MEDIA FREEDOM IN ASIA

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“The potential for stories [in China] was limitless; the ability to get them and write them was quite the opposite.”
- Edward Farmer

During China’s Communist years, especially from 1980 to the present, American reporters who believe in their right to seek information have operated within a system which suspects and hinders their work. Beijing’s view of journalism is wholly different from that of even the most suspicious Western democracy. In this period there were times of what the Chinese call “tightening and loosening”: intimidation of reporters, followed by relative relaxation, succeeded by more harassment.

In addition to the harassment, one of the endemic dilemmas for American reporters in this atmosphere is official lying. In 1979 an editor at the Chinese Communist Party’s leading newspaper, the People’s Daily, told me: “Lies in our newspapers are like rat droppings in clear soup: they are both obvious and disgusting.”

Such lying, which remains persistent, is a central problem for American reporters in communist societies and nowhere more so than in China. Yet, in May 1989, I saw a column of Chinese journalists from the Communist Party’s official newspaper march into the crowds in Tiananmen Square holding a banner 25 feet wide and bearing the words “Don’t force us to lie.” For three weeks, the longest continuous period of press freedom since Mao’s triumph in 1949, papers all over China carried stories which would not have disgraced a British or American reporter; stories, moreover, on a sensational and sensitive subject – urban demonstrations against the commanding heights of state power. After the Tiananmen uprising had been crushed on the night of June 3-4 1989, the reporters and editors who wrote and commissioned those stories would pay for their courage and professionalism with their careers, their liberty, and in some cases their lives.

The brief liberation of our Chinese colleagues, and the open cooperation of Beijing’s citizens, brought home to American reporters how severe were the normal restraints on our work. What was unusual about Tiananmen was the freedom of opportunity for Americans to report. With the usual official obstacles absent, many of us believed we were witnessing the birth of a society in which, for the first time since 1949, we could truly get the story.

China Reporting Before 1972

American reporters in China for the past near-century have felt a sense of mission and responsibility: to bring home the China story and to help transform China into a more modern, even democratic place. This is the legacy – “to change
China” – of the 19th century missionaries. Even though many reporters deny it, many of them have pursued this goal. Until 1980, American reporting has moved in phases, frequently described as oscillating between journalists liking or even loving China and taking sides in its various internal struggles, and enmity. Both attitudes are often criticized as a departure from the ultimate professional requirement of objectivity.

Beginning in the early years of the century with George Edward Morrison (“Morrison of The Times”) and Thomas Millard of the China Press and later Millard’s Review, American and some other Western journalists acted as advocates for this or that side or interest in China.” “Millard used journalism as a tool to spread his ideas about American expansion in the Far East and at the same time to advance the interests of China in Washington against those of Great Britain and Japan.”

He embodied what Edgar Snow later described as the values of his origins: “anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, pro-independence, pro-equality-of-nations, pro-Republican, pro-self-determination, and pro-American.” Peter Rand, an authority on the history of China reporting, says of Millard, “He wanted to influence American policy. All China Hands since then have entertained this desire....” One might add that they favored the underdog.

Millard and his early colleagues saw Chiang Kaishek and his Nationalists (KMT) as bulwarks against Japanese expansionism and champions of national stability. But the next wave of Americans, of whom Edgar Snow would be the star – including Arch Steele, Tillman Durdin, Harold Isaacs, Agnes Smedley, and Snow’s wife Nym Wales – became increasingly anti-KMT. Snow scored a world-scoop with his Red Star Over China, which included Mao’s manipulative account of his own life. Although Mao demanded and received the right to approve the text of his interview, and as shown below Snow altered the manuscript to please critics in Moscow, the book still provides an unrivaled flavor of life at Mao’s guerrilla headquarters.

By the early 1940s, the earlier group was joined by distinguished reporters such as Theodore “Teddy” White who worked for the pro-KMT Henry Luce, who altered his critical dispatches, and Christopher Rand. They found the Nationalist government, to which they had considerable access, weak and corrupt. Once Snow had been to Mao’s guerrilla stronghold at Yanan, the Communists seemed increasingly attractive to the Americans, who saw them as honest and eager to fight the Japanese. When Zhou Enlai came to represent the Communists at Chungking, China’s wartime capital, he charmed foreign reporters, even though they were occasionally shocked by his lies. At no time in that early period did any of them know that Mao was terrorizing his critics and financing some of his operations with opium.

During the anti-Japanese war many reporters simply supported “China,” and President Chiang Kaishek and his wife often appeared on the cover of Time. Harrison Salisbury of The New York Times summed up the pre-1949 years: “Just as the puritan image of the Communists stemming out of [Snow’s] Red Star influenced many, so the image of the Nationalists given by Luce, and his journals, Time and Life, influenced many Americans as well.”

But even if readers’ politics predisposed them to the Snow or the Luce view, the emotional content of the reporting in each case fed the American sense of a special responsibility for China and an expectation that it could be changed.

Feeding stories to the foreign reporters also suited both sides in the civil war. This use of the foreign press for internal Chinese purposes has continued in the Communist period. In the civil war between the KMT and the Communists from 1945 to 1949, Mao’s forces were once again seen as the underdog and received an increasingly favorable American press. Jack Belden’s China Shakes the World is the most notable example. Yet by the time the Communists entered Peking in 1949 no American reporters were there to witness their triumph.

Thereafter, hostility to China, now Communist, built up in the American press during the Korean War. One of the journalists active in the years before 1949 noted that “one must distinguish between American journalists’ attitudes toward revolutionaries ‘before and after they achieve power.”

After 1949 came a long dry spell for American reporters. Apart from Anna Louise Strong, who acted as a propagandist for the Communists, as did Edgar Snow after his carefully controlled trips between 1960 and 1970, American journalists were almost wholly shut out of internal reporting and coverage of China was hostile.

The Nixon Visit and the Press

In 1972 there began a brief honeymoon between the US press and China when President Nixon traveled to Beijing and the press was dazzled by its limited access to a truly big
story and the skill of its handlers. “The total effect of this hostmanship,” said Fox Butterfield of The New York Times, “is like a powerful tranquilizer, enough to make otherwise rational and intelligent people suspend disbelief.”10 Reporters in that golden daze tended to write what their Chinese minders told them, as did the authors of the numerous “I Saw China” books, such as John Kenneth Galbraith and Shirley MacLaine, although there were others, such as the Belgian diplomat Simon Leys, who saw through the carefully devised facade.11

I was no exception to those traveling in the golden daze. In October, 1979, I wrote my first long piece for The Observer (London). Entitled “Back to the Land of Little Red Lies,” it recalled my first trip to China in 1972, during the Cultural Revolution, when I slowly became aware how much of what I was shown and told was designed to deceive and impress. I admitted in the article that in 1972 people like me, grateful for what we took to be genuine access, “humbly helped to insert the rings in our own noses.” “We wanted to deceive you,” my ex-guide told me. “But you wanted to be deceived.”12

Beginning about 1980, when they were permitted to work in China for long periods, American reporters became less starry-eyed and more cynical. Official Chinese visitors to the West often express indignation that the foreign press is so negative about China. The Washington bureau chief of the official New China News Agency told me in October that if the dissidents Wei Jingsheng and Wang Dan received the Nobel peace prize his agency would not interview them “because we disapprove of these people. You interfere with us by praising them.” On the same day, a Chinese Colonel visiting the United States told me after hearing my views on China that “You have hurt the feelings of the Chinese people.”13 Such visitors are especially surprised because the Chinese Foreign Ministry uses the traditional modes of “barbarian handling,” inviting reporters to expensive meals and treating as “old friends” those who produce favorable stories or, when critical, avoid responsibility by citing anonymous “envoys” or academic specialists, usually in the United States.

**Reporters’ Constraints**

Nonetheless, the Western “China story” is indeed an often negative one, although reporters are on the lookout for examples of the free market at work and other signs of lessening state authority. Those who speak Chinese and represent the few British and American papers willing to invest the resources, travel through the countryside looking at the society behind the press conferences in Beijing. Part of the negativism arises from the bonds encircling the foreign press. Until recently Western reporters had to ask for permission to travel outside Beijing and when they did they had to stipulate why they wished to do a story elsewhere, whom they hoped to see, and for how long. Just outside the major cities were signs stating “No Foreigners Beyond This Point.”

Occasionally foreigners, such as John Burns of The New York Times, were expelled for crossing into forbidden zones. Entire areas such as Tibet and Xinjiang were out of bounds except under stringently controlled surveillance. As I note below, in November 1999 some American reporters were threatened with the removal of accreditation for attempting to report on the Falun Gong, the religious movement with millions of members that had just been declared a criminal conspiracy.

**Reporters’ Work-Lives**

All foreign reporters have worked in this encumbering climate marked by “tightening and loosening.” Many journalists in the first wave after 1980 had been taught Chinese in university. Those in the first wave, including reporters like myself who had visited China in the early 1970s, were soon disillusioned by the tight controls imposed on them by the regime and by what they perceived as the oppression of the population.

This disillusioned group soon overlapped with what Jim Mann of the Los Angeles Times, who went to Beijing in 1984, described as reporters who initially believed that “China was improving” until we encountered Democracy Wall, the Spiritual Pollution Campaign, the sacking of [Party General Secretary] Hu Yaobang, and eventually Tiananmen. We saw China with the wraps off, and then we never thought of it the same way again.”14 James Miles has reported from China for 15 years, mostly for the BBC. “I would say there’s been a significant change in the decade since Tiananmen in terms of the freedom of reporters to travel, meet people and interview officials and Chinese academics. This is partly a result of a more sophisticated understanding of media handling techniques acquired by the authorities. Waibans [official handlers] are now far less in evidence in Beijing at least. The authorities clearly feel relatively comfortable now about the kind of things said by the official Chinese academics who are regularly quoted by the Western media, so they probably feel little need at present to interpret interview restrictions too strictly.

Much more information about social trends and economic conditions is now available in the official press. But it remains almost as difficult to confirm the accuracy of what is published. Trips out of town are easier to make, and journalists often do so with little if any contact with waibans. But of course there remains the paramount problem of China reporting: getting access to distant rural and minority areas, as well as getting reliable information about elite political goings on. I would say on the latter score that we are as much in the dark as we were a decade ago – perhaps more so given that there does not now seem to be the same kind of group of liberal insiders as there was in the 1980s, who saw the foreign media as a useful conduit for airing news about ideological struggles and the personalities behind them. I now see far less in the way of scoops based on access to confidential documents than I saw a few years ago. The shifting news agenda towards more economic reporting and less politics (editors are getting bored with dissident roundups) makes it less necessary for journalists to engage in the kind of furtive contacts with dissidents that some undertook in the early 1980s.

**We wanted to deceive you,” my ex-guide told me. “But you wanted to be deceived.”**

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Patrick Tyler, who represented *The New York Times* in Beijing from 1993 to 1997, sums up what must have been a typical experience of that period. “I remember being impressed with Deng and his pragmatism. I arrived in China as Beijing was making the bid for the 2000 Games. They let [the dissident] Wei Jingsheng out. [Foreign Minister] Qian Qichen said in late ‘93 that China would engage the Red Cross on access to prisoners. Jiang Zemin said he was going to try to meet Clinton’s conditions in February 1994. Then there was a big backlash of some kind in the party and a hard-line current ascended and Li Peng’s voice grew stronger. This all happened in my first 12 months and it deeply impressed me about the swings in the leadership circle. The most restricted subjects were Taiwan, religious persecution, Tibet, anything that undermined the public image of Politburo members, including corruption, the historical image of the Party as a progressive force in history, the army, etc. Secrecy is important to them because the Party was built on it; it is intrinsic to the operation and survival of the organism; it comes out of the legacy of the early revolution which tends to regard competitive ideas and ideologies as a threat to survival.”

Mary Kay Magistad reported from China for National Public Radio from August 1995 for four years. “China’s system of controlling journalists is — on paper — one of the most restrictive in the world. But good foreign correspondents realize fairly soon that they should adopt a Chinese attitude toward the rules: that they are flexible, and that you get away with what you can. According to the rules, every foreign correspondent in China should ‘apply to the appropriate authorities’ every time they want to do an interview. Want to talk to old age pensioners? Laid off workers? Get a person-on-the-street reaction to a news event? In each case, you as a foreign correspondent are somehow supposed to (a) know who the appropriate authority is and (b) wait for that person to ‘process your application’ — which could take weeks, and often results in you being told ‘no.’ Obviously, no one operates like that. In Beijing, most foreign journalists go directly to the people they want to interview. There’s always a risk, when doing interviews on the street with a microphone and/or television camera, that police will move in, detain you and make you write a ‘self-criticism,’ acknowledging that you engaged in this ‘illegal activity’ without consulting the ‘appropriate authorities.’

“But few foreign correspondents or camera people seem fazed by that. One cameraman I know has something like 15 self-criticisms in his file. It’s gotten to the point where the Public Security Bureau official just sort of sighs when he sees this guy coming, hands him a sheet of paper, and says the equivalent of ‘you know the drill.’ Person-on-the-street interviews are usually fine, as long as the subject is innocuous and it’s not a particularly sensitive time (i.e. near a major Party-related anniversary, a high-level strategic visit — such as Clinton’s, or the annual National People’s Congress or other significant Party events). In that way, the ‘squeeze’ on foreign correspondents, and on dissidents and other ‘trouble-makers’ is episodic. Most of the time, it’s not all that difficult to operate. Oddly enough, even the most high-profile dissidents’ phone lines were not cut off, even though they were most surely bugged. Many dissidents were willing to do on-the-record interviews by phone, knowing they were bugged. If journalists showed up at these same dissidents’ homes, however, they’d almost certainly be detained. What seems most secretive for the PRC is military information, and information about groups or issues considered a threat to continued Communist Party rule (China Democracy Party, Falun Gong, top-level corruption). It is my perception that, over time, people on the street and in the countryside in China have become increasingly more willing to talk to journalists. Certainly, that has been my experience. There seems to be a higher level of frustration and disgruntlement, and less fear that there will be serious ramifications for talking to foreigners. Obviously, some such fear still remains; I speak in relative terms. Compared to three or four years ago, it is easier to engage and talk at length about sensitive issues, and more likely that people will express discontent.”

My own experience in China was longer than that of most of my colleagues, lasting from 1972 to 1991 – when I was told I could not return — although at no time was I based in Beijing. From 1993 to 1997, I represented *The Times* of London on the edge of China, in Hong Kong. Until 1991, representing *The Observer*, also of London, I traveled from London to China for six weeks to several months at a time. It was a great advantage not being stationed in a bureau; I ignored most of the regulations hemming in reporters stationed in China, rarely asking for either permission or favor. I never traveled with an official minder, and arranged my own journeys. Traveling on trains and local buses gave me the chance to speak with ordinary Chinese, especially if the train or bus was jammed full and one swayed next to the same little group for long hours. I heeded several rules most reporters followed to avoid immediate expulsion. I accepted no documents or letters except from people I knew very well or occasional Tibetan monks. I did not enter military zones and usually turned back when I saw a sign warning foreigners not to proceed past that point.

On the other hand, I disregarded the regulation stipulating that reporters stationed in China should not travel to “minority areas” such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet, inhabited by mostly non-Han peoples. In all such areas I was invariably approached by local or national security officers who asked me why I was there. On such occasions I followed my most important rule: to always identify myself at once as a journalist. Sometimes I was told to leave a particular place, sometimes I was simply warned not to “make trouble.” Occasionally I was detained for a few hours and interrogated; at such times I was invariably asked to write down what I had been doing in the place where I had been stopped, which I always did and signed. When asked to express regret for having broken some unspecified law, I said I would write this down but would indicate that it had been dictated to me. The request was then dropped.

No matter where I was in China, my phone calls were tapped, as was the case with all reporters. I could often hear the equipment or breathing, and I was often shadowed. In Beijing I was followed for years by a car bearing the same...
license plate and carrying four plainclothes officers. If I was talking with a Chinese friend it was common for him or her to point to the ceiling to remind me of hidden microphones. These friends were often visited by security officers immediately after our meeting and were ordered to explain what had been said. For ten years I was occasionally visited by the same security man from the Foreign Ministry who would ask me for my views on China and where I intended to go next. He would display his industry by reading to me from his notebook every detail of my movements of the previous few days. It was he, with satisfaction, who told me in early September, 1991, “You are no longer welcome in our country,” although he gave me no explanation, other than to say “You know why, think about it.” Thus ended years of often disturbing experiences in China.

In 1972 I was one of a small group of visiting American academic China specialists. Our first afternoon in Canton we were taken by our “minders” to a “typical” workers’ apartment house to meet a “typical” family, including two grandparents, parents, and two children. They lived in three rooms, very well equipped with excellent bicycles, television, radio, a carpet, fine bedding, and a simple but good kitchen and bathroom. They told us the building dated from before “liberation” in 1949 and had bars on the windows because in the pre-Communist days there were thieves.

The next day, during a very early stroll on my own, by chance I passed the same building and the father of the family, who I later realized was an exceptionally brave man, beckoned me in. I was now in a bare shabby flat. When I asked him why they were now in a different flat he told me that the other one had been equipped by “them” or “the higher-ups.” The building was only three years old, he added, and the bars were in the windows because there were thieves about.

Seven years later I learned from one of my guides from 1972 that I had been guided through a succession of Potemkin scenarios. Closed schools and universities were opened for our brief inspection, and factories pretended to be producing goods for us to observe and report. People actually in jail, or the “ox-pen,” were released to assure us that they were leading normal lives. During the trip itself there were enough incidents like the one in the Canton worker’s flat to make me deeply suspicious, but some of my companions convinced me to keep my doubts to myself because it might ruin the chances for others wishing to visit China. It was made plain as well that if I expressed negative feelings in America it would help the anti-Communists.

In 1985 I ate five evening meals in the Lhasa flat of a married Chinese couple, both officials, who introduced me to a succession of other Chinese who spoke openly and disparagingly of the failure of Beijing’s policies in the region. My hosts offered me a packet of allegedly top-secret documents which he claimed would confirm rumors of a massacre of Tibetans in Lhasa by the Chinese army. I declined this packet. When I returned to Lhasa six months later and went to the flat where I had been entertained, and to the offices of my hosts and their friends, there was no sign of them and others there said they had never heard of them.

Soon after Tiananmen, in early June 1989, I returned to London for medical treatment for the injuries I had suffered at the hands of armed police during the killings. The minister at the Chinese embassy invited me to lunch and asked me in detail what I had seen. He was particularly interested in my account of the morning of June 4 outside the Peking Hotel, near Tiananmen Square, when I saw the army shoot down people who had come there looking for missing students and then shot down the ambulance doctors and nurses who came to help the fallen. After I had fully briefed him, the diplomat told me that none of what I had recounted had happened. “We have other information,” he told me. “You have been misinformed.”

Occasionally, the Chinese authorities used muscle on foreign reporters. At about midnight on June 4, 1990, almost 365 days to the hour since I had been beaten up, armed police stood four reporters, including myself, against a wall and pressed their rifles to our heads, briefly convincing us that we were facing a firing squad. Ten feet away a Japanese woman reporter attempting to capture this scene had her wrist broken by a club-wielding policeman. Her American journalist husband had been forced to his knees by a policeman who forced his rifle-barrel into the reporter’s mouth while he watched his wife being beaten. Then, the soldiers ran back to their truck and drove off.

During most of my time in China I had an arrangement with my editors in London that would be professionally unacceptable outside the Communist world: I almost never identified a source, either by name, occupation, or even location. If I was told something of interest by a female doctor in Datong I might transform her into a male electrician in Nanjing. But I look back on the years 1985 to 1989 as a relatively open period and on the six weeks before June 4, 1989 as a time of normal reporting by any standard; not only had my Chinese colleagues dared to write the truth, but the people of Beijing had spoken openly and enthusiastically to reporters.

But some Western publishers …

Some Western newspaper proprietors ensure that criticism of China will be restrained. Of these the best-known is Rupert Murdoch, whose positive views of China in the interest of his commercial ventures there are a matter of record. After dropping the BBC from his Star television network in Hong Kong and selling the extremely profitable South China Morning Post, Mr. Murdoch observed that he did not wish to irritate Beijing because of the opinions of some of his newspaper editors. He blocked the publication of Hong Kong ex-Governor Chris Patten’s East and West – despite a contractual obligation with Mr. Murdoch’s publishing house HarperCollins – because, he observed later, he saw no reason to anger the leaders of a country where he was an investor. During Mr. Murdoch’s visit to Beijing in December 1998, President Jiang Zemin congratulated his guest for presenting China objectively and cooperating with the Chinese press, while Mr. Murdoch expressed his admiration for China’s
achievements in all respects over the past two decades.

As the East Asia editor of Mr. Murdoch’s *The Times* for five years, I observed the impact of the paper’s owner on how it covered or did not cover China. Mr. Murdoch, however, is not alone. At the Fortune-sponsored CEOs’ meeting in Shanghai in September 1999, Sumner Redstone, chairman of Viacom and a prospective buyer of CBS, said at a news conference, “Journalistic integrity must prevail in the final analysis... That doesn’t mean that journalistic integrity should be exercised in a way that is unnecessarily offensive to the countries in which you operate.”14

**STATE SECRECY**

Even those reporters who say their work is getting easier emphasize that “secrets” or “national secrets” are the most frequent reasons foreign journalists are given for being denied information.19 The reason, I believe, that Beijing is so distrustful of foreign journalists is its fear of being understood.20 Liu Binyan observes: “In Chinese cultural tradition we honor the written word: characters are sacred to us... In the popular imagination, characters have such great power that shamans, or witches, were once able to write a few characters on a slip of paper and stick it to a door, and people would think they were warding off evil spirits. The Chinese Communist Party’s superstitious belief in the power of the written word, in the power of propaganda, reaches astounding levels. Obviously it aims to control the people’s minds to such an extent that no dissent exists, so that the common people will think exactly as the Party does.”21

Attempting to breach this secrecy, foreign reporters not only make trouble for themselves but can also endanger their Chinese contacts. This is less serious now than ten years ago. Many Chinese will tell foreigners what they think as long as they are not identified. But from this eagerness to converse, some travelers to China these days, especially academic ones who have friends in research centers, assume that Chinese are now free to speak their minds. The regime, however, distinguishes between discussions in private and domestic written criticism, and collective political action. Recent travelers to China who have tried to make contact with politically active Chinese, as opposed to favored academics or cab drivers (notoriously free with their opinions), found most of them either in prison or under close surveillance.

Reporters usually are more skeptical than occasional visitors. This is vital in China where secrecy and lying remain the greatest obstacle to journalists’ work. Indeed, during the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989, foreign reporters noted the unusual degree of openness among the residents of Beijing when they discussed their antipathy toward the government and their support for the students. Even more striking, as the reporter Linda Jakobson has shown, were the several weeks of honest official press coverage of the demonstrations.

But Tiananmen was unique. Normally, discovering the facts in China is an arduous, often mysterious task, even for the Chinese. One of China’s most persistent investigators of Party history is Dai Qing. She spent time in jail after Tiananmen but continues to investigate political secrets. “There is a tremendous thirst for this in China. You foreigners, with your free press, will find it hard to understand this great thirst because you are so flooded with newspapers and books... You should imagine living in a dark room with all the shades drawn. If one shade goes up – just a crack – the light that enters is suddenly very interesting [italics in original].”22

While the official lying makes life difficult for foreign journalists, it is fundamentally disorienting for the Chinese. Hannah Arendt summed up the effect of systematic lying: “It has frequently been noted that the surest result of brainwashing in the long run is a peculiar kind of cynicism, the absolute refusal to believe the truth of anything, no matter how well it may be established. In other words, the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth and truth be defamed as a lie, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.”23

There are few corners of life beyond the family or close friends where Chinese can be certain about the truth. Some secrets about the Communist Party, and even about the Chinese people themselves, the Party keeps close and even intellectuals prefer not to probe, although, as I note below, some writers now unravel these matters in the unofficial press. When secrets do come to foreign reporters they are difficult to corroborate until the regime itself decides they should be revealed, and even then many facts remain shrouded.

The Jesuit Sinologue Father Ladany told me long ago, “Even when the Party tells the truth it is lying.” Party leaders think of themselves as an elite who decide what other Chinese need to know. One of their fears is that if the Party’s record were made public, many of those who sacrificed for the cause would feel they had wasted their lives. Professor Michael Yahuda of the London School of Economics says, “They are claiming to be more open. But since history is the basis of their legitimacy they can’t admit their errors. What they do reveal, these little nuggets, are replete with sins of commission and omission, designed to serve the current approach.”24

**SOME SECRETS**

China’s size makes keeping such secrets easier than it would be in a smaller country. Much of the media is state-controlled and until the 1980s it was almost impossible for most Chinese to travel even short distances. Su Shaozh, ex-Director of the Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought Institute, told me, “China is a very big country. I knew the famine was very big because I was in touch with higher levels. But the government was able to keep the real number secret. The Party is good at this. Look at 1975 – two dams burst in Hunan province killing 230,000 people and it was only admitted fifteen years later. At the time the *People’s Daily* didn’t publish the news.”

There are many examples of such secrets. When and...
where was the Party founded – in 1921 in Shanghai, with Mao present – or in 1920, in Beijing, by intellectuals whose names were expunged from history for almost forty years? How about the great famine of 1959-61? How many died – 16 million (as was grudgingly admitted only in 1981), twenty million, thirty? Liu Binyan says, “Since I was in the countryside during the famine, I should have known the number, but, before 1984, even I didn’t know how many people had died of starvation. In 1984, by chance I found out that perhaps 20 million had starved; a few months later I heard another figure: 30 million. Five years later I heard 43 million.”

Jasper Becker, the Beijing correspondent for the Hong Kong South China Morning Post, has made a comprehensive study of the famine in his book Hungry Ghosts: China’s Secret Famine. “This was the worst famine in human history,” Becker says. “Forty million died. In 1981 Mao was blamed for the Cultural Revolution but was exempted from blame for the famine. That would have left his whole legacy as a model of Maoist striving and austerity, was later “revealed” as a fraud, its heroic leader Chen Yonggui disgraced, and his son exposed as a rapist. Marshal Lin Biao, once Mao’s “closest comrade-in-arms,” was subsequently accused of attempting to assassinate the Chairman and described as having been a bad person for forty years. For many years the great threat to reporting was the concept of “state secret,” defined as anything not officially made public.

American reporters know that if a leader is alive and in power, his or her personal life is nei, internal, and will be discussed with journalists only very discreetly. If this leader falls, however, no aspect of his sexual life is too private to mention. As soon as Jiang Qing, Madame Mao, was arrested after her husband’s death in late 1976, scandal about her proclivities was commonly discussed with Western journalists. The same thing happened after the detention of Politburo member, ex-Beijing mayor and Party Secretary Chen Xitong. After his expulsion from the Politburo in 1995, and from the Party in 1997, for monumental peculation amounting to an alleged $2.2 billion dollars’ worth of municipal funds, no detail of his sleazy private life was kept from the public. Until Chen was brought down, there was very little reporting on him in the Western press apart from his role in urging Deng Xiaoping to summon the army on the night of June 3-4 1989.

Mao Zedong is still officially hailed as a Great Marxist and a Great Revolutionary, who went bad in his final years. Seventy percent good, 30 percent bad was the verdict of the 1981 official evaluation “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China.” But his ex-comrades (some of whom were also his near-victims) now freely “confide” to foreign journalists that Mao was an opium addict who specialized in his craving for young women in his old age. Most Chinese are aware of the truth behind many of the lies. Indeed, the nomenklatura’s te-juan or special privileges – special shops, films, books, residences, trains, planes, cars, and trips abroad – together with their intermarriages and specially favored children, the “Red Princes,” are notorious.

Especially Sensitive Matters

A fact of work-life for American reporters is that some lies are believed by almost everyone. Tibetans, Mongols, Manchus, and Muslims, whose ethnic and cultural differences and historical experiences make them distinct from the Han majority, are regarded by many ethnic Chinese as culturally
inferior and lucky to be included in the great Chinese family. This national myth permits persecution in so-called minority areas when their inhabitants demand autonomy. Only after Tiananmen did some intellectuals come to believe that the Chinese army might be shooting innocent Tibetans. But even most dissidents, including Wei Jingsheng, insist that Tibet has always been part of China and have no patience with scholarly research which suggests the opposite.32

Reporters are normally allowed to visit the minority areas only with permission, and then usually in guided groups. In Xinjiang and Tibet, meeting local people off the official program, interviewing them properly and following up what they say is nearly impossible.33 Those reporters who visit Tibet with official permission may quote the occasional complaint from an anonymous monk but they have no opportunity, on guided trips, to sit in a monastery for several days and wait for real conversations to develop. Even more difficult is investigating the scale of Chinese military and economic power in the minority areas. Occasional articles, such as a recent three-part analysis of the Tibetan situation in both a mainland journal and the leading Communist newspaper in Hong Kong, say little that is new.34

INTERNAL EFFECTS OF LYING

Perhaps the biggest lie is insisting that while the Party makes mistakes, only the Party can correct them. But as Father Ladany and Dai Qing warn, this means covering them up. It may be true that the man who tells the truth will rule China. But the entire lie is so big, starting with the birth of the Party itself, that if it is thoroughly punctured the system will explode. If the verdict on Tiananmen were reversed, embarrassing questions would be asked about the entire top tier of the regime, including Jiang Zemin and his favorites. These leaders, after all, came to power precisely because Deng Xiaoping chose them to restore order after the nationwide uprising of 1989.

The Internet is a recent tool for piercing some of the official secrecy.35 Adept Chinese can use search engines to examine subjects normally off-limits in China. Such knowledge, some claim, will destroy the state’s monopoly on information. But the intensely nationalist educational system immunizes many citizens against heterodox ideas. Most Chinese intellectuals, including many who live abroad, are convinced that the US deliberately bombed Beijing’s Belgrade Embassy in May 1999 and are equally convinced – as the Chinese government has also expressly alleged – that NATO’s attempts to stop the killing of Albanians in Kosovo were acts of American-directed Western imperialism which might lead to foreign intervention in China on behalf of Muslims and Tibetans.

How does a society based on lies function? Orville Schell, dean of the University of California School of Journalism in Berkeley, has asked: “Are there oases in the memory hole for Party higher-ups? How do they arrogate any area where some truth prevails, allowing the government to function?”36 A striking revelation in Dr. Li Zhisui’s memoir, The Private Life of Chairman Mao, was how much the leaders lied to one another. Yet the existence for years of Reference News, a digest of the foreign press prepared for officials, indicates that the senior leaders expect the facts. After years of discussions with Chinese intellectuals, Princeton University’s Perry Link suggests: “There’s a strong pull to get to the bottom of this. But the digging undermines the culture, you’re chipping away at something precious. It’s like getting pushed away by the core of a magnet. Soviet dissidents find it easier. Chinese like to stay within the system.”37

THE NEW PROBERS

Nonetheless, a full picture of the state’s great wall of secrets must include the growing number of Chinese writers seeking ways around and through it. Foreign reporters, including myself, have given either no or negligible attention to the post-1989 push by Chinese writers to probe hitherto taboo subjects.

Geremie Barmé of Australian National University has an unrivaled mastery of the minutiae of the Chinese literary scene. Along with economic reform, he pointed out at an October 1999 Harvard seminar, the deregulated publishing market encourages wide-ranging political and social critiques. As long as they avoid political action, writers can challenge the Party on many fronts, such as official corruption, cronyism, the expansion of the gap between rich and poor, media freedom, and even democratization. The development of democracy in Taiwan, Mr. Barmé says, is now included in discussions of Chinese modernity. Many of these writers, before and since Tiananmen, have suffered at the hands of the security forces. “They were emotionally and intellectually determined to see the one-party state weakened and undermined no matter what the cost. For them the marketplace was a welcome ally in their quest.”38

Some writers, Mr. Barmé observes, have turned their attention to local history, so that even the 1959-1961 famine has fallen under the spotlight. He gives as an example “the journalist Lu Yuegang’s work on the state-induced famine in Fenghuo village, Shaanxi province.”39 From such local investigation other writers, including Yu Jie, author of the hugely popular book Fire and Ice, have moved to polemic. Enraged by the adulation of Mao by the ex-Red Guard Zhang Chengzhi, Yu writes “Statements like this absolutely horrify me... What has Zhang Chengzhi got to say about the 30 million people who starved to death during the so-called three years of natural disasters? How does he react when contemplating the countless tormented souls of those who hanged or drowned themselves or were beaten to death...?”40 Other attacks are even more daring and have been largely unnoticed by foreign reporters. In 1997, the artist Ai Weiwei published a composite three scenes: the White House, Hong Kong, and Tiananmen. “In the foreground of each image,” Barmé writes, “...the artist’s hand is seen giving the finger to each of these iconic scenes.” Accompanying the images is an essay containing these words: “The history of modern China is a history of negation, a denial of the value of hu-
manity, a murder of individuality. It is a history without a soul...”41

Barmé concludes that “the proliferation of ideological stances and cultural possibilities – albeit hamstrung and distorted – ... allowed for an unprecedented opportunity for debate and dissension in the history of the People’s Republic. The lack of adequate public institutions that could provide avenues for constructive change and wide-ranging practical reform meant that the transformation was not neatly discernible or particularly dramatic, but it was continuing apace nonetheless.”42

Mr. Barmé suggested during the Harvard seminar that such writing in an authoritarian society is what Vaclav Havel, in a 1978 essay, calls “the art of the impossible.” He noted as well that Havel’s writings are quoted by the new iconoclastic writers. Some Chinese, therefore, increasingly demand the restoration of a basic human right: the accurate memory of times gone by. Barmé’s succinct rejoinder to my observation that Western reporters appear unaware of this development was “They don’t read enough.”

