

## Turning Everyone into a Censor: The Chinese Communist Party's All-Directional Control over the Media

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The corrupt Communist regime in China appears to be increasingly unable to maintain total control over the lives of its citizens and has been forced to loosen its grip on numerous aspects of life in China. However, Beijing remains keen on enforcing its will on one thing: media. (Another area is the armed forces.)

Lin Biao, the number two man in the Communist regime during the Cultural Revolution, once said: "the barrel of a pen and the barrel of a gun are the two barrels which are crucial for seizing power."

In an information age, media is no doubt the most important field among "the barrels of the pens." To maintain firm control over the pens, the Communist regime must hold a tight grip over its media.

The spokespersons from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs often declare to foreign journalists, "China has no media censorship. Our media enjoys full freedom." When I was in Beijing, in answering questions from foreign reporters about China's media censorship, I would tell them that we did not have the kind of old-fashioned Prussian-dictator-style censorship, which was criticized by Karl Marx. Modern totalitarian regimes are much more sophisticated than the Prussian regime when it comes to censorship. They can use various schemes to enforce all-directional control over media, so much so that every person involved in the media has become an effective and voluntary censor. So why do we have any need for an open, simplistic censorship system that could easily be held liable by others?

The dictatorial regime of the Communist Party of China has been established according to the Marxist-Leninist theories on the class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Also, the media control by a proletarian dictatorship is unrivaled by any totalitarian regime of the past.

I worked for the Communist Party's biggest publishing house - the People's Publishing House - for five years from 1975 to 1980, and for the official organ of the Communist Party - the *People's Daily* - for nine years from 1980 to 1989. Through my experience working for the People's Publishing House and *People's Daily*, especially the latter, I learned that the approach on media control by the Communist Party is mainly through control of the people to make sure that everyone becomes an automatic self-censor.

### Mental and Ideological Control

The control over people is mainly done through mental and ideological control in the following ways:

1) **To read out and relay Party documents.** At the People's Publishing House and *People's Daily*, sessions were often held to relay various Party documents to the staff. The so-called "documents" are minutes/notes from Party officials' meetings of various levels (especially at the level of the Politburo of the Central Party Committee) and certain Party leaders' speeches. These documents will be passed down to various levels, in a strictly hierarchical pecking order, and at different times descending from the top to the bottom. For instance, the same document - in this case the Number 28 Central Party's Document of 1981 - was first read out to officials at and above the deputy-ministerial level - deputy directors of the publishing house and deputy editors-in-chief - at the Great Hall of the People. A few days later, these deputy-ministerial officials would relay the content of the document to officials at and above the bureau-head level and then department-head level, before reaching the section-head level and lower. In other words, the lower level you are, the later you will be privileged to the knowledge of the documents. Some documents will stop at a certain level and those below can only obtain information through hearsay or rumors. The majority of such documents only circulate within the Party and only a small number will be distributed to non-Party members. Even so, the non-Party members working at the People's Daily still have more access to information than the general public.

2) **To hold political study sessions** There are numerous study sessions focusing on political models to learn from, e.g. to learn from Lei Feng, from Zhang Haidi, and Kong Fansen. Journalists are required to learn from Lei Feng and devote everything including their lives to the Party. They are challenged to learn from Zhang Haidi, have an upright spirit even if the body is handicapped, and to be determined to work with super-human force for the propaganda cause of the Party. Also, Chinese journalists are supposed to learn from Kong Fansen, who answered the call from the Party to go to the most backward region and sacrificed his own needs in order to win support for the Party from the backward areas, especially in areas of overwhelmingly ethnic minority population.

