

## The Media and Democracy in China and Taiwan

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### Abstract

This essay offers a comparison of the media in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan within the context of the processes of regime transition in Asia, and argues that this comparison is meaningful only if we avoid a state-centred approach. The discussion contrasts the prevailing authoritarian-style management of the media in China with the liberalization and market competition that characterizes the media landscape in Taiwan. Asking if Taiwan offers a model for eventual democratization of China's media, the essay explores the problems associated with the style of journalism that Taiwan has adopted, and considers whether market forces really are a panacea for the customary problems of democracy.

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Asia is a media landscape in transformation. As new democracies emerge and old authoritarian political systems cling desperately to power, the media are playing an increasingly active and significant role as political agents. As the instruments of popular mobilization and responsive politics, the media can both promote and support regime change and democratic consolidation; equally, they can be the apparatus of political authoritarianism, helping to preserve a reactionary style of government.<sup>1</sup>

Asia is a particularly exciting and appropriate case study as the region provides the opportunity to observe the organization and behavior of the media in multiple socio-political contexts with diverse histories of media practice

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick H. O'Neil, *Communicating Democracy: The Media and Political Transitions* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Vicky Randall, ed., *Democratization and the Media* (London: Frank Cass, 1998); Elizabeth Fox, ed., *Media and Politics in Latin America: The Struggle for Democracy* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1988); James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, eds., *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000); W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman, eds., *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Duncan McCargo, *Media and Politics in Pacific Asia* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003); and Gary D. Rawnsley, *Political Communications and Democracy* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2006).

and cultural understanding. For example, political control of the media in Myanmar, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and China remains firm and resolute. In fact, Myanmar and North Korea still linger at the bottom of Freedom House<sup>2</sup> rankings as the least free nations in the world. Some Asian societies—most notably the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Nepal—have experienced “backsliding” from democracy to authoritarianism. Thailand, too, first under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and, after a military coup in September 2006 under interim Prime Minister Surayut Chulanon, is routinely criticized for having removed essential press freedoms and neglecting constitutional provisions that guarantee media liberty and independence.

However, we also should be mindful that the media in democratic Asian political systems are likewise subject to strict laws, regulations, self-censorship, and the pressures of market competition. This is particularly disquieting in the context of the so-called “war on terror”; human rights advocates worry that the successful prosecution of this “war” depends on the suspension of fundamental liberties, and that the threat to “national security” is once again a convenient excuse to exercise increasingly authoritarian practices against the media, even in otherwise democratic political systems. Nevertheless, in other Asian societies, the impediments to fully democratic media are institutionalized. For example, in Japan, the “kisha” press clubs, exercising a near monopoly on governmental information, are continually criticized as exclusive and over-dependent on official sources, thereby eroding the media’s democratic responsibility to hold the government accountable for its actions.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, in Taiwan, the media are politically polarized, leaving little space for political independence and causing relations among politicians, the media, and their audiences to deteriorate. While voices calling for the separation of politics and the media are persistent, raising critical questions of ownership, influence, and bias, the concept of freedom of speech and the responsibilities associated with its achievement are passionately contested.

Equally fascinating is the way new communications technologies, especially mobile telephony and the Internet, are amplifying the voice of the grassroots, opening new public spaces and creating fresh opportunities for popular mobilization, protest, and participation in the political processes across Asia. Access to information—and alternative or officially proscribed information—is easier today than at any time in the past, despite continued attempts by governments to control the medium, the message, and its

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<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, a “nonprofit, nonpartisan” organization, measures the freedom of the media to assess the levels of democracy around the world by analyzing the legal, political, and economic constraints on the media and journalists. Its Web site address is [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

<sup>3</sup> Ofer Feldman, *Politics and the News Media in Japan* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993), and id., *Talking Politics in Japan Today* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2005).

reception. In an age of global media with information immediately available to everyone with use of a computer, it is becoming progressively difficult to centrally manage information and the new public spaces that are materializing, especially in cyberspace.

