



SARS: Unmasking Censorship in China

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Introduction

Censorship in Communist Mainland China is a known fact and an issue that seems to have become so established that the international community has almost taken it for granted with indifference and little hope. After all, it is to be hoped that China's present economic reform sustained by foreign investment, as many longtime China watchers have wished, might gradually bring transparency and democracy in China. Contrary to this public misperception, however, the grim reality of censorship and deception by the regime has not improved; instead the regime has managed to battle this new era of information technology through building the world's most sophisticated Internet firewall system and by further tightening its vice-like grip on all media outlets in China. Such draconian effort has so far proved successful throughout its 50-year rule until the sudden and unforeseen advent of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). According to the worldwide press freedom index published by Reporters Without Borders, a media watchdog based in Paris, China ranks at a lonely No. 138 in the world above only North Korea (ranked No. 139).¹

China's five-month cover-up of this deadly, contagious epidemic has become egregious with cover stories by prominent publications such as *Time* and *The Economist*, among other major world press addressing this issue. The shockwave of this epidemic has not only reached the boardrooms of Wall Street, bringing about deleterious financial impact, but also has caused legitimate paranoia in dozens of infected territories such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan,

¹ "First Worldwide Press Freedom Index," RSF, (accessed July 9, 2003); available from http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=4116].

and Canada. On June 5, 2003, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission held a hearing at Dirksen Senate Office Building on the subject of SARS in China: Implications for Media Control and the Economy. I had the honor to be among the ten invited China specialists to give a presentation at this hearing. This thesis has, therefore, combined part of my statement at this hearing to illustrate how SARS has among other examples exposed China's longstanding censorship and deception under the Communist regime, together with some additional research and analysis, which are undertaken specifically for the submission of this thesis.

It is impossible not to engage in conjecture as to whether if the SARS virus had mutated beyond China's borders to places like Singapore and Canada, would we have heard about the epidemic by now? Indeed, would the Chinese public have heard about it by now? Maybe not. Perhaps rumors would be still going around; perhaps some foreign correspondents would have written some articles about it for the insight of overseas readers, but it is not unlikely that even those who contracted the illness would not even know that an epidemic was raging to which they had unknowingly fallen victim.

Take AIDS, for example. How many years was it before Beijing admitted to an AIDS problem and how many Mainlanders actually know the extent of the threat? It was not until last year, under pressure from the foreign press and the U.N. that the leadership in Beijing increased its HIV estimate from 30,000 cases to up to 1 million. *Agence France-Presse*, however, reported, "According to UN estimates, up to 1.5 million people in China had HIV by December 2001, and the

number could reach 10 million by 2010.”² Whether or not Beijing’s revised estimate is accurate remains to be seen, just as we cannot know with any great certainty the real extent of the SARS epidemic. Equally important in these matters of health and prevention of infection, how many villagers in central China have been given enough information to know the risk they take in selling their blood? Have adequate steps been taken to sterilize medical equipment to prevent further contamination?

The Chinese regime’s usual response to a health scare is to just cover it up and hope it will go away by itself. Why is that the case? Because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s primary mandate is to stay in power. To do so, it must regulate public sentiment and sustain a good image of itself, irrespective of the underlying reality. That requires keeping a tight grip on information and a policy of effective censorship.

The Story of SARS

On April 20, 2003, the Beijing authorities officially acknowledged that Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) existed as a serious problem within China, more than one month after World Health Organization had issued a global travel alert on this epidemic. *Time* reported that this virus was first uncovered on November 16, 2002, in southern China’s Guangdong province where by early February 2003 at least five persons had died and more than 300 had become

² “Hundreds of Police Storm ‘AIDS Village’ in China, Arrested 13 Farmers,” AFP, (accessed July 9, 2003); available from http://www.ptd.net/webnews/wed/bd/Qchina-health-aids.R0jX_DI3.html.

infected.³ With no information provided on this epidemic from the government, the frightened people in Guangdong province took up the challenge against this “strange plague” on their own by resorting to their traditional healing methods such as white vinegar, Banlangen (a herbal root), and cold tea, to name a few.⁴ This was also the time of China’s biggest holiday—the Spring Festival, during which hundreds of thousands of migrant workers left the more industrialized Guangdong province to return home in different parts of China for traditional family reunions. Such home visit by many of the infected travelers eventually proved to be a formidable mission of death for hundreds if not greater numbers throughout China. Compounding the problem further, a 64-year-old doctor from Guangzhou inadvertently spread the virus on a trip to Hong Kong on February 21, 2003.⁵ Later this epidemic arising from this specific source found its way to other Southeast Asian nations such as Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, and subsequently to Canada and the U.S.

