The Overseas Chinese Democracy Movement: New Direction After Thirty Years

Chen, Jie, University of Western Australia

Overseas Chinese democracy movement (OCDM), or haiwai minyun, consists of the networks, organizations and campaigns of those mainland Chinese dissidents, in exile mostly in the West, particularly in the United States (US), who advocate liberal democratic values to systematically oppose the fundamental system of the party-state in China. It has been 30 years, and exile politics has already become a rarity in the world, since Wang Bingzhang, a medical graduate of McGill University (Canada), initiated in New York in December 1983 the Chinese Alliance for Democracy (CAD), the first overseas political opposition organization of mainland Chinese background since 1949. Considering its historic significance and enduring profile in the overseas Chinese internet and print media, the phenomenon of OCDM remains remarkably understudied by scholars. The 20th anniversary of the 1989 Beijing Tiananmen event, which motivated many to participate in OCDM, and the 30th anniversary of CAD (hence the movement), have served as catalysts for reflection from both observers and activists. While academic works present general assessment of the movement’s trajectory, roles and challenges, democracy veterans have published personal experiences and soul-searching memoirs with varying degrees of credibility.

This paper engages this discourse and seeks to reach a more analytical assessment of the state of the movement at a critical juncture. It is focused on what seems a new lease of life for OCDM amid a widely held view, even among some OCDM veterans, that the movement has declined and failed irrevocably from its moral and political height reached during the first half of the 1990s, due to the subsequent dwindling number of followers, international respect China has won and OCDM’s weakened connections to the Western grassroots communities. I will first review the debate over the trajectory of OCDM, followed by an investigation of the emerging trends which are reshaping and recharging the movement in recent years. Due to the large number of organizations and activists involved, it is impossible to follow other than the main ones. Analysis may often concentrate on dissident activities in and from the US, since democracy organizations overwhelmingly chose the US to establish their headquarters due to obvious factors such as sizeable Chinese communities, global influence of the US political power centres, its dynamic media and robust social movements, and access to the United Nations (UN). Main arguments are as follows.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, political dissidents contributed to the regime change in Eastern Europe and flourished overseas in China’s case. Euphoria is now long gone. However, unless setting the bar too high, it is fair to argue that the overseas Chinese democracy movement is “down”, but not “out”. On the contrary, during the recent years dissident organizations have broadened networking and cooperation with transnational social movements, readjusted tactics timely in support of domestic rights defending movement in the fields of low-politics such as rights to housing, employment and education, and gained new knowledge and political skills by cooperating and campaigning with the exiled Tibetan activists and international Tibet support groups. Meanwhile, cosmopolitan activists have emerged, leading the new thinking and new kind of activities in the movement which have led to the creation of professional lobbyist organizations. In conjunction, these recent trends enable the movement to climb from the nadir. Conditioned by an overall pattern of ebb and flow, if the various dissident organizations seriously reflect on their approaches, preserve their stamina, and prepare for any unexpected political development inside China, their movement may become more sustainable and more effective in influencing political transformation in their homeland, particularly in cases of new emergent events.

On the other hand, the overseas opposition plays only supporting roles in China’s democratization. Major drivers for the country’s move towards democracy come from within. Also it is hard to imagine that the Chinese dissidents overseas become capable of copying the regional success stories of dissident politics – in the cases of South Korea, Taiwan and East Timor, exiled dissidents not just returned home and contributed to regime reconstruction, but also
made themselves national level officials or simply heads of state in the new regimes. These are after all much smaller places and succumbed to the wind of the international or American pressure far more easily than China.