THE SHORENSTEIN STUDY OF TIANANMEN REPORTING

The paving stones in the square were scarred by the tanks and armored personnel carriers on the night of the 1989 killings. By October 1990, when the Asian Games opened in Beijing, those reminders of death had been smoothed away by the Party’s stone masons. Millions of flowers formed the Chinese characters for “Beijing Welcomes You,” and the walls of any building tourists might glimpse had been whitewashed. But Beijing remembered. An elderly woman street-crossing street-sweeper remarked to me that “Because of the Games, this city is like donkey dung: clean and shiny outside, but inside it’s still shit.”

The memory dispose-all had not worked on the old woman. Nor was it working on June 4, 1990, the massacre’s first anniversary, when the tinkling of breaking glass could be heard over the walls of Peking University, ringed that night by armed police to make sure the students did not get out. The sound was of little glass bottles – “Xiaoping” – a play on the name of senior leader Deng Xiaoping, in whose dishonor the Tiananmen demonstrators had broken bottles in the Spring of 1989.

Bearing in mind the vast and micro-managing official apparatus devoted to hampering and blocking their efforts, the success of Western reporters in China and more specifically during Tiananmen, is notable. It is therefore disturbing to read the criticism of them in some American studies of China-reporting. Of these the most comprehensive is the Harvard Shorenstein Center’s report, “Turmoil at Tiananmen: A Study of U.S. Press Coverage of the Beijing Spring of 1989.”43 Although it is put in the form of questions, the report’s conclusion is apparent in its introduction: “Did the media, foreign and Chinese, help bring China to the brink of... change? Next time the dissent rises to the surface, will the media be an ingredient in whether or not that change will occur?” It describes the coverage as “a wobbly prism” which brought out “the best and worst in both media.”44 Harrison Salisbury of The New York Times takes a view opposite to that of the Shorenstein study: “[W]hen you have an event of the magnitude of Tiananmen, to stand by and simply jot down notes and then go off with your word processor to write a story in which you’ve divorced yourself entirely from those events is an unnatural act... It would be much better, for my money... to declare your prejudices and say: ‘This is the way it seems to me tonight, and I know that I am excited.’ That is the kind of reporting that people can understand and accept.”45

“Turmoil at Tiananmen,” by contrast, takes a lofty view, usually expressed as “We think....”46 Yet few of those appearing at the workshop were reporters and even fewer had been in Tiananmen. The report describes the Tiananmen journalists as “working under intense, confusing, and dangerous conditions... As the Pulitzer Prize and other awards granted to such coverage attest, it was, for some journalists, their finest hour.”47 But the students were “favored” by the journalists, the report contends, instead of being “a subject of neutral scrutiny.” The government’s view should have been more fully explored, it is suggested. Actually this was widely done, beginning with the extensive analysis of the People’s Daily’s April 26 editorial which condemned the demonstrations, and which was understood to be the voice of Deng Xiaoping.

The report takes reporters to task for not realizing that Chinese media coverage—which was openly sympathetic to the students—was incorrectly viewed by many Chinese people “as a signal that officials condoned the movement.”48 It claims that this was “concluded” by Linda Jakobson, yet she does not conclude this. She merely says it was the Opinion of Andrew Walder.49 People in China, Ms. Jakobson said, “have grown accustomed to continuous change in policy and they are wary of ferocious political campaigns. They know that the official version of the ‘counter-revolutionary rebellion in Beijing,’ the one that the media is putting out, is what they are supposed to think.”50 What Ms. Jakobson herself witnessed in “many a home” was that people kept the clippings from the May 1989 papers, “so that not even my children will forget,” as one friend explained. When people saw Premier Li Peng being scolded by students on live television it “made a lasting imprint on the minds of hundreds of millions of viewers across the country.”51

The report is correct in its criticism of television reporting from Tiananmen; live and immediate, its pictures were often accompanied by inadequate analysis which often gave audiences a misleading impression. But the report’s authors seem not to have grasped the force of the observation by Amanda Bennett of The Wall Street Journal: “In hindsight, sure it’s clear there was a struggle and [Party boss] Zhao challenged [Senior Leader] Deng and lost. But in China, all is so couched, so murky. I’m not sure what a responsible journalist could have made of it at that point... The power struggle came out in little teeny pieces – there was no way to get at it at the time... The story is the crowd. The story takes over.”52

PROSPECTS

During the last two or three years the incubus of Tiananmen has grown somewhat lighter—although in the run-up to the tenth anniversary the government went to great
lengths to block off the Square. The limited discourse that occurs, the occasional somewhat revealing articles, and the chats with professional Chinese contacts are seen by friends of China abroad as “loosening up”, and critical reporters are told to concentrate on such progress. But foreign reporters remain alert for returns to the “tightening” atmosphere of November 1999. The bureau chief of The New York Times wrote in November that the suppression of the religious sect Falun Gong “left no doubt that [the government] intends to wipe out all organized traces of the movement – even if that requires jailing thousands of people who never saw themselves as enemies of the state.” This determination resulted in traditional pressure on foreign reporters, especially if they interviewed Falun Gong spokesmen secretly. Some reporters were threatened with the removal of credentials and on November 10 the China Foreign Correspondents’ Club complained of official harassment to the Foreign Ministry.53

Foreigners working for Chinese news agencies also feel the heat. Within a Beijing news magazine, for instance, a foreign sub-editor noticed that “On a couple of occasions the news team would disappear for a ‘meeting’ and would reemerge a few hours later murmuring about Falun Gong. ...These meetings were to encourage any practitioners to come forward and repent or to encourage friends and family to do the same. By the end of the month-long campaign (resorting to stories about a 12 year-old who felt breathless when practicing Falun Gong) most of my colleagues were utterly fed up with the whole thing. However most were of the opinion that it was harmful in some way but they weren’t quite sure how.”54

Although we now look back, ironically, at the pre-1989 years as a golden age, it would be foolish to deny that nothing changes in China, or that the secrets are now somewhat easier for reporters to crack. It is apparent too that reporters have failed to notice the vigor of the non-official press in pinpointing some of the regime’s most sensitive secrets. Many Chinese and foreign journalists know that the Party can make terrible mistakes and do terrible things... but that it can only concede this about some of the past. Advocates of systemic change remain an imperiled species. A prisoner already serving a ten-year sentence received an extra eight years not long ago for attaching tiny slips of paper bearing the words “Long live freedom” and “End tyranny” to the legs of locusts and flying them out of his cell window.55

During his twenty-year period of detention, Xu Liangying 56 was sustained by a portrait of Albert Einstein bearing the words “Great spirits have always encountered opposition from mediocre minds.” We China journalists, whether it is our intention or not, have been compiling an archive of the lives of the Chinese under a system of mediocre minds which, like Lenin’s, Stalin’s and Brezhnev’s in the Soviet Union, caused millions to die before their time, blocked the spiritual and cultural development of generations, and kept China poor and backward. Some day this archive may form part of the evaluation of one of China’s shortest dynasties.

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ENDNOTES


3 Ibid., p. 206.


5 For Snow’s manipulation by Mao, see Edward Farmer in Media Studies Journal, Winter 1999, p. 137.

6 James C. Thomson quotes a reporter of that time: “... as one put it, ‘in China, and later Vietnam, we knew all the seaminess of the right-wing groups; but we knew nothing of the seaminess of the revolutionary side.’”


8 Salisbury in Lee, Voices, p. 221.

9 There were a few exceptions. In 1956 Edmund Stevens and Philip Harrington of Look magazine and William Worthy of the Baltimore Afro-American visited China for a few weeks. In the 1960s the Toronto Globe and Mail, favored by Mao because Canada had broken an American embargo on grain sales to China and because of his affection for the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune, provided a Western perspective on China. For an attack on American reporting in this period, see Felix Greene, A Curtain of Ignorance: How the American Public Has Been Misinformed About China. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964. Greene railed Snow in his pro-Beijing bias.


11 Some distortion was too much even for the Chinese. In 1979, when Shirley MacLaine told Deng Xiaoping at the White House that she had met a physicist who told her he was happy laboring in the countryside, Deng, who had also been internally banished during the Cultural Revolution, replied that she had been lied to. Jim Mann in Media Studies Journal, Winter 1999, p. 103.

12 The Observer, Oct. 28, 1979, p. 9. This mass credulity is fully described in Paul Hollander, Political Pilgrims. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 278-346. Nor was credulity the only reason. Orville Schell concedes that on those early trips “... one fear above all predominated.... that if one uttered or wrote ‘incorrect’ thoughts one would never again be allowed back... most of us who have written about China capitulated to this fear.” Quoted with ellipses in Hollander, p. 352.

13 Personal communication.


15 Personal communication.

16 Personal communication.

17 Personal communication.


19 China, of course, is not the only country where governments wrap themselves in secrets. See for example, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Secrecy: The American Experience. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
This fear is breaking down when it comes to Western scholars. At a conference at George Washington University in October, 1999, Professor Elizabeth Perry of Harvard noted the increasing ease of access granted to some Western academics to previously closed Chinese documentation on contemporary matters such as trade unions, and the growing collaboration with Chinese academics.

Liu in Lee, Voices, pp. 133-134.

Quoted in Perry Link, Evening Chats in Beijing, p. 148.


Personal communication.


Lee, Voices, p. 134


Personal communication.

Edgar Snow, The Other Side of the River. New York: Random House, 1962, p. 615. On several occasions the official Chinese press has advised American reporters to emulate Edgar Snow. For anyone who has followed Snow’s career and read his articles and books, this advice is fraught with dilemmas. Does Beijing want reporters to be like the Snow who, in the Sixties, denied there were political prisoners in China while confiding to his diary that he was doing his best to take sides. In May 1962 he wrote to an American friend in China about the famine, and “the absence of concrete information,” wishing “to answer the Alsops and others on the famine starvation reports.... Do try to get me a few FACTS.” Quoted in S. Bernard Thomas, Season of High Adventure: Edgar Snow in China. University of California Press, 1996, p. 308. See also Edward Farmer on Snow’s swallowing of Chinese “whoppers”: Media Studies Journal, Winter 1999, p. 139. Snow had slipped over the line from point of view to bias.


Details of this kidnapping can be found in Hilton’s “The Search for the Panchen Lama”; my review, The Spectator, September 25, 1999. I discussed the possible consequences of this kidnapping with the Dalai Lama, New York Review of Books, June 10,1999.


Dru C. Gladney points out that although Chinese repression in Xinjiang is more violent than in Tibet, “Unlike Tibet, Xinjiang has never been regarded as a Shangri-la that has eluded Western penetration.” There is therefore little Western editorial interest in the region unless a bomb explodes there. Media Studies Journal, Winter 1999, p. 133.


See the comprehensive article on this by Ian Buruma in the New York Review of Books, Nov. 4, 1999.

Personal communication.

Personal communication.


Ibid., p. 363.


The report, published in 1992, was the first in a series intended to investigate how media coverage of international crises affected the public and policy-making. It aimed as well to discover what “lessons” could be learned from this interaction. The report, unusually, was commissioned by the Ford Foundation and was the product in part of an 86-member discussion panel composed of academic and media representatives. Many of the former were China specialists; few of the latter were.


Lee, Voices, p. 227.

The Shorenstein Center’s report is not the only skewed view of American reporters’ activities during Tiananmen. Professor Carolyn Wakeman of the Graduate School of Journalism of the University of California has recently written, “Deeply shaken by the slaughter of innocents [in Tiananmen] whose cause had for weeks drawn their support, reporters who witnessed the bloodshed and interviewed survivors understandably found a simplified narrative irresistible. The dramatic story of heroic students prepared to sacrifice their lives for American freedoms validated the deepest cultural assumptions and most cherished political values of reporters and editors. It appealed to broad media audiences never before interested in China.” Media Studies Journal, Winter 1999, p. 61.


Ibid., p. 208.


Ibid., p. 12.

Ibid., p. 10.


Eric Eckholm, The New York Times, Nov. 4, 1989, p. 1. This is an extract from the newsletter of the Foreign Correspondents Club of China, November 1999. “Our ever-charming ... minders in Beijing have been up to some of their most unpleasant behaviour in years against reporters trying to cover the latest protests of that ‘devil sect’ Falun Gong. Five correspondents from AP, The New York Times and Reuters were summoned for questioning and had their press accreditations and residence permits seized, although they were eventually returned. Some were threatened with unspecified consequences - expulsion, perhaps - if they persisted in contacting Falun Gong practitioners. Others report close, intrusive surveillance by plainclothes operatives upon leaving the diplomatic compounds...club president Jaime Flor Cruz...sent a protest letter to Zhu Bangzao at the Foreign Ministry and Zhao Qizheng at the State Council. (Oct. 28) an illegal activity, and reminded him that foreign journalists working in China are subject to Chinese law. He also said since the FCC is not officially registered, “I suggest you stay away from such (Falun Gong) activities.”

Personal communication.

Asia Watch, Detained in China and Tibet, p. xvi.

Xu Liangying, a physicist and academician now almost 80, has campaigned for political freedom since the 1950s and in recent years has sent petitions to the regime calling for the release of political prisoners.
NHK’S CENSORSHIP OF JAPANESE CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

BY LISA YONEYAMA

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From January 29 to February 1, 2001, Japan’s public broadcasting agency, NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai), aired a four-evening series titled Senso o Do Sabaku ka (How Should We Adjudicate Wars?) on its educational television channel (ETV). The series explored recent attempts throughout the world to adjudicate and redress acts of violence and injustice that have never adequately been prosecuted under the category of “crimes against humanity.” “How Should We Adjudicate Wars?” took up many of the most ghastly incidents of the twentieth century. These included pan-European participation in the Nazi Holocaust, mass rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the French war against Algeria, sexual violence and torture in Guatemala, the Japanese military’s sexual enslavement of women, and South African Apartheid. By exploring memories of these atrocities, the program sought to show how the concept of “crimes against humanity” had been critically challenged and reconfigured in such ways as to help communities remember, make reparations for, and adjudicate racial, gender, ethnic, sexual, colonial and other forms of violence and injustice. The program was produced jointly by NHK, a video production company called Documentary Japan (DJ), and NHK Enterprise 21 (NEP).

However, the second night’s programming on January 30 was heavily censored through deletion, interpolations, alterations, dismemberment and even fabrication. This segment was originally supposed to cover the “Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery” that had been held in Tokyo in December 2000. The Women’s Tribunal was a transnational people’s court that utilized international law to try individuals within the Japanese military, including Hirohito, for their alleged involvement in the sexual enslavement of women.

I became personally involved in this series, and appeared as one of two studio commentators on the second and third nights. When I received an invitation in early December, I was asked to comment specifically on the Women’s Tribunal (on the second night), and on the Public Hearing organized by the International Criminal Court’s (ICC’s) Women’s Caucus (on the third night), which was held in conjunction with the Tribunal. The other commentator, Takahashi Tetsuya, who has written extensively on questions of Japanese war responsibilities, recommended me as his co-commentator. He appeared in all four parts of the series and played a central role in the production process. Takahashi explained the series’ purpose to me as follows: it was supposed to examine
the intellectual and political shift that had been taken in the 1990s with respect to the concept of “war crimes” in international law; and we would assess the Women’s Tribunal as one of many recent attempts at overcoming major historical trauma of the twentieth century. The second night’s program would have questioned Japanese responsibilities for colonial and military aggression. I found the objective to be timely and thought-provoking and thus agreed to participate in the studio recording, which took place on December 27. However, what aired on January 30, 2001 as the program titled, Towareru senji sei boryoku (Wartime Sexual Violence Interrogated), differed drastically from the version in which I had agreed to take part.

The Tribunal

The Women’s Tribunal was made possible by a transnational network of feminist organizations. While a number of feminist and other progressive grassroots groups and NGOs contributed to planning the Women’s Tribunal, the three primary conveners were: the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, the Asian Centre for Women’s Human Rights (ASCENT) of the Philippines, and the Violence Against Women in War-Network, Japan (VAWW-NET). The Tribunal was modeled after the 1967 Russell Court that judged US war crimes in the Vietnam War. At the same time, its genealogy can be traced to the transnational feminist alliance of the 1970s that protested against US militarism and Japanese neo-colonial violence against women, especially in Korea and the Philippines. The Women’s Tribunal, as I argued during the studio recording, can be understood as a major accomplishment of the late twentieth century non-identitarian, anti-imperialist feminism theorized primarily by Third World feminists and women of color. Informed by critical race theory and post-colonial awareness, this feminism refuses to see women as uniformly victimized by male violence and patriarchy, but instead attends to the historical and structural asymmetry that constitutes the gender relations and categories. It is also worth mentioning that the Women’s Tribunal shares many characteristics with the Korean War Truth Commission, an organization devoted to the investigation and adjudication of US atrocities committed against civilians during the 1950-53 Korean War. They both strive to adjudicate the past in order to bring justice to women who have been dispossessed and suffer under current forces of militarism and globalization.

Most importantly, the Women’s Tribunal began to undo the epistemological foundations of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (Tokyo Trial). First, it accomplished what US Cold War policy prevented the Tokyo Trial from doing: it found Emperor Hirohito, the prewar and wartime supreme commander of the Japanese military, guilty. Second, it determined that while primary responsibility for the atrocities lay with Japan, the initial responsibility for suppressing knowledge of the crimes rested with the Allied Forces who, despite the weight of available evidence, had left the issue uninterrogated. Failure to fully prosecute military sexual violence against women allowed similar cases of violence to remain invisible in subsequent decades. These cases have included rape, sexual abuse, torture and captivity that occurred during military conflicts, as well as in the institutionalized sex industry around overseas US and other military bases. The adjudication of the past, therefore, was inseparably linked to the deterrence of future violence. Third, by prosecuting atrocities committed against women of Asia and the Pacific as “crimes against humanity,” the Tribunal challenged the Tokyo Trial’s underpinning epistemology. This is the west-centric and male-centered notion of humanity that has historically tended to exclude women as well as those in the colonized, racialized and under-classed position. Moreover, by prosecuting the state violence committed collectively against women by Japan, the Women’s Tribunal effectively challenged the individual-based notion of legal rights. In these different ways, the Women’s Tribunal enacted an alternative to the course of history that the postwar international community had taken, and thus unleashed possibilities for imagining different presents.

The Women’s Tribunal does not possess the power to enforce its legal decisions. Yet, it was a formal trial proceeding authorized by international law. More than seventy survivors of the “comfort stations” and other wartime violence gave testimonies. Among the most important international law experts who participated were Patricia Viseur-Sellers and Gabrielle Kirk McDonald, who respectively served as chief prosecutor and presiding judge. They had both been centrally involved in considering gender and sexual violence at the former Yugoslavia War Crimes Tribunal. The Tribunal conveyed the weight and force of international opinion against the Japanese government’s unwillingness to face up to its historical responsibilities. If the knowledge about the Tribunal were properly conveyed to the public, there might be an impact on Japanese opinion and lead to legislative measures for an official reparation and eventually even reconciliation.

To be sure, the Japanese government and public have admitted their moral responsibility by offering official apologies. They also established the Asian Women National Fund that offers monetary compensation and financial support for the survivors’ welfare. Yet, many surviving victims refused the atonement money and instead demanded clarification of juridical responsibility. The Tribunal’s organizer responded to such demands by setting the following principle: without adjudication, there would be no true reconciliation and end to the culture of impunity. This precept, one that was rendered initially by the survivors of Japanese military sex slavery and formalized by the Tribunal, can be applied to other war crimes cases and crimes against humanity that are being committed by many countries, including the US. Unless the international community formally acknowledges and condemns the criminality of the acts committed by the perpetrating governments, atonement money or humanitarian aid is insufficient for true reflection, reconciliation, and prevention of future violence. The Women’s Tribunal thus can usher in many positive changes on multiple fronts. It is therefore truly regrettable that NHK failed to capitalize on the opportunity to report fully and accurately on the Tribunal’s accomplishments.

Censorship, Alteration, Interpolation

Censorship achieves its purpose in two ways: one through...
erasure, concealment and silence; the other by giving selected subjects a veneer of eloquence. The problem with the censored program was not only its insufficient reporting of the Tribunal. We need to interrogate what the program conveyed to its viewers as much as what it failed to air. It is necessary to problematize the truth and knowledge disseminated about the Tribunal through the double process of censorship.

The January 30 program reduced videotape recording (VTR) footage of survivors’ testimonies to one-third or less of what had been included in the scenes that I had commented on during the original studio recording. Moreover, the censored program extensively purged and truncated the comments of many individuals in misleading ways. Because I spoke primarily on the Tribunal’s historical and intellectual significance, most of my statements were cut or misconstrued.

Furthermore, NHK deleted my comments on the empowering effects of the Tribunal as a gathering of transnational grassroots organizations; on the Tribunal’s principle that “reconciliation” cannot be achieved without clarifying historical accountability; on the significance of survivors’ testimonies; and on the verdict and its potential to effect social transformations at various levels of Japanese society.2 In order to fill in the gaps created by deletion of testimonies as well as my studio commentaries, NHK inserted extended and irrelevant film footage from European wars, the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, and the 1980s democratization of South Korea. Even so, the program came out four minutes shorter than the other three (40 minutes as opposed to 44 minutes).

Most importantly, the altered program presented the Women’s Tribunal in a distorted manner and disgraced the survivors who appeared in video footage as witnesses. This was done in two ways. First, by adding a suggestive caption in the relevant frames insinuating that the women who testified at the Tribunal were making false assertions about having been enslaved against their will. The second was by interpolating segments of an interview with Hata Ikuhiko, a conservative critic who has gained worldwide notoriety for his extremist views and his denials of the Japanese military’s involvement in the “comfort station” system. Hata is also one of the chief promoters of the recent controversial textbooks that sought to whitewash Japanese colonialism and militarism, and glorify conservative family values. His association’s history textbook was certified by the Ministry of Education, but was adopted by only a handful of schools following a campaign of mass protest by citizens and scholars in 2001.

At the time of the December 27 studio recording, the script did not call for an interview with Hata. Yet the January 30 broadcast contained several minutes of a video recording in which Hata not only denied the military’s involvement in recruiting women for sex, but disparaged the Tribunal as biased and fraught with technical shortcomings from the standpoint of law. To be sure, it is not unusual for some parts of video footage and narration to be changed at different stages of producing a program. Nor am I protesting the inclusion of objectionable views. Hata’s comments, however, were interpolated after a consensus about the program’s content had been established. Because they were added at the last minute, Takahashi and I naturally could not refer to Hata’s remarks. We thus appeared to approve of his views. We also received comments from viewers, unaware of the censorship, that the program as a whole seemed to assess the Tribunal negatively. Moreover, Hata’s interview was given disproportionate weight. Its addition made the program radically different from the one that many of the participants had originally agreed to make.

Since the incident it has been suspected by many media workers and others that intimidation from the far right and pressure from the Liberal Democratic Party led to the alterations. Reliable sources have reported that there have been a number of physical threats made by the right wing against NHK. Right-wing sources have openly admitted and even boasted about the "success" of their campaign against NHK regarding its representation of the Tribunal.3 It has also been alleged that members of the Liberal Democratic Party threatened one of NHK’s executives with budget cuts if they did not censor the program,4 despite the fact that by law the government is not allowed to interfere in NHK programming. NHK is a public broadcasting corporation that is funded by the fees it collects from viewers. The budget must be scrutinized and approved by the legislators but is not managed by the government. Sakagami Kaoru, at the time a producer at Documentary Japan, had been primarily responsible for the third night; but she also became closely involved in production of the second night’s program. She resigned from DJ a few months after the program was aired. In a recent article she testifies to the details of the alteration process.5 While there is as yet no direct evidence, she writes, she is convinced that NHK was keenly aware of the threats and eventually imposed what she describes as “excessive self-censorship.”

From Sakagami’s testimonies and numerous other sources, we know that NHK significantly altered the second night’s programming at various stages. Yoshioka Tamio, the head of the Educational Program Section, made several disparaging remarks about the versions submitted by DJ and forced major modifications. It is also known that executive members of different NHK branches previewed the program. This is considered to be highly exceptional. To be sure, it is not unusual or unacceptable to edit a studio recording and video footage for the purpose of making a program flow better or clarifying the central points. But from the extensive conversation Takahashi and I had with the former president of DJ, we know that at least until January 24 the program’s content, except for a few minor changes and editing, remained almost identical to that of the original studio recording of December.

The first major modification, therefore, took place when Takahashi agreed to a partial re-recording on January 28. During the re-recording, Takahashi was made to speak at length on how the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be regarded as “crimes against humanity.” In his new statements, words such as prosecution, adjudication or accountability were carefully avoided. These were the key concepts that distinguished Women’s Tribunal from the ways in which various other communities throughout the world have attempted to come to terms with their pasts. Through Takahashi’s eloquence, the program devalued the Tribunal even further. Hata’s interview was also inserted at this point. Further changes were made between January 28 and the date when the final program aired, January 30. I was
not informed of any of these revisions.

Protests

There have been a number of protests against NHK. Matsui Yayori, the representative of VAWW-NET, Japan, was the first to publicly denounce the program. She pointed out that the program had covered up the Tribunal’s factual details and left viewers with erroneous impressions of it (February 6). Takahashi, two other participants in the series (Utsumi Aiko and Ukai Satoru) and I sent a jointly signed letter of inquiry to NHK (February 16). In the letter, we pointed out how the program violated and distorted the Tribunal as well as our comments and we asked for a detailed explanation. In March, I sent an electronic message to friends and colleagues calling on them to join me in a letter of protest against NHK. The letter was mailed to NHK on March 15 with over 300 signatories. NHK (i.e. Yoshioka) refused to respond, saying that “no response should be considered a response.”

I also participated in a signature campaign that was launched by over fifty citizens and workers in the Japanese media and education. In this campaign we reasoned that as a public broadcasting corporation NHK had an obligation to respond to viewers’ inquiries and suspicions in a responsible manner, and that it should indicate the concrete measures by which it would try to redeem the Tribunal’s reputation and redress the violations it had committed against many individuals who had participated in the program. The campaign also received support from a Korean professor, Pak Yu-ha, who had called on the Korean public to lend “support to Japanese scholars in their battles against the right-wingers.” The campaign collected a total of 2,878 signatures and the letter was sent to NHK on June 9.

NHK has replied to these inquiries, protests and requests with perfunctory apologies. It has insisted that the broadcasting company retains its exclusive editorial rights under the principle of freedom of expression. Therefore it denies that it must disclose information regarding the production process. Because NHK refused to engage in negotiations, Matsui Yayori and VAWW-NET filed a formal lawsuit against NHK, DJ and NEP. Moreover, some of us involved in the signature campaign established an on-line group called Citizens for Responsible Media (Media no kiki o uttaeru shimin nettowaku, abbreviated as Mekiki-net). Mekiki-net has taken up two agendas thus far: to provide on-line intellectual support for VAWW-NET’s lawsuit; and to check and critique NHK’s Censorship and alteration did not only betray the trust of those who had given support to the program’s production. The most disturbing aspect of the incident is the violation it committed against the women who had survived Japanese military enslavement to testify at the Tribunal. They were not aware that their images and voices would be used by NHK in a program that, through malicious narration and untruthful comments, disparaged their existence. However, it is not they but those who lent a hand to this symbolic violence who should feel ashamed and disgraced. The flagrant self-censoring and heavy-handed modification of the program’s content may have resulted from intimidation by the far-right and the LDP, but NHK and its producers made their own decisions. They were not victims but active accomplices. At the same time, we might reflect on how, as US citizens, we also bear some responsibility. The phenomenon of self-censorship that occurs whenever the imperial household becomes the target of public criticism is often called the “chrysanthemum taboo.” When discussing this “taboo,” however, we ought to remind ourselves that we too have been implicates in its maintenance, as it was our government, beginning with Douglas MacArthur, that actively intervened to protect and sustain this institution in pursuit of US Cold War interests in the region.

I wish to close this essay with two general observations. One concerns NHK’s use of myself as a token feminist. I mentioned earlier that the program retained my statements about the critical differences among women that some feminists have been theorizing, while it deleted or obscured my assessment of the Tribunal’s accomplishments. The program also expunged all of my remarks on how the Tribunal’s verdict productively called for positive social change in Japan. Sakagami notes that after Yoshioka demanded major modifications of the program, the producers considered dropping me from the second night’s program altogether. Indeed, the two-way conversations between Takahashi and the moderator were fully sufficient for the studio scenes. Yet NHK opted to retain some of my comments, even as it made them unintelligible through deletions and fragmentation. This selective appropriation of my presence, even while carefully excising every remark that might lead to questioning existing social arrangements, was nothing less than a gesture toward liberal tokenism. Not unlike liberal multiculturalism in the US, it pretends to include minorities and invite them to speak freely, yet in effect purges any unsettling elements from their speech. As Japan’s mainstream society becomes increasingly aware of the need to rely on diverse populations, we will need to be vigilant about the media’s attempts to appropriate and coopt minorities.

Finally, Itagaki Ryuta, a historian and anthropologist of modern Korea, was the first to note that in the program Hirohito’s guilty verdict was written out only in Korean Hangul script, as had been used in the original South Korean broadcast. Viewers who did not read Hangul would not even have noticed what the sentence said. Regarding the tenacious concealment of the Tribunal’s most damning content, including its assertion of Hirohito’s guilt, Itagaki astutely observed that the situation was actually very similar to wartime conditions under Daihonzai, the Imperial Military Headquarters. This condition is one in which, if a person were exposed only to the Japanese media and knew only Japanese, one could...
go on living without being aware of Japanese crimes or criticisms against the Japanese.  

In the current moment of total mobilization for the “war against terror,” we are witnessing a failure of the US media. It is thus timely yet problematic that I write about media censorship in Japan. Problematic, because discussion on Japanese problems often obfuscates equally or sometimes more serious problems concerning the US. I hope this essay on the NHK censorship will not serve as yet another displacement, but will be read in such a way as to make us more actively critical of the conditions in the US. In this regard, Itagaki’s warning about the media’s Daibon’ei-ization, so to speak, serves as a timely observation about how we ought to be on guard about our own current situation. At the same time, the protests against NHK’s censorship demonstrates that myopic and chauvinistic attempts to purge unsettling elements from a national public sphere can never be achieved without inciting much resistance and proliferation of that which has been suppressed.

ENDNOTES

1 There are a number of publications that dealt with this issue. See especially Nishino Rumiko’s “NHK ni nani ga okita no ka: josei kokusai sanpan hotei o meguru bangumi kaihen sodo” Tsukuru (May 2001). Kitahara Megumi was first to point out the “fabricated” nature of the program. See “Chimoku saserareta no wa dare ka: NHK bangumi kaihen mondai/terebi eizo ni okeru netsuzo” Inpakushon no.124.  
6 The records of Matsui’s and others’ protest against NHK can be found in the following website: http://www.jca.apc.org/~itagaki/nhk/index.html  
THE SURVIVAL OF BURMESE JOURNALISM

BY A. LIN NEUMANN

A. Lin Neumann has more than twenty years of experience in Asia as a journalist and human rights advocate. He was a radio reporter for NBC News in Southeast Asia and has written extensively on Asia and press-related issues. From 1997 to 1999, he was director of Asia programs for the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The most surprising thing about the Burmese press is that it still exists. Governed repressively since 1962 and currently under military rule, Burma is by far the most information-starved country in Southeast Asia. Yet the press refuses to die.

The ruling junta enforces obligatory and capricious censorship at every turn. A host of topics are off-limits, from heavy rainstorms to local politics, losing soccer matches to details of the World Trade Center attacks. Yet there is a strong literary and journalistic tradition in Burma, and many journalists and writers believe that the future of the country hinges on a return to past freedoms.

Despite censorship and the risks of reporting, there are some signs of life in the Burmese press. Negotiating a labyrinth of regulations, private magazines have emerged in the last several years. Most of these titles are confined to business or fashion and all face great difficulty printing controversial material. Still, journalists are trying against the odds to keep their profession alive.

