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Freedom of the Press and Democracy in China

Jeffery Wartman
Elmhurst College
Elmhurst IL USA

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Abstract

This manuscript explores the recent historical developments in regards to the opening up of a more free press in China, and how a more free press and free exchange of ideas will foster more development of social Democracy in China, which has already instituted various economic Democratic reforms.

Many people have different ideas about the true nature of democracy. One school of thought believes that democracy is the act of the people electing representatives to make decisions, held accountable through elections, for the populace. Others believe that democracy is rule by the people, in which the will of the populace is the almighty sovereign. Yet , while to many people the word democracy may mean many things, there is no doubt that if democracy is truly going to exist, there must be a free flow of ideas, both majoritarian ideas and those in the minority, so that people may make proper judgments when choosing their leaders. "The role of the press stands out in every major democratic transformation in modern time" (Xiaogang 212). Without a free press, a free flow of ideas and a minimal tolerance of dissent, the Democratic ideal of governance by the people can not occur if the people do not know

much of what is occurring. In the People's Republic of China, some citizens understood this.

“Individuals began to question nonsensical explanations given by those who had claimed to monopolize the truth. Question after question knocked the bottom out of the official ideology... people began to ask why the quality of goods and services provided by state-owned enterprises was so poor compared to that of free market products. While the direct consequences of market reform were modest in the beginning, the debates eventually succeeded in drawing people away not only from old economic concepts but also from the entire ideology of the Stalinist-Maoist state” (Xiaogang 197-198)

From this, it is obvious that there is a reason that Democracy and freedom of the press go hand in hand. Many of the Socialist economic principles of the Chinese government would be criticized for lack of productivity and overall economic health by experts. Suppressing the press could have either one of the following functions: either to prevent economic experts from being able to obtain information that would allow them to study whether or not the Chinese economic policies are healthy, or to prevent those experts from publishing and therefore getting the message to the citizens of China all together. Either way, the development of democracy is held back by a censorship of the press. As evidenced in Chinese history, such as suppression of the press in the 1980's, the Tiananmen Square demonstrations and its response, and the evolution of the internet have caused the Chinese government to understand that a more free press and free exchange of ideas pushes the citizen towards democracy, and therefore that free exchange has been suppressed.

In China, the press is not officially suppressed. In fact, according to the Chinese Constitution, Chapter II Article 35, “Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration” (“Constitution of the People's Republic of China...”) This clause of the Chinese Constitution clearly states that Chinese citizens reserve freedom of press as a right. However, the press is still highly regulated.

“There is, however, something unique about the press in China's transition to the market, namely the duality of its formal and informal roles. On the formal side, all media are required to toe the official propaganda line.

Press controls in China are not based upon codified censorship but are issue specific. In order to ensure that the media interpret the news in a way favorable to the regime, the state decided what the press can and cannot report, who deals with particular issues and how these news items are to be presented" (Xiaogang 195 - 196).

In other words, Chinese reporters enjoy a Constitutional right to a free press, but in practice the ruling party in China, the Communist Party, oversees all press that is put out in China to ensure it is positive to the regime. In fact, 80 percent of all press coverage must be positive or favorable to the regime (Xiaogang 198). Another way that the Chinese Communist party is able to regulate the press while not giving the appearance of violating the Constitution is by narrowly defining the harm done by a completely unregulated press. "Under its Protection of State Secrets law, revealing anything that the government deems a secret can count as spying. And spying can carry the death penalty" ("Back on the Leash" 32). So not only does saying anything remotely revealing about the Chinese government count as spying, but if you do reveal anything, such as a negative policy enacted by the government, there is harsh penalties involved, including the death penalty.

No one is sure about the number of journalists and writers who have been persecuted for exercising their right to a free press, due to the ambiguity of the charges leveled against them. However, there are 597 documented cases of blacklisting of editorial writers in response to content that they wrote. This was all made possible by the fact that the press had grown exponentially in the 1980's. 1600 press outlets existed in 1988, while in 1978, only 200 existed. Everyone seemed to be on the bandwagon for more press freedom in the 1980's. "Journalists, including those long affiliated with the Communist Party, began to urge reform of state press policies" (Xiaogang 198). The press had been given more freedom than they had ever enjoyed in the history of Communist China, albeit a small amount of freedom. However, something happened in 1989 that caused detention rates to go up. In fact, China had more reports detained in the years after 1989 than any other country in the world (Xiaogang 202).

The catalyst for these crackdowns in the press in 1989 was a demonstration by students, intellectuals and members of the press in April of 1989 who were attempting to have a rally for democracy in the large, Chinese courtyard of Tiananmen Square. Lasting for months, the demonstrators rallied for democratization and civil freedoms, spurred by the death of Hu Yaobang, a reformer who advocated democratization. "The mourning [for Yaobang] turning into vast demonstrations for a free press, more open and representative government, a crackdown on corruption and inflation, and independent labor unions. (Bernstein). Initially the Chinese politburo reacted stoically to the

demonstrations but eventually declared martial law in Tiananmen Square in June. The demonstration was violently broken up months later (Bernstein).

The Tiananmen Square demonstrations were classified by the Chinese government as a “criminal uprising” (Bernstein). There is no question that the demonstrations were not looked upon positively by the Chinese Communist Party.