3) **To create campaigns and movements.** The Communist Party of China has always been at its very best at launching nationwide campaigns and movements. Movements can include both ideological education and physical punishment, as we have seen from movements such as the the Movement Against Three Evils (i.e. corruption, waste and bureaucracy within the Party, government, army and mass organizations), the Movement against Five Evils (i.e. bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts and stealing of economic information), Land Reforms, the Cracking down on Counter-Revolutionaries, the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Anti-Right-Deviationist Movement, the Socialist Education Movement, the Cultural Revolution, and the movement against social chaos and upheavals after the June 4th Democracy Movement. Some movements concentrate on mental indoctrination only and rarely resort to physical punishment. They include: the movements to attack the "Biography of Wu Xun" and to attack Hu Feng, the Great Leap Forward, the Campaign to Reflect on the Past and Examine the Present, the Movement to attack Lin Biao and Confucius, the Movement for Legalist School of Thinking and against Confucius Teachings, the Movement to Counter Attack the Coming back of Right Deviationist Thinking and

against the Gang of Four, the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution and the Movement to Encourage Five Principles, Four Virtues and Three Devotions.

Through

these movements and campaigns the Communist Party has managed to crush and kill anyone who is perceived to be against Party rule and has shown the public the fate of those who are against it. This kind of education is one of life or death. It would almost be tolerable if the consequences for going against the Party were only limited to demotion, deposing of official titles, discarding from the political scene, or even death. However, those defiant to the Party have also been not been allowed to die even after their lives have been taken away.

**4) To participate in activities of Party organizations** The smallest unit in the Communist Party organization is the Party group, generally formed by Party members in a section. If it is a small section, then Party members from several sections will form a Party group. For instance, when I was in the Theory Department of the People's Daily, we had one Party group formed by members from both Philosophy and History Sections. However, the Economic Department had more members so they had one individual Party group. The Thought Commentary Section only had three Party members but they formed one Party group anyway. The Overseas Edition has its own Party group.

The group heads also function as the Party committee secretaries. Some people working on different pages of the paper would also fall into the same Party group. I was working on Page Five of the publication at the time and Page Five members formed a joint Party group with those from Page Seven, the cultural page. I was the group's committee secretary as well as group head. We normally organized one activity each week, which would take up three hours of an afternoon, where we studied the Party instructions, and discussed them to gain an understanding of the document's spirit. Other times we would initiate self-criticism sessions to review and examine how we enacted the spirit of the Central Party Committee's documents. If we realized we did not do well to execute the content of the documents, criticize ourselves and expose ourselves to other Party members' criticism. If the case proved to be serious enough, it would involve a written self-criticism, or even be scrutinized and criticized at a Party Committee meeting.

### **Control over Material Means and Daily Life**

The Communist Party of China has the sole control over all means of production and living necessities. People are appointed to an official position according to the degree of support for the Party as judged by the Party standard. The seniority of your official position will decide, by the Party authorities, the usage and size of possession of the means of production. People in every field of life, be it a monk or a nun, will be allocated a title, an official position according to their title and the corresponding number of material and spiritual privileges.

There are four grades of titles in the People's Daily: senior editor, executive editor, editor

and assistant editor. Reporters also fall into four grades. The first and most important of the criterion for giving you the title is how well you have done in adhering to the Four Cardinal Principles. The "Four Cardinal Principles," initially raised by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, are the principles to "maintain Party leadership, maintain socialism, maintain proletarian dictatorship and maintain Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought." Later the "Four Cardinal Principles" were written into the Chinese Constitution. At the People's Daily, no matter how good a writer you are and how truthfully your stories reflect the real life, as long as the leaders in the decision-making position believe that your thinking does not fit well into the spirit of the "Four Cardinal Principles", you will not only fail to acquire the title of a senior editor, executive editor, you probably will not obtain the title of an editor. Your only choice is to stay in your position as an assistant editor.

The level of professional and official position will entitle you to have a matching level of salary, housing, travel arrangement on business trips, and hotel accommodations. Allocation of fringe benefits depends on strict and well-defined classes or categories. The officials of bureau-head level and senior editors at the People's Daily are allocated into four-room apartments and those above the deputy-ministerial level are entitled to five-room apartments. If the housing is not enough for distribution according to the number of titled positions, those cadres with executive positions will be given priority.

