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ASIA PROGRAM



Woodrow Wilson  
International Center  
for Scholars

## Scholars under Siege? Academic and Media Freedom in China

**ABSTRACT:** This Special Report containing four essays explores questions of academic and media freedom in China from the multidisciplinary perspectives of literature, sociology, journalism, and anthropology. Perry Link of Princeton University describes Beijing's psychological control system, characterized by self-censorship resembling a giant anaconda coiled in an overhead chandelier. Richard Madsen observes that the government's strategy of meddling in academic life is designed to inhibit professional communication among scholars and to co-opt scholars into work that meets the Party's political priorities. Chin-Chuan Lee of the University of Minnesota argues that China's economic reform has created a modest degree of media liberalization and resulted in a combination of authoritarian power and a loosely regulated media. Yongming Zhou of the University of Wisconsin at Madison predicts that Chinese intellectuals will continue to take advantage of Internet technology for the free exchange of ideas and information, whereas the state will continue to monitor these developments while employing more refined techniques of control. This Special Report concludes that although Chinese intellectuals have gained a certain degree of freedom in academic discussion and media reportage, they do not yet possess the ability to challenge official ideology in public discourse.

### Introduction

*Gang Lin*

Beijing's detention of several overseas Chinese scholars for spying has aroused renewed concern about academic and media freedom and the personal security of foreign scholars working in the People's Republic of China. Where are the lines in China separating "spying" from legitimate scholarly inquiry and media coverage? How does the Chinese government enforce conformity of academic research and media reportage, and with what success? To what degree do Chinese intellectuals enjoy freedom of independent inquiry on sensitive political issues? How does the Chinese media accommodate both market demand and government control? Can Beijing stifle the increasing information flow on the Internet? What are the implications of these issues for U.S.-China relations?

This Special Report contains four essays presented at an October 24, 2001 seminar sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center's Asia Program. It explores questions of academic and media freedom in China from the multidisciplinary perspectives of literature, sociology, journalism, and anthropology. One of the key points running through the four essays presented here is that although Chinese intellectuals have gained a certain degree of freedom in academic discussion and media reportage, they cannot challenge official ideology in public discourse and through the printed media.

In the first essay, **Perry Link** of Princeton University recognizes that Chinese intellectuals have gained more latitude in informal and private discussion than before, but notes that they are still subject to governmental repression in public discourse. Beijing employs an essentially psychological control system in which the key is self-censorship. By using vague standards to

*Gang Lin is program associate at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Asia Program.*



define “spying” in China, Beijing intentionally frightens people, pressures intellectuals to curtail their activities, exercises arbitrary power in targeting troublesome scholars, and induces confessions. According to Link, the Chinese government’s censorship is less like a man-eating tiger or fire-snorting dragon than a giant anaconda coiled in an overhead chandelier. Beijing’s detention of several scholars with Western ties and the resultant intimidation of Chinese intellectuals have affected the scholarly world more deeply than surface appearances suggest, Link concludes.

The second essay, by **Richard Madsen** of the University of California at San Diego, focuses on one academic discipline—sociology—to argue that the government’s influence on academic institutions is more complex, less direct, and less predictable than during the Maoist era. The government cannot now simply stifle the expression of any particular idea, much less the independent thinking of Chinese scholars. Although the government intimidates academic sociological research, the academic life of Chinese sociologists demonstrates extraordinary vitality, Madsen maintains. The government’s strategy of meddling in academic life, according to Madsen, is designed to inhibit professional communication among scholars and to co-opt scholars into work that meets the Party’s political priorities. The result is that while many thousands of flowers privately bloom in China today, no schools of thought publicly contend against official ideology.

In the third essay, **Chin-Chuan Lee** of the University of Minnesota explores media freedom in post-Mao China, where totalitarianism has evolved

into state-capitalist authoritarianism with the easing of political interference in the economy. This transformation has created a modest degree of media liberalization and resulted in a combination of authoritarian power and a loosely regulated media. Lee observes that Chinese journalists have altered their role from being “Party propagandists” to being “information providers,” while retaining their statist and elitist orientations. However, private media ownership is still banned in China and all journalists remain state employees. Caught between the need to unleash economic innovation and the desire to keep marketization within official bounds, Beijing has established media conglomerations (syndicates) as a new scheme for state management of media. This strategy, it is hoped, will also enable Beijing to meet potential foreign challenges now that China has joined the World Trade Organization.

The fourth essay, by Wilson Center Fellow **Yongming Zhou** from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, examines how the state has reacted to the dramatic growth in the number of websites devoted to intellectual discussion. According to Zhou, Chinese intellectual websites show an unprecedented degree of openness, frankness and tolerance. These sites give dissident or non-conformist intellectuals a place to publish works that are banned from the print press. Faced with an increasing number of intellectual websites, the state has opted to exert pressure on website editors to ensure self-censorship. Because there are no clear regulations on what can or cannot be published on the Internet, editors have to constantly exercise their own judgment on the admissibility of submitted articles. For the foreseeable future, Chinese intellectuals will continue to take advantage of Internet technology and expand the space for free exchange of ideas and information, while the state will continue to monitor these developments with more refined techniques of control, Zhou predicts.

This Special Report highlights the constraints under which scholars and journalists operate in China today. Although Chinese intellectuals have gained some leeway in thought, expression and communication, a significant gap remains between China’s academic environment and the universal principle of freedom from intimidation. As a consequence, issues of censorship and press expression, of independent inquiry versus the demands of state security, are likely to remain irritants in U.S.-China relations.

## THE ASIA PROGRAM

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### Asia Program Staff:

Robert M. Hathaway, Director  
Gang Lin, Program Associate  
Amy McCreedy, Program Associate  
Wilson Lee, Program Assistant  
Timothy R. Hildebrandt, Program Assistant



# The Anaconda in the Chandelier: Censorship in China Today

PERRY LINK

**T**he importance of the Chinese government in the daily lives of ordinary Chinese people has receded markedly over the last quarter century. No longer, as in the Mao years, does the state punish citizens for comments overheard among neighbors. The scope of unofficial life has expanded dramatically, and informal speech is much freer than before. Although newspapers still do not carry barbed political cartoons, sarcasm no less biting is rampant in jokes and rhythmical ditties on oral networks throughout the country. Some of these sayings flatly blame the Communist Party (“If we do not root out corruption, the country will perish; if we do root out corruption, the Party will perish”). Others dare to satirize Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and other top leaders by name.

## CONTINUED REPRESSION

Yet repression remains an important problem, whose extent and methods are still poorly understood in the West. One must begin by revisiting a dull but fundamental fact: the highest priority of the top leadership of the Communist Party remains, as in the past, not economic development, or China’s international standing, or any other goal for the nation as a whole, but its own grip on power. Thus it continues to ban any public expression of opposition to itself and continues to crush any organization that it does not control or could not easily control if it needed to. The fate of *qigong* breath exercises is a good illustration. In the 1980s the Party encouraged *qigong* as an expression of Chinese essence and a symbol of national pride. The central government even set up a national *qigong* association, complete with its own bureaucracy. But in the 1990s, when some *qigong* masters (Li Hongzhi of Falun Gong was not the first) decided to build their own organizations outside of Party control, the same Chinese-essence breath exercises overnight became an “evil cult,” in need of brutal repression. The



founders of the Chinese Democratic Party, all of whom are in prison today, ran afoul the same principle. Their crime was not the word “democratic” in their group’s name (China already had eight “democratic parties” that were subservient to the Communist Party); their crime was their organizational independence.

