

China's Export of Censorship

Written by Christopher Walker and Sarah Cook
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The Chinese government's effort to prevent dissident authors from taking part in the prestigious Frankfurt Book Fair, an international showcase for freedom of expression, has offered Germany a close-up view of China's intolerance of dissent.

In September, two Chinese writers, journalist Dai Qing and poet Bei Ling, had their invitations to the fair revoked by German event organizers after China's organizing committee complained. The Chinese delegation threatened a boycott over invitations to the writers for a September symposium promoting the Frankfurt Book Fair, which begins on October 14. China is the "guest of honor" at this year's fair. In the face of this pressure, the event's organizers withdrew the invitations. The writers' participation was ultimately enabled when the German PEN club of independent writers invited the two Chinese dissidents.

While Beijing's coercive behavior caught many Germans off guard, it should not have come as a surprise; the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) censorship ambitions are neither new, nor limited to Germany. In fact, this action is just the latest example of an ongoing pattern of interference, cooptation and intimidation beyond China's borders used to muzzle voices critical of the Chinese government.

Two days after the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair, a film festival in Taiwan's second largest city, Kaohsiung, will begin. It, too, has come under pressure to censor. In this instance the issue is a planned screening of "The 10 Conditions of Love," a documentary about exiled Uighur rights activist Rebiya Kadeer. Chinese authorities assert Kadeer has terrorist links, unsubstantiated claims not accepted by most Western countries or independent analysts. Despite pressure to shelve the film—linked to fears that the city's growing industry servicing mainland tourists could be hurt—the Kaohsiung Film Archive and the organizing committee of the 2009 Kaohsiung Film Festival announced on September 27 that it would go ahead with the screening. A similar series of events unfolded at the Melbourne Film Festival this summer.

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In September, Uighur activist Dolkun Isa, who holds German citizenship, was denied entry into South Korea, to take part in a conference on democracy. China is South Korea's largest trading partner. Isa, who fled China in 1997 and obtained asylum in Germany, was held at the Seoul airport without explanation for two days after being denied entry to South Korea.

The Chinese authorities have developed an elaborate arsenal of censorship, including an extensive domestic apparatus of information control. Less appreciated and understood are the methods of interference and intimidation employed to muzzle critical voices abroad. Some of the modern authoritarian techniques the Chinese authorities use for this purpose beyond its borders are detailed in a study, "Undermining Democracy: 21st Century Authoritarians," recently released by Freedom House, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia.

Economic coercion is a principal line of attack in the transnational suppression of issues deemed sensitive by China's rulers. The coercion is applied directly and indirectly.

Instances of direct economic coercion and censorship typically occur when an event has already been planned or already begun. Pressure is then applied by Chinese government representatives on the organizers or local authorities to suppress certain activities or appearances deemed undesirable by the CCP. In such instances, explicit or implicit threats of boycotts, trade sanctions, or withdrawal of Chinese government funding have been used to force the hand of those in charge. The CCP's Frankfurt Book Fair gambit fits this model, given the financial implications of the Chinese government's \$15 million investment in the event.

More insidious has been an indirect form of economic intimidation, whereby publications, event organizers or governments engage in self-censorship on topics deemed sensitive to the mainland, a dynamic some have dubbed "pre-emptive kowtowing." Given their small size, proximity and relationship to the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon.

This June, the Hong Kong edition of Esquire magazine, published by South China Media, pulled a feature story by journalist Daisy Chu on the Tiananmen Square massacre slated to run on the 20th anniversary. In 2008, a prominent legal journal in Hong Kong made a last-minute decision not to publish an article on Tibetan self-determination. A blackout on independent coverage of the Falun Gong is believed to be practiced among certain Hong Kong and Taiwanese outlets

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whose owners have close ties to Beijing or significant business interests on the mainland.

As China's economic clout and role on the global stage grows, it will inevitably exert greater influence beyond its borders. However, the issue is not whether China—which features one of the world's least hospitable environments for free expression—will project influence but what shape this growing power will take. The CCP plans, for instance, to spend billions of dollars on expanding its overseas media operations in a potentially massive show of “soft power.” But whether this enormous investment will simply project the deeply illiberal values that characterize China's domestic media scene to a wider playing field is a question advocates of free expression should seriously ponder.

This critical question, so far, does not provide an encouraging answer.

China's attempts to insinuate itself into Taiwan's media sector, and Beijing's ongoing efforts to limit the vitality of Hong Kong's media, are among the examples of this phenomenon in Asia. The CCP has recently demonstrated its willingness to suppress open expression in Germany and Australia. The United States is not immune to this pressure. The Dalai Lama will be waiting a bit longer for his meeting with President Obama.

The Chinese government's position at the vanguard of efforts to monitor and filter Internet content, using its wealth and technical acumen to devise methods to limit the free and independent flow of information online, also has serious transnational implications for free expression. China effectively serves as an incubator for new media suppression; authoritarian governments around the world carefully watch China's censorship techniques and learn from its innovations.

The community of democratic states must acknowledge the Chinese government's growing media ambitions and efforts to censor beyond its borders. Acquiescence in this challenge will only embolden the Chinese authorities.

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