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Facebook and the People in the Iron House: 非死不可?

April 22, 2011 in [Op-Ed](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)
By James A. Millward

"Maybe we will block content in some countries, but not others," Adam Conner, a Facebook lobbyist, told the [\[Wall Street\] Journal](#). "We are occasionally held in uncomfortable positions because now we're allowing too much, maybe, free speech in countries that haven't experienced it before," he said.

"Right now we're studying and learning about China but have made no decisions about if, or how, we will approach it," said Debbie Frost, Facebook's director of international communications."

So this is what Facebook's lobbyists and international communications folks are saying openly about how they are planning to enter the Chinese market. This article has been much cross-linked, and the sentiments of the lobbyist may be publicly decried. But then there will be the [inevitable responses](#): "why should FB care about democracy? They're a business, after all, and responsible only to their shareholders (as yet not public, though FB has made private offerings to select investors). Why should Facebook be any different than Bob Dylan? You gotta serve somebody, you must accept censorship to get into the Chinese market. It's the cost of doing business; we respect their local ways."

But what about racism, or at least chauvinistic culturalism? Should we care if FB embraces that? Whether it's "Asian Values" advocates, hard-nosed business "realists," or gradual evolutionists within or outside of China, the argument that certain people, in certain places, aren't quite ready to speak or think for themselves based on unfiltered information is a tyranny of low expectations. If an American food critic said Chinese people aren't ready to appreciate, say, good wine, or a foreign film critic said Chinese have lousy cinematic taste, or a Western academic said Chinese don't really understand what real scholarship or good writing is—they would be pilloried on-line, and Chinese students would track them down and stake out their house. Yet it's become increasingly routine to hear, both in China and abroad, that Chinese people are okay with a dumbed-down internet since China is strong, China's economic rise has been remarkable, and in any case you can still play games, shop and read about celebrities on the Chinese intranet. In other words, the *Global Times* (China's hyper-nationalistic, pro-government tabloid) is good enough for China, and it's fine for international media companies to adhere to the standards of the *Global Times* to get access behind the great firewall.

Lu Xun (in [呐喊](#) *Call to Arms*) cared about the people in the iron house:

"Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn?"

"But if a few awake, you can't say there is no hope of destroying the iron house."

Lu Xun lived in different times, and these lines are admittedly too dramatic for the present. But the issue is the same. Does one let them sleep? Is "friending" China a plus, better than nothing, even if the proposed FB-PRC is monitoring the "friend"ship? Would Lu Xun care, today, if he lived outside China or were among the few who have a passport and a VPN connection that allows the savvy and affluent in China to span the firewall? Do I want to keep wasting time on Facebook, or link up with my friends in China using Facebook, when I know that they would not be able to read all my FB posts? Would units at our universities (for example the Asian Studies Program at Georgetown, where I teach) which increasingly use FB

as an announcement board, still want to do so knowing that *FB itself* would censor our announcements of talks that Chinese censors disapproved of?

The WSJ piece mentions that some members of Congress are critical of Facebook for not signing the Global Network Initiative or participating in the Senate Judiciary Committee's panel on "global Internet freedom." But it will not be helpful for any branch of the US government to bludgeon or shame Facebook into compliance. Facebook shouldn't be lockstep with US policy any more than it should be handmaiden to PRC censors. And I wouldn't even say that Facebook should be fighting for human rights in China or anywhere, since it won't be FB but domestic Chinese internet and other media that gradually erodes or overwhelms the controls. Rather, Facebook should simply remember its stated principles: in Mark Zuckerberg's words, that Facebook was intended "to help people understand the world around them" (David Kirkpatrick, [The Facebook Effect](#), p. 143), or that "our main goal at Facebook is to help make the world more open and transparent." By "blocking content in some countries, but not in others," does Facebook now want to add a caveat that unlike everyone else, Chinese people should only be vouchsafed *translucent* understanding of *part* of the world around them?

Sun Yat-sen wrote a century ago that the Chinese people would need a period of "political tutelage" before they would be ready for democracy. It's not Facebook's job to fight for Chinese internet freedoms or human rights. But it's not Facebook's job to help the PRC government further extend that "tutelage," either. Let's not patronize the Chinese people by accepting the argument that some kind of stripped-down, partially-gated, government-monitored Facebook (or any other media) is good enough for them. I (and, I hope, the other 499,999,999 global FB users) want to be friends with Chinese, not just "friend" them.

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