

# The Long Shadow of Chinese Censorship:

## *How the Communist Party's Media Restrictions Affect News and Entertainment Content Around the World<sup>1</sup>*

By Sarah Cook, Senior Research Analyst for East Asia and director of the China Media Bulletin, Freedom House ([cook@freedomhouse.org](mailto:cook@freedomhouse.org)).

### Introduction

China's ambassador to the United States urges Bloomberg's chief editor to withhold a story about Communist Party leader Xi Jinping. A French satellite company cuts the signal of an overseas Chinese television station to "show a good gesture to the Chinese government." A Taiwanese talk show host resigns after station executives try to stop his program from touching on topics sensitive to Beijing. And in Hanoi, a Vietnamese man sits in prison for broadcasting uncensored radio programming to China.

These are a small sample of incidents that occurred over the past eight years. Collectively, they illustrate the various ways in which Chinese Communist Party (CCP) information controls extend beyond mainland China's borders.

This paper summarizes and updates a 2013 study of this phenomenon and its recent evolution as it pertains to the news media sector, while briefly addressing similar dynamics affecting the film, literature, and performing arts industries. Specifically, it focuses on six types of media outlets based outside mainland China that together reach news consumers in dozens of countries: major international media; local outlets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America; mainstream media in Hong Kong and Taiwan; exile Chinese outlets providing uncensored news to people in China; and media serving Chinese diaspora communities around the world.<sup>i</sup>

In many cases, Chinese officials directly impede independent reporting by media based abroad. However, more prevalent—and often more effective—are methods of control that subtly induce self-censorship or inspire media owners, advertisers, and other international actors to take action on the CCP's behalf. The interviews and incidents analyzed in this study suggest a systematic effort to signal to commercial partners and media owners that their operations in China and access to Chinese citizens will be jeopardized if they assist, do business with, or refrain from censoring voices the CCP has designated as politically undesirable.

These efforts—ranging from discreet to blatant—are successful in some cases, and encounter significant pushback in others, with journalists and activists at times scoring important victories. But whatever the outcome of each contestation, the "China Factor" is palpably present, be it at the internationally renowned *Washington Post*, a local newspaper in Nepal, or a Chinese radio talk show in Los Angeles.

The Chinese authorities' transnational media controls manifest themselves differently in different environments. Within China, local officials, security forces, and regulators forcibly prevent foreign correspondents from accessing sensitive locations or interviewees, intimidate their Chinese assistants, and block websites. Outside China, diplomats urge senior executives to alter content, compel businesses to refrain from advertising in disfavored Chinese-language media, and in extreme cases, pressure other governments to suppress CCP critics.

More subtly, a number of political and economic incentives lead media owners and journalists to avoid topics likely to incur the CCP's ire, especially commentary that challenges the legitimacy of one-party rule or reports that touch "hot button" issues such as the plight of Tibetans, Uighurs, and Falun Gong practitioners.

Over the past eight years, many of these dynamics have intensified in scope and nature. Physical assaults against

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper draws upon and updates an October 2013 report published by the Center for International Media Assistance of the National Endowment for Democracy, particularly the overview chapter. The full original report is available here: [http://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-China\\_Sarah%20Cook.pdf](http://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-China_Sarah%20Cook.pdf)

foreign reporters in China have become more violent. Chinese government alliances with media owners have spread from Hong Kong to Taiwan. And major Western news outlets have found themselves facing the kinds of restrictions—including wholesale website blocking and intrusive cyber-attacks—usually reserved for dissident Chinese websites.

The impact of these obstructions reaches beyond the content of news reports, affecting the business models and economic sustainability of independent media. As news outlets and journalists struggle with these complex challenges, democratic governments and international donors can offer diplomatic support, professional training, funding for further research, and where appropriate, direct financial assistance. Such efforts can yield innovative solutions to a multifarious challenge to media freedom, helping to sustain vital sources of uncensored news and open political debate for tens of millions of people in China and around the world.

