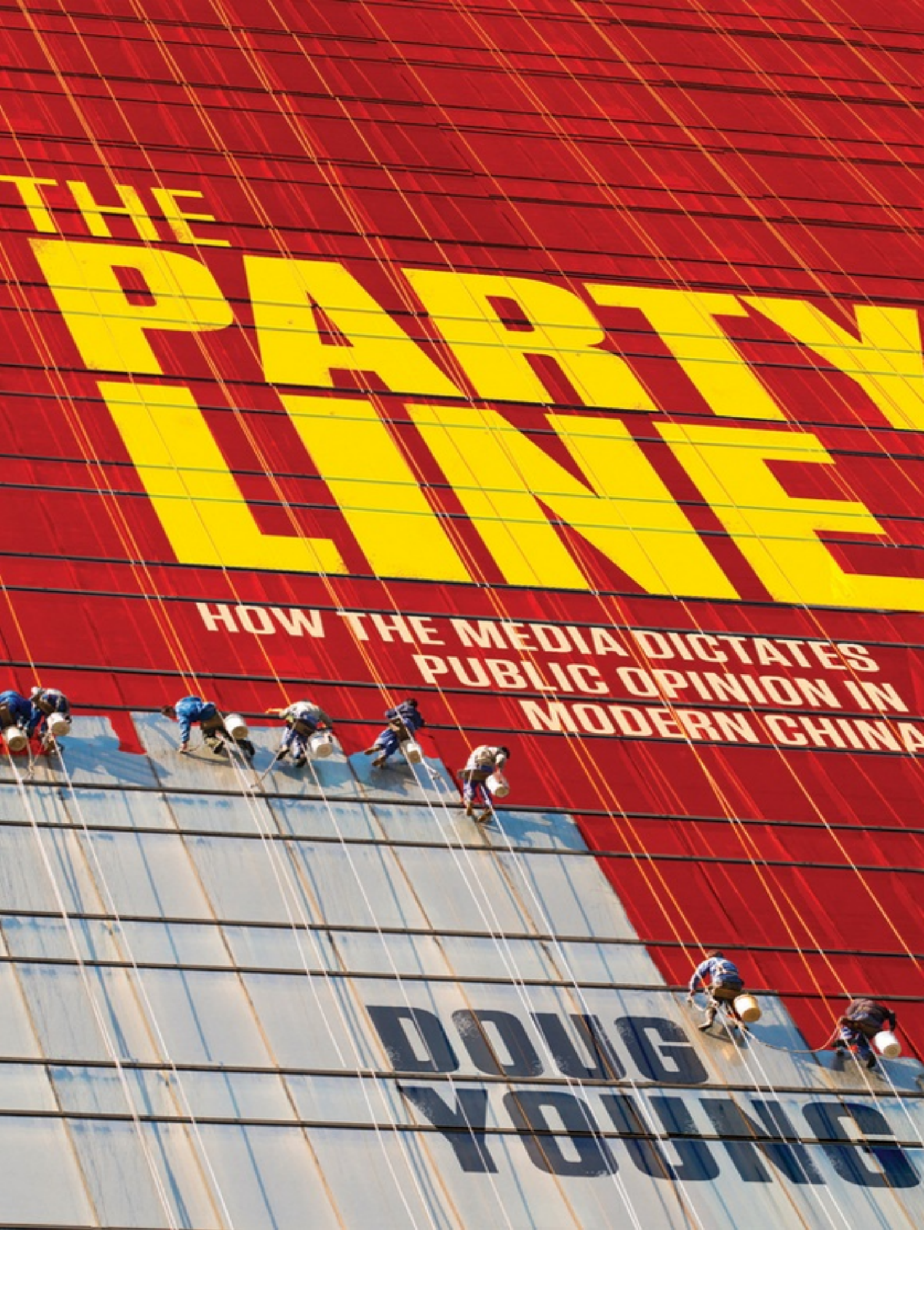


THE REALITY

HOW THE MEDIA DICTATES
PUBLIC OPINION IN
MODERN CHINA

DOUG
YOUNG



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*How the Media Dictates
Public Opinion in
Modern China*

