

Media in China: Methods of State Control

Vi L. Nhan

The People's Republic of China, governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has arguably one of the most restrictive media systems in the world. The government censors all venues of media to maintain its monopoly on power and information while pushing ambitious economic modernization reforms. Why has the CCP been so successful at stifling independent reporting? The success of the CCP's media controls is due to the fact that freedom of information threatens its claims to power and legitimacy. Knowledge is the main catalyst behind political change; it can lead to political mobilization and, ultimately, regime change. The Chinese government's sophisticated instruments of censorship and control aim to prevent all potential sources of independent reporting. The comprehensive management consists of four main categories: legal, political, economic, and technological. Not only does the state generate a repressive legal environment for the media, it also constructs an oppressive political environment for official and self-censorship through state ownership of media and monetary incentives. Lastly, the state expands its reaches to cyberspace with the explosion of the Internet as a medium for information dissemination.

Based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, freedom of the press is essential to democracy and human rights. Though cultural and developmental distinctions do impact the level of media flows within a country, blatant repression of press and media is a violation of that basic human right. Moreover, information is power because it is the main catalyst behind political change. A state monopoly of information stems from the fear of a political change. The People's Republic of China (PRC)

has arguably one of the most restrictive media systems in the world. Reporters Without Borders' 2005 Worldwide Press Freedom Index¹ places China at 159 out of 167 countries. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to maintain its monopoly on power while pushing ambitious economic modernization plans. It censors all information media, from newspaper to DVD, from cassette tape to satellite TV,² and exercises nearly complete control over the country's 358 TV stations and 2,119 newspapers³ – the primary media available to more than one sixth of the world's population.

Why has the CCP been so successful at stifling independent reporting? It devotes vast energy and resources to control information as a way to maintain social stability and assert political control. The Chinese government's sophisticated instruments of censorship and control aim to prevent all potential sources of independent reporting. The comprehensive management consists of four main categories: legal, political, economic, and technological. Legal methods create an environment that is unfriendly to press freedom through restrictive laws and regulations, including the structure of official media regulatory bodies. Political instruments include the party's control over the content of news media, official censorship, harassment and imprisonment of journalists, and the use of the nomenklatura system to control media personnel. Thirdly, economic methods, which include state ownership of media, bribery on content, and marketization of Chinese news media, are used by the CCP to generate a seemingly liberalized media and to introduce incentives for self-censorship. Lastly, technology has also been utilized by the Chinese government to counter the recent proliferation of information through the Internet, which

¹ Reporters Without Borders, "Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2005," *Reporters Without Borders*, http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php?id_rubrique=554.

² J. L. Qiu, "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate Between the Cyberspaces," *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 4 (1999).

³ Ashley Esarey, "Caught Between State and Society: the Commercial News Media in China" (PhD diss., Columbia Univ., 2006), 2.

includes blocking websites, jamming radio frequencies, and monitoring access to the Internet.

Background: News Media in China

The People's Republic of China is the most populous country in the world with a population of 1.3 billion people.⁴ It is also the most rapidly changing actor in the world today. Due to massive market-oriented economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, China's GDP growth has been above nine percent on average since 1990 and above ten percent the decade before that. More than 400 million Chinese have been lifted above the \$1 a day poverty level in the last 20 years.⁵ In this era of globalization, information and technology are becoming increasingly accessible to millions of Chinese. The flow of people across China's borders, the availability of foreign news and shows, and the proliferation of the Internet have all contributed to the weakening of the Chinese Communist Party's hold over information. This change has happened in spite of, not because of, the efforts of the Party.

However, the role of the media is still viewed by the CCP as the mouthpiece of the Party to shape the "values and perspective of the entire population."⁶ The media is part of a powerful state propaganda tool that is governed by the "Party principle," which comprises of three basic components:

1. News media must reflect the Party's guiding ideology.
2. News media must disseminate the Party's programs, policies, and directives.

⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: China," *Central Intelligence Agency*, <http://cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ch.html>.

⁵ World Bank, "China Quick Facts," *World Bank*, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/CHINAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20680895~menuPK:318976~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:318950,00.html>.

