

PUBLIC CONSENSUS RAISES THREAT OF A NEW MAO

BY ZHAN AIZONG

Without a free press, China remains at risk of the enforcement of a public consensus that could foster the reemergence of tyranny.

Public consensus is frightening. It is frightening when only one view and one face is displayed by millions of people, when only the words of the leadership count, when lies become truth and truth becomes deceptive. In the face of such “truth,” there is no press freedom; one keeps one’s views to oneself, hearing only one voice, speaking only one language, while alternatives are taboo. The emperor’s new clothes became the president’s clothes. And this president actually like wearing clothes, but his subjects cannot speak of his clothing; they can only say that the emperor is the embodiment of the truth, and that the emperor’s nudity displays his physical beauty.

On September 30, 2005, Peking University’s Yunnan Forum—regarded as a spiritual home for China’s intellectuals—was shut down.¹ Some Web surfers were as heartbroken as if they had experienced the end of a love affair. In the past, these Netizens had been able to meet online for a harmonious and enjoyable exchange of ideas. The closure of Yunnan Forum represents a ruthless obstruction of free flow of information, and demonstrates that the authorities can tighten their grip on the Internet at will.

In a similar instance, Henan Province’s *Henan Business Daily* was suspended for one month from September 17 to October 16 after publishing a report on August 19 about local officials bribing journalists as a means of stifling coverage of a coal mine disaster. To this day, it is unclear whether the disaster actually happened, whether journalists were actually bribed and how the matter was eventually settled. Meanwhile, *Henan Business Daily* received no acclaim for its heroic effort at exposing the truth, but rather became an indirect victim of the mining disaster. If the leadership can so effectively silence alternative views, is there anything that it cannot do?

In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, it is written, “. . . Let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”² Under Mao Zedong’s 28-year leadership, society seemed peaceful on the surface, but then the Cultural Revolution was instigated for the sake of

enforcing public consensus, resulting in an atmosphere of pervasive and unending conflict and administrative breakdown that brought the nation to the brink of disaster. Only Mao’s death at the age of 83 saved China’s people from further suffering.

On September 12, lawyer Guo Feixiong was detained on his way to Taishi Village in the Panyu District of Guangdong Province. He has since been formally arrested, and will be put at even greater risk if he is indicted and tried on charges of subversion.

Also in September, Ai Xiaoming, a professor from Guangdong’s Sun Yan-sen University, Guo Yan, another lawyer, and Leu Siew Ying,³ a reporter from Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post*, were all threatened and attacked by thugs when they went to Taishi to interview peasant rights defenders. The local police turned a deaf ear to their reports of the attacks, which occurred under the very noses of the provincial leadership. Such episodes would be understandable under conditions of anarchy or political infighting. But in a well-ordered society such as that of Guangdong Province, how could these attacks go unaddressed by the government, public security organs and news media, and still allow for claims of a “harmonious society”?

Xiao Han, an associate professor at Zhengfa University, believes mafia tactics cannot repress democracy movements. He writes, “The attack on Professor Ai in Taishi Village today shows that the local government of Panyu District has gone insane. What kind of sinister government would be so intolerant of a peaceful drive toward constitutionalism in China? The administration remains silent on the Taishi incident and has done nothing but ensure that the news media remain equally silent. But I believe that all rational people in this country will cling to the conviction that no matter how dark the time and no matter how reprehensible this so-called ‘most prosperous era since the Han and Tang Dynasties,’ we will cast aside violence and peacefully pursue constitutional reform and a just stability, because we know that peace will not arise from violence.”⁴

Surely we are not obliged to accept these mafia-like tactics, this dark era, as “business as usual”!

If the outlook for human rights in Guangdong is gloomy, the situation is no better in Shandong Province. Local authorities in Shandong’s Linyi region adopted a violent approach to birth control, inflicting bodily harm and depriving people of their assets. The victims of these outrages had nowhere to turn



Residents of Taishi Village tell their grievances to reporters. Photo: STR/AFP/Getty Images

with their grievances. Fortunately, a blind and learned man named Chen Guangcheng found a way to inform the international community of these illegal acts, which shocked even officials of the State Family Planning Commission in Beijing. The central government launched an investigation that resulted in the dismissal of several local officials, but local residents have every reason to suspect that the handling was little more than an effort to sweep the scandal under the carpet. On October 4, Xu Zhiyong, a law professor from Peking University, went with several defense lawyers to check on Chen Guangchen in Linyi, only to meet with a violent reception similar to that of Ai Xiaoming and the others in Taishi, and local police arbitrarily detained them overnight. Merely carrying a weapon and wearing a uniform is all it takes to enforce the law, regardless of whether legal principles or justice are involved. What judicial organs call “compliance with law” is impotent before rule of man.

A similar sense of impotence prevails in our newspapers and television programs and on the Internet. Even if management were to loosen its grip on the media, I believe that the media would continue to substantially repress or surrender their freedom of expression. Under public consensus, there is in fact no freedom of expression. No matter how many people share the same view, it holds less value than one dissenting

voice; one admission that “there is no press freedom” exposes the true face of “public consensus.”

The formidable nature of public consensus became clear during the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. When the people cried out for the longevity of their leader, they doomed themselves to an eternity of victimhood. If even Liu Shaoqi, the president of the People’s Republic of China, was unable to ensure his own personal safety, what hope was there for ordinary people? In Liu’s optimistic estimation, the “three-year natural disaster” from 1959 to 1961, which killed an estimated 30 million people, could be attributed 70 percent to human causes and only 30 percent to natural causes. Yet Mao bore no responsibility for this immense death toll, and continues to be praised as the “people’s savior.”