### **Control over Editorial and Reporting Procedures**

With such control over the ideological domain, material means and living necessities, all editors and reporters are conditioned to exercise judgment over the kind of news and reports to be carried out according to the Party interest. Although there has not been an open legalized media censorship system in China, every staff member in the media has become a self-initiated censor. But to ensure even safer control, the Communist Party has tightened its grip over the working procedures in the media.

Normally the operational procedures at the *People's Daily* fall into the following pattern: a reporter goes out to conduct an interview, writes up the report and submits the report to his/her editor. The editor checks the report against the Four Cardinal Principles, polishes and corrects it accordingly and then passes it on to the editor in charge of the section. The section chief will in turn check the report against the requirement of the Four Cardinal Principles and polish it again. The report then is sent to the editor who is deputy head of the department, who checks it again. The next step is for the deputy head to submit the report to the head of the department for another check. Once the departmental head has given a final approval, the report will be sent to print and be fitted into a certain page. All reports and articles go through the same procedure. After the draft is printed out, the Deputy Editor-in-Chief in charge will do one final check before the day's newspaper is printed.

Apart from this procedure there are further steps taken by special checking and proof-reading staff, with the checking staff focusing specifically on the ideological appropriateness of the content and accuracy of professional data and proof-reading staff

concentrating on the accuracy of texts and language as well as political and economic issues. If a proofreader catches an article where the content is not exactly in line with the spirit of the Four Cardinal Principles, this person will receive a significant award.

If all the proofreading still fails to spot content straying from the Four Cardinal Principles before they are printed out and issued to the public, there are special censors working in the Propaganda Department of the Central Party Committee whose job it is to spot problems from newspaper articles. Once a problem is caught, the people involved will be prosecuted or even thrown into prison. For instance, a journalist named Gao Qinrong from Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province, revealed serious frauds conducted by certain Party officials in 1998. He was jailed for over three years as a result of this kind of self-censorship.

Apart from professional censors, there are also amateur censors at work. These self-appointed censors are extremely careful and detail-minded when they read newspaper articles, not because they really want to learn about the stories, but because they are trying to catch anything that is not totally appropriate according to the Four Cardinal Principles. Their goal is to get a chance to climb up to an official position or to seek monetary rewards through catching politically sensitive problems. Once they spot such a problem, they will immediately report it to the local propaganda department of the Party committee. To prevent the local propaganda department from taking the credit for it, some amateur censors will telephone or send telegrams to Beijing directly, or even fly there in order to report directly to the Propaganda Department of the Central Party Committee. Therefore, not only is everybody who works for the media a self-appointed censor for the Party, everybody in China acts as some kind of a censor.

### **Physical Control**

Apart from control over mental and ideological domains, material means, daily necessities and working procedures, the Communist Party also exercises strict physical control over the people.

Once you are assigned a job with a certain work unit, it becomes difficult to change jobs. The original work unit will not let you go. If that is the case, then your personal dossier, residency card, grain and cooking oil quotas, as well as your Party membership affiliation, cannot be transferred. Without these documents, the new work unit cannot accept you as a new employee. These days, this kind of physical control over staff movement has been relaxed in many areas. In media, especially at People's Daily and CCTV, key media organs for the Party, such physical control has also been loosened up. At the same time, the Party control over ideology, mentality, material means and people's daily life is not as strict as it used to be. However, control over working procedures has been strengthened.

## **Control Through Corruption**

To ensure the effectiveness of the media control, the Communist Party has added one area on its control list – control through corruption. This is the latest means of control by the Party and has proven to be more than effective.

Since the 1980s, incomes in China have been divided into two categories - proper income and illicit income. Proper income is sometimes referred to as "white income" while illicit income as "gray or black income." The former refers to visible and legal income including salary and bonuses. The latter refers to various illegal incomes generated and transacted in dark secrecy and behind closed doors. To gain the latter income, people have to, as the saying goes, "use their own special prowess and resources just like the Eight Immortals in the Taoist Mythology."