This discussion centers on China and Taiwan as culturally similar yet politically different case studies. China is an example of a neo-authoritarian power that continues to restrain media freedoms in pursuit of a developmental agenda that privileges political interests and the survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); the latter is the first Chinese democracy and is still enduring the painful birth of free and, above all, responsible media within a highly charged and polarized political environment. Given the cultural affinity but political enmity across the Taiwan Strait, does Taiwan offer a model for media democracy in China? Or are the media in China securely embedded within an authoritarian framework that will withstand the pressures of change? We will discover that market forces exert a significant and often decisive influence on the direction of media development, and that the attainment of political democracy does not guarantee more competent, professional, or responsible media. This means we need to be aware of the complexity of government-media relations in Asia that renders problematic any analysis seeking a simple explanation of governmental influence in the media based on direct political involvement in pursuit of political interests. By privileging the state, we are in danger of neglecting economic and commercial forces that mold the media ecology in liberal democracies. Moreover, we also should be mindful of a country's historical development, cultural markers in individual Asian societies (the Japanese *kisha* clubs, for example), and the natural conservatism or apprehension within media organizations that make them disposed to self-censorship. Raymundo Riva Palacio's observations of the media in Mexico equally apply to Asia:

Outside observers who look for examples of direct government censorship, monopolization of the distribution of newsprint and limitless government power to suppress or publicize news and commentary fail to grasp the nature of the relationship between the government and the media—a complex network of mutual benefits, commitments and favours, difficult to penetrate and even more difficult to reform.<sup>4</sup>

A more plural approach to the media is required, even in supposedly monolithic states such as China. An overly state-centric perspective distorts the reality

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<sup>4</sup> Raymundo Riva Palacio, "A Culture of Collusion: The Ties that Bind the Press and the PRI," in *A Culture of Collusion: An Inside Look at the Mexican Press*, ed. William A. Orme (Miami, FL: North-South Center, 1997), 22.

of modern Asia, especially in the era of “new media” and new information technologies. As Duncan McCargo notes:

Importantly ... many of the unsatisfactory forms of agency practised by the media in Pacific Asia do not arise from limits or repression imposed from above. Rather, they reflect the deficiencies of the media themselves: their partnership, their lack of professionalism, their willing collusion with the state or other powerholders, or their pursuit of sensationalism. ...

... Important though the discourse of media freedom may be, it also has the dangerous effect of diverting attention from many of the real shortcomings of media agency, which rest firmly within the control of owners and practitioners.<sup>5</sup>

How far do McCargo’s observations help us to understand the modern media landscapes of China and Taiwan?

### The Case Studies

As a cursory glance at any academic publisher’s catalogues will reveal, the media in China are attracting substantial interest from scholars working within a variety of disciplines. This is a reflection of their importance in the social and economic transformation of China, and a growing recognition that the media—their organization, working practices, content, and reception—too are changing as a consequence of China’s modernization.

The media in Taiwan likewise have changed, but in contrast to the Chinese model, these shifts reveal the influence of deliberate elite-led *political* reforms that have turned Taiwan into a modern democratic society. Unlike their counterparts in the mainland, and despite their clear political affiliations, the media in Taiwan enjoy full professional autonomy from state interference, and have the opportunity to scrutinize and challenge political power without the threat of political reprisal common in authoritarian Taiwan.<sup>6</sup> They facilitate political, economic, and social transparency, accountability, and critical engagement, which together help to make democratic governments work better and more efficiently. The history of the media in Taiwan reveals that they acted as “agents of change” throughout the democratization process, and serve as “agents of restraint”—monitoring, checking, and balancing government—as democracy is consolidated.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the sustained popularity of call-in

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<sup>5</sup> McCargo, *Media and Politics in Pacific Asia*, 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, *Critical Security, Democratisation and the Media in Taiwan* (London: Ashgate, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> McCargo, *Media and Politics in Pacific Asia*, 3-4.

shows on radio and television indicates that the media are committed (if only for ratings and therefore revenue) to providing a platform for a range of voices and perspectives. There is a distinctly bottom-up flow of communication that, far from permitting genuine dialogue, at least creates an authentic public sphere, populated by a mixture of participants from both Taiwan's elite and civil society.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, the independence of the Chinese media is politically constrained, offering the appearance of a system that can be understood only by a state-centric perspective. Both the media (explicitly, national television and press) and the message (specifically, political news and information) are closely supervised and managed by the authorities, and thus the "command" system of party control, described by Chin-Chuan Lee in 1990, remains intact. In a society that fears "chaos" (*luan*), these media are agents of "stability" (*wending*), reinforcing the Communist Party's authority and preserving the "social and political order."<sup>9</sup>

To reinforce this commitment to stability and order, and to fortify the leadership of the Communist Party, the media are managed by a complex network of state and party organizations, including the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) and the Ministry of Culture, and, representing the Communist Party, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee, described as the "key implementer of instructions from the leading group."<sup>10</sup> In reality, the institutional boundaries between state and party are blurred, making it difficult for both observers and, perhaps more importantly, the media themselves to unravel the complex hierarchies that supervise their work.