Doug Young



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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 Fengchan, Paul Pickowicz, Shen Yachuan, Sun Qian, Tu Yan, B.Y. Wong, Xiao Jiansheng, William Zhang, Zhan Zhi'an, Zheng Zhong, and Zuo Zhijian. I'd also like to thank Gao Qi and the Universities Service 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 Bob 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 crim

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.” The 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 array of 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 from 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 deep 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 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 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, making China become 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 journalists and 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 local-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 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 agencies 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 development. 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 a mutual 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 Pollyanna-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 assistants were out celebrating, he received a call saying that the following day was China’s official 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 easy answer. One-off problems, such as a gas explosion or a coal mining disaster, have become relatively regular fodder in today’s Chinese media, as they are both sensational enough to appeal to broader audiences and acceptable to propaganda officials because they don’t tend to dwell on deeper social issues. Some say that the 2003 outbreak of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) marked a watershed in allowing certain types of negative news because the disease of this sort, while negative and potentially devastating, didn’t reflect badly on the Party itself.

or any of its policies. Such a problem was instead an act of nature in which the Party could actually boost its public image by showcasing its efforts to fight the deadly disease and save lives.

Media are also allowed to report on select, more endemic, problems if such reports dovetail with the government's latest agenda. A good case in point is reporting on corruption, which has risen sharply in recent years. Seldom does a week go by without a report about an official in one province or another detained for accepting bribes or for other corrupt acts. However, the reports nearly always involve low-level officials, and the stories they tell fit neatly with the government's narrative that the Party is heeding the call of a frustrated public by diligently weeding out the bad apples within its ranks. One editor I spoke with noted that official sources like Xinhua or other major Party publications are nearly always the ones to "break" news of official corruption cases, as smaller papers often lack the resources and audacity to pursue such news. In such cases, the announcement by Xinhua or another official source of an arrest is a signal to the broader media that they can report on the matter, using both the official accounts as well as accounts based on their own work.

Reporters have also been given free rein to discuss other, less-sensitive issues like pollution and workplace accidents, as the government realizes that stories on these troublesome issues can advance its agenda of trying to stem these problems that have accompanied China's rapid modernization. Barely a day goes by in most major cities without a report of a factory dumping illegal waste into a nearby waterway, or an explosion in a poorly run private coal mine that has left dozens of people dead. Such reports often lead local police, environmental, and other officials to spring into action, again helping the government to meet its objective of showing it is actively addressing these troublesome issues.

One area that is becoming more open but still remains quite sensitive is economic and financial news. After the global financial crisis of 2008 led to some of the worst inflation to hit the country in recent years, many media were initially barred from reporting on the phenomenon to keep from exacerbating consumer discontent. The strategy seemed to be that by keeping big-picture inflation stories out of the media, consumers would assume the problem wasn't so bad. But as inflation became too obvious to ignore, the blackout was lifted and stories on rising prices soon became a staple of many daily news reports. Even in this case, reports were often quick to point out the inflation was largely imported, created by loose monetary policies in the West. Thus, angry consumers could hardly blame the Communist Party, which itself was a victim of irresponsible Western behavior.

Negative economic news is also permissible if given the right spin to teach people a proper lesson that the Party wants to convey, such as the negative consequences of irrational consumer behavior. One such case occurred in the spring of 2011 after a huge earthquake hit northern Japan, causing a major radiation leak at a nuclear power plant. As concern started to grow about radioactive water dumped into the sea reaching China, word started to spread that iodine could ward off radiation poisoning and that salt was a readily available source of iodine. A huge run on salt followed, leaving store shelves empty of all salt products after a wave of panic buying.

