

GARDEN OF FALSEHOOD

China's propaganda machine seeks to control public opinion at all costs – and the media is its tool, writes **David Bandurski**

Not long ago, I stumbled across the inaugural edition, circa 1982, of China's annual *Press Yearbook* in the archives of Hong Kong's Fung Ping-Shan Library. Up front there were washed-out photos of comrades Deng Xiaoping and Zhao Ziyang, whose economic reforms had just set China on the road to change. The volume was suffused with expectation. 'Spring,' enunciated its opening passage, 'has arrived after the fiercest struggle with Winter.' The press, which had been crushed by Mao Zedong's 'cultural authoritarianism' and the violent politics of the Gang of Four, was now re-emerging, the editors wrote. There was even a photograph of Chinese 'press workers' sitting down with Australian journalists, the seeds of a new professionalism.

When China threw off the suffocating lies of the Cultural Revolution, reformers pledged an end to 'falsehood, deception and emptiness'. In the years that followed, there were modest gains for free speech in China as the country opened up to the outside world. More forward-thinking Party leaders started pushing, in the mid-1980s, for a press law that would safeguard freedom of speech and give the media a greater watchdog role. Party leftists

MADE IN CHINA

glowered from the sidelines, eager for the first hints of frost. But the grand design was change, and bright new voices unfolded into timorous bloom.

The hope for an unfettered press retreated into the shadows following the massacre of student demonstrators in Beijing on 4 June 1989. The shock of Tiananmen nurtured the conviction among Party elites that public opinion had to be controlled at whatever cost. The consensus was that Premier Zhao Ziyang had committed a strategic blunder by allowing the newspapers to speak out in support of the students. No harm can come from opening things up a bit, Zhao had said, according to an article appearing after the massacre in *China Comment*, a magazine published internally by the Propaganda Bureau. Zhao's tolerant attitude, they wrote, had 'guided matters in the wrong direction', encouraging further student unrest. And so the master plan was marked out. The CCP's (Chinese Communist Party) propaganda ministers would tame the garden of public opinion by exercising stricter control over the media. The programme was encapsulated by a new propaganda catchphrase: 'correct guidance of public opinion'.

Metaphors of gardening and nature stewardship seem to have great currency with the CCP's press control ministers. One reason for this might be that they identify closely with China's long-standing tradition of 'heavenly mandate', in which a ruler's power and legitimacy arise from his direction and control of the unruly forces of nature. What, after all, is more unruly than public opinion, than the nettles of the human spirit?

Liu Zuyu, a retired leftist propaganda minister who presides over China's secretive News Commentary Group (NCG), the group of powerful party hatchet men responsible for the shutdown, in January 2006, of the journal *Freezing Point* [see pp 62–68], once wrote, 'The NCG is a ranger in the forest, or a woodpecker. He nurses the saplings, pricks out the worms and raises new fields of green, nourishing the forest stands of the socialist news media.'

A number of years back, Liu and the other master gardeners of the NCG proudly circulated a retrospective volume of their most beloved criticisms among senior leaders (these may fire up, down or across China's vast bureaucracy with chilling effect, resulting in the firing or fining of journalists or the closure of publications).

When the press enthusiastically reported in 2003 on the phenomenon of Muzimei, a young woman whose online diary spoke audaciously of her romantic exploits, an NCG member moralised: 'It is the critic's view that the "Muzimei phenomenon" is cause for deep reflection. That this "tell-all diary", which peddles its indecent wares, is given space to vent on websites

truly demands thorough investigation and appropriate action by the relevant government agencies . . . For some media to express sympathy with Muzimei and approve of Muzimei's ways as "an outcome of the opening up of social concepts", as the "voice of women's rights", is truly too ridiculous.'

Among the most unpalatable, to be sure, were those articles implicitly attacking the gardeners and the nature of their work. When one newspaper published an article reflecting experts' views on the impact of journalism studies in China, and taking issue with the press as a mere 'mouthpiece' of the party, the NCG again lashed out. The article in question said China's growing 'media industry' was now based on a pact of equality between the media and its audience, the implication being that the Party's agenda was being pushed aside. This was tantamount to saying the garden could flourish on its own: 'It is the critic's view that this praise of communications scholarship weakens [Party] ideology, denies that news is a "propaganda tool" and rejects the fact that our nation's news media is the "mouthpiece of the CCP"', the NCG riposted. "This praise of a "neutral view of the media", the "strengthening of the news as a popular medium" etc is just the latest edition of the false notion of the press as a "public trust". It is very bad to publish in the news media articles that glorify bourgeois press concepts in such a way.'

