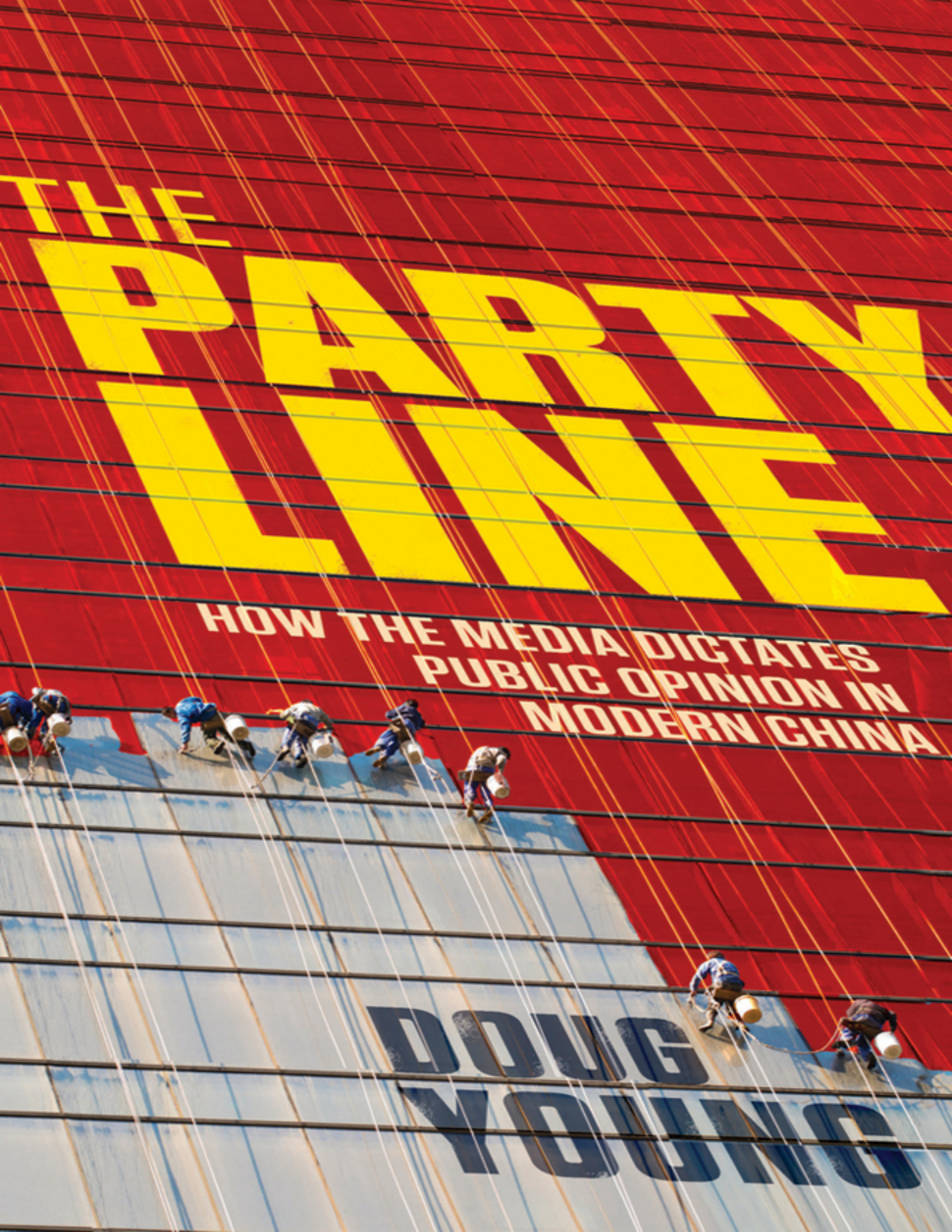
THE
PARTY
LINE
HOW THE MEDIA DICTATES
PUBLIC OPINION IN
MODERN CHINA
DOUG
YOUNG

Contents

The Party Line

How the Media Dictates Public Opinion in Modern China

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John Wiley & Sons Singapore Pte. Ltd.

Published by John Wiley & Sons Singapore Pte. Ltd.