Eighteen journalists are currently jailed for their work in Burma.¹ Journalists who are still allowed to work must contend with a vast web of regulation and censorship imposed in the name of national security or risk arrest or loss of livelihood. Despite these challenges, certain journalists within Burma and in the overseas Burmese community still manage to report the facts about their appalling government.

On a recent visit to Burma sponsored by the journalists’ rights group, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), I found surprising good humor and energy in a situation that would drive most reporters to despair. Once reasonably assured that their identities would be protected, dozens of local journalists – many of whom had suffered harassment and jail time for their work – welcomed me.

They risked their freedom just by talking to an international human rights organization. “Never mind, we are used to the threats,” said a retired newspaper editor who has spent years in prison over the past four decades. “If you haven’t been in jail you haven’t been a reporter here.”

THE IMPASSE

Burma is deadlocked between pro-democracy forces on one side and the military regime on the other. Given strict censorship and government control over news content, it is virtually impossible for the Burmese people to engage in a frank national dialogue about their future.
One of the most crucial measures of future political reform in Burma are the ongoing closed-door talks – the first since 1994 – between the regime and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The United Nations-brokered negotiations were widely covered everywhere except Burma. Yet inside the country, the local press is barred by censors from carrying stories about the dialogue. “We have no idea about this,” said one local journalist. “The talks cannot be discussed.”

As a result, said the journalist, it was almost impossible for people to believe that anything will come of the dialogue.

The press restrictions put Suu Kyi herself at a marked disadvantage. If she hammers out a secret power-sharing deal with the junta, she and her allies will merely be perpetuating the undemocratic practices of the past 40 years. But government officials clearly fear that any crack in the façade of repression could lead to a reprise of the 1988 democratic uprising, which was brutally crushed by the current junta. During that period, Suu Kyi rose to prominence and the military was nearly toppled by massive street demonstrations.

For the first time in years, however, state newspapers have been permitted to mention Suu Kyi without attaching ritual insults to her name. The official New Light of Myanmar, for example, no longer refers to Suu Kyi as an “evil tool of foreign interests.” The Myanmar Times, a new English-language weekly that is pitched mainly at foreign readers and maintains close links with Burmese military intelligence, has even been allowed to cover the releases of some political prisoners and the reopening of offices of Suu Kyi’s political party, the National League for Democracy. Operating outside the direct control of the Ministry of Information, the paper has been billed as evidence that the junta is becoming more tolerant of independent political speech.

That is not the case. Most Burmese read neither The Myanmar Times nor the handful of imported English-language publications available in Rangoon. For the vast majority of Burma’s people, the talks are just another rumor. They fear that the government is only raising expectations in order to undermine the opposition even further. “If we see some reality, then we will believe,” the editor of one magazine told me.²

PAST AND PRESENT

For a time, starting with independence from Britain in 1949 and ending when the military seized power in 1962, Burma enjoyed a fair measure of press freedom. The post-colonial government was democratically elected and press freedom was a fact of life. Literary journals, mass market dailies, and political party newspapers competed freely for readers during a tumultuous period in which competing ideologies, from rightist parties to a powerful communist movement, used the press to vie for popular support.

In those days, Rangoon was a prosperous and fairly cosmopolitan Southeast Asian capital. Everything changed in 1962, when General Ne Win seized power and imposed the “Burmese Road to Socialism,” a policy designed to isolate the country from outside influences. One of his first moves was to nationalize all newspapers and establish a Press Scrutiny Board to impose strict censorship on all forms of information. The board remains fully active today.

The current junta has made a few cosmetic changes since it seized power in 1988, notably changing its name from the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. A public relations offensive of sorts has been underway since then, largely directed by the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), a think tank run by Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, head of military intelligence and effectively the junta’s third-ranking member. But the repressive mechanism of military control remains essentially unchanged, and efforts to paint a picture of economic vitality under the new dispensation have not prospered.

In March 2001, Khin Nyunt explained the regime’s press policy to an audience of Information Ministry staffers. “The staff should know the importance of the news value in line with the time and condition [sic],” said the general, according to the official New Light of Myanmar. “As the staff…are experienced persons in the journalism field, they have the ability to differentiate between news which will benefit the nation and the people, and news which will have a bad effect on the nation and the people.” In practice, of course, this means that the regime sets the agenda, determines most news content, and only allows certain subjects to pass the censors. As a result, local journalists are reduced to writing tame lifestyle and business features for a range of anodyne weekly journals and monthly magazines.

Occasionally, some try to push the envelope by inserting veiled political references into their copy. When their efforts are censored, they often pass manuscripts around to one another or share banned magazines they have managed to save from the scrap heap. “If we stop trying, there will soon be no journalism in Burma,” said an editor at a business magazine. “In the future, when the situation improves, we will need our writers.”

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In Thailand, exiled Burmese journalists struggle to report on their own country

Mae Sot, Thailand—The Burma Border Press Club is in session tonight at an empty, dimly lit Chinese restaurant in this dusty trading town near the Burmese border. At the table, six reporters are eagerly discussing their work. These journalists, five men and one woman, all of them former political activists exiled now in Thailand, are stringers for wire agencies and Burmese language short-wave radio services. They cover ongoing ethnic rebellions along the border, as well as the thousands of Burmese refugees inside Thailand. The task is daunting.

Some 100 Burmese exiles are now working as journalists along the Thai-Burmese border. Their reports form the basis for news items that are then beamed back into Burma by the BBC, VOA, Radio Free Asia, and the Democratic Voice of Burma, a short wave news service based in Norway. It is illegal and dangerous for them to enter Burma. If they sneak in, they face possible arrest. Burmese military intelligence agents are believed to operate inside Thai border towns and refugee camps. Thai military intelligence agents routinely monitor the activities of these journalists, checking their papers, milking them for information, and sometimes threatening them with deportation. Exiled Burmese political leaders also exert pressure on reporters, trying to enforce their own version of political correctness on coverage of news from across the border. “We have to be afraid of the Thai authorities, the Burmese authorities and the rebel authorities,” says Win Myint, a BBC stringer based in Mae Sot.

These émigré reporters are among the very few news professionals who are able to obtain reasonably accurate information about the ethnic insurgencies inside Burma. The reporters interview Burmese refugees, migrant workers, and traders who move between the two countries. Occasionally, they even take daring jaunts across the border. Exiled Burmese journalists are denied both Thai passports and political refugee status. Thai authorities tolerate the Burmese journalists but refuse to grant them legal status for fear of offending the Burmese junta. During periods of political tension—as in 2000, when a band of Burmese rebels attacked a Thai hospital and briefly took the staff hostage—the journalists face harassment and possible deportation.

The English-language magazine Irrawaddy has built an international reputation since it began about ten years ago as a newsletter in the Thai living room of its editor, Aung Zaw. Now operating out of a substantial office in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, Irrawaddy hopes to become an independent national news magazine in Burma once the military regime ends. “Our goal is always to go back home,” said Aung Zaw, a one-time student activist who fled to Thailand following the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. Other exile publications have a narrower focus. The Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), for example, grew out of the struggle for independence inside the Shan State in northern Burma. When Khun Sa, a drug lord who was the main Shan military leader, struck a deal with the Burmese junta in 1996, many other Shan who remained true to the independence struggle were forced into exile. Relying on informants inside the Shan State, SHAN puts out Independence, a monthly magazine that focuses on Shan community issues, including the surviving Shan rebel groups. “Outside of our community, people know very little about the Shan,” said Khun Sai, the editor of Independence. “We want to increase awareness. We believe that in order to become free and democratic, we need a free press.”

Similar publications cover the Karen community inside Burma, the only ethnic group that has not yet struck a deal with the junta. There are also newsletters tied to the National League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi’s opposition political party, and to exiled student groups. The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, a shadow government in exile with links to the political opposition, puts out its own newsletters. Most of these groups try to distribute their publications inside Burma, although just being caught reading one of these newsletters can result in a lengthy jail sentence. Independence, which publishes in both Burmese and Shan, claims to circulate 500 of its 2000 copies a month inside the country, but editors say it is risky even to get the paper across the border.

For funding, the publications must rely on international donors whose priorities are constantly shifting. Most publications operate on a hand to mouth basis. It is tough work, performed by dedicated reporters, most of whom could seek an easier life by applying for political asylum in the West. “We have no place to go,” said VOA stringer Aye Aye Mar, one of the few women journalists working on the border. “But we are here to be journalists and we want to work on the border. We want to stay as close as we can to our country.”

A retired journalist who spent long years in prison went out of his way to assist me in meeting some of his colleagues and friends, a risky proposition in Burma. “I do this because this is what I can do,” he said. “They won’t let me write.” The statement may seem melodramatic, but the editor, who was once a prominent journalist, has been barred from writing for publication and suffered permanent, crippling injuries from years of imprisonment.

A younger journalist with a university degree in urban planning, who makes his living writing for a teen fashion magazine, spent a long day driving me around Rangoon. “I want to show you what they’ve done to our people,” he explained as we passed through the drab outskirts of the city. About an hour outside the city center, he stopped at one of the “satellite towns” constructed after the anti-government uprising of 1988 as a way of emptying central Rangoon of the urban workers who helped swell the ranks of demonstrators. “There are no hospitals out here, and few schools,” he said, adding that the inhabitants had been forcibly relocated. “There are very few factories and people have to queue for hours for buses into the city. People are sad. There is a lot of drinking.”

Could he ever write about this? “I do,” he said as we drove slowly through the squalor of a cramped shantytown carved out of a rice field. “In my private journal. I come here sometimes to talk with the people but it is very dangerous for them to speak with outsiders. Anyway, it will never be published.”

Streets of Terror

In 1988, beginning in April on college campuses, there was a popular uprising against the semi-socialist dictatorship of General Ne Win. The streets were filled with thousands of young demonstrators calling for democracy. After a massacre of students by soldiers on August 8, 1988 the scale of the protests grew. The demonstrators formed street committees in an attempt to govern a capital that had seemingly been abandoned by its government. Official buildings had been ransacked and the bureaucracy was at a standstill. Even
Olympics. and international media was largely transfixed by the Seoul was no independent Burmese press left to follow the story, virtually in Rangoon when the uprising got underway. There journalists involved in Burma's press freedom can eventually be briefly publishing life as a sign that press freedom can eventually be reborn in the country. The underground and independent newspapers were immediately closed following the coup, but many of those practicing journalism in Rangoon today were part of those rebel papers and see their brief publishing life as a sign that press freedom can eventually be reborn in the country. Many of the journalists involved in Burma's brief flirtation with press freedom fled to exile in neighboring Thailand or joined the underground resistance. Others were rounded up and jailed in the months and years following the crackdown.

I was one of only four foreign journalists who were actually in Rangoon when the uprising got underway. There was no independent Burmese press left to follow the story, and international media was largely transfixed by the Seoul Olympics.

**Fast Forward**

Thirteen years later, Rangoon remains a city out of time. The stunning Shwedagon Pagoda complex still glistens magically in the sun and the charmingly faded British colonial skyline has changed little. A handful of new buildings rose in the mid 1990s to herald Burma's planned debut as an Asian economic tiger. A few new hotels were built or refurbished to cater to a tourist wave that never landed. The splendid century-old Strand Hotel, which was a shadow of its Victorian grandeur in 1988, has been restored to its original glory.

But the occupancy? “None sir,” said the bellman with a sad nod of the head. “No guests this week, sir.” The elegant lobby bar only buzzes when the small diplomatic community gathers to swap rumors on Friday evening.

The freewheeling media debates of 1988 are long gone. State newspapers dominate, such as the *New Light of Myanmar*, whose pages bristle with dour headlines about how Secretary Number One of the ruling junta met with the Fisheries Secretary to discuss the prawn. Opinion pages are frequently given over to multi-part diatribes against foreign reporters whose coverage is allegedly part of an elaborate global plot to besmirch the country’s good name.

Matters of seeming national importance are off limits. In the mid-1990s, the government conducted a sustained military offensive against several insurgent ethnic minority forces based in northern Burma. The Burmese press ignored the story completely until the regime announced a series of negotiated settlements with purported minority representatives.

Burma is a global center for the narcotics trade, but the problem is not covered except for government pronouncements. The former leader of the insurgent Shan State Army in northern Burma, General Khun Sa, is wanted for drug trafficking outside Burma. But having made peace with the government, he is said to live in Rangoon, although the fact cannot be mentioned in the domestic press. A severe AIDS crisis is also spreading rapidly according to international experts, but there is little independent reporting allowed on the issue. The issue of forced labor—the widespread practice of pressing villagers into service as unpaid road workers and military porters—has made Burma a virtual pariah state in the eyes of the International Labor Organization (ILO). But this is yet another taboo subject for the media, even though the junta is now allowing ILO representatives to monitor the issue.

**Outside Information**

There is no public Internet access in Burma, apart from a handful of expensive email accounts that pass through a central military server where messages can be delayed for hours while the censors read them. Fax machines must be licensed and it can take years to obtain a permit to carry a cellular phone. State television is a staid propaganda vehicle. Satellite television is available in foreign homes and hotels, but few Burmese can afford it. Tattered copies of foreign newsmagazines are sold as virtual contraband from street stalls. For a premium, passing motorists can also buy...
smuggled week-old copies of the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation*, English dailies from neighboring Thailand. The papers are hawked by skittish newsboys who keep a watchful eye out for the police. Ordinary people depend on Burmese language broadcasts beamed into the country by Radio Free Asia, the Voice of America, the BBC, and the Democratic Voice of Burma, a dissident news service based in Norway. Hungry for news, people keep track of the world on tiny short wave receivers, hiding them from authorities and listening only in the privacy of their homes.

Foreign journalists are generally barred from living in Burma. The international press corps in Rangoon consists of a single correspondent, from the Chinese state news agency Xinhua. Foreign reporters must apply for special journalist visas to enter the country, along with a “Permit to Conduct Journalistic Activities.” The rules change unpredictably and there are no access guarantees. In recent months, perhaps because of the ongoing talks with Suu Kyi, some foreign correspondents have found it easier to enter Burma. The PR-savvy OSS has organized press junkets to Burma in order to promote tourism and publicize the regime’s drug control efforts. But all visiting reporters are followed and monitored by intelligence agents and it is frequently impossible to interview Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for years.

International journalists who write negative stories about Burma can be banned from entering the country. Bertil Lintner, a Thailand-based Swedish reporter for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, has been unable to visit for fifteen years, although he is an internationally respected authority on Burma who has published several books on the country. A number of other Bangkok-based foreign correspondents are unable to obtain visas, perhaps because the regime thinks they know too much. Reporters who please the regime, on the other hand, appear to have special access. These include some Western reporters who have written optimistic stories about the regime’s talks with Suu Kyi.

For years, much of the information from inside Burma has come from foreign embassies whose staffs can field phone calls from reporters abroad with relative security. International wire services, such as Reuters and the Associated Press, must otherwise rely on Burmese stringers who operate under constant scrutiny. Wary of talking openly to CPJ for fear of government reprisals, a number of these reporters say they are regularly called in for questioning when their agencies run stories that are too critical of the regime. The reporters must frequently disguise their sources and plead ignorance if confronted by military intelligence agents regarding stories they write, especially when they cover human rights issues or anything concerning Aung San Suu Kyi. Overseas news editors sometimes change bylines on sensitive stories or add a Bangkok dateline in order to protect their colleagues inside Burma.

Several Burmese stringers told me that they can work sources inside the military government but must be very careful how they report the information. There appear to be key splits within the ruling junta, especially regarding how to handle Suu Kyi, and Western critics and journalists writing for foreign agencies can exploit these tensions – albeit carefully – to find stories. “Up there, among… the generals, there is difference of opinion,” said one wire agency stringer. “Sometimes we can get stories from them.”

Burmese censors are extremely wary of bad news for reasons that are seldom obvious to the outside observer. The censorship office does not give interviews and its guidelines are not made public. The September 11 attacks were ignored by state television and only mentioned in passing by government newspapers. Police confiscated contraband videotapes of CNN’s September 11 coverage and threatened vendors with arrest. Even the news of junta leader Than Shwe’s letter of condolence to the United States was delayed by several days.

When the national soccer team was eliminated from the regional Tiger Cup tournament in the early rounds late last year, the official censorship board quietly ordered newspapers to refrain from reporting the results. “We just enjoyed the trip. They wouldn’t let us do any work,” said a reporter who covered the tournament, which was held in Thailand. Others are less relaxed about the restrictions. “To me it is mental genocide. They are not killing the Burmese people physically but they are killing our ability to think,” said Pe Thet Nee, the editor of the Burmese Independent News Agency (BINA), a small exile news service that covers Burmese politics from Thailand.

Private publications – not newspapers but magazines and weekly “journals” as they are called in Burma – operate under a Byzantine regulatory framework. To obtain a publishing license, which can be revoked at any time, they must pay stiff fees (as well as bribes) to government agencies such as the Department of the Navy and the Drug Control Board. While government agencies technically hold the licenses, once a fee is paid the publications operate as private businesses, with the licensing agencies generally appointing officials as nominal chief editors.

For the most part, the private magazines are billed as beauty and teen magazines, and their covers splashed with photos of models and singers. It is a tactic of survival, say the editors, since they are unable to publish controversial material and the government seems to want to promote consumerism.

All four of Burma’s daily newspapers are published by the News and Periodicals Enterprise (NPE), a division of the Information Ministry. These are almost exclusively vehicles for government propaganda. In addition, some 50 private weekly and monthly magazines are allowed to exist under strict government supervision.

“The censorship board has told us we must not write about AIDS, corruption, education, or the situation of students,” said the editor of a monthly magazine whose publishing license is held by a government ministry. “We also cannot write about any bad news and we must be careful about everything political. That does not leave very much for us to publish.”
The only substantial change in censorship policy has been the gradual elimination, in the late 1990s, of the practice of inking out offending pages or ripping out whole sections of magazines. But the current system is hardly an improvement—indeed, it suggests an increase in censorial sophistication. Under laws dating back to the 1960s, each edition of every publication must be submitted in advance to the Press Scrutiny Board, an agency of the powerful Ministry of Information. If the censors object to any portion of a story, the entire layout must be redone to remove the offending material. Even after the censors have cleared the magazine, they must review all changes again after printing. Magazines must frequently scrap entire print runs because of last-minute objections from the censors. All this creates a powerful incentive for self-censorship.

The censorship process is also said to be rife with bribery. Censors must often be bribed to clear each new edition for publication. Publishers say they must also turn over up to 20 percent of each print run to the censors, who sell them on the street. One editor told CPJ that his magazine and others even had to pick up the tab for a Press Scrutiny Board holiday trip. “Even without the political and censorship problems, they are making money from us,” said the publisher of a beauty magazine. “Every time we turn around we have to pay.”

Corruption and censorship notwithstanding, some outside observers see the emergence of semi-independent publications as a hopeful sign. “Burma is in transition from being…one of the most closed societies in the world,” said historian and Burma-watcher Martin Smith, who notes that business publications have “found a niche that didn’t exist before.”

It is difficult to sustain even such tempered optimism in conversation with journalists inside the country. Two monthly business publications, Dana (Prosperity) and Myanmar Dana were launched in the 1990s as part of the regime’s drive to privatize state-owned industries and attract foreign investors. These publications are among the highest-quality in Rangoon, but they operate within very narrow confines. “If we could report what we know, that would be one thing, but we can’t,” said one staffer.

The July 2001 issue of a journal called Sabai Phyu (White Jasmine) featured a cover quote from the social theorist Edward de Bono: “You can analyze the past, but you must design the future. Otherwise it may be no better than the past.” One editor said the quote probably escaped censorship only because the censors did not understand what it meant.

The editor of a fashion magazine told CPJ that the list of banned topics he had encountered included everything from deposed dictators such as Slobodan Milosevic and Suharto, to floods, plane crashes, and train wrecks. Staffers knew not to write anything even remotely critical of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ten-member regional alliance that Burma joined in 1997. “We are encouraged, though, to write anything bad about Thailand,” said the editor, noting that the two countries are currently embroiled in a border dispute. “But that could also change.”

One reporter told me in detail of his travails in trying to write a story. In June 2001, a dam broke near Wundwin township, about 100 miles south of the city of Mandalay in central Burma. The barrier had silted over and become unstable due to poor maintenance and unusually heavy rains. When it finally gave way, some 200 villages were flooded. As many as 1,000 people died, some of them bitten by poisonous snakes that had been swept along by the deluge.

International media reported the bare details of the disaster, but Burmese journalists mostly avoided it. However, one enterprising local reporter thought he had found a way to slip past the censors and into the story. He went to the flood area with his camera and notebook and documented relief efforts organized by the local people. “I took the angle that the Burmese people help one another in times of crisis and natural disaster,” the reporter recalled. “I didn’t say anything about the reason for the dam breaking or the maintenance problem.” Instead, he played up a spontaneous flood relief donation drive launched in Mandalay to help the victims and reflected on the Buddhist devotion that such charity implied.

His editor showed me the layout that was sent to the censors. It was a 16-page photo essay, with dramatic pictures of the flood’s aftermath and quotes from survivors, a disaster story straight out of Journalism 101. But the story never saw the light of day. “They censored it. I never got an explanation,” the writer said. That month, the magazine went to press 16 pages short of its normal length. Today, the article exists only in a handful of page proofs that were printed prior to the censor’s decision.

The board even spiked a local film critic’s review of The Man in the Iron Mask because he quoted the Musketeer slogan, “One for all and all for one!” The censors apparently decided that “one” referred to Aung San Suu Kyi and “all” to the Burmese people.

Tin Maung Than, the editor of the journal, Thintbawa (Your Life), fled into exile with his family in late 2000. Tin Maung Than got into trouble for circulating photocopies of a rare speech by a government official who openly criticized Burma’s economic policies. The military also watched Than closely because he was once associated with Suu Kyi’s opposition political party, an affiliation he gave up many years ago.
ago to concentrate on writing. “Real journalism is not possible in Burma,” he said. “We have to say everything in general terms and let the readers feel the meaning for themselves.”

MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

In March 2000, The Myanmar Times opened for business. The weekly English language paper features snazzy graphics and good paper. It is published by an Australian entrepreneur named Ross Dunkley, who prepared for the job by serving as managing director of the Vietnam Investment Review, one of the first private magazines in that heavily censored country. With good color separation, quality paper, and a slick layout, The Myanmar Times is unlike any other publication sold on the streets of Rangoon. But the US$2 cover price is more than four times the cost of any other weekly journal and well beyond the means of most Burmese readers. A recently launched Burmese language version is also expensive by local standards.

The Myanmar Times is exempt from many of the rules that govern other publications in Rangoon, a fact that annoys its competitors to no end. For example, the Times is the only Burmese paper to have carried fairly straight coverage of the ongoing talks between Aung San Suu Kyi and members of the ruling junta. On occasion, Suu Kyi’s picture even appears on the inside pages of the paper. The Myanmar Times is also the only local paper to have mentioned recent releases of political prisoners and to have noted that the ILO recently accused the Burmese military of using forced labor in rural areas.

Dunkley plugs his weekly as the first “truly free press” in recent Burmese history. In fact, Dunkley’s enterprise is the brainchild of intelligence chief Lt.-Gen. Khin Nyunt, Secretary Number One of the ruling junta, and members of the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), the government think tank over which Khin Nyunt presides. Earlier this year, the Times even carried a rare interview with Khin Nyunt.

The Myanmar Times is a key part of Khin Nyunt’s strategy to rehabilitate the junta’s battered international image, says Bertil Lintner, the Swedish journalist based in Thailand who has covered Burmese affairs for 20 years. Lintner and other analysts believe that Khin Nyunt disagrees with the Information Ministry’s heavy-handed approach to propaganda. An influential OSS officer named Col. Thein Swe is also frequently quoted in The Myanmar Times and appears to be actively involved in running the paper. When the Times was launched, Thein Swe told Asiaweek that the paper would be “different, more flexible” than other papers.

For his part, Dunkley downplays his paper’s obvious closeness to the regime. “Officially we go through military scrutiny, but the reality is that we have an amicable dialogue, and 95 percent [of the paper] is not subject to censorship,” Dunkley told Agence France-Presse earlier this year. “I just report the facts,” he said. When reached by phone in Rangoon, Dunkley refused to be interviewed, instead referring all questions to an assistant who subsequently could not be reached despite repeated calls.

AND IN THE END

The net effect of years of isolation and censorship has been to starve the Burmese people of news access that is taken for granted in most countries. By comparison, even China is an open society.

As the world moves toward a more open global information society, the people of Burma are stuck in the past. Many of the social and political problems that plague Burma—ethnic tensions, rampant corruption, poverty—are worsened by the lack of information and debate on the issues. The regime apparently fears that any media liberalization could provoke a political transition in which it would risk loss of power and subsequent reprisals.

Whatever happens to the current regime, one lasting legacy of military rule will be the generals’ steadfast prohibition on press freedom. For almost 40 years, ever since Ne Win staged his coup in 1962, the country has been run as the parochial playground of whatever band of officers is in power. The result has been the depletion not only of the country’s financial capital but its intellectual capital as well. Journalists have become isolated from their peers in other countries. They are unable to study their craft and censorship has stripped the media of any critical edge. These will be hard patterns to break, even if the regime is replaced.

Recovery will be a long process. “If we were allowed to, we could set up newspapers tomorrow because we have the presses,” said a frail former editor who once spent seven years in solitary confinement after he was arrested for his writing. “But where would we find the journalists? I am one of the last...who remembers what it was like to have real newspapers in this country.”

This article is adapted from a report prepared for the Committee to Protect Journalists.

ENDNOTES

2 In this and many other references in this work, the author has been asked to shield those he spoke with from possible official reprisal by not revealing their identities or details of their publications.
3 The SLORC changed the official name of the country from Burma to Myanmar after seizing power but many observers, CPJ included, respect the wishes of many Burmese and continue to use the country’s traditional English name. While Ne Win was replaced, it is widely believed that he continues to wield substantial influence behind the scenes.
In July 2001, a small tin mine in Guangxi province flooded, trapping and killing scores of miners. What followed became emblematic of a growing trend in China. Amplified by the information revolution, the story itself became the story. Neighborhood media outlets, cowed into silence by local authorities intent on covering up casualties, e-mailed their version of events to regional journalists, who scrambled to the city to investigate. Subsequently, regional papers began to report on hundreds dead and missing, even while the official Xinhua news agency remained silent. Those reports were circulated by Chinese Internet users and web portals, allowing the story to spread nationally, until even the venerated and politically correct People’s Daily followed up on the story. The central government ultimately felt compelled to send an investigative team, resulting in the mine owner’s arrest.1

It is clear that the role of the Chinese media has changed dramatically from the days when it functioned strictly as an ideological Party mouthpiece and government cheerleader. At the same time, its evolutionary trajectory remains unclear. No longer simply part of the propaganda apparatus, the country’s media is still far from functioning as an impartial observer and commentator. Amidst the economic and political aftershocks of WTO membership, the country’s media sector is struggling to reflect and keep pace with the changes sweeping the country.

Foremost among the drivers of change for China’s media is the information revolution, whose impact has been significant and multifaceted. Although recent advances in information and communication technology have both empowered and weakened the state, they have undeniably made it more difficult for the government to hoard and control information resources. With the breakdown of the government’s monopoly on information, traditional and Internet-based media have capitalized on the opportunities made possible by new technology. By making available a wide range of news stories from geographically diverse locations, for instance, Chinese web portals have been encouraging competition between news organizations. This competition means that small, local news organizations are increasingly pushing the boundaries of acceptable reportage, pressuring larger national organizations to follow. News often appears on the Internet either exclusively or before traditional media outlets can publish it. Even stodgy, official media organs such as the People’s Daily view their web sites not merely as an extension of the newspaper, but as separate entities with their own corporate culture and often a more progressive mode of op-
eration.

Of course, most people still rely on traditional media to obtain information. An October 2000 survey conducted by China Market and Media Research examined media consumption in 20 cities, and found that an average of 12.3 percent of urban residents were using the Internet. Yet a majority of those polled still read newspapers and watched television to get their news. Data obtained from the China National Readership Survey in 2000 shows that television achieved a penetration rate of almost 100% in the 30 cities polled. Meanwhile, Internet penetration is growing at a fast pace. China’s official Internet Network Information Center estimated the country’s Internet users hit 33.7 million at the end of 2001, although outside observers argue that this estimate is inflated.

Despite the statistics, history shows that new trends in the media sector are far from irreversible. Wide-ranging changes may be undone by a shift in central government policy. Hence, while the information revolution may indeed be an unprecedented development that has taken hold in China, it is still capable of being harnessed and directed by the central government to serve its own purposes, be they liberalization or increased control.

**HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY**

The PRC’s policy toward reporters and intellectuals has oscillated, with periods of state repression alternating with periods of openness. As early as Mao Zedong’s “Hundred Flowers Movement” in 1956-57, in which he invited diverse schools of thought to contend openly and criticize the Party, journalists were encouraged by the Party to take greater editorial initiative and engage in investigative projects in taboo areas. In Mao’s subsequent crackdown, the most outspoken critics of the Party were vilified and cast out of their professions. Overall, however, momentum toward less state domination of the media has been building since Deng Xiaoping initiated wide-ranging economic reforms in the late 1970s.

Under Mao’s totalitarian regime, the media’s function was to serve the state and impose ideological hegemony. His regime was characterized by vertical control of communication, exemplified by a top-down media system that acted as a conduit carrying Party thought to the masses. This was complemented by a telecommunications system that was accessible only to elites. In practice, ideological hegemony was accomplished by overwhelming the citizenry in every aspect of daily life with official information and interpretations of reality. Since Mao’s Leninist state required the appearance of unanimity, the mass media served the function of explaining and justifying official policy, while still providing an important staging area where various factions could wage surreptitious battle over policy direction. Especially during the years of the Cultural Revolution, diversity and independent opinion in the media were sharply discouraged.

With the advent of economic reforms in 1978, the role of the media began to change. No longer defined by the government as an instrument of class struggle, the media was promoted as an instrument of economic development and social modernization, with an emphasis on business information and entertainment. Nonetheless, advances and reversals in press freedom continued during the 1980s with some regularity. For example, liberalization increased after the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Central Committee in December 1978, but quickly retreated after the crackdown on the Democracy Wall movement in 1979, as well as the campaigns against “spiritual pollution” in 1983. The period of relative openness in the mid-1980s was followed by retribution after the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

The Tiananmen crackdown was also perhaps the most seminal in terms of media involvement in protest. Journalists had significantly contributed to the wave of political activism sweeping student and intellectual ranks in the country. As students marched through Beijing calling for democracy in May 1989, hundreds of journalists staged a rally outside the Xinhua News Agency to protest the firing of a Shanghai editor, while objecting to restrictions on their own coverage of the pro-democracy movement. The protests were attended by reporters at smaller publications as well as by employees of prominent national media organizations such as the People’s Daily and the English-language China Daily. Journalists also joined student demonstrations in provincial capitals all over China. Semi-official publications like the China Women’s News and Science and Technology Daily, which received state funding but were not wholly government mouthpieces, broke with official instructions and covered part of the pro-democracy demonstrations. Needless to say, following the June 4 crackdown the media paid a heavy price. The entire editorial leadership of the People’s Daily was replaced, numerous journalists were arrested, and harsh regulations were imposed on all media organs.

In recent years, amidst a liberalized economic environment and an increasing diversity of information sources for the general public, the media has continued to play a strong propaganda role for the central government, especially in setting the agenda for public debate on foreign affairs. The Chinese media’s reporting of the Balkan crisis in 1999, including the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, shows that the media is far from free of state pressures to present the central government’s version of overseas events. Chinese media painted the military campaign as part of a US-led plot to subjugate first Serbia and then the world under the guise of international humanitarianism, and barely touched upon Slobodan Milosevic’s policy of ethnic cleansing. The Chinese media also waited two days before reporting President Clinton’s apology following the bombing of the Chinese embassy on May 7, 1999. Subsequently, the press played a key role in fanning nationalism and anti-Americanism, at least until the end of July, when the central government ordered a stop in order to improve ties with the US to counter Taiwan’s independence rhetoric.

**CURRENT TRENDS**

Some posit that the trends of commercialization, globalization and pluralization are combining to break down state control over propaganda dissemination or “thought work.” While assessments of the state’s “thought work” capacity vary, most observers agree that the information revolution, embodied most tangibly by the rapid spread of the Internet, has accelerated these trends. As a result, it is becoming difficult for the Party to dictate and enforce the media’s ideological
role. A decrease in state funding also means that outlets must now compete for audiences and advertising, causing a shift from rote reporting of official visits to livelier, more adventurous coverage.

