

Ongoing controversies in Taiwan and China surrounding the media are once again highlighting the delicate balance that must be struck in cross-strait cooperation in all matters pertaining to journalism.

As the editorial staff at Guangzhou-based Southern Weekly defied censors this week over government intervention in the newspaper's editorial last Thursday, several Taiwanese who in recent months have launched protests against the monopolization of the media and the risks of increasing Chinese influence, received just what they needed to confirm that their actions were justified.

Since President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) came to power in 2008, Taiwan has made a series of moves to encourage cross-strait journalistic exchanges, with government agencies calling for more cooperation in news and entertainment media. One of the premises under which such liberalization was launched, we are told, is that the more Chinese journalists are exposed to operating in a democratic society, the likelier they are to pollinate China with liberal thoughts once returning.

Although a case can be made for such efforts, after decades of Chinese journalists operating in Europe, the US and Canada, such results have yet to materialize. This is not because Chinese journalists — the real ones, as opposed to those who work for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) — are intrinsically anti-democratic.

It would be unfair to argue that Chinese need to physically leave China to learn the virtues of liberty and democracy. Over the years, there have been ample examples of Chinese journalists, academics, writers and activists who, at great risk, exposed social ills and corruption in their country. Many of them have never worked abroad.

The problem, rather, lies with the strong grip the CCP has on all forms of media throughout China.

From comments to the effect that there is no such thing as “so-called censorship” in China to a Global Times editorial arguing that “Even in the West, mainstream media would not choose to

## Old tactics on Chinese media failing

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openly pick a fight with the government” — as if the Pentagon Papers had never happened, to use but one of many examples — Chinese authorities are making it clear that efforts to liberalize Chinese media through contact are failing. In several instances, the environment hardened under Chinese President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), just as such contact was accelerating.

China can expel Western journalists, delay their visas, have them followed and roughed up, and can pressure foreign governments, such as Canada’s, to bar certain journalists from covering events attended by visiting Chinese officials, but somehow, the rest of the world must continue to play by the rules.

If the theory of exposure were valid, keeping the door open would make sense. However, as Beijing shows no sign of wanting to play by the rules, it is perhaps time we reassessed the means by which we intend to help journalists and activists in China who are driven by a need to speak truth to power.

Given Taiwan’s small size and China’s designs upon its people, the one-way street of media cooperation with China is especially dangerous. Beijing will take and impose change, but it will deny any reciprocity in the process. Under such dynamics, Taiwan’s media environment as it is today is gravely threatened, while China’s remains insulated, with little prospect for change. Knowing this, the importance of ensuring that journalism in Taiwan remains free of political and commercial influence becomes all the more apparent.

Undoubtedly, Taiwan can serve as an example to China of alternatives for a post-Confucian society.

However, simply throwing it into the wild without proper protection is the surest way to dismember it. For the sake of Taiwan itself, and for those who believe that the path to a liberal China runs through Taiwan, the nation’s media environment must remain “uninhibited, robust and wide-open,” to quote Lee Bollinger, a noted expert on the US’s First Amendment.

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