Given clear evidence, on March 12, 2003, World Health Organization (WHO) gave out its first global alert about SARS and warned on April 2 against travel to Hong Kong and Guangdong province.⁶ Angered by what he perceived to be a campaign of lies and cover-ups emanating from the Health Ministry, on April 8, 2003, Yanyong Jiang, a 72-year-old retired doctor at the People’s Liberation Army Hospital No. 301, disclosed to *Time* and other foreign press sources that there were more SARS cases than the officials have admitted. According to an

³ “Tale of Two Countries,” *Time*, May 5, 2003, 54.

⁴ “Guangzhou’s ‘Strange Disease’ Plague,” RFA, (accessed July 9, 2003); available from <http://origin.sarsinfo.cn/article.html?&id=98794>.

⁵ “Tale of Two Countries,” *Time*, May 5, 2003, 54.

⁶ “Tale of Two Countries,” *Time*, May 5, 2003, 54.

AFP report, WHO estimated on April 16 “hundreds” of probable cases in Beijing, compared to the 37 cases acknowledged by the health official.⁷ Facts, rumors, and even political jokes surfaced in the midst of ensuing fear and panic and achieved wide circulation via Internet and mobile phone’s Short Messaging Service (SMS) within China until SARS became a taboo word and arrests are reported to have taken place. One political joke even advised U.S. Government to halt its search for Iraq’s Information Minister in the Middle East, as this so-called “comic Ali” had been hosting SARS press conferences in Beijing, on behalf of the Chinese regime. On April 20, 2003, the very same day that China’s Health Minister and Beijing’s mayor were sacked as scapegoats, the official number of infected people jumped tenfold from 37 to 339. All of a sudden, previously crowded Beijing became almost a ghost town, as migrant workers and the affluent tried to move out of the city by train or car. Soon afterwards, more than 20,000 people were placed in quarantine in Beijing alone. All schools were shut down and university students were ordered to not leave campuses, which were guarded by armed police.

While the government attempted to cope with this new epidemic with all available means: medical and political, its cover-up and deception, however, appear to have not discontinued. *Time* reported that just before WHO’s inspection team arrived at the China-Japan Friendship Hospital, “31 coughing, shivering staff members who had caught SARS from patients were hastily loaded

⁷ “*Chronology of the SARS crisis in China*,” *AFP*, (accessed July 10, 2003); available from http://www.ptd.net/webnews/wed/an/Qhealth-sars-china-chrono.RSrb_DyJ.html.

into ambulances and driven around until the investigators left.”⁸ This same *Time* article further reported, “Dr. Zhang Hanwei, director of the Shanxi Provincial People’s Hospital in Taiyuan, relayed what he called the ‘three nos’ disseminated by China’s Ministry of Central Publicity: no talking to the media about SARS, no talking to the public about treating the disease and no talking to WHO if its experts come calling.”⁹ One *AP* report stated that WHO’s spokeswoman Mangai Balasegaram complained, “China’s SARS data has serious flaws because the information does not show how half of the country’s patients caught the highly contagious respiratory illness...Right now the situation is that we have a whole load of people, and we don’t know where they got the disease...The problem with the data is that there are holes in it.”¹⁰ This same *AP* report also stated, “SARS has killed at least 230 people in China and infected more than 4,800, according to the Health Ministry. Nearly 2,200 of the cases are in Beijing...Worldwide, SARS has killed at least 519 people and infected 7,200 others.”¹¹

The WHO’s cumulative number of reported probable cases of SARS states that by July 10, 2003, 8437 persons had been infected with this virus worldwide, while 812 persons were confirmed to have died from this epidemic. China, excluding Hong Kong, Marcau, and Taiwan, has reported 5,327 cases and 348 cases of deaths thus far.¹²

⁸ “Hiding the Patients,” *Time*, April 28, 2003. 23.

⁹ “Hiding the Patients,” *Time*, April 28, 2003. 23.

¹⁰ “WHO: Beijing’s SARS Data Seriously Flawed,” AP, (accessed July 10, 2003); available from http://www.ptd.net/webnews/wed/bb/Asars-china.Rod4_DyA.html.

¹¹ “WHO: Beijing’s SARS Data Seriously Flawed,” AP, (accessed July 10, 2003); available from http://www.ptd.net/webnews/wed/bb/Asars-china.Rod4_DyA.html.

¹² “Cumulative Number of Reported Probable Cases of SARS,” WHO, (accessed July 10, 2003); available from http://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/2003_07_10/en/.

Many Chinese people feel once again betrayed by their leadership's deception and are hesitant to trust Chinese media outlets, which are all state-run and state-controlled. A running joke amongst Chinese intellectuals about the Communist Party newspaper, *The People's Daily*, is that the only thing factual in it is the date. Even the foreign press and correspondents in China are constantly told to operate within certain parameters, or else they risk being detained or have their bureaus being shut down.