## A Transnational Toolbox

*“The Communist Party thinks it's now powerful enough to intimidate [non-Chinese], from business people to diplomats to academics and journalists, and it's willing to throw its weight around. It has learned that this often works and is willing to do anything to protect its image and stop negative news from being reported.”*

—Paul Mooney, freelance journalist and veteran China reporter<sup>ii</sup>

*“I remember clearly the days when you could safely assume that as long as you wrote something abroad, it was free and clear from repercussions ... Suddenly we're all Hong Kong, where no one wants to offend the mainland because it's too close.”*

—Orville Schell, director of the Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations<sup>iii</sup>

Since coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has constructed a multi-layered system for censoring unwanted news and stifling opposing viewpoints within China.<sup>iv</sup> Over the past two decades, this domestic apparatus has spawned mechanisms that extend some censorship to media outlets based outside China. Reflecting the adaptive nature of Chinese authoritarianism, such pressures are a complex mix of overt official actions and more discreet dynamics. They manifest themselves in four key ways:

- **Direct action** by Chinese diplomats, local officials, security forces, and regulators both inside and outside China. These measures obstruct newsgathering, prevent the publication of undesirable content, and punish overseas media outlets that fail to heed restrictions.
- **Economic “carrots” and “sticks”** to induce self-censorship among media owners and their outlets headquartered outside mainland China.
- **Indirect pressure** applied via proxies—including advertisers, satellite firms, and foreign governments—who take action to prevent or punish the publication of content critical of Beijing.
- Incidents such as **cyberattacks** and **physical assaults** that are not conclusively traceable to the central Chinese authorities but serve the party's aims and result from an atmosphere of impunity for those attacking independent media.

In practice, different tactics are adopted for varied media and information environments. For **international media**, local officials and unidentified thugs in China obstruct foreign correspondents, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs delays visa renewals, and central authorities arbitrarily block websites. Outside China, diplomats have been known to apply pressure on senior editors and executives to alter coverage, while recent cyberattacks have infiltrated the global servers of leading outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

For non-Chinese language media in **Asia, Africa, and Latin America**, local government officials—particularly in South and Southeast Asia—have taken steps to restrict or punish reporting damaging to China's reputation. This

has occurred either at the behest of Chinese representatives or to preemptively avoid tensions with a large donor and trading partner.

The CCP's efforts to expand control over Chinese-language media based outside the mainland are more systematic, reflecting how the party's domestic political concerns often drive foreign policy priorities.

Co-opting owners of media outlets in **Hong Kong, Taiwan**, and the **Chinese diaspora** in order to marginalize dissenting reporting and commentary has been a key strategy. Outlets and owners whose reporting portrays Beijing positively are frequently rewarded with advertising, lucrative contracts for non-media enterprises, joint ventures, and even political appointments. When such tactics fail to reach their objectives, more heavy-handed approaches have been used, such as Chinese officials' calling journalists and editors directly to castigate them for their coverage.

More forceful measures have been taken to obstruct the operations of independent-minded **offshore Chinese media**. Particular efforts have been made to undermine their financial viability and block mainland audiences' access to their content. They have suffered advertising boycotts, debilitating cyberattacks, and harassment of contacts in China. In several cases, foreign companies and event organizers—ranging from Apple to Eutelsat to NASDAQ—have barred their access to newsworthy events outside China or assisted in Chinese government efforts to prevent their content from reaching mainland audiences.

The spectrum of Chinese government and party entities involved in these attempts to thwart reporting by foreign and overseas Chinese media is as broad as the tactics applied. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Chinese diplomats worldwide feature regularly in accounts of obstructions ranging from visa denials to demands for content alterations to pressure on businesses not to advertise with a disfavored outlet. The corresponding entities handling relations with Hong Kong and Taiwan play a similar role in these locations.

Not surprisingly perhaps, many of the same bodies that supervise censorship and surveillance within China are also involved in applying media controls with transnational implications. These include the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department at the pinnacle of the control apparatus, as well the State Council Information Office, the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and when interrogation is called for—the Public and State Security Bureaus.

