

The role of media in China's democratisation

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Democratisation in China over the last two decades has probably followed the most twisted path in the world. The economic reform beginning in the late 1970s unwittingly led to a massive political consciousness, and that massive political consciousness in turn led to a high demand for democracy. Nevertheless, in the past 20 years or so the world's 'last stronghold' of communism has had frequent political ups and downs, and each of these ups and downs clearly left either a positive or a negative mark on the course toward democracy.

For most of the years in the 1980s, democratisation in China was in the full blossom and had its best time. The media also benefited a great deal from this political relaxation. Not only did the media obtain an ever-fast development and expansion, but also the media's content was much bolder than before and the control of the media was much loosened. However, the most significant aspect of these changes is that, for the first time in communist China's history, media were able to play a role of catalyst for democratisation. This single but very important change alone symbolised a transformation of the country's media system from an authentic communist media model to an authoritarian-like new media model, under which the media were granted some autonomy and freedom as long as they support state and leadership and do not criticise or threaten the power structure. But the uniqueness of the China case is that, ironically, this new role and function of media as a catalyst for democratisation and a promoter of democratic consciousness was now weakening the communist ideology and endangering the Chinese Communist Party's ruling position.

Since China embarked on reform in the late 1970s, society was becoming increasingly pluralised, and people were enjoying unprecedented freedom and diversified lifestyles. The Party's control over ideology was also relaxed to some degree and the media were getting more independent at every possible political opportunity. Consequently, discussion of many political and ideological issues through media became possible. To the Party, as long as the views and opinions were not directly challenging the Party's ideology and leadership, they were generally tolerated. Obviously, this new attitude contained some elements of the authoritarian media model.

Nevertheless, every time when the Party felt that the media had gone too far or had become too open, liberal, and free, a political campaign would be launched in order to counter those trends. For instance, in 1983 when the media were in the heyday after several years of enjoying 'freedom' and playing a role of catalyst for democratisation, the Party felt the media had become too open, liberal, and free, which was perceived as a threat to the communist ideology and system. The Party therefore launched a large-scale political and ideological movement—the anti-Western spiritual pollution campaign, and set the media as the major target of this anti-

Western spiritual pollution campaign. The Party issued a special document to the media, ordering the media to follow 'correctly' the Party's 'political principles' and 'political directions' (Decisions, 1983).

The anti-Western spiritual pollution campaign only lasted for several months due to its unpopularity and the trend of openness, liberalisation, and democratisation kept moving forward. Also, the media continued to play an active role of catalyst for openness, liberalisation, and democratisation. The vigorous progress in all these aspects reached another new level in 1987, which seemed to have passed the limits set by the Party and resulted in another nation-wide political and ideological movement—the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign.

Similar to anti-Western spiritual pollution campaign, during the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign the Party also set media and all other ideological organs as the major target of the movement. The most representative reflection of 'bourgeois liberalisation' is the media's advocate of the 'imported' ideas such as anarchism and individualism (Schnell, 1999, p. 4). Once again, the Party issued another document entitled 'The Decision Regarding the Guiding Principles for the Socialist Spiritual Civilisation'. Among the numerous mandates listed in the document, one was the reinforced censorship of the press. In the meantime, in an effort to execute the so-called 'strengthened macro-control of media', the Party's Propaganda Ministry also issued a 'guideline' requiring the print media submit their articles for approval before publication and the electronic media submit their programmes for pre-view before broadcasting.

The anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign in 1987 also did not last too long and received little anticipated results. Instead, after the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign, the consciousness for democracy and the democratisation process continued to expand with a much more rigorous speed and an unprecedented scope, which finally led to the 1989 Tian'anmen pro-democracy demonstrations.

The role of media in the early 1990s

The occurrence of the 1989 Tian'anmen Square student pro-democracy movement was both a peak of democratisation in China and a turning point of the democratisation process. After 1989, China's democratic movement was forced by the 'state repressive apparatuses' to be at a standstill. In the early 1990s, both the media and the democratic movement were in one of the darkest periods in China's modern history.