In 1998, a major newspaper picked up the CCP's tepid notion of 'thought liberation', the idea that the Party should encourage progress by inviting alternative ideas, and carried it off in a more progressive direction. They wrote that 'lack of free speech and thought repression were the principal manifestations of thought imprisonment, and a key cause of China's long season of backwardness'. The article continued: 'In China, we are currently permitted only to speak those lies we should expressly avoid, and we cannot utter the truths we are in most urgent need of saying.' Not surprisingly, in 'the critic's view', the newspaper had been 'very wrong' to advance such ideas.

Nothing is too trivial, no wildflower too minute, for China's propaganda department and its shadowy NCG. In the late 1990s, the group wrote portentously of the emerging 'buds' of westernisation in China's domestic cartoon industry. In Chinese tradition, one critic explained, the animal world is governed by its own set of character relationships. Cats, for example, are heroic figures, while mice are villains. The influence of western ideas was turning the tables. Mice were now being depicted as cute, clever and even insurgent. The critic's concern centred on a Chinese cartoon called *The Adventures of Shuke and Beta*, in which a pair of mice rallied compatriots in the animal world to thwart a human conspiracy to exterminate them. 'It is



*The East meets the West, Beijing
Credit: Mark Henley/Panos*

the critic's view that while the above-mentioned cartoons do not necessarily harbour an attitude of praise for the West in their direction and creation, the trend of "westernisation" in domestically made cartoons is definite cause for alarm.'

As silly as all of this may seem, 'guidance of public opinion' is serious work for the CCP. That work has intensified since the 1990s. In fact, Liu Zuyu and his NCG are a relatively late innovation of the press control system, adapting it to the new challenges of an economically vibrant China.

Censorship under the CCP has typically been enforced through directives (bans and orders) issued in advance of news reports. These may instruct the media to avoid a sensitive story altogether, use only official press releases from Xinhua news agency or enthusiastically promote the latest trade fair in Beijing. 'Correct guidance' is enforced by the inertia of China's

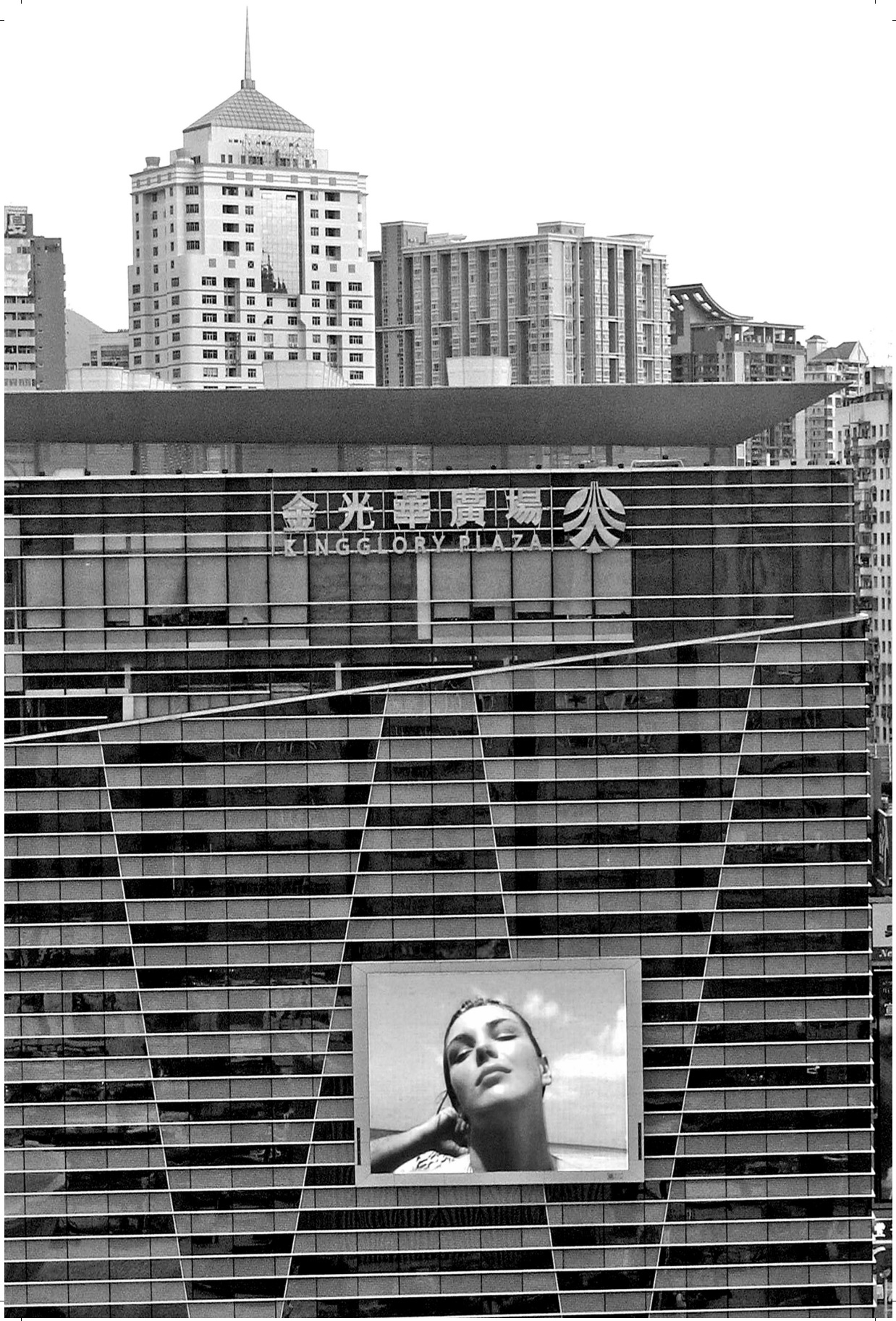
vast press bureaucracy, where everyone from the smallest copy editor to the editor-in-chief and director must be mindful of 'propaganda discipline' as a matter of political survival.

