

“More Repression? Beijing’s Response to the 21st Century?”

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“As I prepare to leave prison and walk back into freedom, I feel more confident than ever that systems that allow free speech are superior to systems that do not. Repressive systems are at odds with human nature. They are far inferior to free systems in their ability to encompass, adjust to, and support the natural variety and vitality of human experience; to stimulate human creativity and human benevolence; and to create a social atmosphere of tolerance, friendship, and trust. I hereby appeal to all my fellow citizens who long to live and grow in dignity, and to all my fellow Chinese who wish for a revival of our Chinese nation, to join in building the kind of system that allows every citizen the right to speak the truth whenever he or she wishes.”¹

--Jiang Qisheng
April 5, 2003
Ward 16, Block 6, Beijing no. 2 prison

Jiang Qisheng was arrested in Beijing on May 18, 1999 for publishing his views on the massacre of June 4, 1989 and for planning a candlelight memorial for its victims. His “crime,” according to the rulers in Beijing, was sedition.

Jiang’s case is a legal travesty, of course, and the Chinese government should feel a burning embarrassment about it. But I am not a lawyer and will not try to discuss legal points, either about Jiang’s case or about Article 23 in Hong Kong. Others at this conference are much better qualified than I to discuss legal points.

I want to discuss instead what happens to a society, and to the people within it, when the natural human desire to say what one thinks is curtailed by government pressure. These are questions I have studied for many years, primarily for the case of China, but also, to some degree, for the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Cambodia under Pol Pot, South Africa under apartheid, Nazi Germany, and certain other cases. Commonalities of human nature unmistakably arise from such comparisons. Human beings everywhere tend to respond to government threats by manipulating language (playing “language games”) and by imposing self-censorship upon themselves.

Some will say that the cases I have just mentioned are irrelevant to Hong Kong and to Article 23 because no repression will come to Hong Kong. Did the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping not promise Hong Kong “one country, two systems” and “no change for 50 years”? So what does Hong Kong have to fear? This question needs brief address before I turn to my main topic of what repression of speech does to a society.

¹ “Shenzhou zhi da yuanhe rongbuxia yige Lu Xun? --Wo de sixiang gaizao zongjie” (Summary of my thought reform: Why is there no room for a Lu Xun in a land as big as China?), statement prepared for Public Security personnel in Beijing.

“Trust Us, Human Rights will Remain Secure”

Just as it is human nature to want to say what one thinks, it is likewise quite natural to want to believe the pleasant things that someone else says. It is natural that Hong Kong people should want to take the Beijing government at its word.

But the historical record of the Communist Party of China in keeping promises simply does not warrant such trust. The facts in this record are so well known, and so well worn, that we ironically tend to forget them. But look:

--In 1949, when the Party took over Shanghai and other major cities, it asked businesses to stay in place and continue functioning, promising that all would be well. Then, in the Three-Anti and Five-Anti Campaigns in 1952-53, the promises were abruptly broken.

--In 1956 intellectuals were encouraged to speak their minds in the “Hundred Flowers” Movement, but a few months later, in another dramatic breach of promise, those who spoke out were labeled “rightists” and persecuted for 20 years.

--During the demonstrations at Tiananmen in 1989, top leaders promised students that, if they left the Square peacefully, there would be no *qiuhou suanzhang*, no “after-the-fact retribution.” And what followed? Within two days, a “most wanted list” and a nationwide manhunt. Those who were caught were thrown into prison. Protesting workers, who were not famous enough to be on the wanted lists, but who had protested, were just shot.

In a word, the historical record of the Communist Party of China in keeping its promises is horrible. Some say--exhibiting the natural human desire that *this time* things will be different--that the Hu Jintao government will be better at promise-keeping. But in the late 1970s many said the same of the new leader Deng Xiaoping. The burden of proof must be on those who claim that the promise to Hong Kong will be different from all those earlier promises. The evidence thus far is that it will not be different.

The political succession from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, despite its policy turns, has been interlocking, and each successor has honored and protected the political foundation he inherited. Each has sensed that “stability”--meaning the security of his own power--could be hurt by free speech about what has gone before. Hence it has remained continuously taboo in China to speak or write openly about the Great Leap famine, the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Massacre, the *laogai* archipelago, and other topics that relate to the political and moral responsibility of the top leadership. Only when these topics are publicly and honestly addressed in China might wishful thinking in Hong Kong be justified. But the openness is not there. On the contrary, just a few days ago four young people were given eight- and ten-year prison terms for “sedition” after posting issues of public concern on the Internet.² Is this a sign that the Hu Jintao government is different, and will keep its promises to Hong Kong?

