

China Blog - March 2023

Author: World Watch Research analyst / Asia

Contents

Reporting what suits the CCP best.....	1
<i>Telling China’s story well</i>	1
<i>The emerging National Bureau for Data</i>	2
A glimpse of coercive diplomacy	3

Reporting what suits the CCP best

Reporting from and about China became steadily more difficult in 2022. This has been made abundantly clear in the chilling [annual report](#) published by the Foreign Correspondents Club in China (FCCC, 1 March 2023).

To an increasing extent, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is making it clear how it wants reporting about China to be done and the number of resident foreign correspondents is shrinking, especially from countries with a history of independent and critical press. This does not bode well for the future. Another interesting aspect in the FCCC report is the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on journalism. As of March 2022, [147 countries](#) from all continents had an official ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ with China (Green FDC, accessed 7 March 2023) and China has been keen to invite and train up journalists from African and Latin American countries, who then report on Chinese affairs in apparent independence. They were reportedly prioritized for accessing the limited number of seats reserved for reporters during the 19th Party Congress in November 2022.

While it would be wrong to claim that no information coming from China and its statistical offices can be trusted, outright distortions of numbers still happen (as with statistics concerning the COVID-19 outbreak). However, according to Professor Jeremy Wallace from Cornell University, it is more frequently the case that a [gentle massaging](#) of numbers takes place in order to make things look better, especially in the economic sphere (Grid News, 7 March 2023).

Telling China’s story well

At the same time, information reported by local Chinese journalists is becoming significantly less independent (WWR, [Recent Country Developments](#), 9 February 2023). For a journalist certificate, to be renewed every three years, journalists need to answer a host of ideological questions to make sure that they ‘love China’ and ‘love the Chinese Communist Party’. A campaign to promote [patriotic education](#) is in full swing across the country (PRC Leader, 1 March 2023) and the phrase ‘[telling China’s story well](#)’ (introduced in August 2013 by Xi Jinping in his first year as leader of the nation) became a

constant reminder that engagement in international discourse must – in the eyes of Beijing – highlight China’s positive aspects and assumed superiority (China Media Project, 16 April 2021).

To achieve this goal, little effort is being spared: Inside China, the well-known ‘50 cent army’ and ‘little pinks’ are active in censoring and steering debates on the Internet, while outside China, the CCP runs ‘influence campaigns’ to paint ‘the correct picture’ of what is happening, according to the CCP’s narrative. Little of this propaganda-drive has been recognized or combatted at international level, which is why campaigns shaping the narrative about what is happening in border regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet should be particularly instructive for observers (ASPI, [Frontier Influencers](#), 20 October 2022). Such CCP campaigns have the potential to distort and even completely cut off reports of what is really happening in China, including the situation of Christians, as they are perceived as being potentially dangerous (since they are one of the largest social groups not under the control of the CCP).

At universities, guidelines and communiques issued by the Communist Party have constantly limited the space for independent research and academic discussion. As China File reported on 13 March 2023, referring to a recently published study, [student informers](#) in the class rooms have an especially chilling effect on professors. Other professors said that they do not mind that classes are recorded and taped, and adapted their teaching accordingly. As one professor said: “I think Hu Shi [a diplomat and scholar of Republican-era China] once said, when a country talks about morality every day, this country is particularly immoral. I really feel the degeneration of this country now—this country is hopeless. As so many people have profited from such a degraded environment, they are very supportive of such a system. A bad environment is where good people cannot do good things, so that you can only fall.”

The emerging National Bureau for Data

There is, however, another development which is even more worrying: At the most recent Two Sessions meetings in March 2023, the creation of a ‘[National Bureau for Data](#)’ (NBD) was announced by the leadership (Grid News, 14 March 2023). While this new department may sound harmless enough, it will serve to oversee all data the government and private companies are collecting from citizens. While details still need to emerge, this new bureau has the potential to centralize all data for further analysis, something that has been feared for a long time. In this respect, it should be noted that even China’s infamous health app did not run on a centralized system, but was only a form of data-collection at local government level with no interaction between the various data-gathering centers. With the emergence of the NBD, data-collection and analysis is likely to lead to an easier and more seamless way of monitoring and controlling citizens, including Christians. This does not mean that the NBD will definitely be used in this way, but for a ruling party putting ever more emphasis on Communist ideology, security and regime safety, it is likely to prove too tempting to leave such a treasure-trove of data untapped.

A glimpse of coercive diplomacy

As reported by The Diplomat on 10 March 2023, outgoing Micronesian President David Panuelo has published a letter written to the leaders of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) which gives a rare glimpse into China's "[political warfare and grey zone activity](#)", currently faced by small nations in particular.

While it may be somewhat exaggerated to call the letter a 'bombshell', it provides chilling details of how a Head of State has been openly followed, threatened and intimidated. In one incident described in the letter, the Chinese embassy in Palikir simply ignored the FSM government's decision not to send a representative to a conference by making a private citizen of the country its fictitious representative. While [spying, offering bribes](#) and pressing the country into accepting support in the form of vaccines were the general tactics described (AP News, 13 March 2023), President Panuelo sums up what he calls a general theme as follows: 'The FSM says 'no', and our sovereignty is disrespected, with the PRC saying we have achieved a consensus when we have not.'

This letter may be dismissed as an embittered farewell note from a disgruntled politician, voted out of office and now settling scores. Nevertheless, it gives a rare insight into the mindset with which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views foreign countries, especially smaller ones. At an ASEAN meeting in 2010, then Foreign Minister Yang Yiechi famously [quipped](#): 'China is a big country and you are small countries and that is a fact' (Financial Times, 13 July 2016). If the CCP is acting even against sovereign states and their representatives in such a strong-handed way, how much more will it act against perceived dissidents and 'troublemakers' back home, such as Christians, for instance?