The gray/black income falling into the pockets of *People's Daily* editors and reporters amounts to frightful figures for some, and moderate figures for others, depending on how bold or how conservative you are. The conservative staff members will passively accept money if the money is offered to them in moderate amounts and if they feel the deal will not be exposed or cause problems. The less conservative ones will ask for an exorbitant amount, and then proceed to negotiate down until the two parties reach a mutually acceptable minimum figure. Even after several rounds of negotiations, the deals could amount to tens of thousand RMB (yuan) paid out to editors and reporters. Certain really hardened and audacious ones can collect bribes in six-digit figures or more from one single deal. It is my understanding that CCTV staff are even worse than those at the *People's Daily* and have price tags that are ten or a hundred times higher.

Who are willing to spend tens of thousand of yuan on the *People's Daily* and on CCTV for positive public images? They fall mainly into the following categories:

- 1) Government officials of various levels - levels of ministry, bureau, department, section and sub-section; or levels of province, municipality, county, township and village (village-head-level officials are not considered government officials and are not paid with government salaries, but their direct control over the peasants make them the most horrible group of all).
- 2) Presidents and managers of state-owned enterprises.
- 3) Owners of private businesses.
- 4) People involved in show business such as actors, singers, painters, artists and various handicraft people.

The visual image and texts/words that appear in the *People's Daily* or on CCTV promoting and boasting about people in the above categories apparently have been bought with money, but the key factor is that not all such images and words in the official

media are paid promotions. It is difficult to find out which ones are paid and which ones are not. The confusion of "a fish eye mistaken for a pearl" serves the desired purpose. More importantly, such communicational strategies achieve a much better effect than plain advertisements, while the money payment only comes to one tenth or one hundredth of full advertising fees.

Most editors are also reporters at the *People's Daily* and CCTV. They are editors in the office and reporters when going out to the field. Normally they would go out to do the interviews, write up and edit the report themselves and then fit it into a designed page layout. As long as they are not politically suspicious in any way and are willing to give out a share of the profit to those in charge, they usually will have the green light. During the early 1980s, editors and reporters experienced different treatments when they went to the coastal regions and inland areas. In the coastal regions, especially in Guangdong Province, which was a pioneer in economic reforms, editors were treated with deference and preferential honor and reporters were less enthusiastically received, because editors were believed to have the decisive editorial power, while reporters were thought to be subordinates to editors. This differentiation is similar to the general practice in the media industry of other countries. The inland areas, on the other hand, were relatively uninformed about the editors' role and thought reporters were the most powerful guys because they were always impressed by names of reporters printed in newspapers. To accommodate such a situation, the name cards of *People's Daily* staff generally have "editor/reporter" as the title. On the Wanted Circular for my arrest, my title was given as "editor/reporter."

After Deng Xiaoping's tour of the southern region in 1992, a new wave of anti-corruption campaign erupted at the *People's Daily*, just like everywhere else in China. In the *People's Daily* and all other media organizations in China, not one clean editor or reporter can be found. Further, not one professional journalist in China can be considered clean. The issue is only different degrees of corruption, not whether or not there is any corruption involved. A small minority, who are only passive takers of smaller amounts of money or other material offers, are the only people believed to have a conscience.

The scale of corruption that literally involves everybody across the board turns out to be rather conducive to the Party's control over media. The Commission for Inspecting Discipline of the Central Communist Party has a work team permanently stationed at *People's Daily*, which has all the bribery-taking details of all editors and reporters on file. If you appear to have shown any sign of disagreement or dissatisfaction with the Four Cardinal Principles, you will be called by the work team for a chat. You will be given an initial warning. If you do not come up with an in-depth self-criticism and change your behavior accordingly, you might be labeled "a corrupt element." Punishments vary - you can be stripped of your Party membership and deposed from your position - that is a light penalty; or you can be sentenced to a couple of years in prison, which is a more severe punishment. Despite the form of punishment, you will not be formally charged with going against the Four Cardinal Principles. You will be sentenced with a corruption charge, because if they say you have acted against the Four Cardinal Principles, you would definitely evoke sympathy and support from the vast general population, and you

would become a great hero in the history of the People's Daily. But if they accuse you of corruption with strong evidence, then you cannot argue back even if you know that you are no more corrupt than anybody else at the People's Daily. Even if you have been a passive taker of money from those who want to be promoted in the newspaper, the experts at the Commission for Inspecting Discipline have ways to turn your passive acceptance into solicitation. After all, the unalterable fact is, you have accepted bribery, and there is a thin line between accepting bribery and demanding bribery.