Seeking to halt the panic, China quickly mobilized the media to dispel the rumors by putting out reports citing officials and scientists declaring that salt contained far too little iodine to counter the effects of radiation, and that radiation poisoning from Japan was highly unlikely in any event. Reporters then went on a sort of witch hunt, most likely encouraged by central propaganda officials, for people who had stocked up during the panic buying. One of those, a man from western China who had purchased 6.5 tons of the product at inflated black-market prices, only to discover he had spent much of his life savings on something that was worthless to stop a threat that didn't exist, became

national pariah overnight. The reports about the man were generally derisive, simultaneously warning and mocking anyone foolish enough to think that China was under threat from radiation, or that such a man could lower the risk.

Many reporters will say that financial news in general has become much less sensitive in recent years, and that this is one of the few areas where the government has let the media adopt a more Western-style role of watchdog to help keep China's freewheeling corporate world from becoming too unruly. Before 2000, one reporter told me that bosses at big state-run companies would often complain to local propaganda departments when newspapers carried unflattering stories about them, resulting in the customary "courtesy call" that nearly every editor in China has received from either a company or a propaganda official when one of his reporters wrote something politically incorrect. But nowadays such complaints to propaganda departments often fall on deaf ears, as the Party allows the media to help police an increasingly affluent and powerful corporate sector. In one instance, the reporter said he wrote an article about the embarrassing failure of a merger between two state-run companies, and received a call from an official at one of the firms berating him for his audacity and reminding him he could have the reporter arrested. Later, the official's superior called to apologize for the earlier exchange, in a quiet acknowledgment that such reporting, if done responsibly and accurately, was acceptable.

In terms of the Party's own agenda, the media have always been and remain a steadfast tool for the government to show its people who is in charge. On the international front, most major daily newspapers still feature prominent pictures and stories on their front and international pages any time a head of state visits China. Such reports seldom discuss what was said or done at those meetings, probably because very little of major substance occurred. Instead, these kinds of reports are designed to show Chinese officials simply looking like leaders. Most Chinese readers will tell you they don't bother to look at such reports, but certainly the images of their top officials shaking hands with other global leaders must leave at least some kind of impression that, consciously or not, adds to the credibility of these leaders.

The Party also uses the media to make its views known on international incidents that directly or tangentially involve China, many of which will be discussed in more detail in the later chapters of this book. Such use of the media can appear somewhat whimsical to the outside observer, with reports suddenly changing tenor midway through the course of a story, or even disappearing from the media altogether. One recent case occurred in 2010, when a former Filipino police officer took a bus full of Hong Kong tourists hostage in Manila. The incident ended with eight of the hostages killed in a bungled rescue attempt by the Filipino authorities. Initial Chinese media reports on the incident were largely indignant over the poor handling of the situation, creating friction in Sino-Philippine affairs that soon threatened to spiral out of control. Sensing this, propaganda officials stepped in and ordered local papers to keep the tone of their stories in line with official foreign ministry statements, to report more positively on the rescue effort, and not to link the case with Sino-Philippine relations.

While most negative news is discouraged, other sensitive topics are explicitly off limits and are never featured in the local media. These include most religious matters and conflicts between the Han Chinese majority and the country's many ethnic minorities, as well as anything critical of China's human rights record. Another topic off the agenda is the Falun Gong spiritual movement, a broad-based, well-organized group that burst on the scene in the 1990s, and later was outlawed and deemed an "evil cult."

Another interesting case along these lines occurred during the Jasmine Revolution of early 2011.

also called the “Arab Spring,” which saw a series of uprisings destabilize and unseat longstanding governments in the Middle East and North Africa, starting in Tunisia and then spreading as far and wide as Egypt, Libya, and Syria. As the unrest spread, China’s leaders and propaganda officials worried that the protests might inspire the same in their own country, and ordered a sudden ban in the media on the use of many of the words related to the movement. In the weeks that followed, most news reports on the subject were outlawed, and “Egypt,” “Tunisia,” and other related words were expunged from most of the nation’s major news and social media web sites. All photos and video of the protests were also banned, amid concerns that they might remind some of similar images from China’s own Tiananmen student movement of 1989, which ended in a bloody crackdown.