Although it is unclear exactly how long the SARS virus has actually been around, one of the main reasons—perhaps the only reason—that the Chinese government was forced to move from complete denial to finally admitting to the presence of SARS within a period of only a few months, is because it is a disease that directly affected the international community. Thus external pressure was brought to bear on the Chinese leadership. Such external pressure not only has negative political implications in the form of a tarnished credibility image in the international community, but also has brought about long-lasting economic repercussions.

Manipulation of Information as a Source of Power

The manipulation of information is such a crucial element in the identity and survival of the CCP that without media control and censorship, many believe that it is very likely that the Chinese Communist Party would quickly cease to exist in its current form. This is because once the Chinese people and the world can take a good, hard look at the “skeletons” in the CCP's closet and the degree

to which the Party serves its own interests to the detriment of the Chinese people, the very existence of the Party could very well be called into question.

The CCP has always been very systematic and consistent in its manipulation of information. Usually the image that is fed to the public often has little to do with reality, as the goal is political expedience, not balanced reporting.

Since its earliest days, the CCP has known that media can alter perception of reality in the minds of the populace. As far back as the 1920s, when the CCP was still in its infancy, it had already set up a Department of Propaganda modeled after Stalin's system. In 1957, the CCP began its first public purge of outspoken intellectuals in an effort to control what was being thought and discussed amongst the masses. Millions were labeled as "Rightists" and were sent to jail, so-called "re-education through labor" camps, and mental institutions for expressing their opinions; thus began the CCP's successful attempts to muzzle the people. The Great Leap Forward movement in 1958 entailed the most inflated propaganda campaign ever in the CCP's history. The CCP had two primary purposes for this movement: 1) a mass steel production campaign in an effort to surpass England; 2) setting up of people's communes nationwide. The entire nation was mobilized to build backyard furnaces in order to boost its steel production. On the other hand, most of the people's communes exaggerated their production output to demonstrate how remarkably humans could conquer laws of nature. The Party's newspaper at one time even boasted that one mu (=0.16466 acre) under the people's commune could yield 5,000

kilograms of rice—a feat that no combination of agricultural scientists or magicians could ever imagine, let alone deliver.

The historical Cultural Revolution (1967-76) led by Mao Tze-tung has spun its propaganda to perfection in terms of mobilizing the populace for a series of political campaigns. Throughout this ten-year period of turmoil, Mao manipulated public sentiment through its state-run propaganda machine to eliminate his long-march colleagues who co-founded the People's Republic of China, such as Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao, among others. This so-called Cultural Revolution did in fact bring disaster to China's own 5,000-year civilization, as it attempted to wipe out Chinese culture and values in an effort better to allow the foreign transplant of Communist ideology to take root and grow. The anti-Confucius campaign in the early 1970s, for example, was aimed at removing all Confucian influence upon Chinese society through burning books and denunciation of the ancient and deeply ingrained teachings. Countless Buddhist and Taoist scriptures as well as temples were also burned to ashes among other classic books and ancient architectures.

Most Chinese people did not have access to short-wave radios until Mao passed away in 1976. Listening to foreign radio stations was considered a capital crime of treason in those days. Mao was concerned with the motives underlying the provision of information and assistance from Western countries, as he believed that isolation or the policy of “self-reliance” was in the best interest of China and his people. Not only did he succeed in fending off information and

influence from overseas, particularly from the “revisionist Soviet Union” and the “imperialist United States.” Mao also did everything he could to root out the traditional Chinese culture and values, so that the imported Communist ideology founded by unfamiliar foreign surnames (Marx, Engles, Lenin, and Stalin) could dominate thinking in this oriental “Middle Kingdom.” “The Campaign against Four Olds” (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) was another classic example of the genre.

In the early 1980’s, Deng Xiaoping initiated economic reforms in a move to save the collapsing economy. As some historians have pointed out in recent years, however, “economic reform” simply meant that all the Communist Party had to do was gradually loosen its hold on economic activities. When Deng realized that a certain degree of freedom of expression had also started emerging within the package, some dissidents were arrested and there was a clampdown on free speech. The most notable crackdown was the tearing-down of the Democracy Wall in Beijing, where intellectuals had once freely posted their progressive opinions on the future of China. Nonetheless, the economy started to grow and free expression among the populace also continued to find informal outlets throughout the 1980’s.

