



# CHINA

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**FOCUS EXECUTIVE TRAVEL**

# A hundred flowers bloom

A clash at an outspoken Chinese paper has offered a glimpse into a media system straining at censorship restrictions

追

的一种大治之梦、富强之梦、幸福之梦。它历经百年来仁人志士的民族觉醒和牺牲，历经半个多世纪共产党人建国的苦难辉煌，历经三十多年改革开放的攻坚克难，终于发芽抽枝。这梦想从未像今天那般真切，从未像今天那般接近，因而从未像今天那样值得国人为之努力探索，为之不懈奋斗！

## MAO IN SUNGLASSES, P34

China's censors and traditional media struggle to keep up with the fast pace and controversial subjects of information online



Imaginedchina

The protests continued for four days before the vans arrived. Shortly after lunch on January 10, a group of police and plain-clothed officers grabbed the few remaining protesters and carried them away. “I’ve been kidnapped!” one man shouted over and over again until the van door slid shut, muffling his cries.

So ended the dramatic conflict between the supporters of a group of journalists at China’s *Southern Weekly* newspaper and the Chinese authorities. *Southern Weekly’s* staff threatened to strike on January 6 after a provincial propaganda official rewrote a front-page New Year’s editorial urging legal reform into a pro-government paean. Officials smoothed over the conflict by agreeing not to punish the journalists or alter editorial content if the paper went to press the next week – a rare concession for the propaganda department – but not before numerous publications and internet users had issued messages of solidarity.

Foreign press interpreted the clash as a pivotal movement that might spark the reform of China’s strict censorship system. But in the protest’s wake, the status quo appears to have returned.

Over the past decade, many Westerners assumed that Chinese censorship restrictions would ease as the economy developed and information flowed more freely. But that future has yet to arrive. The Paris-based press freedom group Reporters Without Borders ranked China as the sixth most repressive media environment in the world in 2012, above only Iran, Syria, Turkmenistan, North Korea and Eritrea.

China’s propaganda department continues to ensure the media sticks to the official narrative by implementing blackouts on certain subjects, issuing directives on topics and angles of coverage and meting out punishments for the worst offenses, including revoking business licenses, firing journalists or even jailing them for allegedly inciting social unrest. These ugly prospects encourage journalists and editors to practice self-censorship, a far more effective method of policing content than external controls.

Media experts say restrictions could even tighten in the years to come. “The censorship of the media in China has not been more relaxed. It has been consistently controlled,” said Xiao Qiang, the founder and editor-in-chief of China Digital Times, a bilingual news website. “Sometimes it is maybe tighter than other times, but in general in the last five or 10 years the central propaganda department’s control over all the media, newspapers, magazines – whether commercial or non-commercial – has been firmly, firmly there.”

But even though censors have not loosened their grip, more information has begun to slip through their fingers. The growing use of the internet and *weibo*, Chinese microblogs similar to Twitter, has led to an explosion in the amount of information available, and both state-owned and private media are now pursuing edgier topics to capture the attention of an increasingly discriminating audience. With the commercial stakes for insightful and interesting stories now more valuable than ever, the Chinese media and censors will undoubtedly collide again.

### The first recorders of history

China’s censorship regulations, so antithetical to Western values of free speech, have grown out of a vastly different history and conception of the media. After 1949, the People’s Republic modeled its state-run media system on that of the Soviet Union. Since then, the media’s primary responsibility has been to serve as the state’s “ears, eyes, throat and tongue,” relating the party’s story and vision to the masses and informing the leadership of current events and public opinion.

To accurately reflect the party line, smaller papers source much of their coverage of national and international issues directly from Xinhua, the state news agency, reporting independently primarily for local affairs. The government ensures its publications stay on message by appointing the top officials of media organizations and restricting editor positions to party members.

As the party’s eyes and ears, Chi- >>

## ► Mao in sunglasses: The internet forces censors and media to evolve

Dark sunglasses similar to those worn by Chen Guangcheng began showing up on unexpected faces shortly after the blind Chinese dissident fled to the US embassy last May. Photoshop aficionados plastered glasses onto KFC's Colonel Sanders and the portrait of Mao Zedong over Beijing's Forbidden City, and numerous internet users posted bespectacled images of themselves online. Since the images didn't employ keywords, censors had a difficult time blocking them.

Twenty years ago, few Chinese would have even heard Chen's name. Any mention of the rights activist would have been quickly expurgated from any publication that dared to print it. But the expansion of the internet and social media has revolutionized exchanges of information around the world, and China is no exception. China's online population exploded from only 50 million one decade ago to more than 500 million last year. As of mid-2012, nearly 370 million people were registered users of Sina Weibo, a Chinese service similar to Twitter.