Despite the hype associated with the Internet, traditional media still remain primary sources of information for much of the public. Whether in the realm of satellite television or local newspapers, trends previously limited to specific geographic areas have been leveraged by technology into the national arena. The general character of Chinese television, for instance, has been affected by the growing availability of domestic satellite television channels. Although China Central Television is still the most popular station nationwide, local satellite channels are beginning to have a profound influence on the country as a whole. A case in point is Hunan Satellite Television, which provides lively, occasionally controversial content that has made it one of the most financially successful television stations in the country. Its nightly news broadcasts skip coverage of official steel plant visits in favor of investigative reports and human interest stories, enabling it to expand beyond a strictly local audience. Received by subscription only, the station claimed 200 million viewers last year, and its Saturday evening prime time advertising rates are the highest for any station in the country, including the national network CCTV-1. As with many other business ventures in China, commercial success has helped mollify officials who initially complained about its unorthodox policies, and other stations around the country are now hoping to duplicate its success.

Foreign media companies, too, play pioneering roles in China’s television sector. In 2001, the world’s largest media company, AOL Time Warner Inc., signed a landmark deal with the Chinese government to broadcast a Mandarin-language cable channel into southern China. The deal marked the first time that an American media corporation was able to participate in China’s cable television sector, which has always been classified bureaucratically under the propaganda apparatus and subject to special ideological considerations. Meanwhile, media tycoon Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation maintains a stake in the well-connected satellite broadcaster Phoenix Television. Phoenix has been cautiously testing the limits of politically acceptable information, by reporting events such as the election of Chen Shui-bian as the new president of Taiwan in March, 2000.

Yet foreign and domestic broadcasters are, on the whole, still not willing to overtly challenge the government on the limits of acceptable speech. Phoenix has been able to get away with its programming partly through the high-level connections of its chairman and principal owner, who is a former Army propaganda officer, and partly because only relatively elite, affluent households can afford its signal. Moreover, media investor Murdoch has taken great pains in recent years to stay on China’s good side. After inflaming Chinese leaders in the early 1990s by characterizing satellite television as a threat to totalitarian regimes, Murdoch subsequently dropped BBC news programming from his Star TV satellite network in an attempt to mollify officials and curry favor. New television ventures that lack the right clout are not likely to generate significant envelope-pushing content. Even AOL executives concede their new channel will feature only politically and culturally inoffensive programming, although reportedly it will include contemporary dramas and sitcoms from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Newspapers, both local and national, are also feeling market pressure to commercialize and provide more reader-friendly content. Many are doing so through their web sites, which often address topics considered too politically sensitive for traditional newprint. The People’s Daily, for instance, maintains a strong web presence that is significantly livelier than its print counterpart, and offers an increasing mix of sports and lifestyle reporting, enhanced with popular, nationally-themed forums and chat rooms that compete with similar forums run by private companies. The site also caters to local audiences throughout China by picking up news from local papers, which are often more daring in their investigative reporting than papers geographically and ideologically closer to Beijing. The People’s Daily has also used its web site to post news that is unavailable through traditional outlets. For instance, while Chinese television and newspapers excised the portions of US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s August 2001 television interview that dealt with human rights, the full text was eventually posted on the People’s Daily website, reportedly in response to Washington’s protest over the cuts.

However, although the People’s Daily’s website features a more liberal atmosphere than that found in the print version, it nonetheless fits into the government’s plan to build a large, coordinated online propaganda system. The US spy plane incident on Hainan Island in 2001 touched off a flurry of nationalistic sentiment on the People’s Daily “Strong Country” web forum, set up earlier by the newspaper after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Similarly angry postings also rose in volume following the September 11 attacks on the US. The government has historically used nationalism to bolster public support and divert attention from domestic problems. As a result, much official news on domestic websites features a nationalistic tone – although this can be altered to suit the policy objectives of the central government. For instance, while nationalism was fanned following the Belgrade embassy bombing, it was deliberately dampened in January 2002, following the discovery of bugging devices on Jiang Zemin’s American-produced plane. Many felt that this was done to preserve good ties with the US in the run-up to an upcoming presidential summit. Hence, while the Chinese government hopes that cultivating nationalism will boost its legitimacy, it is also aware that overly militant public opinion could constrain its policy choices, and in the worst case scenario, turn against the government.

Some of the most interesting media developments have taken place on new commercial web portals, which inject some – though not all – formerly taboo issues, from homosexuality to environmental pollution, into the public debate. Such forums, which permit users to read, circulate and respond to news and opinions, generate discussions previously impossible in the public sphere and on a nationwide level. Many Western advocates of freedom of expression point to these developments as a sign that the information revolution has catalyzed an irreversible stream of politicized thought that, once unleashed, will inevitably lead to demands for political liberalization. Others argue that the Internet and other
new technology help create a chaotic space filled with apolitical content and atomized individuals, a space that ultimately will not contribute to the formation of an independent civil society.16

It seems more likely, however, that the government is allowing the Internet to be used as a pressure valve, preemptively allowing the broadening of acceptable discourse in order to prevent a buildup of mass frustration. While still ambivalent about open political debate, the Chinese government appears to be tacitly encouraging a degree of public throat-clearing in the relatively controlled environment of Internet chat rooms rather than in areas outside state purview.

It would be a mistake to characterize the online environment solely in terms of growing openness and diversity. Internet-based news gathering by non-official organizations is prohibited, and even that which is permitted exists under a slew of restrictions adapted from traditional media regulations. Although the scope and scale of online commentary has been expanding, most users still practice some form of self-censorship, generally avoiding obviously politically sensitive web sites (such as those promoting Taiwanese independence or highlighting Chinese human rights abuses) and the expression of controversial opinions on politically sensitive topics. Commercial Internet portals refuse to see themselves as part of the Chinese media per se; they prefer to think of themselves as information aggregators, not interpreters or providers. In fact, many of China’s up-and-coming Internet entrepreneurs see a substantial regulatory role for government in the Internet sector. Though often heralded in Western media as democracy’s pipeline-builders, these businesspeople usually have visions for Chinese Internet development that are pragmatic and complementary with state strategy. While many entrepreneurs note that their relationship with government is increasingly consultative, giving them some form of input into the policymaking process, few are willing to push the state on politically sensitive topics such as those relating to press and speech freedom.

Chinese leaders themselves attempt to shape current trends in media development, often resulting in ambiguous messages. Few see a totally independent role for the media. Jiang Zemin, describing the power of the information revolution in an August 2000 speech, extolled the speed and scope of free-information flows while simultaneously warning against the dangers of so-called harmful information and calling for an international treaty to regulate it.

An August 2001 campaign to clamp down on the media included a list of “Seven No’s” banning media involvement in seven broad areas. These include disclosure of “state secrets,” interference in the work of the Party and the government, and negation of “the guiding role of Marxism.” Similar rules exist for news and information made available on the Internet, and many are simply new iterations of past media regulations.

The recent deluge of regulations, some conveyed unofficially, show that the government is attuned to the effects of the information revolution and other pressures on the media sector. The influence of the information revolution, alongside urgent commercial pressures, has helped give birth to another period of relative openness and liberalization in the Chinese media. This has not been an insignificant development, and institutional and ideological structures have been shaken at a fundamental level. Yet new organizations such as the State Council’s Internet Propaganda Administrative Bureau have been created specifically to guide and coordinate the news content of Chinese websites, and are intended to develop a “healthy direction” for the dissemination of online news. Even as the government encourages new technology as a stepping stone for economic development, it continues to advocate their “healthy and orderly development,” which is a commonly used official expression used to indicate development at a government-dictated pace.

Moreover, China’s history shows that periods of relative openness are often followed by periods of retrenchment, and it may be that recent media restrictions, such as the “Seven No’s,” represent part of such a process. With a change in leadership looming, the future direction of media sector reform is up in the air. What seems certain is that the government will continue its attempts to ensure that the information revolution empowers the media to serve state interests.

ENDNOTES

5 Yuezhi Zhao, Media, Market and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1998) p. 34
6 Lee, Voices of China, p. 7.
9 Lynch, After the Propaganda State.
14 Interviews with Chinese officials, Beijing, June 2001.
15 Some argue that while nationalism can be manipulated by Chinese officials, it may also, if properly directed, help create a more vibrant public sphere. See Jack Linchuan Qiu, “Chinese Opinions Collide Online: U.S.-China Plane Collision Sparks Civil Discussion on Web,” USC Annenberg Online Journalism Review, April 12, 2001. http://ojr.usc.edu/content/story.cfm?id=561
16 Lynch, After the Propaganda State.
At a New Year’s press conference on January 11, 2001, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung made an unexpected statement on “media reform” that marked the first shot in what was soon to become a bitter struggle between the government and the media:

“Freedom of the press is fully guaranteed as never before in our history. Therefore, I believe it is incumbent upon the news media to practice fair and balanced reporting, and criticize responsibly. We are aware of the high level of public demand for reform of the news media. I believe all of us—the media, academia, citizens’ groups, and the National Assembly—should join hands in an effort to develop transparent and fair reform measures.”

In the months that followed, the progressive government mobilized its powers of sanction with the objective of weakening the conservative media companies. By summer, several newspaper owners had been detained for tax evasion and embezzlement, and many of the country’s largest media organizations had been subjected to a sudden tax audit that resulted in unprecedented penalties. While a majority of Koreans agreed on the need for media reform, the timing of the government’s actions prompted suspicions of political motivations, particularly since the upcoming 2002 elections will be critical in determining the fate of Kim’s policies.

Several questions emerge from the events surrounding the media tax audit. Why would Kim Dae-Jung, a longtime advocate of democracy and human rights who had recently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, spearhead an attack on the country’s free press? Why was the mass media locked in conflict with a democratically elected government? And why did the struggle between the government and the media expand to engulf all sectors of Korean society? While the answers are still not entirely clear, the events are more comprehensible when viewed against the background of Korean politics, the country’s active civil society, and the ongoing process of democratization that began in 1987.

THE MEDIA TAX AUDIT

One of the first responses to President Kim’s statement came in the form of criticism from the political opposition. A spokesman for the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) said that Kim’s declaration “should be interpreted as
a public warning against reporting that is critical of the government” and that “the statement that “that media, academia, citizen groups, and the National Assembly... should join hands in an effort to develop transparent and fair reform measures’ underscores President Kim’s intention to tame the media by mobilizing public opinion.”

Kim Dae-Jung’s call for media reform was soon followed by concrete measures aimed at major media companies. The National Tax Service (NTS) announced that on February 8 it would begin an audit of 23 Seoul-based media companies, their interrelated enterprises, and their controlling shareholders. On February 7, the Fair Trade Commission (FTC) announced a separate “investigation into the state of unjust transactions and inequitable insider dealings” by ten Seoul-based newspapers and three broadcasting companies. Two months later, the FTC announced that it would re-introduce a set of guidelines regulating newspapers’ marketing and advertising activities that had been repealed in 1999.1

The Korean media had rarely been subjected to such audits, and as a result the government’s sudden measures raised many eyebrows. Under the authoritarian governments of the past, the press had faced severe limitations but in return had received preferential economic treatment, including relative immunity from tax audits and investigations. When audits were conducted, they were carefully targeted to silence criticism rather than attempts to impose standards on the industry. The most recent precedent is a 1994 audit of ten Seoul-based media companies by the Kim Young-Sam administration. However, the results of the 1994 audit were never officially announced, and the case was eventually settled through compromise.

The present administration was determined to push further. After four months of intense audits, the NTS announced on June 20 that between 1995 and 2000 the 23 companies had evaded a total of 1.36 trillion won ($1.05 billion) in taxes. As a result, the companies were fined a combined 505.6 billion won ($390 million). This is the largest tax penalty a single industry in Korea had ever received, and averaged more than 22 billion won per company. The Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo, and Dong-a Ilbo – known as the Big Three newspapers – were fined 86.4 billion, 85 billion, and 82.7 billion, respectively.

The next day, the results of the FTC investigation were announced. These 13 media companies, which had already been hit with penalty taxes by the NTS, also had to pay the government a 24.2 billion won ($18.6 million) fine imposed by the FTC. The Dong-a Ilbo was slapped with the largest fine of 6.2 billion won, while the Chosun Ilbo, Munhwa Ilbo, and JoongAng Ilbo were fined 3.4 billion, 2.9 billion, and 2.5 billion respectively. But even after this second round of punitive measures the government continued to pursue the media, bringing criminal charges against six major companies, including the Big Three, as well as the individual owners of the Chosun Ilbo, Dong-a Ilbo, and Kookmin Ilbo. These owners, as well as other media executives, were subsequently detained and indicted for tax evasion and embezzlement.

Reactions to the Tax Audit

Media companies displayed two different types of reactions to such unprecedented strong-arming by the government. On the one hand, the progressive Hankyoreh Shinmun, smaller newspapers such as Kyunghyang Shinmun, the government-owned Daehan Maeil, and the publicly-managed broadcasting companies KBS and MBC insisted on acceptance of the audit, heralding it as a step toward media reform. They claimed that the media’s special privileges, including exemption from tax audits, had fostered corrupt management and irresponsibility. Besides their financial improprieties, company owners are said to personally appoint key editors, stifle stories critical of their interests and maintain strong ties with certain political parties. In a country that had sent former presidents to jail, went the argument, the media should not be placed above the law in the name of press freedom. By March 2001, the Hankyoreh Shinmun had begun a series of feature articles exposing past illegalities committed by the Big Three newspapers and their owners. Hankyoreh also denounced the Chosun Ilbo and Dong-a Ilbo for having been pro-Japanese during the period of Japanese Imperialist rule, and subservient to the military dictatorship during the pre-1987 authoritarian era.

The conservative Big Three newspapers, however, claimed that the tax audit was a politically motivated crackdown.2 According to these newspapers and their conservative allies, the tax audit was a high-level strategy of media control designed to subdue criticism. They insisted that even if there was evidence of media wrongdoing, reform should be left to the media companies themselves since government intervention would infringe on freedom of the press. Articles to this effect appeared almost daily in the Big Three newspapers in the period following the audit results’ announcement.

The divisive effects of the media tax audit reached beyond the government and the media into Korean society at large. The progressive newspapers and public broadcasting companies who supported the Kim Dae-Jung administration had allies in many sectors of Korean society, including progressive civic groups. These include the People’s Coalition for Media Reform (PCMR) and the Citizens’ Coalition for Democratic Media (CCDM). On the other hand, the Big Three were strongly backed by the conservative opposition Grand National Party and many of its supporters. The media companies on both sides were also adept at mobilizing intellectuals, bringing about a split over the issue within intellectual ranks as well.

Further complicating the situation was the fact that the progressive-conservative polarization has a geographic component. The opposition Grand National Party’s political base is the heavily industrial Kyung Sang-Do Province, which occupies the southeastern part of the Korean peninsula. President Kim’s political base is Chulla-Do Province, in the southwest. Most of Korea’s former Presidents — including Park Chung-Hee, Chun Doo-Hwan, Roh Tae-Woo, and Kim Young-Sam — have been from Kyung Sang-Do, and the region fared well under these leaders. Chulla-Do, on the other

The divisive effects of the media tax audit reached beyond the government and the media into Korean society at large.
hand, has fared less well. Since the election of Kim Dae-Jung in 1998, regional animosities and ideological conflicts have only deepened.

Due to the tight linkages between issues, the controversy surrounding the media tax probe developed into a polarized struggle between Korean progressives and conservatives. The former refers to an ideological orientation that emphasizes social justice, equality, and communitarian welfare. Korean progressives are sympathetic to trade unions and are adamant about reforming the chaebols, Korea’s huge family-owned and family-managed business conglomerates. They are also sympathetic toward North Korea and support Kim Dae-Jung’s “Sunshine Policy” of unilateral overtures toward the North. Conservatives stress such values as individual autonomy, free market economics, and anti-Communism. Beyond these ideological issues, however, they also tend to represent powerful vested interests, some with ties to the authoritarian era. They frequently criticize the “Sunshine Policy” as hasty and wasteful, advocate reciprocity as a more appropriate basis for inter-Korean relations, and support strong ties with the United States. In 2001, the media tax audit became yet another issue symbolizing the ideological divide in Korean society.

Foreign media associations also took sides in the war of opinions, turning the affair into an international concern. The International Press Institute (IPI)—an international group of newspaper publishers and editors—and the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) aligned themselves with the Big Three newspapers in arguing that the tax probe was aimed at quelling criticism. The IPI in particular expressed concern that press freedom was under threat. On May 16, 2001, IPI Director Johann Fritz sent President Kim Dae-Jung a letter criticizing his attempts to “muzzle the critical voice of the independent press in South Korea” in the name of reform. In a news conference held in Seoul on September 6, 2001, two days after the indictment of 13 media executives on charges of tax evasion and embezzlement, Fritz announced that IPI members had unanimously decided to place South Korea on its “watch list”.

On the other hand, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the world’s largest journalists’ organization, declared its belief that the media tax audit was essential for press freedom in Korea. During its 24th triennial world congress, held in Seoul in June 2001, the IFJ expressed its full support for the media tax audit by participating in a street demonstration for media reform organized by the Korean Federation of Press Unions (KFPU), the Journalists Association of Korea (JAK), and progressive civic organizations such as the People’s Coalition for Media Reform (PCMR). In a press conference held in Seoul in September 2001, IFJ President Christopher Warren reiterated the organization’s conviction that the media tax probe was based on popular demand and was a genuine step toward reform.

The Media Reform Movement

Calls for media reform in Korea trace their pedigree to the media democratization movement dating back to the pre-democratic era. For four decades after the establishment of the First Republic in 1948, Korea was ruled by an authoritarian government that wielded broad powers over the media and society. The media democratization movement therefore originated as a long-term struggle to free the press from official control.

The pattern of resistance and reprisal is typified in a 1974 effort by Dong-a Ilbo reporters to stand up to the government. In a “Declaration of Freedom of the Press” issued by about 200 newsmen at the traditionally independent newspaper on October 24, 1974, the reporters proclaimed: “[T]he unprecedented crisis in our society today can only be overcome through the practice of free speech... We will never kneel to any pressure to stifle free speech.” But this struggle eventually provoked a response from the Park Chung-Hee regime, which coerced firms into canceling their advertisements with the paper. By January 1975, the Dong-a Ilbo and its subsidiaries, the Shin Dong-a monthly and Dong-a Broadcasting Station (DBS), had lost more than 90% of their advertisers. While the reporters, editors and publishers vowed never to submit to government control, the newspaper was unable to hold out for very long. In the end, about 150 reporters were dismissed or suspended largely because of their active participation in the movement. But the dismissed reporters immediately organized the “Dong-a Struggle Committee for a Free Press,” which has since played a central role in media reform.

The June 1987 Democratization Movement marked a dramatic turning point, as South Korea underwent a political transition and the media finally gained its autonomy from the government. The June 29 Declaration that resulted from the June Democratization Movement contained eight components, including a constitutional amendment for direct presidential election. The declaration also called for active promotion of freedom of the press that can be summarized as “The government cannot and shall not attempt to control the media.” After the June 29 Declaration, the Korean government began to refrain from direct political interference and introduced a “media autonomy policy” characterized by liberalization and deregulation, in effect leaving the media to the free market. While this represented the fulfillment of many of the media democratization movement’s objectives, the movement did not disappear. Instead, it underwent several modifications in response to the changing political and social environment.

First, as government control over the media diminished, the influence of media owners and advertisers increased. The June 1987 Democratization Movement marked a dramatic turning point, as South Korea underwent a political transition and the media finally gained its autonomy from the government. The June 29 Declaration that resulted from the June Democratization Movement contained eight components, including a constitutional amendment for direct presidential election. The declaration also called for active promotion of freedom of the press that can be summarized as “The government cannot and shall not attempt to control the media.” After the June 29 Declaration, the Korean government began to refrain from direct political interference and introduced a “media autonomy policy” characterized by liberalization and deregulation, in effect leaving the media to the free market.4 While this represented the fulfillment of many of the media democratization movement’s objectives, the movement did not disappear. Instead, it underwent several modifications in response to the changing political and social environment.

First, as government control over the media diminished, the influence of media owners and advertisers increased. Consequently, the journalists and civic groups working for media reform turned their attention to the goal of “freedom from proprietors” rather than “freedom from the government”. Given this objective, the “clan media” – corporations owned by a single family and ruled by the interests of their corporate owners – was placed under particular scrutiny. Although the media had been freed from government intervention, in many ways it still bore the imprint of the authoritarian era: concentrated ownership, an opaque style of management, and association with vested interests that stood to lose from political reforms urged by progressives. The media has also
openly tried to influence elections. The Chosun Ilbo favored the ruling Democratic Liberal Party’s Kim Young-Sam in 1992, and in 1997 the JoonAng Ilbo backed the ruling GNP’s candidate Lee Hoi-Chang. It was widely believed that these newspapers favored the ruling party’s candidates, and that they did not want to see the progressive Kim Dae-Jung elected President.

Second, the media’s newfound autonomy and freedom was accompanied by an increase in its influence on public opinion. At the same time, liberalization and deregulation led to the breakup of the strict media cartel that had prevented new entries to the media market, resulting in intense competition. In this market-driven situation, the Korean media faced what has been called “the dilemma of the pluralist media in a capitalist society”; a decline in quality due to severe market competition. Indeed, the Korean media has frequently been criticized for its sensationalism and commercialism, and the public has responded with various movements such as the 1993 “turn off your TV” campaign. Combined with worries about the media’s role in politics as “the unelected power,” growing sensationalism and commercialism contributed to concern about its failure to assume responsibilities commensurate with its influence.

Third, the media democratization movement faced changes as democratization brought increased public political participation. Some of the most dynamic forces in Korean society since the 1987 have been the many civic groups dealing with issues such as the environment, health, traffic, women’s rights, consumer rights and the media. In the authoritarian era, the media democratization movement had been led by journalists themselves. As various citizens’ organizations appeared, however, the campaign for media reform developed into a broader based movement.

Amid these transformations, the political landscape changed dramatically with the inauguration of Kim Dae-Jung in February 1998. His election marked the first peaceful and democratic transition of power between the ruling and opposition parties in Korea’s history. During the new administration’s first months, the focus of the media reform movement has turned specifically to major newspapers. One reason for this change was the successful amendment of the Broadcasting Act at the beginning of the year 2000, which had been a major goal of the media reform movement. This significantly reduced the government’s direct influence over broadcast media. But a more important reason may be that the media reform movement, led by progressive civic groups and journalists’ associations, came to recognize that their larger task should be to address the monopoly of the newspaper market by the Big Three papers, whose market share stood at over 65%. Those in favor of reform argued that the Big Three newspapers’ dominance was not due to superior quality, but to unfair business practices, enormous financial capacity and a superior sales network. Because media reformers believed that a monopoly over the media implied a monopoly over public opinion, they insisted that this was a case of market failure and that government intervention was appropriate.

**INTERPRETING THE MEDIA TAX AUDIT**

Those who saw the tax audit as legitimate reform thought
nies, like those in other industries, will be subject to regular tax audits. This is a positive development. On the other hand, the controversy has left a deep wound in the Korean mass media. The Korean press had previously been a unified community despite differences in political orientation. Since the audit, however, the divisions are so great that it is difficult to feel a sense of community among Korean journalists.

**METHODS OF MEDIA REFORM**

When asked if they support media reform, most South Koreans answer in the affirmative. In an opinion poll conducted jointly by the People’s Coalition for Media Reform and Hankil Research in December 1999, 96% of respondents said that media reform was necessary. In particular, there is broad agreement on two basic objectives of media reform. One is improving the transparency of media management and guaranteeing free and fair competition. The second is making the media a democratic forum in which all citizens can participate freely and equally. The media tax audit and the FTC investigation were most immediately concerned with the first goal. Since the audit, all media companies have realized that they must strive for transparency, if only to avoid penalty taxes and further government scrutiny. The FTC investigation also resulted in the restoration of regulations on marketing and advertising practices. Despite some criticism, these regulations appear to curtail excess competition in the newspaper market and limit aggressive marketing practices that favor the conservative major papers.

In spite of a broad consensus on the need for reform, there are two conflicting points of view on how to achieve it. The market-liberal view stresses free competition and a correspondingly limited role for government. The proponents of this view argue that evaluation of the media should be carried out by consumers. For them, therefore, the most important function for the media reform movement is to improve the quality of the news and to establish an Audit Bureau of Circulation in order to normalize the function of the market. They also argue that media reform, both financial and editorial, should be carried out by the media itself. This view – under the circumstances a pro-status quo position – has been advocated by the Big Three newspapers and the conservative Grand National Party.

In contrast, the interventionist view emphasizes the active role of the state and the public in correcting the market’s failure to achieve a democratic media. Proponents of this view believe that the Korean media’s biggest problem is the monopoly of the entrenched “clan” companies and the limitations imposed on journalists’ editorial autonomy by media proprietors. “Autonomous reform” by the media itself is seen as impossible under these circumstances, and continuous pressure from the public via civic organizations is required. Also, in order to normalize the distorted media market, direct official intervention such as the tax audit is deemed necessary at times. This interventionist view has been supported by journalists’ organizations such as the KFPU and the JAK, as well as by progressive civic groups that have spearheaded the present media reform movement. Among these groups, the best known is the People’s Coalition for Media Reform (PCMR), which was created in August 1998 by 33 separate civic groups. Since its inception the PCMR has called for a media tax audit, and in November 2000 the group petitioned the National Assembly for the passage of legislation aimed at curbing the concentration of newspaper ownership. Those who take the market-liberal point of view claim that the progressive camp is driven by political and ideological motives.

There may be some truth to this. The progressive camp has constantly argued that it will be hard for the Kim Dae-Jung administration’s reform policies, especially the “Sunshine Policy”, to succeed under the Big Three newspapers’ constant criticism. Accordingly, the media reform movement has focused on these newspapers, and its core target has been the Chosun Ilbo, which has the highest circulation in Korea and has the reputation for being the most influential as well as the most conservative newspaper. The progressive camp’s opposition to the Chosun Ilbo is symbolized by the anti-Chosun boycott campaign. The campaign started in the middle of the 1990s, and includes citizens from various sectors of Korean society and more than 60 civic organizations, including the Citizen’s Solidarity Against Chosun Ilbo (CSACI). The campaign’s activities include holding street demonstrations and using the Internet to call for the cancellation of subscriptions. The “anti-Chosun Campaign” is illustrative not only in its target, but also in its use of mass mobilization as a vehicle for media reform. In retaliation, the conservative media and the political opposition frequently denounce the Kim Dae-Jung administration and its method of media reform as “populist”.

While media reform is necessary for the consolidation of Korean democracy, some believe that the movement is overly radical and that it has been too dependent on “populist” methods of mass mobilization. Rather than stimulating dialogue, many of the reformists’ demands and methods simply provoke conservative retrenchment. The movement’s opponents also argue, with some justification, that it has been politically connected with the ruling party and the Kim Dae-Jung administration. Some key figures from the civic groups involved in the media reform movement have been appointed to high level positions by the government, including president of the public broadcasting company, and board members of government-supported institutions.

**CONCLUSION**

Because the primary concern of the media reform movement lay in the weakening of the conservative media, the media tax audit degenerated into a battle between conservatives and progressives. If the tax audit had been conducted on the grounds of routine tax administration as the government had claimed, the scope of the conflict might have been minimized. Yet the conflict expanded beyond these bounds, spreading throughout Korean society and exacerbating existing divisions. It would therefore be incorrect to see the tax audit as pertaining only to the media-government relation-
ship, or even as a clash of political interests ahead of the 2002 presidential election. It should be seen, more generally, as a struggle between conservatives and progressives for the dominant voice in Korean society.

The 1987 democratization was in a sense incomplete, and Korean democracy is a work in progress rather than a finished product. The consolidation of democracy at all levels of society is more difficult and time-consuming than political transition from authoritarianism to electoral democracy. Major institutions, including political parties and the mass media, are facing great public pressure for reform. In Korea, as in almost all capitalist countries, the conservatives have an institutional and financial advantage, but the current struggle indicates the growth of progressive forces.

The year 2001 will be remembered as a period of great conflict in the history of Korean press. The tax audit of 23 major media corporations by the National Tax Service aggravated the relationship between the Korean government and the media, exacerbated conflicts within the media, and polarized Korean society. This is ultimately counterproductive, since the two sides' inflexibility serves to forestall meaningful dialogue and makes compromise impossible. If media reform becomes an ideological struggle, this will hurt not only the cause of media reform but Korean democracy as well. Abandoning the media to market forces may be questionable, but the consolidation of democracy will require greater governmental restraint than was exercised last year by the administration of Kim Dae-Jung. For its part, the media needs to acknowledge public demands and carry out independent reform for reform. Only if this happens will further confrontations be avoided.

ENDNOTES

1 Under the new regulations, referred to as “newspaper notifications,” newspaper companies will be banned from distributing promotional copies and gifts to readers in excess of 20% of their paid circulations. The administration of former President Kim Young-Sam introduced similar regulations on newspaper in January 1997 because severe sales competition between local distribution offices of major dailies led to a murder the year before. But the Kim Dae-Jung’s government scrapped the regulations two years later when dailies promised to strengthen self-control over unfair practices. The major newspapers, however, have recently under attack for failing to keep their promise.

2 The Big Three newspapers, although there exist certain differences among them, represent conservative interests, which are also elite interests. During the authoritarian era, some of these papers, especially Dong-a Ilbo, fought against the military dictatorship for press freedom. But ideologically, they have been conservative and represented the conservatives.

3 Kyu Ho Youm, Press Law in South Korea (Ames: Iowa State University, 1996), p. 58. Chapter 4 provides an excellent review of the history of Korean press and politics during the authoritarian era.

4 For a more extensive discussion on the results of the media autonomy policy, see Seung-Mock Yang, “Political Democratization and the News Media,” in Larry Diamond and Doh Chull Shin, eds., Institutional Reform and Democratic Consolidation in Korea (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), pp. 149-170.

5 The GNP is a descendant party of the DLP. The DLP became the New Korea Party (NKP) in 1996, and the NKP merged with the Democratic Party and changed its name to the GNP in the course of 1997 presidential campaign.

6 The perceived social influence of the Korean media is confirmed in many public opinion polls. For example, according to the audience opinion survey by the Korea Press Foundation (KPF) during the 1990’s, Koreans think that the journalists’ influence on public opinion is extremely great, second only to that of the politicians, and that it is greater than that of a businessperson, a bureaucrat, or a lawyer. Korea Press Foundation, Audience Opinion Survey, 1993, 1996, 1998 & 2000. Indeed, in the democratized Korea, it was not uncommon to see various important government policies changed or scrapped as a result of media coverage.


9 Chong Wa Dae (the Blue House) – analogous to the White House in Washington – is the supreme executive authority of the Korean government as well as the executive mansion of the President of the Republic of Korea.

10 Sung Han-yong, Why Did DJ Fail to Resolve Regional Animosity?, p. 306.

11 There is an opinion that the NTS tax probe has also focused on the Big Three newspapers. “As indicated by the amount of penalties imposed, the probe has focused on the so-called ‘Big Three’ papers which have spear-headed the criticizing of President Kim’s policies, especially his approach to North Korea.” Hong Soon-il, “Trials of the Press,” The Korea Times, July 5, 2001.
LOCAL MEDIA AND THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IN CHINA

BY SOPHIE BEACH

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Premier Zhu Rongji and other officials have said publicly that Chinese journalists should act as watchdogs over society, and many Chinese newspapers are filled with more diverse and dynamic reporting than at any time in recent memory. Visible shifts in official attitudes toward the media give the impression that the Chinese government is actively encouraging a freer and more independent press. In reality, however, governmental control over information in China remains an entrenched system that begins with the central government and extends to the smallest papers in remote provinces.

Recent advances in the quality and range of reporting are due to hard-fought efforts by local reporters and editors, who are aggressively exposing the wrongdoings of local officials and other powerful interests. As a result, journalists are increasingly becoming the targets of local elites who do not want their misconduct revealed. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, China is the world’s leading jailor of journalists. In 2000, 24 journalists were in prison because of their reporting; in 2001, the number increased to more than 30.

While media policy is set by the Central Propaganda Bureau, an arm of the Chinese Communist Party, provincial propaganda bureaus are responsible for ensuring the implementation of central policy in their regions. They do this by controlling the legal, political and personnel structures of local media organs. Local officials can essentially use whatever means they deem necessary to silence their critics. Journalists investigating official wrongdoings on the local level become the victims of this system.

Furthermore, because local officials are held responsible for illegal activity in their districts, they help ensure that negative reports never see the light of day. When a major mining disaster in Nandan, Guangxi Province killed almost 100 miners in July 2001, the owner of the mines and local authorities threatened and harassed the journalists who had come to report the story. “Nowadays, if there are deaths involved, even provincial leaders and county chiefs are held responsible, so they have created a news blackout,” a police officer near Nandan told Agence France-Presse. Yet journalists who traveled to Nandan from other areas persisted, and the story was covered in a number of publications outside the immediate Nandan region. Eventually, the central government was forced to respond to the allegations, and an official inspection team found that 80 miners had died and that local officials had conspired with the mine owners to cover it up.