Censorship in intellectual matters broadly follows the same pattern. Nearly anything can be said in private, which is a big advance over the Mao years. And because academic journals have such modest circulations, they are given somewhat more latitude than other publishing media. As long as scholars do not confront the top leadership head-on, they can write in scholarly journals pretty much as they choose. Moreover, in recent years, what many of them have chosen to write has been more favorable to the Party leadership than what they were inclined to write in the 1980s. (The reasons for this shift are complex—some have to do with government pressures, others with shifting perceptions of China’s place in the world; to probe the matter in detail would require a separate essay.)

When an intellectual does want to express a politically sensitive idea in public, it remains the case that he or she must take a risk. As in the past,

taking risks is not just a matter of personal courage, although that certainly is important. It helps as well to have allies or backers with whom to share the risk. It can also help to use indirection, such as pseudonyms, surrogates, or Aesopian expression. Even highly-placed people, such as the sponsors of the *Tiananmen Papers*, choose indirection in going public.

Although repression has decreased in breadth during the Jiang Zemin years, its essential methods have changed little from the Deng era. In fundamental principle they inherit the Mao years as well. These methods have “Chinese characteristics”; they have always differed, for example, from those of the Soviet Union. The Soviets published periodic handbooks that listed which specific phrases were out of bounds, and employed a large bureaucracy to enforce the rules. China has never had such a bureaucracy or published any such handbooks. Propaganda officials rejected these more mechanical methods in favor of an essentially psychological control system in which the key is self-censorship. Questions of risk—how far to go, how explicit to be, with whom to ally, and so on—are moved inside the cerebrums of every individual writer and editor. There are, of course, physical punishments that anchor one’s calculations. If you calculate incorrectly and go too far, you can lose your job, be imprisoned, or, in the worst case, get a bullet in the back of the head. If you live overseas you can run the risk of being cut off from your family and hometown. But most censorship does not directly involve such happenings. It involves fear of such happenings. By “fear” I do not mean a clear and present sense of panic. I mean a dull, well-entrenched leeriness that people who deal with the Chinese censorship system usually get used to, and eventually accept as part of their natural landscape. But the controlling power of this fear is quite effective nonetheless.

### THE ADVANTAGES OF VAGUENESS

Outsiders to this system can be puzzled by its use of vagueness. Gao Zhan and Li Shaomin are arrested. Why? What did they actually do? What defines “spying”? Why were these two arrested for using “internal” materials when so many others who do the same thing remain unmolested? I do not know the answers to these questions for these two people, but

I am not in the least surprised by the general “vagueness.” This vagueness is purposeful, and has been fundamental in the Chinese Communist control system for decades. It has the following four advantages:

- A vague accusation frightens more people. If I am a Chinese scholar working in the United States, as Gao Zhan was, and I do not know why she was arrested, then the reason could be virtually anything; therefore it could be what I am doing; therefore I pull back. (Result: many people begin to censor themselves.) If, on the other hand, I could know exactly why Gao Zhan was nabbed, then I could feel fairly confident that my own work was all right—or, if not, how to make it all right. (Result: few people would pull back.) Clarity serves the purpose of the censoring state only when it wants to curb a very specific kind of behavior; when it wants to intimidate a large group, vagueness works much better.
- A vague accusation pressures an individual to curtail a wider range of activity. If I do not know exactly why I was “wrong,” I am induced to pay more attention to the state’s strictures in every respect. This device has been used in literary and social campaigns in China since the 1950s. Who can say—or ever could—what exactly is meant by “spiritual pollution” or “bourgeois liberalism”? The cognitive content of such terms is purposefully vague; only the negative connotations are clear. To be safe, a person must pull back in every respect, and must become his or her own policeman.
- A vague accusation is useful in maximizing what can be learned during confession. When Li Shaomin was arrested, he asked his captors the reason and they answered, “You yourself know the reason.” It was up to Li to “earn lenience” by “showing sincerity” through “confession.” The word game is standard. The police also routinely say that they already possess an exhaustive amount of information on your crimes; the purpose of interrogating you is to measure your sincerity, not to get more information. In fact, though, this is often a lie. The point is precisely to get new information from the detainee, which can then be used either on that person or on someone else. Clarity about the accusation would obviously destroy this tactic.



- A vague accusation allows arbitrary targeting. Leaders who exercise arbitrary power normally want to disguise the real reasons for their actions. In a culture like China's, where the "face" of the leader represents his morality and hence his claim to political legitimacy, it is especially crucial to pretend that the leader is acting legally and morally. (The need for pretense only increases as the leader's moral behavior worsens.) In this context, the availability of vague and even self-contradictory laws is very useful to the leader. For example, a rule might state: "It is forbidden to collect internal materials." Yet, as everyone knows, many such materials are easily available, and many people collect them. This makes it possible for me, the authority, to use the rule to arrest Gao Zhan or Li Shaomin or whomever I like—for who knows what reason?—and at the same time to have a ready, face-saving justification for my exercise of arbitrary power. China's constitution itself illustrates this handy flexibility. It provides that citizens have freedom of speech, of assembly, and of the press. But its preamble also sets down the inviolability of the Communist Party rule, Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong-Thought, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the socialist system. The huge space between these two contradictory poles (both of which, by the way, are poor descriptions of the actual patterns of life in China) gives leaders immense room to be arbitrary while still claiming to be legal.

The detentions over the past two years of Gao Zhan, Li Shaomin, Wu Jianmin, Xu Zerong, Kang Zhengguo, and other scholars with Western ties are part of a problem that runs far, far deeper than those cases taken individually would suggest. The majority of such cases never come to light. Kang Zhengguo, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, estimates that "hundreds and thousands" of Chinese who return to their homeland are invited for "chats" in which the police warn and threaten them in various ways ("You want to come back to China again?" "You wish the best for your friends and relatives?"). The police also specifically warn them not to say anything about these threats when they go back to the West. ("Let us not have any loose tongues," "Remember to preserve the positive image of State Security," etc.). I cannot corroborate Kang's estimate

that there are "hundreds and thousands" of such "returnee interviews," but would note that just within my own circle of friends I have heard a dozen or so such stories in recent years (and my small circle, multiplied by the size of the world, may well reach "hundreds and thousands").

Among "dissidents" it is fairly common to use pseudonyms for the purpose of returning to China. When one woman, a well-known critic of the Chinese government, did this last year, the police in her hometown knew who she really was, and let her know that they knew it, and yet both sides played the language game of pretending that her "returnee interview," where specific threats were delivered and received over tea and snacks, was simply a social event. Back in the United States, she still abides by certain rules, on pain of threats to her relatives.

In addition to the substantial number of people directly affected by this tactic, a much larger number is indirectly affected through intimidation. For every person who is threatened with forced exile or mistreatment of relatives, many more hear about such threats and censor themselves accordingly. Active fear in such cases is rare. Speaking and behaving within prescribed boundaries merely seems prudent. With the passage of time, forbidden zones come to seem normal, even natural. Most Chinese wend their ways through the political landscape without questioning all of its boulders and ditches, but simply skirting them, getting where they want to go with minimum trouble. By contrast, the "dissident" who does raise questions or state principles can seem a bit block-headed, and even somewhat "deserving" of the trouble he or she gets into.