## Recent Trends

Some of the above dynamics date back to the 1990s. Nonetheless, over the past eight years, certain features have intensified, expanded, and deepened. The paradoxical combination of the CCP feeling emboldened internationally and insecure domestically has contributed to this trend. With more than half of China's population now accessing the Internet and some political content going viral despite domestic censors' efforts, the CCP's nervousness of overseas news trickling in has increased. "Chinese are getting better and better at finding ways around the Great Firewall," freelance journalist Paul Mooney said. "They can immediately read international news stories and are no longer dependent on the official line from the state media. It's no wonder the party is worried."<sup>v</sup>

The following are a number of ways in which the CCP's transnational media controls have evolved since 2008:

- Violent attacks, visa restrictions, and website blocks affecting foreign correspondents and international media outlets have increased.
- Beijing's efforts to influence newsroom decisions in Hong Kong have intensified, expanding to topics touching upon internal Hong Kong politics.
- In Taiwan, conditions that have fueled self-censorship in Hong Kong have emerged, with apparent similar effect.
- Advertisers are shying away from disfavored exile Chinese-language outlets increasingly of their own, preemptive accord and not only due to official Chinese pressure.
- Cyberattacks have been directed at broad targets (such as the global servers of international outlets or foreign hosting providers) as well as specific ones (individual journalists or overseas news websites).

The above trends began emerging during the tenure of former CCP leader Hu Jintao. Nonetheless, as current Chinese president Xi Jinping has tightened ideological controls at home, content restrictions and manipulation are also affecting an ever-broadening array of institutions and economic sectors overseas.

Since November 2012, when Xi took the helm of the CCP, Freedom House's *China Media Bulletin* has noted over 40 instances—in 17 countries and international institutions—of Chinese information controls negatively affecting free expression outside China.

## **Propaganda and Censorship: Two Sides of the Coin**

Testifying in 2011 before the U.S.-China Economics and Security Review Commission about China's foreign propaganda efforts, Ashley Esarey, a scholar of Chinese media, noted:

The objective of CCP leaders is to utilize propaganda to retain high levels of popular support domestically and to improve the regime's international influence. When propaganda messages are disconnected from actions that speak otherwise or challenged by rival perspectives, the effectiveness of propaganda falters and sows doubt among both foreigners and Chinese alike.<sup>vi</sup>

Esarey's observation helps make sense of why the party's recent multi-billion dollar effort to expand the reach of state-run media has been coupled with the trends described in this paper. For the party's narrative to be convincing to audiences inside and outside China, reporting—especially investigative reporting—about the darker sides of CCP rule at home and Chinese activities abroad must be suppressed.

In seeking to accomplish this aim, the party's transnational obstructions appear to prioritize a set of targets that one former Chinese diplomat said were internally called “the five poisonous groups.”<sup>vii</sup> These are Tibetans, Uighurs, practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual group, Chinese democracy activists, and proponents of Taiwanese independence.<sup>viii</sup> In many instances, these groups and related causes were explicitly mentioned as the focus of direct or self-motivated censorship, highlighting the special importance the CCP attributes to them. The transnational activism of Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners—including the latter's efforts to build their own media entities free of CCP controls—render them even more frequent targets of restrictions.

These issues touch on some of the most egregious and systematic abuses taking place in China today, pointing to the CCP's nervousness of regime violence being exposed, as well as the human costs of international silence. In addition, the mechanisms used to marginalize discussion of these subjects are easily applied to new topics deemed politically sensitive. In 2012, multi-faceted reprisals against American news outlets for investigative reports detailing the assets of party leaders' relatives reflected this dynamic. Foreign correspondents' attempts to report on issues such as land disputes, environmental pollution, and AIDS compensation also encountered interference. These topics collectively affect the lives of tens of millions of people in China and may have global implications.