This story demonstrates that local officials are increas-
ingly willing to tolerate lurid stories of crime or corruption, as long as they do not reflect negatively on the home province. This is especially true in the provinces far from Beijing, where small local papers out of sight of central officials bring needed revenue to the local governments which officially own all publications. Newspapers and magazines increasingly rely on advertising revenue as the economy turns into a freer market and the government spends less on media subsidies. In China as in the rest of the world, lively reporting about crime, corruption and political scandal sells.

Nevertheless, while some space has been created on a local level to allow for investigative reporting, there has been no fundamental change in the relationship between the press and the government. Central control over information in China is part of a systematic, institutionalized mechanism. During periods of heightened political sensitivity, the censorship mechanism tightens in order to prevent unwanted news from reaching the public. During less sensitive periods, local officials have more leeway and newspaper reports become more dynamic and less full of slogans lauding the achievements of the “great, glorious and correct Communist Party.”

As a part of one of the most intense government crackdowns on the Chinese media in recent years, the State Press and Publications Administration announced on August 8, 2001 that publications could be immediately closed down for publishing reports that: (1) negate the guiding role of Marxism, Mao Zedong Thought, or Deng Xiaoping Theory; (2) oppose the guiding principles, official line, or policies of the Communist Party; (3) reveal state secrets, damage national security, or harm national interests; (4) oppose official policies regarding minority nationalities and religion, or harm national unity and affect social stability; (5) advocate murder, violence, obscenity, superstition, or pseudo-science; (6) spread rumors or falsified news, or interfere in the work of the party and government; (7) violate party propaganda discipline or national publishing and advertising regulations.

Any province, autonomous region, or municipality that has more than two papers closed down for violating one of the so-called “Seven No’s” will not be allowed to start any new publications in the following year. Such stipulations place the onus of implementation squarely on the shoulders of local officials.

While the “Seven No’s” were widely publicized, media regulations are more often communicated in quiet conversations between local propaganda officials and editors. Meanwhile, the government publicly encourages aggressive investigative reporting by journalists. After the Nandan mining disaster, the *People’s Daily* published an editorial called, “What if the Media Was Absent?” which called on journalists to report on official wrongdoings and praised the journalists who uncovered the miners’ deaths. “Keeping the media away from disasters is the wish of some officials... [but] through the efforts of journalists, those people who did their best to cover it up has been torn open at the corner,” it said.

While publicly declaring a commitment to eradicating official corruption, the government maintains very tight control over this process. It allows publication of certain reports about corruption or wrongdoings only if they are first condemned by authorities through a sometimes informal approval process. Central authorities seldom offer support to, and sometimes even persecute, journalists who threaten this control by independently reporting on corruption, crime, and abuse of power that they see on the local level. Without effective implementation of constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, journalists can be subject violent retribution from local officials or other powerful interests. Central officials rarely intervene.

According to a 1999 report in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, intellectuals and academics in China feel that, “intolerance and suspicion are always present... [and] the observable, apparent shifts in government behavior are based on tactical considerations rather than any fundamental changes in official attitudes toward dissent.” This analysis holds true today for the country’s journalists.

Reporters who take on the local elite in their home area face more certain consequences than those who focus outside the immediate region. Widespread local protectionism means that city, county and village officials and their supporters have the power to use various means, sometimes violent, to silence those who expose their wrongdoings. By the same token, if a local publication exposes unlawful activities in another part of the country, local officials may be more willing to help protect the reporters and editors responsible for the report.

Journalists’ right to report freely is therefore largely dependent on the fluctuating attitudes of local officials. While freedom of expression is guaranteed under the Chinese constitution, no implementation measures exist to protect reporters who try to exercise this right. Additionally, under international law, journalists are protected by Article 19 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression. Yet, even though China became a signatory to these agreements in 1999, the legal system does not protect citizens’ basic, internationally recognized rights.

Four cases demonstrate the risks faced by local journalists who take on officials in their home regions.

The Murder of Feng Zhaoxia

In January 2000, reporter Feng Zhaoxia, of the Xi’an-based *Gejie Daobao*, was found in a ditch outside the city with his throat cut. While local police quickly dismissed the case as a suicide, his former colleagues and family members strongly believe that he was murdered.

Feng had reported extensively on the relationships between corrupt local officials and criminal gangs. His articles focused on various abuses of power in the region, including embezzlement of funds earmarked for infrastructure purposes. He also wrote about a local Communist Party official who was a convicted felon.

He had been threatened repeatedly in the past. In the
days leading up to his death, he told colleagues he was being followed and feared for his life. Details about his case remain sketchy because local officials banned media reports about the case soon after Feng’s body was found.

The fact that Feng published these articles is an example of the risks journalists and editors are sometimes willing to take to expose official wrongdoing. While Gejie Daobao did take that risk, Feng wrote the stories under a pen name to shield himself from possible repercussions. The ultimate failure of this precaution leads one to wonder whether Feng would have had an added measure of security if he had published his reports in a publication far from his home province.

THE ARREST OF JIANG WEIPING

Jiang Weiping is another reporter who took on the powerful local elite. A veteran former reporter for Xinhua News Agency and Dalian Daily, Jiang was serving as the northeast China bureau chief of the pro-Beijing Hong Kong paper Wen Wei Po in 1999 when he learned of several corruption scandals in the region. Aware that he could not publish the stories in an official publication, he wrote them under pen names and sent them to the Hong Kong magazine Qianshao.

In early December 2000, Jiang was arrested by Dalian security forces and charged with “inciting to subvert the government,” “illegally holding confidential documents,” and “revealing state secrets.” The last charge is frequently used against journalists and academics in China who present views that deviate from official opinions. “State secrets” is a nebulous term that the State Secrets Bureau (directly under the Central Committee of the Communist Party) defines as anything that risks “undermining the consolidation and defense of state political power, and undermining state unification, national unity and social stability.” In reality, it encompasses any information about economic and social policies that does not originate from the government itself. By using this charge against journalists, the government is not required to publicly divulge many details about the case, saying that to do so would threaten national security. Following a secret trial on September 5, Jiang was sentenced to eight years in prison.

Jiang’s reports exposed corrupt behavior among a number of high level officials in northeastern cities. One story revealed that Daqing mayor Qian Dihua had been arrested for illegal investment schemes, the gains from which were partially spent on apartments and cars for each of his twenty-nine mistresses. In addition, Jiang reported that Bo Xilai, vice mayor of Dalian, had covered up the corruption scandals involving his friends and family members. Finally, Jiang exposed Ma Xiangdong, vice mayor of Shenyang, capital of Liaoning Province, for gambling away 30 million yuan in public funds in Macau casinos. Even though Ma’s case was later widely reported in the Chinese media and his December 2001 execution was used as an example in the government’s fight against corruption, Jiang made himself vulnerable to retribution from the authorities by reporting on the story without official approval.

Prior to his arrest, Jiang had received several awards for journalistic excellence from provincial governments. Neither the local nor central governments contradicted the truth behind his reporting for Qianshao. Jiang’s detention, like that of many other individuals arrested for political reasons, violates many aspects of Chinese law. While the Criminal Procedure Law stipulates that prisoners cannot be detained for more than seven months without being sentenced, Jiang was held for more than a year before any verdict was passed on his case. In addition, a government White Paper on criminal reform in China states that, “Prisoners have the right to exchange letters with their relatives and friends and to regularly meet with family members.” Yet Jiang’s wife went more than a month with no news of her husband’s whereabouts, and she has not been allowed to visit or talk to him since his arrest. Jiang was never given a chance to fairly defend himself in a court of law. His trial was secret, and not even his wife was allowed to attend. Nevertheless, the court handed down a eight-year sentence in a decision that was probably decided before the trial even began.

THE DEMISE OF SOUTHERN WEEKEND

While Jiang Weiping wrote his reports secretly by publishing in a Hong Kong publication under a pen name, other reporters who have tried to achieve the same goals publicly have suffered similarly as a result. Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo), a popular, hard-hitting newspaper published in southern Guangdong Province, was a recent victim of overzealous local officials. One of China’s most progressive and adventurous newspapers, Southern Weekend had long pushed the boundaries of media control in China by publishing explicit reports on social problems such as AIDS, crime, and the trafficking of women. Although its editors have repeatedly angered government officials, the paper has managed to stay afloat by limiting its coverage to problems outside Guangdong.

On April 19, 2001, the paper published an article about a criminal gang, led by Hunan Province native Zhang Jun, that killed 28 people in a spree of murder and theft. Titled “The Growth of an Ultra-Violent Group,” the piece contained interviews with gang members and their families. The author also analyzed problems such as poverty and other forms of inequality that may have led the gang members to a life of crime.

Such analysis, in a major paper, reflected poorly on the leadership of Hunan Province. Because the paper is published in Guangdong Province, Hunan’s leaders had to seek help from Beijing in order to punish the paper. The Hunan provincial government notified central authorities that Southern Weekend had published a negative portrait of China’s socialist struggle, according to local sources interviewed by the international media. At a central propaganda meeting in Beijing, officials from several provinces, including Hunan, “demanded that the paper be stopped.” Soon, deputy editor-in-chief Qian Gang, front-page editor Chang Ping, and another senior editor were demoted. The news section chief and reporter were fired and banned from ever working in journalism again.

The Southern Weekend firings came during an extensive tightening of the government’s control over the media. Journalists throughout the country were called to Beijing to attend political training sessions and a number of publica-
tions were closed down. The Zhang Jun article provided a convenient reason for government officials to crack down on the paper. Nevertheless, management demoted and fired the journalists only after extreme pressure from the provincial propaganda department, according to a journalist familiar with the case. Since the crackdown, the pioneering newspaper has become as bland as any of the large, nationwide publications.

THE ARREST OF GAO QINRONG

Gao Qinqrong was a reporter for Xinhua News Agency when he published an article about a sham irrigation project in Shaanxi Province. According to official reports, local officials in drought-plagued Yuncheng County had achieved a great feat by constructing 67,000 water tanks in only six months. After Gao discovered that the pipes were not connected to any water source, he wrote an exposé that appeared in the May 27, 1998 internal edition of the official People’s Daily and was also sent to the Central Disciplinary Inspection Committee, the party’s internal investigative unit. The story became national news and was covered by Southern Weekend and China Central Television.

Nevertheless, local officials in Yuncheng were displeased with the story and arrested Gao on December 1998. Although his reports exposed violations of the law by officials involved with planning the irrigation project, Gao became the subject of a criminal investigation. He was tried on trumped-up charges, including bribery, embezzlement, and pimping, and sentenced to 13 years in prison. Although the central government had at first condoned his reporting, there has been mixed official reaction to his arrest, and he has not yet been released.

The few legal avenues that exist in China to fight against unjust treatment by local officials are rarely used to any effect. A grassroots movement calling for Gao’s release has been initiated in China, and Gao has won the support of high level officials. Several members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference of the National People’s Congress issued a motion at last year’s parliamentary meeting urging the Central Discipline Committee and Supreme People’s Court to reopen his case. His defense lawyer published an essay on the Internet revealing the flaws in the case against Gao, and his wife has repeatedly traveled to Beijing to ask for his release. After realizing that he had run out of domestic recourses for justice, Gao wrote directly to United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson asking for her intervention. When Robinson traveled to Beijing in November, she brought up his case and Jiang Weiping’s in her meetings with high officials. Neither central nor local governments have responded to these requests.

CONCLUSION

Under the current political system, it is easy for China’s leaders, whether in Beijing or in the provinces, to exert control over the news that appears in the country’s media. For local officials, regional publications become a means to bolster their reputation, both among their constituents and among central officials. Likewise, if an especially aggressive publication such as Southern Weekend attracts a large readership, local officials may be willing to protect it so long as the targets of its reports are outside the home province. However, as Southern Weekend learned last year, editorial independence will not last long during periods of political sensitivity.

Central officials want to maintain control over the reform process, including the fight against corruption and other social and political ills. Independent reporting on official wrongdoings threatens the Party’s monopoly on information as well as their ability to keep the anti-corruption campaign within strictly delineated boundaries. While visible shifts in official attitudes toward the media are sure to continue, more meaningful change is unlikely. “The Chinese Communist Party now and for the foreseeable future will not relax their strict and substantive controls over the media, unless Chinese politics undergo a dramatic transformation,” writes He Zhou, the author of The Chinese Media: A New Perspective.¹⁴

The hope for a more independent Chinese media then rests with the editors, journalists and local propaganda officials who are willing to take risks and hold leaders to their words. Each investigative story that makes it past the censors, like those about the Nandan mining disaster, will help create a standard by which the public will begin to judge the newspapers they read every day. With more public support for a free press, it will become more difficult for the authorities to jail, harass, censor or attack journalists who are merely doing their jobs.

ENDNOTES

² See “Probe Launched into Latest China Mine Tragedy Amid Cover-up Claims.” Agence France-Press, 31 July 2001; Running in Place, by the Committee to Protect Journalists. Available at www.cpj.org.
³ This is a phrase commonly used in Chinese Communist Party propaganda. See “Report on Xiamen Smuggling Case.” Xinhua News Agency, 8 August 2001, for an example.
⁶ See Reuters, 3 April 2001
⁸ See http://www.chinaonline.com/refer/ministry_profiles/c01041766.asp
¹⁴ Chen and He, p.17
In 1996, the outgoing British governor of Hong Kong highlighted press freedom as one of the benchmarks by which the “one country, two systems” policy would be judged after China regained sovereignty over the colony. “Is the Hong Kong press still free,” he asked, “with inhibited coverage of China and of issues on which China has strong views?” The question underlined one of the major concerns in Hong Kong prior to the 1997 handover. In light of the sharp differences between the two political systems and the two societies, many feared that the Communist regime would use direct and indirect political pressure to rein in the freewheeling Hong Kong media.

More than four and a half years after the transfer of power, there has been no serious erosion of press freedom in Hong Kong, and Beijing has not overtly interfered with the Hong Kong press. Nevertheless, the issue of press freedom has become more complex, as conflicts have emerged between different conceptions of the media’s proper role. On several occasions, remarks on the media by senior mainland officials have created anxiety among journalists and society at large about the media’s ability to function independently of government influence. In April 2000, a senior official at the central government’s Liaison Office in Hong Kong, Wang Fengchao, warned the Hong Kong media not to portray views that advocate Taiwan independence as “normal.” The media, Wang said, is obligated to support China’s sovereignty and integrity. The controversy underlined the sharp differences in the role of the media in the two societies.

The media’s watchdog role against the abuse of official power is particularly important in Hong Kong, where the possibility of full democracy remains remote. Tung was chosen in 1996 by a 400-member Selection Committee composed mainly of local business leaders and the professional elites for a five-year term beginning July 1, 1997. The second Chief Executive Election will be held on March 24, 2002. The new leader will be elected by a 800-member Election Committee composed of Hong Kong citizens elected from designated organizations such as business associations, labor unions and professional bodies. In the present legislature, only 24 of the 60 members are elected by the public through geographic constituencies. The remaining 36 are chosen through “indirect elections.” Of these, six are chosen by the 800-member Election Committee. The other 30 come from “functional constituencies” including associations of lawyers, doctors, architects and businessmen. According to the Basic Law, the earliest possible date for the full public election of both the Chief Executive and the legislature is 2008, subject to a
set of strict requirements including consent of the Chief Executive, two-thirds of the legislature and two-thirds of the Hong Kong deputies to the Chinese National People’s Congress in Beijing. Most analysts believe that the possibility of full democracy by 2008 remains remote.

The Government and the Media

As in most free societies, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’s (SAR) government and media have a love-hate relationship. It is true that there has been no direct interference with the press since the handover. No newspaper has been closed down because of political pressure. Nor has there been new legislation that undermines press freedom. Beijing’s self-restraint with respect to Hong Kong’s internal affairs since the handover has helped reduce fears about media freedom, and as a result the line between pro-China and pro-Hong Kong media has become somewhat blurred.3 Public perceptions of the Communist government have also gradually improved, with most people largely satisfied that Beijing has honored its promise to give the SAR a high degree of autonomy. Top Hong Kong government leaders have also underlined press freedom as one of the four pillars of the city’s success. Chief Secretary Donald Tsang has said there was “no room for compromise” on press freedom.4 Both Tsang and his predecessor Anson Chan, described by Newsweek magazine as “the conscience of Hong Kong,” are known as strong defenders of a free press. Top SAR officials, including Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, have acknowledged the importance of a free press to the preservation of a free and open society.

On the other hand, SAR government leaders have on several occasions expressed concern over what they see as the Hong Kong media’s shortcomings. Faced with the worst economic recession in decades, government and business leaders have blamed the media for spreading unnecessary pessimism and for being overly critical, arguing that this has fueled public discontent with the government and deepened the negative public mood. Secretary for Justice Elsie Leung, who serves as the government’s top legal adviser, has accused the media of fabricating news, disguising wild speculation as fact and attempting to foster discord among civil servants.5 Secretary for Civil Service Joseph Wong has urged the media to emphasize positive news about the civil service, rather than focusing on its failures and the deficiencies, such as laziness and low productivity in some government departments.

In April 1999, speaking at a lunch hosted by the Newspaper Society of Hong Kong – an organization representing newspaper proprietors – Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa expressed his concern over developments in the media: “In the past six to twelve months, there have been a lot of views expressed in society. Many people have asked me, why has the media become more market-oriented? Has it given top priority to making profits and increasing sales? It is true that everybody, every business organization needs to make money, but apart from press freedom, should the media also shoulder some social responsibility?” Tung’s question implies its own answer: the press should assume social responsibility when exercising its freedom.

One target of political pressure was Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), a public broadcaster funded by the SAR government and given full editorial independence in its operations. While the government has refrained from criticizing the public broadcasting organization, some pro-China conservatives have stepped up criticism of the station in the past few years. According to them, the RTHK – as a government-funded broadcaster – should operate in a different way from commercial broadcasting companies.6 Specifically, they think it is obliged to explain and promote government policies. It is hardly surprising that there have been calls from some pro-China politicians for Tung to step up control over the RTHK if he is re-elected in March 2002 for a second five-year term. Among the fiercest critics was Xu Simin, a veteran Hong Kong delegate of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. They were infuriated by RTHK programs that sharply criticized and ridiculed SAR leaders, including Tung. One major controversy erupted in September 2001, when the program “Headliner” likened the Tung government to the Taliban regime in the way it treated the people and held on to power. Tung commented that the program was in “bad taste.” The government-appointed Broadcasting Authority, whose functions include handling public complaints against broadcasting organizations, found the program lacking in impartiality. It gave its most lenient form of reprimand, “advising” RTHK to strike a fair balance among different viewpoints. Under the law, the Broadcasting Authority can impose a fine for any breach of guidelines in broadcasting programs.7

The media and political analysts rightly observe that some senior SAR officials have a somewhat adversarial view of the media and that they are inclined to support more government regulation. Jonathan Fenby, the former editor of the English-language South China Morning Post (SCMP), wrote in The New York Times in July 1999 that “there’s been a much stronger reaction to the newspaper, from officialdom, from business circles, from members of the establishment, than at any time since the handover.” Margaret Ng, a barrister who was elected through the legal functional constituency to sit on the Legislative Council, observed in the same issue that “As a whole, newspapers have become steadily more pro-government since the handover.”

Official criticism of the media has given rise to fears among some journalists that the government was searching for an excuse to rein in the media for political purposes. Some journalists are adamant that Tung, certain senior SAR offi-
cialists and politicians who have the ear of the central government are always looking for opportunities to tighten their grip on the media. Others have observed a degree of government favoritism towards newspapers that show more sympathy for the administration, granting these newspapers exclusive interviews and leaks. Some are also concerned that media owners’ substantial mainland investments, and their subsequent dependence on good relations with Beijing, may lead to self-censorship on topics likely to offend the central government. As a result, the anxiety of journalists about press freedom remains deep, especially with regard to self-censorship. A 2001 survey of journalists conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) revealed that 14% of respondents believe the problem of self-censorship exists and is serious. Sixty-one percent say the problem exists but is not serious. Twenty-two percent say there is a “little bit” of self-censorship, and only 3% say there is none at all.

On the other hand, the survey also showed that a lack of press freedom and political interference in the media were not among journalists’ major concerns. When asked to choose and rank the five main reasons that might make them quit their profession, 44% of journalists cited low pay and 36% mentioned the pressure of the job. Other top reasons include lack of opportunities for further study (32%), irregular work hours (30%), and lack of opportunities for promotion (28%). The prospect of reduced press freedom (21%) and political interference with journalistic work (18%) ranked ninth and tenth. CUHK pollster Clement So commented that the seemingly contradictory findings showed that while journalists feel that the overall political situation has improved, they do not yet feel completely comfortable with the situation.

**From Politics to Economics**

People are frustrated with Hong Kong’s economic recession, rising unemployment and a spate of government blunders since the handover. Many blame Tung for the problems. According to a poll conducted by the University of Hong Kong (HKU) Public Opinion Program, public confidence in the SAR government has fallen below that in the central government. Confidence in the central government rose from 43.5% in October 2001 to 51.5% in November, a record high since the survey was first conducted in July 1997. The confidence rating of the SAR government in November was 44.1%.

The mainland economy has also become increasingly important to Hong Kong, which currently faces a double economic challenge: accelerated economic restructuring towards a knowledge-based economy, and a sharp deterioration of the global economy since the September 11 terrorist attacks. With the further opening up of the mainland economy after its accession to the World Trade Organization, Hong Kong has to reposition itself to cope with increased competition for investment in China. While it remains unclear how Hong Kong can benefit from a more open Chinese economy, the mainstream view is that the momentum of capital and human movement to the mainland is irresistible. As a sign of this trend, a large-scale job fair organized by mainland-based firms in Hong Kong – the first of its kind – attracted thousands of professionals who have their eyes on the mainland’s greener pastures.

Amid this trend – captured in the popular phrase “go north” – and softening attitudes towards the mainland, the CUHK survey of journalists showed a significant change in their views about the news media’s political inclinations. Compared with a similar survey conducted in 1996, the new survey indicates that journalists believe the media has become more politically homogeneous. The mass-oriented Chinese-language Apple Daily was rated the most pro-Hong Kong, with 6.51 points out of a possible 10 (the higher the number, the more pro-Hong Kong the media source; the lower the score, the more pro-China). Asia Television received the lowest score at 4.54, followed closely by the Beijing-funded newspaper, Ta Kung Pao at 4.63 points. The gap between the highest and the lowest score in 2001 was 1.97 points. The corresponding figure in the 1996 survey was 4.65 points. According to the scholars who carried out the survey, the results show that the concepts of “pro-China” and “pro-Hong Kong” have lost their clarity, and are no longer seen as mutually exclusive. The ideological differences among the media have correspondingly become smaller.

The subtle change of political identity among the Hong Kong media is part of the growing influence of the “one country” factor in post-handover Hong Kong. The pride in being Chinese has manifestly grown stronger in light of positive developments in China over the past few years. There are some clear cases of strong nationalist feelings in Hong Kong. The whole community reacted with enthusiasm and hope to news of China’s formal entry to the World Trade Organization, Beijing’s successful bid for the 2008 Olympics and China’s victory in the qualifier match for the World Cup Finals in 2002. Battered by the worst economic crisis in decades, businessmen and professionals are increasingly aware of the importance of China’s vast market and of greater integration between the two economies. The new economic dynamic is bound to have an impact on the balance between the “one country” and “two systems” components of the Hong Kong-mainland relationship.

Accordingly, the Hong Kong media has stepped up its coverage of development in China, especially the opportunities and challenges in the new economic synergy. In stark contrast to the coverage of China in the aftermath of the bloody 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square, the media has recently portrayed a more positive picture of China. Reports on human rights and democracy in China are receiving conspicuously less attention from the media, which has become fascinated instead by the rapid economic growth of Shanghai and the Pearl River Delta cities. The notion of a “Shanghai vs. Hong Kong” economic contest has become entrenched in the minds of the public thanks to the media’s sanguine, and at times over-zealous, reports about Shanghai’s progress combined with overly pessimistic forecasts of Hong Kong’s future.

Another example of the Hong Kong media’s new interest in China is its coverage of the so-called “go west” campaign. In the summer of 2001, Hong Kong media organizations joined a top-level delegation led by SAR government officials and comprised of leading businessmen and professionals to visit the underdeveloped western region of the mainland. The trip was organized following a decision by the central government to speed up development in the western part...
of the country to help bridge the gap of economic development between the western and coastal regions. Some media professionals and the Hong Kong Journalists Association criticized the media for its failure to report objectively and comprehensively about the development of the region. Most of the reports, they commented, resemble propaganda trumpeting the positives of the remote region such as abundant natural resources, without equal emphasis on its backwardness in transportation, infrastructure and legal system.

The shift of emphasis in reporting on human rights issues to economic issues reflects a gradual change of public attitude towards China after the 1989 Tiananmen protests. As China continued its open door policy and economic reform, more people came to accept Beijing’s desire to achieve “stability above everything”, even at the expense of human rights and democracy. While some believe that the Hong Kong media exercises self-censorship on topics that might offend Beijing, there has been no concrete evidence of this.

With growing media coverage of the mainland, the gap between the two societies has been further narrowed in recent years, as evidenced by the noticeable change of public perceptions of the mainland. According to the HKU survey, public confidence in China’s economic development has been rising. A survey conducted the SAR government’s Planning Department found that more than 40,000 Hong Kong citizens now live on the mainland and nearly 190,000 homes have been bought across the border by SAR residents. The trend towards a mobile cross-border population will continue, the department says, with more than 300,000 Hong Kong citizens expected to live or work in southern China by 2030.

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Over the past two years, local media has also given prominent coverage to lifestyles in major cities including Shenzhen and Shanghai. Overall, these reports carry the message that Hong Kong faces stiff competition from some Chinese cities, where the cost of living is lower and quality of life comparable, if not higher.

The realities, however, are far more complex. The improvement of economic conditions in the mainland has been impressive, but human rights and political liberties have been largely neglected. Leading cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen have seen rapid economic growth, but they lag behind Hong Kong in important areas such as rule of law and press freedom. The central government has not overtly interfered with the internal affairs of Hong Kong, but it has asserted its influence on crucial issues such as the candidacy of the chief executive. Since the handover, Hong Kong’s relationship with the mainland has become more subtle and complex, and in the future it will only become more so. As the clarity of old divisions gives way to bonds based on economic ties and nationalistic sentiments, the challenge for the media will be to strive for more balanced, comprehensive, enlightened and independent coverage.

**The Media and the Public**

At the level of public opinion, perceptions of the media have worsened in the past few years due to persistent bad publicity. The *Apple Daily*, a leading newspaper, published a front-page apology on November 10, 1998 after it was revealed that one of its reporters had paid a laborer to pose in bed with a prostitute in order to illustrate the infidelity which drove his wife to push her two sons out of their high-rise public housing flat window before jumping to her death. Another reporter from the *Apple Daily* was jailed after being convicted of bribing police officers for confidential information on police cases in 2001.

Various public opinion polls show a fall in the media’s credibility. They include a survey conducted by CUHK in late 2001 and a survey among journalists conducted by four groups in October 1999. The surveys indicated that the public is concerned about the problem of sensational reporting, inaccuracy, indecency, and emphasis on sex and violence. In his annual Policy Address delivered on October 6, 1999, Tung warned that press freedom should not become a pretext for disregarding media ethics, saying that “it is inexcusable for any media operator to resort to pornography, violence, libel or misrepresentation simply for profit.” He also said that the media’s disregard of its social responsibilities and professional ethics “is an issue of prime public concern which deserves the government’s due attention.”

According to the CUHK poll conducted in 2001, the self-image and social status of journalists have declined compared with other occupations. In 1997, journalists ranked third, after engineers and doctors. In 2001, they ranked seventh. The list was topped by university professors, followed by doctors, engineers, nurses, secondary school teachers and the police. Journalists’ ratings of their own social status are even lower. In 2001 they ranked themselves ninth, compared with fifth in the 1997 survey.

The two CUHK journalism scholars who conducted the survey attributed the decline to three factors. First, there has been more negative news about the media’s sensationalism, unprofessionalism and decline of ethical standards. Second, journalism has been unable to enhance its professional expertise and retain talented people. Third, the profession has yet to establish an effective self-regulation mechanism.

The survey results are hardly surprising. The proliferation of sensational, dramatized and even fictional reporting has blurred the line between information and entertainment. In 1996, for example, a weekly magazine ran a cover story claiming that a local multi-millionaire was dying of cancer. It turned out to be a hoax perpetrated by a 19-year-old, and the magazine was forced to apologize publicly. On January 22, 2002, a tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, was convicted of contempt of court over a report on a kidnapping case. The newspaper’s chief editor admitted in court that remarks made during the trial led to his conviction. In December 2002, a tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, was convicted of contempt of court over a report on a kidnapping case. The newspaper’s chief editor admitted in court that remarks made during the trial led to his conviction.

Increasingly, people no longer regard the news they read in newspapers as information, but more as “info-tainment” – half-truth, or re-invented reality. The damage to the credibility of the media in its role to inform could be serious. There are fears that people no longer see the media as a watchdog against government wrongdoings and official abuse of power. Rather, the public will perceive of the media as an industry run by money-hungry businessmen and peopled by half-professionals with few ethical and professional standards and no awareness of their social role.

This trend, ironically, continues despite an emerging understanding that the public demand for a greater political
voice makes a strong and independent media more important than ever. Since the channels for political participation remain limited, people have high hopes that the media will function as an effective fourth estate, bridging the gap between the public and the seats of power.

**Regulating the Media**

Views are divided over how the media can be regulated without compromising press freedom. The joint survey conducted by the four journalists’ groups in October 1999 showed that less than 5% of journalists were satisfied with the media’s ethical standards, while 52% were dissatisfied and 42% have mixed feelings. Fifty-two percent of respondents supported strengthening industry self-regulation, while 35% preferred the establishment of a non-government statutory body to monitor the press. The four journalists’ groups later jointly issued a non-binding Code of Professional Ethics covering general guidelines for journalists and editors in carrying out their work. News organizations have been urged to adopt the code, but actual implementation has been inconsistent. Some have adopted it in its entirety, some have taken it as a reference, and others have stuck to their own code.

The proliferation of paparazzi reporting among some mass-oriented Chinese-language newspapers and periodicals has prompted the government-appointed Law Reform Commission to issue a consultation paper on the intrusion of privacy by the media in 1999. One major proposal is to set up a statutory press council to handle and initiate investigations of public complaints. The proposal drew mixed reactions from the public. Pessimists fear that the new body will deal a severe blow to press freedom by opening the door to government control, and it was against the backdrop of fear that the Code of Ethics was issued.

In addition, eleven newspapers and the News Executives Association and Federation of Journalists Workers took the initiative of forming the Press Council of Hong Kong in 2000 to handle complaints against media intrusion of privacy. This marked the first, albeit small, step towards the independent promotion of professionalism in the Hong Kong media. The three popular Chinese newspapers – the Oriental Daily News, its sister daily The Sun, and the Apple Daily – did not take part. According to its Constitution, the Press Council will be composed of both media professionals and other citizens such as educators and lawyers, and will investigate complaints against its member newspapers concerning intrusions of privacy. If the complaint is substantiated, the Council will require the newspapers involved to issue a public apology and correction. However, the Press Council has no power to impose penalties. Meanwhile, the Law Reform Commission and the government are watching how the media’s self-regulation mechanism works, and the Commission’s proposal for an official press council is still on the table.

The infamous Article 23 of Hong Kong’s Basic Law, which calls for laws prohibiting seditious activities, continues to loom as a threat to freedom of the press. Many journalists fear that reporting on issues such as pro-independence activities in Taiwan and Tibet could be banned under an anti-seditious law. In June 1996, the then head of the Chinese State Council’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, Lu Ping, said that the Hong Kong press would not be allowed to advocate “two Chinas” after 1997. In the wake of the controversy over media coverage of the “special state-to-state relationship” advocated by the then Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui, the deputy director of the central government’s Liaison Office in Hong Kong Wang Fengchao said in April 2000 that the drafting of Article 23 should be accelerated.

Given the sensitivity of the issue, the SAR government has so far delayed its consideration. It has yet to initiate the legislative process such as a public consultation on the issue, but it has not ruled out the possibility of invoking Article 23. More importantly, pro-democracy and human rights activists are worried about the Tung administration’s growing intolerance of political dissent. This attitude is manifested in the way that police officers handled protests and in how Tung and his top aides have responded to criticism, particularly from the media. Human rights activists and lawyers have cited the tightening of regulations governing protests, such as restrictions on the use of loudspeakers and the designation of areas for public demonstrations as a case in point. Citing the controversy over the program that compared Tung’s administration to the Taliban regime, former chairman of the Bar Association Ronny Tong urged the SAR government to learn to “respect our right to criticize.”