⁶ Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004).

3. News media must accept the Party's leadership and subscribe to the Party's organizational principles and press policies.⁷

The resolution of the First Chinese Communist Party Congress in 1921 states that “no central or local publications should carry any article that opposes the Party's principles policies, and decisions.”⁸ This amounts to the current view of the news media as instruments of political and social control rather than independent sources of information and a check on the government.

However, following the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978 where Deng Xiaoping attempted to improve both the economy and Party's legitimacy after the Cultural Revolution, the air of openness and political reform carried over into the realm of media. In 1979, the Central Propaganda Department, the organ responsible for media, lifted restrictions on intellectual inquiry and encouraged the media to increase the flow of information for economic development and to rebuild the propaganda system. The media was urged to be more proactive and original while, at the same time, expected to strengthen the centralization of the party leadership and unity. This led to the proliferation of the media with a large increase in print media from 1,116 newspapers and magazines in 1978, the year before the liberalization of the media, to 7,298 in 1987. In a little less than a decade, there was a 654 percent increase in the number of available print media.⁹ With the encouragement of the CCP for greater media autonomy, the news media increasingly gained confidence to run critical stories of the state and of the economic problems of China.

By the mid 80's, however, the prolific increase in the number of news media sorely compromised the party's ability to

⁷ Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois P, 1998), 19.

⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹ Ashley Esarey, “Cornering the Market: State Strategies for Controlling China's Commercial Media,” *Asian Perspective* 29 (2005): 48.

monitor media content. This explosion in the number and confidence of print media met a reversal in the violent government crackdown of the late 80's. The government retaliated against media support in 1989 for widespread democratic protests by closing down on those newspapers and magazines believed to have supported demonstrators and submitting hundreds of journalists to re-education. The state also adopted re-registration as a tool to reduce the growth of media and pluralism arising from media freedom. Re-registration analyzed the status and conduct of all media organizations before allowing for continued operations with the intent of rooting out newspapers and periodicals that had committed political mistakes or had low standards.¹⁰ This reduced the number of newspapers from 1,576 at the beginning of 1989 to 1,254 by 1991.¹¹ This trend continued until another political cue from the government in 1992 signaled to the media a safer environment. The media became dramatically commercialized after Deng Xiaoping in his Southern Tour in 1992 concluded that continued economic reform was needed to bolster the party's legitimacy.¹² This relationship between government and the media is indicative of the dependent nature of media in China on Party's directions.

Legal and Institutional Approach to Censorship

The state exercises numerous legal and institutional methods to control the flow of information and to restrict the media's ability to operate independently. Article 35 of the 1982 Constitution guarantees the Chinese citizenry "freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration."¹³ However, several other articles in the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52

¹² Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 76.

¹³ People's Republic of China, "Constitution of the People's Republic of China," <http://english.people.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html>.

constitution set the pretext for suspension of previously named freedoms through libel regulations (Article 38); the elevation of the collective interests of the nation, society, and the freedoms enjoyed by other citizens above those of the individual (Article 51); the call for all citizens to “protect state secrets, cherish public assets...respect public order and social morals” (Article 53); and the prohibition of citizens to veer from their duty to protect the “security, honor and interests of the motherland” (Article 54).¹⁴ These articles have been utilized by the Party to suppress politically unsavory forms of information.

Additionally, the state also exercises multitudes of criminal and administrative regulations to consolidate its power. The “Protection of National Secrets Law” of 1989 makes it a criminal offense to divulge information on “military affairs, projects for economic and social development, technological development, criminal investigations by national security agencies,” or other subjects determined by state institutions to be ‘secret’ in nature.¹⁵ Any information can be classified as state secret if determined by the regulatory bodies to harm state interests or security. Journalists have to gain permission from related government agency prior to publication, if their subjects relate to government personnel and institutions. This leads to the suppression and delay of information by the regulatory bodies. The 1997 Criminal Law further prohibits media freedom by making it a crime for any individual or organization to “divide the nation” or “destroy (national) unity,” an offense punishable by three to ten years of imprisonment.¹⁶ The government also takes actions to curb free debate online. The most important Internet regulation is the Temporary Regulation for the Management of Computer Information Network International Connection implemented in 1997. Specific items in the regulation prohibit private ownership of direct international connection, and state that all direct linkage

