate associated risks, we will avoid direct engagement with users within mainland China. Instead, our strategy involves indirect engagement by collaborating with trusted partner groups and Wikimedia communities fluent in Chinese and situated in regions with substantial Chinese diaspora populations. These communities include, but are not limited to, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, and Canada. Our collaborations aim to leverage their networks and outreach capabilities to safely disseminate information, raise awareness, and promote engagement with Wikimedia projects.

2. Expanding the Unofficial Promotion Channels in Mainland China

We will actively share our research findings and methodologies with trusted partner organizations committed to increasing access to free information within highly restricted regions, such as mainland China. Additionally, we will collaborate with Wikimedia's global network of volunteer developers and affiliates, encouraging donations of inactive domains. These donated domains will further expand the reach and effectiveness of the unofficial promotion channels, enhancing the sustainability and scalability of this initiative.

3. Extending Unofficial Promotion Channels to Other Restricted Regions

Our longer-term objective includes adapting and extending the unofficial promotion channels established for mainland China to other regions facing similar Wikipedia access restrictions, notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, etc. We will identify local partners and Wikimedia community groups in these areas to replicate successful strategies, share best practices, and foster a broader impact by increasing global accessibility to Wikimedia projects and facilitating the free exchange of knowledge across diverse, restricted environments.

Evaluation

The success of the proposed project will be evaluated using the following measurable indicators:

1. **User Engagement**:
   - Quantitative measurement of unique users accessing Wikipedia through the project's unofficial promotion channels.
   - Tracking of sustained user engagement over the project duration to gauge channel effectiveness.
2. **Survey Participation and Quality**:
   - Achieving the target number of 500–1,000 complete survey

responses from mainland Chinese users.

- ○ Evaluating response quality, depth, and representativeness to ensure meaningful insights.

3. **Content Impact and Insightfulness**:
   - ○ Clear identification and categorization of priority topics and areas of interest, based on actual user interaction data.
   - ○ Validation through feedback from Wikimedia communities and trusted partner groups to confirm the impact of identified topics and content.

4. **Actionable Insights and Impact**:
   - ○ Delivery of a comprehensive research report with clearly articulated findings, actionable recommendations, and strategic implications.
   - ○ Assessment of report impact through feedback from Wikimedia Foundation stakeholders, partner groups, and presentation at relevant community events (e.g., Wikimania).

External Evaluation:
The evaluators should consider the project's success in terms of both quantitative targets (user numbers, survey completions) and qualitative impact (relevance and usability of insights, clarity of recommendations, and community reception). Ongoing feedback from trusted partners and Wikimedia Foundation stakeholders throughout the project duration will also serve as a critical measure of external evaluation.

Budget

Research Project budget link:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qGR35

EjtnvJIaZNYdxwuR-xv-zSLvj35nHJ0sWi0wmo/edit?usp=sharing

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