

Transforming Taiwan's Media, Qualifying “China Factor”: Expanding Positive Freedom of the Press

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Depending on how ‘China factor’ is defined, changing landscapes of Taiwan's media and its future might be interpreted and campaigned for accordingly. Prior to 1989, China is a background, against which Taiwan's state formulated significant portion of its communication ‘policy’. Gradually and in retrospect, the year of 1992 should be taken as a watershed marking China as one key factor segmenting Taiwan's newspaper readership, which has continued up to the present day. Since mid-1990s, with the opening-up of the mainland's (audio-visual) media industry, China comes to be imagined as one potential lucrative market for Taiwan's media investment and products. The latest financial crisis broke out in 2008 has proved to be yet another signpost separating China's current role from its previous ones not only in terms of China’s international position, but her relationship to Taiwan’s media. From now on, an increasing number of people has come to perceive China as a threat to Taiwan's press freedom, though it may be contended that should the new baron purchasing one of Taiwan’s media conglomerate were less an idiosyncratic player, such a negative interpretation of China’s role may not surface, or is surely to arrive much later.

In addition to reviewing these four dissimilar perspectives on ‘China factor’, with more detail accounts given to the ‘threat’ case, this paper is to ponder upon its truth and falsehood and reason with its arguments. Its various proposals aiming for reducing China’s putatively malign influence on Taiwan’s press freedom will be discussed. To begin with, Taiwan has been ranked by the Freedom House as the most or the second most free country in Asia during the past decade. Therefore, it may not be immediately comprehensible why China with a notorious press freedom record can cause harm to Taiwan, even after one of her major media groups falls prey to a tycoon owing his major economic interests to China.

Having analyzed why and how this ‘threat’ accusation can or cannot be sustained, the author proposes that concept of press freedom should not be restricted to its narrow and negative side, it needs to be properly restored and expanded to include its positive aspect. This paper will further contests that only through such endeavors could it be

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possible that press freedom realizes its instrumental values and makes greater contributions to enhancing Taiwan's democracy.

When Taiwan's media is equipped with more positive press freedom, a fuller-blown public service media group as its indispensable institution, not only China as a threat to the island's freedom becomes less an issue, a prospect can then be envisioned that Taiwan enters confidently into a more fruitful engagement with China that may benefit both sides of the Strait. Such a scenario should not be dismissed as a utopia, there is after all a minor precedent. In early 1993, as one of the responses to a vehement campaign boycotting its position toward China, the *United Daily News* launched Taiwan's first letter-to-the-editor page which in subsequent years is emulated and has since become a constituent part of Taiwan's general newspapers. With the benefit of hindsight, this new institutional element can be attributed to the unintended creation of 'China factor'. Twenty years later, for people taking democracy and cross-strait relationship seriously, 'China factor' as a threat should be intentionally channeled into another path, with a view to lending fresh and decisive supports to the decade-long campaign for expanding Taiwan's public service media.