### SELF-CENSORSHIP WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Self-censorship affects the scholarly world more deeply than surface appearances suggest. When Gao Zhan was arrested in China, her academic research was interrupted. That was a specific loss. But it was a tiny loss compared to what happens when other scholars observe such cases: research trips are canceled; certain questions are deleted, or asked in altered form, or written up in less-than-fully-candid ways. The specific extent of these losses is hard to measure, not only because people are reluctant to speak about them (no scholar likes to acknowledge



self-censorship), but because the crucial functions are psychological and very subtle. They happen within the recesses of private minds, where even the scholars themselves may not notice exactly what is happening. (I do not say this to denigrate my fellow scholars. Over the years I have noticed the phenomenon in myself as well.) In sum, the Chinese government's censorship is less like a man-eating tiger or fire-snorting dragon than a giant anaconda coiled in an overhead chandelier. Normally it does not move. It does not have to. It feels no need to be clear about its prohibitions. Its silent message is "you yourself decide," after which everyone below makes his or her large and small adjustments—all quite "naturally."

Does the coiled anaconda affect U.S.-China relations? Of course it does. What could be more fundamental to good relations than accuracy of mutual perceptions? And how can intimidation or censorship of any sort help in this regard? To be sure, many other factors contribute to mutual understanding, and our country lags in addressing a good number of them. (To name just one, young Chinese who study English still outnumber young Americans who study Chinese by a ratio of several thousand to one.) But the present topic is academic and media freedom, and in that realm it should be stated bluntly that the Chinese government's tactics are harmful to relations. They contribute to distortions both in Chinese perceptions of the United States and in U.S. perceptions of China.

When the World Trade Center was destroyed, some Chinese—primarily young, male, and educated—exulted on the Internet and cheered the flaming images. Later a group of twenty Chinese scholars issued a statement in which they decried this reaction and then sought to explain it. Chinese young people, they wrote, had been "led astray by certain media themes and education guidelines in recent times." In the early 1990s, when the Deng Xiaoping regime began to stoke Chinese nationalism as a way to recoup its popularity after the Tiananmen debacle, it began to employ images of the United States as a swaggering hegemon—that frustrated China's Olympic hopes, that interfered in China's domestic affairs in human rights, that sought to "contain" a rising China, and so on. These images are by no means the whole story on why some Chinese youth cheered the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, but they played a role. They

were not accurate portrayals of the United States and were not intended to be. They were caricatures produced and spread by Chinese journalists who, themselves living beneath an anaconda in the chandelier, may or may not have agreed with what they themselves were writing and saying—and indeed may not even have put the question to themselves in quite this way.

The anaconda plays a smaller role in U.S. misperceptions of China, but the effects are still significant. Scholars are affected more than journalists. In the wake of the arrests of Gao Zhan, Li Shaomin, and others, a number of U.S. scholars of Chinese background canceled research trips to China, while others of various backgrounds canceled or altered projects that they feared might compromise Chinese collaborators inside China. It is impossible to estimate how much is lost when such long-term investments are at stake. Which of these curtailed research projects, at what point in the future, might be helpful in getting Americans to see China more accurately? While this is hard to say, it is easier to see the effects when the anaconda prevents knowledge that is already at hand from being properly shared with the U.S. public. This does happen, in both gross and subtle ways. For example in 1999, when the Falun Gong organization suddenly made itself felt in China and the world, the U.S. public could have benefited from the best scholarly understanding of the phenomenon. But when one of our major news organizations invited one of our nation's top scholars in a relevant field for a television interview, the scholar declined. He did not want to lose access to fieldwork in China by appearing in public on a politically sensitive issue. He knew that foreigners who displease Chinese authorities can be denied visas, or, even if allowed into China, denied interviews or access to archives.

The problem is more common, and more complex, for scholars who study the Chinese government and need to nurture and preserve their contacts among Chinese officials. In short, like the disincentives presented to Chinese scholars, the pressures on Americans come in various gradations and subtleties. And like Chinese, Americans have reasons for not wanting to speak of these problems in public. I am not a scholar of the Soviet Union, but from my secondary readings in that field I have the impression that the Soviet government was never



anywhere close to that of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in either sophistication or effectiveness of this kind of psychological pressuring. And American scholars, I believe, did not censor themselves to the same extent when writing and speaking of the Soviet Union.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Are there policy implications for the United States? Yes, I expect so. The United States should make it clear that we view censorship, including self-censorship under duress, as a violation of free expression. The United States should also expose this problem to the light of day; the anaconda's power is greatest in dim light. Where U.S. citizens are concerned we should, as President Bush did in the cases of Li Shaomin and of Gao Zhan's son, press hard for legal treatment. Where Chinese citizens are concerned, we should point out Beijing's violations of Chinese law and of international conventions. (It is, for example, a violation of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights for a member state to deny entry to one of its own citizens; yet there are published lists of more than 50 Chinese citizens in exile who, only because of what they say and write, are to be detained and deported if they try to enter the PRC.)

I have friends in the Chinese dissident community who argue that what I have sketched in the preceding paragraph is too weak, and even self-deluding, because it has no teeth. They point out that PRC leaders are astutely attuned to practical gains and losses. Moral suasion from the West and ideological riposte from the other side are viewed as mere fluff by comparison, they say, and tend only to distract naïve Westerners. If the PRC manipulates passports, visas, and border controls in order to threaten people, my friends argue, then why should not the United States withhold visas from the PRC political elite? This is tit for tat—and after all, the United

States has plenty of capital to spend in this regard. The Party-run media in China might promote images of a U.S. hegemon; but at the same time the children and grandchildren of the elite head toward that hegemon—more than anywhere else—for education, for business, and for the safekeeping of family funds. Use of these factors, my friends say, can provide the kind of concrete incentives that would really work.

I feel deeply conflicted in trying to respond to my friends. Should the United States keep out murderers? Sure. But punish children and grandchildren for the distasteful behavior of their elders? And advertise the policy openly, so that it radiates its own intimidation-effects and becomes, as it were, a baby anaconda? Such steps rather clearly lead us away from the very principles of fairness and freedom from intimidation that we seek to defend. On the other hand, I am convinced that my dissident friends are correct when they argue that PRC leaders respond best to practical, concrete incentives and that Washington policymakers have for some time been excessively tangled in diversionary fluff and have underplayed the U.S. hand.

At a minimum, I believe, the United States should better publicize the phenomenon of how the PRC elite comes to the U.S. for higher education, green cards, and banking. (Ordinary Chinese people will have their own speculations about where the banked money originated.) This may be a job not for the U.S. government but for a good investigative journalist; but I would hope the U.S. government would cooperate with such an effort within the limits of the law. Two important advantages of such a tactic are: 1) it would undermine Chinese state-sponsored anti-U.S. propaganda by exposing it as hypocritical; and 2) it would tend to align the United States with ordinary people in China, who in any case widely suspect their leadership of embezzlement, and thus at this level, too, help Chinese people to see Americans as the friends that we are and ought to be.

## Academic Freedom in China

RICHARD MADSEN

**F**or the past four years, I have been co-principal investigator for a project funded by the Ford Foundation, to develop the discipline of academic sociology in China. This has provided a good vantage point to observe the shifting mix of opportunities and constraints faced by Chinese scholars. I will ground my analysis on these observations, but will argue that the analysis is applicable to most other academic contexts.

