

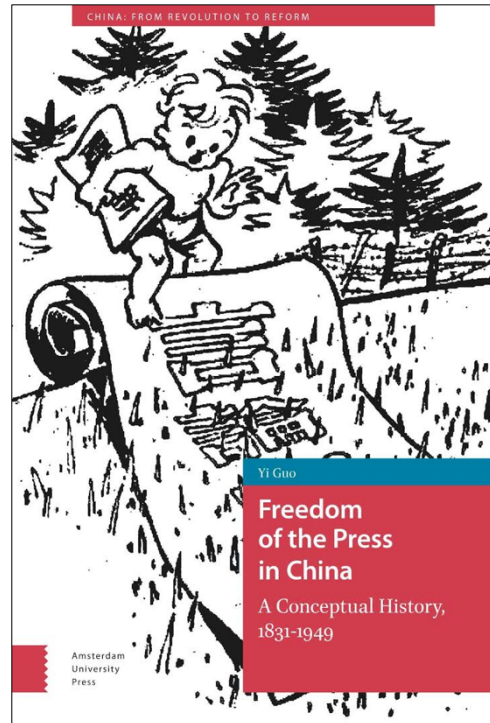
Yi Guo, **Freedom of the Press in China: A Conceptual History, 1831–1949**, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 264 pp., \$120.84 (hardcover).

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In a time when bewildering misinformation floods social media in our everyday life, it seems that the idea of freedom of speech is in urgent need of reconceptualization to meet the rising threats to democracy and public welfare posed by intensifying censorship and information warfare on the Internet. As social media platforms start to enforce stricter content rules while antidemocratic echo chambers continue to amplify counternarratives online, many human rights observers scratch their heads for solutions to defend freedom of speech in the post-truth era. After four decades of economic reform, the People's Republic of China (PRC) now seems poised to confront the United States on delicate issues through social media platforms, sparking concerns over an intensifying Sino-US rivalry.

Under the current troublesome global climate, Yi Guo's ***Freedom of the Press in China: A Conceptual History, 1831–1949*** makes a timely contribution: It offers a nuanced historical ethnography of the distinctive route taken by China on issues related to press freedom during a period when Chinese intelligentsia and politicians eagerly absorbed and repurposed many Western political thoughts, including those related to press freedom, to search for solutions to free a then poverty-stricken and war-ridden China from both internal conflicts and external aggressions. Through riveting historical accounts, the author shows that this particular phase carries significant relevance to the current state of press freedom in the PRC.

The concept of press freedom was first introduced to China as early as the 1830s by Western businessmen, European Protestant missionaries, and Chinese diplomats (p. 31). Instead of being a direct linguistic import, the concept of press freedom went through a process of "transcultural knowledge transfer" (p. 19) between China and the West in the 19th century, thus making it a fluid signifier rather than a rigid concept. Building upon rich historical archives, Guo shows that despite the existence of a conceptual distinction between "freedom of the press" and "freedom of speech" in Western literature, these two political phrases were treated as synonyms and deployed interchangeably in the Sinification of Western concepts. This finding not only affirms an epistemic gap between the concept of press freedom as the West understands it and its re-articulation in the Chinese context but also sheds light on the ongoing intellectual debates on the recent proposition of "Asian values" (p. 28).



The book begins with a contrast of graduation speeches delivered respectively by a Chinese student in the United States and an American student in China in 2017. Both graduates made harsh critiques of their homelands while praising the culture of their host countries. The backlash on the Chinese social media toward the former speaker, noted by Guo, alludes to the existence of a unique understanding of freedom of speech and the press, intertwined with nationalist sentiment in mainstream Chinese discourse. This specificity, argues Guo, derives from "particular historical, socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts" (p. 28). This book, as noted by Guo, explores these specific factors that contributed to the emergence and iterations of Chinese discourse on press freedom.