1 Fusionopolis Walk, #07–01, Solaris South Tower, Singapore 138628

Other Wiley Editorial Offices

John Wiley & Sons, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

John Wiley & Sons, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, P019 8SQ, United Kingdom

John Wiley & Sons (Canada) Ltd., 5353 Dundas Street West, Suite 400, Toronto, Ontario, M9B 6HB, Canada

John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd., 42 McDougall Street, Milton, Queensland 4064, Australia

Wiley-VCH, Boschstrasse 12, D-69469 Weinheim, Germany

ISBN 978-0-470-82853-3 (Cloth)

ISBN 978-0-470-82855-7 (ePDF)

ISBN 978-0-470-82854-0 (Mobi)

ISBN 978-0-470-82856-4 (ePub)

I would like to dedicate this book to my parents, Bernard and Ellen Young, who have patiently put up with all my China fixations over the years.

Acknowledgments

Tackling such a broad and complex subject as the media in China has been a challenge that I never could have undertaken without the help of many people, both inside and outside the country. First and foremost, I would like to thank the many people who provided me with insight on the workings of the Chinese media and the broader context of events described in this book, including Dou Fengchang, Paul Pickowicz, Shen Yachuan, Sun Qian, Tu Yan, B.Y. Wong, Xiao Jiansheng, William Zhang, Zhang Zhi'an, Zheng Zhong, and Zuo Zhijian. I'd also like to thank Gao Qi and the Universities Services Centre for Chinese Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where I spent many happy hours poring over old copies of Chinese newspapers for my research. I would also like to acknowledge the book *Marketing Dictatorship*, and thank its author, Anne-Marie Brady, for providing me with insight on many of the finer points about how the Chinese media machine operates.

Readers are also critical to improving any manuscript, especially when the writer is someone like myself, who has spent way too much time working in the subject area and may lose perspective on some of the issues that might not be so familiar to others. In that regard, I'd like to thank Bill Berkeley, John Brill, Renee Chiang, Emily Rourke, and Gina Keating for their feedback, and especially Josephine Khu and my sister, Margo Young, for making it through the entire manuscript.

At Wiley, special thanks are due to Nick Melchior for helping me to develop my idea into a real book, and I'd also like to thank Gemma Rosey, who helped me see the project through to completion. Much of my knowledge of the Chinese media comes from nearly a decade working as a

journalist in Asia, and for that I’d like to thank Reuters for giving me the opportunity to report from a wide range of positions and locations over that time. Also at Reuters, I’d like to thank Don Durfee for introducing me to Wiley, and for his additional support in my endeavor.

Finally, I’d like to thank a woman who probably doesn’t even remember me, my graduate school historiography teacher at Columbia University, Madeleine Zelin, who unknowingly helped to set me on my current course in life through one of her class assignments. That assignment, which asked us to compare a historical event as detailed in the press versus how it was later recorded by historians, helped me to see how I could join my passions for writing and history through a journalism career, with the realization that journalists really are the first recorders of history.

Introduction

Imagine this: You wake up one morning, roll out of bed, and turn on your radio to hear the morning drive-to-work show as you get ready to go to the office. Mike, Harold, and Samantha are going through their usual banter when the news announcer breaks in: “This just in,” he says. “We’re getting word that Clinksburg Mayor Tom Whitfield has been arrested as an accessory to murder. There are no further details at this time, but we’ll be back with more on this breaking story when we have new information.”

The show returns to Mike, Harold, and Samantha, who instantly jump on this breaking story by cracking jokes about Whitfield, the mayor of Clinksburg, who was elected two years ago on a campaign of toughness on crime. You wonder how the very man you voted for could have been busted for such a serious offense, even though you’re not really sure what the crime actually is.

After dressing, you turn on your laptop and go to the *Clinksburg Chronicle* homepage. Sure enough, under the “breaking news” section is an article accompanied by an unrelated photo of Mayor Whitfield at a recent event. It offers several new details beyond the original bulletin without citing any sources. “Mayor Whitfield Arrested in Murder Cover-Up” reads the headline in bold, followed by the lead: “Clinksburg Mayor Tom Whitfield has been arrested and charged as an accessory to murder. The mayor was taken into custody this morning at his home in suburban Clinksburg.” You want to know more, but you really need to leave for work.