All that was to come to an abrupt end on June 4, 1989, as solders were ordered to shoot student demonstrators on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. It is a testament to the power of China’s propaganda machine that despite the bloodshed people in the U.S. and elsewhere witnessed on television, to this very

day, apart from certain informed Beijing residents, many Chinese people continue to believe that no students were killed in the incident and that the victims of this so-called “counter-revolutionary rebellion” were actually the marching soldiers. This is, sadly, evidence of the extent to which the Communist Party has been able to control the thinking of the Chinese people.

China’s Propaganda Ministry serves as both the CCP’s news watchdog and news generator because its censorship includes not only blocking information but also the dissemination of misinformation and control of what is said or not said, as was the case with the SARS’ cover-up. Every province in China, every city, and every workplace has a propaganda division to ensure that the press and other information outlets remain consistent with the message or policy from Beijing. Foreign investors in China are also instructed to allow the government to set up CCP branch committees in their joint venture corporations so that Chinese employees will not be contaminated by foreign “unhealthy elements.”

The media has even become an effective weapon for repression in China. Jiang Zemin, formerly the Chinese president and now China’s military leader, has been mindful of Mao’s remark that political campaigns like the Cultural Revolution need to come every seven or eight years. With such periodic “class struggles,” Mao believed that society would stay disciplined and united around the CCP dictatorship. Whipping up the requisite fervor to create such a struggle,

however, requires both the suppression of true information and the creation and dissemination of false information.

The same political campaign that was launched against the ideals of Confucius repeated itself in the summer of 1999, when Jiang Zemin started the persecution of a peaceful, traditional meditation practice called Falun Gong. It should be noted, however, that the Chinese government endorsed this meditation practice both at home and abroad from May 13, 1992 to July 20, 1999, and had issued during this period of time proclamations for its health benefits. This writer was able to attend two large Falun Gong experience-sharing seminars sponsored by the Chinese Consulate General in New York City. Due to the fears emanating from the size of its following (estimates to embrace 70-100 million people) and the revival of another popular Chinese culture, Jiang ordered his propaganda machine to launch a smear campaign to defame both the founder and the practice of Falun Gong, blaming such things as suicides and murders on Falun Gong practitioners.

For the past four years, the Chinese people have seen and read such negative propaganda. In the absence of other sources of information, how could they be expected to know that Falun Gong, like all practices of the Buddhist tradition, prohibits the taking of life and advocates non-violence and the principles of "Truthfulness, Compassion, and Tolerance"? Such misinformation has prompted neighbor to turn in neighbor, schools to expel their students, and families to turn against their loved ones. For millions of Chinese people, this is

just like reliving the dark days of the Cultural Revolution. Despite over 100,000 Falun Gong practitioners being now incarcerated within jail, labor camps, and mental institutions, the extent of this atrocity remains an unknown story to most people in China. Sadly, this atrocity is still being played out, even though it violates every internationally recognized human rights code, including China's own Constitution.

More recently, a crackdown on 63 organizations by China's Civil Affairs Ministry has taken place with the intent to curb the freedom of association, conscience, and expression. Many of those registered groups were formed for recreational hobbies, cultural studies and the arts, such as the China Fisherman's Association, the Dancing Hall Music Association, the Shakespeare Association, etc. There appears to be a continuing paranoia in the new leadership in Beijing about people enjoying private association. As a civilian group, the anglers in the China's Fisherman's Association could be expected to have a passionate interest in their fishing activities and piscine science; but the government apparently has a genuine fear of people to gather without authorization. According to a *Newsday* article, "You have to watch those fishermen," a western European diplomat was quoted as saying. "Pretty soon everyone will be on the riverbanks with rods and reels, and that will be the end of the Communist Party."¹³

¹³ "China Cracks Down on Clubs," *Newsday*, June 22, 2003.

Cyber Censorship

The latest battleground for information control is the Internet. Guo Liang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing told the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in 2001, “Mao Zedong said that to have power you need two things: the gun and the pen ... The Communist Party has the gun, but the Internet is now the pen. If they lose control of it, something will happen to challenge their authority.”¹⁴ Incidentally, the CPJ lists Jiang Zemin among the top ten enemies of the world press. Thousands of Internet cafes in Beijing and all over China have been shut down for “security reasons.” All Internet services are required to install filtering software to block prohibited sites and monitor some 60 million Chinese Internet users.

