

What can contemporary China teach us about the media and democracy?

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There is a very strong temptation to answer this question with one word: nothing! The PRC is in no way anything resembling even the most limited form of democratic state. There are no free elections, no freedom of speech, no freedom of association – none of the basic building blocks of democratic life are present. A defender of the PRC might quibble with such a sweeping statement, claiming that at the very local level there are indeed contested, if closely managed, elections and that Hong Kong and Macau, which are part of China, have at least some democratic liberties. The fact remains, however, that in none of these parts of China does the will of the people, in however limited and attenuated a form, determine who shall govern, nor the framework within which they will govern. In the whole of “Greater China” the only outpost of anything meeting the basic criteria of moderately free and contested elections and a modest amount of freedom of speech and association, is Taiwan. This, however, is officially regarded by the PRC as a rebel province which needs to be reunited with the motherland, peacefully if possible but forcibly should it attempt independence.

What such incontestable facts establish is not that there is nothing at all to learn but that there is nothing positive to learn from the PRC about the media and democracy. There are, however, a number of important negative lessons that we can learn, particularly about the value of some of the academic misconceptions about democracy, democratization and democrats.

1. The first of these is a very obvious one: laws and constitutions are no guarantees of free media and democratic life. The official text of the 2004 version of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, available in official English translation at http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/node_2824.htm, reads in part as follows:

Article 34 All citizens of the People’s Republic of China who have reached the age of 18 have the right to vote and stand for election, regardless of ethnic status, race, sex, occupation, family background, religious belief, education, property status or length of residence, except persons deprived of political rights according to law.

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.

China is not, in fact, a one-party state. To quote China Radio International “China is multi-party country. Apart from the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CPC), there are other eight political parties..... Politically they support the leadership of CPC.” In practice, the political rights available under Article 34 are only available to the CPC and its eight puppet parties.

The same is true of freedom of the press. All media, from China Central Television down to the most local of publications, are controlled directly or indirectly by the CPC, through its network of propaganda departments. This control is exercised not only over obviously political matters like hard news but penetrates every area of the media, including entertainment. For example, the State Administration of the Press and Publications, Radio, Film, Television, (SAPPRFT) intervenes in reality shows to police the language that celebrity contestants may use: it is impermissible to call anyone a “pig” or make reference to “ghosts.”

In practice, none of the provisions of Articles 34 and 35 confer any such rights upon the citizens of the PRC.

2. The second is that the same constitutional provisions can be interpreted in radically different ways. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is governed under a special mini-constitution, called the Basic Law, available at <http://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/>, which is supposed to guarantee its distinct status under the “One country. Two systems” deal that was agreed with the British imperialists when they returned Hong Kong to China. It has, at key points, more or less identical wording with the Constitution of the PRC. In part, it reads as follows:

Article 27

Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and to strike.

Hong Kong is most certainly *not* a democracy but it does indeed enjoy the democratic freedoms specified in Article 27. In practice, virtually the same words mean completely different things depending upon historical factors and contemporary realities. The extent to which any country or territory can be said to meet even the minimal definition of democracy and free media depends not at all upon the wording of the constitution but upon the prevailing social conditions.

3. There is no ontological relationship between free markets and democracy. As noted above, Hong Kong does not meet even the most minimal formal definition of democracy. Its Chief Executive is nominated by a cabal of special interests and appointed by Beijing. Incumbents enjoy powers pretty similar to those of the former British Governors General.

Hong Kong's Legislative Council (Legco) indeed has a democratically elected majority, who win their seats at what is at the time of writing a very bitterly contested election, but it is also stuffed with special interest representatives owing their positions to "functional constituencies" which are, in most cases, rotten boroughs and in no cases democratic bodies. Their franchises are grotesquely distorted. The "Agriculture and Fisheries" functional constituency has 1 Legco seat and 154 electors; the "Education" functional constituency has 1 Legco seat and 88,185 electors (of which number I am *not* one). By contrast, the "New Territories West" geographical constituency has 9 Legco seats and 1,086,511 electors (of which number I am, again, *not* one). This works out at around 120,723 electors per seat, or 784 times as many as in Agriculture and Fisheries. There are 35 seats elected from geographical constituencies and 30 from functional constituencies. In addition there are 5 "super seats," which are elected by all eligible voters in the whole of Hong Kong, but candidates must be, and must be nominated by, District Councillors. In short, the whole thing is a stinking gerrymander designed to ensure that any radical legislation can be blocked. (You can find the gory details at <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/08/27/the-complex-design-of-hong-kongs-legislative-elections-ensure-that-nothing-will-change/>)

Up until the 2016 election, permanent residents of Hong Kong had, under Article 26 of the Basic Law, the right to stand for election, except for the super seats, of course. This year, the government has decided that representatives of parties advocating the independence of Hong Kong should be barred from standing: in other words, permanent residents have the right to stand for election unless they favour radically amending the constitution. The plain fact is that Hong Kong is daily losing its democratic freedoms under pressure from Beijing.

This same city, however, is regularly judged to have an extremely free market economy. The very right-wing US Heritage Foundation, for example, judges Hong Kong to have the greatest degree of economic freedom in the world (<http://www.heritage.org/index/country/hongkong>). This economic freedom has been an enduring aspect of the city for many years but it has most certainly not resulted in any incentive for political freedom. Having a free market does not produce democracy.