In fact the 1997 promise of “one country, two systems” and “no change for 50 years” has already been broken--many times and obviously. As an example let me offer a personal experience that is quite unimportant in itself, but shows the problem with unusual clarity. When I visited Hong Kong in late June, 2002, I was detained at the airport for forty minutes of questioning. Nothing was wrong with my passport or papers,

² Human Rights in China, “Four Internet Activists Imprisoned for Subversion,” 28 May 2003.

but Hong Kong immigration officials, after checking their computer screens, saw that I was on a PRC blacklist. (I have, indeed, been on such a list since 1996.) The H.K. officials did not know what to do with me, and spent time telephoning to higher-ups for instructions. They asked me repeatedly whether I intended to visit “the mainland.” I said no, and the higher-ups eventually decided to let me in, and that was that. The problem is that I had been to Hong Kong about fifteen times between 1954 and 2001, and never before had I been interrogated at the border like this. “No change for fifty years”? Here was obvious change. And why? Not because of any problem I had with Hong Kong or Hong Kong had with me--only because of a “mainland” blacklist that Hong Kong officials felt bound to respect. “One country, two systems”? Obviously not.

A more important example of the PRC’s broken promise to Hong Kong concerns the Hong Kong press, where the rise of self-censorship has drawn much notice in recent years. “Self-censorship” is indeed the relevant term for press control in the Chinese world today. For decades in mainland China, the primary means of control of the press, and of all public expression, has been to oblige people to constrain themselves out of fear of the consequences of speaking “incorrectly.” Communist China has used this technique more than have other repressive states. The former Soviet Union and the nationalist Chinese government in the first part of the 20th century, to cite just two examples, relied in their censoring activity more on bureaucrats and on physical techniques, whereas, right from the beginning, the Communist Chinese found it much more effective to frighten people into censoring themselves.³

From the viewpoint of the repressing state, one of the big advantages of self-censorship is that it is invisible. The key processes of censorship happen within the privacy of individual minds, and since no victim of self-censorship likes to admit to it (because it can seem cowardly), few people ever speak of self-censorship openly. For the repressing state, this silence is golden, because it allows the censors to pretend that there is no censorship of any kind going on. They can say, “we didn’t do anything.”

But, like a fog creeping into a bay, self-censorship can quietly create an unmistakable difference in a public “climate.” The mechanisms may be hard to see but the results surely are not. In 1989 I happened to be in Hong Kong five days after the Beijing massacre. I will always remember the feisty Hong Kong press during that season. Television and radio broadcasts, and dozens of newspapers and magazines, focused almost constantly on the massacre--its origins, its horror, its villains, the heroes, China’s fate, Hong Kong’s future, world reaction, and more. Was there self-censorship? Not that I could see. What I saw was a broad spectrum of open, free expression. Even *Ta Kung pao* and *Wen wei po* were beginning to speak independently.

My next visit to Hong Kong was in March, 2001, and the atmosphere of the press had changed dramatically. I had recently been involved in publishing *The Tiananmen Papers*,⁴ so Hong Kong journalists were interested in meeting me and I could get a sense for their mood first-hand. I was surprised at how timid some of them were. Two young reporters from *Ming Pao* who came to my hotel to interview me were so nervous that

³ For more, see my essay “The Anaconda in the Chandelier” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. XLIX, no. 6 (April 11, 2002), pp. 67-70.

⁴ Zhang Liang, *The Tiananmen Papers: The Chinese Leadership’s Decision to Use Force against Their Own People--in their Own Words*, ed. Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2001).

their hands quivered throughout the interview. Many others asked me how George Bush, the new American president, might treat “us,” and I was surprised to realize how often “us” meant not the Hong Kong people but the Beijing government. The new timidity and nervousness in the Hong Kong press was accompanied by the acknowledgment of a new political master. *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po* had crawled back into their shackles and were quoting Beijing directly. Their reporters told me that *The Tiananmen Papers* was a “fabrication,” done by “a small clique” of “people with ulterior motives.”