One notable case involves Miss Liu Di, a 22-year-old student who was arrested on the campus of Beijing Normal University on November 7, 2002, on the eve of the opening of the Communist Party's 16th Congress. She had posted messages signed “the stainless steel mouse” in an Internet chat-room. Reporters Without Borders reports that the authorities accuse her of “jeopardizing national security.” Her situation seems perilous as China’s Supreme Court determined in January 2001 that the punishment for breaking the law on state secrets and the dissemination of information jeopardizing the state includes the death penalty. Liu Di’s family has still not been allowed to see her and authorities say they are

¹⁴ “*The Great Firewall*,” A. Lin Neumann, briefing by Committee to Protect Journalists, January 2001

not revealing her place of detention allegedly in an endeavor to put pressure on her.¹⁵

On May 29, 2003, four more young Internet dissidents were sentenced to prison terms of up to 10 years for discussing the growing social problems and for posting reform-minded essays on the Internet. An article in *The Baltimore Sun* stated, "At their trial, all four accused their jailers of abusive treatment. Xu Wei informed the judge that he had been beaten and tormented with electric shocks to his genitals."¹⁶ Reporters Without Borders estimates that more people are in prison in China for expressing their views on the Internet than in any other country in the world.

The arrests of this new breed of cyber dissidents are the result of a program called "Golden Shield." Researchers say this secret program was proposed by the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Information Industry and assigned sizeable financial and human resources. According to Reporters without Borders, it involves a cyber police force of an estimated 30,000 persons and it is capable of spotting, identifying and arresting dissident Internet users. The government has also issued more than 60 laws and sets of regulations about use and abuse of the Internet.

One incident that raised eyebrows amongst the international community was a decree from the CCP in early September 2002, which banned the Internet

¹⁵ "Young Internet user Liu Di secretly detained for four months," Reporters Without Borders, (accessed July 12, 2003); available from http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=5093.

¹⁶ Joshua Eisenman, "Suppression goes online," *The Baltimore Sun*, June 26, 2003.

search engines Google.com and AltaVista.com. Unlike some other media, search engines such as Google and AltaVista are apolitical. One week after the initial ban, Google was back in China, but only partially. The U.K.-based *Guardian* noted: "...when the magic name of Chinese president Jiang Zemin was entered, Google consistently replied that the information 'is currently unavailable'... A click on 'BBC News' produces a blank and even the weather in England and Scotland is banned."¹⁷

Beijing denied all knowledge of this ban, as it normally does with its other forms of censorship. Mr. Wang, an official from China's Ministry of Information Industry, was quoted as saying, "The Ministry has received no information about Google being blocked, and we have received no information about a block being lifted."¹⁸ One Hong Kong's human rights group reports that over 500,000 foreign websites are currently blocked in China on the grounds that Chinese people might be exposed to pornography and other "unhealthy elements" from abroad. Among such "unhealthy" websites are news sites for *The Washington Post* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, to name but two.

Anti-censorship Effort

Whilst information control may be the Chinese regime's greatest source of strength and the key to its success; at the same time, it could also very likely prove to be its most formidable weakness.

¹⁷ "Google is back in China but don't try asking any difficult questions," John Gittings, *The Guardian*, September 14, 2002.

¹⁸ "Google mystery deepens," AFP, September 13, 2002.

Efforts by foreign governments to bring alternative sources of information to the Chinese public are consistently blocked. Although many in China try to listen to *Voice of America*, *Radio Free Asia*, *BBC*, etc., on short-wave radios, the frequencies for these media sources are jammed in China.

China guards its information monopoly jealously. An American citizen, Dr. Charles Li, is currently serving a three-year sentence in China on charges of allegedly “preparing” to break through a television signal to broadcast outside information on the persecution of Falun Gong to the people of China. He has been held in a Chinese prison for more than six months and, according to Shanghai-based U.S. consular sources, has gone on a hunger strike. Furthermore, Dr. Li has reportedly been beaten, force fed and given “brainwashing” classes. The world and Dr. Li’s fellow Americans should all pay attention to the case because no matter how much it might be hoped that the Chinese regime is now telling the truth about SARS or anything else, as long as Dr. Li and the other dissidents who have tried to break through censorship remain incarcerated, it should be clear that China’s clampdown on information remains every bit as strong as ever.

As for the private sector, rather than bringing greater freedom to China, in their scramble for profits some Western companies are instead more likely to be importing Chinese-style censorship to the West. While U.S. government attempts to get information into China are consistently blocked, Chinese government propaganda is welcomed daily into American homes. It has become known that a

major U.S. media company will bring cartoons and entertainment programming to certain media outlets in Southern China in exchange for putting content from China's state-run television system, Chinese Central Television (CCTV), on cable in the United States. This U.S. company willingly signed an agreement that it would refrain from broadcasting the news or any other programming that might be considered "sensitive".

It is also recognized among Chinese Americans that many Chinese language newspapers, radio stations, and TV stations in the U.S. are actually financed by the Chinese Communist Party and have been spouting the Communist Party line upon SARS and other issues such as U.S. war against Iraq. For example, a Chinese TV network in New York recently repeated Beijing's SARS death toll, which remains suspiciously low when contested with the numbers released by the World Health Organization. For many Chinese-speakers, this TV station could be the only source of information. In this manner, the whole culture of fear and repression is also subliminally exported along with TV programming. Many overseas Chinese do not dare speak to reporters or say what they think about the Chinese government for fear that agents from the Chinese Embassy and consulates might be watching or tapping their phones. Perhaps their fears are not unfounded.