The structure is further complicated by the creation of new layers of bureaucracy that appear to lie outside the official system. The News Commentary Group (NCG), for example, was established in 1994 to "clean house at major newspapers," and has been described as a "shadowy group of Communist Party officials entrusted with tremendous power and almost no accountability":

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<sup>8</sup> Alice R. Chu, "Taiwan's Mass-Mediated Crisis Discourse: Pop Politics in an Era of Political TV Call-in Shows," in *The Minor Arts of Daily Life: Popular Culture in Taiwan*, ed. David K. Jordan, Andrew D. Morris, and Marc L. Moskowitz (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> The prospect of nation-wide "chaos" is increasing. In 2006, there were 87,000 public order incidents in China, compared to just 10,000 in 1994. The authorities have prevented journalists from reporting these incidents, blaming human rights activists and foreign journalists as intent on spreading disorder. Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters Without Borders), July 2006, Annual Report 2007, <http://www.rsf.org> (accessed February 22, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Ching-chang Hsiao and Timothy Creek, "Open and Closed Media: External and Internal Newspapers in the Propaganda System," in *Decision Making in Deng's China*, ed. Carol Lee Hamrin and Suisheng Zhao (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 78-79.

The NCG...is a reinvention of censorship that allows the party to ensure “guidance of public opinion” in the midst of an unruly market. Party leaders can use the NCG as their hatchet men and at the same time confuse, for the sake of China’s international image, the issue of exactly where they stand on censorship.<sup>11</sup>

Such managerial structures that lie outside the official system represent a grave impediment to the democratization of the media and reinforce the image of arbitrary and insidious political power. Their existence undermines the apparent honesty sought by the leadership. Premier Wen Jiabao’s positive declaration at the close of the 10<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress in March 2006 offered some hope: “A people’s government should accept the democratic supervision of the people. ...Only if a government is subject to the supervision of the people will it not dare to be indolent. ... Every citizen in this country has the freedom of speech and freedom of publishing.” So far, so encouraging. However, any optimism was tarnished by his qualifying statements: “At the same time, every citizen in this country needs to abide by the laws and safeguard the national and social interests. ... we ... need to educate and properly guide the general public so that they can more and more realise that their legitimate concerns need to be expressed through legal channels and in lawful formats.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, the party-state nexus, supported by such organizations as the NCG, is intended to offer the paternal guidance that Hu claims modern China requires. Moreover, the bureaucracy is designed to strengthen the message that the media are required to perform specific duties on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party. President Jiang Zemin’s pronouncement of these responsibilities as part of his declaration, “On the Correct Direction of Public Opinion,” in October 1996, clearly states the media’s political mission and their association with the party:

1. The press must be guided by the party’s basic theory, basic line, and basic guideline, and keep politics, ideology, and action in conformity with the Party Central Committee.
2. The press must firmly keep to the standpoint of the party, adhere to principle, and take a clear-cut stand on what to promote and what to oppose on cardinal issues of right and wrong.
3. The press must adhere to the party’s guideline with stress on propaganda by positive examples, sing the praises of people’s great achievements, and conduct the correct supervision of public opinion that should help the party and state to improve work and the style of leadership, solve problems, enhance unity, and safeguard stability.

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<sup>11</sup> David Bandurski and Lin Hui, “China’s Shadow Censor Commissars,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 169, March 2006, 28-30.

<sup>12</sup> “Chinese Premier Addresses Media on Major Issues,” *People’s Daily*, March 15, 2006.

4. The press must...hold patriotism, collectivism and socialism on high, and use best things to arm, direct and mold the people.

Ten years later, little had changed. By 2006, new President Hu Jintao had embarked on his project of promoting and building the “harmonious society,” in which the media had an essential role. Meeting with 450 representatives of the All China Journalists Association in October, Hu and his propaganda chief, Li Changchun, explained their vision:

“Under the embrace and leadership of the party, the news battlefield... should closely encircle the overall work of the party and the state. ...” The media “should tightly grasp the direction of the correct public opinion [and] continuously raise its capability to lead public opinion,” [Li] was reported as saying.