The information age poses a challenge not only to China's censors, who are struggling to silence the discussion of topics like Chen. Chinese newspapers and magazines, still bound by tight restrictions on what they can write, are also fighting to remain relevant given the fast pace and controversial subjects of online information. These new technologies are creating messy contradictions between the Party-approved journalism and the opinions that proliferate on the internet.

### Game theory

The internet and Sina Weibo have irrevocably complicated the work of censorship. Chinese internet users have found they can stay one step ahead of censors by avoiding certain blocked keywords, instead making allusions to words or images in the banned concept. The most appealing of these inventions become internet memes, popular phrases or images that pop up in ever-mutating forms.

Chen's dark glasses were one such form of sociopolitical commentary. Another occurred in January, when peo-

ple around the country professed their love of "southern-style congee," a homonym for the Chinese name of the *Southern Weekly*, the newspaper that fought back against censorship of its New Year's editorial in January.

To combat this gathering wave of non-official information, the propaganda department has been forced to alter its tactics and prioritize amid a gathering wave of online information. Research by Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts of Harvard University showed that censors focus their energy on *weibo* posts that may spark collective action, while leaving alone other, more general criticism of the government.

But although more information is slipping through the censors' nets, the party is also developing more active and effective strategies to deal with this new media environment. "Some people will call it a loosening [of censorship], but it's not really a loosening – it just changes the nature of the game," said David Bandurski, editor of the website China Media Project. "It's an ongoing chess game, if you will."

One new strategy has been trying to discredit the accuracy of online information. The Chinese government has launched a campaign against rumors, issuing sharply worded statements and publishing editorials in state-run newspapers on the danger of specious online information. The police have even detained and charged people for spreading rumors online.

Meanwhile, the government is using new media to disseminate information, as well as block or alter it. "They're gradually losing control of information in the sense that information in general is harder to control. But the state has been very smart in adapting to the new situation and maintaining a certain degree of control," said Ying Zhu, a media scholar and the author of "Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television."

For example, the propaganda department pays a team of netizens, dubbed the "*wumao dang*" or "fifty-cent party," to seed online conversations with pro-party comments. Government offices and departments are also increasingly using

## 'It's an ongoing chess game, if you will' -DAVID BANDURSKI, CHINA MEDIA PROJECT

social media to get out information. "New media is becoming one of their management tools," said Shi Feike, an editorial board member of *Southern Metropolis Weekly*.

### Behind the curve

The growth of the internet has also had powerful effects on traditional media organizations, which have been forced to react much faster to keep up with the flurry of online information. In China, that acceleration has helped expand the range of topics media organizations can cover. If an interesting story gains attention online in the hours or days before the propaganda department issues guidelines on how or whether to cover it, Chinese journalists will increasingly view it as fair game.

Fast-moving stories on the internet and *weibo* now increasingly set the Chinese media agenda. Several major stories of 2011 – for example, the 10-day stand-off between villagers and officials in Wukan, Guangdong province, the environmental protests in Shifang, Sichuan province, or the deadly high-speed train crash outside of Wenzhou, Zhejiang province – first gathered steam online before becoming national and international news. Within a week, however, the propaganda department had made sufficient phone calls and threats to bring reporting on these subjects to heel.

The internet has also expanded the scope of what Chinese journalists can cover by increasing the connections between the information available domestically and abroad. China's "Great Firewall" system of internet controls is the most comprehensive censorship tool in history, but it is still far from watertight. "All the big stories about top-level corruption were products of Western media, and because of the internet,

their stories get back to China. That's a development the government in China is very afraid of," said Minxin Pei, a China scholar at Claremont McKenna College.

The internet, and *weibo* in particular, have also raised the stakes for traditional media by facilitating the rise of citizen journalism, in which internet users often work together online to expose corruption or other wrongdoings. Susan Shirk, a professor at the University of California San Diego and the author of "Changing Media, Changing China," calls citizen journalism "a real challenge to professional journalism. Nowadays, a lot of professional journalists still have constraints in what they can write in their publications."

In one high-profile incident last year, netizens accumulated photographs of Yang Dacai, a Shaanxi province official, wearing a succession of luxury watches, apparent evidence that he was on the take for more than a meager official salary. "Watch-Wearing Brother," as internet users came to call Yang, was ultimately ousted from his post for disciplinary violations.

Some accuse these public-led reports of bringing down journalistic standards and blurring the line between verified information and rumor. There is truth to that: The take-down of Yang Dacai was a best-case example of the investigative power of the internet, while others have led to wrongful victimization and harassment.

Even so, the success of internet users in evading the grips of censors shows that this exponential increase in "unverified" information is an unstoppable force. To the dismay of Chinese censors, the country's restrictive media environment makes the free flow of online information all the more powerful. ♦



» nese state media also have an explicit role as intelligence gathering agencies. Media organizations are responsible for bundling reports that are deemed too controversial to be released to the public for circulation among government officials. Most of these *neican*, or internal references, are produced by Xinhua, but all journalists are charged with writing them when they uncover information that might be useful for the government, Doug Young, a professor of journalism at Fudan University, writes in "The Party Line: How the Media Dictates Public Opinion in Modern China."

