

# The Contrasting Sides of the Great Fire Wall

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## The Contrasting Sides of the Great Fire Wall

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JAMES ROGERS, DEC 15 2010

### **A comparison of mass media censorship in Hong Kong and Mainland China**

In recent years the term 'mass media' has increasingly become an idiomatic and colloquial term used in many different forms, for many different reasons. Therefore, as an introduction to the essay it is necessary to define what this paper will denote by the term mass media. "*..mass media informs, entertains and engages the public through the use of; newspaper, television, films, radio and increasingly the internet.*" [1] The simplicity of this definition has been chosen intentionally. Too often scholars separate the term 'mass media' and assign it different meanings for China and Hong Kong; this is wrong. Of course, it is all too clear that each state has its different uses for the mass media. However, the mass media and the forms it is produced in stay the same; they are just utilized for different motivations. In this essay it is these motivations which shall be discussed to find an answer to the question posed. Three core areas of China and Hong Kong's modern mass media will be compared in this essay: culture and history of the modern mass media, law and the modern mass media and the levels of social linkage through the media in each nation. Overall, these topics are intended to highlight the differing roles of the modern mass media in China and Hong Kong. As stated, it is first important to address the culture and history on which the two states modern mass media's are based upon.

Both states have diverse histories that are built on conflicting ideals; liberal capitalism for Hong Kong and

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authoritarian communism for China. These ideologies have of course had a bearing on their mass media's. Firstly, when we look at China and the media we think of suppression and censorship. However, this is not new to China, censorship and suppression can be traced back to the early 1900's and the Qing Dynasty. In 1900 a newspaper named *Su bao* was sold to the reformist Cheng Fang whom made the paper take an anti-establishment and radical line[2]. An example of this comes from the June 9<sup>th</sup> (1903) issue: "*The paper published ... The Revolutionary Army (Geming jun), a pamphlet advocating violet revolution...its main purpose was to overthrow the Qing rule.*" [3] Such an article criticising the government had high level repercussions. The Qing government arrested six editors and writers of the paper on charges of treason, from this point *Su bao* ceased to be allowed to print. Upon this, the 'first sedition case'[4] in the Chinese mass media took place. The case resulted in two of the main editors, Zou and Zhang, spending three and four years in prison respectively. From looking at this historical example of the mass media being suppressed, it is clear to see that China has a long history of keeping a firm grip on the information that is published as a way of keeping control and maintaining stability. This view was further consolidated in the 1950's by Mao.

The idea of controlling all forms of expressive enterprise was imperative for Mao, it ensured the obedience of the people and maintained a party orientated populous. As said by Mao when talking about keeping the people united; "*Our purpose is to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.*" [5] This idea of 'one heart and one mind' has become a concrete part of the Chinese culture. Moreover, majority of the public conform with censorship rules to ensure prosperity is maintained; anyone who does not comply is open to a hard-line response by the government. An example of the Chinese Communist Party (C.C.P) enforcing these rules is the imprisonment of the journalist Shi Tao. Shi Tao is serving a 10 year prison sentence for allegedly passing national secrets to other states[6]. However, it is widely believed that this is just an excuse to stop his anti-establishment reporting over the internet. Overall, both of these examples show that the government control of the mass media in China has been a long standing ideal. It has therefore become a deeply embedded part of the society in which the Chinese people live. In Hong Kong, the history and culture of the mass media is very different.

Hong Kong has a Liberal capitalist history, and with this come liberal capitalist freedoms. In 1991 the first three tier; District, Urban and Regional Legislative elections for the Legislative Council took place in Hong Kong. The media played a very important role, making the parties involved fully known to the public. "*The mass media played a significant role in legitimizing the image of these parties by mobilizing and raising the awareness of the voting public*" [7]. Here similarities to China can be noted as the media legitimises the political party/ies. However, the legitimisation in Hong Kong is not for the sake of the party/ies involved, as in China. In Hong Kong the mass media utilised its freedom to give a transparent view of each party for the sake of the public. This is so the public can clearly distinguish the difference between the politicians who could potentially represent them, and thus choose who they feel is best for the job. From these examples of the history and culture behind Hong Kong and China's modern mass media, it is clear to see where the difference lay. China restricts its mass media from reporting negatively in order to maintain stability. Furthermore, to safeguard a positive image, the C.C.P broadcast pro-party propaganda to ensure the party-line is adhered to by the people; in Hong Kong the opposite can be said. Hong Kong, as seen above, has a diverse pro and anti-establishment press which give a balanced view of the political situation. "*Freedom of information and the press is vital to Hong Kong's ...livelihood and future*" [8]. As shown in this quote, press freedoms are very important to Hong Kong. Media companies such, *Apple Daily*, *Wen Hui Bao* and the television program *Headliner* are free to scrutinize the ruling politicians and their decisions publicly. This is done in order for the people to judge the quality of their leadership, and in-turn prompt change if the officials are not doing their jobs correctly. In Hong Kong this freedom is also written as law.

In conjunction with and to uphold the media freedoms in Hong Kong article 27 of Basic Law states; "*Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication...*" [9] Article 27 is the bedrock of freedom in Hong Kong and is regarded very highly by the public as it allows the mass media to freely express their opinions without fear of legal ramifications. In contrast, China has two laws in their constitution which bare reference to the freedom of speech and media. Firstly 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.*" [10] From this alone you would be forgiven for believing China to be a liberal state with free speech and a free press, unfortunately article 54

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contradicts article 35; *"It is the duty of citizens of the People's Republic of China to safeguard the security, honour and interests of the motherland."* [11] It is clear to see how this very openly worded article can be used by the C.C.P to prosecute any journalist or citizen whom they judge not to be safeguarding the aforementioned interests of the motherland; *"These provisions in the Chinese Constitution, qualifying or limiting article 35 and its protection of free speech..."* [12] .As we can see from this quote, these laws are contradictory and block the free press and speech in China. The polarization in freedoms which these laws produce truly highlights the differences in Hong Kong and China's modern mass media's. One key example of how these laws manifest themselves in everyday life is through the levels of social linkage citizens have in each state.