In the 1990s, as economic reforms intensified in China, change gradually gripped the media sector. Commercial restructuring was slower to take root here than in the industrial sector, but by the middle of the decade a handful of more professional, commercially oriented media was already emerging, catering to a developing consumer market and an increasingly savvy urban population. The government cautiously encouraged this trend, partly as a cost-saving measure (with a few exceptions, all media was government funded) and partly to prepare for foreign media competition, or the 'coming of the wolves' as it was called (World Trade Organization membership was just a few short years over the horizon). China's news stands bloomed. Tedious Party newspapers were crowded out by a new generation of metro newspapers [commercial tabloids and broadsheets] and consumer magazines, all clamoring for ad revenues. These publications were the new, eye-catching hothouse flowers of China's state-controlled press.

Commercial restructuring did not imply a loosening of political controls on the media. The News Commentary Group (NCG) was formed in 1994 as a powerful system of post-facto censorship, capable of striking terror into publications that stepped over the line in spite of the daily pressures of 'correct guidance'. *Freezing Point* editor Li Datong once likened the NCG to the Sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of more free-thinking media, ready to make its devastating fall at any moment.

The problem for the party was that its policies worked at cross-purposes. While media commercialisation was crucial to overall economic development (and profited the party as well), the media succumbed increasingly to the gravitational pull of reader demand, undermining the overarching imperative of 'guidance'. This sometimes had a more professional journalistic impact too, taking the form of bolder investigative reports and news exclusives. As the NCG growled in the late 1990s, 'In recent years a number of media have violated propaganda discipline in order to get exclusive reports and win readers, and this is a grave error.'

The cat-and-mouse game continued on a modest scale as China headed into the new millennium, a kind of replay of *The Adventures of Shuke and Beta*. A handful of more independent-minded media and individual journalists sought ways, with varying degrees of success, of making inroads against propaganda discipline and preventing the extermination of the truth. But control reigned supreme in the garden of public opinion.





MADE IN CHINA

The equation of commercial change and political control meant even the boldest attempts at professional journalism in China took on a twisted form. The cautious editorial philosophy at *Southern Weekend*, a newspaper known through most of the 1990s for its muckraking reports on pressing social issues and lower-level corruption, said it all: 'There are some truths that cannot be told, but we must not tell outright lies.'

When commercial fecundity is married to political constraint, the offspring are bound to be grotesque. And this is why China now faces an entirely new species of untruth, springing not from Maoist ideology but from a noxious combination of economic growth and political control. CCP leaders apparently do not see the contradiction. The ultimate aspiration for China's leaders today is a garden of falsehood nourished by a revenue stream.

In 2002, as President Hu Jintao took the reins in China, he introduced the latest version of the party's master plan for China's media. It was called the 'Three Closenesses'. It sounded almost like a change in orientation for China's state-controlled media – content that was more relevant and appealing, or closer to 'life, the truth and the people'. But 'guidance' remained the controlling principle, and in the summer of 2003, Hu signalled a tightening of press controls by disciplining bolder Chinese media in the aftermath of the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars). The formula once again was commercial vitality and political restraint. Since then, harder-nosed journalism, which had flourished on the margins since the late 1990s, has faced new political pressures. Investigative reporting, known in China as 'supervision by public opinion', has noticeably suffered over the past few years.

