

**Countering Internal Chinese Propaganda and Censorship:
Cultural Exchanges Key to Establishment of a Free Press**

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Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party has implemented a robust and complex propaganda and censorship machine that affects its own citizens and influences foreign perceptions. Promoting dissent and discourse within the Chinese populace that leads to the gradual establishment of a free press within China should be the United States' (US) long-term strategic goal to eliminate propaganda, preserve peace, and create a more predictable relationship with China. To accomplish this gradual change, this paper prioritizes the importance of cultural exchanges through education by increasing the number of Chinese student VISAs, creating and sustaining Mandarin language programs in US schools, and promoting opportunities for US citizens to study and work in China.

Countering Internal Chinese Propaganda and Censorship

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has implemented a robust, complex propaganda and censorship machine that affects its citizens and influences foreign perceptions. Internally, branches of the Chinese government ensure that citizens cannot access information that may harm its national security and many Chinese citizens do not even realize they are receiving biased information.² Promoting dissent and discourse within the Chinese populace that leads to the gradual establishment of a free press within China should be the United States' (US) long-term strategic goal to eliminate propaganda, preserve peace, and create a more predictable relationship with China. Consistent, long-term goals must be put into motion now in order to provide predictability and stability in the future. Cultural exchanges between US and Chinese citizens through the increase of Chinese student VISAs and improvements in the US educational system will be key to countering propaganda and gradually establishing a free press within China.

Merely 50 years ago, China was still pursuing isolationist policies and had virtually zero foreign direct investment.⁸ Since then, China has increased international investments that have brought the nation forward as a world competitor and economic powerhouse.⁸ These changes have decreased suffering within their populace and have provided some economic prosperity for urban citizens leading to improvements in the Chinese way of life. However, this progress has not eliminated significant human rights abuses committed by the CCP and does not provide many of the civil liberties and social programs provided from a modern democracy.⁹

While the slow pace of social change can be excruciating for democratic citizens watching from the outside, China is postured to continue momentum towards more democratic principles in the future.³ According to McIntyre 2015, there are three preconditions that make a

country a better candidate for successful democratization; business and education investments, establishment of a free press, and balance of power.⁸ China has met the first precondition and now is the time for the US to take indirect steps to improve Chinese citizens' awareness so that they demand a free press that has the ability to highlight corruption, prevent human rights abuses, and enhance social programs within the country. While this seems like the next logical step for the US' goals in China, it is certainly easier said than done since the CCP has invested heavily in the censorship and control of its population.

The Great Firewall of China has been very effective in controlling the information the Chinese populace consumes through news outlets and online media sources. This firewall blocks any information that the CCP does not consider favorable to its goals or policies. The general Chinese populace likely does not realize the censorship they are exposed to on a daily basis and the content that could be accessed through a free Chinese media.⁶ For this reason, it is important to increase the amount of cultural exchanges between citizens from the US and China. Deeper understanding of each culture will benefit both the US and China and create a shared understanding of the pros and cons of both societies. Such exchanges could lead the populace of China to push for more freedoms and force the CCP to gradually implement free press principles, similar to the way Taiwan gradually transferred to a free press in the past.¹⁰

In order to increase shared cultural competencies, the US should take steps to increase awareness through education. Increasing student VISAs for Chinese students to complete degree programs and attend graduate schools in the US is one avenue to accomplish this goal. In 2019, the US hosted 373,000 Chinese students, which made up about 35% of the total foreign student population in the US.⁴ A gradual increase of five percent each year for the next ten years would

continue to aid the long-term strategic goal to establish a free media in China and would increase shared cultural understanding.

However, even though the United States has historically been the most desired country to attend college, recent policy changes and anti-Asian hate crimes in the US have caused Chinese students to consider other destinations for their educational aspirations. In 2018, the US steered toward more nationalist policies and put restrictions on Chinese students' involvement in certain science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs. Additionally, the trade war between the US and China and the pandemic have further complicated the VISA process and Chinese student university applications have fallen 18 percent in the 2021 academic year.⁷ While nationalism might address the US' short term concerns, it will not help with long-term goals and will not give the US the competitive edge in future conflicts.

Admittedly, increasing Chinese student VISAs does not come without disadvantages, as the threat of academic espionage is still a perceptible concern that should be addressed. According to Grubbs 2019, "in 2014, the US Department of Defense found that nearly a quarter of all foreign efforts to obtain sensitive or classified information was through academic institutions."¹ While university research is critical to the advancement of national defense data convergence and acquisitions, steps can be taken to ensure that foreign students do not receive access to this material. All universities with sensitive research projects should be subject to strict protocols for their foreign students to ensure the wrong information does not become subject to academic espionage. Additionally, students involved in these projects must understand that sharing information about these projects is a threat to national security.¹

Despite the dangers, increased cultural exchanges and understanding between citizens is a great deterrent and defensive strategy to the increasingly competitive landscape between the US

and China. While increasing Chinese student VISAs should be priority number one, the US educational system can also help increase cultural exchanges by increasing Mandarin language programs, advertising student exchange programs, and promoting collegiate and teaching opportunities in China.¹¹ In order to increase the amount and quality of Mandarin programs in US school systems, Chinese student VISA holders could be offered the chance to teach Mandarin within US schools to stay longer or work towards permanent residency.

While placing a high priority on cultural exchanges will not immediately change the competitive landscape, the US must improve its development and implementation of long-term strategies to compete with a patient China. Policies that change every year or drastically flip with each administration could have the opposite effect and result in a negative attitude towards the US. For this reason, it is imperative that the US continues to be a safe and welcoming place that appreciates cultural differences and welcomes new ideas. Increased globalization and competition makes shared understanding between the two cultures and establishment of a free press within China an imperative strategy for the future.

Establishment of a free press throughout China is key to combating corruption, human rights abuses present especially in minority populations throughout China, and environmental disasters to name only a few.⁵ Additionally, a free press will continue to move China in the right direction towards a more democratic nation which will significantly reduce the chances of a conflict with the US in the future. It is important that the Chinese people understand the freedoms and the checks on government power and corruption they would be afforded with the establishment of a free press.

In the last 50 years China has made radical changes that will likely continue to drive them closer to a more democratic society. The next step to continue this forward progress is the

establishment of a free press which would be a radical change since the CCP currently goes to great lengths to censor and change information that could be harmful to their regime. The US must make the establishment of a free press within China a top long-term strategic goal and must keep policies relatively consistent with each new administration to be effective. To achieve these goals, the US must prioritize cultural exchanges through education by increasing the number of Chinese student VISAs, creating and sustaining Mandarin language programs in US schools, and promoting opportunities for US citizens to study and work in China.

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