

Statement Presented to the Congressional-Executive Committee on China

By Gong Xiaoxia
September 22, 2003

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I come here today to share with you some of my thoughts on the recent development of press freedom, or lack of it, to be more precise, in China. Particularly, I would like to discuss the meaning of the new regulations issued by the party, which are widely hailed as a bold marketization reform and a step toward press freedom. I would like to address my concern that the overall misinterpretation of these new regulations may lead to misunderstanding of the Chinese political situation, and might mislead our foreign policy toward China.

Perhaps I should first briefly introduce my own background. I was born in the People's Republic of China. I was once a peasant, a worker, a scholar, and a political dissident there. I came to study in the United States in 1987, and am now a U.S. citizen. From 1998 to earlier this year, I worked as director of the Cantonese Service in Radio Free Asia. I am also a regular contributor to the Chinese language media outside China. Therefore, monitoring the Chinese media is not only my job, but also part of my daily life.

Let me quickly outline my main points. Based on my research and my personal experience, I believe that the new regulations recently issued by the Chinese Communist Party, although they may bring about some competition among the media, do not imply any fundamental change in the Party's tight political control over the media. In fact, the new market these rules create may provide the Party with new means to further suppress press freedom. Moreover, it may set off a more nationalistic or even xenophobic trend in covering foreign affairs. It may encourage further America bashing in the Chinese press.

These new regulations were issued between June and August this year. They greatly limit the number of newspapers and magazines owned by the government or party offices. According to these regulations, each provincial government office is given the ownership of one newspaper and one magazine, each municipal government one paper, while county governments are deprived of media ownership. The government media can no longer require villages and other groups to buy subscriptions. Such forced subscription has been a most resented practice for the last half a century.

As a result of these regulatory changes, most of China's press organizations, which used to be directly controlled by the government, have now been thrown into a new media market.

Although the motivation of these new regulations is budget prudence instead of press freedom, they have raised hope of limited press freedom. Many people believe that, by introducing marketization, these regulations open doors for private ownership in media, which is among the last areas where government ownership still dominates. In other words, the trend of marketization in the Chinese economy has now reached the media.

Will this be the beginning of a new era of press freedom? Most China observers have given positive answers. For example, Liu Xiaobo, one of the most prominent writers and political dissidents in China, has pointed out that marketization will certainly expand freedom. Other critics are even more optimistic. They predict that a profit-driven competitive media market will expand the horizon of the press, and eventually bring about liberalization and press freedom in China.

Undoubtedly, marketization will introduce competition and profit seeking among the media organizations, and thus will indirectly encourage some bold experiments between the competitors. However, neither marketization nor competition instinctively indicate freedom. Rather, market competition may provide the party authorities another instrument to control the media, since the terms of competition and the rules of this market are largely set by the party. Therefore, to media organizations, privately owned or otherwise, winning in a competitive market often means to tilt toward the direction of the government authorities.

There are three key questions, which can help us to tell if the new media regulations are or are not likely to lead to more freedom. First, do media organizations need the approval from the Party Propaganda Department to operate? Second, can the Party Propaganda Department interfere with the personnel, especially hiring, firing, and promotion of editorial and management staff, in media organizations? And third, must media organizations follow the guidelines regularly issued by the Party in order to stay in business?

Unfortunately, the answers we have to these questions leave little room for optimism. Press freedom in China remains merely an illusion, even within a competitive market.

In order to survive in today's market, Chinese media organizations have to yield to the pressures coming first from the Party, and then from the market. To be in business and profitable, they must promote the Party ideology but do so in ways that are attractive to their audience, especially when compared to the old stiff propaganda style. In the background, the Party maintains tight disciplinary power over any members of the media who dare to challenge its authority.

Marketization in the media does not necessarily indicate liberalization. In fact, combined with strict dictation from the Party, it may well open new forms of media control that use the pressures of the new market to strengthen political dictatorship.

In fact, the profit-seeking trend has been taking place for a few years. The new regulations merely make it official. Under this new trend, I have observed that the Chinese media organizations have indeed become more diverse and bolder in reporting social and some marginal domestic political issues, but few dare to challenge the political authorities.

Meanwhile, I am also greatly disturbed by the intensifying hostility by the Chinese press toward the United States in its coverage of international affairs in general, and of the war on terror in particular.

A review of the Chinese media since September 11 shows increasingly negative coverage of the West, and, most especially, of the United States. During the war in Iraq, for example, the Chinese media constantly attacked the coalition forces, even as it kept praising the Saddam regime and the Iraqi military. As a Chinese internet user pointed out, CCTV, the central TV station in China, was perhaps the only TV station outside the Arab world which reported so many "victories" of the Iraqi regime, or that launched so many vicious attacks to the coalition forces. Another critic said that the Chinese press seemed to want to become a "consultant" of the Iraqi regime regarding military strategies.

Such a tone was, of course, set by the party propaganda department. Since the beginning of the war on terror, that department has issued many directives to guide the media in covering this war. Such directives, although rarely openly publicized, are handed down to each media organization. One of those directives, for example, was issued before the 16th Party Congress. It forbade the publication of background information about any of the terrorist organizations before the Congress. It instructed the media to wait for an official party line. After the 16th Congress, another directive was issued forbidding negative

reporting about any Palestinian terrorist organizations, such as Hamas. To the contrary, those directives were filled with anti-Western messages.

Whereas the Chinese media follows the party line as a matter of survival in domestic affairs, it seems positively enthusiastic in doing so when covering international affairs. They seem to have discovered that following the party line here is quite profitable. Take the Iraqi war coverage by CCTV as an example. The number of its viewers jumped 28 fold during this period. The station consequently earned an extra 100 million US dollars. In other words, the Chinese media was able to collect millions dollars by selling anti-American propaganda. The Chinese audience, it seems, has a genuine appetite for receiving and accepting such propaganda.

The Chinese media have found a niche here. In the past few years, they learned that America bashing is not only politically correct, and therefore safe, but also fashionable, and therefore profitable.

Why so? I can think of several reasons, including the popular nationalistic and anti-West sentiment, which has been repeatedly demonstrated in such events as the EP3 spy plane incident and the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. However, the fundamental underlining reason remains the government's tight control over the media.

Today, although China has become a member of WTO and its economy has become more capitalistic than communist, the Chinese government still monopolizes all information resources from abroad. Except for a handful of prudent internet users and the audience that listens to international radio stations such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, the government-controlled press is the only source of information about international affairs in China. Unlike in domestic issues, when most Chinese have first-hand experience to assist their judgement, the government can easily and does continue regulatory charges notwithstanding to dominate the coverage of international issues and thereby form and control popular opinions. The popular nationalistic sentiment mentioned above is itself largely a product of government propaganda.

In the past ten years, people in the United States witnessed increasing hostility from the Chinese media toward their government, their political system, and their foreign policies. The Chinese government should be held responsible for such hostility, since it is this government that sets the tone for China's press. The Congress of the United States should be aware this basic fact, and not be thrown off the track by the Chinese Communist Party's efficiency-focused marketization of the media.