Sociologists have certainly had their share of trouble under the People's Republic of China (PRC). Before 1949, China had developed some of the best sociology/social anthropology programs outside the Western world. In the Maoist era, sociology was denounced as a carrier of Western bourgeois ideology and was eliminated from the university curriculum, while Fei Xiaotong and other distinguished sociologists and anthropologists were publicly denounced or imprisoned. In the early 1980s, sociology was slowly revived. Fei Xiaotong and other elder statesmen were invited to become leaders of the revival. With the help of funding from both the Chinese government and outside NGOs like the Ford Foundation, training programs were established to cultivate a new generation of scholars, and the most promising young scholars were given opportunities to pursue Ph.D. degrees abroad. Although most of this '80s generation of graduate students failed to return to China, most of them have continued to focus their professional research on Chinese society and some of them have played important roles in building bridges between professional colleagues in China and the United States.

### SOCIOLOGY IN THE 1990s

Meanwhile, in the 1990s, increasing numbers of universities and social science academies have established departments of sociology, and the elite universities have set up Ph.D. programs. As it did for economics, legal studies, and international relations



studies, the Ford Foundation continued to develop “capacity building” programs in sociology. I participated in the second half of an eight-year program to hold workshops on advanced sociological methods, to give out grants for innovative sociological research, and to conduct seminars on special topics in the sociological study of China. Although these efforts have, in the end, been successful, they have brought more than their share of troubles. Workshops have been abruptly cancelled. Visiting Chinese-American sociologists (and on occasion their local relatives) have been followed by the secret police under suspicion of being spies. At least one of the Chinese recipients of our grants has recently been jailed.

Such problems reflect a general suspicion among Chinese authorities that academic sociological research may threaten their position. Sociologists are in fact studying some of the most sensitive issues facing the Chinese government today. In our Ford Foundation project alone, we have funded research on rising inequalities, ethnic and religious tensions, migrant labor, laid off workers, and forced resettlement of people in the path of the Three Gorges hydroelectric project. Well-trained sociologists now

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*Richard Madsen is professor of sociology, University of California at San Diego.*





have the ability to gather and publish statistical data that are more accurate than official government figures. In the vacuum caused by the discrediting of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology, China's social theorists are exploring a variety of new frameworks—ranging from neo-liberal to social democratic to neo-socialist—for understanding social development. At the same time, as a newly revived discipline, sociology is vulnerable—poorly funded and lacking powerful patrons in the political establishment. It is not completely an accident that three of the five foreign scholars recently arrested and charged with spying by the Chinese government—Gao Zhan, Li Shaomin, and Xu Zerong—were in fact professional sociologists.

Despite all the harassment I have alluded to, however, the academic life of Chinese sociologists demonstrates extraordinary vitality. At each of the two special topics seminars that I helped organize as part of our Ford project (which were all conducted in Chinese, with only a few foreigners present), there were astonishingly frank, passionate, sometimes anguished discussions about some of China's most sensitive problems—especially the problems of laid off workers and underemployed farmers (which many scholars see as truly explosive), the increasing gaps between the rich and the poor caused by globalization, abuses of power by local officials, the prevalence of corruption, and the revival of religious beliefs. These discussions were comparable in openness, in boldness, creativity and intensity to conversations that I participated in during the late 1980s, on the eve of the Beijing Spring of 1989. The difference is that the academic conversations of the late 1990s seemed better grounded in research and more sober and realistic than those of the late 1980s. The waves of government repression during the 1990s have not stifled intellectual ferment, at least among the sociologists I have observed.

### POLITICAL INTERFERENCE FROM THE PARTY

The relationship between the Party and academic institutions certainly affects the ways in which intellectual ferment can develop, and influence public affairs. But the effects are more complex, less direct, and less predictable than they were during the Maoist era. The Communist Party still supervises university departments and academic research insti-

tutes. Leaders of such institutions do not necessarily have to be Party members, but they still have to be acceptable to local Party committees. Nonetheless, for the most part, the Party does not have the level of control necessary to set down a general “line” that all scholars would have to follow.

It can do this now only on selected issues that the Party deems critical, like the suppression of Falun Gong, and even then the Party cannot exact full compliance. For example, one day during a seminar that our Ford Foundation project held in Beijing in July 1999, just a week after the government declared Falun Gong to be an “evil cult,” all of the participants from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences had to skip our session to attend a meeting at their institute, at which they were given marching orders to defeat Falun Gong. Some scholars may have participated eagerly in their effort—in which they are basically given an outline of everything the government deems wrong with Falun Gong, and asked to use their expertise to fill in the details—but most avoided participation. Many privately derided government overreaction to the Falun Gong and expressed regret that they could no longer do objective research on such a religious organization. And they freely voiced such criticisms among their colleagues, even though they would not publicly oppose the government's campaign in print. Even on the few issues that it throws its full weight against, the government can no longer stifle independent talking, much less thinking, among China's scholars.

On most other issues, even ones fraught with sensitive political implications, scholars can have wide leeway for discussion and publication. The involvement of the Party in their workplaces, however, continues to cast a cloud of uncertainty over their lives, not so much by the Party's attempts to enforce ideological compliance as by its potential to interfere in academic politics. Like academic departments here in the United States, Chinese departments are full of petty disputes over resources, power, and prestige. But in China, scholars involved in these disputes can be tempted to use their connections with the Party to win their case, which sometimes leads to ugly consequences. Some problems encountered by our program to develop sociology were occasioned by jealousy over who would get the computers that we provided to organizations

that carried out our training workshops. If losers in the competition for these resources were well connected with the Party, they might forward complaints about the workshops to the Party and even to the public security apparatus. The complaints would have to be made in ideological terms—and sometimes there were even hints of accusations about spying—but everyone knew that the ideological language was only an excuse for mundane struggles over resources.

This use of the Party as an instrument in academic rivalries increases the general level of misery and anxiety in academia, though it is so unprincipled that it does not really stifle free expression of most academic views. Anyone, on any side of academic debate, can become victim to such power politics. Virtually everyone is guilty of violation of some ill-defined regulation or other. To attempt any kind of a thorough analysis, most scholars would have to make use of that vast range of materials that are officially labeled as state secrets. To make enough money to live on, most have to supplement their official academic work with “creative income” (*chuangshou*) gained from moonlighting that exceeds officially approved limits. Such inevitable violations can be used as an excuse to hurt a rival in a power struggle. Sometimes one does not even have to be a rival. If one is in the wrong place at the wrong time, one can be made a scapegoat. Such seems to have been the case of Li Shaomin and Gao Zhan, who seem to have been arrested as part of an effort to find scapegoats for various intelligence leaks. The net effect of this political meddling in academic life is not to stifle the expression of any particular idea but to make people discouraged with academic life in general. Thus some of the good sociologists whom we have helped train in the past decade have abandoned academic sociology for higher paying and probably safer jobs doing market research for multinational corporations. Political interference helps drive away some of China’s best minds from the task of finding rational solutions to its social problems.

