

Debate over censorship emerges in China

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2 March 2006

In a letter circulated to journalists in mid-February, a group of former senior Chinese officials called on the Beijing government to ease its rigid media censorship, particularly of political news and commentary. The appeal is another sign of a broader debate in Chinese ruling circles on how to deal with the extreme tensions being generated by the country's deepening social inequality.

Written on February 2, the letter criticised the decision of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Propaganda Department on January 24 to shut down *Freezing Point*, a popular supplement to the official *China Youth Daily*. The journal was widely regarded as a thought-provoking publication that featured articles challenging the official line on controversial topics, including historical issues, policy on Taiwan and rural unrest.

Among those who signed the appeal were Li Rui, Mao Zedong's former secretary; Hu Jiwei, a former editor of official *People's Daily*; Zhu Houze, a former Communist Party propaganda boss; and Li Pu, a former deputy head of the state-controlled Xinhua news agency.

The letter declared: "At the turning point in our history from a totalitarian to a constitutional system, depriving the public of freedom of speech will bring disaster for our social and political transition and give rise to group confrontation and social unrest. Experience has proved that allowing a free flow of ideas can improve stability and alleviate social problems." The regime could no longer "keep the public locked in ignorance," it stated.

Li Datong, editor of *Freezing Point* and himself a Communist Party official, prompted the campaign by posting the secret order banning his journal on his personal web blog. The stated reason for shutting down the publication was a comment by historian Yuan Weishi, criticising the treatment of the 1900 Boxer Rebellion in official textbooks. Yuan pointed out that the texts conveniently ignored aspects of the rebellion, including its backward and xenophobic elements and the collaboration of Manchu rulers with the imperialist powers.

The issue is a sensitive one. These distortions are part of the Beijing regime's efforts to concoct a new justification for itself as the continuation of the struggle of the "Chinese people" to free themselves from the "national humiliation" of foreign oppression. Consequently, the role of Manchu rulers in helping the colonial powers to plunder China is covered up. In a similar vein, peasant xenophobia among the Boxers is uncritically accepted as an expression of "Chinese patriotism".

This propaganda serves a definite political purpose. As its claims to be "socialist" have become discredited, the Stalinist regime has sought to establish a new base of support among sections of the middle class and capitalist elite by appealing to Chinese nationalism. The reactionary character of this propaganda was evident in the anti-Japanese protests that erupted last April, involving racist attacks on ordinary Japanese working and travelling in China.

Yuan's essay was embarrassing to Beijing for several reasons. Not only did it cut across the new official version of history but it undermined one of the main accusations of the Chinese regime against Japan—that Tokyo allowed the publication of history texts falsifying Japan's wartime atrocities. A high-ranking official from the State Council, China's cabinet, bitterly told Reuters on February 17 that Yuan's essay had "severely hurt the national feelings of the Chinese people, creating malicious social consequences".

On the same day, 13 prominent scholars who had contributed to *Freezing Point* wrote to President Hu Jintao defending the journal and the constitutional right to freedom of expression. "There are those among us who don't fully agree with the views expressed in Yuan Weishi's article, but we firmly believe in protecting his right to publish the article, because Yuan's piece didn't violate the Constitution or break the law. A basic tenet of freedom of speech includes the right to express 'incorrect views,'" the letter declared.

The signatories included He Weifang, a leading scholar on constitutional rights, and Qin Hui, a history professor at the prestigious Qinghua University. Concerned at the growing controversy over the issue, Beijing agreed to allow the journal to reopen in March, but without its former editor Li Datong and on the condition that it publish an article criticising Yuan's essay.

While the immediate controversy has been ended, there is no doubt that the broader debate about "political reform" in ruling circles will continue. The explosive growth of foreign investment and the transformation of China into a massive cheap labour platform have created huge social tensions as the gulf between rich and poor has deepened.

Sections of the Chinese leadership and intelligentsia have advocated the introduction of "democratic" mechanisms to stabilise the regime by providing a safety valve for widespread discontent. They warn that the current policy of police-state repression against the numerous protests of workers and peasants will eventually provoke a social explosion that will engulf the regime. Advocating more open discussion, they point out that strict censorship is not only unwise, but unattainable given modern communication technologies.

Their opponents warn that any, even small, concessions on democratic rights will produce an opposition movement that can spiral out of control. Even 16 years after the mass protests in Tiananmen Square, Chinese leaders are still haunted by the emergence of the working class alongside student demonstrators in Beijing. Their answer is a mixture of brute repression and the whipping up of xenophobia and nationalism.