Esarey's comment above also offers insight into an unexpected finding—that alongside hard news reporting about politically sensitive topics, the CCP appears especially wary of analytical commentary and talk shows in Chinese that promote critical debate about its rule, dissect party propaganda, or evaluate the prospects for democratic change. Many incidents of censorship in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora have involved terminating or neutralizing political analysis programs or commentators, despite—or perhaps because of—their popularity.

## **Expansion Beyond the News Media**

In recent years, the CCP's interventions and influences have also extended beyond news outlets to a surprising range of information dissemination channels, including mobile phone applications, pop music, hot air balloons, and video games. Many of the above tactics employed against critical news coverage are increasingly affecting literature and entertainment content as well, as are reports of self-censorship.

- **Technology services:** The Chinese government has blocked access to prominent global social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook since 2009. But a range of other technology services—from Google’s Gmail email application, to Apple’s movie and TV store, to an online streaming initiative of Disney’s—have been blocked or shuttered over the past two years, with varying financial implications for the companies involved.
- **Book publishing:** After the mysterious late-2015 abduction of five men connected to a Hong Kong publishing house known for disseminating politically sensitive books about CCP leaders, a chilling effect has reportedly taken hold in the territory’s publishing industry. A growing number of foreign authors have encountered efforts to censor the translations of their works published in China. And in 2014, at the behest of a Chinese printer, *Reader’s Digest* removed a fictional story from an anthology for the international market due to its references to religious persecution and torture in China.
- **Art and music:** A Tibetan art display blanked out in Bangladesh, a classical dance performance with Falun Gong-related pieces cancelled in South Korea, and a Jon Bon Jovi tour stopped because of a Dalai Lama image shown at a concert years before. These and other incidents in 2015-2016 involved direct Chinese embassy pressure on foreign governments, economic leverage surrounding TV content sold in China, and implied threats to discourage support for Beijing’s critics in ways reminiscent of news media-related cases examined in this study.
- **Film production:** Chinese firms have increased financing for English-language feature films, purchased Hollywood production companies, and launched new co-production initiatives. Such growing financial intersection between Hollywood and the Chinese film industry along with tight restrictions on how many and which foreign movies can be shown in China have lead some executives to recommend that scenes, which might upset Chinese censors, be preemptively removed even from the globally screened version of a film.

## The Limits and Impact of Beijing’s Influence

In spite of these trends, there are clear limits to Beijing’s reach. Media outlets around the world daily put out news that the CCP would likely prefer hidden, and Chinese activists such as Chen Guangcheng have received much international attention. Various factors—from market pressures to journalistic integrity to independent courts—serve as countervailing forces to CCP influence. Foreign correspondents and their Chinese interviewees take great risks to expose unsavory facets of party rule and important changes in Chinese society. Media executives and advertisers in North America boldly refuse Chinese pressures despite potential reprisals. Exile media have developed creative ways to disseminate their content to millions in China. And in Taiwan, a youth-led movement helped prompt retraction of a deal that would have expanded the media holdings of Beijing-friendly tycoons.

At times, the Chinese government’s own cost-benefit analysis seems to curb the usual instincts of the censorship apparatus. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, the CCP appears to have opted for propagandizing its own views via expansion of state-run media and provision of free content to local outlets rather than aggressively pressuring them to follow the party line. In Taiwan, Chinese officials have shied away from intervening in discussions of the island’s independence, instead encouraging self-censorship on how the mainland is portrayed. The result is a complex, nuanced, and ever-changing negotiation over where the “red line” lies.

Much is at stake as this transnational contestation unfolds. Independent media outlets facing Chinese reprisals experience rising costs and loss of advertising revenue in an already competitive and financially challenging industry. Individual reporters encounter restrictive editorial policies, threats to their livelihood, and even physical injury. News consumers outside China are deprived of information for assessing the political stability of a major trading partner, responding to health and environmental crises, or taking action to support Chinese people’s quest for a more free and just society.