### RESTRICTION ON THE FLOW OF IDEAS

Besides demoralizing scholars within their workplaces, the interference of the Party limits their opportunities to communicate with colleagues in

other parts of the country and the world. In the United States, the standards for good scholarly work are shaped less by the norms of individual university departments than by the norms of self-governing national and international professional associations. The wide sharing of ideas made possible by professional meetings allows scholars to refine their ideas and to organize large research agendas. The professional associations in China, however, are not self-governing—their leadership is chosen under the supervision of the Party. The associations have a big role in determining what kind of agenda will be discussed at professional meetings and who will be chosen to attend the meetings. Moreover, organizing a professional meeting usually requires permissions from a number of agencies, including public security, for the venue where the meeting will be held. The net effect of this is to limit opportunities for scholars to link up across universities or research institutes. Thus scholars lack opportunity to refine and elaborate their views. Our Ford Foundation project for developing sociology sometimes threatened leaders of China’s sociological establishment because we provided opportunities for sociologists from around the country to attend our workshops—and we mainly chose participants on the basis of their actual research accomplishments rather than on the basis of their political connections. This helped to generate meetings that were extraordinarily lively—but we also had to contend with complaints (and be concerned about recrimination) from highly placed sociologists that they had not been invited. The enthusiasm of the sociologists for such meetings, however, was partially a function of their scarcity. Although more opportunities are opening up for scholars to come together from throughout China to carry out professional discussion, there are still not enough opportunities to sustain a vibrant professional life. Too many meetings sponsored by the official professional associations are, as one scholar put it to me, “graveyard meetings” dominated by a cautious, older establishment unwilling to encourage creative new research endeavors.

This lack of opportunities for professional communication does not so much stifle the production of ideas as it inhibits the coalescence of ideas. “Our problem,” one outspoken senior scholar told me in 1988, in the ferment leading up to the Tiananmen



demonstrations, “is not that we lack ideas. Everybody has plenty of ideas. The problem is that no one has the same ideas.” The Chinese government’s efforts to inhibit professional communication keep scholarly debate lively, but fragmented. Individual Chinese scholars are often amazingly creative and inspiring bold. But they do not easily form well-worked-out schools of thought (analogous, say, to the “communarians,” “critical theorists” or “neo-conservatives” in the United States) in which common ideas are refined and developed through public dialogue and debate. This helps to keep scholarly communities from becoming politically threatening, but it also keeps them from offering sophisticated, realistic solutions to China’s problems.

Besides inhibiting schools of thought developed through face-to-face communication, the government also, of course, inhibits publication of provocative ideas. The boldest (and most interesting) ideas expressed in our sociology workshops came in sessions where participants did not present formal papers. Most of the more provocative ideas will not be published—or if they are published, they will be expressed in roundabout ways. (My colleague Edward Friedmann notes astutely that the best way to read a Chinese journal is just the opposite of the way one reads a professional journal in the United States. Here, one usually reads the introduction and conclusion first, and if these seem important, then reads the details of the argument in the middle. But in Chinese journal articles, the introduction and conclusion are often meaningless ideological boilerplate. The interesting ideas are all buried in the middle.) Censorship is uneven, and some publishers dare to produce truly interesting, critical works, like He Qinglian’s *China’s Pitfall*. But their capacity to do so is uneven. There are few stable venues where proponents of a certain style of work can consistently get published. Thus, many thousands of flowers privately bloom in China today, but no schools of thought publicly contend.

### LESS PROGRESS ON FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

While restricting the flow of ideas that would allow the learned professions independently to develop their own schools of thought, the Party deploys resources to co-opt scholars into work that meets

political priorities. Most research funds are doled out from government ministries through professional associations, like the Chinese Sociological Association, or through the social science academic/university systems. The money is for projects defined as important by the government. The leaders of institutes or departments then assign their researchers to the projects. Our Ford Foundation project for developing sociology introduced a method for funding research that seemed very radical to many Chinese sociologists—individual grant applications evaluated by blind peer review. It took them some time to understand it and even longer to get accustomed to it. Those who did get such grants were very proud of them because they gained a new sense of accomplishment based on individual merit and creativity. By the same token, the peer-reviewed competitions were perceived as threatening by those who controlled the main sources of government funding for the sociological establishment.

The American process of blind peer review shifts the locus of evaluation of scholarship from state supervisors to the community of professional scholars. If such a process were widely institutionalized—and there is no sign that this will happen any time soon—it would at least loosen the grip that the government has on the scholarly community. The result would not necessarily be the production of more dissident ideas. Here in the United States, after all, the dependence on professional peer review takes some of the idiosyncratic charisma out of scholarship and makes research conform to conventional paradigms. In China, it would probably dampen the production of brilliant sparks of creativity, but it would facilitate steady flames of knowledge—which might by and large help the government grapple with its increasingly complex social problems.

Coherent, confident, well-organized, and relatively autonomous communities of scholars will help imagine viable alternatives to the current regime. But the current regime is too fragile and insecure to tolerate them. So it stifles the production of knowledge that might help find solutions to some of its problems out of fear that one solution might possibly be to replace the regime. This increases the possibility that the unstoppable social evolution taking place in China will be an unpeaceful one.

In America, when we talk about the problems of academic freedom in an undemocratic country like



China, we usually talk about restrictions on the rights of individual scholars to express themselves. I have attempted to focus more on communities of scholars than on individuals. From this point of view, the problem faced by China's scholars is not simply that of restrictions on their individual freedom. It is one of restrictions on their ability to impose upon themselves new forms of professional discipline that would enable them to develop coherent schools of thought. Scholars have more freedom than ever before to express themselves, at least in private. This leads many foreign scholars to be very favorably impressed at the progress made in respecting the right of freedom of speech. But even though progress has been made in freedom of speech (despite the punishments meted out on a handful of genuinely courageous dissidents), there has been much less progress on freedom of association. And it

is the ability to speak and write in public, in freely chosen assemblies that set their own collective standards on what constitutes accurate information and correct inference, that can provide the basis for a socially efficacious academic speech.

Moreover, although our human rights discourse understandably focuses on the plight of scholars who, out of conscience, defy an unjust regime, I have also considered the plight of those hapless scholars who find themselves arbitrarily punished by the intrusion of politics into academia. The vulnerability of academics to arbitrary government harassment, coupled with their low salaries, discourages many capable people from becoming scholars at all. More than direct political intimidation, this general discouragement perhaps poses the greatest threat to academic life in China today.



## When Power Marries Money: Media Freedom in China

CHIN-CHUAN LEE

**T**he transformation of Chinese politics from totalitarianism to state-capitalist authoritarianism has created a modest degree of media liberalization and a unique combination of power and money in China's emerging media market. To what degree do the Chinese media enjoy leeway for operation in the midst of marketization? What are the principal forces underneath the media liberalization in China? What are the main obstacles impeding such development? Can China's new media conglomerates relieve themselves from the control of political power? This essay attempts to address these and related issues.

### DEMOBILIZED LIBERALIZATION

The development of a state-controlled market mechanism in China in the years since 1976 has resulted in what I call "demobilized liberalization" of the media, with three main characteristics diverging vastly from the Maoist era. First, while China remains at the bottom of the media freedom scale in the world landscape, its political system has been transformed from totalitarianism into state-capitalist authoritarianism. Mao's totalitarian state intruded into almost every facet of life, mobilizing people's souls and minds to reach national goals through mass campaigns, whereas Deng Xiaoping's authoritarian state has retreated from non-political domains of civic life, allowing an economic market to operate alongside the state power. Consequently, the media have transformed their role from serving as the Party's mouthpiece to "Party Publicity Inc.," whose job is to promote the Party's image and legitimacy rather than to brainwash people.<sup>1</sup> A general profile of journalists collated from various surveys suggests that they have been redefining their role from being Party propagandists to being information providers. Although China's media market is structurally embedded in and intertwined with the state's policy, economic vibrancy has generated a partial momen-



tum of its own, yielding considerable media expansion of what Isaiah Berlin called "negative freedom," freeing them from complete Party control.<sup>2</sup> The state is still highly authoritarian, arbitrary and intrusive, but the imperative for it to reckon with the implications of market competition has given the media a freer rein in areas that do not directly confront the ideological premises of the Party. However, the scope of liberal discourses remains pitiful, and the pendulum swing between considerations of political control and economic profit has caused ideological clashes, factional fights, and oscillating policies.