To be sure, the Tiananmen massacre was an especially sensitive topic. But for that very reason it is a good example to show how much the confidence and independence of the Hong Kong press had already suffered in a decade. The question now is whether and how much Article 23 will accelerate this sorry trend. Should Hong Kong people “trust” Beijing to stop the psychological pressure that produces self-censorship? Of course they should not. This pressure is a tried and true tool in Beijing’s overall effort to control thought and expression. Even well-known dissidents living in the West have been induced to censor themselves by a Chinese government who trades on fear: “you will not be allowed back to China,” “your telephone access will be cut off,” “your family will not be allowed out of China,” and so on--unless you obey our guidelines on certain topics. These are heavyweight threats used to control heavyweight players, but many kinds of lesser threats are available for use on less weighty people. A society that lives under a generalized fog of fear induces timid souls to censor themselves even when they really do not have to. Will Article 23 increase self-censorship in Hong Kong? There is no doubt it will, unless Hong Kong people are somehow different from other human beings.

And how much will this matter? What does repression do to a people? Increased self-censorship brings to a society a certain superficial uniformity as well as “stability,” and its authoritarian leaders gain security. But what is lost? What are the costs of repression? I want to divide the question into two--the costs to society as a whole, and the costs to the character of citizens.

Societal Costs of Repression

With the recent outbreak of SARS still vivid in memory, one should not have to argue at length that government suppression of information can have costs. Thousands of people have fallen ill, and hundreds have died, who might have remained alive and healthy if information on SARS had spread faster than the SARS virus. In addition the economic costs of SARS have been tremendous--indeed incalculable if one includes the indirect costs, on a global scale, of canceled plans and diverted energies.

But the SARS disaster is hardly the first or greatest caused by poor information flows in the PRC. AIDS afflicts hundred of times more Chinese than SARS does, and the spread of AIDS has been due in considerable part to the government’s suppression of news about it and withholding of information on how to block it.

SARS and AIDS both illustrate the harm that can come when a government does not share information with its people. But disaster can also result when information flow is blocked in the other direction--when people can’t get word through to a government. In numbers of dead, the largest disaster in China’s history (even bigger than the Taiping

Wars) was the Great Leap Forward famine of 1959-62, when somewhere between 20 and 50 million people met untimely deaths. The towering arrogance and crackpot agricultural theories of Mao Zedong (largely borrowed from Trofim Lysenko) were primary causes of this disaster, but it is worth noting that blockage of free speech played a crucial role as well. What Chinese farmer in 1958 did not know that planting rice stalks right next to one another would kill the crop? What local official who reported bumper harvests and sent all available grain into the cities did not know that the reports contained false information, and that the false information was killing people? Yet neither farmers nor local officials spoke up. They self-censored. They dissembled and lied, and it is not easy to blame them, given the system they were living in. Information flow was so bad that even Mao Zedong, according to his doctor Li Zhisui,⁵ did not know about the famine until summer 1960, when it had already been going on for a year. Would the famine have been prevented if a free press had been able to tell the truth? This is hard to say, because Mao's despotism had other means. But there is no doubt that forced self-censorship and mendacity were important causes of the famine.

One of the biggest problems in China's post-Mao years has been corruption. No other problem has drawn more popular complaint. The Communist Party has announced anti-corruption drives from time to time, and has occasionally identified and punished a scapegoat. But to the planners of such drives, the "show" of progress has always been more important than progress itself, and the political jockeying over whose friend or ally will be the targeted victim has itself been mired in back-door string-pulling. Only a force like a free press, a force truly independent of the Party power structure, can effectively expose and reduce corruption. But what reporter in China can easily risk such independence? As we saw last year when *Southern Weekend* (taking its lead from the Hong Kong press) dared to report on corruption in Project Hope, honest reporting can lead to targeting by the central authority and even to vague threats of "divulging state secrets".⁶ Under such conditions corruption will only continue to grow and to spread.

Muzzling free expression also leads to public cynicism. Press control can prevent popular indignation from getting a fair hearing, but it cannot make the indignation itself go away. Resentment is simply driven underground. People still complain where they can--at home, in corners of parks, and in other places where they judge that they can speak freely without brining disaster upon themselves. This is why China in recent years has seen a burgeoning of *shunkouliu*, the popular rhythmical sayings that people pass around informally. The favorite topic of *shunkouliu* is corruption. One well-known example is:

If we don't root out corruption, the country will perish.
If we do root out corruption, the Party will perish.⁷

In another, a power-holder diverts public property to private gain:

⁵ Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York: Random House, 1994), pp. 339-340.

⁶ He Qinglian, "Zhongguo de xinwen guanzhi" (Media control in China, manuscript prepared for Human Rights in China), ch. 5, pp. 1-4.