You pull out of your driveway and quickly tune to the local radio news station. You learn that Mayor Whitfield’s wife is the one actually accused of murder. The report adds that

the mayor found out about the crime and tried to hide it, but again no further details are given.

You soon arrive at work, where the story is already the talk of the office. Everyone is generally as surprised as you are, but no one ever stops to question where the accusations are coming from, despite the lack of details and attributions. What's more, the story so far has been devoid of images, with no news conferences, video, or photos of the mayor or his wife being led away in handcuffs, or anyone making statements. It's all been text on the page and announcers stating facts with no sources.

You check the *Chronicle* and several other web sites throughout the morning for updates, and are also in regular touch with friends and close colleagues via e-mail and instant messaging to stay on top of the story. You have a few more details by lunchtime, but you're no longer sure what is coming from where and how reliable the sources are. According to various reports you've received, the mayor's wife fell out with one of her business associates, an unnamed Kenyan man, whom she is now suspected of having killed. There are still no names of accusers behind the allegations, but the *Chronicle* is now saying that Mayor Whitfield was believed to have known about the murder just a few days after it occurred but failed to go to the police.

Minor details trickle in through the rest of the day. Oddly enough, there are no comments from the mayor or any member of his staff, from the district attorney, or from anyone else, for that matter. After work, you skip the usual drink with your colleagues and drive straight home to catch the evening news on TV.

The mayor's arrest is at the top of the broadcast, and by now the report is probably as close to complete as it's going to get today. The announcer rehashes the details you've already heard, with yet another old photo of Whitfield. She says the mayor was arrested at about six-thirty this morning

at his suburban home, and is being charged as an accessory to murder. He reportedly learned about the crime committed by his wife a couple of days after the Kenyan man died in a mysterious auto accident. But he failed to go to the police for at least the next week, leading to his arrest this morning.

The whole story has a certain strangeness—not so much the actual facts, but the lack of attribution. You expected the usual multimedia circus, which should have included TV footage and photos of the mayor and possibly his wife being led away in handcuffs from their home, press conferences by his lawyer and the district attorney, and possibly even written statements from the family of the Kenyan man. Instead, all the reports and images have a kind of flatness to them.

The next morning, the newspapers mostly rehash accounts from the previous day. On your way to the kitchen you notice someone has slipped a manila envelope under your front door with the words “strictly confidential” written in heavy black marker on the front. Upon opening it, at the top left of the document inside you see “Official, Final Version,” and below that “For Immediate Release.” Then two lines down, at the center of the page, comes the headline: “Clinksburg Mayor Tom Whitfield Guilty of Murder Cover-Up.” As you read down the page you realize that the document you are now holding is the sole source of information for all the facts you heard yesterday, containing everything from the auto accident that killed the Kenyan man to the fact that the mayor knew about his wife’s involvement in the case for at least two weeks without going to the police. Nowhere on the sheet is there any indication of who is accusing the mayor, what evidence there is against him, where he is now, or how he or anyone else in the case has responded to the allegations. And yet, he was arrested anyway—and the

media reported it all as if it were fact without noting any sources.

Welcome to news reporting as experienced in China. While the following story may sound strange, it closely mirrors a case that captivated much of China in the spring of 2012. That case saw a former Communist Party high-flier named Bo Xilai arrested for serious breach of discipline after his wife allegedly had a British business associate murdered when their relationship soured. No stories appeared in the Chinese media for several weeks after Bo's disappearance from public view, despite widespread rumors. When the media finally reported on the matter, all stories came from a single source: the official Xinhua News Agency, with editors and reporters throughout the country understanding that this was the truth of the matter as decided by the highest ranks of the Communist Party.

The following pages will explore how the Party has used its tight control of the media over the past six decades to publicize news and win over public opinion for its agenda, first for building a socialist state and later for its current plan to build a market-oriented economy with "Chinese characteristics." They will also explore how that media message gets cast, by examining the vast bureaucracy that news stories must pass through before being published to make sure they conform to the message of the day.