In society, linkage is the process of the public uniting and expressing their views in the form of petitions, and peaceful or violent protests to get their common concerns noticed by the government. Mass media can act as a catalyst in helping linkage to occur. In Hong Kong, linkage is prevalent and due to the legal freedoms the people possess, they have the right to form groups and protest against the government. Many of these groups are formed using the internet, an ever growing form of the modern mass media. One such example of this is the linking and uniting of the Hong Kong public against the government's plans to implement article 23 of Hong Kong basic law in 2002; *The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government..."* [13] The wording of this article got the public anxious, they saw the article as a way for the Central People's Government to suppress their freedom of speech and free press in Hong Kong. In a reactionary move, the internet was utilized to link and unite the people of Hong Kong against the article. Websites such as '[www.article23.org.hk](http://www.article23.org.hk)' were formed; they started online petitions against Article 23's legislation which put pressure on the government to drop the measures. Subsequent websites, blogs, and forums helped the public communicate and unite for a common cause. In July 2003, through the linkage that occurred using the modern mass media, an estimated 500,000-700,000 people took to the streets to show their opposition. This led to the government abandoning the articles implementation in 2004, no date has been set for its future introduction; *"The mass media played a significant role in mobilizing and raising the awareness of the voting public."* [14] Here it can be seen how important the mass media is in terms of linking the society of Hong Kong. Through the use of the internet social linkage occurred, the public were able to protect their freedoms and unite against policy which they disagreed with. In modern China this is not the case, the formation and uniting of the public against the government and its policies, by utilizing the modern mass media and its outlets, is less than desirable for the C.C.P.

However, the policy of media censorship and suppression has not always been a key goal for the Chinese government. If you take a look back to the 1970/80's in China it can be seen that the official line to the public was to rise up and express your problems, social linkage was encouraged and the people were the power; *"It was the class struggles of the peasants, the peasant uprising and the peasant wars that constituted the real motive force of historical development in Chinese society."* [15] Views like this expressed by Mao himself encouraged linkage; this message was in the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. Many comparisons can be drawn with Hong Kong today in the level of freedoms the people and certain forms of media had. Of course, as a result of these freedoms, the public spoke up about their problems, as it was encouraged and not uncommon. The media, especially newspapers and radio were a good way to link together and publically show your grievances. The government also encouraged groups to use the media in the form of posters and student newspapers to address their local communities on prevalent issues. Nonetheless, this all changed at a pivotal moment in on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 when an estimated 400 to 800 citizens, mainly students, who had linked together through the articles in newspapers and through radio, were murdered by the government [16]; *"The suppression of dissent and press also allows the government to portray dissent and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations as being something undesirable"* [17]. As this quote shows, this was the start of comprehensive restriction on the forming of unions, politically motivated groups and any real form of mass linkage without government approval. Due to these events, politically motivated linkage is hard to achieve in China. The media sources which would usually accommodate linkage are restricted or heavily censored. The internet is a key example of this where sites like; Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia are banned. These sites are the new radio broadcasts and student newspapers which helped supply information and create linkage with the Tiananmen protesters in 1989. Due to the threat such sites pose to the government, they are cut off from the majority of the '420 million' internet users in China [18]. Sensitive information such as the religious beliefs of the Falungong movement, and the already addressed Tiananmen protests cannot be obtained, and a cyber police force, bigger than that of the whole New York Police Department, at 38,000 people, patrols the web 24 hours a day;

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thus making China a heavily censored state with little room for linkage and a free press[19]. Overall, after looking at the social linkage and the modern mass media in Hong Kong and China it can be seen just how different the media's are.

To conclude it is important for the legitimacy of this paper to stipulate that there are of course, exceptions to the examples posed in the this essay. For instance, in China you are free to report, broadcast information and form groups about situation on a domestic level that are not damaging to the government such as environmental or housing issues as long as you have government approval. This alone shows a certain level of freedom and linkage in China. There has also recently been progress with the calling for a lift on the 'Great Fire Wall' by '23 senior elder C.C.P members including Li Rui, who was the secretary to Mao Zedong', thus showing the country has a more lenient future[20]. However, in answer to the question posed, it is clear to see that from a historical cultural point of view that the two nations were built on very different ideological manifestations. From these differing ideologies come different viewpoints and in turn, differing laws. These laws, which are addressed in this essay, further lay the foundations for the differences the two states have. China's articles 54 and 35 contradict one another, which leads to the C.C.P being able to have a strong hold over the freedoms of speech and press. This is converse to the modern mass media in Hong Kong which due to article 27 has a free press and free speech. Finally by looking at linkage, we have seen how these two very different laws present themselves in the everyday life of Hong Kong and Chinese citizens. With heavy internet censorship in China stopping people linking and expressing their views on major political issues, it is easy to see how the law affects people and the media. In Hong Kong as was shown, the demonstrations against article 23 of basic Hong Kong law shows how the public use their freedoms to link together and utilize the mass media to preserve their free press and free speech. Overall it is fair to say that from the examples shown, the modern mass media's in Hong Kong and China are very different in many ways. This is not to say in the future China may progress to have a more liberal mass media, but for now the differences remain obvious to distinguish.

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