Li stressed that the priority of “news and propaganda” was to fully publicize the important speeches of Hu, especially his pet project of “building a harmonious society”, the *People’s Daily* said.

“We must unite the thoughts of the entire party and the people with the spirit of the party’s central committee,” Li was reported as saying.<sup>13</sup>

The vocabulary here is revealing: not only do Hu and Li reiterate the relationship of the political and media systems, but also they invoke a discourse of war (“the news battlefield”), suggesting the presence of security threats that are somehow connected to the media. Moreover, the media must understand and promote “correct” public opinion, with the party presumably deciding what is and is not correct in this context.

In short, the transition of leadership from the Third to the Fourth Generation of leadership (led by Hu Jintao, who allegedly instructed propaganda officials in September 2004 to learn from Cuba and North Korea) did not alter the fundamental basis of power in China, nor its expectations of the media; and neither have the new leaders contested the overpowering paternalism at the core of the politics-media-public interface. Clearly, the national media at least are embedded within the political system and have a responsibility to work with and inside it, not against it, to build and support the “harmonious society.” This is an unmistakable barrier to the full democratization of the media, for it demonstrates that not only are journalists prevented from interrogating and challenging state power—the cornerstone of democratic media—but also that any reforms will take place only with the authority and supervision of the party.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Chinese Communist Party Calls on Media to Toe the Line,” *Taipei Times*, October 26, 2006.

Likewise, the rise of investigative journalism that exposes corruption is welcome, but we should remember that it is only possible at the local level and with the tacit consent of the central authorities. It is feasible to find anecdotal evidence of such journalism's achieving its desired effect and influencing policymakers.<sup>15</sup> However, while the 2003 SARS crisis is appropriately viewed as a watershed in demonstrating how control and active suppression of the news can backfire on a government in the Internet age in the face of pressure from a host of foreign media and global public opinion,<sup>16</sup> coverage of an outbreak of avian flu in 2005 suggested that the Chinese leadership still was not prepared to tolerate complete transparency.<sup>17</sup>

The reality of China's political containment of the Internet—a theme I explore in depth elsewhere<sup>18</sup>—contradicts the utopian aspirations of Netizens, who once believed that it was impossible to censor or regulate Internet content, and that individual states had no authority in cyberspace. A greater number of Web sites are now blocked, rendering them virtually inaccessible, while sophisticated filtering software allows a greater degree of control over the Web pages that surfers can access. Further, a so-called Internet police force trawls the Web for subversive content. Fifty-two “cyber-dissidents” are in Chinese prisons for posting inappropriate content and criticizing the government online: only ten others are imprisoned elsewhere in the world, highlighting China's leadership of nations that impose severe legal penalties on Internet misuse.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The party is devising new ways to manage the media. In February 2007, that government announced that media outlets would be allocated twelve points and would be subject to closure if all their points were deducted. See Cary Huang, “Beijing Tightens Media Grip with Penalty Points System,” *South China Morning Post*, February 9, 2007. Moreover, the Publicity Department of the party's Central Committee issued a decree in January 2007 that the media should seek permission to cover significant historic events and key anniversaries (2006 was a key year of anniversaries, including the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Mao Zedong, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai, the thirtieth anniversary of the Tangshan earthquake, and the fortieth and thirtieth anniversaries of the start and end of the Cultural Revolution, respectively).

<sup>15</sup> In April 2004, staff at a hospital in Anhui province informed the media of the rising numbers of malnourished babies. This led to a series of reports about substandard milk powder and prompted Premier Wen Jiabao to order a State Council investigation.

<sup>16</sup> The *Asian Journal of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2005) is a special issue devoted to “Media, Crisis and SARS,” and includes Ernest Zhang and Kenneth Fleming, “Examination of Characteristics of News Media under Censorship: A Content Analysis of Selected Chinese Newspapers' SARS Coverage,” 319-339.

<sup>17</sup> The relevant agencies of the Chinese government responded with full press conferences and briefings for both the international and domestic press. However, it seems that the government responded only after the foreign media had picked up the reports; journalists still encounter resistance from unhelpful local bureaucrats when they try to investigate such stories. In October 2006, the Publicity Department ordered newspapers to seek approval before reporting new outbreaks of bird flu and animal or human deaths that were a consequence.

<sup>18</sup> Gary D. Rawnsley, “Virtual China: Threat or Opportunity?” *St. Antony's International Review* 3, no. 1 (2007): 42-57.