For Chinese people, the stakes are even higher. In the age of microblogs, circumvention tools, international travel, and satellite television, overseas media outlets offer a vital source of information on matters with life-or-death

consequences, be they torture, environmental pollution, or threats to public health. Their ability to function and report uncensored news promotes transparency and accountability in an opaque and arbitrary political system. Beyond hard news, they offer an opportunity for Chinese people to engage directly with the world without the state media's politicized filters. Independent Chinese-language outlets offer users access to diverse perspectives, historical facts, and a more realistic view of their country. The forum for public debate that they provide often engenders a change in perspective that many Chinese find liberating. Thus, when a program is cancelled, a commentator censored, or a publication forced to shut down, the loss is real.

As China's international role expands alongside a deep sense of CCP insecurity at home, these transnational confrontations will grow in importance, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the media assistance community.

---

<sup>i</sup> A number of news outlets may straddle multiple categories, but have been examined in in one or the other for the purposes of this report. Although Hong Kong is part of the People's Republic of China, its media are remarkably freer than their mainland counterparts under the "one country, two systems" arrangement. As such, they are examined in this report as media based outside of mainland China.

<sup>ii</sup> Email interview with author July 10, 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> Emily Parker, "Censors Without Borders," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2010,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/books/review/Parker-t.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

<sup>iv</sup> For a detailed examination of domestic media and internet controls, see "China, *Freedom of the Press 2013* (New York: Freedom House, 2013), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/china>, and *Throttling Dissent: China's New Leaders Refine Internet Control* (New York: Freedom House, 2013), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/throttling-dissent-chinas-new-leaders-refine-internet-control>.

<sup>v</sup> Paul Mooney, email communication to author, July 10, 2013.

<sup>vi</sup> *China's Narratives Regarding National Security Policy: Hearing before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (March 10, 2011) (testimony of Ashley Esarey, Visiting Assistant Professor of Politics, Whitman College),

<http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Esarey.pdf>.

<sup>vii</sup> *Falun Gong and China's Continuing War on Human Rights: Joint Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations and the Subcomm. on Oversight and Investigations of the H. Comm. on Int'l Relations*, 109th Cong. 49–50 (July 21, 2005) (Statement of Mr. Yonglin Chen, First Secretary and Consul for Political Affairs, Former Chinese Consulate, Sydney, Australia, Appendix 2) <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-109hhrg22579/pdf/CHRG-109hhrg22579.pdf>.

<sup>viii</sup> These groups and related topics combine perceived threats to both CCP rule and China's territorial integrity, as well as past and present human rights violations whose widespread discussion in China could severely damage the party's legitimacy. Sensitivities regarding Tibet and Xinjiang typically involve challenges to official narratives about the regions' history, advocacy of their independence, independent investigations of recent unrest, and sympathetic coverage of leading figures like the Dalai Lama or Rebiya Kadeer. The party's hostility towards Falun Gong, a spiritual and meditation practice that became popular during the 1990s, dates to 1999 when then CCP head Jiang Zemin and other hardliners viewed its informal nationwide network and theistic worldview as a threat to party rule and launched a campaign to eradicate it. Since then, sympathetic portrayals of the practice, independent investigations of human rights abuses, and Falun Gong practitioners' nonviolent activism have become among the most censored topics in China. The CCP also remains highly sensitive to discussion of the 1989 Beijing Massacre, in which the military opened fire on unarmed prodemocracy demonstrators, killing between several hundred and several thousand. Movement leaders from the period who continued their activism in exile remain sensitive figures, while new generations of activists and commentators periodically run afoul of party censors, particularly when they proactively challenge one-party rule or advocate for a democratic system in China. Lastly, the Chinese government's position is that Taiwan is a province of China despite its de facto features of sovereignty. Recognition of Taiwan as an independent state internationally or calls for independence by Taiwanese politicians typically draws a strong response. The CCP often conditions foreign aid and other cooperation on counterparts' affirmation of a "One China" position.