4. There is no ontological relationship between the private ownership of the press and support for democracy. Unlike the mainland, Hong Kong has a press that is, in its vast majority, privately owned. However, in the 2015 struggle for democracy (the "Umbrella Revolution") only one of the 17 daily papers included in the Chinese University's regular surveys of media credibility supported the movement for democracy unequivocally. This title, *Apple Daily*, is owned by a successful entrepreneur who, unusually in Hong Kong, is hostile to Beijing. For its pains, the paper is regularly starved of advertising by pro-Beijing companies, both local and mainland. Most of the other newspapers are owned by capitalists who have strong links with Beijing and who depend for their profits on sustaining those relationships. To a greater or less extent, their editorial policies follow their economic interests, which have no place for democracy. Whether a privately owned media outlet supports democracy or not depends upon the same sort of complex factors as determine whether constitutional provisions are existential realities or not.
5. There is no ontological relationship between capitalists and the establishment of democracy. What is true in Hong Kong of the special case of newspapers is true more generally. The vast majority of capitalists in the SAR, not to mention the vast majority of capitalists on the mainland, and big international companies like HSBC, are opponents of any move towards democracy. Indeed, during the Umbrella Revolution, big businesses in the city were solidly in support of the government's refusal to make any concessions.
6. There is no ontological relationship between the "middle class" and the establishment of democracy. "Middle class" is hardly a well-defined sociological category and it hard to say how many people might merit the description, but recent estimates by market researchers put it at around 19 per cent of the

mainland population, or roughly 145 million people (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-03-09/here-s-what-china-s-middle-class-really-earn-and-spend>). This middle class is the product of the economic transformation of China over the last forty years and compared both to the peasantry and the majority of manual workers it is quite privileged. An “average” member of this group earns more than five times as much as a peasant and roughly twice as much as a migrant worker.

In both Hong Kong and the mainland, there are determined individuals who have devoted their lives to the struggle for democracy and some of them are indeed unquestionably members of the “middle class.” The brave lawyers currently undergoing bitter persecution in the mainland are excellent examples. The “middle class” as a whole, however, shows little interest in democracy and there is little evidence that it is prepared to enter any serious struggle to achieve it. On the contrary, this vast majority of this substantial social group is much more concerned with spending its newly-acquired wealth on property, consumer goods, education and other indicators of success. To the extent that they have been mobilized, it has been as part of the city-wide demonstrations about environmental dangers that are a relatively common, and quite understandable, feature of contemporary China. While there is no evidence that, like the Thai middle class, they are enthusiastic backers of dictatorship, neither is there a shred of evidence that there is any necessary link between them and democracy.

7. The social groups that have mounted the most consistent and determined opposition to the CPC’s rule are peasants and urban workers. These disputes often begin around concrete issues like workers’ unpaid wages and the illegal seizure of peasant land. In the six months before writing this (on 28th August 2016) there were 1091 strikes in China and 28 of them involved more than 1000 workers (<http://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>). Such strikes, however, necessarily involve issues that go well beyond the simple demands themselves since they mean a breach with the official “All China Federation of Trade Unions” which, according to close observers:

...claims to be the “world’s largest trade union,” with around 288 million members and more than one million full-time officials. The structure of the ACFTU reflects the hierarchical administration of the Chinese Communist Party and regional government: ACFTU officials are essentially government bureaucrats with little understanding of the needs of workers or how to represent them in negotiations with management. At the enterprise-level, the vast majority of unions are controlled by management and represent the interests of management. Only very occasionally will an enterprise trade union actually support workers against management. (<http://www.clb.org.hk/content/about-us>)

It is more difficult to specify the number of peasant “mass incidents” since the authorities stopped collecting, or at least publishing, them some years ago. One detailed study, however, argued in 2012 that roughly 65 per cent of all such events were related to land issues (https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Asia/1012ecran_gobelong.pdf, p. 37). These necessarily involve political issues since they are triggered by the actions of local party officials in seizing land illegally, offering inadequate compensation or evicting people from their homes.

In at least one case, that of protests in the village of Wukan in Guangdong province in 2011-12, the dynamic of the struggle did indeed lead to the establishment of genuinely free and democratic elections at the local level (<http://www.scmp.com/topics/wukan>). It is, of course, just as impossible to have democracy in one village as it is to have socialism in one country, and Wukan has been under pressure ever since. In the most recent incident, an elected leader was arrested on allegations of corruption, provoking another round of mass demonstrations.

Many commentators seek to explain Wukan, or the many cases of striking workers electing their own leaders, as exceptions or a best short term expedients. There is no doubt that none of these struggles amount to an existential challenge to the rule of the CPC. What is the case, however, is that they embody a dynamic of democratization in a way that other confrontations do not. When (middle class) students attack the Japanese embassy over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, they confront the police, but there is nothing in the dynamics of their struggle that leads them towards democracy. It is the social position of the peasantry and the working class in the vast upheaval that China is experiencing that drives them to resistance, and the character of that resistance inevitably leads them in the direction of democratic political structures.

That it is the wretched of the earth that have the greatest interest in democracy should not come as a surprise. From the sans culottes of the Great French Revolution and the Chartists in Britain, through the leading role played by social democratic parties in the struggle for universal suffrage before the First

World War to the resistance to the rise of fascism in its aftermath it was these classes that led the struggle for democracy.

China does not yet provide us with any positive models of the relationship between media and democracy but it does help to dispel many of the myths that have accumulated around these issues. We live in a period when, in the developed world as much as in the developing world, democracy is embattled. In my view, it is worth fighting to save it, and in order to do that we need to have a clear picture of the issues at stake.