The only news about the Jasmine Revolution allowed were reports from Xinhua and other official outlets, which usually focused on China-related elements of the unrest, such as spotlighting how the government was helping to evacuate Chinese nationals trapped in the region. When Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak finally stepped down, the news got little play in the Chinese media. One editorial playing to a broader fear of national civil unrest, even warned that China could plunge into chaos if the country wasn’t careful and tried to stage its own similar movement.

Changing with the Times

While certain elements have remained on the agenda in the Party’s more than six decades in power, many other items have come and gone depending on who was running the show. The biggest divide was between the Mao era from 1949 to 1976, and the post-Mao era that now accounts for more than half of Chinese history under Communist Party rule. Whereas the earlier period was filled with revolutionary messages as Mao and his Party consolidated power and set up their vision of a socialist state, the post-Mao era has been characterized by greater pragmatism on the part of the Party, with messages aimed at demonstrating the government’s dedication to improving the lot of more than a billion Chinese through the adoption of a more market-oriented economy.

The early era saw the media singing the praises of the Communist Party and Mao Zedong. During that time, when literacy and newspaper distribution were still low and TV nearly nonexistent, easy-to-remember slogans were often the most effective way of conveying the Party’s latest message to the hundreds of millions of Chinese farmers who still lived in the countryside, and whose main access to the media came through loudspeaker systems set up throughout their villages, through radios played during meals at communal mess halls, and from newspapers posted on communal bulletin boards. Each slogan was part of a broader campaign, and reporters often traveled to the countryside both to spread those messages and to report back on how campaigns were being carried out at the grassroots level.

One reporter I talked to worked for a rural broadcaster in central China in the 1960s and early 1970s. He recalled a series of slogans that typified the messages of the day, all employing simple concepts aimed at making the average rural Chinese understand and appreciate the Party’s efforts at building a more just socialist state. One, *Nongye xue Dazhai*, called on farmers to “learn agriculture from Dazhai,” a rural village in western Shanxi province set up as a model agricultural area. A companion slogan, *Gongye xue Daqing*, called on factory workers to “learn industry from Daqing,” an oil-rich area in northeastern Heilongjiang province. Two other popular slogans of the day were for everyone: “Learn from the People’s Liberation Army” and “Engage in class struggle,” messages that were clearly close to Mao’s heart as he tried to push socialist reforms in cities and the countryside in the

early days, and to turn class struggle and worship of the nation's military into pillars of the nation's consciousness.

In those days, reporters, many of them recruited from smaller villages and towns, were generally encouraged to travel back to their hometowns and other remote areas to report on the changes that were happening in those places as Mao and the Communists sought to transform both agriculture and industry. First drafts of all stories went through a heavy-handed editing process, which often included the addition of language praising Mao, the Communists, and socialism. Typically the final stories bore little or no resemblance to the original drafts.

The reporter I talked to recalled submitting one article with another reporter about the improving situation in an area inhabited by the Miao minority, where many young people were starting to get basic education, a step up from the illiteracy and hand-to-mouth existence of the previous generation. Their story included references to the difficulties of life without education and culture. The references were quickly cut by the editors for being too negative and not in keeping with the message from Mao, and replaced with language blasting the tyranny of the previous regime under the Nationalists, whom the Communists had defeated in 1949 after a prolonged civil war.