The whole ecology of speech and information in China today faces a crisis of credibility. The media is invested with power by virtue of its traditional role as agent of the Party's will. As it is hustled away from public interest coverage and toward profitability, the temptation to abuse that power and pander to the basest interests of the public grows stronger. China now has its own brand of yellow journalism. There is 'news extortion', in which journalists write critical news reports about companies and then pressure them into taking out ad contracts. There is 'paid-for news' – state-controlled media coverage sold to the highest bidder. There is 'fake news' – fabricated content tailor-made to 'attract eyeballs'. In one case several years ago, a newspaper convinced a young woman to donate her liver so they would have an exclusive news story. And of course, there is good-old-fashioned propaganda.

In June last year, Beijing TV ran a shocking undercover segment about street vendors in the capital filling steamed buns with a combination of pork fat, cardboard and lye. The story, which drew international attention, came at a bad time for China, which was fighting back against a spate of incidents raising serious questions about the safety of Chinese-made imports. On 8 July, Beijing TV issued a public apology for the news segment, saying it had been ‘faked’ by a freelance reporter. Subsequent news reports said Beijing police had detained the reporter and that an investigation was under way. The public response to this news was deeply mixed. Many Chinese wondered whether the authorities might have carried out a ‘fake’ investigation to discredit a ‘real’ story. ‘Ten days ago the public thought the TV news story was real and the steamed buns were fake,’ wrote a well-known newspaper columnist. ‘Now authorities are saying the news report is a fake and the steamed buns are OK. But people are still totally at a loss. Which one is real and which one fake? Right now, what most frustrates the average person is that they don’t have any way of penetrating the confusion.’

Chinese leaders answered the ‘Cardboard Bun Hoax’ with a seasonal campaign against ‘fake journalists’. They avoided, of course, the core issue of what exactly makes a ‘real’ journalist, an issue striking to the heart of the role of the press in China. Is a journalist any less likely to fabricate a story, or extort money, just because she has been issued official press credentials and undergone training in the ‘Marxist view of journalism’? Of course not. In 2004, 11 journalists were exposed for having accepted bribes in exchange for keeping silent about a mining disaster in Shanxi Province – four were from China’s official Xinhua News Agency.

Last August, as the debate over ‘fake news’ raged in China in the aftermath of the Beijing TV story, Hong Kong journalist Leung Man-to commented in a mainland editorial on the highly suspicious way in which disaster survivors were routinely quoted praising leaders on state television. Leung’s editorial referred specifically to China Central Television coverage of a Henan mining accident that month, in which one miner was quoted saying as he emerged from the darkness: ‘I thank the Central Party! I thank the State Council! I thank the government of Henan Province! I thank the people of the nation!’ How was it, Leung asked, his implication clear, that this miner’s first words on being released from mortal danger moved so easily down the national chain of command? Is official party news coverage ‘fake news’ too? That was a dangerous question, even if Leung did not state it directly. Ten years earlier, *Southern Weekend* was criticised by the NCG for poking fun at

MADE IN CHINA

flood coverage in the party newspapers, which quoted numerous sources as saying, 'The Communist Party is the best!'

When 'real' news is routinely killed and propaganda allowed to flourish, is it any wonder the Chinese don't know what to believe? 'There's no such thing as true news here in China,' one user wrote in a Chinese Internet chat room. 'If you watch the news in China, you'd better approach it as entertainment.' Another wrote: 'How much of the news right now is real? Real journalists, fake journalists – they're all tarred with the same brush!' Real journalists *are* at work in China. They live parasitically on the garden flowers. They worm their way through the heartwood of 'propaganda discipline'.

But the CCP's hostility toward the truth, and those who seek it, haunts China's future and the question of its role as a responsible world power. As the country takes on an ever more prominent role in world affairs, what kind of global citizens will China's leaders allow the Chinese to become? Can China behave as a responsible power if its citizens are not held responsible for their own thoughts and ideas? When will the Chinese be permitted independent intellectual lives outside the garden of falsehood?

When veteran journalist Zhai Minglei faced the shutdown of his independent, non-profit magazine *Minjian* last year, he sounded a note of warning over the future of an economically powerful but politically stunted China. He wrote: 'China's hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games might demonstrate that the Chinese people are physically stronger and sturdier. But the death of *Minjian* reminds us that the mental horizons of the Chinese people are confined to the child's playground. While the market is glutted with mediocre, materialistic consumer fare, public affairs coverage is repeatedly squeezed and bled out.'

As China's leaders and their gardeners of 'guidance' tend to the 'forest stands of the socialist news media' they jeopardise the diversity and vitality so crucial to China if it is to become a healthy, modern and 'harmonious' nation.

'Without freedom of expression,' wrote Zhai Minglei, 'all of those buds of thought differing from the party line, which might bring about progress in our society, stand to be trampled and destroyed.' □

© David Bandurski

DOI: 10.1080/03064220802081571

David Bandurski is a freelance journalist based in Hong Kong and a scholar at the China Media Project, University of Hong Kong