**Conclusion**

The Hong Kong media has not undergone any major changes since the PRC regained sovereignty in 1997. It remains healthy, diverse and independent. Subtle changes, however, are quietly underway in Hong Kong’s political ecology, as it looks for new direction in a rapidly changing region. Despite a general consensus that a new economic partnership will evolve between Hong Kong and the mainland, few have the crystal ball to tell how it will shape the overall relationship between the SAR and the mainland, or how this will affect life in the SAR. It is clear, however, that the media will not be exempt from these changes. The challenge for the media is to play the role of an independent voice in the effort to maintain the SAR’s unique identity while achieving closer integration with the mainland.

The sharp economic downturn and corresponding decline in the quality of life, including a drop in wage levels, consumption and asset value, have undermined the authority of the Chief Executive and the SAR government. Rightly or wrongly, people blame the SAR leadership for these problems. At the same time, demand for political accountability from the undemocratically constituted government has soared.

Yet, despite Tung’s low popularity, central government leaders and most of the 800 Election Committee members have indicated some support for his re-election. All signs point towards an uncontested victory for Tung. In his annual Policy Address in 2001, Tung announced the introduction of a “new accountability system” if he is re-elected in 2002. Under the system, a new layer of political appointees will be created by Tung to hold political responsibility for major policies. Senior civil servants will assume the administrative role in policy implementation. The introduction of a Hong
Kong's re-election would bring about drastic changes to the political landscape. Having learned from his failures, Tung and his ministers will be determined to lead a more powerful government with an aggressively proactive public relations strategy. In an election speech delivered on December 13, 2001, Tung also announced plans to establish a more effective public opinion survey system in his second term. Tung and other ministers have said they would continue to make more efforts to meet the people and hear their voices directly. Top government leaders are keen to take greater initiative by going directly to the people to win support for their policies. The government Information Services Department will launch its own e-newspaper in the summer of 2002 to help ensure that messages about the government are directly conveyed to the public.

There are both positive and negative implications to these proposed changes. On the positive side, senior government leaders will make themselves more accessible to explain their thoughts to the public. The downside is the Hong Kong media could be played into the hands of government PR strategists who are manipulative in their dissemination of information. Given the truism that information is power, the watchdog role of the media will be circumvented if the government goes too far in manipulating public opinion to their own advantage. Already faced with the challenge of balancing information and entertainment, the media will have to manage a more delicate relationship with the government without compromising its independence and integrity.

Regardless of the depth of frustrations about the media's excesses and abuses, there is still strong support for its freedom. This has been particularly true in the past few years, when the media has exposed a spate of political scandals. In the summer of 2000, the South China Morning Post carried a report quoting the accusation made by University of Hong Kong pollster Robert Chung that Tung attempted to influence his opinion surveys via a third party. At that time, Tung's popularity hit a low point, and the event triggered a political storm that led to an independent inquiry. After weeks of public hearings, an independent panel ruled that the university vice-chancellor and his deputy had put pressure on Chung. The university's vice-chancellor, Cheng Yiu-chung, resigned to take responsibility for the scandal. In late 2000, the Apple Daily ran confidential documents showing that popular legislator Gary Cheng failed to declare business interests to the legislature as required. It later emerged that Cheng sought economic gains by abusing his status as a legislator, and he was eventually convicted and sentenced to prison in December 2001.

As long as Hong Kong remains a free society, market forces will continue to operate in the media and newspapers will have to tell the truth if they want to keep their readers. Public aspirations for the media to strike a balance between freedom and social responsibility have grown. There has been a strong sense within some quarters that the media is so free that its power is unchecked. In the end, the media's intrusions of privacy, unethical practices and fabrication of facts could become ammunition for those who seek to curtail its freedom. Speaking at the Freedom Forum in November 2000, Anson Chan told journalists and other media professionals that the best way to protect their interests was to strive for excellence. But media proprietors, executives and journalists have yet to reach a consensus on how to achieve this amidst the profound changes taking place both within and outside their industry.

ENDNOTES

1 Despite its relatively small population of 6.8 million people, Hong Kong boasts 26 Chinese-language and five English-language daily papers. Except for the two dailies, Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po, which have been described as pro-China, most print and electronic media are market-oriented and non-affiliated.


3 The establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the flight of the Kuomintang to Taiwan was paralleled by a division in the Hong Kong media. Through the 1970s, newspapers were broadly categorized as pro-China (Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po), pro-Taiwan (the now-defunct Hong Kong China Times) or independent (Ming Pao). With the closure of Taiwan-affiliated newspapers in the 1980s as part of the gradual pull-out of Taiwan interests before 1997, the dividing line came to be between pro-China and unaffiliated/pro-Hong Kong. As the public sense of a Hong Kong identity grew in the 1980s and 1990s, the unaffiliated/pro-Hong Kong media emerged as the mainstream. As China and Britain clashed over issues concerning the transfer of power, the mainstream media and Hong Kong society as a whole were caught in the middle. In most cases the media sided with London, not because it supported colonial rule but because they shared common interests on most issues related to the handover.

4 South China Morning Post, October 25, 2001

5 South China Morning Post, August 26, 1999

6 On the other hand, journalists and analysts rightly fear that an erosion of RTHK’s editorial independence will be a bad omen for press freedom in Hong Kong.

7 South China Morning Post, December 14, 2001.

8 Their observation, however, has not been independently ascertained.


10 According to the ACNelson report on newspaper readership in November 2001, Oriental Daily News has a readership of 1.95 million, followed by Apple Daily (1.43 million), The Sun (483,000), SCMP (340,000), Ming Pao (331,000), Sing Tao (158,000). Both Oriental Daily News and The Sun have not joined the Audit Bureau of Circulation. They claimed a circulation of 500,000-550,000 and 200,000-250,000 respectively. Apple Daily’s circulation is around 350,000. The three mass-oriented dailies took up about 70% of total circulation of all newspapers. The SCMP has a circulation of about 120,000. Pro-China newspapers including Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po have a small number of circulation between 30,000 to 40,000.


12 The four groups are the Hong Kong Journalists Association, the Federation of Journalist Workers, the News Executives Association and the Hong Kong Photographers Association.

13 Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, 1999 Policy Address.

14 Ming Pao, January 3, 2002.


18 Article 23 says the Hong Kong SAR Government shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People’s Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organization of bodies from conducting political activities in the SAR, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the SAR from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies.

19 South China Morning Post, June 3, 1999.


21 Under the election law, a candidate needs to be nominated by at least 100 Election Committee members to be eligible for the race.
CONFlict in aceh

The consequences of a broken social contract

By Anthony L. Smith

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The conflict in Aceh is widely misunderstood in both international circles and in Indonesia itself. The rebellion in Aceh is usually characterized as being Islamic in nature. One retired Indonesian general expressed his disappointment with Aceh when he stated: “The Acehnese have demanded greater Islam, we gave it to them, and they still cause trouble.” A prominent leader of an Indonesian Muslim organization also recently said: “Ah, the Acehnese, we have given up on them.” These two statements are indicative of the types of comments one might hear in Indonesia. The first alludes to the fact that many view the conflict in Aceh as being primarily an Islamicist struggle. The second reflects the common belief that Aceh is destined to be a restless province.

The war in Aceh has become a grinding conflict in which civilians are the primary victims. Most of these victims are not even protagonists in the conflict – although who constitutes a “protagonist” is open to a somewhat loose interpretation by both armed belligerents in the conflict. The emergence of the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM or Free Aceh Movement) in the 1970s sparked the beginning of the troubles in the province. Over the last several decades, the Indonesian security forces have mounted a massive military response to GAM and its alleged supporters. There were probably around 1,500 lives lost in the year 2001, which is in fact the low point in humanitarian terms since the conflict began. The death toll since the emergence of the separatist problem is thought to be 10,000. Aceh is increasingly the province with the loudest demands for autonomy or independence. Unfortunately, many who have demanded independence, or were critical of the Indonesian security forces, have been treated as armed separatists and subject to sanctions.

The armed rebellion in Aceh is not the automatic result of either ethnicity or religion, even though these issues are influential in Aceh’s society. Massive human rights abuses and economic exploitation in Aceh during the last decade of the Suharto regime, more than anything else, explain the increasing turbulence and alienation of the province. Recent history in Aceh clearly shows shifting opinions on the subject of independence, with strong public support for either greater autonomy or full independence far more visible at the end of Suharto’s brutal crackdown on the province. However, as an examination of the last few years reveals, the tactics employed by Suharto’s New Order regime have not entirely disappeared from the security forces’ approach to the problem. Recent steps to devolve 70% of provincial revenues back to Aceh under an enhanced autonomy deal is a major step forward, but does not tackle the problem of justice. Unlike the other regions of Indonesia, autonomy has been granted at the provincial level in Aceh and Irian Jaya,
while elsewhere power rests at the district level.

What is Aceh’s relevance to Indonesia and the wider ASEAN community? First, Aceh and Irian Jaya (or Papua) represent the two most substantial separatist challenges to Indonesia’s statehood, and thus the case of Aceh speaks to the question of Indonesia’s stability and cohesion. Aceh, unlike Irian Jaya, was part of the Republic of Indonesia from 1945 (it was the first area liberated from Dutch rule), and its independence would have far-reaching consequences for Indonesia’s territorial integrity. Second, the case of Aceh calls into question the conduct of the Indonesian security forces and their contribution (or lack thereof) to Indonesia’s cohesion, and may serve to inform how the international community can best forge military-to-military relations with Indonesia. Third, it raises questions for the international community on how to respond to the growing problem in Aceh.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although it may seem a truism, it is worth stressing that some aspects of Aceh’s history have great relevance to the modern conflict and to a general understanding of Aceh itself. Of the 4 million Acehnese, about 90% are ethnic Acehnese, and 99% are Muslim. The remaining 10% non-Acehnese are either indigenous groups, such as the Gayo or Alas peoples, or transmigrants. It is very evident that the Acehnese people think highly of their history, culture and language, and view themselves as having a special identity.

Aceh was once a major regional power. At the crossroads of ancient trading routes, the blood lines of Malay, Indian, Arab and Chinese people are evident in the Suku Aceh (Acehnese ethnic group) to this day. As the entry point of Islam to Southeast Asia, Aceh follows a more orthodox form (Acehnese aristocrats, by and large co-opted by the Dutch in earlier times, were eliminated by forces led by the ulema (Muslim scholars).

Despite its help in overthrowing the Dutch and its special character, Aceh was a loser in the post-revolutionary order and was not made a province. The latter was the source of much resentment that fed into subsequent events. In the 1950s, the Darul Islam rebellion – an attempt to turn Indonesia away from its pluralist constitutional foundation and create some form of Islamic state – emerged as one of a number of challenges to the fledging Indonesian state. The movement was particularly strong in parts of Java and Aceh. A crucial point here is that Darul Islam in Aceh never promoted the cause of independence, and was, in time, co-opted by the Republic of Indonesia. Aceh was made a separate province and later gained special status under law as an autonomous region, although largely in name only. The Darul Islam rebellion, however, has given the erroneous impression that the more recent independence rebellion is brought about by the desire for an Islamic state, and Suharto’s government obscured reality by painting the insurrection as fuelled by Islamic fundamentalism.

A casual view of Aceh’s history has led many academics, policymakers and journalists to draw the tautological conclusion that Aceh is troublesome because it is troublesome. However this is not entirely the case, even if it suits both protagonists in the conflict to assert this for their own reasons. While it is true that Aceh resisted the Dutch, resistance to the idea of Indonesian statehood has only been an issue since the 1970s, and only gained strong political currency in the 1990s. In other words, an explanation is needed for why Aceh’s independence was a politically redundant issue until widespread resistance to the state developed in the last few decades.

As will be evident from the following sections, Suharto’s authoritarian regime lost the hearts and minds of the Acehnese. The sense of alienation makes Aceh different from East Timor or Irian Jaya, where it is questionable that the
people of these territories ever accepted Indonesian rule at the time of their absorption. In Aceh’s case, it was not that people lacked nationalist fervor but that a period of human rights abuses and economic exploitation has led many Acehnese to favor independence, or at the very least substantial autonomy from the state of Indonesia. Events since the 1970s illustrate this point.

ENTER GAM

In 1976 a new factor in the form of GAM, or the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement), arrived on Aceh’s political scene. It grew from a small number of Hasan di Tiro’s followers into a movement of thousands holding control over substantial areas of Aceh. The Darul Islam movement of the 1950s for the creation of an Islamic state was conclusively brought to an end in the 1960s, and although there was some overlap in personnel (including di Tiro himself), GAM was a very different organization.

GAM was established in 1976 when di Tiro declared independence for Aceh in an event that seems to have gone unnoticed by the Indonesian authorities (although given the small numbers involved, they could be forgiven for the oversight). This declaration marked the first emergence of GAM, which has subsequently been crushed several times, but continues to reemerge. In fact, despite nearly a decade of martial law under Suharto and a major police operation in more recent times, GAM probably has the largest numbers of armed members today than any time in its short history.

Some space is necessary to understand the nature of the movement that was founded by Tengku Hasan di Tiro in 1976. First, the movement reflects the character of di Tiro himself. Although he has lived the bulk of his life in the west (Sweden particularly), he is the heir to an important Acehnese family of famous Muslim scholars. The di Tiro family has a claim to the Aceh Sultanate, based on a disputed episode in which it is said that the last recognized Sultan handed them his mantle. Di Tiro explicitly links Aceh’s independence to his own family, using the destruction of his family by the Dutch as the principal reason why Aceh Merdeka (Aceh’s Independence) was not possible until 1976. Paying some attention to the need for democracy and the nebulous concept of “the will of the people”, di Tiro lays claim to the Acehnese sultanate which GAM promises to restore.

Hasan di Tiro has experienced growing frustration with Indonesia, which culminated in the 1976 establishment of the Aceh Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF), to later also be called the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) by the media. GAM is not internally cohesive; there are major ideological and personality splits within the group. Some foreign observers say that the core of GAM is far more solidified than both Indonesian officials and the international media have made out. The military hierarchy of GAM in Aceh has declared for di Tiro. The formal head of the armed struggle is Tengku Abdullah Syafi’i, who remains the most powerful military commander inside Aceh, while Cut Nur Asyikin heads the important women’s chapter (women sometimes participate in the fighting and in support roles in Aceh). Di Tiro himself is now elderly and ill from a series of strokes. A key di Tiro lieutenant and cabinet minister in exile, Zaini Abdullah, has emerged as the most likely successor to the ailing di Tiro.

Although inspiration from, and reference to, Islam is reasonably common in literature and statements emanating from GAM, it is not prominent in its propaganda. For instance, there is not even a mention of Islam in the “Re-Declaration of Independence of Aceh Sumatra” in 1976. The approach taken varies with the audience. At times the literature is anti-western, but special vitriol is reserved for Java, the Javanese, and above all, Jakarta. Di Tiro claims that GAM members have been labeled “Muslim fanatics” to “isolate them internationally”.

In the literature that emanates from GAM, and di Tiro in particular, Aceh’s case for independence is based on (1) its separate history; (2) economic exploitation by the center; and (3) human rights abuses and a general lack of democracy. Given the claim of continuous support for independence in Aceh since 1945, GAM tries to downplay ideas that Aceh may have at some stage been a willing part of the Republic of Indonesia; ironically, this stance is the mirror image of the military claims that Aceh has always been a restive province.

Pervading GAM’s literature are references to racial definition and anger against the state of Indonesia. The Indonesian government is variously described as “Javanese Indonesian colonialist” or a “lately fabricated Javanese Indonesia”. Governors are called “Acehnese quislings”. Indonesia itself is a “fabricated pseudo-nation” with “Indonesian nationalism” as “a cover-up for the incipient Javanese nationalism”. Indonesian is viewed as a corruption of Malay and referred to as “Pidgin Malay” – a “grotesque language”. To di Tiro, the Indonesian flag is an upside down Polish flag, and the national anthem is plagiarized from Yale’s “Boola-boola” song.

In the eyes of di Tiro, Indonesia is a Western creation that extends the shelf life of colonialism in order to cripple true self-determination. This view is summed up by the title of a 1985 di Tiro publication “Indonesian Nationalism: A Western Invention to Subvert Islam and to Prevent Decolonization of the Dutch East Indies”, or the 1984 publication “Indonesia as a Model Neo-Colony”. There is a strong anti-capitalist theme running through his works. Indonesia is also characterized, not only as a lackey of an exploitative colonial order, but a fascist dictatorship. All this leads to the conclusion that peoples in South Maluku, West Papua, Sulawesi, Borneo, and East Timor are also colonies.

In practice GAM has deliberately targeted people of Javanese origin in their field operations. In the case of Central Aceh, large numbers of Javanese transmigrants, who had lived in the area since Dutch times, left the district in mid-2001 due to GAM intimidation. GAM makes no apologies for its practice of removing the Javanese, arguing that the military uses them as spies and informers. In one interview with this author, a GAM leader maintained that the TNI (Indonesian military) and BRIMOB (mobile brigade police) consisted of 80% Javanese personnel. Although this is almost certainly an inflated figure, it does reveal a strong identification of the security forces with Java, rather than Indonesia itself.

What will GAM do with Aceh should it obtain independence? GAM literature stresses the history and restoration
of the Acehnese sultanate as the reason for independence. They wish to go back to the Golden Age of Iskandar Muda, with one leading GAM official saying that the laws of Iskandar Muda would serve as the foundation for the new “social contract”. However, it is questionable that such a body of law would be relevant to modern-day Aceh, which no longer resembles Iskandar Muda’s feudal empire. It is unclear what a government by GAM might look like should it ever come to power, or whether such a government would in fact benefit Aceh.

Oscillations of the Free Aceh Movement

Broadly speaking GAM’s activities can be divided into three distinct phases, during which the movement was undermined and subsequently strengthened.

In the first phase, between 1976 and 1982, GAM proclaimed independence and attempted to spread propaganda for independence. By the end of this phase, the GAM movement was crushed by the security forces, with its leaders either dead, in prison, or in exile. However, a solid core of supporters went to Libya to receive training.

The second phase began with the return of a hundred well trained GAM operatives from Libya in 1989, when Aceh was declared a Military Operation Zone (DOM: Daerah Operasi Militar) by the Suharto government. By late 1991, the province was largely under Indonesian control again and government troops had doubled to 12,000 in the mid-1990s.

Brutalized by the war in East Timor, the troops who conducted the DOM were known for their “slash and burn” tactics. This involved massive repression (including more than 5,000-6,000 deaths during the operation, many later discovered in mass graves) as well as torture, arrests without due process, burning the homes of suspected independence supporters (or sometimes their entire village), house to house searches and serious sexual assaults on women with alleged GAM connections.

The GAM, drawing its strength from the traditionally restive areas of Pidie, North Aceh and West Aceh, was able to gradually spread the rebellion to “non-traditional” areas in the east and south – areas not traditionally resistant to the idea of the Indonesian state – because of the enormous hatred that has built up due to the actions of the security forces. This phase was the most crucial in turning the Acehnese against the security forces.

In the third phase, which could also be called the reformasi era, the head of the armed forces, General Wiranto, announced the end of DOM in August 1998. His withdrawal of the security personnel introduced specifically to bolster the local government forces, was accompanied by televised scenes of Acehnese hurling insults and rocks at departing troops. After the resignation of Suharto earlier that year, there was a new boldness in 1998. Wiranto apologized to the Acehnese (reportedly causing many to break down in tears) on August 7, 1998. As subsequent events were to show, however, a great opportunity to engage in dialogue, restore justice, end human rights abuses, and placate anti-Indonesian feelings was missed. Violence returned to the province in late 1998 with engagements between GAM and local security forces. Over the next few years, the situation grew increasingly worse. In 2001, 1500 people were killed, the worst tally on record.

As one measure of dissatisfaction with the security forces, GAM has grown from a handful of di Tiro acolytes to an estimated armed cadre that hovers around 10,000 to 15,000 in number (these figures only include those with weapons). Weapons are sourced from Thailand, with funding from Aceh through GAM’s taxation system and possible support from private Malaysian sources. In the past, GAM has also purchased weapons from corrupt elements of the security forces. GAM officials have stated that they will not abandon the armed struggle in the same fashion as the Falintil in East Timor, on the grounds that the military will destroy them if they disarm or go into cantonment.

As mentioned earlier, GAM’s training was done in Libya, but the Libyan connection is now downplayed by both sides. frstwhile sponsor of global terrorism, Qaddafi, has committed Libya to Indonesia’s territorial integrity, while GAM now claims that its training was paid for and done by mercenaries. GAM has strongly denied that its members have any connection with Afghanistan and has taken strenuous efforts not to be identified with terrorist networks like Al-Qaeda. On September 15, 2001, in response to the terrorist attacks in the US, GAM’s exiled leadership issued a statement that, in part, read: “We support and firmly stand behind the United States in its drive against terrorism in whatever guise they [sic] may appear.”

What this history demonstrates is that GAM, although often described by the Indonesian military and the international media (not entirely without justification) as a rag-tag collection of irregulars, has dramatically improved its fortunes since 1976 despite serious attempts to destroy it. Growing support for independence in Aceh is not synonymous with support for GAM, since much of the population has been terrorized by both sides in this conflict. However, GAM has been able to recruit bigger numbers than ever before largely thanks to central governmental policies that have alienated the local population.

Operations of the Military

There are currently around 12,000 troops in Aceh, supplemented by another 20,000 police (mostly BRIMOB). Does the military respond to civilian control in Aceh? Evidence seems to indicate that they do not. The International Crisis Group stated that: “The military is driven by what it sees as its own sacred mission and also by the hopes that others have in its capacity to achieve that mission.” Complete access to the strategies of both the police/military (and GAM for that matter) is difficult given the opaque nature of decision making and the inability of outsiders (domestic and foreign) to be privy to that process. Nevertheless, there are some observations that can be made. The overall security operation in Aceh is not under martial law and therefore functions under the aegis of the police. All military units are, in theory, under police control, which is in turn (again in theory) answerable to civilian authorities at the national and provincial levels. There is evidence that the different branches of the police and the military are not well coordinated. Even politicians have complained that security forces have under-
minded the attempts to seal a peace accord, most likely because these forces have no faith in negotiations and see it as a patriotic duty to win the war through the force of arms.

Human rights abuses continue in Aceh, and military involvement can be shown in at least some of these cases. The Republic of Indonesia’s (RI) negotiating team favors an expansion of the talks to include other groups, but fundamentally all groups opposed to the military, whether they employ violant means or not, are treated as “GAM”. The political movement SIRA (Aceh Referendum Information Center), which promotes a referendum on the issue of independence, and the victims’ rehabilitation group RATA (Rehabilitation Action for Torture Victims in Aceh) have both suffered the consequences of being critical of the government.15  Military representatives and their sympathizers seemed to simultaneously characterize GAM as a rag tag bunch of criminals unresponsive to command and control on one hand, and a well coordinated conspiracy, including all the NGO groups in Banda Aceh (especially SIRA), on the other.

While human rights abuses and assassinations became common place during the DOM phase, the situation has not improved in the post-Suharto era, apart from a brief respite after May 1998. Killings of both combatants and non-combatants happen nearly on a daily basis. The military campaign against the GAM often takes the form of the assassinaion of suspected (and unarmed) sympathizers in what Tempo magazine likens to Argentina’s “dirty war.”16 A common tactic has been to leave dead bodies lying on public highways or in front of army and police posts as warnings.17

The US State Department’s human rights’ report on Indonesia for 2000 holds both the security forces and the GAM responsible for “numerous extrajudicial killings”, although the former is believed to bear greater responsibility. Amnesty International has concluded that “the majority [two-thirds or more] of the victims are not from the two parties to the conflict but are ordinary citizens”18.

Under Presidential Decree IV of April 2001, a six point plan was supposed to be implemented to provide a host of development and security measures in Aceh. Given the lack of development anywhere in Indonesia, security measures have been given more weight. Both government and business representatives confirm that the strategy has clearly been to enhance security first before looking to other measures to win the people’s loyalty. The security forces have launched the Operasi Pemulihan Keamanan dan Penegakan Hukum (OKPH) or “Safety Recovery Operation”.

The police and army have set up a network of posts and road blocks for the dual purposes of preventing people from throwing stones or firing into the posts and to allow for the collection of tolls. There are 70-80 road blocks alone on the way from Banda Aceh towards Medan, a distance of roughly 400 kilometers. It is estimated that soldiers in the Indonesian military only receive Rp 10,000 (US$1) per day (the rest of their salary stays with their family), while BRIMOB are on a miserly Rp 6,000. Their incomes are heavily supplemented by informal “tolls” collected at these roadblocks, which place an enormous burden on the poor population. This kind of informal taxation serves to further confuse military objectives. The population’s resentment at paying inordinate amounts of money (given the high numbers of soldiers) un-

dermines any possibility that the security forces can win the people’s allegiance for the government.

While officials on the RI negotiating side admit that there are faults on both sides over the course of the modern conflict, they place the blame for the security crisis on the GAM as a separatist and unconstitutional body. In public and in private, it is readily acknowledged that the soldiers are completely unprofessional due to the low pay, but it is believed that these issues will be solved once the GAM is defeated.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The human rights situation in Aceh is out of control. Justice has completely broken down. There is no witness protection, no due process of law for suspects, and no registrar of missing persons. The vast majority of murders and destruction of property is committed by “unknown persons” – although invariably both sides accuse the other of the crime. This gives the conflict a very messy character, whereby no one can be sure who has committed a given crime and for what reason although for the Acehnese, suspicion often falls on the security forces.

There is strong evidence that the security forces have not acted in a wholly professional manner. Indonesia’s official National Commission on Human Rights (Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia [Komnas-HAM]) has over 1616 well documented cases of military abuses on file from August 1998 to the end of 1999 – not one of which has come to trial.19 Tapol, the London based Indonesia human rights NGO, claims that there are a further 7,727 cases from the DOM period. Various investigations by parliament and Komnas-HAM have concluded and culminated in two trials, but critics say that the punishments are too light (ranging from 2 to 10 years) for the crimes committed, and that those tried are scapegoats for more senior officers who have so far escaped the court proceedings. Some in the diplomatic community, and many in Aceh, question whether or not those convicted have been properly processed, and that those convictions are “a patriotic duty to win the war through the force of arms.”20 While officials on the RI negotiating side admit that there are faults on both sides over the course of the modern conflict, they place the blame for the security crisis on the GAM as a separatist and unconstitutional body. In public and in private, it is readily acknowledged that the soldiers are completely unprofessional due to the low pay, but it is believed that these issues will be solved once the GAM is defeated.

The security forces have gained further attention for their alleged actions. The Network for Indonesian Democracy, Japan (NINDJA) has documented numerous incidents of military threats if flags are not flown in Aceh on Indonesia’s Independence Day. NINDJA also claims to have interviewed witnesses to a massacre at the Flora Bumi plantation and pinned the blame on the security forces. This incident occurred in Idi Rayeuk where the village was burned and forty people massacred in August 2001. The district of East Aceh tried to send in an investigation team to do a report but were refused access to the military-held area.

But the real cause célèbre in Aceh was the December 2000 killing of three RATA volunteers. Four RATA activists were ambushed by BRIMOB and the civilian militia, and one lived to tell the tale (and to identify eight attackers). The eye witness accounts of the survivor and others put four BRIMOB and four militia personnel in custody, but all had escaped by mid-2001. This incident points to what is probably the most substantial problem for the people of Aceh, in that the majority feels that justice has never been done (some-
thing freely admitted by officials), and that there is no effective law and order.

The involvement of the security forces in human rights abuses in no way exonerates GAM. GAM has routinely been involved in the assassination of Javanese persons, suspected informers, and security personnel. It also enforces its own taxation system, under which businesses and smaller operators who do not pay put themselves in considerable danger. Local commanders and criminal elements (many simply free-riding on the GAM name) have been involved in drug running, extortion, and piracy, even though many of these actions are condemned by the exiled GAM leadership in Sweden. However, whenever human rights abuses occur there is a tendency by many Acehnese to suspect the security forces especially after the RATA and Flora Bumi killings. The fact remains that even in villages unsupportive of GAM, the people fear a visit by the “Soldier-Bandits” (i.e. the Indonesia security forces) far more than a visit by GAM.

In Banda Aceh there are several groups covering human rights issues. The main ones are Flower Aceh, Koaalisi NGO HAM, FP HAM, and RATA. SIRA is more overtly political, as its aim is to bring about a referendum. All of these groups operate under difficult circumstances and are viewed as highly suspicious by the authorities, SIRA most of all. Despite the fact that none of these groups advocate the use of violence, nor do they openly declare for independence, all are viewed as betrayers of the Republic of Indonesia because of their overt criticism of the government.

The result of a marriage between more than a hundred groups, SIRA appears to have a very strong following within Aceh based on the numbers of people who attended the 1999 Referendum rally in Banda Aceh, even though it has no formal membership base as such. Its leader, Muhammad Nasar, is regarded as Indonesia’s first political prisoner since the fall of Suharto and has been sentenced to 10 months in jail for “spreading hate.” SIRA is well organized and has drawn a number of lessons from the East Timor case. Although there are philosophical similarities between SIRA and GAM, SIRA is clearly not the same as GAM. SIRA does not advocate violence, recognizes Indonesian state authority, and does not openly endorse independence. Members of SIRA have been kidnapped and tortured by the police, and many believe that they are amongst the 400 or so names drawn up on the military “red list”.

In the final analysis, there is a fundamental confusion within the security forces about what constitutes a belligerent or an “enemy” in this conflict. Supporters of independence, or NGO groups promoting human rights, are demonstrably targeted by the security forces. Some have been executed in extra-judicial killings, a number have been tortured, and many have been verbally warned. Although both the military and GAM are guilty of human rights abuses, the former has done little to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate targets, thereby seriously polarizing Acehnese society as a result.

**Attempts to Mediate**

The Wahid Administration, upon assuming power in 1999, attempted to find a negotiated settlement to the problem in Aceh, and in 2000, a “Humanitarian Pause” was implemented. Although the Indonesian president and the military chief of staff gave orders to prevent the deaths of non-combatants, nearly 800 people lost their lives during the ceasefire in effect from June 2, 2000 to January 15, 2001. While the Humanitarian Pause’s achievements seemed negligible to many, it does represent the start of a dialogue process. These talks, brokered by the Switzerland-based Henry Dunant Centre (HDC, also known as the Centre pour le Dialogue Humanitaire), have been about improving the humanitarian situation rather than about the political situation (which Jakarta did not entertain). Talks have been extended to a series of discussions in Banda Aceh at the Kuala Tripa Hotel under the title Damai Melalai Dialog (Peace Through Dialogue).

HDC’s role has been to facilitate the discussions between RI and GAM through the construction of a new round of talks called the “democratic consultation”, now that the Humanitarian Committee and the Security Modalities Committee have concluded. What this really means is the bringing of all the major NGO groups in Aceh into the process so that it is not just RI and GAM – thus rendering “popular consultation” a more apt (but more awkward) descriptor of the process than “democratic consultation.”

Unfortunately there have been strong signs of a growing reluctance in Jakarta (under both the Wahid and Megawati regimes) for a political settlement. Indonesia’s Defense Minister at the time, Mahfud M. D. revealed his frustration with the process in early 2001: “Look at the Free Aceh Movement. We have held talks with them twice, but they were fruitless. They still ask for independence, which the government will never allow.” This statement reveals the minister’s unrealistic expectations, and Mahfud has further promised to undertake stern action against the independence movement. Prominent generals have lobbied for a resumption of greater military action. Strategic Reserve (Kostrad) commander Lieutenant-General Ryamizard Ryacudu has issued a further challenge to the civilian authorities: “The issuer of the orders should also be willing and dare to take responsibility. Let us say that Kostrad troops are deployed in Aceh and then a lot of people are killed, the soldiers should not then be quick to be blamed and dragged to the court for legal matters.”

Ultimately RI wants the talks to conclude an agreement that also gives amnesty to all soldiers accused of war crimes. The government will “never” consider foreign observers as this is an internal matter. In its eyes, the allowance of foreign observers is a slippery slope to an international court, and it is unfair that GAM be spared this exposure while Indonesian officers go to jail under such an arrangement.