In many instances from that era, the media engaged in outright lies, painting beautiful pictures of how the latest Mao campaign had improved the life of millions of peasants when just the opposite was true. In one instance, villages all over China were set to literally digging away hills and knolls to create new farmland, in response to a tale popularized by the government about how people from one village had literally moved a mountain to create new fields. During that campaign, one reporter recalled how his office was inundated with heavily edited reports from village communes throughout the area on how they were digging up earth, specifying how many tons of dirt they had moved to create new fields. But when the spring rains came the following planting season and created a huge muddy mess, no one wrote in telling of major disruptions caused by the ill-conceived policy, and the media carried no reports on these events.

In the post-Mao era, the agenda shifted from a focus on class struggle, which had plunged the country into a decade of chaos during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, to an economic agenda of building a more market-oriented economy while maintaining the Party's grip on power. The Chinese media began portraying China as a country of laws, as the Party sought to convince outside investors who were crucial to its economic development that they would be treated fairly and not be subject to the whims of local officials. One reporter used the following metaphor to describe the turning point: Before the shift at the beginning of the Reform era in 1979, the media were like someone tied to a chair and locked in a room—it didn't matter whether the person was dead or alive. After the shift, the media became more like someone still locked in the room, but no longer tied to the chair. Suddenly he has a little freedom to do his job, though still within a highly restrictive environment. Whereas even the smallest things like socializing with foreigners had been strictly taboo for reporters and raised suspicion in the period of class struggle, many of those things became acceptable in the newer climate.

During this time, especially in the early Reform era, reporters were still often assigned to write stories with messages that the government wanted to publicize. One reporter said he was once assigned to report a "story" in the early Reform era with the prewritten headline "China Sticks to Socialism." In effect, the story was an unsubtle message telling both the Chinese people and the world that China was practicing market economics but was still sticking to the core socialist values that gave the Communist Party its legitimacy.

The post-Mao Communist Party emphasis on economics was clearly demonstrated in the media following the bloody government crackdown on a student movement at Tiananmen Square in 1989 that called for democratic reforms. After the crackdown, which saw hundreds of people killed by tanks and troops advancing into the city, Party officials, using the media as their voice, went on their own assault to assure both domestic and foreign audiences that the country was still on an unstoppable road to economic reform, even if it had rejected the kind of political reform sought by the Tiananmen students. During this period, the media also went to great pains to carry a detailed “explanation” why the government had launched the crackdown. A host of catchphrases came into the media lexicon, calling the movement an “antigovernment rebellion” and saying it had been orchestrated by a small number of antigovernment “black hands” manipulating a well-intentioned general public.

Immediately after the crackdown, the media were also awash with comments from the handful of stalwart Chinese allies who voiced support for the use of military force, saying it was understandable and necessary. Nowhere was there mention of the far more numerous statements from other nations condemning the crackdown. This tactic, whereby the media carry a carefully filtered selection of standalone stories, each showing support from a different global leader, is commonly used by the media to this day. In some cases the aim is to justify government actions like the Tiananmen crackdown, while in others the goal is to show indignation over acts like NATO’s accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

As economic achievements have become the message of the day, showcasing government accomplishments has also moved to the center of the Party’s agenda, providing justification for its continued leadership after the abandonment of its socialist agenda. In this more recent period, we see a big increase in reporting on natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, which provide strong opportunities to show the government hard at work assisting and rescuing victims of such acts of nature. A nonstop stream of articles and photos filled the national media after a huge earthquake struck Sichuan province in 2008, leaving tens of thousands of people dead. And during a particularly harsh drought in the spring of 2011, barely a day went by without mention in the media of how the controversial Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, built during the Reform era in the 1990s, had helped to alleviate suffering by releasing extra water into drought-stricken regions.

In recent years, China has also discovered that “big events,” most notably sporting events, are an effective means of showcasing its new economic prosperity. Since the Beijing Olympics of 2008, barely a year has gone by without China hosting one kind of major sporting event or another that inevitably gets huge coverage from the domestic media, which report on every detail, from elaborate choreographed opening ceremonies to the actual events and finally the equally elaborate closing ceremonies. During such big events, all negative news is banned from the media.

