A Foreign Policy Goal: Developing Civil Society in China?

The European Community and many of its member states have incorporated the goal of promoting the development of ‘civil society’ in China into their China policy guidelines. By this they mean supporting more vigorous and independent articulation and organisation of society in an environment where the Party, and the State under its control, claim a monopoly by right in both fields, and have set up powerful machinery to secure this monopoly. The guidelines contain the implicit and certainly not uncontested claim that foreign nations have a stake in the development of such articulation and organisation, and that they consider this to be beneficial to the stability and predictability of this big country, both domestically and in the international environment. In terms of helping towards independent articulation. Some of these nations, such as the UK, France and Germany, have already been taking practical steps for many years by supporting radio and TV stations broadcasting in Chinese into China. These broadcasts are in no way restricted to news about these foreign countries, but often include news about China that is unavailable from official sources inside China, or opinions by Chinese living in China itself or abroad who do not find an avenue of articulation through the official media. In their day-to-day practice, these stations function as a part of the Chinese public sphere, and are recognised as such by the Chinese authorities, albeit generally as illegitimate imperialistic intrusions into the sacred Chinese national space/public sphere. In normal times, selected portions of programmes from these foreign stations might be rebroadcast by official stations in China, and, in times of crisis, as in May and June 1989, these stations (and others such as the Voice of America) might be the only ones to provide any detailed information about developments on the ground in China. When the
Chinese authorities run official news blockades in this way and jam their broadcasts, their reports are relayed through loudspeakers on the country’s campuses.

The arrival of the internet has broadened the internationalisation of the Chinese public sphere. However, the golden age of Chinese internet access lasted only about three months, from October 1999 to January 2000. By then, Shanghai alone could boast over a thousand government censors employed for the single purpose of screening the few existing China/internet connections for any material that they might consider to be politically or morally out of bounds. Well in line with its general attitude towards sovereignty, the Chinese government has rigorously maintained that the Chinese public sphere is coterminous with its national space, and that any unscreened material entering the national territory is contraband or an imperialistic intrusion. While this attitude shares some features with, say, that of the German courts when they take action against foreign internet providers such as Yahoo for carrying information originating in third countries, for example on the sale of a second-hand copy of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, which is illegal in Germany, China’s rigorous and largely successful defence of its national information space has no real counterpart elsewhere.

One might leave it at that and close the subject with a few remarks about the sad absence of free speech, a free press and internet access in China, and the firm expectation that, with the growth of the internet and the opening of the market that will accompany China’s accession to the WTO, things will ‘inevitably’ change for the better. Which they might or again might not.

The worthy goal of promoting Chinese ‘civil society’, however, is based less on a specific analysis of the Chinese body politic than on a general assumption about the necessary and beneficial structure of a modern society that is extrapolated from that of a few Western states. This essentialising view goes hand in hand with equally essentialising views about how ‘the Chinese’ are, or how ‘China’ is. As far as China is concerned, one might argue that the Sinologists have not done their homework in providing the public, including the officials who define these foreign policy goals, with studies that they might draw upon to understand the historical and cultural specificities of the Chinese case.

Without claiming to be qualified to enlighten the public, or to be a consultant to any government agency, I would say that there appears to be a happy and serendipitous convergence between some of the problems outlined above and some of my own research in the past decade on the structure and development of the Chinese public sphere, and especially the early Chinese newspapers.²