Indeed, the 1989 bloody event was the most serious setback to China's democratisation, and since then the media's role in democratisation had a 180-degree turn from a catalyst to a preventer. Not only were almost all the media's development and expansion plans terminated, but also the media's content was much tightened and many books, magazines, newspapers, radio and television programmes, and films were either banned or cancelled. Moreover, numerous brave journalists who fought for democracy during the 1980s as 'people's soldiers'

were either jailed, dismissed, or expelled, and the public's critical views and voices were no longer heard from the media.

In the aftermath of the 1989 event and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party were very sensitive about anything that could weaken their power. The Party used all occasions to insist that a direct democracy would not be suitable for China because the Chinese people are ill-educated and ill-prepared for the decentralisation of power. At this stage only a totalitarian political system would work for China, and the media thus must only use a totalitarian-like media system—the communist media model, which is characterised by being totally controlled by the communist party and government and entirely at the service of the communist system and ideology.

Once again, the media thus had another transformation from an authoritarian-like media model back to a typical communist media model. The media were now required to be a vehicle 'one-hundred percent loyal' to the Party, the Party's political course, and the Party's central tasks (Sun, 1992). The Party mandated that the fundamental functions of the media must be first to guide society and public to follow the Party's direction and, second, mainly to praise 'good things' instead of exposing and criticising 'bad things'. Again, a document regarding media and ideological work was issued by the Party's Central Committee. The document sternly criticised the media for not closely following the Party's political lines and therefore having committed 'serious mistakes' (Decisions, 1992).

Evidently, all these demonstrated another 180-degree turning of the role and function of the media from a less restrict, authoritarian-like media model back to a heavily controlled, totalitarian-like media model. Through these, the Party was executing a typical communist media system.

The switch-back was thought by the Party as a 'political must' because the Party felt the threat of 'peaceful evolution' (Deng, 1992) The Party therefore decided to launch a thorough political and ideological movement—the anti-peaceful evolution campaign right after the 1989 Tian'anmen pro-democracy demonstrations. The campaign after 1989 was very different from the one in 1983 and the one in 1987. As Lynch (1999) analyses, although indications that spiritual pollution and bourgeois liberalisation could unsettle China's political order first appeared as early as 1983, to many of the party leaders those early indicators seems only 'minor irritants' that could be handled with just a few jailings and party expulsions. Only in 1989 did most of the party leaders finally realise with a shock the extent to which lost control over media and ideological work could threaten the regime's integrity.

The new environments of the mid-1990s

Since the mid-1990s, because of various external and internal factors, China has gradually returned to its reform path, although the reform has now also become a very much controlled process with many restrictions. In the meantime, democratisation too has become an even more controlled process. The fundamental purpose of democratisation now was not to change Chinese

society into a democratic one, but to serve the Chinese Communist Party's political needs in a new international and domestic environment. Under this purpose, democratisation has been led to two different directions. One is the separation of an economic freedom/democracy and a political freedom/democracy. Another is the separation of political freedom/democracy at the grass-root level and political freedom/democracy at the central level.

One dual-direction policy was the separation of media's economic autonomy and their political autonomy. In the 1990s, most media institutions were forced to have their economic autonomy. Except several core media institutions, the government gradually terminated the subsidies to most media institutions and pushed them into the market competition. However, the Party still tightly held the control of media's political autonomy. While all media institutions have to 'enjoy' the economic autonomy and financial freedom, the political control of media still only belongs to the Party alone (Yu, 1998). Economically free but politically controlled, the media have been unwillingly moving toward two opposite directions. This is why the role of the media is changeable every time when the political climate alters.

Another dual-direction policy was the separation of freedom and democracy at the grass-root level and freedom and democracy at the central level. At the grass-root level, the Party wanted to use the media to promote anti-corruption, openness, equity, transparency of government affairs, and democracy; but at the central level, the Party wanted the media to prevent all the above-mentioned goals. Most of the party and government officials being criticised by media were those of low ranking cadres, not the top and key leaders, and party and government policies being questioned or challenged were almost all the local ones, not the ones issued by the Party's central committee or the central government. This mixed role of media reflected the Party's new attitude toward democratisation and media.