<sup>19</sup> “China ‘Leading Crackdown on Net,’” *South China Morning Post*, February 2, 2007. Outside China, four cyber dissidents are in jail in Vietnam, three in Syria, and one each in Tunisia, Libya, and Iran.

This discussion so far has reinforced the image of China as a state-dominated media system. The party-state complex with its prevailing political and ideological interests strengthens the command structure, guiding and instructing the national media and the Internet from the political center. Nevertheless, it is essential not to lose sight of the fact that provincial and local media are subject to less political supervision than those operating at the national level and that censorship of nonpolitical media is not as severe as news and information about political issues. Media and political decentralization, the geographical spread of economic reform, the assorted transformations within the media industry, and the different rates of these changes reveal a media landscape enveloped by complex and uneven liberalization that is difficult to explain from a state-centred perspective alone.

This (albeit limited) mixture is principally attributable to the market-driven economic reforms that have propelled China's modernization since the early 1980s. The rapid development of eastern China, including the creation of Special Economic Zones, has fuelled consumption, transforming audience demand—less politics, more entertainment, and life-style<sup>20</sup>—and creating a dependence on advertising revenue.<sup>21</sup> Still, even entertainment is not immune from government interference and paternalism in the Harmonious Society. In January 2007, the Chinese government announced it would impose tighter restrictions on reality talent contests and ban altogether from the prime-time schedule dramas that failed to promote Communist Party values. The vice director of SARFT said that only “ethically inspiring TV series” which “reflect the reality of China in a positive way” should be broadcast.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, there is no doubt that the market has transformed media consumption. Government and political units are still expected to subscribe to the official party newspapers, reflected in the popular use of the term *dangbao* (party newspaper) to refer to *Renmin Ribao*. Its authoritative status is confirmed by its availability: *Renmin Ribao* is incredibly difficult to acquire and impossible to buy on the streets, being available by subscription only.<sup>23</sup> Rather, street

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<sup>20</sup> Jianying Zha, *China Pop* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995); Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz, eds., *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); and Michael Hockx and Julia Strauss, eds., *Culture in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Commercials were banned during the period of Mao's leadership, and media depended for their survival on state subsidies. In 1979, commercials began in Shanghai and rapidly spread. As the costs of maintaining the media increased subsidies became less valuable. Advertising therefore emerged as an important source of revenue, replacing subsidies in the 1990s in all but a few key national media run by central authorities.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Clarissa Oon, “Beijing Tightens Grip on Prime-time TV,” *Straits Times*, January 23, 2007. See also, Palacio, “A Culture of Collusion.”

<sup>23</sup> Before leaving China in February 2007, I tried to find and buy *Renmin Ribao*. It was impossible. My contacts within the Communist Party eventually found me some copies and explained my difficulty by telling me that “no one wants to read it.”

vendors now sell magazines and newspapers with mass or popular appeal which, together with television and radio, now constitute the preferred media of the domestic sphere. The possible consequences of these changes should not be understated. While they do not imply that China is democratizing or that the state's management of official news and information is relaxing, the shift toward media pluralism nevertheless indicates the emergence of (tolerated) personal spaces in a media ecology previously subject to complete authoritarian intervention. These spaces are formed by the combination of economic reform and institutional changes within the media, especially the growing dependence on advertising revenue, that together encourage audience individualism and consumerism. They suggest the appearance of a distinct separation between "state" and "society."

However, we do need to avoid the assumption that market forces are a panacea. They do not cause democratization, and they can actually have unfavorable consequences. Dependence on advertising revenues generates gaps in access to information that replicate the growing variations in wealth across China.<sup>24</sup> The market reforms privilege the cities, especially in the east, where Chinese with the economic power to be consumers are located. Low-density, low-consumption areas in the middle and west of China are ignored because these markets are not profitable. Even expanding access to television will not solve the problem if audiences do not have the financial power to consume the goods advertised in commercials. To understand the implications of this, it is important to note that, by the end of the 1990s, the national television channels could reach 92 percent of the population, though this still excluded sixty million families in rural China with no access; in October 2006, China's first direct broadcast satellite, Sinosat 2, was launched to allow rural areas to have strong signal-access to a full range of television programs. China now has over 700 national and local television stations and almost 2,000 cable stations broadcasting a total of 56,000 hours of programs.<sup>25</sup> It is possible that, rather than unifying the nation, this national access to more diverse television programming will only aggravate the economically underprivileged who will be able to see the lifestyle denied to them. The potential for unrest is therefore undeniably present.