There is one overriding theme that holds just as true today as it did in 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded: On major issues, the Chinese media speak with a single voice, which is that of the Communist Party. Any semblance of many voices created by the nation's wide and varied range of newspapers and TV and radio stations is mostly an illusion. Yet at the same time, this book will also explore how China's media are far from a stagnant force and have undergone a steady process of change over the years. Perhaps nowhere is that change more apparent than

in the current era, when the Party is having to rethink its approach in response to the rapid rise of the Internet, which now allows millions of Chinese to voice their views on current events alongside official versions in the state-owned media.

In the course of my survey, I will examine several major events and how the Chinese media reported on them, from the 1950–1953 Korean War, to the Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989, to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In exploring these events, my purpose is not to critique how closely Chinese media accounts conformed to reality, but rather to provide some insight into why the Chinese media reported on those events the way they did, and what their approach said about the Communist Party's agenda at the time. At the same time, I also hope to show how the government has modified its approach over the years in response to new proprieties and challenges of the times.

After more than a decade of working as a reporter in China, I find the Chinese media especially fascinating for their remarkable focus and ability to stay on message. In many ways, my interest in this subject dates back to a project in my graduate school days when we were asked to compare newspaper accounts of a historical event with later accounts in history books. My fascination with the idea of journalists and newspapers as the first recorders of history quickly grew, and was one of the reasons I became a reporter.

A key misconception among Westerners about the Chinese media is their assumption that, as with Western media, the ultimate goal is to report a story as objectively and truthfully as possible. Whereas the Western media are interested in presenting developments as they appear to reporters on the ground, China, through its media, is more interested in reporting a version of the truth that it wants its own people to believe, a sort of idealized image of itself.

From the Western perspective, the depiction of events in the Chinese media is often considered highly flawed—painting an overly simplistic view of the world where everything is black and white: white if the matter is in line with Party objectives and priorities, and black if it is not. From the Communist Party's perspective, this all makes perfect sense. To quote Party doctrine, the media are simply the "Voice of the Party."

Chapter 1

The Agenda

Telling the Party's Story

Locals read Chinese newspapers displayed on a public notice board in central Beijing March 23, 2011. The practice of displaying newspapers on public bulletin boards for all to read dates back to the earliest days of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Photo Credit: Reuters/OTHK

A helpful metaphor to understand the world as depicted by China's media is the classic family portrait. This highly choreographed photo has mother and father at the center

surrounded by their sons and daughters, everyone cheerful and smiling. Nowhere is there any sign of the many conflicts that most such families have, from minor issues like everyday fights between siblings to deeper resentments due to different priorities. All of those negative elements have been left out of the portrait, even though they exist and are very real factors for everyone within.

As head of the Chinese “family,” the Communist Party uses China’s media to show the world a harmonious place—one where farmers and factory workers smile and whistle while they work, where scientific and economic achievements abound, and where the Party is a source of comfort and assistance in times of trouble. Seldom is there mention of the constant power struggles taking place behind the scenes, or of smaller embarrassments like the naming in 2010 of a jailed dissident as China’s first Nobel Peace Prize winner, to say nothing of major screw-ups like the Great Leap Forward—an agricultural fiasco of the 1950s that saw as many as 40 million people die of starvation during one of Mao’s many disastrous initiatives under the country’s centrally planned economy.

China’s media are a sort of window on the soul of the Communist Party. They present the Party’s message of the day, its broader agenda, and information on how it aims to achieve its goals. They also contain messages—some straightforward and others more veiled—of what is and is not acceptable, and what happens to those who make trouble. Equally important is what’s *not* reported, be it an event that’s considered taboo or an official who has fallen out of favor. By understanding China’s media, and how and what they choose to report, one can start to understand not only the Communist Party’s agenda, but also its hopes and insecurities, what it sees as its accomplishments and shortcomings, and how it plans to lead the world’s most populous nation and second-largest economy through the

21st century en route to becoming the next global superpower.

The mandate of China's media is to tell China and the world about the Communist Party's agenda. While that agenda has changed over time, several major themes and tools in the media's tool kit have remained surprisingly constant in the more than six decades since the Communist Party founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. These include such tactics as emphasis on the actions of Party leaders, and a focus on positive news and achievements, all aimed at raising the government's prestige and legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people.