Having said so on record, it is well known that the military has lost patience with the peace process. RI accuses GAM of not taking the process seriously by sending representatives without any power in the field, while RI has sent “proper officers”. RI wants Abdullah Syafi’i, the GAM military commander, to be present at the talks, but GAM will not agree to this as it does not think his safety is assured; journalists who interview him report that he shifts location every night. This process was disrupted on July 20, 2001 when the security forces arrested the GAM negotiators, which seems like a des-
perate move that will no doubt reinforce Abdullah Syafi’i’s reluctance to join the talks.

Referendum

It would seem quite clear that the majority of Acehnese favor independence, and many Acehnese watchers believe that any vote on the issue would see independence win with about the same margins as it did in East Timor (around the 80 percent mark). Although this seems like a bold claim or at the very least untested, the pro-referendum rally in 1999 demonstrated a significant depth of feeling. However, the situation is not irreversible. Support for independence is strong largely because most Acehnese are afraid of, or angry at, the security forces and not necessarily because they are anti-Indonesian or GAM supporters. Large numbers of Acehnese want a referendum on the issue, which makes groups like SIRA, and some student based groups, very important in political terms.

Although GAM and SIRA activists claim that anti-Indonesian feelings have been evident in Aceh all along, there was a particular out-pouring of anger in 1999. During the reformasi era, the public learned a lot more about the military operation conducted in Aceh over the previous decade. There was enormous anger when the Acehnese realized that human rights had been systematically and substantially abused, and word-of-mouth stories of killings and rapes by the authorities were not just isolated incidents. This situation was seriously compounded by two events: firstly, the Simpang KKA incident in North Aceh on May 3, 1999 in which soldiers were caught on film, by a RCTI (Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia) reporter, killing up to 56 villagers and taking away the wounded (some of whom were never seen again); and secondly, the July 23, 1999 incident at a Muslim boarding school in West Aceh in which 38 people were killed and burned in a mass grave, the exhumation of which was captured on film. The ultimate outcome aside from the senseless loss of lives was the realization by many Acehnese moved by the earlier apology that violence by the security forces was not a thing of the past.

Events in East Timor in 1999, coupled with promises for a similar ballot in Aceh by the mercurial President Wahid, served to unrealistically raise expectations and to heighten public clamor for a ballot. On November 9, 1999, there was a pro-referendum rally in Banda Aceh organized by SIRA and other like-minded groups, with similar rallies held in other cities in Aceh. Estimates of the crowd that gathered in Banda Aceh range from the pro-government estimates of 300,000 attendees, allegedly threatened by GAM into attending (even though the GAM would not ask for a referendum given their ideological claims), to NGO estimates of 2 million. Media reports suggested between 500,000 to 1 million, with large numbers also prevented from attending by the police and army road blocks. Whichever figure one accepts, many Acehnese attempted to demonstrate for a referendum. An attempt to repeat the referendum rally exactly a year later sparked a massive security operation to prevent it. According to an International Crisis Group report: “[m]ethods included shooting out the tires of cars and trucks, and shooting in the air at checkpoints and into the sea in the direction of boats bringing prospective participants. At least 41 people were killed during the two weeks preceding the rally.”

Economic Exploitation and Regional Autonomy

In 2001, a special autonomy deal – similar to the one made with Irian Jaya – was offered to Aceh, in which 70% of government revenues will be returned to the province. If done correctly, this arrangement will be an important step forward in alleviating the problem of Aceh. One of the most substantial charges leveled against Jakarta by many sections of Acehnese society is that Aceh has been subject to economic exploitation. These feelings are by no means unique to Aceh, but they have led to wider alienation. This perceived exploitation in Aceh, although also claimed by many in the provinces of Kalimantan and Riau, has become wrapped up in secessionist claims in the restive province. Aceh produces 30-40% of Indonesia’s gas exports and about 10% of its oil, yet to date it has seen little returns. In the early 1990s, Aceh was ranked as the seventh poorest province in Indonesia (out of 27 at the time) despite its wealth in natural resources. Less than 5% of the returns went to Aceh.

As a result of this economic imbalance, there has emerged a “dual economy” or two separate economies with very little interaction between them. Development has concentrated around Lhokseumawe, with the “rich ghettos of migrants” on the one hand, and the vast majority of Acehnese who largely missed the gains of the New Order period on the other. Exxon Mobil’s operations at PT Arun, near Lhokseumawe provides no better symbol of this “dual economy.”

Under Law Number 5/1974, Aceh was given special status as a Provinsi Daerah Istimewa (Special Provincial Area). In theory, the law gave the province some authority, but in practice it meant nothing as the center could, and always did, override local initiatives. Jakarta initially tried to undercut support for the GAM in 1999 by allowing Aceh to decide on and implement aspects of Islamic law (Syariah) beyond those that apply to the rest of Indonesia’s Muslim population (inheritance, marriage and divorce), but which nevertheless failed to address the real issues of justice and poverty. In 2001 the issue of special status was revitalized. The new autonomy deal gives 70% of revenues back to Aceh and allows the provincial government to extend Syariah Law and to call the province “Nanggroe Aceh Darusalam.” Undoubtedly the return of revenue will be popular (if any of it trickles down from the provincial administration) but the popularity of Syariah Law has never been tested by popular ballot.

Prospects for the Future

It is assumed by many that Megawati, as Vice President and now President, has largely supported the use of the military in Aceh. Before becoming President, she angered many Acehnese when she stated that the problem of Aceh would be over by August 17, 2001 (Indonesia’s Independence Day). At the very least, her statement revealed an unduly optimistic view of the situation in Aceh. During a recent visit to the US, she publicly linked the threat the US faces from global terrorism with the situation in Aceh. The potency of labeling the Aceh problem as “Islamic terrorism” has taken on a
whole new exigency in the wake of September 11. It would be a tragic misunderstanding if Aceh were viewed through that particular prism.

Nevertheless, there are signs of hope in the Megawati administration: the foreign minister, Hasan Wirayuda, was intimately involved in the Aceh dialogue process in 2000 and understands the Aceh problem. In addition, the vice president, Hamzah Haz, has quietly advocated a more holistic solution to the problem, given that Haz’s United Development Party is strong in Aceh. On August 22, 2001, Megawati and a 28-member delegation went on a four-hour whirlwind tour of Aceh and she apologized on Independence Day 2001 to both Aceh and Irian Jaya, so once again there is an admission of some culpability for the crimes of state agents. But as with the apologies from Wiranto and Habibie, fine words and gestures are not the same as taking concrete actions that might reverse the problem.

The way that the Aceh conflict plays out does have international and regional implications. As US pressure comes to bear on Indonesia to deal with the connections between Islam, terrorism and government, there is a possibility that the Indonesian government may attempt to link Aceh to the wider global problem (although groups such as Laskar Jihad in Ambon will more likely be the focus of the US State Department). However, a number of Western countries, as well as some of Indonesia’s near neighbors, have expressed great concern over the problem. The commander of the US Navy’s Pacific Command, Admiral Denis Blair, has publicly stated that Indonesia’s treatment of Aceh needs to be re-examined. These comments have been echoed privately by other governments, as well as publicly by Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan on his January 2001 visit to Indonesia.

While most states support Indonesia’s territorial integrity, a number are concerned that Indonesia’s policies in Aceh are counterproductive. The threat posed by Aceh to Indonesia’s cohesion is not lost on Indonesia’s neighbors and friends. Indonesia has weathered the loss of East Timor, and would most likely also be able to cope with the departure of Irian Jaya, since both were late additions to the Republic of Indonesia. The loss of Aceh from the Republic has more serious legal and psychological consequences. Aceh is not only part of the original territory of Indonesia, but forms a part of Indonesia’s heartland people by Austronesians, and thus ethnic relatives of the peoples of Java and Sumatra (as opposed to the Melanesian East Timor and Irian Jaya). Aceh’s departure may open the door to wider secession, and, many fear, the end of Indonesia. However, it is far too early to predict either scenario, namely that Aceh will be independent or that Indonesia will break up. In fact, there is nothing inevitable about either event coming to pass, not least of all because the international community has no inclination to recognize an independent Aceh (or any other breakaway province), and GAM cannot defeat the Indonesian military in the field. It is also the case that the Indonesian military will make certain that Aceh is not lost to the Republic, but this eagerness has been the cause of the wider problems discussed in this article.

What has lead to some vociferous demands for either secessionism or separatism (meaning independence or substantial autonomy) in Aceh? Primordial sentiments and economic underdevelopment have contributed to the restive nature of modern Aceh, but these factors alone cannot explain what has transpired. GAM’s dramatic growth and the increased numbers of ordinary Acehnese demanding a referendum have only occurred after a decade of appalling human rights abuses. And as this essay has shown, the security forces have barely moved beyond the authoritarian mindset of terrorizing the population.

It is tempting to believe that democratization in Indonesia has created a chaotic situation; in fact many argue exactly this. But for Aceh the problem was clearly created by the authoritarianism of the past. Indonesia is not alone in trying to deny separatist tendencies; advanced democracies — such as Canada, the UK, or Spain — show the same tendency here. Even if confronting GAM is perfectly legal under international law and norms, the question is over the means by which this conflict has been pursued. The high numbers of innocent civilians killed by the security forces demonstrate a serious problem with these means.

These concerns give real validity to the claim made by the international NGO, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), that “basic democratic values such as pluralism, tolerance, inclusiveness, negotiation, and compromise are keys to building lasting settlements.” A substantial study concluded in 1993 by IDEA shows overwhelmingly that democracies can more easily deal with such settlements and that “[a]uthoritarian systems can present an illusion of short-term stability, but are unlikely to be sustainable over the long term.” Yugoslav and the Soviet Union are two prime examples. It is not revolutionary or even new to suggest that the New Order regime is responsible for exacerbating the problem of Aceh. However, democratization is not responsible for making the problem worse; in fact, what one can observe in Aceh is actually the failure to achieve full democratization in the province. Authoritarian practices within the security forces inherited from the past have not died with the Suharto regime.

If there is one lesson to be taken from Aceh, it is that the Indonesian military cannot hope to simply crush the rebellion. Destroying GAM in the past has seen it come back stronger and in bigger numbers than before. In a sense, the military is fighting an idea, and they are losing this war utterly and completely. Human Rights Watch has concluded that “[t]here is ample evidence ... that Indonesian forces deliberately and systematically employ executions to deter villagers from supporting GAM... .” This strategy cannot reverse the current political crisis, nor will it convince the people of Aceh, that, once again, they should support the Republic of Indonesia. What exactly has the military campaign achieved? Ironically, albeit predictably, it has fanned the flames of independence in the province of Aceh.

ENDNOTES

1 The province of Aceh — with a population of 4 million out of Indonesia’s 220 million — is located at the far northwestern corner of the Indonesian archipelago. It was well established centuries ago as the entry point of Islam into Indonesia and beyond. Today, Aceh’s brand of Islamic faith is far more orthodox than in much of the rest of Indonesia.

2 Suharto called his regime the “New Order” (Orde Baru) as a propaganda tool
Indonesia, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, transmigration has occurred since Dutch times. A large number of Javanese while many transmigrants in Indonesia (including many to Aceh) came spontaneously from the crowded islands of Java and Madura to less populated areas, while many transmigrants in Indonesia (including many to Aceh) came spontaneously (i.e. without government sponsorship). Transmigration families moved into Aceh for a host of reasons, but often they have been connected with either government departments or business interests. To further complicate the picture, transmigration has occurred since Dutch times. A large number of Javanese families moved into the mountainous regions of central Aceh to work on the coffee plantations. This community still remains in Aceh and is now several generations removed from Java itself. They represent a genuine settler community, and many regard themselves as daerah puteh (sons of the area), just like the Acehnese or Gayo.

Many cities in Indonesia have streets named after these three heroes. Cut Nyi Dhien, a determined resistance fighter, has assumed cult-like status in Aceh, and the city is still very popular as a narrative. 4 Aceh’s participation in Indonesia’s post-war anti-colonialist struggle is often cited by Indonesian officials as a factor that binds Aceh to the Indonesian state. Troops, funds and equipment flowed out of Aceh to join the independence struggle, including, famously, Acehnese women selling their jewelry to purchase the Revolution’s first aircraft – this DC3 now rests in Banda Aceh’s main public square.

Grandson of the aforementioned Teungku Chik di Tiro of the Dutch War, 5 Di Tiro, like a number of other GAM officials, uses the title Teungku – traditionally used for Islamic scholars. This has probably reinforced the erroneous impression that GAM has an Islamicist agenda. However, in di Tiro’s case, the title is viewed as being hereditary. With the demise of the aristocrats (uleebalang), the scholars and teachers of Islam filled the void. Scholars who have interacted with di Tiro agree that his philosophy and outlook are aristocratic (some would even say “feudal!”) rather than religious. After nearly half a century abroad, he has lived, as historian Geoffrey Robinson politely puts it, “in a fashion that one would not readily associate with the life of an Islamic scholar.” Geoffrey Robinson, “Rawan is as Rawan Does: The Origins of Disorder in New Order Aceh”, in Benedict R. O’G. Anderson (ed.), Violence and the State in Suharto’s Indonesia, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, p. 219.

Much like naming in other contested landscapes, the spelling of Aceh denotes political preferences. The spelling “Acheh” is often preferred by those promoting independence, largely because it is not the Indonesian spelling, and not because it has any better historical or linguistic “parity.” The reference to Aceh-Sumatra reflects earlier notions that the territory of Iskandar Muda will be re-stored, and reflects di Tiro’s idea of somehow bringing the whole of Sumatra into the picture of Aceh’s authority. If the intention was to rule over Sumatra, directly or via tribute, this would hardly make a greater Aceh less colonial – by di Tiro’s definition – than Indonesia itself.

GAM’s military component, which also goes by the moniker, AGAM, is firmly under the control of Tengku Abdullah Syafi’i – the most powerful GAM leader inside Aceh itself. AGAM is divided into district and subdistrict commands. Although a chain of command has been set up to match the Indonesian police and military, there is evidence that local commanders may, from time to time, enjoy a wide degree of autonomy. During 2001, a local GAM “officer” declared that unless international shipping paid GAM taxes, piracy would continue. This statement was repudiated by the GAM high command at a later date. Although various rogue commands and free rider criminal elements using the GAM “brand” are known to operate, Syafi’i’s AGAM represents the most serious threat to the security forces.

There is no evidence to suggest that people of Javanese ancestry are any more likely to be government “spies” than other transmigrant peoples (or even sympathetic Acehnese, of which a number are in the various services). But it is likely that transmigrant populations will not only be completely opposed to the idea of independence for Aceh, but are sufficiently angered by GAM’s intimidation to have no sympathy for them.

This was the first of various apologies given to Aceh – Megawati also offered one soon after taking office as president. Perhaps one of the most crucial elements of the apology is that it is an implicit acceptance of culpability for the crimes against humanity. There can be no doubt that large numbers of extra-judicial killings and sexual attacks did take place in Aceh, and that the security forces perpetuated many (possibly most) of them.

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Political uncertainties have plagued Nepal since the events at Narayanhti Palace on the fateful night on June 1, 2001. The royal massacre that claimed the lives of King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev and his heirs sent a shock wave through the nation. In the days that followed, angered Nepalis rejected the official version of events which stated that Prince Dipendra gunned down his family in a drunken stupor after a quarrel over his choice of bride and then committed suicide. On June 4, Gyanendra, the slain king’s brother, was hastily enthroned. In a grief-stricken rage, rioters took to the streets of Kathmandu shouting “Death to Gyanendra” and threw rocks at the palace. A curfew was immediately imposed, and the military, with unwavering loyalty to the new king, took control of the capital.

Instability ensued. Arrests followed an article published in Kantipur, a Nepali-language daily, which compared the royal killings to the bloodiest coup in Nepal’s history, the Kot Massacre of 1846. Meanwhile, the Maoists, a home-grown guerilla movement, escalated their six-year effort to overthrow the constitutional monarchy. The Nepalese Maoist movement models itself after the Shining Path guerrillas in Peru, and it is not affiliated with the Communist government in China, a faithful supporter of Nepal’s monarchy. Nepal became a multiparty parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy in 1990 after significant pressure on King Birendra. Democratically elected governments have had a high turnover since then, and in mid-July following the palace massacre the prime minister resigned, tarnished by corruption charges and criticized for his passivity during palace investigations.

The new prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, ushered in a brief interval of normalcy. He took immediate action and initiated negotiations with the Maoists, who agreed to a ceasefire. To his credit, Deuba succeeded in brokering a series of three peace talks, which took place between August and November. Though negotiations remained on friendly terms, none of the Maoist demands were met, even when they dropped the most thorny one from their list: the end of the constitutional monarchy, officially Hindu, in favor of a secular communist republic. The four-month cease fire shattered at the end of November in what was conjectured to be a split between hawks and doves among the Maoist ranks. Guerilla attacks resumed at an unprecedented level.

On November 26, King Gyanendra successfully garnered support for a state of emergency and de facto civil war against the Maoists by adopting the international rhetoric against terrorism. The state of emergency has an unsettling precedent: his father, Mahendra, invoked emergency powers in 1960. Mahendra effectively ended the nascent democracy, established less than two years earlier, and assumed absolute...
power for the monarchy. Moreover, he arrested government leaders and banned political parties; it took thirty years for multiparty democracy to reemerge. Under the present state of emergency, King Gyanendra is getting his first taste of power. He has received international support for his anti-terrorist stance, most recently from Colin Powell during a January visit to Nepal. Gyanendra will most likely push to extend the emergency. His attitude towards democracy is yet untested, but his commitment to end the Maoist threat to national stability once and for all seems firm. If political parties are unable to gain consensus to support a continued state of emergency, there could be a contest between the elected government and the palace. Under the circumstances, the survival of Nepal’s eleven-year-old democracy could be at stake. The following is a brief survey of the monarchy’s role in Nepal, which will demonstrate both its historic importance and its capricious relationship with democracy.

Symbol of Unity

The Shah dynasty has been the unifying force in Nepal since the 1768 conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by Prithvinarayan Shah. The Shah kings were the leaders of a tiny hill state called Gorkha, but Prithvinarayan Shah and his successors conquered vast tracts of rugged Himalayan terrain, from the Teesta River in the east to the Sutlej in the west. The final defeat of three Malla kingdoms, which had dominated the Kathmandu Valley for much of the medieval period, took twenty-three years of scrupulous and unyielding tactics and gained the Gorkhas their reputation as fierce and rugged soldiers. The period of expansionism ended abruptly with the Anglo-Nepali war of 1814-1816, which cost Nepal 40,000 square miles of territory but secured for it sovereign status and a hands-off policy from the British.

The religious basis of the king’s legitimacy has been an important element in the national identity of Nepal, now the only surviving Hindu kingdom in the world. The central sanctification process, with Vedic and tantric roots, was brought to the capital by Prithvinarayan Shah. It consists of a coronation ceremony, raja abhisheka, which confers on the king divine status as an incarnation of Vishnu. The king’s legitimacy is further enhanced by his ancestry, traced to the famed Rajput warriors that fled Muslim invaders in fourteenth-century India. The Indra Jatra, a royal festival of the indigenous Newar population of the Kathmandu Valley, was appropriated by the Shah dynasty as a symbol of their conquest of the Malla kingdoms. It occurs annually towards the end of the monsoon season in order to affirm the king’s sanctified role of joining heaven and earth, symbolized by erecting a ceremonial pole at the medieval Malla palace, Hanuman Dhoka.

Another important feature is the blessing of the king by the “living goddess” Kumari. Prithvinarayan Shah used the latter to gain instant legitimacy, when he sealed his conquest of Kathmandu during the Indra Jatra festival and placed himself before the Kumari to receive immediate sanctification as the ruler of Nepal.

Even during the period of de facto rule by the powerful Rana family, which lasted over one-hundred years, the monarchy was maintained as a symbol of both unity and continuity, though divested of any real power. Control of Nepal was transferred from the Shah dynasty to ministers in the Rana family between 1846 and 1950, after Jung Bahadur Rana wiped out most of the key ministers and power brokers of Nepal in the Kot Massacre of 1846. King Rajendra fled to India but was later prevented from reentering; his son, Surendra Bikram Shah, was enthroned instead. Thereafter, the position of Prime Minister became the hereditary prerogative of the Ranas, who married into the royal family to enhance their prestige. The sanctity of the Shah dynasty was nevertheless emphasized in an effort to keep the royal family isolated as “virtual state prisoners,” while the Rana ministers had complete authority over the laws and administration of Nepal, symbolized in their possession of the royal seal, Lal Mohur.

Rivalries within the various branches of the Rana family prevented Jung Bahadur from placing himself on the throne even though he tried in vain to secure British approval for such a scheme. To the British in India, the monarchy represented a stabilizing influence in Nepal despite the many intrigues in and outside of the palace. After Jung Bahadur provided crucial military assistance to the British in the Indian “mutiny” of 1857, Queen Victoria rewarded him with a British title and the return of territory in the Terai lost in the Anglo-Nepali war of 1814-1816. Jung Bahadur’s explicitly pro-British policy was followed by the Rana family until the end of British colonial rule in India in 1947.

Hinduization

Cultural unity, under the banner of Hinduism, was consolidated during the Rana period. This was necessary in order to stabilize rule over the territorial conquests of the early Gorkha state. The Gorkhas, along with other Indo-Aryan hill people, were predominantly high-caste Hindus. One mechanism for their consolidation of power was the important legal code, the Muluki Ain of 1854, through which the multiplicity of Nepal’s ethnic and religious groups were arranged within a caste hierarchy vis-à-vis the dominant Hindu elite.

Although many of these diverse ethnic groups, together
over half of Nepal’s population, had either a Buddhist or animist heritage, they were forcibly assimilated into a Hindu caste hierarchy via the Muluki Ain. The overarching stratification entailed in this legal code impacted a wide spectrum of policies and privileges. Not only did the code delineate penalties for crimes according to caste, but it also governed laws over land tenure and trading privileges, which were economically significant. The Muluki Ain incorporated hill tribes, like the Gurung and Magar, into the middle ranks of the caste hierarchy, encouraging them to acculturate and work within the system. However, ethnicities considered impure by Hindu standards were relegated to the lower tiers of the caste hierarchy.

The result was a gradual adoption by a number of Tibeto-Burmese groups of Hindu norms and religious practices, including ritual, festivals, dress, diet, and settled agriculture. This process, dubbed Hinduisation, arose in a large part due to the political and economic advantages of assimilation. Anthropologist Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka explains this process as follows: “Within the framework of the emerging Hindu polity, ethnic populations, notably ethnic elites, responded with the adoption of specific cultural symbols of those in power.” The king remained at the apex of society, surrounded by an elite structure based on heredity and caste status. More marginal groups, in the lower echelons of the caste structure, often became subordinate to high-caste groups, who were encouraged to settle throughout the terrain by **birta** land grants. These land grants enabled the central government to extend its influence throughout the hill areas and create a network of loyal allies. The stranglehold with which the Ranas and other elites came to dominate Nepal created a resistance movement, just as democratic consciousness was awakening in the country’s southern neighbor, India.

**The Experiment**

A democratic revolution against the Ranas gained momentum after the sudden flight of King Tribhuvan to India in 1950. The Nepali Congress, a newly merged political party of various dissident groups in exile, took the king’s bold move as a cue to begin violent agitation for democracy across India’s border in the southern part of Nepal called the Terai. Meanwhile, Gyanendra, then only four years old, was temporarily enthroned in place of his grandfather. The Rana regime tried in vain to gain international recognition for the infant king. However, the government in Delhi sympathized with Nepal’s democracy movement. Indeed, many Nepali dissidents who had participated in India’s struggle for independence and afterward remained in exile there to organize their own movement. The top priority for India’s Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was a peaceful transfer of power to incipient democratic forces. Beijing had already made clear its intentions toward Tibet, and Nepal provided a crucial buffer state whose border India had pledged to defend. A restraining hand was placed on the Nepali Congress party, who had launched their struggle with Indian cooperation, just short of toppling the Rana regime, and the “Delhi compromise” was born. It consisted of a tripartite agreement between King Tribhuvan, the Rana Prime Minister, and the Nepali Congress to restore the monarchy to power and install an interim government to oversee elections to a constituent assembly.

King Tribhuvan’s triumphant return to Nepal inaugurated the first experiment in democracy on February 18, 1951. Thereafter this date is celebrated as Democracy Day. The experiment began with an interim government made up of a coalition of ministers from the Nepali Congress party and the Rana family, based on the stipulations of the Delhi compromise. The Interim Government of Nepal Act soon followed in March of 1951. It vested executive powers in the king and a council of ministers, who could be appointed or dismissed at his will. The king retained veto powers but left the direct governing to the coalition of ministers. However, the coalition, comprised of antagonistic interests, lasted less than a year, and successive cabinets likewise fell prey to internal strife. These interim governments were hampered by the lack of a mandate from the people, no defined term of office, and little authority to act without the king’s consent. Meanwhile, the monarchy took a more active role, and power gradually became concentrated in the palace. Elections for a constituent assembly were ultimately postponed until 1959. Whether one attributes the gradual centralization of power in the monarchy to the failure of interim governments or to the agency of the palace, it is clear that by 1954 the monarchy had effectively regained absolute powers.

Meanwhile, India’s role as the midwife of Nepal’s democracy had become a source of resentment. During the early 1950s, Indian influence had steadily increased. Indian officials served in an advisory capacity, assisted with top administrative roles, and provided military assistance after a 1952 coup attempt. India’s military mission stayed on eight years in order to help modernize Nepal’s army, which was perceived as a threat to Nepal’s sovereignty not to mention a great insult to its national pride in its Gorkha soldiers. While both the political parties and the monarchy owed their initial success to India, the nationalist task required Nepal to distinguish itself from India and carve out a uniquely Nepali identity.

**Nepalism**

When Tribhuvan’s son, Mahendra, ascended the throne in 1955, among his prime objectives were the diversification of Nepal’s foreign relations beyond its dependence on India and the strengthening of its national identity. His strategy in foreign policy was reminiscent of Prithvirayan Shāh’s advice in his political treatise, **Dībya Upadēsa**. Characterizing Nepal as “a gourd between two rocks,” the country’s founder counseled his successors to remain friendly to both Nepal’s powerful and sizeable neighbors. Indeed, Mahendra’s foreign policy shifted from “special relations” with India to a policy of “equal friendship” with all nations. In his first years as king, Mahendra appointed prime ministers who were alternately pro-China and pro-India in order to play these emerging powers against each other. Moreover, political diversification also opened doors to aid from a wider selection of countries. The United States was particularly eager to provide aid as part of its Cold War strategy. Two crucial moves in terms of international recognition for Nepal’s sovereignty were its joining of the United Nations in 1955 and the ex-
change of embassies with the United States, China and the Soviet Union in the years that followed. All this was accomplished by Mahendra before the elections finally took place in 1959.

The first democratically elected government came and went in less than two years. Its abrupt termination had more to do with royal ambitions than the failure of democratic institutions per se. Mahendra retained broad emergency powers in the constitution promulgated by the palace in 1959, just before the elections. The constitution had otherwise provided for a parliamentary system with a bicameral legislature, based on the British and Indian models. The Nepali Congress party won the elections with a clear majority and no significant opposition party gained enough seats in the parliament to challenge its authority. This result left the king with no leverage to counteract the socialist leanings of the new government. No doubt the pro-India bent of the Nepali Congress party caused him some concern. Given India’s later annexation of the neighboring Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim in 1974, Mahendra’s fears cannot be discounted. However, Prime Minister B.P. Koirala’s close ties with Delhi were unduly stressed in light of his careful handling of border issues with China, including the controversy over territorial possession of Mt. Everest. A more realistic concern was the opposition mounting from conservative circles. The socialist leanings of the Koirala government were immediately expressed in the Birta Abolition Act of 1959, which curtailed privileges of land-owning classes.

In the heated arena of foreign and domestic policy issues of the day, Mahendra proclaimed a state of emergency and orchestrated the arrests of Nepali Congress party members, including the prime minister, who remained in prison until 1968. The Nepali Congress responded with a guerilla uprising the next year. However, India’s defeat in the Sino-India border dispute of 1962 forced Nehru to urge an end to the armed rebellion which had launched itself from the Indian border.

Asserting national identity became a way for the monarchy to justify its existence in lieu of parliamentary democracy and also as a means of carving out a distinct niche for Nepal in the region. This policy was dubbed “Nepalism” by one minister. In the Constitution of 1962, Nepal was officially declared a Hindu state. This statement reinforced the traditional role of the monarchy as the apex of Hindu society. The precedent had been set long ago when Prithvinirayan Shah declared Nepal asal hindustan, the true Hindustan. The new system, called the Panchayat Raj, was conceived by the king as a uniquely Nepali form of government. It involved three tiers of government – local, district, and national – designed ostensibly to decentralized policy decisions. Local governments were directly elected, and these representatives elected the district seats, who in turn elected the national government or Rastriya Panchayat. This indirect process served to reinforce conservative policies and the position of traditional elites. It gave the Panchayat system the semblance of democracy, but the king held both veto power and the ability to formulate laws.

The Panchayat Raj was touted as “guided democracy” without the factionalism – or the freedom – of party politics. It was hollow rhetoric. The Rastriya Panchayat acted more as a rubber stamp to palace policies than an active legislative body. Mahendra sought to sweep his rule under the cloak of democracy in order to legitimize it both at home and abroad. Moreover, according to anthropologist Richard Burghart, Mahendra articulated his political system in such a way as to legitimize “the continuing political autonomy of his kingdom and the perpetuation of his preeminent role in a ‘uniquely Nepalese’ form of government.” The new system had some progressive features. For example, a new legal code soon replaced the Muluki Ain of 1854. Caste, though not outlawed, was replaced by the concept of equality of all citizens before the law. However, political parties remained banned for the duration of Mahendra’s rule, and the press was censored. Meanwhile, according to Louise Brown, “Mahendra wooed the army while simultaneously emasculating it as a political force.”

Language policy likewise became a focal point for the reinforcement of a unique national identity. Nepali was affirmed as the state language in the new constitution and became the only official medium for education, government radio and public signboards. Hindi and Newari, the indigenous language of the Kathmandu Valley, were discontinued in official capacities. The aim of this policy has been summarized by political scientist Selma Sonntag: “Nation-building meant distancing Nepal politically (through the panchayat system) and culturally (through the Nepali language) from India and its Hindi-speaking masses of the Gangetic plain.” The promotion of Nepali as a national language can be seen both as a means of national unification and as a modern tool of domination by the existing elite. Just as with the process of Hinduization, the result was a tendency toward assimilation. Often the youth relinquished their mother tongue in favor of Nepali, learned in school, which offered more economic prospects. Once again, national unity relied on the assertion of a “hegemonic culture” over ethnic and linguistic multiplicity with a detrimental impact on the cultural integrity of ethnic groups. This is captured by the Panchayat slogan: ek bhasa, ek bhes, ek des or “one language, one dress, one country.”

Jana Andolan

Although the recently slain King Birendra will be remembered as a true collaborator with democracy, it was not an easy start. He inherited the Panchayat system from his father, Mahendra, but in 1980 submitted it to a referendum after a spontaneous outburst of anti-Panchayat agitation. Student demonstrations, sparked a groundswell of discontent with the Nepali government in Kathmandu and beyond. In response, Birendra sought a popular mandate for his government. Elections were held in 1980, asking the Nepali people to decide between a reformed Panchayat Raj or multiparty democracy, which resulted in a fifty-five percent victory in
favor of status quo albeit in modified form. The reformed system eliminated three-tiered indirect elections in favor of direct elections at the national level, which were held in 1981 according to universal suffrage. The result was a seventy percent turnover in the membership of the Rastriya Panchayat, a testament to the widespread disapproval of the entrenched elites.

The 1981 elections did not lessen the palace’s power, but it did liberalize the political climate to the extent that political parties, though officially banned, could effectively function; they began to organize with fervor.\textsuperscript{25} The Panchayat system had done little to alleviate poverty in rural areas. Despite steady and increasing foreign aid reaching $226 million in 1990, Nepal remained one of the poorest countries in the world with a GNP per capita of only $170.\textsuperscript{26} The economic plight of the ordinary citizen was further exacerbated by an embargo imposed by India in 1989. The embargo, in response to an arms deal that Birendra brokered with China, severely limited access routes to commerce for landlocked Nepal and crippled the economy. Mounting economic tension infused political parties with the widespread popular support necessary to launch a massive democracy movement.

By 1990, popular discontent and political forces joined to produce a people’s movement, \textit{Jana Andolan}. The movement represented the first coordinated effort by political parties, particularly the Nepali Congress and a United Left Front to end the Panchayat system. It began symbolically on February 18, Democracy Day, and raged for fifty days. It consisted of a sustained series of demonstrations across Nepal, including nationwide strikes that shut down the streets, disrupting every aspect of urban life: transportation, administration, and commerce. The police crackdown was oppressive, and the jails filled with thousands of people. For the first time, the growing middle class of merchants and professionals were galvanized against police violence.\textsuperscript{27} The most climactic event of the movement was a demonstration, involving more than one hundred thousand people on April 6, which ended in a confrontation with police forces when protestors charged towards the palace. The brutality that ensued, with police firing into the unarmed crowd, was the deciding factor for the king. Soon after, he ended the ban on political parties. Multi-party elections took place in less than a year.