In the interests of free speech and truthful information, there is an urgent need for supporting the existence of alternative sources of Chinese-language

media within the U.S. to provide a counterpoint. The people of China are important, and so are the Chinese Americans in our own backyard.

Other elements of the private sector in the U.S. seem also more likely to bow to censorship than to advocate free speech within China. *The Los Angeles Times* reported last year that some 300 Western businesses and other organizations have signed what was described as a “Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for China's Internet Industry,” otherwise known as a self-censorship agreement.¹⁹

Moreover, it is no secret now that China's sophisticated Internet firewall is built with the assistance of and know-how of foreign corporations. With technology so blatantly being used to implement repression, the software industry has understandably become somewhat more tight-lipped about its long-time claim that technology transfer can only help the cause of democracy and freedom in China.

There are, however, private companies that are attempting to break through China's firewall. Dynamic Internet Technology, Inc., for example, has been on the cutting-edge of dispatching secure customized information and emails into China. Ultrareach Internet Corporation, a software company, has also developed an Internet anti-censorship technology that can avoid being blocked and is able to deliver web content to users inside Mainland China. Apparently with greater demand for news about the SARS and other critical matters, more

¹⁹ “The Great Firewall of China,” Xiao Qiang & Sophie Beach, *The Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 2002.

and more web surfers in China have been accessing overseas websites over the last couple of months, and this new technology is there to help them. Companies such as this one, combined with other efforts, will succeed in bringing down the “Great Firewall of China” in the end.

China’s Media & SARS

In the run-up to the critical 16th People’s Congress last November, China’s Propaganda Department was working overtime, sending out a hefty memo to editors informing them which topics were considered off-limits — basically anything and everything that could possibly reflect poorly on the Party’s job performance, even including industrial accidents and such incident as food poisoning.²⁰ The Propaganda Department warned the media to “be careful,” or else some might be shut down.

Under these conditions, no reporter dared address the topic of SARS truthfully, known in China euphemistically as “atypical pneumonia,” a relatively mild term that inadequately conveys the severity of the actual disease.

It is interesting to note that the Health Minister Zhang Wenkang and the mayor of Beijing Meng Xuenong were both dismissed from their positions for what state media imputed was their inadequate response to the outbreak, hence the leadership is able to claim that it has come clean with the WHO. Both, however, were not accused by the top leadership of any cover-up work, nor of

²⁰ “China food poisoning kills 40,” BBC, (accessed July 13, 2003); available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2258389.stm>.

lying to the Chinese people or the world—seemingly an indication that they did not have the authority to release truthful information for sake of the “stability of society” or rather of the “stability of the government” in the face of an unknown and frightening new plague.

On Monday, June 2, however, *AP* reported that a top Chinese health official, Gao Qiang, was still denying claims that Beijing tried to hide the seriousness of the SARS virus. Gao claimed that the government warned about SARS as early as February and that early efforts to contain its spread were slowed by poor information.

In addition, securing accurate numbers in China is a little easier said than done. *Asia Times* reported on June 3 that there appeared to have been an outbreak in SARS at a residential complex called Beiyuan Gardens. With more than 10,000 residents living in close proximity to each other, the outbreak threatened to be the next Amoy Gardens—the Hong Kong housing complex where more than 300 people contracted SARS and about 35 died. *Asia Times* reported, “Beijing media have yet to report on the situation at Beiyuan Gardens. Some residents have tried to bring attention to their situation via public websites, but, for example, their information was deleted within less than a minute after posting it on the popular Internet portal Sina.com. Even their telephones are now unable to send out text messages—Beiyuan Gardens residents have become overnight outcasts. Having fallen into despair, some residents of Beiyuan

Gardens sent a letter to Wang Qishan, Beijing's new mayor... Complex residents are still waiting for Mayor Wang's response."²¹

Does this sound like the reaction of a government and a media committed to transparency? In Hong Kong, residents of the Amoy Gardens were quickly evacuated, quarantined, and given food, shelter, and medical care. In Mainland China, it appears the residents of Beiyuan Gardens were shut out by the security apparatus and left to their own devices, free to contract SARS and infect others.

China's *Caijing* economic journal was recently ordered to halt its publication business because its June 20th issue disclosed information on the SARS outbreak as well as a high-profile Shanghai real estate scandal. This clampdown on media does not fit easily with the new "openness" promised by Gao Qiang, the Vice Health Minister, in battling against SARS. Ironically, this also occurred during the same week when WHO lifted the travel alert against visiting Beijing.