Secondly, media organizations have been making various, sometimes bold, attempts at news improvisation and marketing experimentation to attract wider readership in the growingly diverse marketplace.<sup>3</sup> The struggle to serve the Party vis-à-vis the market has exhibited uneven development in China's different regions, with the media that appeal to mass consumers mushrooming in major coastal cities. Since the early 1990s, metropolitan newspapers (*dushibao*) have become the most popular media in urban areas. With less ideological color, the metropolitan newspapers pay closer attention to relevant events and policies that affect everyday life in the

*Chin-Chuan Lee is professor of journalism and mass communication, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.*



urban areas. The rise of the metropolitan newspapers, many of which having reaped substantial profit, owes much to the rapid growth of advertising revenues and disposable income of urban residents in China. The metropolitan newspapers have made innovations in news format and content to meet the market demand while going around the Party's rigid ideological taboos. Despite the growing inequity in the distribution of media resources between the urban and rural areas, the gradual erosion of the Party's influence in the urban areas is obvious. Market consciousness has also given birth to some media programs and genres (such as call-in radio or television programs and investigative reporting) that address such public concern as consumer rights, environmental conditions, and the quality of government services.<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, the market-oriented Party media have been characterized as a "capitalist body" that "wears a socialist face."<sup>5</sup> Since the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, Chinese journalists have largely recoiled from political activism and instead plunged into the surging ocean of commercialization. They now aim to garner profit without overstepping the prescribed political boundary. Newspaper editors concede that they endorse the socialist economy in the front pages, but promote a mixed or a free economy in the middle and following pages. Paid journalism—getting illegal money for reportage from individuals or institutions concerned—has become a prevalent way of life for journalists in China. Such unseemly conduct cannot exist without combination of an authoritarian power and an unchecked market. In fact, Party propagandists are not immune to paid journalism. As an integral part of the corrupt scene, they do not prove to be morally or ethically superior to their rank-and-file media colleagues. The marriage of power and money has enabled the Party to trade market opportunities for media loyalty, while the media profit from the market without challenging the Party legitimacy.

### NO GRAND FREEDOM

The unevenly developed and poorly regulated media market in China is part of the shortsighted reform agenda of the Party, which was undertaken to save the Party from the brink of a legitimacy crisis. The proclaimed "socialist market economy with

Chinese characteristics" is actually state capitalism with authoritarian characteristics. It seems clear that the state in the reform era is caught in a double bind between the need to obtain economic growth (a principal source of the regime's legitimacy) and the desire to keep the media market under official control. Media reforms are vulnerable to sudden changes by the Party in response to pressures arising from internal factional fights or perceived external threats. Economic reform has driven the media, now cut off from state subsidies, to scramble for advertising in the stormy commercial sea. However, private media ownership is still banned in China and all journalists formally remain state employees. Consequently, more and more media in China conduct themselves in capitalist fashion behind a socialist veneer, without building a civic consensus on core democratic values (such as the primary role of public opinion, or checks and balances). Retreating from the heyday of political reform in the second half of the 1980s, the media now do not advocate grand reform agendas.

The limited leeway that the Chinese media enjoy can be best illustrated by their strategy toward reportage on official corruption, one of the most severe issues in China. From the perspective of a market economy, exposing "model" cases of corruption and irregularities may earn the media wider readership and more profit. As several surveys conducted in the 1980s showed, many journalists aspired to playing a greater "watchdog" role to check government abuses and corruption in tandem with the agendas of the reformist bureaucracy.<sup>6</sup> However, in the 1990s, the Chinese media at best dared to "swat small flies, but not beat big tigers." While some of political leaders have tacitly endorsed limited investigative efforts at times to tackle the malaise of rampant bureaucracy, these investigations have invariably taken aim at the transgressions of lower-level bureaucrats and business managers rather than those of the higher-ups.<sup>7</sup> As an editor-in-chief of a leading metro daily candidly acknowledged to me during a personal interview, making a distinction between small flies and big tigers was a conscious editorial policy. Yet, even swatting small flies is not entirely risk-free for journalists, for they may unintentionally run into some big tigers who find media exposure of their underlings embarrassing.



Economic reform demands more and better information for improving business and financial management and for developing technological infrastructure. This in turn requires a more independent press supported by market economy and media professionalism. While Chinese journalists have gained more space in non-political reportage and discourse, the media market is distorted with heavy penetration by state power. China has too little media professionalism. Advances in media professionalism may constantly risk being nipped in the bud by the Party.

### MEDIA SYNDICATES WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Illustrative of this power-money combination is the current state-engineered drive toward the goal of establishing media conglomerates (syndicates) in China. These conglomerates, however, can only operate printed media and are not permitted to own any broadcasting institutions. Their activities cannot cross provincial borders.<sup>8</sup> Mindful of communist denunciations of Western media syndicates, I view Beijing's drive toward press conglomeration as a new scheme for the Party to manage the emerging media market in a Chinese way.

Beijing has been trying to organize press conglomerates around a score of Party media organs. These Party organs are conceived of as if they were big sponges to absorb unprofitable, chaotic, and disobedient small press. The purposes for this arrangement are multiple. First, the state wants to absolve itself of financial obligations for unprofitable press by transferring such responsibility to those profitable media conglomerates. Second, by organizing media conglomerates around core Party organs, the Party can ensure its continued control over the media. Third, the drive toward media conglomeration is justified as a preemptive strategy to meet potential foreign challenges now that China has joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). The fact that the Party finds itself having to negotiate with and capitalize on market forces, instead of resorting to government subsidies and outright repression as it did during the Cultural Revolution, amounts to tacit acquiescence to the limits of its own power.

Many of these Party-backed press conglomerates, however, are obviously inefficient, wasteful, and

bureaucratic, even though all are striving for huge financial profits. My field trip to China in the summer of 2001 reveals that within the same press conglomerate may lie several newspaper outlets of similar genre that compete viciously with one another. Even though this lack of product differentiation or audience segmentation defies every known marketing principle, a press conglomerate owning more newspapers may make propaganda officials who supervise it look more prestigious and glamorous, at least on paper. As economic calculation is subject to political consideration, China's media conglomerates cannot operate purely on the market mechanism. While the popular metropolitan newspapers usually serve as cash cows to support the media conglomerates, they are seen as politically marginal within the media groups.

The PRC's accession to the WTO poses immense but unpredictable challenges to the political economy of its domestic media. Major global media conglomerates (such as AOL-Time Warner, Murdoch's News Corporation, Disney, and Viacom) have been cultivating close ties with top Chinese leaders and waiting anxiously for years to march into the Chinese market. Two of them (AOL Time-Warner and News Corporation) are being allowed to enter the Guangdong province in a limited and experimental way, but we can predict that their products will be "politically correct" for the Party. If the market is further cracked open, however, global media conglomerates are most likely to start with investment in the new and financially impoverished telecommunication sectors or in certain areas of media management (such as in advertising business), but by no means will the regime abandon its editorial strongholds or yield them to foreign media conglomerates. It is unlikely that the state will lift its ban on domestic private media ownership in the near future. The Party will continue to control a press that grosses a profit margin (above 25%) far exceeding that of other industries. Thus, the media may well be the last ideological and economic "forbidden fruit," and the Party is reluctant to concede its control to either international or domestic challengers.