⁷ Bufan fubai wangguo, fan fubai wang dang.

He's got the finance system on his left,
 And the banking network to his right.
 He taxes all of industry
 With all his beastly might.
 He's the king of electric current
 And prince of the water pipe,
 But what's he care for kids at school?
 Not a strip of tripe!⁸

It is probably healthful that citizens can have this kind of informal outlet, if normal popular opinion is going to be repressed. But the combination of a controlled public press and a rampant private rumor mill is hardly a healthy overall system for a society. Xiao Han, a lawyer who works in Beijing, has called China today “a society where people speak only of private things in public, and of public things only in private.” Discussion of serious social and political questions is pushed underground.

Cynicism is an inevitable result. Public cynicism in China today is stronger than it has been in decades. Ordinary people look at official corruption and reason that if the leaders are pillaging the public, why shouldn't I? Am I stupid? Another *shunkouliu*, cynically entitled “A Short History of Comradely Sentiment,” says:

In the 50s we helped people
 In the 60s we criticized people
 In the 70s we fooled people
 In the 80s everybody hired everybody else
 Now we “slaughter” whomever we see.⁹

Here “slaughter” is my translation of *zai*, which corresponds roughly to “rip off” in colloquial English. The common use of the word in Chinese cities today captures the moral vacuity of commercial life. Public cynicism seeps even into the bonds of friendship and family; the phrase *zai shou* “ripping off those close to one” reflects the ultimate sell-out of human trust for the sake of material gain. Press censorship is not the only cause of this kind of social and moral decay, but it is closely related.

Costs to Human Character

When a government obliges a populace to censor itself, it complicates the psychology of every citizen who would speak in public. Before speaking or writing, every person must account for two different levels in the mind: 1) what do I think? and 2) what can I say? These two levels generate a constant “language game.” A person has to calculate how to “put things” so that one level of the mind is satisfied while another judges that safety is not compromised.

⁸ Caizheng shi die, yinhang shi niang, gongshang shuiwu da hui lang. Dian laohu, shui bawang, renmin jiaoyu hei xinchang.

⁹ Wushi niandai bang ren, liushi niandai zheng ren, qishi niandai hong ren, bashi niandai gu ren, rujin jian ren jiu zai ren.

There is no question that this experience is a universal human response to repression. It appears in all cultures, wherever repression exists. Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia,¹⁰ Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the Soviet Union,¹¹ Primo Levi recalling the Holocaust,¹² Bloke Modisane in South Africa under apartheid¹³--and many other writers--have written eloquently about how people are forced to play language games in order to get along, and how the continual playing of language games, over time, comes to condition and ultimately to ossify the way people think. Even the distinction of "true" and "false" can fade away, overshadowed by the distinction of "correct" versus "incorrect." Miklos Haraszti's eloquent metaphor of writers living in a "velvet prison" is about writers in communist Hungary,¹⁴ but Haraszti's principles apply to many other times and places where repression has succeeded. Hong Kong today is not yet in a velvet prison, but it certainly is moving in that direction.

How long will it be before official PRC jargon comes to dominate the thinking of Hong Kong people? When will protesters become "rioters," certain religions become "evil cults," the Communist Party be equated with "China," and democrats become "anti-Chinese elements"?

When a population is forced to accept misleading political jargon, its weaker-minded citizens tend to give in. They find it easier to get through life just by going along, and, as they do, their thinking falls in line with the jargon of the ruling authority. But every population also contains tougher-minded people who resist the jargon. For them, truth puts on a halo. Because it is under pressure, it takes on a special, almost magical value. In 1964 Victor Erlich wrote of Soviet dissidents that:

When fraudulent official semantics distorts the normal relations between sign and referent, responsible and accurate use of language becomes a blow for personal dignity. ... The simple act of calling a spade a spade, of naming the unspeakable, becomes an epiphany.¹⁵

Two months ago Jiang Qisheng, writing inside the no. 2 Beijing Prison, made a similar observation:

For people who have lived through days of inhibition, repression, suffocation, and frustration, the experience of speaking the truth fortifies human character. Truth now feels like a precious blessing and pleasure of life, and brings to a person a sense of inner solidity and comfort.¹⁶

Similarly Ba Jin, looking back on his long life, has noted that "only after I had been deprived of my human rights and had lived in a 'cow shed' for a decade did I truly realize that I was a 'person'."¹⁷

¹⁰ Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the powerless : citizens against the state in Central-Eastern Europe* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1985).