The Constitution of 1990 defines Nepal as “a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu, Constitutional monarchical kingdom.”\textsuperscript{28} This definition was a compromise between palace attempts to safeguard its prerogatives and demands from ethnic and regional groups. Sovereignty was vested strictly with the people of Nepal, not the monarchy. Yet the king retained the title of supreme commander-in-chief of the army, broad emergency powers and control over palace-related issues, including succession. The new constitution provided for a parliamentary system with a bicameral legislature comprised of 205 seats in the House of Representatives (\textit{Pratinidhi Sabha}), elected by universal suffrage, and a 60 member National Assembly (\textit{Rastriya Sabha}) in which the king could nominate ten members while the other fifty seats were to be indirectly elected by the House of Representatives and an Electoral College.\textsuperscript{29} Hinduism remained the state religion, a subject of much controversy. And although Nepali remained the state language, the multiplicity of national languages were also recognized. In 1990, Radio Nepal began broadcasting in Newari and Mathili (a Hindi dialect prevalent in the Terai) and added eight other languages by 1993. Over the following years, resources were directed toward language and textbook development for primary school education in various mother tongues.

The 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of ethnic activism. \emph{Janajati} or “indigenous peoples” movements worked to redress the two-hundred year domination of the Hindu elite through political mobilization and the promotion of cultural heritage for distinct ethnic groups. In one highly symbolic battle, the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, formed in 1990 as a coalition of indigenous groups, successfully petitioned against the imposition of Sanskrit as compulsory in schools. Ethnic differentiation, not assimilation, became the dominant trend in the new democracy. In the 1991 census, the percentage of people identifying Nepali as their mother tongue shrunk for the first time. Coalitions based on ethnic allegiance were complicated by the fact that many ethnic groups include a diversity of subgroups. Some have distinct languages, like the Rai and Tharus, and others have broad geographic diffusion, like the Tamang. These factors became obstacles to the organization of broad-based lobby groups and also to the framing of a common identity.

To counter political fragmentation, the constitution explicitly bans political parties formed on the basis of regional or ethnic affiliation from participating in general elections.\textsuperscript{30} Many such parties sprung up in 1990, but only two were al-
allowed to participate in the first elections: the Rastriya Janamukti Party and the Sadbhavana Party. They were carefully defined in broad enough terms despite ethnic and regional affiliations. The Mongol National Organization actively defies this stipulation by entering its candidates as independents. This unique party advocates a federation of Tibeto-Burmese states and the end of monarchy "which it sees as a buttress of Hindu dominance." Whether ethnic activism will ultimately undermine Nepal’s cohesion and give rise to separatist movements remains to be seen.

Throughout the 1990s, King Birendra acted as a stabilizing factor. He never overstepped the bounds of his role as constitutional monarch, even during the steady stream of minority and coalition governments. By 1997, democracy had reached a low point, when three coalition governments came and went in a single year; this was due not only to a hung parliament but also by the inability among party members to transcend factionalism in the interest of political stability. Even the first majority government formed by the Nepali Congress party, between 1991 and 1994, ended prematurely in internecine conflict. The current government is led by the Nepali Congress, which won a majority of seats in the last elections in May 1999.

The Test

Throughout Nepal’s history as a unified country, the monarchy has been the single consistent factor. However, the role of the king has undergone significant transformations over time: from conqueror to symbolic figurehead and from absolute ruler to steward of democracy. It is because the monarchy has been such a critical factor to Nepal’s unity and sovereignty that the credibility of the new king, Gyanendra, is so crucial at this juncture.

The royal massacre still casts a long shadow over the palace. Gyanendra’s initial gaffe, explaining the incident as an accidental misfiring of an automatic weapon, was hardly resolved by the findings of a token commission. The commission report, which unequivocally implicated Prince Dipendra, raised more questions than it answered. For example, how could the prince, so drunk and high that he had to be helped upstairs to his bedroom by four men, later juggle multiple weapons and move skillfully between rooms several times while shooting at royal family members, all in a palace full of guards? It is a mystery that may never be solved.

Though far from winning over the Nepali people, King Gyanendra is slowly gaining approval. A key legitimating moment came at the very start of September during the third day of the royal festival, Indra Jatra. According to the Kathmandu Post, “The people heaved a sigh of relief when the Kumari offered her blessing to the King without hesitating, indicating a prosperous future.” The all-important coronation ceremony, which empowers the king as Vishnu incarnate, is still at least a year off for Gyanendra. In early January, the eleventh summit of SAARC (South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation) was hosted in Kathmandu without a hitch, despite the tensions between India and Pakistan over a terrorist attack in India on December 13. The summit provided the king with his first opportunity to meet leaders of neighboring Asian countries, including India’s Prime Min-

ister Vajpayee and Pakistan’s President Musharraf. Regional terrorism was high on the agenda, and SAARC members signed a resolution against harboring terrorist groups on their soil. The visit by regional leaders to Nepal and their unannounced condemnation of terrorism have been important legitimizers for Gyanendra and his emergency. No doubt Colin Powell’s stopover in Nepal during his Asia tour in late January further enhanced Gyanendra’s stature as an accepted figurehead. Powell heralded the government’s efforts to end terrorism in Nepal but also cautions against prolonging the state of emergency, in the interests of safeguarding democracy.

For now, the streets of Kathmandu are quiet, enforced by army checkpoints and nightly curfews. Maoist attacks are, for the most part, restricted to the countryside, where guerrillas control a handful districts and continue to lay siege to police stations and army posts. Since the emergency, the press has been barred from sensitive areas, and some arrests of journalists have been reported. All in all, the economy has been hard hit by a forty-two percent decrease in tourism and the departure of numerous aid agencies after the bombing of a Coca-Cola plant in Kathmandu in November.

If the current scale of Maoist violence continues, the result could be a protracted civil war in which democratic institutions are suspended ad infinitum. Under the current constitution, the king has three months of emergency powers in the event of a national crisis. After that, the emergency must be ratified by a two-thirds majority in parliament. The clock is ticking. By February 22, the parliament will have to decide whether or not to continue the emergency. But the prospects for consensus seem slim. Opposition to the emergency among political leaders has mounted since December.

Prime Minister Deuba is a principal advocate for continuing the emergency; however, his Nepali Congress party does not have enough seats to carry a two-thirds majority on its own. By the end of February, all eyes will be watching King Gyanendra. In order to conform with the present constitution, the king must either build consensus concerning a sustained emergency or bow to the will of the elected government. Only then will his attitude toward democracy truly be known.

Endnotes

2 This term will be more familiar to readers as “Gurkha,” based on its Anglicized mispronunciation popularized by the British during the colonial era. The transliteration, “Gorkha,” is currently used by the government and press in Nepal as well as by Western scholars.
3 The Anglo-Nepali war of 1814-1816 occurred over a border dispute and access to trade routes in the Himalayas. Ludwig Stiller contends that such a dispute was inevitable given Nepal’s military strength at the end of its successful conquest of much of the Himalayan region and the British East India Company’s expanding trade interests from its stronghold in northern India during the early colonial era. See Ludwig Stiller 1973. The Rise of the House of Gorkha: A Study in the Unification of Nepal 1768-1816. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
4 The Vedas contain the most ancient Hindu rituals and consist in a body of sacred texts, originating from the second millennium BCE.
5 The Rajputs were a famous warrior clan who rose to power in northern India during the 9th -10th centuries.
The "living goddess" is a rotating position with Buddhist origins, which has played a key role in the Hindu royal festival, Indra Jatra, since the time of the Malla kings. The position is held by a young girl, kept in seclusion until puberty, except on ceremonial occasions. Once the girl has matured, she returns to a normal life and a new "living goddess" is selected.

The Indo-Aryan hill people, who form the top tier of the caste structure in Nepal, are known as Parbatiyas and consist predominantly of Brahmins and Ksatriyas. The Ksatriyas, or warrior class, can be divided into groups claiming descent from the Rajput warriors in India (see note 5 above), such as the Thakuris and Gorkhas, and those who migrated to Nepal in ancient times and intermarried with local ethnic groups, notably the Chetris (formerly Khas). The Brahmins also claim to originate in India.

The ethnic composition of Nepal's indigenous groups is remarkably diverse, including the Newars in the Kathmandu Valley; Tibeto-Burmese tribes in the western and central hills like the Gurung, Magar and Tamang; eastern Kiranti people such as the Rai and Limbu; Tibetan peoples along the northern border, grouped as Bhotiyas; and the Tharu in the southern strip of Nepal bordering India (though more recently Hindi-speaking immigrants from India have also settled in this southern region, called the Terai). The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley are a notable exception to the discussion that follows. They have historically included both Buddhists and Hindus. Additionally, the Newars had their own caste system which was incorporated into the Muluki Ain, such that high-caste Newars were granted a similar status to their counterparts among the Indo-Aryan hill tribes. Moreover, from the very beginning of Nepal's unification, Newars played an important role in the government. They were necessary allies to cultivate since the administration of the country occurred in their indigenous stronghold, the Kathmandu Valley. Even during modern periods of direct monarchical rule, Newar elites have served important government posts alongside Parbatiyas.

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The term “Sanskritization” was first introduced by M. N. Srinivas in the landmark study, Social Change in Modern India. It denotes the adoption of high-caste behavior by low-caste Hindus and tribals as a form of social mobility. The term “Hinduization” is more in usage among contemporary anthropologists to emphasize the adoption of Hindu forms by non-Hindu groups as a type of syncretism and assimilation.


When King Tribhuvan fled to India, he took the rest of the family with him but mysteriously left Gyanendra behind.


Joshi and Rose 1966, p. 395.


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Joshi and Rose 1966, p. 395.


See Brown 1996, pp. 75-80.

REVISITING JAPAN’S INTERNATIONALIZATION

REFLECTIONS ON THE JET PROGRAM AFTER 14 YEARS

BY DAVID MCCONNELL

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Over the past decade a fascinating social experiment has been quietly unfolding in schools, communities and local government offices throughout Japan. Conceived during the height of the US-Japan trade war in the mid-1980s, the proposal for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program was first presented as a “gift” to the American delegation at the “Ron-Yasu” (President Ronald Reagan and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone) summit in 1986. At considerable expense, the Japanese government would invite young people from the US and several other English-speaking countries “to foster international perspectives by promoting international exchange at local levels as well as intensifying foreign language education.”

Fourteen years later, with an annual budget approaching half a billion dollars, the JET Program is now the centerpiece of a top-down effort to create “mass internationalization.” Noting that it eclipses in magnitude even such highly regarded exchange programs as the Fulbright and the Peace Corps, Japanese officials have proclaimed the JET Program as “the greatest initiative undertaken since World War II related to the field of human and cultural relations.”

For over a decade I have been tracking the JET Program as a lens on the cultural form and meaning of internationalization in Japan. During two years of intensive fieldwork in Japan between 1988-1990 and six follow-up trips from 1993-2001, I was able to observe many classes taught by the program’s Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and to conduct numerous interviews with Japanese administrators, teachers and students. I also collected a large number of in-house surveys, manuals and documents that have been produced over the program’s history.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

As Thomas Rohlen of Stanford University has noted, if we were to divide American attitudes toward Japanese schooling into three phases, the better part of this century could be characterized as the era of indifference. In the late 1970s and 1980s, however, we entered the age of discovery. As Japan’s economic success was linked to its highly educated and disciplined workforce, there was an increasing examination of how broad public support for education, the social organization of schooling and culturally-specific approaches to childrearing and discipline formed the foundation for Japan’s educational successes. On the political left, liberals applauded the egalitarian streak in Japanese schooling that led Japan to do a much better job than the US in raising a larger percentage of its population to higher levels
of academic achievement and internalization of social norms. On the other side of the political spectrum, conservatives noted the presence of a streamlined core curriculum and the many ways in which “family values” supported the educational system. The overall sentiment was that we had much to learn from Japan.

In reaction to the “Japan is great” theme, however, another set of popular and academic accounts emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s that purported to reveal “the dark side of Japan,” to quote the subtitle of Ken Schooland’s book, *Shogun’s Ghost*. In sharp contrast to the portrayals of Japanese education as a “desirable difference,” these reports criticized the uniformity, inflexibility, and closed nature of the Japanese system.

We heard of Ministry of Education officials who promoted nationalistic textbooks, which whitewashed coverage of Japan’s military activities in Asia. Politicians dropped racial slurs, such as former Prime Minister Nakasone in 1986 when he attributed Japan’s educational success to racial homogeneity and the apparent decline of US achievement to racial diversity. Relentless *kyoiku mama* (education mothers) pushed their children to do well on entrance exams at virtually any cost. “Returnee children” went through a hazing process in which they were forced to give up the cognitive and interactive styles they had acquired abroad. Finally, we were told that Japanese teachers of English could not speak the language and reduced its study to solving discrete lexical items for the entrance exam, thus rendering six years of compulsory study of a foreign language virtually useless.

Some of these criticisms clearly perpetuated stereotypes, but others could not be dismissed so lightly. As a whole, they suggested that whereas Americans began with the assumption that all children are different, Japanese educators began with the opposite assumption. This notion that all children were basically the same created enormous pressure to conform to culturally appropriate standards of behavior. In this view, Japan was a “closed system” and its inability to cope with diversity was its Achilles heel.

When I was doing fieldwork in Japan in the late 1980s, a hot item circulating among the foreign community was one of those national character jokes that accentuate the worst stereotypes of a country but sometimes have a grain of truth. An international team commissioned several nations to do a book on the elephant: Germany produced a 3-volume set called *A Short History of the Elephant*; Britain’s book was titled *Stalking the Elephant in the Wilds of Africa*; the US came up with *How to Raise Elephants in your Own Backyard for Fun and Profit*; and Japan produced two volumes. The first was *Elephants: How They See Us*, and the second was *The Elephant-Japan Perception Gap*, both of which allude to an exaggerated sense of uniqueness.

In response to the conflicting sets of interpretations about Japan that arose over the past quarter century, the American public thus came to be of two minds about Japanese education and Japanese society in general. On the one hand, the recognition that Japan had completed one of the most dramatic economic turnarounds in human history, coupled with the continued high performance of Japanese students on international tests of science and mathematics, raised the real possibility of using Japan as a mirror for American practice. On the other hand, there was plenty of evidence to suggest that ideas of Japanese homogeneity were still powerful and that “difference” was negatively marked. It is little wonder that Joseph Tobin of the University of Hawaii-Manoa began referring to the dominant American view of Japan as the “Yes, but . . .” approach: it conceded the superiority of Japanese achievements in certain areas but argued that those achievements came at too high a cost.

Thus, in spite of its considerable accomplishments, Japan in the mid-1980s continued to suffer from an acute image problem. Japanese public officials were under intense pressure from the US and from European countries to take steps to reduce the trade surplus and to dismantle the formal and informal barriers to foreign investment in Japan. At a time when pluralist nations around the world were struggling to integrate their ethnically diverse populations, Japan’s government was asked to solve a problem of precisely the opposite order: to “create diversity” and to acquaint its insulated people with foreigners at the level of face-to-face interaction. Dependent on the goodwill of the foreign community, particularly the US, both for national security and for continued economic prosperity, it became increasingly important that Japan be able to show that it was, in fact, “international” and that foreigners could be integrated into Japan’s tight-knit society.

In 1987 Japanese government officials decided to try to solve this problem by emphasizing people-to-people contact rather than structural negotiations at the governmental level. Their solution was to drop thousands of college graduates from primarily Western countries into public secondary schools all over the nation.

Four countries were invited to join the JET Program in its inaugural year: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. The total number of JET participants in 1987 was 813 individuals, with the large majority coming from the US (570) and the UK (149). Canada and Ireland were added in 1988. Job types for participants were also divided into two major categories. Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), comprising over 90 percent of all participants, were to be based in public secondary schools or offices of education, where they would “team-teach” English classes with Japanese teachers of English. Those in the second category, Coordinators of International Relations (CIRs), were to be placed in prefectural or municipal offices where they were to assist in the internationalization of local communities. (A third category, Sports Exchange Advisors (SEA), was added in 1994. Though their numbers were few, CIRs and SEAs were invited from dozens of different countries. This paper, however, deals primarily with the ALT component of the JET Program).

Rhetoric and hyperbole aside, what is the JET Program
really about? In the next few pages, I use the JET Program as a lens to examine the accuracy of the “closed system” image of Japan. How did Japan chart a course between its sincere desire to be recognized as international and the strong sense of separateness still felt by many Japanese today? What were the powers and limitations of the Japanese state to facilitate top-down change? How did the JET Program diffuse through the many layers of Japan’s public education system?

I believe that the JET Program is an ideal case for examining the “closed system” image because it represents a buzzword (namely, “internationalization”) turned into reality (thousands of foreigners arriving each August at Tokyo’s Narita airport). It gives us an opportunity to see how “internationalization” gets defined not by academicians or politicians or the media, but rather through the implementation of a policy. The myriad decisions made about the program give a form to internationalization, even if it is unintended.

**The Struggle to Cope With Diversity**

There is some evidence suggesting that the overall structure of Japan’s attempt to “import diversity” was shaped by a preoccupation with Western countries and that Japanese officials and teachers did have trouble integrating the JET participants into local institutions and established routines. First of all, as one ALT pointed out, “the six initial participating countries represent a very narrow and carefully selected segment of the English-speaking world. Very few of us fall under headings other than WASP…color, variety and pattern have been screened out of the controlled sample brought here for this experiment.”

In addition, there have been a variety of incidents that point to serious difficulties on the Japanese side in dealing with the diversity represented by the ALTs. In one case Japanese officials threatened to disband the program when they discovered that a few ALTs were planning to advertise a gay support group in a program-sponsored newsletter. In another case, *The Japan Times* ran a column on the JET Program by Karen Hill Anton entitled, “Japan Pulls in the Welcome Mat With Racial Discrimination.” The piece chronicled the struggles of an African-American participant who met stereotypes and even ill will in a community that had expected a white ALT.

The school visitation system devised by prefectures in the early years of the program also reflected a lack of empathy for the ALTs’ situation. Many prefectures adopted the strategy of “spreading the wealth” by sending the foreign youth to as many schools as possible on a one-shot basis, where they were wheeled out like living globes. One ALT compared himself to a teabag dipped in dozens of cups of tea and went on to point out: “That makes for one weak cup of tea!”

Even the structure of the team-teaching system revealed that internationalization was conceived of as situational accommodation to Western demands more than fundamental cultural change. The widely shared view was that team-taught classes were something entirely distinct from regular English classes, which were taught in traditional grammar translation style solely by a Japanese teacher.

Finally, Japanese at all levels tended to see internationalization less as breaking down walls between individuals. Instead, they saw it as building bridges of communication between cultures or groups that they assumed would always be fundamentally different. There was little expectation on the part of the Japanese hosts that the ALTs would really “join the group”; rather, the expectation was that they were short-term guests. This mentality was reinforced by all kinds of special treatment, including generous salaries, a five-day work week, a three-year limit on their stay, as well as a relative lack of Japanese language learning options during the early years of the program.

While Japanese officials had not conceived of the program as a permanent integration of foreigners into Japanese society, some ALTs were upset that they were treated differently from regular Japanese teachers. They began to complain that the “guest mentality” served as a distancing mechanism, one which kept foreigners at arms-length. Japanese were often puzzled by this reaction because they saw the politeness and hospitality as illustrative of the high esteem in which they held Westerners. One Ministry official told me that if such special treatment was discrimination, then it was “accidental discrimination,” because the intention was good.

In sum, we do find some evidence of Japanese officials shaping program structures and initiatives in ways that ran counter to the cultural sensibilities of many ALTs. That there was difficulty integrating the ALTs into local institutions is not surprising given the origins of the program in foreign pressure and the extent to which Japanese continue to view cultural identity as rooted in blood and conferred by birth.

If we were to end the analysis at this point, however, as if the Japanese response to the ALTs was the unproblematic outcome of a monolithic “culture of suspicion” towards foreigners, we would miss a significant part of the picture. At least as interesting as the uniformities in Japanese responses were the variations.

**Turf Wars and Competing Priorities at the National and Prefectural Levels**

There were different reactions to the JET Program at the national, prefectural and local school levels. Each of these administrative levels is a distinct socio-cultural subsystem with its own set of pressures and priorities. At the national level, tensions were virtually assured by the fact that three government ministries – Home Affairs, Education and Foreign Affairs – were charged with oversight of the JET Program. Each had its own goals for the program, and since good foreign policy does not always make good domestic policy, and vice versa, there were plenty of turf battles between the internally and externally focused ministries charged with implementation.

The Home Affairs Ministry gained overall control of the program and established its own office called the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) to
administer the program. CLAIR in turn hired former program participants to serve as buffers between the foreign participants and the Japanese staff. Why would this ministry, which was probably the least international ministry in Japan by almost any definition, gain control of a program that would seem to be under the clear jurisdiction of the Education Ministry? The answer is that the Home Affairs Ministry was involved in a delicate and much broader balancing act to promote regionalism and local development and at the same time ensure a coordinating role for itself. Home Affairs officials did not like relying on the Foreign Ministry when local governments approached them for advice on international matters. The high-profile JET Program thus provided a vehicle for raising the Home Affairs Ministry’s status and power vis-à-vis both local governments and rival ministries. Moreover, its close relationship with Finance Ministry officials and its role as coordinator of the taxation system ensured the Home Affairs Ministry that it could raise the money for the program through the local allocation tax (koofuzei), a form of general revenue sharing.

The Ministry of Education was charged with overseeing the “team-teaching” portion of the program, and officials there have seen the goals primarily as enhancing the teaching of conversational English. The Education Ministry, however, initially opposed the plan for the JET Program, not so much in principle as because it would lose control of two smaller English teaching programs it operated. It also feared that the scope of the JET Program would lead to widespread resistance by Japanese teachers.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by contrast, which recruits participants overseas, was wildly enthusiastic about JET because of its potential for enhancing foreign understanding of Japan. One Ministry official put it bluntly: “From the viewpoint of our ministry, it is a significant part of Japan’s national security policy that these youths go back to their respective countries in the future and become sympathizers for Japan.”

With such a diverse group of players it is doubtful the proposal for the JET Program would have seen the light of day without the intense American pressure surrounding the US-Japan trade wars of the mid-1980s. The announcement of the JET Program came on the heels of The Maekawa Report, a high-level policy document outlining the steps Japan would take to reduce her trade surplus and decrease non-tariff barriers for American companies in Japan. This report, coupled with the need for a goodwill gesture to President Ronald Reagan at a Tokyo summit in 1986, lead Prime Minister Nakasone to personally authorize the program.

As one example of the kinds of conflicts that erupted due to intersectoral competition, former Prime Minister Takeshita on a trip to Europe in 1988, suddenly announced that French and German participants would be invited to join the JET Program the following year. The announcement was scripted by the Foreign Ministry, and no doubt served a real diplomatic benefit, but it came as a complete surprise to Education Ministry officials, who had to scramble to find base schools for this new group. Most of the French and German participants ended up teaching English more than their native tongue.

When we move down to the prefectural level, we find that governors and mayors have been very enthusiastic about the idea of a heavily subsidized program which would put them on the bandwagon of internationalization. Some prefectures, such as Saitama, Chiba, Hyogo and Nagano, now hire three to four hundred ALTs each year. But it is Japan’s curriculum specialists (shido shuji), career teachers temporarily appointed to local boards of education, who bear the brunt of handling ALT concerns on a daily basis, and they typically see this responsibility as a heavy burden.

In my book, Importing Diversity, I give detailed accounts of how two of these prefectoral administrators use social type (gender, race, nationality, age) in placing ALTs in local schools and how they handle incidents such as premature departures, cases of sexual harassment, and conflicts over conditions in schools. The overall picture, however, closely approximates what Michael Blaker of the University of Southern California has described as “coping”—they take a reactive posture that involves taking as few risks as possible. Such a stance is usually seen as spineless by the ALTs. In fact, it is a very pragmatic response given the unevenness of English skills among the curriculum specialists and the necessity of juggling conflicting priorities. For example, a number of these administrators were striving mightily to raise prefectural exam scores in English at the same time that they were promoting team-teaching of conversational English.

**Beyond the Stereotypes: The JET Program in Local Schools**

It is at the school level, however, where the symbolic agreement on internationalization, so easy to maintain when kept at a level of generality, begins to break down. The most powerful realities in Japanese secondary schools are preparation for entrance exams and the cultivation of proper character and morality in students. The dominant model stresses propriety and organizational maintenance, and by these standards, the ALTs often behave poorly (not intentionally, but because their upbringing leads them to view the goals and process of education differently).

For instance, the cultural theory of learning underlying the English as a Second Language methodologies in which ALTs are “trained” at an initial orientation stress concepts such as student as active learner; teacher as facilitator; communication rather than grammar; a curriculum that is inherently interesting; and classes marked by spontaneity. But this philosophy of “education through play” finds few adherents in Japanese secondary schools. Many teachers described classes lead by the ALTs as “classes without rigor” (kejime no nai juugyou) or “just a playtime” (tan no asobi), and they would preface the shift from an ALT-lead conversational exercise to the study of grammar with phrases such as, “Now, let’s get down to studying!” (Soredewa, benkyoo ni hairimasu). The discrepancy between the mandate of teaching conversational English and the reality of the entrance exams has lead to an immense contradiction, resulting in the underutilization of many ALTs.

Of course, the Japanese teachers I interviewed were not a homogeneous group. On the one hand there were a small handful of teachers, quite competent in English, who viewed the ALTs as much-needed medicine for an outdated and
credentials for a career in international business or finding a role among the ALTs. At one end were those who came with a “tourist mentality” and were content to remain largely outside the social worlds of their Japanese hosts. At the other end were a minority of ALTs who viewed the ALTs as a virus whose potentially deleterious effects needed to be controlled as carefully as possible. One middle-aged teacher from a small rural school put it this way:

When an ALT came to our school, she was very sensational and brought an international atmosphere but nothing was gained in terms of ability. Her lesson was just an amusement. Of course, I didn’t tell her, but inside I was thinking, ‘She’s such a young girl; this is such a waste of time’.

Yet these two extremes mask the presence of a large majority of Japanese English teachers who are quite ambivalent about the program. One veteran high school teacher, alluding to Commodore Perry’s forced opening of Japan to the West in 1854, called the JET Program “the second coming of the black ships” and articulated the dilemma this way:

‘Black ship benefits’ accrue to teachers when the ALT system awakens you from your peaceful slumber and creates acute anxiety. You begin to wonder whether you should have been using more classroom English and worry whether students will respond well to the team-taught class. In a dither, you hasten to make preparations, but when they take too much time, you begin to resist and eventually fall into the ‘expel-the-foreigner’ camp. On the other side, however, is the ‘open-up-Japan’ camp which seeks to usher in a new era and thus gives wholehearted approval to the timeliness of the ALT system. Most teachers, myself included, are probably somewhere in between the two extremes, fumbling along in a trial-and-error mode as we struggle to respond to this new system.

Mirroring the spectrum of views just described, teaching strategies among Japanese teachers also ran the gamut from using the ALT in a highly controlled manner (much like a human tape recorder) to turning the entire classroom over to the ALT.

I also discovered a wide range of backgrounds and motivations among the ALTs. At one end of the spectrum were those who came with a “tourist mentality” and were content to remain largely outside the social worlds of their hosts. At the other end were those who practically rejected their own culture in the rush to embrace Japanese language and society. There were ALTs who approached change in a culturally sensitive manner and more activist ALTs, as well as those who came with very specific motives, such as gaining credentials for a career in international business or finding a spouse.

To be sure, the ALTs brought their own views of ethnicity to the cross-cultural encounter, which were equally culture-bound as those of their Japanese hosts. In general, they saw ethnicity as a personal religion, a matter of individual choice, and they tended to assume that individuals could belong to more than one cultural group if they so desired. But such conceptions of ethnic flexibility failed to recognize the strict reality of Japanese group identities, which demanded constant loyalty and attention. Many ALTs were not willing to put themselves at the bottom of the pecking order, nor did they try to develop heightened sensitivities to interpersonal relations, both of which would have been expected of a new member of the school faculty in Japan.

Moreover, in spite of the variation in their backgrounds, many ALTs tended to see Japanese education and society as in need of “development” at some level. Their behavior—from bringing plastic chopsticks to school to protest the destruction of the rain forest by Japanese lumber companies to telling everyone that their best friend was Korean, just to make the point that they valued diversity—often reflected a demand that Japanese reconstitute themselves and their society in order to bring it more in line with Western expectations.

In short, the degree and quality of integration of ALTs into schools and classrooms was not simply the result of a cultural model stipulating that foreigners be kept at arms length. Rather, it was the product of a complex process of negotiation that depended on prefectural and district priorities, school type, faculty composition and disposition, and the language skills and motivation of the ALTs themselves.

A LONG-TERM VIEW OF THE JET PROGRAM

A long-term perspective on the JET Program is important because it allows us to sort out those features of the program that are malleable from those that are relatively unchanging. When we examine the learning curve on the Japanese side, it is hard to come away with anything but admiration for the tenacity with which they have struggled to acquire ownership of the JET Program. Simply put, they have not given up.

The conflict in the early years of the program went far beyond the disillusionment many participants felt about their under-utilization in the classroom. Three JET participants, each for different reasons, committed suicide by jumping in front of trains, leading to a call for counseling services to be made available to JET participants. Several participants returned home early due to sexual harassment in the workplace, leading to calls for better education on both sides, and more and efficient responses. JET participants protested having to pay into a pension fund from which they never collected benefits. In fact, in the first few years of the program, the large majority of JET participants joined a “support group” called AJET (the Association of JET) to pressure CLAIR for changes.

From the perspective of Japanese officials, AJET was nothing more than a “quasi-union” and privately they held little sympathy for it. But over the years, CLAIR and Ministry
officials took up AJET’s concerns one by one, and though the wheels turned very slowly, they took significant steps to address ALT concerns. By the year 2000, AJET had virtually been incorporated into CLAIR’s decision-making apparatus.

Nearly 95% of JET participants now say they would recommend the program to a friend; less than 1% return home prematurely; and close to half renew their contracts for a second year. The alumni ripple effect has also begun to be felt. The total alumni population now stands at more than 30,000 individuals, and there is an increasingly active alumni association in all participating countries. In spite of the preference for white Westerners in the early years of the program, by the year 2000 invitations were being extended to Koreans and Chinese (albeit in much smaller numbers) and the intake from all countries was increasingly diverse, including Maoris from New Zealand and Native Americans from the US.

Viewed over the long term, one can only be impressed by the receptivity of Japanese teachers of English, who were never consulted about the program. In spite of initial ambivalence and resistance, they have learned to cope with a top-down intervention that walks, talks and even talks back. In the course of the past 14 years, ALTs have been based in nearly one-half of the nation’s 16,000-plus public secondary schools and have visited every school on at least a semi-regular basis. Given the conventional wisdom in the US that top-down reforms rarely get through the classroom door, the receptivity of the Japanese system appears to be nothing short of phenomenal.

There are a number of reasons for this success in at least getting the forms of implementation in place, one of which is the nature of the intervention itself. Unlike a written directive from one’s superiors, or a new set of curriculum materials, one cannot put an ALT “on the shelf” to be used at a later date. The Japanese cultural predisposition to put oneself in the position of “learner” was also a factor; even older teachers were usually willing to try their hand at team-teaching. Moreover, the extensive professional development opportunities available to Japanese teachers meant that they could attend workshops, conferences and demonstration classes on team-teaching in order to get advice from other colleagues in the field. Over time, team-teaching gradually worked itself into the mechanism of craft – into the dynamic and ongoing process of honing pedagogical techniques for the classroom.

This success had less to do with the coercive power of the central government than with the degree of consent which already existed among educators at lower levels of the system. While some still see internationalization as a disagreeable pill which the country must take, most recognize the necessity of increased interaction with foreigners. They continue to salute the flag of internationalization, even though the final implementation usually involves some slippage in order to protect local priorities.

Japan’s capacity to evolve economically and to adapt to an exterior world of superior technology has rested on an extraordinary capacity for learning. The opening of Japan’s markets has been slow but steady, and while coping with diversity is not the same as opening markets, Japan does have a very public goal of becoming more cosmopolitan. The JET Program is perhaps a very small part of this larger picture. I would argue, however, that in spite of some initial difficulties, the overall track record of Japanese teachers and administrators in handling the influx of ALTs is cause for optimism regarding the country’s likelihood of meeting the considerable challenges posed by diversity in the future.