

## Statement Presented to the Congressional-Executive Committee on China

By Bu Zhong  
September 22, 2003

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Distinguished representatives of the CECC, Ladies and Gentlemen:

China has been in the midst of rapid change in all sectors. Media reform, though much slower than other sectors, is now beginning to catch up.

Perhaps few predicted that the SARS epidemic could bring such a widespread panic across China, and a not so widespread, but still heavy, push to China's media reform.

### **China's media during SARS**

As we know, the SARS epidemic first originated in South China's Guangdong Province in February. It then spread to Beijing and several other provinces. Not surprisingly, the government-controlled media kept tight-mouthed about the disease at the beginning. During that period, Beijing residents mainly depended on the Internet, emails and cell phone messages for SARS information. The Internet came to China as the first forceful reminder that the days of censorship and suppression of information are numbered.

The media silence was broken in early April after China's new Premier Wen Jiabao admitted that the SARS situation was "grave." In those days the reporting was mainly about government efforts to contain the spread of the disease and heroic medical workers saving lives.

In May and June, however, a few newspapers began to criticize the government's handling of SARS information. More criticism came after the government declared it would punish any officials who tried to cover up SARS information from the public.

Let me describe a few of the important ways I see China's media evolving today in the wake of the SARS epidemic.

### **Media's commercialization**

As one of the first signs of media reform, the media's commercialization started silently about 10 years ago. The most dramatic step of the commercialization came in June when the central government announced that it would end its direct financial support to all but three newspapers and one journal.

This means that most government-owned print media will soon have to sever ties with government agencies. (I'm not sure how the broadcast media will be affected.) As *People's Daily* reports, these media "would then be free to operate in the marketplace rather than continuing to serve as cultural units under government departments or social organizations."

China now has more than 2,000 newspapers, 9,000 magazines, and 2,000 TV stations. But 25 years ago, there were fewer than 200 newspapers. The rapid growth of the news media has made government control less effective, and no one can prevent them from going to the market.

## **The end of compulsory subscriptions**

Another sign of China's media reform is the end of compulsory subscription, which also happened this June. In the past, before the end of each year, the government used to issue circular orders requiring all its departments and agencies subscribe to official publications. Now this practice is becoming history because the government has decided to stop it.

## **Changes within official newspapers**

Over the past 10 years, the official media have become increasingly unpopular. On Beijing's streets, no *People's Daily* can be found on newsstands. At the same time, the government has been cutting off its financial support to its mouthpieces. In late 1990s, the financial support *China Daily* received from the government accounted for less than 10 percent of what it needed, while the remaining 90 percent came from its ad revenue and a few tabloids it published.

Nowadays all the official newspapers publish one or more tabloids, which carry a lot of ads and have cut their officialdom to a minimum. These tabloids make so much money that they can comfortably support their more official big brothers. In Beijing, the *Beijing Daily* publishes a tabloid, the *Beijing Evening News*, and the *People's Daily's* publishes the *Jinhua Daily*.

## **Journalists push frontier**

Many Chinese journalists are pushing the frontier to put their "controversial" stories in print or on air. China Central Television's TV magazine, "News in Focus," offers a good example. Now and then, it has to pay lip service to the official line for survival, which is fully understandable. But from time to time, it airs the deepest grievances and the indignation of those oppressed by the sheer greed and shamelessness of the lower-level government bureaucracy. To me, the show is mainly a muckraker, occasionally, a shocking muckraker, in the best tradition of the American muckrakers.

## **Changes in top leadership**

The majority of the new top leadership, once in full power, clearly has in mind the need to ease media control, but *to* ease it little by little. As high technology develops at breakneck speed and out of their control, the Chinese media becomes more and more open almost against their will. Some degree of disobedience and even defiance on the part of the media can be observed in the past couple of years. And also some official tolerance.

As soon as he gained the power, China's President Hu Jintao invited experts to give regular lectures to all the Politburo members. The main contents of each lecture (already 10 or so lectures to date) have been reported in the press as a subtle means of letting attentive people know what's in the minds of the top leaders right now.

As I remember, the first study session was on the Constitution and Rule of Law – a manifest enough hint to the public that during Hu's reign, he's going to rule by law, not by his personal authority. The latest lecture they had is about the industrialization of media contents. The concept is nothing new in the West. But it is in China, where media outlets had long been taken as tools of ideology, and propaganda machines.

## **No change is insignificant**

It seems to me that no change in China's media is insignificant. Right now, the gains made at every step might seem too insignificant to matter, but the progress is there for people to see, if they care to notice it. These modest gains will in time amount to marked and important change.

In China, growth in press freedom and independence will likely be a painfully slow process, but the media are shuffling their feet forward in the right direction. One can coax, cajole and coerce it to move a little more quickly. But it is unwise, even undesirable for one to exercise undue pressure on it, which may yield an effect to the contrary. If you refuse to believe things are going in the right direction, pick up any newspaper, even the People's Daily, and compare it with what it was, say, 10 or even five years ago. In those old, dark days, news of a plane crash was suppressed in media if there were no foreigners on board.

And next to Internet then came the second great shock that shook the leaders to their nerve-ends, the misfortune of SARS. It showed the deep-rooted practice of suppression of information and of public deceit in the worst possible light. Now all see that this hated practice can quickly and directly endanger the lives of thousands of people. And the epidemic drove the lesson home in the most convincing manner that the denial to the people's right to know could be the denial of their very lives.

Finally, I hope the voices from the Chinese people can be heard here. To find out what's happening in China's media, we must listen to those who still live in China and those who work in Chinese news media.

Thank you very much.

Bu Zhong