The historical emphasis on public consensus continues in China to this day, and the authorities have barely loosened their control over free expression. Although Liu Shaoqi has since been vindicated, and his family granted the honor of the state as well as financial compensation, what has been done for the families of those 30 million people who died of unnatural causes? When will they be viewed as “victims of the Republic” and compensated accordingly?

It is for this reason that I urge all of us to reflect upon history and be wary of public consensus so that we may prevent

the emergence of another monster such as Mao Zedong. Mao's character can be adduced from the people around him. Liu Shaoqi's experience demonstrates that Mao could be ruthless with his closest confederates; Liu could not simply be publicly disgraced, he had to be persecuted to death. Lin Biao is another case in point. Lin Biao was hardly a sterling character, but he was no fool, and his assessment of Mao was spot-on.

I would like to here introduce some points raised by Professor Shan Shaojie of Renmin University's Department of Philosophy in his book *Mao in Power*⁵:

- 1) Of course we cannot deny Mao's historical role in uniting China, for which he has gained historical stature and support . . . But now historical judgment has turned against him because of his abuse of the trust and status granted to him by the Chinese people, and he is regarded as a modern day Qin Shihuang.⁶
- 2) Mao was not a true Marxist-Leninist as he claimed to be; he was a follower of Confucius and Mencius cloaked in a superficial Marxism, and was the most tyrannical and feudalistic ruler since Qin Shihuang.
- 3) Mao knew that taking everyone on at once would doom him to annihilation, so at every stage he made alliances with some factions while fighting others. But he had no fixed loyalties, and those who were his friends today might easily find themselves embroiled in deadly accusations tomorrow. History shows that all of those who supported him and put him in power were eventually condemned or even executed for political crimes. His secretaries either committed suicide or were jailed, along with countless of his closest confederates. Even his son eventually went mad.
- 4) Mao was a paranoiac and a sadist with a personal philosophy of "all or nothing." If he decided to persecute someone, he would persecute to the death, and if he wronged someone, he would carry it to the furthest extreme, then put the blame on someone else.
- 5) In short, all of Mao's underlings who were obliterated from the political scene were in effect his scapegoats (See "Summary of Project 571" by Lin Ligu and others for details).⁷

Shan Shaojie further notes, "What at the time was presented as 'reverse education' resonated with many people, and the concept of 'Reform Through Labor' was especially well received by those who were young and educated."

Of course, we should do all in our power to prevent history from repeating itself, but what guarantee is there? The government has downplayed the legacies of the Cultural Revolution and the June 4th incident by fostering a public consensus that gives top priority to social stability. Is this any way to prevent history from repeating itself? Marx once said, "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."⁸ At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the last emperor, Pu Yi, was dethroned, and Yuan Shikai quickly rose to power, only to disappear from the political stage amid gales of derisive laughter 83 days later. China no

longer has an emperor, but aren't all of the country's affairs still in the hands of a few individuals?

Freedom and democracy can only take root when a country respects and protects human rights, with at minimum the establishment of a constitutional government and civil society. Without a constitution to ensure civil rights and without the emergence of civil society to bring harmony, even a specific "press law" cannot ensure the integrity of press freedom.

When citizens fail to bravely confront violence, advocate press freedom and defend their civil rights, in a sense they compromise and even collude with the violence leveled against those who do defend press freedom and civil rights. In that way, they risk becoming enemies of the people and opponents of freedom.

The British sociologist Herbert Spencer once said, "No one can be perfectly free till all are free; no one can be perfectly moral till all are moral; no one can be perfectly happy till all are happy."⁹ The truth is that the values of liberty, equality, fraternity, human rights, democracy, constitutional governance, rule of law and civilization are universal. For that reason, each and every one of us should champion and fight for civil rights. By fighting for the freedom and rights of others, we also fight for our own.

The pursuit of press freedom is not just a matter of protecting people's right to know, but also of protecting freedom of expression. It is a citizen's sacred right to disclose scandals, praise and restore virtue, and recover common sense and historical memory. To keep silent is to effectively surrender to imposed public consensus, and to collaborate with the forces of autocracy, fostering a resurgence of dictatorial aggression and paving the way for the recurrence of tragedy.

Translated by Pei Ju Tsai

The original Chinese version of this article can be accessed on the Web site of China Information Center: <http://www.observechina.net/info/artshow.asp?id=36755&ad=105/2005>.

NOTES

1. See Radio Free Asia, "China Closes Web Site That Reported Taishi Village Standoff," http://www.rfa.org/english/news/politics/2005/10/03/china_taishi/.
2. Genesis 11:4 (King James Version). In the Bible story (Genesis 11:1-9), the people's vainglorious effort at unity resulted in God dispersing them with mutually unintelligible languages.
3. Editor's note: Lew Siew Ying was accompanied by another reporter, Abel Segretin of Radio France Internationale, who was also punched and slapped by guards and thugs while covering the protest.
4. Xiao Han, "Shengyuan Ai Xiaoming jiaoshou," <http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/5/9/27/n1066417.htm>.
5. Shan Shaojie, *Mao Zedong zhizheng chunqiu* (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2000).
6. The Qin Emperor, known for uniting China through ruthless brutality.
7. Lin Ligu, the son of Lin Biao, helped draft the "Summary of Project 571" as a plan to assassinate Mao.
8. Karl Marx, 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Chapter 1.
9. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), *Social Statics: or, The Conditions essential to Happiness specified, and the First of them Developed*, Chapter 2: "The Evanescent of Evil" (London: John Chapman, 1851).