When he came to power in 2002, President Hu expressed interest in limited reforms. Faced with growing unrest, however, he soon shelved the idea and opposed any significant easing of restrictions, including of media censorship. Taboo topics include discussion of the growing social inequality produced by market reforms and criticism of

Beijing's falsification of China's modern history. The Chinese leadership is particularly sensitive to any ideological tendencies with the potential to transform the widespread, but localised, protests into a broader anti-government movement.

The regime is well aware of the dangers posed by the Internet and other technologies to its tight censorship. That is why Beijing has insisted that major Internet companies such as Microsoft, Google and Yahoo ban politically sensitive items, like the Tiananmen Square massacre, from their search engines and provide details of email accounts to allow the arrest of "subversives".

Under the pretext of controlling pornography, violence and organised crime, the police have established specialised groups to monitor and control the use of the Internet and other telecommunications, including mobile phones. The authorities are engaged in an increasingly difficult task as the number of Internet users, including an estimated 69 million web bloggers, continues to mushroom.

The latest measure in the city of Shenzhen is the installation of a surveillance system involving the appearance of cartoon policemen—Jingjing and Chacha—to "patrol" news and discussion web sites in the southern manufacturing city. A policewoman from the Shenzhen Internet Surveillance Centre proudly told the *Financial Times* on February 17: "Now internet users know the police are watching them". She said the presence of the two cartoon cops would frighten anyone conducting "illegal" activities through the Internet, particularly against the state.

Armed with sophisticated filters, thousands of so-called cyber police are engaged in the largely ineffectual exercise of maintaining "the Great Firewall" to block the rising tide of information and ideas circulating on the Internet. Internet users in China already have software that can evade official filters and provide access to banned sites. Moreover, in a bid to attract users, Internet providers, web sites and tens of thousands of cyber cafes pay little attention to official censorship rules.

The attempt to shut down *Freezing Point* highlights the dilemmas confronting Chinese authorities, even in relation to conventional print media. As part of the policies of market reform, funding to state-controlled publications has been cut, forcing editors to rely more heavily on revenue from circulation and advertising. However, if newspapers simply repeated the official line, no one would buy them and the publications would soon go out of business.

As former *Freezing Point* editor Li Datong told the *New York Times* on February 15: "Every serious publication in China faces tough choices. You can publish stories people want to read and risk offending the censors. Or you can publish stories that the party wants published and risk going out of business."

A *Washington Post* article on February 19 explained that Li provoked a crisis for the Chinese government last year by leaking a letter exposing the inner workings of official censorship. In a 13,000-word memo, he explained how Beijing had installed Li Erliang, a pro-censorship party official as the editor-in-chief of *China Youth Daily* in December 2004. The purpose was to rein in outspoken reporters, particularly from the associated *Freezing Point*. Li, however, ignored the new regime of "self-constraint" and continued to publish controversial stories and comment.

Last August, the new boss imposed a system of payment for journalists based on approval ratings. Reporters would receive 100 points if their stories were approved by provincial governments and 120 for Propaganda Department approval, right up to 300 if Politburo

members were pleased. Conversely, the points and related salaries could be drastically reduced if the stories offended various authorities.

Li published his lengthy exposure of the point-system and the propaganda apparatus without official approval on August 15 via the newspaper's computer system. Although the editor-in-chief quickly withdrew the letter, it was not quick enough. Li's colleagues distributed the memo, which rapidly spread throughout China via email and text messages as well as hundreds if not thousands of blogs and online forums.

Bureaucratic rigidity played a role. Every Friday morning, the Beijing Municipal Information Office, an agency of the CCP Propaganda Department, meets with the executives of China's most important web sites such as Sina, Sohu and Yahoo! China to inform them what should be published and highlighted for the coming week. Instructions are also given on what foreign web sites to block and new key words that should be barred from search engines.

Li's letter, however, slipped through the net. The cyber police, web site editors and censorship authorities took no action for hours—partly because it was not on the weekly list of banned items, and partly because some officials felt it might reflect a change in political line in Beijing and did not want to risk being out of step. By the time top Beijing officials intervened, the letter had been widely read. One web site manager said the memo was viewed 30,000 times before he took it down.

"Li Datong" was, of course, added to the official Internet blacklist of banned words, but in subsequent months the popularity of *Freezing Point* skyrocketed. After a great deal of hesitation, Chinese authorities finally decided to shut down the journal. But again the news spread like wild fire across the Internet, forcing a partial backdown.

The problem is not just that the Internet is undermining Beijing's rigid ideological control. More fundamentally the Chinese regime and its pro-capitalist policies are incompatible with the democratic and social aspirations of the vast mass of the Chinese population. The Internet is simply a vehicle for the popular discontent, anger and hostility that will, despite the efforts of all wings of the police state regime, inevitably erupt.



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