¹⁴ Ashley Esarey, “Speak No Evil: Mass Media Control in Contemporary China,” *Freedom at Issue: A Freedom House Special Report* (February 2006), http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/33.pdf.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

must go through the state-owned Internet Service Providers (ISPs): ChinaNet, GBNet, CERNet or CSTNet. The regulation also requires all users to register to obtain Internet access, and deems “harmful information” that is either “subversive” or “obscene” as forbidden.¹⁷ These laws and regulations have contributed to a legal environment that is not conducive to independent media reporting.

Another method pursued by the government to control the media is through the structure and organization of its media regulatory bodies. Directly under the Political Bureau and its standing committee is the Central Propaganda Department, the central coordinator of the media. Its function is to promote the party’s ideologies and to project its legitimacy. It manages three government organizations responsible for the three main media of information: the State Press and Publication Administration (with jurisdiction over print media); the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (with control over broadcast media); and the Ministry of Information Industry, etc. (with ownership of the internet industry). The Central Propaganda Department also controls Xinhua News Agency, the party’s official information transmitter to the public. Chinese news media are required to secure their news sources through Xinhua, effectively granting the government a monopoly for domestic news service.¹⁸ The Chinese government owns all major media production companies, including publishing houses, television and radio stations, Internet networks, and ISPs.¹⁹ Through this ownership, the state has tremendous power over the media market, which includes books, magazines, newspapers, TV and radio programs, and IP addresses. Besides these methods, the Central Propaganda Department requires journalists to undergo re-education on Marxism, the role of CCP leadership in the media, media laws and regulations, most recently in 2003, prior to renewing their media licenses. These legal and institutional techniques all serve

¹⁷ Qiu 1999.

¹⁸ Wenfang Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 80-1.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 80.

to tighten the state's monopoly over information and the medium of information.

Political Approach to Censorship

The Chinese government exerts great political control over the content of news media. Along with legal mechanisms, the Central Organization Department and the Central Propaganda Department use the nomenklatura system of appointments to influence the management of the media by directly selecting managers of national media. The central regulatory bodies have indirect influence over personnel of local media through their appointment of local political leaders who are then responsible for the selection of the local media managers.²⁰ These managers are responsible for the content of their organizations and are expected to censor content deemed unfavorable to the government. Those who do not comply risk their posts. This creates an atmosphere of self-censorship in fear of reprisal by the state.

The Central Propaganda Department also determines the standards of acceptable news content through propaganda circulars (PCs), documents containing specific instructions for media across the country on how to handle sensitive topics or specific news stories. The PCs may also require the media to use news directly from national media organizations such as Xinhua, *People's Daily*, or CCTV.²¹ Similar to the Cadre Evaluation system where local leaders adapt line items to reflect certain local conditions, it is also common practice for local branches of the Propaganda Department to adapt the national PCs for local conditions. Along with the dissemination of PCs, the Central Propaganda Department also communicates with media managers through phones or meetings to relay content directives. Media managers are held responsible if published reports veer

²⁰ Esarey 2005, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

from the party's directives; therefore this official censorship induces continued self-censorship. The state also practices "passive censorship" or "cold treatment" that aims to limit the impact of controversial topics or ideas on the public through media neglect.²² In response to the cynicism regarding the truthfulness of state message and the effectiveness of its propaganda endeavors, the Party acknowledges that public criticism or debate about unacceptable ideas or stories inadvertently amplify them. If a problematic book managed to evade censorship and appeared on bookshelves, government authorities would stop its distribution and subsequent editions quickly and quietly. Instead of publicly criticizing it, the government would rather avoid bringing the book and its ideas to the attention of the masses.