### CONCLUSION

Political change in post-Mao China from totalitarianism to authoritarianism has brought about a cer-



tain degree of media freedom in non-political discourses. There have been profit-oriented innovations in news format and content among the more market-driven media outlets. The most significant phenomenon is the development of the metropolitan newspapers, with less ideological color and closer attention to issues of public concern in the urban areas (such as transportation, jobs, and consumer fraud). While China's economic reform and a growing consumer consciousness have motivated the development of the media market, because of the Party's preoccupation with political stability, the media are cautious about reporting official corruption and tend to avoid politically sensitive issues. Beijing's efforts at developing media groups around a score of Party media organs, in part as a preemptive strategy to meet the post-WTO challenges from foreign media syndicates, reveal the Party's desire to manage China's immature media market through the combination of power and money.

Studies show that the media have played an important role in precipitating the breakdown of authoritarianism in a wide range of countries, including Spain, Chile, Hungary and Russia.<sup>9</sup> So far, the Chinese media have posed a less immediate threat to Party hegemony. Can Taiwan's experience be any guide? To draw a comparison, we must consider Taiwan's private media ownership, its relentless social movements that struggled for democratic rights under a liberal constitution, and the long term U.S. influence on the island.<sup>10</sup> None of these conditions seem to be present in today's China.

#### ENDNOTES

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# Expanded Space, Refined Control: The Intellectual Electronic Press in China

YONGMING ZHOU

The continued introduction of information technology into China has had a profound impact on the development of the modern Chinese press for over a century. The adoption and spread of telegraph service in the last two decades of the 19th century coincided with an initial wave of newspaper publication, and markedly affected ways of news transmission. More than a century later, the effect of the Internet on the Chinese media and press is being felt in no small way, following the rapid development of this medium of communication in China. According to the China Internet Information Center, China had only 620,000 Internet users by October 31, 1997. That number had increased to 26.5 million by the end of June 2001.<sup>1</sup> The Internet has rapidly affected the development of China's print press. The number of newspapers online has grown from one at the beginning of 1997 (*People's Daily*) to about 400 (20 percent of all Chinese newspapers) by September 2001.<sup>2</sup> In addition, other media players, commercial portal websites, institutions, and individuals, have also wasted no time in using the new information technology to disseminate news, ideas and information, a function formerly reserved exclusively for the traditional press and media. Although we are still at an early stage in its development, it is safe to say that this emergent Internet press has changed the social and political landscape of the Chinese press forever.

## INTELLECTUAL WEBSITES IN CHINA

This paper focuses on a unique niche in Chinese cyberspace-intellectual websites, which refer to those Chinese websites that focus on academic, critical and theoretical discussions on diverse political, cultural, as well as intellectual topics. These websites usually have three major parts: a webzine for electronic publications, a Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) forum for the improvised exchange of ideas, and a digital academic work archive for the effective dis-



semination and retrieval of scholars' works. Webzines can be seen as online editions of regular magazines, in which articles are selected and published by web editors, whose editorial criteria are often reflected in differences in journal styles, positions and degrees of sophistication. The BBS provides a platform for web surfers to engage in a more improvised discussion, as well as a place for people to publish articles that may not be palatable to the webzine editors. Although most intellectual websites first appeared after 1998 and have very short histories, they have become popular outlets for many Chinese intellectuals to voice their opinions on a variety of issues concerning China in general and academic matters in particular.

The uniqueness of the intellectual electronic press and its popularity can only be understood within the special context of China. While the number of Chinese newspapers had increased from 186 in 1978 to 2,038 in 1999, and the total number of Chinese journals had reached about 8,000 in 2000,<sup>3</sup>



each newspaper or journal had to have official sponsorship and submit to official supervision in order to get publication permission. With this control mechanism, independent publication and editorship were dreams beyond the reach of Chinese intellectuals before the arrival of the Internet. Since a website can be easily turned into an online magazine, run on the Internet anywhere in the world, it is very difficult for the government to monitor all the time, and does not need a large amount of start-up capital. Chinese intellectuals have enthusiastically embraced this new opportunity, and an increasing number of intellectual websites are flourishing online.

The majority of the first generation of Chinese intellectual websites were run by individual intellectuals on a very limited scale. Later on, the number of so-called institutional websites increased. These sites are run by cultural establishments, such as academic institutions or existing intellectual magazines, which in many cases are non-mainstream or non-conformist. No matter whether they are individually or institutionally run, these websites all try to differentiate themselves from the traditional print press by proclaiming their “independent,” “private” (or non-official) and “non-commercial” status. Their status as intellectual yet non-official sites is certainly the main attraction to viewers seeking fresh ideas and information.

The ever-growing intellectual electronic press in Chinese cyberspace is in direct opposition to the government's desire to develop the electronic press by adding online versions to print newspapers while keeping control of publication and editorship. We thus need to explore what kind of strategies the state has adopted to control this new domain. However, discussion of and investigation into this question uncovers a further series of questions. What, we might ask, are the characteristics of the Chinese intellectual electronic press? How have the intellectual website editors responded to the state and in what way? What are the prospects of continuance and growth for this press form in China? The following discussion will try to answer the above questions and provide a preliminary assessment of the development of intellectual websites in China, based on observations of a number of Chinese intellectual websites, including *Sixiang de jingjie* (the Realm of Ideas) <[www.sixiang.com](http://www.sixiang.com)>, now defunct; *Sixiang pinglun* (Intellectual Review) <[www.sinoliberal.com](http://www.sinoliberal.com)>; *Sixiang geshihua* (the

Formalization of Ideas) <[www.pen123.net](http://www.pen123.net)>; and *Shiji zhongguo* (Century China) <[www.cc.org.cn](http://www.cc.org.cn)>.

### A WIN-WIN GAME?

To summarize relations between intellectual website editors and the state, it is safe to say that, so far, both Chinese intellectuals and the state can claim themselves winners. As far as intellectuals are concerned, the Internet has certainly enabled them to expand the space they need to engage in idea exchange and free discussion. In contrast to the regularly published academic and intellectual magazines in China, intellectual websites show an unprecedented degree of openness, frankness, and tolerance. The content of these sites is extremely rich and reflects the general concerns of intellectual circles in recent years, ranging from critical comments on current national and international affairs, debates between the New Leftists and the liberals, the introduction of Western social theories, the promotion of nationalism, and the staging of controversies between different intellectual factions. In an analogy to the special economic zones where market economies have been allowed to emerge in the last two decades, the greater degree of freedom and tolerance in expressing opinions on these intellectual websites has caused them to be labeled “special ideas zones” in China by online commentators.

The most obvious illustration of this status is that these sites give dissident or non-conformist intellectuals a place to publish works that are banned from the print press. Dai Qing, a former fellow of the Wilson Center, sent her works to the Realm of Ideas and was subsequently published. Works by another non-conformist Chinese writer, Wang Lixiong, are widely circulated on the Internet. Furthermore, not only are articles by the liberal intellectual Li Shenzhi available on various websites, but there is also a website devoted to the study of his ideas, in sharp contrast to government's efforts to ban his works in print. Finally, academic and intellectual works, such as *Collected Works of Vaclav Havel*, that cannot find a publishing outlet in the print press, have been published online and have enjoyed a wide readership.