While most reports they carry tend to have an element of truth at their center, the Chinese media have never worried about massaging that truth to make it better fit the government's agenda. A poignant example occurred in 2003, when Yang Liwei became China's first man in space. Millions of Chinese watched on China Central Television, the country's largest broadcaster and one of the Party's main mouthpieces, as the Shenzhou 5 capsule blasted off on October 15 for the historic mission, as China became only the third country in the world to send a man into space. Later reports suggested that broadcast of the launch, which was billed as live, was actually delayed by several minutes to give officials time to disrupt the program in the event of any disaster or unforeseen problems.

While that precaution proved unnecessary, excessive G-forces on the capsule's reentry caused Yang's lip to split and start bleeding, leaving his face covered with blood when the hatch was opened with cameras rolling outside. Officials quickly determined that such an image wasn't the triumphant one that they wanted the world to see. So they quickly cleaned up the blood, sent Yang back into the capsule, and had him reemerge for a second, more befitting "first time," flashing a victory sign to the delight of proud

Chinese viewers. This “touchup” of the truth came to light only many years later when an official from Xinhua, China’s official news agency, told the story to a group of journalism students to illustrate when prettying up the truth was necessary to make sure the public got the right message.

Stories incapable of such “touching up” because they simply have no positive side are often just excluded from media coverage altogether. Such selective “editing” of entire events from the record books was more common in the 1950s and 1960s, when China was still a closed society and most media worked hand in hand with local propaganda departments. One old-time reporter I talked to recalled one such instance of selective “non-reporting” during the Cultural Revolution, the 1966–1976 mass movement that saw Mao throw China into chaos as he tried to rekindle the nation’s Communist revolution and attack his critics.

In one of Mao’s campaigns at the time, the nation’s communes were called upon to introduce double planting seasons to increase yields. But as was often the case with many of Mao’s campaigns, this one had no scientific foundation, and many regions where the growing season was simply too short for two plantings saw their net harvests dive from previous levels, leaving many hungry.

The reporter, working in a rural radio station at the time, wrote an article implicitly criticizing the policy based on his observations at many of the surrounding communes he had visited. He mailed the piece to his provincial newspaper and the *People’s Daily*, the official Communist Party newspaper, without informing his editor. Such unsolicited submissions from rurally based reporters were common at the time, as even the biggest publications lacked the resources to do much reporting outside their immediate home bases. The *People’s Daily* editors were less than pleased to receive the editorial, and informed the reporter’s provincial propaganda department. Not only did the article never see the light of

day, but the reporter's hometown police department issued a warrant for his arrest. Throughout the crisis, the media carried no reports about the policy's disastrous fallout, opting instead for locally written accounts singing the praises of its wisdom and effectiveness.

A more recent example came in 2010 when Liu Shaobo, an outspoken critic of the Communist Party and author of an open doctrine calling for democracy in China, won the Nobel Peace Prize. Despite frequent denunciations of the award by Chinese officials, whose remarks were meant for foreign consumption, the matter received little or no mention in domestic Chinese-language publications. One reporter I spoke with remarked that the more daring newspapers today will often take chances and write about controversial news where an official line has yet to be firmly established, reflecting the central government's loosening oversight on less-sensitive issues in recent years. But in Liu's case, he said, there was no gray area whatsoever: The news was not to be reported, and the media acted as if the event had simply never happened.

Another reporter noted that Liu's name was absent from the Chinese media throughout the entire nominating and selection process. There were no veiled threats in the media when it was widely believed that Liu was a front-runner for the prize, and no condemnations when he received the award. The reporter speculated, based on previous experience, that while many in the media were probably aware of developments by word of mouth, Communist Party propaganda officials had most likely talked to top editors in advance, a common practice in today's China, and instructed them not to print any news on Liu, as if the matter didn't exist. Reflecting a cynicism held by many Chinese reporters in the current climate due to limits on what they can report, he added that if a top Chinese government or Party official had received the prize, it would

have been the leading news item in all the domestic media for at least several days.

The occasional maverick newspaper that does try to carry reports out of line with the official agenda can face major consequences, as I learned from one reporter whose newspaper dared to publish such an article.