This brief survey demonstrates that the economic liberalization and the simultaneous absence of political liberalization have exerted as tremendous a strain on Chinese media as they have in every other aspect of life. Market forces pull the media in one direction; the determination of the Communist Party to

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<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge 2003), and Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen, eds., *State and Society in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century China: Crisis, Contention and Legitimation* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Zhao Huanxin and Xin Dinding, "Satellite Will Expand TV Coverage," *China Daily*, October 28-29, 2006.

maintain its authority pulls them in another. It is now a cliché to observe that China has experienced an economic miracle based on market forces that depend on the free flow of information, ideas, and debate. The dilemma is that this miracle is occurring in an environment where the flow of information is tightly controlled. While embracing the value of communications as indispensable instruments of social and economic development, the government continues at the same time to limit their use, access, and content and therefore their potential to act as a viable competitor for political power. What is good for China's long-term prospects—the free flow of information and ideas—is ultimately bad for the Chinese government. With the proliferation of media, publishers, and audiences, more professional journalism, and a print industry evermore determined to challenge the government, a centrally created and disseminated message is unable to compensate a society increasingly willing to protest and express its grievances in public spaces.

All too often, media systems that have experienced reform through democratization sacrifice the democratic ideal for profit and commercial growth, as demonstrated in Taiwan where competition between media and media platforms for ratings and advertising revenue has transformed the condition and practice of journalism. And some of this competition reflects the same “hard news—soft news” rivalry that increasingly characterizes the Chinese print media. This is most visible in the culture of the popular call-in television programs which shatter the “boundaries between information and entertainment, senders and receivers, spectators and performers....”<sup>26</sup> Where previously Taiwan's media were expected to conform to a culture of deference to political institutions and politicians, now many television programs and publications offer spectacular confrontation (as in the call-in shows), dramatic footage of violence caught on close-circuit television, and sensational exposés of public figures to entice audiences: so-called “yellow” or tabloid journalism (most conspicuous in Jimmy Lai's *Apple Daily*<sup>27</sup>) today flourishes in Taiwan on a scale previously inconceivable. This situation has arisen because of a noticeable decline in deference to authority, but also because of perceived entitlements to democratic rights of free speech, media pluralism, and the rising power of the market over state forces. Now the media are intruding evermore enthusiastically into the private the lives of politicians and other celebrities, while the bereaved and victims (and even perpetrators) of crime are paraded nightly on television with little sensitivity. Where many democratic societies

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<sup>26</sup> Chu, “Taiwan's Mass-Mediated Crisis Discourse,” 104.

<sup>27</sup> *Apple Daily* is a tabloid newspaper that began life in Hong Kong, concentrating on celebrity gossip, scandal, naked women, and lurid crime scene photographs. It also has published sexually explicit images and even reviews of recommended brothels. The *Apple Daily* has contended with the DPP-oriented *Liberty Times* as the most popular newspaper in Taiwan and is the preferred choice for the 30-34 age group.

are trying to find ways to regulate sensationalist and invasive reporting, many parts of Taiwan's media seem to revel in the idea that free speech is a democratic license to sensationalism, to encroach on the private lives of those in the public spotlight.<sup>28</sup>

However, the market impact of *Apple Daily* and the competition for revenue by means of yellow journalism raise crucial questions about the development of journalism as a profession: Where does freedom of speech end and moral responsibility begin? Taiwan's media are still discovering the need for professional self-discipline and self-regulation in their reporting of disasters, crime, and celebrity and personal tragedies,<sup>29</sup> and this I would argue is just one sign that Taiwan is still in the early stages of democratic consolidation.<sup>30</sup> Here, we can detect the influence of democratization: too many people in Taiwan, particularly journalists and politicians, suppose freedom of speech absolves them from any responsibility for caution, sensitivity, and sometimes accuracy. Their experience with the authoritarian control of media makes them naturally and understandably suspicious of state regulation. However, rather than implement strict privacy laws, the government must try to encourage self-regulation within a framework that will accept standards for quality. This may be achieved by, for example, conceding more powers of regulation to media-interested activists and nongovernmental organizations. Can a government really legislate for quality?