With the overwhelming anti-corruption campaign in place, all editors and reporters of People's Daily are so worried about self-protection that they become sheepish followers of the Four Cardinal Principles in dealing with daily reports. They are all voluntary media censors.

### **Let All Journalists Become Careful and Cautious Media Censors**

Foreign friends might wonder: why doesn't the Communist Party of China formulate a set of media laws in keeping with its interest and then just openly and legally strengthen its media control? After all, the Party has complete control over its legislature and can write whatever laws it wants to. Many sinologists mistakenly use this logic to measure and study the Communist Party of China. They often forget that the Party is the most horrible organization in human history and knows no qualms or limits about evils. Another common error sinologists tend to make is to infer and analyze Chinese Party leaders' public statements, and conclude their policies have gone through changes, or even significant changes.

In fact, these mistaken beliefs are espoused not only by sinologists or our foreign friends. I will give you one example that happened a couple of years ago. In 1998, an official at the Jinan Municipal Civil Administration, Shandong Province, allowed the dissident Chinese Democratic Party to go and talk about the possibility of registering the party as a legal political organization. Maybe it was just a self-initiated idea from this official, or the true intention of a director or section-head blurred out under the effect of a few drinks, or maybe it was an idea from the above, or even from Zhu Rongji himself. So what? It was at most "one step backward in order to move two steps forward". Or it could simply be a revised version of the "tempting the snakes out of the den" strategy that Mao invented. But, at hearing the news, some friends of the pro-democracy movement immediately started fantasizing about the wildest dream : they believed the Communist Party would lift the ban now on Party organizations. Some went around applauding and spreading the news; others wrote articles to cheer and celebrate. As soon as Zhu Rongji uttered one or two interesting sentences, one self-proclaimed leader of China's pro-democracy movement immediately applauded Zhu as a "liberal".

Based on my own experience and stories I witnessed and heard for 22 years working for the Chinese Communist Party, as well as my 45 years of living in China, I have come to one conclusion: there is no evil the Communist Party of China is not capable of. The limit is only in our imagination.



The Communist Party's dictatorial regime in China is different from all other forms of totalitarian regimes in that whatever the regime wants to do or not do is entirely up to the convenient discretion of the Party itself. It can manipulate legislature to formulate laws that best serve its interests, or refuse to set up laws that, judged by the convenience of the Party, might become difficult to enforce. The latter is best illustrated by the lack of media and publishing laws in China.

To make laws that appear decent and proper, they must look like proper laws on paper, rather than obvious decrees of a dictatorship. So once a decent set of laws is formulated, they will turn out to be more trouble than their worth for the Party, if these laws cannot be enforced properly.

Chen Yun, the number two man in Deng Xiaoping's era, had made several successful attempts to prevent and stop the formulating of decent media and publishing laws. The result is that to date China has no media law or a law on publications. Chen Yun's argument was that media and publishing laws were our (the Party) lethal weapons for seizing the power and fighting with the Guomindang (KMT), the Nationalist Party. Now that we are already in power, why should we create a set of laws to tie our own hands and feet down? Why should we rack our brains to provide lethal weapons for the opposing enemy forces? If we don't have those laws, we can do whatever we want to. Once we have established a set of media and publishing laws, we will be offering our enemies a tool to tie us with so that they can deal devastating blows to us.

To control the ideology of people without setting up laws, and to achieve the most effective control, there is only one way: to make every media professional a careful and conscientious censor.