It was 2002, and the reporter had interviewed Li Rui, a former secretary of Mao Zedong, on the sidelines of the National People's Congress, China's annual gathering of top government, business, and social leaders in Beijing. Negative news during this period is strictly prohibited. Rather, during the many policy speeches, press conferences, and photo opportunities open to reporters, the focus is on government achievements over the past year and on the agenda for the year ahead.

Li, who was around 85 at the time, used the interview to call for political reform—a topic strictly forbidden by the economically liberal but politically conservative Communist Party. During the interview an outspoken Li spoke critically not only of the current administration, but also of his former boss, Mao, and Deng Xiaoping, architect of China's economic reform. Despite the sensitive nature of the topic, the reporter's paper went ahead and published an article. One month later, the paper was shut down. The Li article was perhaps the final straw for the paper, which had angered propaganda officials with a steady stream of investigative-style profiles of Party officials that went beyond the usual puffery and tried to present their subjects as real people with strengths and weaknesses.

Specific agenda items have come and gone over the years, but one thing has remained constant: The Party is always front-page news. A quick look at any established Chinese newspaper, from the biggest city dailies to the smallest provincial papers, quickly reveals a surprisingly uniform set of images and stories across the spectrum on

any given day. A closer examination of many of these papers further reveals that most of their top stories are identical, taken directly from Xinhua reports featuring the latest comings and goings of top officials and accompanying photos. Even articles from day to day start to look the same, describing which meetings top leaders attended, whom they met, what was discussed, and even the occasional text of a speech, all accompanied by photos of handshakes, people at meetings, welcoming banquets, and so forth.

China watchers take delight in “reading the tea leaves” by observing front pages of domestic newspapers, noting who is in and out of favor by looking at the order of names in articles and who appears in stories at the top of the front page, who appears at the bottom, and who doesn’t appear at all. The average Chinese often simply skips these front-page stories and goes straight to the inside pages where more conventional news is placed. One reporter told me that monikers used for top leaders in their obituaries are particularly revealing, reflecting the current state of politics as much as the stature of the person who died. The most important leaders are remembered as “Great Revolutionaries of the Classless Society.” Next down the pecking order are “Loyal Communist Warriors,” followed by “Outstanding Revolutionaries of the Classless Society.” Past leaders who have fallen out of favor often get no moniker at all, and their deaths may be carried as simple four- or five-line announcements with few or no details beyond the fact that they died.

One reporter at a provincial newspaper told me that the rules at his paper were quite straightforward: The front page was reserved for the province’s two top officials—the governor and the Party secretary. As a general rule, no other government official could appear as the lead of page one, he said. To fill so much space with the comings and goings of just two people, the newspaper had a dedicated team of

about a half-dozen reporters who, each evening, would receive the two men's schedules for the next day, and then follow them around and take copious notes on all of their meetings and events.

I got an interesting taste of this mindset while teaching journalism at one of Shanghai's top universities. For one of their weekly assignments, I asked my students to write about an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council after Israel had attacked a flotilla of Turkish ships carrying aid supplies to the Gaza Strip in 2010. To my surprise, quite a few of my students' papers came back with simple leads that said "The United Nations Security Council met after Israel attacked a flotilla of Turkish aid ships." Nowhere was there any mention of what action the Security Council took—just the fact that they met. I explained to the class that what happened at the meeting was the news, and not the meeting itself. In response, one of the bolder students raised her hand and quietly pointed out that in the Chinese media it is just the opposite: The fact of the meeting and details like who attended are always the news, and substance is strictly secondary.

The Party's iron grip over the nation's front pages has persisted to this day and is still evident in most media, which are nearly all state-owned at some level. But at the same time, the Party, as part of its move toward a more market-oriented economy, has also encouraged the media to sink or swim on their own, cutting off most of the government funding they received in the past and making them rely on advertising and other market-oriented revenue sources to fund their operations. This shift has produced an interesting new dichotomy over the past decade between official Party newspapers, which still rely on the state for much of their funding, and a new generation of newspapers and magazines carrying more consumer-friendly fare.