Most worrying for any analysis of democracy and the media in Taiwan is the prevalence of "crisis discourses" in the media and what Chu<sup>31</sup> calls "the ritualization of crisis issues." Political problems are simplified and reduced to undemanding dichotomies—China versus Taiwan; unification versus independence; Taiwanese versus Mainlander; the Kuomintang (KMT) versus the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP); "blue" versus "green"—

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<sup>28</sup> During my last visit to Taiwan at the end of 2006, I noticed that footage taken from close-circuit televisions was used more extensively than ever before in news broadcasts. These give the impression that no one is safe from the cameras, and they are able to trap the indiscreet and careless celebrity or politician.

<sup>29</sup> To give just two examples: In March 2006, a school teacher accused of having an affair with a student, killed himself. On the same day, a photo of the teacher had been published on the front page of *Apple Daily*. The second example is the media frenzy over the suicide of Taiwan's veteran comedian and actor Ni Min-jan in May 2005. Media coverage included clear pictures of his body and detailed descriptions of how he killed himself.

<sup>30</sup> John Higley and Richard Gunther, eds., *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1991); and A. Schedler, "What is Democratic Consolidation?" *The Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (1988): 91-107.

<sup>31</sup> Chu, "Taiwan's Mass-Mediated Crisis Discourse," 91.

that no longer resonate in a Byzantine political environment populated by politically sophisticated and media-literate citizens. The relevance of such dated frameworks for understanding politics in Taiwan is diminishing, and the multiplicity of political and social identities, together with the demands of market forces, require a more attuned approach. Simple juxtapositions are no longer appropriate or acceptable, and can be dangerous as they reinforce extreme political polarity and ethnic divisions.

Another indication of Taiwan's relatively junior status among the ranks for new democracies is the issue of the relationship between the media and politics; persistent calls for their separation raise important questions of media ownership, influence, and bias. Critics are particularly vocal during election campaigns, observing then a clear partiality in political coverage.<sup>32</sup> The *United Daily News* and the *China Times*, the two broadsheet newspapers with the highest circulation, have been reproached for their tendency to support the KMT and its political allies. These newspapers may dominate the market, but alternative newspapers promoting competing platforms are readily available at newsstands; the newspaper with the third highest circulation, *Liberty Times*, for example, is part of a group that favors the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Therefore, critics claim to observe an apparent absence of professionalism among journalists and editors on these newspapers, suggesting that, rather than following the news agenda, they create it, choosing what to report and how, with the intention of presenting the news from their own political perspectives. This should not be particularly disturbing; studies of newspaper content and organization throughout the democratic world reveal unambiguous bias in favor of one political party or platform, especially during election campaigns.

Most striking is that the problems arising from a completely (politically and economically) free media environment have prompted greater attention to "bringing the state back in." As in other democracies (especially mature democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom), a modicum of state regulation is accepted as both desirable and necessary to frustrate the more repellent features of a free and plural media system. Liberal commentators routinely discuss the market as a panacea for problems within the media. Their logic is deceptively simple: by conceding greater powers to consumers and creating the conditions for greater competition within the industry, market mechanisms will compensate for and eventually subdue problems arising from ownership and bias. One member of President Chen Shui-bian's cabinet offered a useful summary of this model: "The less government interference the better. If the public dislikes a certain TV channel or radio station which they think is manipulated by a certain party or individual they detest, they simply refuse to watch it or listen to it. It's that darn simple." Perhaps this is too simple. First,

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<sup>32</sup> Frank Muyard, "Taiwan, the Birth of a Nation?" *China Perspectives*, no. 53 (2004): 33-48.

it assumes that audiences are able to detect manipulation and interference, can decode it, and have the necessary analytical tools to judge the program's motivation. Second, leaving the power of regulation to the market does not guarantee quality. Competition does not stimulate producers' appetites for innovative programming, but often instead drives them toward sharing formats and their convergence in the middle ground of "mass appeal" programming. These concerns about the quality of output prompted demands for more state involvement and the creation in July 1998 of the Public Television Service (PTS). This was designed as "an independent, non-profit station to serve the interests of the public, raise broadcasting standards in Taiwan, safeguard freedom of expression and access to knowledge, and enhance national education and culture."<sup>33</sup>

President Chen Shui-bian's commitment to reform Taiwan's media and facilitate their separation from political institutions and processes required bold and decisive action because it entailed breaking traditional ownership patterns and unravelling complex patron-client networks that served political and economic interests. Most problematic was that, since media liberalization, and certainly since their party won the presidency in 2000, members of the DPP had themselves benefited from their involvement in these networks. The DPP's withdrawal from Formosa Television (FTV) and the KMT's decision to sell its stocks in the media were significant in making the separation of politics and the media an institutional reality. The creation of the National Communications Commission (NCC) with cross-party membership to review media legislation and the actions of the GIO, and introduce a much-needed system of checks and balances to the media industry likewise reinforces the commitment to separate government and the media.