¹¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956; an experiment in literary investigation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974-78).

¹² Primo Levi, *The drowned and the saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1989).

¹³ Bloke Modisane, *Blame me on history* (New York: Dutton, 1963).

¹⁴ Miklós Haraszti, *The velvet prison : artists under state socialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

¹⁵ Victor Erlich, "Post-Stalin Trends in Russian Literature," *Slavic Review* 23.3:405-419, p. 418.

¹⁶ Jiang Qisheng, "Wo de baozhengshu: yi sheng shuo zhen hua" (My guarantee: to speak the truth for life) Beijing no. 2 prison, April 6, 2003.

¹⁷ Ba Jin, "Suixianglu," quoted in Wang Zisong, "Zhengzhixuejia de tianzhen" (The naivete of political scientists) *Dushu* 1994.6.15-22, p. 15

At the other extreme, there are also a few people, in any culture, who actively embrace the language of repression. These are the opportunists, the people who sacrifice integrity for career advancement. To them the two-leveled problem of “what do I think?” versus “what can I say?” disappears, because only the second of these questions matters. The skill of speaking “correctly” becomes the focus of all intellectual effort; whether or not words are actually true does not matter. Examples around the world are easy to recognize. Iraqi Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Shahaf, who could tell the world with a straight face that Iraqi troops were annihilating U.S. invaders even as buildings literally were falling down behind him, and who could further declare that “if I’m lying may lightning hit my mother” (April 12, 2003), may seem to have a problem of personal character. But this is not the best way to view him. His problem is not personal, nor is it cultural. It is the product of a system. Yuan Mu, the State Council spokesman during the 1989 Tiananmen events, was China’s al-Shahaf. Yuan could stand before China’s unfree press and announce that “our press is free.”¹⁸ Two days after the bloody massacre of June 4 Yuan could say:

...the current situation is that a very few thugs engineered a counterrevolutionary rebellion in the early hours of the morning of June 3, but because of the valiant struggle of the People’s Liberation Army, their plot was not entirely successful. ...Some ruffians are still hatching all kinds of plots...¹⁹

The skill of people like al-Shahaf and Yuan Mu should not be underestimated. Walter Scott, writing that “Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive!” reminds us that to lie smoothly, and with consistency, is no easy matter. A truth-teller can always lean on his memory of the truth, and, although memory might be faulty, truth itself is solid and consistent. The liar has no such bedrock support. He is at sea. His only guide is memory of what others want him to say and what he has said before.

If PRC-style repression and self-censorship move fully into place in Hong Kong, then counterparts of al-Shahaf and Yuan Mu will blossom here as well. Hong Kong people are just as intelligent as people in Baghdad or Beijing; given an appropriate environment, some of them will also master the fine skill of manipulating interlocking lies.

In sum, the costs of repression are not just in the blockage of information flows within a society, but in moral and intellectual maladies that can seep into the character of individual citizens. Why should a society pay such prices? What kind of security, and for whom, does it buy?

Party and People: Exactly Whose “Security” is At Stake?

Defenders of sedition laws argue that any state needs security, and this is true. It is also true that any just law, by nature, is essentially a trade-off: it restricts someone’s freedom for the sake of some greater good. By law, a red traffic light limits my freedom by stopping me at an intersection so that pedestrians and other vehicles have their fair chance to use the roadway. “Perfect freedom” would say that no one should have to stop

¹⁸ Han Minzhu, *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 192.

¹⁹ Beijing Television Service, June 6, 1989; translated in FBIS, June 7, 1989, pp. 12-19.

at an intersection; but the costs of such an arrangement would clearly be greater than the costs of temporary losses of freedom. The trade-off in the traffic law makes sense.

In the case of sedition laws, the main trade-off is between security of the whole society on one side and the freedoms of individual citizens on the other. Even democracies confront this trade-off. In recent months the U.S. has been debating a “Patriot Act” that would increase the powers of police to detect and prevent terrorist attacks, but only at the cost of considerable reduction in the privacy of citizens. The US public and its politicians are debating whether the good of the country as a whole can warrant such measures.

