

# Chinese Freedom

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Chinese freedom may seem like an oxymoron to some, but I address the question as one who is committed to four months a year in China. I research and teach in the area of Marxism, philosophy and religion. In particular, I have developed close connections with the Institute of Marxism in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The government provides immense resources for the study of Marxism in all its facets. There are schools of Marxism in nearly every university, centres that specialise in one or other aspect of Marxism, and many, many scholars who work in this area. In short, the situation is one of socialism in power, with Marxism as the ideology of the state. This changes the situation dramatically. Marxism is no longer restricted to being an academic pursuit or an oppositional political movement. Instead, it is in power.

How does intellectual freedom work in such an environment? Is the government omniscient and omnipotent, checking through everything that one writes and says? Are intellectuals merely puppets of government ideology? Hardly. I have encountered an even wider range of approaches to Marxism than I find in other parts of the world. This ranges from those who dismiss all forms of Chinese Marxism as fake, preferring instead some Western European Marxists as the only 'true' ones, to those who fully support what is called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Some suggest that no-one 'believes' in Marxism any more in China, while others are surprised to learn that anyone should even dream of making such a suggestion.

This is only the beginning, for many distinguish between Marxist research that is 'ideological' and research that is 'academic'. The former feel constrained by the expected perimeters of research in light of government policy, while the latter pursue developments in areas such as Marxist philosophy, social sciences,

economics irrespective of any constraints. At the same time, the ‘ideological’ dimension is undertaken with full knowledge of the situation, to the point of fostering academic research. I have found this to be the situation with the Beijing Centre for Studies of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, with whom I am working a project. This should indicate that the distinction is itself artificial and has much to do with the self-definition of scholars and their working situations. Someone else or some other centre is ‘ideological’, but not my own. Of course, the designation of work as ‘ideological’ is found not only in China (I have had journal articles rejected since they were too ‘ideological’).

Further, Chinese scholars distinguish between what is ‘sensitive’ and what is not. One is supposed to avoid ‘sensitive’ topics, such as religious radicalism or valorising the Cultural Revolution, which is officially regarded as one of Mao Zedong’s mistakes. However, major bodies such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences are also expected to foster research into ‘sensitive’ topics, for these are vitally important. Here foreigners also play a major role, for scholars such as myself are encouraged, if not expected, to bring new and controversial perspectives on the topics under debate. Many are brought to China to participate in conferences and seminars, and the Chinese Academy sponsors many international conferences on matters relating to China. Via complex patterns of feedback and reporting, these views make their way into higher levels of debate. My sense is that a vigorous process of critical assessment is used in determining what is of value and what is not. The superficial material, if not the rubbish, is soon discarded and critical insights make their way forward.

I can say that I have found no constraints in what I say and publish in China. Indeed, I am encouraged to say what I think. I find that scholars and students are very ready to enter into debate, to disagree and put forward their own views. Of course, it helps if one is known as a ‘friend’ of China, for what I say is then seen in that light. This may be called the ‘partisanship of freedom,’ as first formulated by Lenin.