Building on a wide range of scholarship from China studies to historical semantics, *Freedom of the Press in China* explores how the concept of press freedom metamorphosed "diachronically and synchronically" (p. 23) in the Chinese context from the 1830s to 1949. In chapter 1, Guo delivers an in-depth discourse analysis to outline the initial "conceptual transplantation" of press freedom by Western expatriates and Chinese diplomats in the late 19th century (p. 39). These publications, noted by Guo, only circulated in the royal court and trading ports, exerting little influence on the broader Chinese society. Nevertheless, through the dissemination of religious publications and "secular periodicals" (p. 43), Protestant missionaries were among the first to introduce the idea of press freedom to a broader audience in imperial China. Though their initial intention was to protest against the censorship of Protestant discourse by the Roman Catholic Church in Macau and to attract more disciples, their writings on press freedom seemed to have taken root in China at a time when educated Chinese were eager to acquire Western knowledge after being disillusioned by imperial China's multiple defeats in its encounter with European powers (p. 45).

At the turn of the 20th century, translations of Western sociopolitical and philosophical thoughts started to flow into China from Meiji Japan. Chapter 2 deals with this phase of cross-cultural knowledge transfer and provides an etymological investigation of the neologism *chuban ziyou*, which, according to Guo, refers to the idea of press freedom in Chinese (p. 21). By tracing the disheveled introduction of Western political philosophies written by Chinese students, scholars, and political activists in Meiji Japan, Guo underscores the "linguistic complications" (p. 31) in modern China's discourse of press freedom caused by the early Sinification of Japanese *kanji*, the Japanese ideograms adapted from Chinese characters.

Building on these findings, chapter 3 explores how specific sociopolitical milieu at the turn of the 20th century led Chinese intelligentsia and politicians to formulate a utilitarian rather than idealistic view of press freedom. Differing from classical Western liberalism, press freedom was treated in modern China as a means to strengthen the declining empire rather than an end in itself. This specific "structure of feeling" (p. 105), noted by Guo, led Chinese intelligentsia to oppose absolute freedom of the press and speech in exchange for social stability and development (p. 108).

The remaining chapters traverse the first half of the 20th century to explore the diverse discourse of press freedom offered by prominent political figures, journalists, and intellectuals in modern China. In particular, chapter 4 shows the long-lasting intellectual legacy of Sun Yat-sen, the "Father of the Nation" of the Republic of China (RoC) and founder of KMT (Nationalist Party of China) on RoC's news policies posthumously. However, despite being enshrined in the constitution, the concept of press freedom was merely an empty phrase in the

RoC (p. 141). In chapter 5, Guo uncovers an intriguing public apathy, sometimes even aversion toward freedom of the press and speech in modern China, ranging from young students to less educated commoners.

Chapter 6 turns toward the educated elites, examining the differing discourse of press freedom in the 1920s and 1930s China. The intellectual debates of the time were centered on two main issues: "people's rights versus human rights" and "freedom versus limitation" based on modern China's specific social contexts (p. 161). Through a critical assessment of Sun's intellectual legacy, Guo notes that its deeply embedded elitism had led many elites, who occupied high-ranking and influential positions in RoC, to dismiss public opinions as merely "irrational utterances" (p. 171).

In the final years of the RoC, the KMT-led central government's news policy took an antiliberal stance under Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek. Chapter 7 examines the diverse calls for press freedom by newspeople, liberal intellectuals, and communists in the 1940s, when power struggles were waged between KMT and CCP for sole sovereignty of China. Concerned about the rising popularity of communist discourse, Chiang imposed an unwelcoming military dictatorship, thus denying modern China the chance to implement constitutional democracy and political freedom (p. 202). In the concluding chapter, Guo explores the theoretical and empirical implications in the conceptual iteration of press freedom in pre-1949 China, arguing for its relevance in understanding the current state of freedom of the press and speech in China.

Cautioning that this book is not intended to "defend the lack of press freedom in modern China from a perspective of complete cultural relativism" (p. 224), Guo offers a nuanced perspective for readers to ponder whether a wholesale borrowing of the Western liberal model of press freedom could actually take hold in contemporary China, especially in the post-truth era. This book is a rigorous historical investigation among a series of recent publications on the press histories of late 19th- and early-20th-century China (see He, 2019; Wang, 2019). Those interested in the fields of China studies, media and communication studies, social histories, and sociolinguistics will find this book to be a fascinating read.

References

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- Wang, F.-H. (2019). *Pirates and publishers: A social history of copyright in modern China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.