The problem when authoritarian governments pass sedition laws is that the phrase “the good of the country as a whole” is no longer reliable. Who is protected by the sedition law of an undemocratic government? The whole country? Or the ruling party? Or the top leadership of the ruling party? In a democracy these things can be separated; a leadership can fall while the country marches on, just as well, and maybe better, than before. But in an authoritarian system, country, party, and leader all roll into one, and a citizen who challenges one of the three can be accused of “subverting” all three. This is why the Beijing government works so hard to identify itself as “China,” and labels as “anti-China” any person who publicly criticizes the Communist Party or its top leaders. (To a Western Sinologist like me, this practice can seem almost humorous. I spend my lifetime studying Chinese language, culture, and history, which I come to love deeply, and when I criticize Jiang Zemin the New China News Agency says that I am “anti-China.”)

In the 1950s the Communist Party of China built a “public system” (*gongyouzhi*) for the Chinese economy. Urban workplaces became state-owned and rural villages formed collectives and then communes. But in politics a truly public system never arrived. The political system relies on secrecy, appointment, and loyalty to superiors inside a limited-membership organization. Objectively speaking this should be called a “private system.” (*siyouzhi*). It does not belong, and never has belonged, to the Chinese public. Information flow within this private system is of two kinds--a fact that is reflected in the two fundamentally different functions of the New China News Agency. One function is to collect solid, objective truth and send it in reports up the bureaucracy. These reports are secret, because the public is not trusted with the whole truth. The more sensitive an item of news is, the smaller is the elite who is allowed to see it. The other function of the information system is to disseminate to the public those items and aspects of information that the leadership views as useful--or at least harmless--for the public to know. The public reports are considerably narrower--and more optimistic, and more sanitized--than the internal reports.

For this large information system with its two different missions, both aimed to support authoritarian rule, a free press in Hong Kong is an awkward and difficult fact. The use of sedition laws to push Hong Kong into harmony with the larger system does provide “security,” to be sure. But security for whom? For the people of Hong Kong? For the people of China? Or for the membership-only group that rules China?

Conclusion: What Do the Chinese People Deserve?

In the early twentieth century the great Chinese writer Lu Xun worried about Chinese character. Are Chinese people naturally obsequious or inherently cowardly? Do they gaze at the suffering of others and remain moved? Are they, in a sense, indirectly responsible for the kind of government they get?

No, I say. Much as I admire Lu Xun, on this point I feel he was too sour. Is there no energy, optimism, and idealism in recent Chinese history? Certainly there is. The problem is that, at nearly every turn, a paranoid government has crushed or undermined the idealism. Consider:

--In the early 1950s, enthusiasm for a “new society” was high; most people trusted their leaders, trusted their fellow citizens, and were willing to sacrifice. Then came the axe of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the insanity of the Great Leap, and a cynical gap between official and unofficial language.

--The Red Guard movement during the Cultural Revolution was, in its earliest roots, based in youthful idealism about breaking the iron grip of Party bureaucrats. But the movement was misled and manipulated by leaders with their own political agendas, and it ended in disaster.

--In 1978-80 “scar literature” stimulated and reflected another wave of genuine popular idealism. The Cultural Revolution was wrong! Let’s dig out the rot! Let’s get our society back on the right track! Millions read scar literature and were excited. But when the probing went “too far,” when it began to question the basis of Party power, Deng Xiaoping ordered an end to it.

--Student movements in 1986 and 1989 again revived a spirit of social idealism, and even euphoria, until the June Fourth massacre applied the brakes and Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 “southern tour” opened the way for the rampant and cynical mentality of “money rules all” that has pervaded China ever since.

Chinese culture asks better than this. It is deep in Chinese culture that “proper behavior”--including morally proper behavior--is something that people should practice and that the society as a whole should be able to rely upon. Chinese people deserve better government than the one the Communist Party has given them.

But the Chinese people will not get that better government without press freedom. People in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where press freedom has been much stronger than in the mainland, have a special duty to lead the way for all of China. Hong Kong urgently needs more press freedom, not less.

To that end it is right to study, expose, and oppose the nefarious fine print of Article 23. “The devil is in the details,” and I salute my colleagues who are identifying and exposing those details.

But in a larger sense, much more than fine print is at stake. Transparency, honesty, and fair government are at stake. Social justice is at stake. So, ultimately, is the integrity of public language and the personal character of the millions of citizens who are obliged to use it. It is not an exaggeration to say that even the fate of the great nation of China could turn in part on the question of whether the people of Hong Kong, at this critical juncture in the early 21st century, can drive a stake in the ground and say, “No.” No--once and for all. No, we will not allow a private group in Beijing, a group who for 53 years has manipulated China’s information systems for its own purposes, to extend this stultifying web over the people of Hong Kong. Hong Kong people, and the people of China as a whole, deserve better.