In China, the leadership can claim to be reporting accurate numbers, but who is to say that they are not playing a cat and mouse game with the World Health Organization? Who is holding China and its government accountable? Even in the midst of a global SARS crisis, the Chinese regime still keeps a close eye on its political interests. For example, the regime insisted on blocking the WHO from sending inspectors to Taiwan to help them control the spread of the disease and on lifting the travel alert on Mainland China prior to Taiwan, though

²¹ "New SARS disaster looms in Beijing," *Asia Times*, June 3, 2003.

Taiwan has been forthcoming and cooperative with WHO all along. Some things seem never to change.

The latest victim of censorship by China's media outlets is the burst of recent mass protests against Article 23 in Hong Kong. When China's premier Wen Jiabao visited Hong Kong on July 1 for the sixth anniversary celebrations of Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese rule, the occasion became a forum for a display of public outrage against the proposed security bill which Beijing desires to introduce in an attempt to curb freedoms and voices raised in dissent against the Communist regime in Beijing. *AFP* reported that in China's state-run press "there was no mention of the controversial Article 23 legislation nor the 500,000 people opposed to it who took to the streets in the territory's biggest protest since more than one million people rallied after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing."²² The European Union is critical of this so-called anti-subversion law (another name for Article 23), while the U.S. Congress has also voted to condemn it. At the time this issue was the subject of heated debate, *AP* reported, "CNN's broadcast into China was cut Monday night during an interview with a critic of a planned Hong Kong anti-subversion law that opponents say could stifle the media."²³ This same *AP* report also stated, "China's Communist government prohibits ordinary Chinese from receiving CNN and other overseas satellite channels, restricting them mainly to hotels and residences and offices for

²² "Chinese newspapers fail to report mass protests in Hong Kong," AFP, (accessed July 10, 2003); available from http://www.ptd.net/webnews/wed/cz/Qhongkong-protests-china.Rt3y_DI2.html

²³ "CNN China broadcast censored," AP, (accessed on July 10, 2003); available from <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/30/cnn.china.ap/>

foreigners. Reports on topics sensitive to the government are often interrupted with no explanation.”²⁴

The Impact of SARS

As for an assessment of the long-term impact the SARS crisis will have on transparency and media control in China, it remains difficult to draw any definitive conclusions at this time. It is still uncertain as to how long and how serious the SARS epidemic will prove to be and how much of an overall impact it will have on China’s economy. It is also unclear how the different factions in the government will behave. Given the Chinese Communist Party’s track record and its willingness seemingly to resort to all and any means in pursuit of its self-preservation, the task of converting China into a more transparent and open entity could be compared to asking a tiger to turn vegetarian. In its eyes, giving up meat could endanger its very survival, and by the same token, a totalitarian regime without media control would not be an effective dictatorship at all.

There is, however, one thing that the SARS epidemic, in spreading to other nations, has done, and that is to focusing more international attention on the issue of transparency in China. The way the Chinese regime attempted to cover up the situation and to disseminate falsehoods both domestically and internationally has seriously damaged its credibility, and that is a lesson which China sorely needed to learn. It has also served as a wake-up call for foreign governments, a reminder that this is still a repressive regime that has been

²⁴ “*CNN China broadcast censored*,” AP, (accessed on July 10, 2003); available from <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/east/06/30/cnn.china.ap/>.

compulsively mendacious for more than 50 years. Perhaps SARS will take away some of the blind in the eyes of the US private sector when it comes time to assess the unfailingly rosy economic statistics that China disseminates every year.

Certainly SARS has made the ASEAN nations reconsider their relation to China, as their tourist revenues drop and their economies suffer. As one Hong Kong based reporter wrote in late April this year, "In contemporary international relations, soft power matters. Reputation, transparency and accountability are all important measures to reflect one's standing in the global hierarchy. In its mishandling of SARS, China has squandered precious political capital that it has built up over the past five years. It will be a long time before China can restore its internal and international position...."²⁵

Another significant SARS related impact lies in China's slowing economy as well as its trade with foreign countries. Domestically, services industries such as tourism, hotel, transportation, and restaurant business have been hit very hard. Take Beijing for example, according to China's official *New China News Agency*, Beijing's hotels for foreign guests in May received less than 10% of the visitors they had in last May. Only 12.2% of hotel rooms were occupied. Income from tourism has dropped 87% to 91% compared with last year. The volume of air travel has dropped 86% and that of railroad travel 79%. The income from foreign

²⁵ "SARS could doom China's leadership," Asia Times, (accessed on July 10, 2003); available from <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/ED26Ad02.html>.

