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Freedom with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract

The following “note from the field” is based off of first-hand observations and experiences had while living and working as an affiliated professor at a Chinese university. Noting the well-known political restrictions existing in China, the piece argues that against dominant Western narratives depicting a lack of freedom within China, there ostensibly appear spaces offering levels of emotional and interactional freedoms greater than what one can experience in the West. This argument is framed within the thought of Western intellectuals such as David Riesman, Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills and Stjepan Mestrovic, and is advanced by considering the vast historical and cultural changes in recent Chinese history that have created an anomic condition in regards to newly emerging spaces made possible by vast wealth acquisition in the last several decades.

Keywords

China, David Riesman, Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills, Freedom

There is no need to rehash in detail the accusations that have been levied against China- but nearly all, in one form or another, deal with political restrictions or restrictions on information. In my assessment, most accusations are true. Freedoms, at least as we in the West understand these, are severely limited here. As an American professor at a Chinese university, you know what not to speak of, mostly because you are told in indirect ways not to speak of these things. Known as the “Three T’s”, as a waiguoren (foreigner) it is best to avoid mention of Tiananmen, Tibet and Taiwan. And when your colleagues and friends feel comfortable enough with you to broach these subjects of politics, religion and power, in non-party, critical ways, it is often done in hushed tones with glances to see who is around and who may be listening.

So too is information restricted on the internet. To google (when the website is not altogether blocked) the “Three Ts” is to immerse yourself in an Orwellian world where Tiananmen Square only exists as the seat of power in Beijing; Taiwan is a Chinese province, and Tibet has been made a peaceful and idealic land wrestled and liberated from the backward ways of barbarism. In this way, information is restricted, and ideology is offered in its place, and this is troublesome to my Western sensibilities.

K. Kerr/ Societies Without Borders 8:3 (2013) 384-390

But I have come to believe something important from living and working here: In some ways, I feel freer in my day-to-day life in China than I do in America.

FREEDOM IN CHINA

This may seem absurd to Western sensibilities. But one must remember, China is more than its government. In fact, my sense is that for many Chinese, the government is much like the weather. You may not like it, and it may make your life hard for the moment, but you tolerate it, because it will eventually change. The 20th Century alone saw the end of the last dynasty, partial rule from both Western powers and Japan, competing claims for power from the Communist and the Kuomintang, the eventual rule and reunification of the country by Mao's forces, the restructuring of economic and social life under Communist-inspired policies, and the subsiding of this grip with Deng Xiaoping's Opening and Reform, rolling back the worst of the Mao-era policies and ushering in "Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics." But beneath this, at the level everyday sociology, the level often ignored in American narratives about China, and against the heaviness of its hard history that undoubtedly weighs down the Chinese psyche, there's a lightness to their everyday routines. Certainly, government bureaucracy has its realm of iron power, but for the daily life of the Chinese, *some* of the time, they carve out spaces offering levels of emotional freedom that compared to America, reveals stifling levels of bureaucratic and emotional incarceration in our own character-type and daily routine.

A few weeks ago at a restaurant in China, my three year old was injured while playing. It was a scenario likely to have never happened in America. Walking behind me through a motor-powered revolving door, he mistimed his exit. Half his body was instantly pinned between the wall and the still spinning glass door. The safety mechanism failed to stop the door when it felt the pressure of his body wedged against the frame. Likewise, the door continued to squeeze tighter and tighter even after I frantically punched the emergency off button- it was not connected. It was only a father's frightened and desperate strength at seeing his son in dire straits that finally broke the door open and freed him. But no one worried about lawyers and lawsuits, though they did worry for him. It was my own fault, not the fault of the restaurant. I should have been watching him better. And they were right. When we brought him to the hospital, no one called health insurance for prior approval, nor did they ask about insurance. They only asked what his troubles were. He turned out to be ok, in far better shape than the door that pinned him; just sore and bruised and scared- much as his father was. And to my surprise, I did not have to explain the situation to social workers before I was allowed to leave with him. We simply went to a

window, paid an incomprehensibly small amount of money and left. The ordeal was over.