This contradictory and conflicting role and function of media were said by the Party to be a 'necessary Chinese characteristic,' a metaphor used by the Party to justify many of its controversial or criticised policies. This dual direction of the media in democratisation again symbolised a transformation of China's media system from a totalitarian-like communist media model to a developmental-like media model, which is characterised by a mixture of elements of the authoritarian media model, communist-like media model, and to a lesser degree, even libertarian media model. This type of media advocate support to the state, not challenge to the state, favours the government's control of the media, and emphasises the media's role and function mainly for nation-building, social progress, and economic development.

On April 1, 1994, a complete new television programme titled The Focal Point started broadcasting on CCTV, China Central Television, China's only national television network with a potential 900-million viewership. The appearance of The Focal Point on CCTV symbolised a permission from the Party to allow the media to have a little of freedom of criticism (Yang, 1998). The appearance of this kind of programmes across the country was an important breakthrough since the setback in the late 1980s. The loosening and reopening were also seen in the print media. Since the mid-1990s, the print media have again achieved fast growth. More importantly, other than the state-owned media, for the first time enterprise-owned, professional-association-

owned, industry-owned, and even individual-association-owned media have begun to appear, although they are still at the initial stage and very insignificant to the state-owned media.

Implications and prospects

The media's changeable role in China's democratisation can be attributed to three factors. First, following the world-wide trend of democratisation, in the 1980s the consciousness of democracy began to develop among the hundreds of millions of people. The ruling political party in China had to compromise with the public's demand for democracy. Second, the media practitioners were tired of being the pawns of the Party and wanted to be part of this democratic movement and make their contributions to this historical transition. Third, on the other hand, however, the media in China are still under the tight and absolute control of the regime and are a political and ideological tool of the Communist Party. They were never a truly independent social institution, nor were they a genuine public service. In fact, the changeable role and function of the media in democratisation vividly reflected the changeable policies of the Chinese Communist Party.

The mixed role and changeable function of the media in democratisation have some profound implications. Two of them are worthwhile noting. First, for decades media in China was a pure propaganda machine of the Party and the media reflected a typical top-down, one-way communication paradigm. The media's sole function was to transmit the party and government's policies, decisions, and messages to the public. The public was just a passive, collective receiver of those messages. Not only was their participation of policy discussion and decision-making not needed, but also the public's use of media to voice their reactions toward the Party and government's policies and decisions were prohibited. Therefore, even though the role and function of media in democratisation are still seriously limited, they are unprecedented.

Second, for most of the years in communist China, criticism of the Party and government officials were not allowed because the target of criticism was viewed by the Party as toward the communist system and the party leaders. That type of criticism would even be considered as 'submissive' and thus would result in serious consequences, such as state punishment, professional discipline, and dismissal. Criticism of the party and government officials on the media was therefore a taboo. Instead, the media are supposed to praise the Party, the communist system, the great achievements of the party and government leaders, and the party and government policies. Therefore, criticism of the Party and government officials was a breakthrough in Chinese media, though the criticism still has many limitations. Nevertheless, these changes reflected a big step of China's media toward a democratic media system and laid some foundation for realising a truly open, free, and democratic media system in the future.

Despite all these developments, progress, and achievements shown since the mid-1990s, the media still cannot be called a really open, free and democratic one yet. According to a survey conducted in the mid-1990s, 88 percent of the surveyed were dissatisfied with the overall performance of the media, and 79 percent thought there were still too many restrictions and 'forbidden areas' for the media. Moreover, in general 68 percent of the surveyed considered the media did not tell the truth when touching the sensitive issues, and more than half stated that the

media's coverage of the government policies and work was not 'transparent' (Yu, 1998).

What needs to be noted is that this media's dual direction is not something only seen in China. As Hao and Xu (1998) observe, some Asian leaders, whose countries have registered remarkable economic growth following the capitalist path, still stand up to openly or indirectly challenge the concept of free press as understood and practised in the West. Through political manoeuvring and personal influence, these Asian leaders have tried to mould their own countries' press system in such ways that go against the tenets underlying various normative theories for press freedom and make such practice different from the rest of the world. Nevertheless, how much farther can these countries go is questionable. As Gong (1994) puts it, in fact 'now more than ever, it seems impossible to foster a globally competitive, market-oriented economy while at the same time tightly centralising control of the information and authority necessary to make decisions' (p. 274). This trend has also emerged in China. The demand for political freedom and democracy including a democratic media has been increasingly getting higher and higher. For example, some leading scholars have already pushed the Party to 'ensure that citizens fully enjoy those rights of physical freedom, free communication, free speech, and a free press' and that 'censorship of all publications must be stopped and private mass media must be legalised' (Lin, 1997, p. 5).