The media is also sometimes charged with a wider responsibility, that of independent monitoring. This "supervision by public opinion" (*yulun jiandu* in Chinese) is the closest thing the Chinese media have to a mandate to carry out investigative reporting, although the scope of this coverage is far more limited than in the West. This supervision does not entail releasing hard-hitting exposes on the top levels of government, but rather helping the central government uncover misconduct at local governments and agencies.

As independent monitors, journalists have proved to be a useful tool for ferreting out low-level corruption and tackling the social problems the government has prioritized in the last five years. Chinese journalists today can write with relative impunity about pollution, food safety scandals, mass events and emergencies, all topics that used to be off limits, said Shi Feike, an editorial board member of *Southern Metropolis Weekly*. These stories must depict the higher levels government in a positive light, however, often as the force that steps in to discipline a corrupt official or distribute aid in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

This kind of story benefits all parties involved, said Young of Fudan University. "It plays to the reporters who like to do investigative reporting, it plays to the commercial element in that it helps to sell papers, and then it also plays to the party agenda, which is the most important thing. If it didn't play to the party agenda, you wouldn't see people doing it."

Not everyone agrees on the party's willingness to permit this form of investigative journalism, however. Wen Yunchao, a well-known blogger who goes by the pen name "Bei Feng," said this kind of investigative reporting can too easily stray to topics the party would rather not bring to light. "Many people believe that media

supervision ... is a useful tool. But I think that China's ruling party doesn't have the confidence or courage to use that tool, because it can't necessarily be monitored or controlled," he said.

### Follow the money

But the prospect of commercial gain sometimes tempts Chinese media to stray from the party line. Since Deng Xiaoping decreed in the 1980s that the media could be partly privatized, commercially minded papers sprung up around the country, transforming journalistic coverage in the process. To compete for readers, established media outlets have been forced to expand beyond the former dry propaganda to incorporate timelier, more aggressive reporting.

**'Advertising is the driving force for change in the news media in China and, in my opinion, it's unstoppable'**

**-WEBSTER K NOLAN**

The strongest impetus for a "market-place press" has come not from newsrooms but from publishers and advertising departments, writes Webster K Nolan, the former director of the East-West Center Media Program in Honolulu. "In fact, you might say that advertising is the driving force for change in the news media in China and, in my opinion, it's unstoppable."

An increasingly vibrant mix of private companies is now pushing the fold in terms of content. *Caijing*, a magazine launched by journalist Hu Shuli in 1998, has achieved notoriety for its hard-hitting financial journalism, as has Caixin Media, which Hu founded in 2010 after departing from *Caijing*.

China's privately owned online and social media empires – Sina, Tencent and Renren – are also more likely to run edgier content to attract viewers and advertisers, though like all media organizations they toe a certain line to keep their licenses. "They need to be aware of the party line, but for commercial reasons, not for ideological reasons," Young of Fudan University said.

The rise in commercially minded >>



**COVER TO COVER:** *Oriental Outlook*, *CBN Weekly* and *Southern People Weekly* magazines in May 2008 all featured reported on the massive earthquake in Sichuan province, a topic that was initially designated off-limits by censors

>> journalism is not confined to private companies. The government has gradually cut funding for some state media companies, forcing them to expand their audiences and increase advertising revenue to make ends meet. State-run media such as China Central Television or party newspaper *China Youth Daily* now produce much of China's investigative journalism, especially commercial exposes highlighting faulty products or corrupt business practices.

Southern Group, the owner of the newspaper at the center of the recent censorship clash, is another example of a state-owned company that has tried to expand its audience by covering edgier topics and publishing outspoken editorials, such as the controversial New Year's letter. "Those south-based companies even view that as their competitive advantage to deliver the more liberal perspective," said Xiao of China Digital Times.

### I walk the line

While journalists have an unprecedented ability and incentive to pursue more controversial stories, the threat of punishment by China's censors often dampens this impulse.

In today's chaotic media environment, the state's most influential method of control is undoubtedly making it profitable for companies to practice self-censorship. To ensure their papers' commercial success, editors must guarantee their issues stay on stands. Journalists, who are

## 'The logic of the party line and the bottom line really don't contradict each other anymore'

-YING ZHU, AUTHOR

often paid by published word or article, also have a strong incentive to invest their time in stories that will see the light of day.

"The logic of the party line and the bottom line really don't contradict each other anymore," said Ying Zhu, a media scholar and the author of "Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television." "This alliance [between the party and the media] has functioned to create mainstream presses that are both ideologically inoffensive and commercially successful."