During one such pageant, the Asian Games of October 2010, held in Guangzhou, a huge fire broke out in an apartment building under renovation thousands of kilometers away in Shanghai, leaving more than 50 people dead and exposing the broader issue of shoddy practices throughout China’s construction industry. One reporter recalled how his publication was banned from carrying anything on the story besides the short, official Xinhua reports while the Asian Games were still in progress. In that instance, his paper adopted a tactic that has become increasingly common among progressive media: that of using the Xinhua report as the foundation of the article, but then adding liberal amounts of the paper’s own reporting. By taking this approach, papers have found they can get around bans on reporting of certain negative stories, since anything from Xinhua is officially allowed to appear in local media. And by adding in their own reporting, which often goes beyond Xinhua’s more superficial treatment, they also give readers a more in-depth view of the issues.

Interestingly, times of political turbulence are among the few exceptions when control from the center is jettisoned and most decision making happens locally in terms of what to report. The two most famous periods in that regard are the decade-long Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square student movement of 1989. The former saw many newsrooms become camps divided between those loyal to Mao's ideas preaching a return to class struggle and more moderate leaders, who advocated a less-radical approach and more focus on economic development, with different groups prevailing at different times and in different publications despite all the dogma that filled the media during those times. Despite the relative freedom to take sides, the media in this period were ironically largely devoid of real news, and instead were filled with vacuous slogans and editorials calling on people to follow the thinking of whatever camp had the upper hand at the time. During the Tiananmen Student Movement, the reporting became much more varied as the center again lost control, with many major newspapers sending reporters to Beijing to file their own stories—something that would have been unthinkable under normal circumstances when most media would simply use reports from either Xinhua or China Central Television.

On more local issues that fall off the central government's radar screen, internal debates about government policymaking still take place, with the potential to produce bold and innovative reporting. One such case occurred in 2006, when Shanghai's local Communist Party boss, a man named Chen Liangyu, and those around him came under fire for allegedly mispending city funds in a scandal that eventually resulted in his ouster. Throughout the scandal, it was clear that a branch of the Party, probably with strong support from central leaders in Beijing, was trying to remove Chen and that no one was in clear control. As a result, the media both in Shanghai and throughout China were relatively free to write whatever they wanted about the situation. One Shanghai-based reporter recalled receiving a steady string of scoops during that time from anti-Chen forces, and feeling confident enough to publish them despite the risk of backlash from Chen's allies.

Agendas may come and go over the years, but at the end of the day the Communist Party really has one main goal that never changes: staying in power. Even top Chinese leaders are subject to this one major tenet, and talk of plurality from them or anyone else is strictly banned from publication. Premier Wen Jiabao commented on the need for political reform in several high-profile speeches during the closing years of his tenure from 2002 to 2012, which many took to refer to a strong separation of the Communist Party from the government, perhaps even to allowing non-Party members into top government posts. Yet despite wide coverage of his remarks in foreign media, domestic publications blacked out his comments under strict orders from central propaganda officials. That blatant ban led 23 prominent leaders from across the political and cultural spectrum to sign a rare open letter calling for an end to such censorship, which, ironically, was itself censored from all domestic media. During a 2011 visit to the United States, President Hu Jintao's remarks on China's human rights record, made in response to a reporter's question, met with a similar fate, receiving zero coverage in the Chinese media, which otherwise provided nonstop coverage of the trip.

Clearly, when any leader or group wants to stay in power, it will tend to stifle any talk of political plurality or giving voice to dissenters, even when such talk comes from within the top echelons of its own ranks. Viewed from this perspective, the vast majority of what appears in China's media, both the actual content and the packaging, all has a common aim. When there's good news, it's there to show off the Party's accomplishments. When there's bad news, it's there to let the public know that the problem is being tackled. On the broadest basis it's all about using the media to show a picture of China that may be less than perfect, but one that is still presenting its best face to both its own people and the rest of the world.

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