

and often wilful blindness. Al Jazeera is not the perfect solution, but at least it offers the hope that it will keep people talking to each other. In the current situation, that may be all we can ask for.

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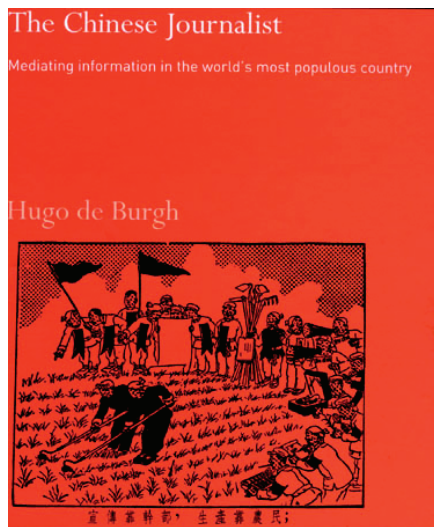
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Hong Kong still a sanctuary for dissident media ideas and sparks

The Chinese Journalist: Mediating information in the world's most populous country, by Hugo de Burgh. London and New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2003, 248pp, ISBN 0 415 30573 x

CHINA IS a fertile place for journalists' stories. We frequently read that China has changed and is continuing to do so for the better. But the magnitude and nature of changes in China may be hard to comprehend for journalists who observe them from the relatively stable freedoms of Western democracies.

One might consider the impact of political change on the single life of a 20th century Chinese intellectual. A friend of mine's Chinese grandmother decided to see out her days in Hong Kong. The old lady had been



born in the twilight of the imperial court of the Manchus and had been a child as the Republic was born. She had grown up as the warlords balkanised her country and witnessed the rise of the Guomindang nationalists. She fled the massacres of the Japanese invasion and cheered the Communist revolution. Then she saw her friends sent to re-education camps after Mao lured them to criticise him and ‘let 100 flowers bloom’.

Later, she only just survived the famine created by Mao’s then lauded Great Leap Forward. Intellectuals who had made it so far, found themselves rounded up by the Red Guards of the subsequent Cultural Revolution, to be vilified, harassed and some times murdered. After a lifetime of

turmoil, the British colony seemed an outpost of sanity and security.

British Hong Kong had, in its last days, a mostly free press which reported to the world on China’s convulsions. Greater China never did.

Generations of Chinese journalists have been forced to accommodate, rationalise and advocate a series of truth-sensitive regimes of various shades of repression. What may have been seen as the truth today, could be declared incorrect tomorrow and illegal next week.

In China, according to the author of *The Chinese Journalist*, Hugo de Burgh, most journalists once saw themselves as ‘the throat and tongue’ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). China has traditionally seen journalists as intellectuals and journalism has been a recognised route to senior CCP positions. (The editor of the *People’s Daily* still holds ministerial status.) The party line was crystallised by the *People’s Daily* and enforced by attendance at regional CCP Propaganda Party meetings. This imposed conformity was particularly severe during the Cultural Revolution, when *Red Flag* editorialised that there could be ‘absolutely no press free of restrictions’ and expression of ‘different opinions’ must not be allowed!

Chinese journalists and journal-

ism were therefore embedded in the authoritarian state power structure, which prevailed, in spite of moves towards a market economy.

But China *is* changing.

The growth of free market has allowed Chinese media groups to transform themselves from state subsidised industries to horizontally and vertically integrated conglomerates engaged in real estate, property development, manufacturing and other entrepreneurial activities. This process was evident when I examined the operations of the *Guangzhou Daily*, and compared its reporting of the 1997 Hong Kong handover to that of the *People's Daily*. Questions about CCP assumptions at the heart of Chinese journalism could be seen to be creeping in at the margins of Chinese regional newspapers. They were reflecting the style of anglophone journalism practised in Hong Kong.

Economic freedoms, de Burgh argued, provided Chinese media groups with a degree of independence, allowing Chinese journalists to mediate between citizens and state, engaging in public scrutiny of administrators. Modern Chinese citizens wrote to the press seeking reforms, in the same way Manchu peasants petitioned the mandarins. Modern mainland Chinese journalists could act as a check on officials' corruption, in ways which were unimaginable in

the Cultural Revolution. But criticism of the CCP's central authority, like that of the Dowager Empress, continued to be forbidden.

A free market was not necessarily interdependent with free speech. Chinese journalists were bound by their nation's cultural and political norms. Their myths reflected the evolution of mainland Chinese journalism: the role of the CCP as national saviour, the benefits of paternalistic leadership, the myth of harmony and most recently the belief in salvation through wealth.

De Burgh suggested that what he called anglophone journalists were not nearly as free to diverge from consensus as their notions of free speech might suggest. Anglophone journalists couched their stories in Western myths; including those of progress, individualism and benign authority

In practice, he said, many anglophone and Chinese journalists did not challenge authority. Most journalists, wherever they were located, did not practise investigative journalism, de Burgh said.

This attempt at cultural evenhandedness was perhaps the book's greatest weakness. There is a significant difference between writing what one is given and having to write what one is told. Mainland Chinese journalists remained more tightly control-

led by state assumptions than in western journalism cultures. Dissident western journalists get the sack. Dissident Chinese journalists can still go to jail. One merely had to compare mainland China's reporting of CCP sensitive stories about Taiwan, Tibet or domestic terrorism to that of Hong Kong, to expose where cultural practices ended and censorship began. Critics, whether they be Falun Gong or Hong Kong's Democrats are silenced in Beijing. It was significant that the half million strong, free speech demonstrations held in Hong Kong in 2003, were either ignored or dismissed as 'large meetings' in other parts of China.

Hugo de Burgh's book does much to illuminate Chinese mainland journalism which he said was inextricably bound up with the often implicit expectations of China's culture. He provided unique insights to their education, practices and philosophies. But there are two co-existing press systems in China which influence each other; on the mainland, where the CCP exercised direct control and in Hong Kong, where the CCP sought to contain free speech. To ignore the latter is to neglect a dynamic for real change in journalism, one which fires the former with ideas, examples and information.

In spite of economic and regime change, most Chinese citizens still do

not enjoy free speech. Hong Kong remains a sanctuary for the dissident ideas needed to give journalism its intellectual spark and ethical impulse. This view does not represent anglophone notions of democracy. Rather it reflects the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; freedoms which Hong Kong journalists have sought to defend and extend.