

China's public expression philosophy: a case of too little theory?

The Chinese government's stance towards the question of free speech is guided by a philosophy that is complex but intelligent. Rogier Creemers diagnoses the underlying causes.



A little while ago, Professor Gong Fangbing of the Chinese National Defence University became the subject of widespread mockery, after he published an article claiming that the development of democracy in China is held back because [insufficient theoretical preparations](#) have been made so far. The phrase “because of insufficient theory”, became a justification for a host of ills on social media platforms, ranging from the delay of trains to the dismal performance of China's national football team. At the same time, this quote is actually rather revealing about how Chinese elites conceive their role in policymaking, their conception of society and the role of truth.

First and foremost, there seems to be a fundamental belief or assumption in these circles that, in the same way that the natural world is underpinned by laws that can be understood and used to predict future phenomena, there are “rules” which govern the development of societies. [The objective of scholarly research](#) is to discover these rules and provide suggestions on how they should be applied in reality. In the view of the present leadership, that structure is grounded by the

basic principles of Marxism, or socialism with Chinese characteristics, as it is called now. This claim, that social theory can not only help in understanding and explaining the past and the present, but also reveals and determines the future, is based on the purported scientific nature of its historical and dialectical materialism. As a consequence, it is possible, in this view, to discover what should be done to develop society through diligent exegesis, theoretical study, or small-scale experiments, and to arrive at optimal solutions that benefit all. These assumptions run deeply into the language of Chinese politics. Even Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum, that China should "cross the river by feeling the stones", presumes that the stones are there, that they each are within stepping distance of each other, and that the other side of the river is the destination to be reached.

This monism is not only scientific or epistemological, it is also related to ethics. In other words, not only is there one defined way to understand reality, there is also only one accepted moral system, in which it is impossible for opposing or mutually exclusive value concepts to exist. In turn, this notion is closely connected to the idea of harmony. This ancient idea, which goes back to the era of Confucius, 25 centuries ago, reflects a preference for communitarian values and the absence of conflict. In classical Chinese philosophy, harmony could be attained by all individuals being in their proper place and doing the proper thing. In this way, the realm would be ordered and there would be no war. More recently, a comparable notion in Marxism – the idea that at some point in the future, all contradictions between classes and individuals will fade away – deeply reverberated with this idea, and achieving the utopian future, where there will be no more clashes and contradictions, still seems to be the ultimate objective of Chinese modernisation, with the half-way house of the "moderately well off society" as a preliminary objective.

This notion of Marxism was received in the China of the late 19th century, around the same time as other western ideas, such as classical liberalism and social Darwinism, as China searched for ways to modernise. At that time, the Chinese imperial system had become increasingly atrophied and weakened by domestic rebellion and foreign invasion. This was a tremendous shock for a civilisation that had hitherto considered itself the centre of the civilised world. Consequently, intellectuals and thinkers embarked on a project to find a way for China to be saved, and to turn into a strong and wealthy country, able to resist foreign intervention. While there were a number of liberal scholars, such as Yan Fu and Hu Shi, by the late 1920s domestic fragmentation and Japanese militarism had radicalised the younger generations, creating fertile ground for Chinese versions of fascism and Leninism. Both the Guomindang and the young Communist Party had strong links to Moscow, and the Guomindang cultivated connections with fascist Italy and Germany after taking power, and developed "party rule" models to govern China. During neither the republican era nor the period of Maoist rule would there be a space for pluralist opinion and deviating interpretations of reality.

Obviously, these ideological and epistemological concepts have a tremendous impact on the idea of free expression. Generally, it is accepted that free speech is conducive to the circulation of facts that are necessary to inform social, economic and political life, as well as the opinions generated in a plural society, between which it is often necessary to mediate, build compromises and

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agreements. But in a society where truth is defined a priori, and certain structures of thought and value are defined to be solely correct, the necessity for speech to be free shrinks significantly. Conversely, opening up the public space to competing ideas would be considered dangerous as it would provide a platform for falsehoods to spread.

None of this implies that the control of speech is absolute. The advent of the Deng era brought an end to the strictures of Maoist China, and the government withdrew to a large extent from the private life of its citizens. It was no longer required to wear identical outfits or sport identical haircuts. Marriage or employment were opened up for personal choice, rather than appointment, and there was a recognition that ideological voluntarism alone was insufficient for modernisation and development, which also require technological and scientific expertise. The pragmatic Deng brought back an earlier philosophical concept, [letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools contend](#), to indicate that henceforth, debate and criticism on certain issues would be permitted. However, this also did not mean the institution of a true right to free speech, the reality is a little more nuanced.

Ever since the internal chaos and foreign invasions of the 19th century, the prime objective of Chinese politics has been to find a way to save the nation and restore its former glory. This was the motivation for most of the intellectuals during the late empire and the republican era, and remains the legitimation for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leading position. At present, the CCP considers that, in order to achieve this goal, a few fundamental elements are necessary. First among these is the leadership of the party, which – as the vanguard of the people – is the sole entity able to conduct this process. A second requirement is social stability, as the prolonged century of internal and external turmoil that China experienced between about 1850 and 1978 was deemed to be a crucial factor in China's backwardness. Decisions and policies further down the line are usually justified by the extent to which they contribute to these objectives. This conflicts with the deontological concept of rights, which would hold that rights are to be defended because of their own inherent value.

