Communication, technology, and authoritarian regimes

Will the continued development of wireless, the Internet, and other communications technologies provide sufficient counterweights to authoritarian trends in countries such as China?

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We often think that new technologies empower new social, political, economic and cultural forms. Early modern printing is usually associated with dramatic changes in intellectual and political life in European history, arguably setting off revolutions of thought and behavior there that some, such as Elizabeth Eisenstein, have overoptimistically argued single-handedly caused the turn from medieval "scribal" to early modern "print culture." Scholars have recently ascribed similar "rose-colored" powers to the rise of print culture in early modern China and Japan, arguing that between 1500 and 1800 Chinese and Japanese society also went through print revolutions of unprecedented scope and magnitude, which empowered revolutionary new trends in thought and social formations. In China, for example, after 1450 Ming civil examination

papers were first compiled in the publishing rooms inside the provincial 乡试 and metropolitan 会试 examination compounds 贡院, where a host of copyists, woodblock carvers, and printers worked under the imperial examiners 考官. Essays were printed out with the examiner's comments and bound according to rank. These official collections of examination essays were based on the original, anonymous essays that the examiners actually had read. Those originals were returned to those who requested them after the examination. In addition, the best essay on each quotation or question in all three sessions of both provincial and metropolitan examinations was included in the official examiners' report (乡试录，会试录) and sent to the court for review.

The widespread internal printing by the state of examination essays, known as "8-legged essays" (八股文) then precipitated a substantial increase after 1600 in publishing such essays by private bookstores and printers for the public educational marketplace. The public printing of essay collections by private printers increased during the late Ming publishing boom, when the commoditization of culture intensified via the influx of Japanese and New World silver after 1550, and expanded further under the demographic boom of the "High Qing" under the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors. This Ming-Qing increase in the printing of private, commercial collections of examination essays can be attributed to the formalization of the eight legged essay from 1500 to 1800 into the official essay style. In addition to enabling the widespread printing of vernacular novels and encyclopedias (类书) that occurred, the print revolution also empowered the expansion of the examination market for the classically literate, which during the Ming and Qing dynasties added a third tier of 1,300 local county and 140 prefectural examinations, thus dramatically increasing the empire-wide pool of candidates who would be interested in such collections. In other words, the early modern printing boom in China in part redounded as much to the imperial state's support for an educational orthodoxy based on Cheng-Zhu learning (程朱思想) that could be tested empire-wide as to the emergence of independent forms of local or regional forms of literary production or dissenting media.

Accordingly, civil service examinations under the Ming and Qing dynasties by themselves were not an avenue for considerable social mobility, that is, they were not an opportunity for the vast majority of peasants and artisans to move from the lower classes into elite circles. The archives indicate that peasants, traders, and artisans, who made up 90 percent of the population, were not a significant part of the 2–3 million who regularly failed local biennial licensing tests (岁考，科考) between 1500 and 1900. Despite this fact, a social byproduct of the examinations was the limited circulation in the government of lower-level elites from gentry, military, and merchant backgrounds who were able to read the latest examination essays in efforts to keep up with the times. In addition, the large pool of examination failures created a rich collection of literary talent that flowed easily into ancillary roles as novelists, playwrights, pettifoggers (lawyers), ritual specialists, and lineage agents. In other words, print culture in Ming China aided and abetted significant social changes, but these changes accrued to the power of the state as much as they increased the levels of classical literacy empowering Chinese literati.

One must look beyond the official meritocracy to see the larger place of the millions of failures in the civil service examinations. One of the unintended consequences of the examinations was the creation of legions of classically literate men (and women) who used their linguistic talents for a variety of nonofficial purposes: from physicians to pettifoggers, from fiction writers to

examination essay teachers, from girls competing for spouses to mothers educating their sons. Women along with Buddhist and Daoist clergy were excluded, so the pool of candidates in late imperial China—as in contemporary education circles worldwide—was exclusive. Because of the requirement to master non‑vernacular classical texts, an educational barrier was erected as the hidden curriculum that separated those licensed to take examinations and those who could not because they were classically illiterate. The circulation of partially literate non‑elites and lesser lights as writers for hire was an unintended byproduct of the civil examination's educational process and explains the value of print culture for the many and not just the few in premodern China.

When modern reformers summarily eliminated the civil service examinations in 1904, the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) undermined its longstanding partnership with gentry-merchant elites. The dynasty fell before a new schooling system could be put in place empire-wide, however. With hindsight we can see that civil service examinations and print culture had served both imperial interests and literati values. Along with the examinations, the dragon throne and its traditional elites also collapsed in the twentieth-century Chinese revolution. China's print culture, however, survived and expanded.

If we think that new communication technologies such as the internet will on their own eventually unravel the controlling trends of prevailing attitudes in China, we should think again. The telegraph in China promised a speed-up of communications and wider access to information at the turn of the twentieth century, but Manchu and Chinese authorities under the last imperial dynasty controlled the new telegraph offices and ensured that the government and the police monopolized them. When the leaders of the Republican revolution unexpectedly gained the upper hand during October 10, 1911, demonstrations in the inland city of Wuchang, the "Chicago of China," they quickly took over the local telegraph office to broadcast their triumph. For example, they wired a revolutionary message declaring Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 the first President of the Republic of China. Sun was then in exile in the United States and riding a train to Denver, Colorado, when he heard the news while reading an English newspaper. When Sun returned to Shanghai in triumph in December, 1911, he was appointed president of the provisional government. So far so good, but the telegraph could not stay out in front for good. In January, President Sun reached an impasse, and he resigned his position in favor of Yuan Shikai 袁世凯, a former general under the previous Manchu regime, who quickly extinguished the promise of the Republican revolt at Wuchang 武昌. Thereafter the Republic of China limited the public use of the telegraph to the government and accepted organizations. State-controlled media was the rule thereafter.

Others are currently working on interesting projects that evaluate the impact of new technologies, such as the telegraph, for rapid communication at the turn of the 20th century in China. It is very sobering to learn how quickly the weaker Republican state, and the 1920s warlords it engendered, gained quick control over such new technologies. We can compare the successful limits applied to the internet today by the much stronger Communist state to the reining in of the telegraph 90 years before by the weaker Republicans. Media technologies, such as telegraphs, telephones, faxes, and the internet do not exist independently of their social and political contexts. Faxes, like the telegraph, also moved briefly out in front of political events world-wide and in China,

but fax machines were quickly rendered harmless. Authoritarian political cultures must first change, as Japan's and Germany's have, before the new media technologies can enable permanent public counterweights to the return of autocracy. Under the reins of an authoritarian state, the information highway can just as easily be hijacked in the name of nationalism. Imagine if the internet had been available during the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 in 1966, and we can perhaps understand why the media is as prone to repression as it is towards free speech.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, the fault lies not in the media; it lies in us.