“In the days leading up to the Tiananmen Square crackdown, the Communist Party's senior leaders came to believe that the demonstrations, if left unchecked, could lead to the violent overthrow of party rule and the onset of social chaos... to these leaders, the Tiananmen demonstrations confirmed that limited political dissent could rapidly attract support from other groups seeking to vent their own dissatisfactions” (Gilboy and Heginbotham 28).

This shows the extent that the citizens of China have power that most do not even realize. There are over a billion people in China, and although a civil war would be bloody, there is little doubt as evidenced by the fact that the Chinese leaders were terrified of the demonstrators at Tiananmen Square that the Communist Party wouldn't last long after a true uprising from all the people. This shows that the oppression that the Communist Party has exerted over the Chinese people itself is keeping a move towards democracy down; the Chinese government has been so hostile and militant in handling of dissent that people are fearful of speaking out. The suppression of dissent and press also allows the government to portray dissent and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations as being something undesirable. Because the Communist Party has control of the press, demonstrations like Tiananmen Square get media coverage as democratic in the United States, but shown either as a criminal action or something vastly undesirable and worse than communism.

After the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, many of those who fought to dissent and demonstrated openly about freedom and democracy left China. Many intellectuals fled to either France or the United States and formed political organizations and formed intellectual journals to further the cause of democracy and political reform in China that was the centerpiece of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. (Beja 440). But although all that was done by intellectuals in the aftermath of Tiananmen, there needed to be a better way to get information to the citizens of China; those who needed it the most.

In the mid-1990's, the Communist Party of China changed their focus in the suppression of democracy and the free flow of political ideas from print sources and demonstrations to something that fit the modern age of technology better

and provided a very deep threat to the oppression: the internet. In the largely unregulated internet of the western world, the internet has become a political force.

“Increasingly easy access to email and the world wide web globally allows politically disenfranchised groups to communicate with like-minded or sympathetic audience. Furthermore, particularly in regimes where the freedom of the mainstream media is restricted... the internet has become an alternative medium through which opposition groups have been able to have a voice... the internet is not only a medium of communication, it is effectively a vehicle for political change and transformation (Abbot 99 – 100)

The Chinese government understood the power the internet had, and attempted to use it to their advantage. The internet was allowed in China for use in commerce, in an attempt by the government to energize stagnant domestic spending in the economy (Abbot 101-102). However, anything besides e-commerce on the internet is highly regulated by the government, stemming from a situation in which students in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations used a precursor to the internet, a ChinaNet newsgroup hosted by Stanford University, to coordinate and organize their demonstrations for democracy. The Chinese leaders knew of the newsgroup and have been proactive in regulating the internet ever since (Abbott 100). Recently, in June of 2005, Microsoft gave in to a demand by the Chinese government to completely remove the word democracy from its Chinese version of Microsoft's search engine (“Back on the Leash”).

However, the internet is harder to regulate than print media and demonstrations would be. Because of the nature of the internet, it is very difficult to permanently ban citizens from visiting particular sites. “Anyone who has some knowledge of the Internet can find a way around. However, while control may effectively be beyond the ability of governments – monitoring is not” (Abbott 104). Firewalls and blocking mechanisms by the government are simple for knowledgeable hackers to circumvent, but there is almost no way to browse the internet without leaving footprints – a trail of where one has been, and this ability has enabled the Chinese government to handle the internet in much the same way as renegade press outlets: by monitoring the browsing history of the citizens and arresting anyone the government feels is a threat on grounds of leaking state secrets. Raids and shutting down of suspected rogue internet cafes are commonplace, as is the execution of suspected hackers.

The internet provides many services that the print media and dissent can

not. If given free reign to surf the internet, many Chinese citizens would be able to see and learn about democracy from an American, western perspective. Underground print media and rallies about democracy often sound either like an unworkable, idealistic utopia or as something undesirable, due to the propaganda they've been fed. Chinese citizens, through the internet, would for the first time be able to see that democracy which is desirable and workable actually exists in many places in the western world, and they would realize democracy is not monolithic. The Chinese citizens would be able to tailor the theory of democracy to their own culture and create a new kind of democracy of their own.

However outstanding the prospects of the internet sound, the sad truth is that while a large base of internet users would inevitably bring more democratization in China, only 12.3 million people in China have internet access as of June 2000. This is less than 1% of China's population. If democratization is going to come to China via the internet, the first step will be to bring internet connections to a majority of Chinese citizens.

There is no question that China is long overdue for democratization. Every so often, liberalizing starts to occur, as it did with the press in the early 1980's. However, some event usually springs up, like the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989, that frightens the Chinese Communist Party and causes a strong crackdown in any movement towards democratization or liberalization that may have occurred. However, there is a solution in the existence of the internet. If the internet became widespread in usage, democratization in the long run would be the likely result due to the ease in getting around firewalls and banned websites. Until the internet becomes widespread, democratization will not occur to its full extent and the Chinese people will not live in freedom until the chains of communism can be lifted.

About the Author

Jeffery Wartman, undergraduate student of Political Science at Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, IL.

Presented different research topic at the annual convention of the Illinois Political Science Association, November 2005.

Plans to attend graduate school beginning Fall 2007 term to achieve a Political Science Doctoral degree.

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