Conclusions

Back and forth, over the past two decades China's media have experienced both progress and setbacks. The course of the development in China's media has not only reflected a gradual evolution of the country's media from a tightly controlled party propaganda machine to a multi-faceted social institution, but more importantly, it has also reflected the transition of the Chinese society from a closed, heavily controlled totalitarian nation to a less controlled, open-oriented, and democracy-seeking country.

At the practical level, the most important significance of the changes in China's media is that the media began to march toward functioning also as a place for the public to voice their views and opinions about their concerns. At the theoretical level, the most important significance of the changes is that, to a certain extent, the media finally began to function also as a social institution and force for democracy. The media have become the agents in the political process and social transition. As Lichtenberg (1990) observes, never before has the media been as critical to the political process and social transition as it is today, and never before has the media's importance and its democratic role and function been so widely and publicly recognised.

In spite of those changes in the last two decades, by the standard of a free and democratic media in the Western countries, the media in China are not a truly open, free, and democratic one yet. Among all the limitations imposed to the media, the most serious one is that all the media are still under the control of the Party and the fundamental purpose of the media is still to serve the needs of the Party and government, not the needs of society and people.

The freedom of speech, the right to know, and the transparency of government work and public affairs, are all subject to the needs, willingness or mercy of the Party. For China, there is still a

long march to go to reach the destination of a truly free media and a truly democratic society.

There are both pessimistic and optimistic prospects for the future of China's media. From a pessimistic perspective, the various limitations of the media represent tough obstacles on the road to democracy. China's constitution does grant the people the freedom of speech, press, peaceful assembly, demonstration and protest, and it also criminalises any violation of personal freedom. But the history shows these provisions are more like a sham than a reality (Yan, 1997). Although as early as in 1984 China began to consider establishing the press law when the reform was at a peak moment, so far the press law is still in the cradle (Hong, 1998).

From an optimistic perspective, nevertheless, the changes in the media represent a hope for and a progress toward democracy, freedom of speech, and the public's social surveillance of the ruling political party and government. As Yan believes (1997), in the future, before too long, thousands of independent newspapers and journals with various agendas will emerge, dazzling programmes and shows will appear on television screens, political speeches and campaigns will be broadcast daily, and criticism of the ruling political party — whatever the party is — will not be considered 'counterrevolutionary' or 'subversive'. A democratic media will come to China sooner or later.

However, between the pessimistic perspective and the optimistic perspective is a more realistic perspective. It sees that four aspects regarding the media may be gradually improved whereas two aspects will not be changed. First, the basic role and function of most media institutions as a political and ideological organ of the Party may be gradually faded and the characteristics of the media as enterprises may become more and more noticeable; thus, the autonomy and freedom of the media would be increased. Second, the ruling political party and government may mainly execute their macro guidance over the media and interference less and less with media's daily practice; thus, the media would be able to play a more active role as a social surveillance, though not a watchdog of the Party and government. Third, market economy may be fully introduced into the media and competition may be used in a much more expanded scope; thus, a foundation needed by a fair and democratic media system would be established. Fourth, both the establishment of the press law and the code of journalism may be speeding up; thus, media would be mainly guided by law and self-disciplines, instead of by the orders of the Party and government. Nevertheless, on the other hand, two things will remain unchanged. One is the 'socialist nature' of the media, and the other the Party's leadership over the media (Gui, 1998).

One very important thing to keep in mind when discussing the future of the media reform in countries like China is that media are not the master of themselves and thus they cannot decide their own fate, actions, and directions (Jaing Zemin, 2001). The media's fate, actions and directions are mainly dependent on the political systems of their nations. As McChesney (1999) points out, media reform can take place only if it is part of a broader political movement. Now, after all these fluctuations, it is hoped that Chinese totalitarianism can evolve again into an authoritarian-like system because, as Su (1997) sees, not only what China has all experienced is unavoidable for a country to transfer from a communist dictatorship to a democratic system, but also an authoritarian-like system is perhaps a necessary step before China can truly move toward a complete democracy.

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