Such a split actually dates back as far as the 1950s and early 1960s, when most papers were categorized as either Party papers, such as the *People's Daily* in Beijing and *Liberation Daily* in Shanghai, which devoted most of their ink to the latest Party news, or more commercial populist papers, such as Shanghai's *Wenhui Bao*, which had its roots as a real commercial paper in pre-Communist China. The Party papers, most of them formed around or after 1949, got a big chunk of their news directly from Xinhua, China's official news agency, whose stories were the closest thing to official Party news releases. The populist papers were separate from these official Party mouthpieces, and usually contained more features and locally based reporting.

The more consumer-oriented papers were largely forced to toe the Party line for much of the 1960s and 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution, but have gravitated back to their commercial roots in the current Reform era. In addition, a new generation of consumer-oriented papers has sprung up since the 1990s, many founded by the older stalwart publications but quickly supplanting their parent papers to become bigger breadwinners. This new generation of more commercial papers, while still avoiding taboo subjects like Tibetan and Taiwanese independence, look more like Western newspapers, carrying a wide array of articles on sports and entertainment, local news, and healthy doses of international stories on subjects that are less politically sensitive in China. Even the stalwarts have joined the populist movement, devoting their front pages to Party politics but then leaving the rest of the paper for more popular material. Many Chinese will say that anyone who buys one of these papers won't even bother looking at the front page, but instead will skip straight to the inside for more interesting fare.

Tool for Social Stability

The media's function as a tool for social stability has been another major theme over the past 30 years, especially in the current Reform era, when massive changes have drastically altered millions of lives in a very short time with the elimination of many socialist-era safety nets. Top officials can be quite frank on this topic. One top Chinese official in Hong Kong, Hao Tiechuan, caused a commotion in 2010 when he told a local association of journalists that maintaining social order was one of the Chinese media's main roles in society. Regular readers of Chinese newspapers and magazines will be quick to note they seldom carry reports of unrest of any kind, be it labor unrest due to low or unpaid wages, or protests over cronyism and corrupt local officials. Such reports, so the thinking goes, could incite others to take similar action. On the other hand, reports detailing the arrest of local officials for corruption or the settlement of a labor dispute are much more common, showing readers that their grievances are being heard without the threat of social upheaval.

I got a first hand look at this phenomenon while working in the Hong Kong bureau of Reuters in the spring of 2010 when a series of strikes broke out in the affluent Pearl River Delta, home to many of China's biggest exporters. The unrest began with a series of suicides at one major Taiwanese-run complex, as despondent young workers took their lives after working long hours for low pay, often in isolation designed to keep productivity high. The unrest later spread to Japanese-invested factories making parts for big automakers like Honda and Toyota, with workers going on strike over low pay and long working hours.

Chinese media are sometimes allowed to report such problems if they occur at foreign-owned factories, and many wholeheartedly jumped on the bandwagon by sending their

own reporters to cover the first wave of suicides. They later flocked to the auto parts makers to cover the latest developments. But several weeks into both cases, the government clearly started to worry that all the reports were having a contagious effect, leading more unhappy workers to consider the possibility of staging their own strikes. Concern over this potential for growing unrest resulted in a crackdown that saw the number of reports drop off sharply and in some papers disappear completely. Reporters at those papers later said that propaganda officials banned them from writing their own reports, and that only the official reports from Xinhua, which were often brief and thin on details, could be carried on either subject. One reporter at a newspaper in the region later told me that reporters are generally conditioned to be careful when reporting on matters that can influence public order or create social instability, or to simply avoid such topics altogether.

Another reporter commented that strikes are a sensitive matter in China, as are suicides, and that an understanding exists between propaganda officials and journalists to generally avoid reporting on such matters or to exercise caution when doing so.

More progressive publications print stories on labor unrest and other social problems at their peril, as they run the risk of being severely censured or even closed down by having their licenses revoked if they upset the wrong people. A textbook example is a case involving a progressive publication in the southern city of Guangzhou that ran a story about an out-of-towner waiting to have a grievance heard who died of a suspected police beating while in custody. That article exposed an underground system of informal detention centers in many of China’s major cities used to confine “undesirables.” Such centers, while not officially authorized, had become a useful tool for local

police to deal with large numbers of similar petitioners who often came from the countryside to lodge protests on anything from local corruption to dissatisfaction over terms of compensation for confiscated land, and who loitered around without any real hope of having their grievances heard. The story caused an uproar when published, and led to calls for reform—clearly one of the newspaper's goals in printing it. It also resulted in the detention and later arrest of three of the newspaper group's top officials.