The emergent intellectual electronic press has also facilitated the formation of a group of public intellectuals in China. This development is signifi-





cant because after Chinese intellectuals played an important role in enlightening the general public in the 1980s, many of them have chosen to “return to study” since the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. Avoiding being labeled as having too many thoughts but not enough scholarship, scholars in the 1990s have emphasized the study of concrete social issues and empirical scholarship more than grand theory building, thus creating a division of labor between academics and intellectuals. Although intellectual websites differentiate themselves by focusing on serious and thoughtful discussion, most of them prefer short, interesting and eye-catching articles to purely theoretical inquiries, mainly in order to make their sites more attractive to general viewers. It is this characteristic that provides a new space for non-conformist intellectuals to publish thought provoking essays which would not appear in either strictly academic journals or the mainstream print press. Thanks to the interactivity, speed and unlimited space of e-publishing, a great number of new internet-based writers and commentators have appeared and established their reputation in cyberspace, in addition to the well-established academics who are also frequent writers online. They have become China’s new public intellectuals who aim to facilitate the exchange of ideas, or more optimistically, the formation of a public e-sphere in China.

### EXPANDED SPACE UNDER REFINED CONTROL

While this new development challenges the state’s concern with controlling cyberspace, my preliminary assessment is that the Chinese state has not yet come up with a clear policy to deal with intellectual websites. Thus the boundaries of expression for an intellectual e-press remain ambiguous. The closing down of the Realm of Ideas website by official pressure illustrates the state’s early concern about the problems posed by an uncontrolled electronic press, but the frequency of the closing down of intellectual websites is generally much lower than the frequency of new sites being set up. It seems that the state has resorted to a more refined control mechanism than that used against the print press, as shown by the fact that Li Yonggang, the web editor of the Realm of Ideas, did not suffer direct disciplinary action from Nanjing University and was subse-

quently granted permission to go to a Hong Kong university as a visiting scholar in early 2001. Faced with an increasing number of intellectual websites, the state seems to have mostly opted to exert pressure on website editors to conduct self-censorship rather than to close down the sites outright.

In fact, no matter how “independent” or “non-official” a website claims to be, various degrees of self-censorship exist to ensure the physical viability of the site. The most difficult point that editors need to bear in mind is that there are no clear regulations on what can or cannot be published on the Internet. Editors therefore have to constantly exercise their own judgments on the admissibility of submitted articles. Like a sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of the editors, the ambiguity and arbitrariness of government policy in this area has turned out to be very effective. The editor of the Formalization of Ideas told me in an interview that he spent about two thirds of his time and energy conducting self-censorship. Although he wanted to keep his site as open and discussion as frank as possible, he tried not to cross the boundary line which, according to his understanding, was not mentioning organized political dissents. Topics including Falun Gong, independent labor unions and political parties have thus been excluded from the site. His strategy has worked so far, but he is always worried about the possibility that the site will be shut down some day.

For the foreseeable future, the development of an intellectual electronic press will follow the path we have seen so far. On the one hand, intellectuals will continue to take advantage of Internet technology and expand the space of free exchange of ideas and information. On the other, the state will continue to try to monitor developments, with more refined measures of control. Thus the process will involve constant negotiations and contestations between intellectuals and the state. For intellectuals, the desired goal is to have a free press online and use it to create a public e-sphere in which they can engage in rational discussion of all sorts of issues. For the state, even though it has accepted the fact that the Internet has opened up a new space for intellectuals, this new domain must stay under its control and not become a threat to its authoritarian power. Since both sides’ abilities to achieve their desired goals are constrained, the final result will in all probability be an expanded space under more refined control.

The state faces a dilemma. Although it is keen to regulate and control the Internet in order to prevent the dissemination of information seen as a threat to the government, it also has a strong desire to use the Internet to promote e-commerce and economic development. The government's promotion has been an important factor contributing to the phenomenal development of the Internet in China. The government's behavior here is very different from the fate that telegraphy encountered more than one hundred years ago. When Western countries tried to set up telegraph lines in China in the 1860s, they met strong rejection from both the Qing Court, concerned about sovereignty, and the general public, worried largely about issues such as geomancy.<sup>4</sup> It thus took decades for China to accept the technology, and establish its own telegraph service under government's direct control in 1881. China's attitude toward the Internet has been startlingly different from this nineteenth-century precedent. Both the government and the society as a whole have quickly accepted the new technology and embraced its enormous technological and commercial potential. Concerns about development seem to have relaxed concerns about control.

Indeed, "control" has become a key word in much discussion on information technology, and much discussion of the development of the Internet in China has thus focused on the government's efforts to control the free flow of information online. The actual picture is more complex. First, the state is not a monolithic entity. Different factions within the government have held different positions on how to handle the new technology, which makes state policy fluid and internally contradictory. The inflow of international capital has not only played a big role in establishing the infrastructure of information networks, but also has started to penetrate websites, including the intellectual websites, as shown in the cases of the Formalization of Ideas and Century China. In this new context, suppressive control is not the only issue. Along with suppression and regulation, the state also uses subtler and softer strategies to achieve its goal. For example, as an American embassy report pointed out in 1998, warding off "bad influences" from Western language websites can be done in two ways. The government could block them all, but it might also choose an alternative of promoting Chinese websites with more

interesting content and thus making cyberspace more "Chinese" and easier to monitor. The latter strategy seems to have worked. Today only 9 percent of Chinese users visit foreign language websites.<sup>5</sup> This strategy is consistent with the strategy employed by the state concerning the development of the print press. From 1993 to 1997, 374 new newspapers were published in China. Among them, more than 60 percent were metropolitan newspapers, especially evening publications that were generally less politically oriented.<sup>6</sup> The opening up of some cyberspace by the state could be viewed in the same perspective, in that it is a selective expansion amid social and commercial development in China.

## CONCLUSION

As long as the state does not dramatically change its policies, website editors will be under pressure to conduct self-censorship and thus a truly independent intellectual electronic press will not emerge in the near future. In addition, several other factors constrain the development of an independent electronic press. First, most current intellectual websites are small operations and lack adequate financial and technical support to enhance their publicity and attract many users. The Realm of Ideas, one of the most successful websites, had 4,000 homepage visits per day in its heyday before it was shut down, and was confined to a very small readership. Secondly, individual websites are frequently very compartmentalized, often offering a narrow editorial position and drawing upon a narrow pool of contributors and readers. This situation is a reflection of existing factionalism among contemporary Chinese intellectuals. Thirdly, worse still, intellectual websites have been the hotbed for different factions to engage in heated disputes that have often gone beyond legitimate idea exchanges. In June and July 2000, a controversy about the Cheung Kong Reading Awards transformed the BBS forum of the Realm of Ideas into a rumor mill and a place for personal attacks, which might be seen as the online equivalent of "big character posters" in the Cultural Revolution. The unprecedented openness to express individual opinion in these websites has not necessarily led individuals to engage "in rational and critical public discussions that formed the basis for a 'public opinion,'" described by Jürgen Habermas as



the essence of the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> Turning an intellectual website into some kind of cultural tabloid decreases the authority and credibility of the forum, often discouraging existing readers from participating in discussion again. Thus, although the embryonic Chinese intellectual electronic press holds great promise for the future, at present it mainly serves as an intermediary domain between private intellectual discourse, which is quite free, and a still-controlled official intellectual discourse. Whether it may undergo a transformation into an independent and free electronic press will depend on both the relaxation of government policy and the maturing of Chinese cyber-intellectuality.

#### ENDNOTES

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