



LIVING WITHOUT FREEDOM IN CHINA

By Edward Friedman

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It's not easy for American students to know what it means to live without freedom. They know all the bad things about their own country—Virginia Tech, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, the Enron and Halliburton scandals, the LA riots, elections stolen, federal attorneys fired for pursuing criminals rather than a political agenda, etc. How democratic is America?, they cynically wonder. When you tell them how awful these other places are, they ask, aren't you just whitewashing your own society?

The hardest place to understand what the lack of freedom means is China, which is nothing like the Stalin model or Cuba or North Korea. It's by no stretch of the imagination a totalitarian society. In post-Mao China, Chinese travel abroad in huge numbers. The country has the fifth largest tourist population in the world, on its way to being number one. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese students are abroad; in internet use, China is about to overtake the U.S. as number one in the world. It's a market society, brutally competitive; the economy is less state-owned than France or Austria's, for example. Life is not dominated by communist block units; you can buy your own house or car, there's no forced labor. You can choose your physician freely; most young Chinese would say they live in a free, democratic society.

So what does it mean to say that Chinese people live without freedom? First, it is a brilliant system at making people complicit with the unfreedom. For days after the June 4, 1989, massacre in Beijing of democracy supporters

headquartered in Tiananmen Square, there was great tension in the city between people who live there and the occupying army. How did the party respond? Teachers were ordered to teach their students a new song: "The Army loves the people, the people love the Army." Parents couldn't say the song was untrue lest their children repeat this back at school. You can't bring up your children the way you want to.

This is true for many lies the Chinese are forced to let stand uncontested. There still are committees for the defense of the revolution. They have to make their own money and often turn into Avon ladies, visiting house to house, but you know that if you aren't complicit, maybe you won't get a passport. It may be held against your child when s/he applies for college. You and your family will be shunned in the neighborhood. You could be committed to a psychiatric hospital.

China is not the worst stable authoritarian regime in the world: a North Korean might consider it free. Even foreigners who go to North Korea and then come back to China feel they are returning to a free country. But you get faced every day with decisions that bring it home to you that you're not. If your child is ill, should you go to the pharmacy and buy some medicine? Of course, but medicines are often frauds in China. There have been cases where baby formula is bogus and children have died from receiving no nutrition. China has a ruthless free market, no regulation, no safety standards, no FDA, no CDC, no NIH. It's also the world leader for people dying in industrial accidents, and about 400,000 each year die from drinking the water, which is unpotable. A Chinese journalist recently went to 10 Chinese hospitals wanting to get his blood tested. So he complained of certain aches and pains that he knew would cause them to test his blood. But he didn't give them his blood, he carried in a thermos with tea and poured that into the cups. Eight of the ten reported to him that he had the most serious blood disease and that it would cost them endless money for treatment.

China has people who see the problems of this corrupt, arbitrary society and try to do something about them. There

are courageous lawyers and journalists. The leading political crime in China is land seizures. The economy is growing at a fantastic rate, which means that you can sell pieces of land to a developer for a lot of money. You don't want ordinary people to get rich. All the goodies are grabbed as much as possible by the ruling group. Over 97 percent of all millionaires in China are relatives of the top party elite. There are those who complain and resist, who stick to their guns. Lawyers come in to defend them. Accordingly, China is first in the world in the number of lawyers, journalists and Netizens in prison.

These things are hard to see when one is visiting, but there are signs one can see if one looks hard. Go to the railroad station at midnight, and you will see tens of thousands of people sleeping in the street. It is probably the most unequal stable society in the world. Income in the poorest rural areas has been declining. There's no union, with one exception: the government is now promoting getting unions into multinational corporations, but as an instrument of party control, not to help the workers. The Party doesn't like foreigners doing things they don't know about. They want their agents in the places where the foreigners are, to control things as much as they can.

Freedom means the ability to hold your government accountable. There is no way to do this in China, and people die. China is said to have 16 of the 20 most polluted cities in the world, and some would say it would be 20 out of 20 if they didn't lie about the other four. Everything is corrupt. The only way you can get anything done is through corruption. This creates a sense of no morality. But people want meaning in their lives. So there's a tremendous religious revival. All over China, all religions are reviving. The Party fears it. How does it respond? It crushes Christian house churches, it doesn't like Lama Buddhism, it's careful about Hui Muslims, but beyond that, it's pushing essentially its own state religion, a combination of Han chauvinism, in which Chinese worship the yellow emperor, and an authoritarian Confucianism. The state is building Confucian temples. The vision is that China is going to explain its extraordinary rise to its own people and to the world as the result of its unique ethical religion, its Confucianism. It's going to spread Confucian societies all around the world, it's going to teach everybody that China produces a better quality of people because it has this moral authority and all others are inferior. Confucianism is the only way to raise people, and the world is properly hierarchically ordered with Confucian Chinese at the center of it.

China is a superpower. Its economy is rising, its military is rising, and Chinese people in surveys are more popular in most countries of the world than are Americans right now. China's going to be using this money to serve certain purposes. Among them are undercutting the power of the United States, democracy and human rights and supporting authoritarian regimes. Whether it's Sudan or Nigeria, they can buy up the oil and governments don't have to listen to any kind of international pressure about conforming to human rights. China has already defeated the international human rights regime.

China's rise means that freedom is in trouble. The era we're in is very much like the era after WWI. Authoritarian models are rising and are becoming more attractive. I can imagine a future in which unregulated hedge funds lead to an international financial crisis and this is seen as coming out of the Anglo-American countries, London and New York being the two centers of these monies. But China regulates capital, so these things are not allowed in. The Chinese model may yet look even more attractive than it does now.

In describing this Chinese rise and how I believe it has the potential of being a threat to freedom in an extraordinary way that we haven't seen since the end of WWI, I am not trying to suggest that Chinese don't care about freedom; people do not need a Greek-Roman Christian heritage to care about freedom. That kind of claim is parochially and culturally very narrow. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its beautiful preamble, is a Mencian document (Mencius is one of Confucius' disciples). The word "individual" never appears in the document. The language was shaped by the philosophy of Mencius because one of the crafters of the Universal Declaration was a Chinese gentleman named P.C. Chang. Of course this is December 1948, the day after the Genocide convention was passed. The communists didn't come to power for another year.

There is no trouble in understanding freedom and human rights in any culture in the world. People living in tyrannies may in fact have a better understanding of what freedom is about than American teens, who think it's just that you get your driver's license in your late teens. The Chinese regime has fostered a nationalism to trump democracy. People are taught that they are threatened by democracy, that democracy would make people weak. Party propaganda has it, "How did Rwanda occur? Because they tried to build a democracy. If the Hutus had simply imposed their will, they never would have had that problem. If it moves in a democratic direction, China is going to fall apart; it will be like what happened to Russia, to Yugoslavia. Do you want to end up like Chechnya and Bosnia? That's what the Americans really want. You are fortunate to be a Chinese living in an ethical, authoritarian system." The TV will show pictures of say the Los Angeles riots, the Sudan, and people are made frightened and confused. They're proud to be Chinese and want to raise ethical kids. They want a country they can be proud of, certainly not like American kids. The Chinese are taught that American youth are smoking at an early age, use pot, have babies in their teens, watch pornography on TV, spread AIDS, get divorced, and don't care what happens to their elderly parents. Why would you want to live in such an immoral way? This propaganda seems to work with many Chinese.

So what is growing in China is an authoritarian, patriotic, racially defined, Confucian Chinese project which is going to be a formidable challenge not just to the United States but, I think, to democracy, freedom, and human rights all around the world. China is going to seem quite attractive to many people. That is why it is so very important to understand what living without freedom really means.