Others run a similar risk. One reporter I interviewed from another progressive publication told me of an instance in 2005 when farmers in the central province of Hebei clashed with a local steel factory that wanted their land in order to expand its operations. The farmers were resisting the local government's attempt to confiscate the land, and so the publication sent several reporters to cover the conflict. On learning that reporters were talking to the farmers, local police went to the scene and roughed up the reporters, seizing their notes and film. The publication's headquarters later got a call from propaganda officials informing them they didn't have the authority to report on the matter. Despite that warning, they went ahead and published a story on the conflict, complete with photos smuggled from the scene, leading to the resignation of the head of the township's news and propaganda department.

While such news with the power to fan discontent is clearly off limits, just the opposite is true for "happy news," which is always welcome and has been a staple of the Communist Party's media agenda, especially in the post-Mao era. Most Chinese reporters have numerous tales about stories they pitched that were ultimately shot down for lack of a positive message. Writers of downbeat stories are often asked to rewrite them with a more positive spin if they want their work to see the light of day, with the result that many

Chinese papers often exude a surrealistic Pollyana-esque glow.

One former Xinhua reporter I talked with said his editors would often ask him to tone down his stories if they sounded too liberal, or to remove facts that sounded too negative. Stories of discontent in any form or about people who had died in conflicts were generally discouraged, he said, as were taboo topics like crime and prostitution. The main mission was to show society in a positive light. Another reporter said that any rookie reporter writing in the 1960s, 1970s, and even into the 1980s quickly realized that the media were the "Party's tongue and throat," to quote a popular slogan coined early on and still in use today. Reporting positive news is especially important during high-profile events like the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, or just about any major Party gathering—especially the annual National People's Congress held every March.

A former reporter for China Central Television (CCTV), the country's main national broadcaster and one of the Communist Party's main mouthpieces, described a particular experience that highlights the extreme difficulties that reporters face in trying to tell a negative story. In that instance the reporter traveled from Beijing to a village in eastern China's Anhui province to visit a school for poverty-stricken children set up by a former law student. The school had previously received national media attention and was constantly being praised for its good work. But the purpose of his trip wasn't to write yet another feel-good story, but rather to explore allegations that the law student was also a pedophile who had sexually abused boys at his school.

Despite receiving the go-ahead from his editors, the reporter was discouraged before even leaving by a local education minister in Anhui, who made it clear that this kind of report would tarnish the school and all its good work. But

the minister was powerless to stop the story since CCTV, as a national broadcaster and an official voice of the Communist Party, had the authority to pick and choose its own stories without local interference. Undeterred by the local minister's words, the reporter traveled to the school to interview its founder and some alleged victims.

Things went relatively smoothly until the reporter returned to Beijing to produce his final story. It was then that the problems began. His first attempt at a story consisted of two parts, each 25 minutes long, set to air on a CCTV investigative news magazine show. That version got the green light from his supervisor and was set to air the next day. But that evening, while the reporter and his assistant were out celebrating, he received a call saying that the following day was China's officially designated Teachers Day, and that it would be inappropriate to broadcast the story then. Later that night he got another call and learned that a more senior editor had seen the piece and thought it too long and negative to be released—the first signs of major resistance to the story.

After a heavy round of cutting, which saw the piece trimmed by half to a single 25-minute segment that included a toning down of the more negative elements, the story was again approved for broadcast. The reporter was out celebrating once again when he got another call, this time saying the story was still too negative and asking him to add a few more positive elements. Ultimately he had to recast the story eight times and spent two months working on it. In the end, it was never even broadcast, costing him a big part of his salary in an industry where reporters are paid partly based on the number of their pieces that are aired.

While negative news is generally discouraged, propaganda officials have begun to make a subtle distinction in the past decade between two kinds of such news, namely problems that can be solved with relative ease and those that have no