Minor car accidents in China, which we have been in one, are not followed by furious calls on cell phones from inside the car to the police, the ambulance, the tow-truck company, the insurance company and finally a lawyer, and all followed by car rental companies, body shops and incomprehensible bills, often from outside contracted agencies. Unlike America, where our bureaucratic ethos demands we remain emotionless and channel our rage through a never-ending maze of bureaucratic outlets (often times making us even angrier), here, the drivers exit, inspect the damage and negotiate. A crowd gathers, and often with the help of the bystanders, a ruling is made as to who is at fault, money is exchanged, and all go about their day.

Likewise, it is common to see high school kids drinking beer at restaurants during their lunch break. No one cares. It is not an issue. Parents do not consult psychologists, the school does not suspend them, the police and courts do not get involved in this non-issue, and the students are not required to attend classes on the dangers of alcohol. To ask the Chinese, as I did, at what age is one allowed to drink alcohol, is to have them respond with “At what age do you allow people to drink water?” One does not have to go to specially sanctioned stores, at sanctioned hours on pre-approved days and produce government-issued identification to buy alcohol. It is available at all times, everywhere, like water, and is not judged and treated as a special legal or moral category.

But it is driving on a Chinese street where the difference in freedom is really felt. People here drive like they walk, and they walk the same way water flows. Traffic laws exist. But I have never seen them enforced, and rarely are they followed. Sidewalks serve as passing lanes, one-way streets are any-way streets as cars will travel in both directions and sometimes backwards while performing a u-turn (all things I have seen first-hand or experienced while riding in a taxi). Painted lines demarking lanes serve simply as artwork and speed limits, both minimum and maximum, are arbitrary numbers. Cars compete with bicycles, which compete with animals, who compete with a forklift in reverse carrying a noodle stand in the middle of an expressway (something I saw on my most recent stay), and all compete with the pedestrians who will leapfrog across even highways if it is the most efficient way to get to their destination. Jaywalking as a violation is unheard of, restrictions on the type of vehicle that can be on the road are non-existent, and no one is afraid of police issuing seatbelt tickets. It is your car, how many wheels you have on it (three wheeled, chain driven cars are common), where you park it, what you do in it and what you do while driving it is your own business. And so no one seems to get angry at the chaotic freedom that is Chinese driving culture. It contrasts greatly with the American way, where, as noted by the French social theorist

K. Kerr/ *Societies Without Borders* 8:3 (2013) 384-390

Jean Baudrillard, we exist in a land of *freeways* littered with “Must Exit” (1986:53) signs.

Finally, I remember in America picking up my infant son from the hospital after he was born. I had to speak with a nurse and produce a car seat before they allowed me to take possession of him. In China, when I pick my child-up from his Chinese Pre-K, he becomes angry in our insistence that he be strapped into his car booster seat. He wants to ride with his friends, between the legs of their parents, tied together with a small rope at the torso, as they speed away laughing, weaving in and out of the chaotic and exhilarating traffic on their gas powered scooters.

The lack of bureaucratic restrictions obviously carries its own problems. Though I suspect that an analysis might show this is not always so. If the unseen apparatus of regulatory systems aren't looking out for my friends, I wonder if I am more apt to pay them more care myself? In an American culture that is so defined by a bureaucratic ethos, we are often blind to the fact that custom and tradition can provide needed functions for the common good. Not everything must be institutionalized or bureaucratized. But, as my family personally experienced, safety issues abound. As an American writing to an American audience, there is no need to expound on these. They are obvious. One only needs to turn to any number of Chinese or Western publications to read about environmental degradation, food safety issues, exceedingly high rates of traffic fatalities and injuries, and numerous other issues that arise from lax or non-existent regulatory systems in China.

No culture's way of life is perfect- their solutions generate new problems. My point is that unlike in America, the stress and anxiety that comes from the never-ending entanglement one has with government and corporate bureaucratic organization, and even more so, from our neighbors and ourselves who have internalized this control, weighs much less heavy on my psyche in my day to day non-political activities while I am here. The fact that America has the highest incarceration rate (both in sheer numbers and proportion of our population) of any industrialized nation, including China, speaks volumes about the amount of laws and regulations that we allow. We are not more deviant than others, only more accepting of external and internalized bureaucratic control in our daily routines it seems.