## Conclusions

By focusing on China and Taiwan—presenting an authoritarian-democracy dichotomy—this article has demonstrated that a state-centric approach is useful but limited. While there is no doubt that the political arrangements have contributed to the contours of the media landscapes and continue to influence their development, a state-centric perspective, even in authoritarian China, ignores the complexity of the media architecture and pathology. Economic forces, cultural idiosyncrasies, the media's view of themselves and their relationship to the state, and society all play a significant part in shaping how politics and communications interact.

For example, the Chinese media have experienced liberalization within

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<sup>33</sup> GIO, *Republic of China Yearbook*, 2006, Taipei: GIO, <http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5-gp/yearbook/17MassMedia.htm>.

an authoritarian framework. Reforms are designed to serve economic modernization and the harmonious society, thus preserving the power of the Communist Party. Thus, we can observe there the increasing segmentation of audiences, the multiplication of apolitical forms of information, news and entertainment, the rise of investigative reporting, and the effects of consumerism and advertising—all contributing to new social formations with an emerging and distinct separation between “public” and “private,” and “state and society.” At the same time, we must acknowledge that any criticism of the Communist Party and its dominant ideology are prohibited, private ownership of media is not allowed, and the state retains the authority and power to suspend or close media, and fire or jail journalists and editors. The autonomy of the media as political agents is therefore severely limited to promoting and preserving stability; and although it is possible to tap into a vast seam of anecdotal evidence of journalists testing and even breaking the prescribed boundaries, the latitude that the media in China enjoy is politically constrained. Professionalism is growing—journalists now have structured career paths based on performance rather than political commitment<sup>34</sup>—and while they are far from willing collaborators with powerholders, the Chinese media recognize how their survival depends on satisfying their political stakeholders (via self-censorship) and the market (via their pursuit of nonpolitical news, entertainment, and sensationalism).

Does Taiwan offer China a model? That Taiwan was itself for four decades an authoritarian political system that closely supervised the media and has now transformed into a vibrant Chinese democracy, suggests a similar transformation on the mainland is possible, though not probable in the short to medium terms. First, there are no signs that the Communist Party is prepared to relinquish power in China in the way that the KMT decided to change Taiwan. For the foreseeable future at least, we can expect the Chinese state to control the direction of media development: stability and the continuing supremacy of the Communist Party are the dominant priorities and will not be threatened by the “chaos” associated with independent media.

Moreover, the media in Taiwan are still struggling to define their role in, and their relationship to, the democratic political system. As the foregoing has discussed, a multitude of serious problems stain the media landscape: the dominance of crisis discourses and a bifurcation of political options that oversimplify the present political system into a series of outdated dualities; the

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<sup>34</sup> Hugo de Burgh, *The Chinese Journalist: Mediating Information in the World's Most Populous Country* (London: RoutledgeCurzo, 2003); Huailin Chen and Chin-Chuan Lee, “Press Finance and Economic Reform in China,” in *China Review 1998*, ed. Joseph Cheng (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1998); and Zhongdang Pan, “Improvising Reform Activities: The Changing Reality of Journalistic Practice in China,” in *Power, Money and Media*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

pursuit of sensationalism; and the difficulties in finding the balance between freedom of speech and the responsibilities associated with such freedoms. Free market principles are not necessarily the solution, and Taiwan is now finding it necessary to bring the state back in to preserve and strengthen democracy. A regulatory framework is required in a free media landscape as the more mature democracies have discovered; the FCC in the United States and Ofcom in the United Kingdom, for instance, are examples of such successful supervisory units.

Taiwan will offer a model for China only when the island's media accept that regulation is not the equivalent of control, and that supervision does not have to be a threat to democracy. The present media arrangements that privilege economic interests and unregulated market competition (allowing for oligopoly control), and a style of journalism that knows few boundaries are perhaps entirely inappropriate for a population of 1.3 billion widely dispersed and accustomed to the command system of media regulation.