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# Hu Jintao's "Concession" on Human Rights

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By Alice Miller

Chinese President and CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao's remarks on human rights during his joint press conference with President Obama in Washington on 19 January have been widely regarded in foreign media as a grudging concession that broke new ground in Beijing's position on the issue. Specifically, confronted by a persistent Washington press corps, Hu for the first time acknowledged "the universality of human rights" in international politics and conceded that "a lot still needs to be done in China in terms of human rights."

Whether Hu attempted to dodge a question about China's human rights position posed by an Associated Press reporter, as many Western media have concluded, or the initial question was inadequately translated into Chinese, as Hu claimed, cannot be answered conclusively from available reporting. But the remarks that Hu gave to the follow-up question on the issue when a Bloomberg reporter pressed for an answer—which, according to a BBC account, Hu read from a note card prepared for the occasion—did not break new ground. They merely repeated longstanding PRC positions on this issue.

Beijing has repeatedly and explicitly acknowledged that human rights are universal since the mid-1990s in statements at home and abroad. Even before then, Beijing indirectly acknowledged the principle of the universality of human rights in endorsing the 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," and over the years it has accepted the principle in signing on to several international human rights covenants and protocols. Last year, for example, Beijing's ambassador to the UN He Yafei summarized Beijing's position in an interview with the PRC news service Xinhua:

China respects the universality of human rights and believes all rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated. The principle of universality has been included in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other international human rights instruments. China has so far ratified more than 20 international human rights instruments, including seven of the eight core human rights instruments. This demonstrates clearly China's affirmation of the universality of human rights. (Xinhua, 17 March 2010)

This position has been a staple of authoritative PRC statements for more than a decade. For example:

- Foreign Minister Qian Qichen enunciated it in Washington in April 1997 in a speech before a luncheon sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, the U.S.-China Business Council, and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. (Xinhua, 30 April 1997)
- Qian repeated it in his annual address to the UN General Assembly in September 1997 and again in remarks at the opening ceremony for the International Symposium on World Human Rights Toward the 21st Century in Beijing. (Xinhua, 24 September 1997 and 20 October 1998)
- In January 1999, Assistant PRC Foreign Minister Wang Guangya underscored acceptance of the principle as major point of agreement between the United States and China at the end of the first U.S.-PRC bilateral dialogue on human rights in Washington. (Xinhua 14 January 1999)

The principle has been incorporated as a point of agreement in several joint declarations signed by the top leaders of China and other countries, including two between Paris and Beijing, one signed by former PRC President and CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin and French President Jacques Chirac in 1997 and the other signed by Chirac and Hu Jintao in 2004. (Xinhua, 16 May 1997 and 27 January 2004).

Nor is the acknowledgment that China "still has a lot to do" with regard to human rights new. Since 1991, for example, Beijing has issued a total of eight white papers on human rights in China, most of which have acknowledged shortcomings in China's performance on the issue and the need for progress. For example, Beijing's first human rights white paper in November 1991 stated in its preface:

As a developing country, China has suffered from setbacks while safeguarding and developing human rights. Although much has been achieved in this regard, there is still much room for improvement. It remains a long-term historical task for the Chinese people and government to continue to promote human rights and strive for the noble goal of full implementation of human rights as required by China's socialism.

Similarly, the 2001 white paper stated:

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that China is still a developing country. Limited by impediments of natural, historical and economic development, there is still room for improvement with regard to the levels of China's democracy and legal system building, the degree of social civilization and people's living standards. (2000)

And, most recently, its 2010 white paper acknowledged:

China is a developing country with a population of 1.3 billion. Due to its inadequate and unbalanced development, there is still much room for improvement in its human rights conditions. The Chinese government is taking effective measures to promote the sound development and social harmony with a view to building a more just and harmonious society and ensuring that the people enjoy a more dignified and happier life. (2010)

As these successive expositions indicate, Beijing's perspective on human rights is evolutionary, not absolute. That is, human rights are in principle universal, but assessment of their achievement in any given society at any moment must take account of its material and historical capacity to achieve them. The value attached by Western societies to human rights in the contemporary era, Beijing argues, reflects their overall level of economic and social development. By the same token, while all countries should endorse achievement of the universal goals of human rights, progress toward those goals must be assessed in the context of their respective levels of development. And so attainment of basic human rights of economic subsistence must come before full achievement of other ideals, including of civil liberties.

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