The political environment for journalists is also very hazardous. Reporters do not have the freedom to cover the news freely and without harassment. The jailing of journalists is among the most effective tactics employed by the state. China utilizes this tactic more than any other country in the world.²³ The Propaganda Department can cancel rebroadcasts of television news programs or dismiss individuals associated with the piece deemed unacceptable. Controversial cases of media's challenge to the party's top-down control have resulted in the removal of editors, resignations of journalists, imprisonment of editors and journalists, forced closure of news organizations in print and broadcast organizations such as *Southern Daily* of Guangdong; *21st Century World Herald*; *Southern Metropolitan Post*; *Democracy and Rule*

²² Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, eds., *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 65.

²³ U.S. House Congressional-Executive Commission on China. *Media Freedom in China: Roundtable before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China*, 107th Cong., 2d sess. June 24, 2002 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002).

United States Congress, Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "Media freedom in China: Roundtable before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, One Hundred Seventh Congress, second session, June 24, 2002" (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002).

of *Law, Science and Technology Herald*, and *Focal Point*, a popular CCTV program in the 90's.²⁴ Therefore, the state creates an environment that curbs editorial independence and journalistic freedom.

Economic Approach to Censorship

The Chinese state also employs economic controls over the media to maintain its power. As stated before, the government owns all of the major national media organizations. This means the government has virtual control over the activities and the contents of these organizations, allowing the state to distribute its version of news. Since the economic reform, the state no longer fully subsidizes the media. It has urged the industry to turn toward marketization to generate profits to sustain their operations. The Party's "Making Media Big and Strong" Policy of January 2002 aims to promote the creation of powerful and profitable domestic media conglomerates under Party's control that are ready for global competition.²⁵ Print media at the city, provincial, and central levels have been reorganized into media conglomerates or media "groups" in order to financially strengthen the media industry and politically consolidate leadership. These media groups are responsible for publishing both the official papers that are intended for the dissemination of the official party's view and also the profit-driven semi-commercial papers that are intended for mass consumption. This method greatly trims unnecessary waste of resources and, most importantly, consolidates the party's power by simplifying the task of appointing media managers and reducing competition for

²⁴ Tang, *Public opinion and political change in China*, 84; Esarey, "Speak No Evil," 6.

²⁵ David Bandurski, "Propaganda Head Liu Yunshan Promotes Commercialization of Media to Strengthen China's 'Cultural Soft Power,'" *China Media Project*,

<http://cmp.hku.hk/look/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=1&NrIsue=1&NrSection=100&NrArticle=834>.

advertisement revenue as a market incentive for news media to comply with the party's directives over content. The CCP's new strategy for managing mass media in the 1990's consisted of the components mentioned above, along with continued centralization of political control over the management of media, and continued elimination and consolidation of controversial or vulnerable media.²⁶ Commercialization of media operations allowed the CCP to redesign its party's message in a glossy package for easier public digestion. Media managers exchanged the dogmatic style of the Mao era to adopt the Western model of flashy advertising and polished presentations.

Moreover, media organizations also employ monetary incentives to induce censorship. A great percentage of a journalist's salary comes from performance bonuses determined by the success of his or her piece. If reports are deemed too controversial to be published by the Propaganda Department, journalists who are responsible for them do not receive their pay or bonuses. Journalists who dare to explore sensitive issues have to produce reports out of pockets before hand. They might or might not receive reimbursements, depending on how the reports are received.²⁷ Frequently, these methods lead to effective self-censorship by individual journalists to avoid monetary losses. Therefore, marketization and the decrease of state ownership in the media do not necessarily mean an automatic move toward democracy in media. The change simply shifts the more explicit methods of state control to a more passive form of censorship, including stopping the distribution of certain books, using the nomenklatura system and pay incentives to encourage self-censorship.

²⁶ Esarey 2005, 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

Technological Approach to Censorship

The way information is distributed is changing rapidly. The Chinese state is employing more sophisticated controls to counter these changes. The Internet is the newest form of information dissemination, a growing threat in the view of the CCP. Presently, there are 123 million Internet users in China.²⁸ Up until 1993, there was no concrete party platform to control the Internet. However, as information technology evolves, the state authorities develop more innovative ways to counter its wide spread effects. There is a constant state presence through the vigilance of cyber police in monitoring the Internet and its chat rooms, emails, message boards, websites, etc. Internet chat rooms are lively forums for political debate and pluralism. The sheer speed with which news can travel across the country and around the world has created new and enormous challenges for the CCP, which remains determined to control information. In 2002 when massive labor protests erupted in several major cities, activists managed to overcome a central news silence on the demonstrations by transmitting news of their activities via the Internet.²⁹ Because of its potential to break the CCP's monopoly over domestic news, the Internet is seen as a special threat to party's legitimacy.