Certain topics, such as minority conflicts, the military and top-level corruption, remain clearly off limits for media – as was demonstrated by the exile of Bloomberg and *The New York Times* outside the Great Firewall after they published articles on the family wealth of China's top leaders. "The reason why government officials can tolerate investigative journalism is that these reports can only expose problems no higher than the provincial or municipal level," said Zhan Jiang, a former investigative reporter that is now professor of the Department of

International Journalism & Communication at Beijing Foreign Studies University. The rules are the same for large companies, which are often led by high-ranking officials, he said.

Chinese describe the media's uneven scrutiny of the country's social problems as "swatting at flies and letting the tigers run free," said Hu Yong, a professor at Peking University's School of Journalism and Communication. Unfortunately for journalists, the line between flies and tigers is not always clear. "China's media censorship system isn't transparent, nor does it have clear boundaries. In many cases there are accidental, unprompted and arbitrary factors that render censorship highly unpredictable," he said.

The boundary between what Chinese journalists can and cannot cover has wandered significantly over the past few decades. Censorship restrictions relaxed in the 1990s with China's initial surge of economic development, and investigative reporting reached an unprecedented peak in 2003, as journalists uncovered the true extent of SARS. However, blowback from that crisis built into a crippling ban on cross-regional reporting in 2005, an effort by local governments to halt media exposes on their dealings.

Censorship restrictions were again loosened before the 2008 Olympics, as China sought to present a friendly face to the West, but the trend has since reversed. In 2012, censors clamped down on political coverage as the leadership transition approached. Newspapers >>

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**'Even though there are 100 matters you are not allowed to discuss, there must be one issue where you've made the right bet and you can step forward'**

**-LU YE, JOURNALIST**

>> such as *Beijing's Economic Observer* scrapped investigative departments, and many investigative journalists quit their jobs, said Zhan of the Beijing Foreign Studies University. "Last year was a year of politics, so there were few investigative reports."

But even as censorship has intensified in the last few years, a changing media environment has rendered these restrictions increasingly ineffective.

The amount of information available in China and the speed with which it is transmitted have both increased exponentially with the spread of the internet and the launch of *weibo*. Internet users stay one step ahead of censors by using homonyms and memes, popular phrases or images that reappear in different permutations, to comment on controversial situations (see box on page 34).

Online information is raising the bar for traditional media, encouraging them to move faster and cover a broader range of topics in an effort to keep the public's attention. Censors have been forced to prioritize only the worst offenses amid this wave of information and adopt their own new media strategies to disseminate information.

"All they can do is try to spin it, try to control the damage, from their point of view," said Xiao of China Digital Times. "It's much less effective than five or 10 years ago but still effective enough to keep the online message of their perspective."

### Taming tigers

Since acceding to the role of party secretary in December, Xi Jinping has urged party media to become more relevant and "accessible" to average people. China's new propaganda chief, Liu Qibao, also urged party newspaper *People's Daily* to be more "innovative" during a visit in January. But there are few signs that Xi or Liu



**MATTER OF EXPRESSION:** *Southern Weekly* returned to newsstands on January 10 following its clash with censors

Imagochina

will move quickly to reform censorship restrictions.

The control of the media "is still absolutely essential to maintaining one-party rule and, as they see it, social stability. So we can expect that to continue," said David Bandurski, editor of the website China Media Project. "It would be very naïve to see a progressive long-term loosening when none of the other factors have changed."

Chinese officials at various levels of government still have the power to control the media and the propaganda department, and they have a strong incentive to stop media reports that paint them in an unflattering light. Journalists have few legal rights, and news organizations are dependent on government officials for the handful of licenses they need to operate.

But even in this repressive environment, the Chinese media is likely to turn out surprises. Doug Young of Fudan University compares China's media system in the first few decades after 1949 to a human body. The propaganda department functioned like the brain, which controlled media organizations directly as if they were its extremities. Today, China's media system more closely resembles an

orchestra, he said. Players have room for some individual expression and artistry, though if they make too many discordant notes the conductor will kick them out.

"I always believe there is still ample room for investigative journalists in China [to do their jobs]," said Lu Ye, a journalist and professor at Fudan University. "Even though there are 100 matters you are not allowed to discuss, there must be one issue where you've made the right bet and you can step forward."

The media has powerful incentives to push the envelope in terms of self-expression. The personal satisfaction of creating cutting-edge work, the increasing value placed on freedom of expression and the growth of new commercial incentives in China have enlivened a cohort of aggressive and creative Chinese journalists. And despite the difficult and dangerous challenges journalists face, China's lack of transparency means clarity is more valuable than ever.

"For the long term, I am optimistic about the development of investigative journalism in China. The society needs it badly," said Zhan of Beijing Foreign Studies University. "China is a heaven for investigative journalism; it just hasn't been heaven for investigative journalists." ♦