Consequently, the space for public discourse is structured in a purposive manner: it is there to support Chinese economic and social development, and the question of whether or not public expressions are permitted, depends on different elements, such as the content of the message, the identity, qualifications and background of the speaker, the scope of the audience, the objective of the message, its relationship to social stability and party authority, etc. As a vanguard Party, the CCP believes that it has an important role in raising the “quality” ([suzhi](#)) of the entire population, which will make them new and better flag-bearers of the modernisation project. Hence, public information for mass consumption should be primarily directed at inculcating the scientific insights of the CPP, in order to “arm the people with scientific theories, guide the people with correct public opinion, mould people with a noble spirit, inspire people with excellent works, and shape the pursuit of a vigorous and upward spirit in the whole society and a healthy and civilized way of life.” Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan likened it to a [security check in an airport](#); in order for everyone to fly safely, some individual discomfort is necessary. In order for everyone to live in a stable, ordered society,

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the same applies.

One wonders how fellow Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo would react. He, of course, is serving an 11 year prison sentence for having, amongst others, written [Charter '08](#), a document calling for a fundamental transformation of Chinese politics. Yet at the same time, China's academy and social media are buzzing with political comment and criticism. A Harvard study indicated that – contrary to many western expectations – online comments that are negative towards state leaders and policies are not more likely to be censored. Again, a more nuanced idea of criticism is necessary.

The first level, the fundamental, constitutional aspects of the polity, are beyond criticism. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping indicated that reform would take place within the limits of the [Four Cardinal Principles](#): party leadership, the socialist system, the people's democratic dictatorship, and Maoism-Marxism-Leninism. In 2011, the [Central Committee indicated](#) that China would not institute multi-party governance, ideological pluralisation, separation of powers, a bicameral system, federalism or privatization. Similar rules govern the media: the role of the media as the party's mouthpiece, party management over the media, party management of media cadres, and the correct public opinion orientation, all cannot change.

A second level is that of the policies and measures adopted within that constitutional structure. Here, the space for discussion is considerably larger, especially within academic and research institutions. Indeed, western visitors to China who engage with these circles are often amazed by the openness of the argumentation. The official reason for this is that, while the basic principles of Marxism are clear, it remains a question as to how these apply to present circumstances. Nevertheless, a fundamental line remains that at the end of academic debate, an optimal solution is to be found, which can then be broadly implemented.

At the third level – the concrete implementation of these policies and state actors – the party has a long tradition of engaging in criticism. The struggle sessions of the Cultural Revolution can be seen as an aberrant, extreme manifestation of this. Still, the party calls upon all its cadres to subject themselves to "[public opinion supervision](#)", where everyone with a justified claim against specific acts of specific individuals, in principle, should be allowed to air their grievances, as long as they do so in a constructive manner. To a certain extent, this is perceived as politically harmless, as it does not challenge the position of the CCP or its claim on the truth, but ensures that the truth is followed.

It is, however, exactly at this last point that a first major disjuncture arises in reality. In the absence of constitutionally defined minimum rights for expression and limits on state intervention, the power of individual cadres within the system, as well as their potential personal gains, can be substantial. As a result, the above terminology is used to frame blatant exercises of that power. In the name of harmony, maintaining social stability and preventing conflict, protesters with legitimate claims are silenced or, when they avail themselves of the Chinese political tradition to go to the capital and claim redress, are pursued by locally hired thugs and thrown into the infamous Beijing "[black jails](#)". In the name of science, ruthless social policies, such as the one-child policy, are instituted, existing

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customs and habits are destroyed, and traditional communities replaced with brutalist urban planning. In the name of the higher truth, facts negating that truth are banned from public discourse, and their proponents denounced as having "[ulterior motives](#)".

At a higher level, Chinese citizens are directing the same indictments to policy that are increasingly made in western nations: the reduction of policy interests to easily quantifiable terms, such as efficiency and growth, and the concomitant usurpation of the political sphere by economic elites. These have created a situation in which disillusion and discontent with policies is growing as large portions of the population feel left behind. In other countries, this has given rise to a swathe of highly critical books and articles by scholars and journalists, but also popular movements, such as the occupy protests. In the United Kingdom, thousands took to the streets in opposition to budget cuts and tuition fee hikes. In China, however, while policy criticism and discussion is increasingly prevalent, particularly on social media, such organisation is beyond the pale, as the CCP does not tolerate any form of organisation that might result in a challenge to its monopoly position. Hence, it is still up to the CCP to decide how to respond to calls for policy change, and it is extremely difficult to influence this process from outside the black box. It is exactly for this reason that Liu Xiaobo was imprisoned: he did not just call for policy change, but for change at the highest level of political organisation.

Again, political monism is of significance in this regard: as the party claims to represent the most fundamental interest of the overwhelming majority of Chinese, any competing political organisation is seen as traitorous. Where there is no idea that opposition can be loyal, all opposition is by necessity inimical and treated as such. It is not for nothing that Hu Jintao pointed at [foreign hostile powers' strategy to divide and westernize China](#), or that the international relations analyst [Yuan Feng indicated](#) that China had most to fear from rights-defence lawyers, underground religions, dissidents, internet leaders and the powerless masses. Their existence, which cannot be explained through the scientific framework the CCP claims to master, can only point to malice towards the "broadest masses" and ulterior motives. A similar cognitive dissonance that is present in economic leaders worldwide who cannot comprehend how their scientific solutions fail to restore economies and rebuild popular support.

After the 18th Party Congress and the installation of the fifth generation of leaders, many eyes are turned on Xi Jinping, wondering how his Standing Committee will advance reform. In this thinking process, it is important to remember the meaning that reform has in China: to change things for the better. From the early days of Deng, reform has meant an improvement of the current system, not a radical change. It could hardly have meant anything else. Accepting pluralism, in all its colours and guises, is simply inconceivable in the epistemology of the Communist Party, and so are liberal conceptions of free expression and democracy. For the foreseeable future, these will not come to pass. There is insufficient theory.

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