tourists as a whole is projected to suffer a loss of USD\$650 million.²⁶ *China Daily* reported that Guangdong province hotel association lost USD\$38.55 million in April alone. Some economists estimate that China's growth rate will drop 1.5% to 2% from its projected target of 7%. One economist from China's State Tax Bureau predicted that SARS would cost RMB200 million to RMB300 million in the year of 2003.²⁷ Overall, the cost of SARS for China is estimated at RMB400 billion or about 10% of its GDP, a loss similar to the disastrous Asian financial crush in 1997 or the big flood in 1998.²⁸

In terms of international trade, Professor Zhang Hanlin, Director of WTO Research Institute affiliated with Beijing Foreign Trade University, held that if SARS dies out by June and July, China's total import and export volume would be reduced to about USD\$10 billion and foreign investment would lose about USD\$1 billion.²⁹ At least fourteen countries, such as Malaysia, Switzerland, and Sudan to name a few, have restricted Chinese travelers from entering their countries, unless they show a SARS-free medical proof.

Thus, while the SARS crisis itself may or may not make China change its long-term habits, perhaps one lesson the international community can draw from this is that external pressure works. If a form of behavior endangers human lives, instead of coddling China or keeping a deferential distance, China can indeed be

²⁶ "SARS has negative impact on Beijing's tourism," Dajiyuan Chinese website, (accessed July 11, 2003); available from <http://www.dajiyuan.com/gb/3/6/18/n330688.htm>.

²⁷ "SARS hits China's economic growth," BBC Chinese website, (accessed July 11, 2003); available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/chinese/news/newsid_3026000/30260631.stm.

²⁸ "SARS: China has lost RMB400 million," Dajiyuan Chinese website, (accessed on July 11, 2003); available from <http://www.dajiyuan.com/gb/3/6/18/n330688.htm>.

²⁹ "SARS: China has lost RMB400 million," Dajiyuan Chinese website, (accessed on July 11, 2003); available from <http://www.dajiyuan.com/gb/3/6/18/n330688.htm>.

pressured to do better. Over time, such improved standards of behavior are better for the Chinese people, and indeed for the Chinese regime itself. Ultimately, better behavior and a little humility could have far-reaching implications for the creation of a more open society that is better equipped to participate in the international community.

Conclusion

The story of SARS is but one of the examples which serves to remind us of the chilling reality of censorship under the Communist tyranny, as well as of the importance of freedom of information in bringing about transparency, the rule of law, human rights, and civil society in China. This also calls for the international community to continue its efforts to open up China, not only driven by economic interests, but more importantly for the purpose of bringing about positive social changes for the benefit of all the 1.3 billion Chinese people.

SARS was not just a natural calamity, but became also a man-made disaster in Mainland China. More lives could have been saved, had Beijing chosen not to cover the issue up for more than five months. Again, had this epidemic not plagued foreign countries and led to an international outrage, the Communist regime in Beijing would, most likely, have remained tight-lipped about it and viewed the epidemic with the same indifference with which it addressed the widespread AIDS epidemic in China. The tragedy of SARS lies not merely in the simple negligence or irresponsibility of certain individual officials of the regime, but in the operating logic of this authoritarian Communist system. It shows that when government officials deal with an issue at hand, they tend to allow political

considerations to predominate. After all, this contagious SARS is not a “counter-revolutionary” phenomenon, and it should not be treated accordingly. Hu Ping, a well-known intellectual in exile, thinks that because the government officials are not elected by the people, the populace and their wellbeing are just as meaningful as the statistical numbers, so long as the numbers are within certain permitted parameters.³⁰

This thesis cites the case of SARS and other examples to demonstrate that the Communist regime in China has with some degree of success relied upon censorship to sustain its power. Because its mandate is simply to sustain its hold upon power, this requires manipulation and control of information, particularly in this era of globalization, economic transformation, and technological revolution. The manipulation of information can take multifarious forms: cover-ups, lies or misinformation, censorship, deception, and retention of a tight grip on media outlets.

The available reference/source materials on this subject matter of SARS and censorship in China, including documents from WHO, media, and NGO, as well as from governmental sources are extensive, though the information tends to be unsystematic due to the difficulty of collecting information from China at this time. Detailed knowledge of SARS itself also remains quite limited because it is such a new epidemic.

This paper hopes to serve as a reminder for those who live in the free world that transparency and freedom of information must be treasured as a

³⁰ “SARS: the Real Story.” *Beijing Spring*, June 2003.

fundamental right, liberty, and perhaps the most important attribute to sustain an open and civil society. This thesis concludes by borrowing some brief words of ancient Chinese wisdom, “When nature makes trouble, man can survive; but when man makes trouble, man cannot survive.”

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