In the recent years, the Central Government has introduced regulations designed to restrict online content and to increase state monitoring. These regulations include requiring website operators and ISPs to keep records of content and user identities, and to hand these over to authorities when demanded. The government also imposes a far-reaching firewall, reputed to be the world's largest, over all of its direct international lines. The firewall blacks out http, www websites, and ftp servers that contain "harmful information" and automatically targets words such as "June Fourth" or "Falun Gong."³⁰ Currently, there is a government project called the "Golden Shield" to replace old

²⁸ Central Intelligence Agency.

²⁹ U.S. House Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2002.

³⁰ Qiu 1999, 13.

style censorship with a massive, omnipresent architecture of surveillance. Ultimately, the aim of the project is to integrate a comprehensive online database with an all-encompassing surveillance network – incorporating speech and face recognition, closed-circuit television, smart cards, credit records, and internet surveillance technologies. This system is proposed to be completed by 2008.³¹ If successful, this project will make China the greatest police state in the world.

Conclusion

The success of the CCP's media controls is due to the fact that freedom of information threatens its claims to power and legitimacy. Information is the main driver of political change because it provides the masses with the knowledge of their situation and the evidence of state's efforts to tamper with that information. Knowledge can lead to political mobilization and, ultimately, regime change. The Party recognizes the vulnerability of its position in the face of truth; therefore, it devotes vast energy and resources to control information. The state develops comprehensive censorship mechanisms that aim to curb freedom of information through legal, political, economic, and technological channels. Not only does the state generate a repressive legal environment for the media, it also constructs an oppressive political environment for official and self-censorship through state ownership of the media and monetary incentives. Lastly, the state expands its reaches to cyberspace, with the explosion of the Internet as a medium for information dissemination. To address these new challenges, the CCP is relying to a greater degree on coercion, a strategy that makes it vulnerable to domestic and international criticism. The CCP faces an unpleasant choice: more freedom or more repression? Both options threaten the Party's monopoly of power and poise the country on the road for political change.

³¹ U.S. House Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2002.

Bibliography

- Central Intelligence Agency. "The World Factbook: China." *Central Intelligence Agency*.
<http://cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ch.html> (accessed November 1, 2006.)
- Esarey, Ashley. "Caught Between State and Society: The Commercial News Media in China." PhD diss., Columbia Univ., 2006.
- . "Cornering the Market: State Strategies for Controlling China's Commercial Media." *Asian Perspective* 29 (2005): 37-83.
- . "Speak No Evil: Mass Media Control in Contemporary China." *Freedom at Issue: A Freedom House Special Report*. (2006).
http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/33.pdf.
- Hackett, Robert A. and Yuezhi Zhao, eds. *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005.
- Lieberthal, Kenneth. *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.
- People's Republic of China. "Constitution of the People's Republic of China." *People's Republic of China*.
<http://english.people.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html> (accessed November 1, 2006).
- Qiu, J. L. "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate between the Cyberspaces." *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 4 (Winter 1999/2000).
- Reporters Without Borders. "Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2005." *Reporters Without Borders*.
http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=554
 (accessed November 1, 2006).
- Saich, Tony. *Governance and Politics of China*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Tang, Wenfang. *Public Opinion and Political Change in China*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005.

U.S. House Congressional-Executive Commission on China. *Media Freedom in China: Roundtable before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China*. 107th Cong., 2d sess. June 24, 2002. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002.

World Bank. "China Quick Facts." *World Bank*.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/CHINAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20680895~menuPK:318976~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:318950,00.html>. (accessed November 1, 2006).

Zhao, Yuezhi. *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and The Bottom Line*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998.