Long before Baudrillard or Michel Foucault became fashionable, theorists of American and Western culture were noting the increasing surveillance, control, stress and anxiety mounting in the everyday life of Americans. David Riesman (1950), author of *The Lonely Crowd*, the best-selling sociology book of all-time, described the American in an age of diminishing autonomy and increasing control from peer groups and bureaucratic apparatuses, as harboring increasing levels of “curdled indignation” in a country that demanded mass conformity- including an

expression of “niceness” at all times. Similarly, C. Wright Mills (1959) described Americans as “cheerful robots,” controlled by increasing bureaucratic and peer-group oversight not only in their actions, but also in their emotional responses in the face of this control. The contemporary social theorist Stjepan Mestrovic (1997) writes of Americans as “postemotional,” manipulated and controlled to the point we are now unable to generate spontaneous and authentic emotional responses to cultural and personal events. Erich Fromm ([1941]1965) even foretold of a happy-faced fascism internalized in the emerging Western character-type. While my own internalized control will not allow me to go as far as Fromm in characterizing American culture (my god, what would my colleagues think?), there seems to be some truth to these sentiments that run counter to our ideological beliefs about ourselves.

And herein lies, perhaps, part of the explanation for what I perceive to be increased everyday freedoms in China. While Chinese society is much older than Western culture, over the last two generations it has been born anew. While Walt Whitman (1855) enjoined Americans to choose a first-handed life over an inherited one, China has no such choice. It finds itself in a newly emerging social order that precludes any guidance, advice or direction from past generations. They must make it up as they go. As one of my students in China stated to me, “My parent’s ways are too backward. Life is different now. They are too old to understand what is going on. But I don’t understand it either. That’s my problem.”

Despite 5000 years of history, little exists to help them understand the massive shift that has re-crafted the environment they now inhabit. Unlike Westerners, whom both Foucault and Mills indicate have internalized controls that make outward freedoms illusory, the Chinese exist in a still forming environment. Not only do they yet have no internalized controls to help them navigate the new order, in the newly emerging socio-cultural environment, neither does there yet exist externalized bureaucratic structures to control, direct and inhibit emotional and interactional agency in many phases of daily life.

On one hand, the conservative forces that demanded conformity-filial piety (see Fei 1946 and 1992) and communal ethics housed in the communist work units (see Fong 2011 and Watson 2011)- have grown exceedingly dim in the post-Mao era. On the other hand, interactional rules have yet to solidify surrounding the new social order that has sprung forth amidst the great wealth produced by capitalism. In many ways, China exists in an anomic state, both a state of normlessness in the older Mertonian conception of this term (see Merton 1938), and as an internalized “infinity of desires” as understood within neo-Durkheimian thought (see Mestrovic 1992). It is an extreme state of freedom that is at once both troubling and liberating.

K. Kerr/ *Societies Without Borders* 8:3 (2013) 384-390

While political restrictions and the behest of ironclad seats of bureaucratic power are still the norm in political interactions, China's current anomic condition offers personal and everyday freedoms that are palpable. Freed from the demands, surveillance and control rooted in traditional filial piety and the now defunct communist work units, existing in a newly-born consumer and public culture with yet solidified interactional and emotional rules, and with yet established bureaucratic oversight of many of the emerging consumer-created spaces and activities that have become possible within the last generation, Chinese culture is increasingly challenging the dominant Western narratives on freedom in China.

Yes, restrictions and lack of freedoms do exist here. Problems are numerous. China is not a utopia. But what one finds, if they put down their books and turn off their TV's and "just go out and look" as David Riesman was fond of advising his students, is a culture and a people immensely more complicated and dynamic than what mainstream Western narratives indicate, and in many ways offers, at least for the moment, a type of emotional and interactional freedom that has long disappeared within Western culture.

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K. Kerr/ Societies Without Borders 8:3 (2013) 384-390

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