

CHEN GUANGCHENG: THE HOLLOW CORE OF A PRESS MANIPULATION PRESIDENCY



I live in the Pacific time zone, a full three hours behind the news makers and breakers on the east coast. I woke up early yesterday, by my time, and found an apparent great story

occupying my Twitter stream: Chinese dissident and activist Chen Guangcheng had not only, through the miracle that is United States benevolence, been sheltered in the US Embassy (as had been theorized) from his daring blind man's escape from house arrest, but had been represented in a breathtakingly humanitarian deal with the oppressive Chinese government that resulted in his proper medical care, reunion with his family and a safe and fulfilling life from here on out.

The proverbial "and everybody lived happily ever after".

By the time I got my second eye open, and focused, I realized what I was reading something more akin to a Highlights Magazine "What's Wrong With This Picture?" puzzle.

And so it was. What a difference a day makes. The initial report I read this morning at the source Washington Post article appears to be pushed aside from their website, supplanted by a

more honest report.

The first report at the WaPo depicted an incoming call to the reporter from US Ambassador to China, Gary Locke:

What I was not prepared for was when Locke said, "I'm here with Chen Guangcheng. Do you speak Chinese? Hold on."

And then passed the phone over.

"Hello, this is Chen Guangcheng," came a matter-of-fact, almost cheerful voice.

I introduced myself in halting Chinese, using my Chinese name and the Chinese name for The Washington Post. I asked how Chen was, and where. I asked him to speak slowly, to make sure I could understand.

"Washington Post?" Chen repeated, his voice sounding generally happy. Chen said he was fine and was in the car headed to the hospital, Chaoyang Hospital. He repeated the name slowly, three times.

And that was it. Chen handed the phone back to the ambassador, who said they were stuck in traffic, but promised a full briefing later.

Following the old "two source" rule for journalists, I definitely had my story. Chen was indeed under U.S. diplomatic protection, as we and other news outlets had been reporting. He was now leaving the embassy on his way to the hospital. In a vehicle with the American ambassador. The first word would go out soon after that, in a blast to our overnight editors, and via my Twitter account.

I learned later that I was just one in a succession of calls U.S. diplomats made from the van at Chen's request – they

also spoke to Chen's lawyer and to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, recently arrived in Beijing for an important two-day summit.

That was the "happily ever after" story which was too good to be true.

It was indeed too good to be true. A mere twelve hours later, and even the Washington Post reports a far different tale:

The blind legal activist Chen Guangcheng left the refuge of the U.S. Embassy in Beijing for a hospital on Wednesday, but he was quickly cordoned off by Chinese police and reportedly seized by misgivings about his decision, as an apparent diplomatic triumph risked dissolving into a potentially damaging episode in U.S.-China relations.

After four days of secret negotiations, U.S. diplomats on Wednesday initially touted then later scrambled to defend their role in forging an agreement that they said contained extraordinary Chinese promises to allow Chen – a self-taught lawyer known for criticizing Chinese policies on abortion – to move his family to Beijing, where he would begin a new life as a university student.

Chinese officials, by contrast, broke their official silence on Chen by firing a broadside complaining about U.S. interference in China's internal affairs. The Foreign Ministry demanded an apology, which State Department officials declined to give.

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But activists' fears over Chen's fate mounted, and they expressed increasing alarm – fueled by a series of Twitter updates – that what seemed like a human rights victory was spiraling quickly

into a worst-case scenario.

Chen was no longer under U.S. protection, they noted, and it was not clear whether he had left on his own free will or under coercion. While U.S. officials said they had been promised access to Chen in the hospital, Britain's Channel 4 news quoted a conversation with him in which he seemed confused and upset that no American diplomats were around.

"Nobody from the [U.S.] embassy is here. I don't understand why. They promised to be here," Channel 4 quoted Chen as saying.

Bob Fu, president of the advocacy group ChinaAid, said he was concerned that "the U.S. government has abandoned Chen" and that the Chinese government is "using his family as a hostage."

Quite a difference, no? And that, quite frankly, appears to be the sanitized version from the Washington Post, who has a dozen eggs on their face. But nowhere near the eggage the Obama Administration, and State Department, has on their collective face.

Hillary Clinton, and the State Department under President Obama, have been far from perfect, to be sure; but, overall, one of the stronger, if not strongest, departments in Obama's cabinet. But this is way ugly, and ought to, by all rights, leave a very permanent mark. It is a stain fairly earned in every sense of the word. Hard to imagine a more cravenly constructed pile of PR bullshit since the Jessica Lynch affair. Yet here it is in living steaming brownish color. All painted with Madame Secretary conveniently in Beijing, China. Awkward!

Such are the vagaries of policy by press manipulation though. The ass biting incidents such as the aforementioned Jessica Lynch, the dishonor of the man that was Pat Tillman, to the

broken promises of Barack Obama on warrantless wiretapping and war crime accountability, to the false hope of Cairo, to the greasy and uncomfortable election politicization of the SEAL's takedown of Osama bin Laden a year ago, to Chen Guangcheng.

There has been precious little return on the false hype from the Obama Administration; instead, a wave of disappointment. And the press is, without saying, all too willing to serve as the tool of the string pullers in power, regardless of which political faction it may be at any given time. It is who they are, it is what they do. As Glenn Greenwald said recently of the willing press:

They aren't nearly so substantive as to be driven by any sort of belief or ideology or anything like that. Their religion is the worship of political power and authority (or, as Jay Rosen says, their religion is the Church of the Savvy). Royal court courtiers have long competed with one another to curry favor with the King and his minions in exchange for official favor, and this is just that dynamic. Political power is what can give them their treats – their “exclusive” interviews and getting tapped on their grateful heads to get secret documents and invited to White House functions and being allowed into the sacred Situation Room – so it's what they revere and serve.

That is exactly the bogus and counterfeit relationship between Presidency and press that led to the unquestioning, and ultimately embarrassing, breathless buy in by the Washington Post on the spoon fed horse manure from the Obama Administration's Chinese Ambassador, Gary Locke, on Chen Guangcheng.

It is all a media manipulation now, and the media do not care who, or which side, are doing the manipulating. Presidency by press release.

It doesn't matter if it is real or fabricated,
it is all good if it sells. The distressing
thing is that it does, indeed, sell.