



Thanks to:

Michel Wu as well as the large number of agency staff who agreed to be interviewed

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Xinhua: the world's biggest propaganda agency

Three years from now, the Olympic flame will arrive in Beijing. Thousands of journalists from around the world will pour into the Chinese capital to cover the largest international sports event. They will have to comply with the strict rules imposed for decades on the foreign press working in China.

On the other hand, thousands of journalists working for the official *Xinhua News Agency* will guarantee the success of these Olympic Games, in defiance of transparency. In fact, *Xinhua* remains at the heart of the censorship and disinformation system established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since it took power in 1949.

The world's largest news agency is now seen by some as a credible media - Google News for example often picks up its reports - on the same level as other international news agencies. Its huge Internet visibility (*Xinhuanet.com* puts out news in seven languages) and free distribution of its reports in many countries, has allowed *Xinhua* to become a major player in the field of international news.

Xinhua currently diffuses more than 1,000 reports a day - 700 on international news and 300 on internal news.

This investigation report, put together by Reporters Without Borders and a French journalist who worked for two years for *Xinhua*'s French service, shows that the agency remains an organ of propaganda in the service of the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. Its modernisation is very superficial.

Xinhua's goal is to maintain the CCP's news monopoly. It is, according to the official definition, "the eyes, ears and voice of China". It is the de facto largest centre of news gathering and distribution in the country. No news, especially on sensitive issues, should reach the media without the say-so of the all-powerful *Xinhua*.

Xinhua has marked its 70th anniversary in 2001. Its forerunner, the agency Red China, was founded in Ruijin District in the eastern province of Jiangxi. The agency adopted its current name in January 1937. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in Octo-

ber 1949, *Xinhua* became a state-run agency, totally subordinate to the CCP and the government.

Since it was founded, it became the main outlet for the CCP's propaganda to China's media. *Xinhua* provides all media (at least 306 radio stations, 369 TV stations, 2119 newspapers and 9038 periodicals) with all major items of national and international news.

The world's biggest news agency

According to official figures, the agency employs 8,400 people. (Agence France-Presse by contrast has a staff of 2,000) of whom 1,900 are journalists and editors. Its president, Tian Congming, has the rank of a minister. He is supported by editor-in-chief, Nan Zhenzhong and four vice-presidents, Zhang Baoshun, Ma Shengrong, Cai Mingzhao and He Dongjun.

The agency's news gathering and handling is broken up into three parts: "the headquarters" (its official name), national branches and international branches.

The "headquarters" is in Beijing, at 57, Xuanwumenxidajie. It consists of "the national news department, the international news department, the national news department for overseas clients, the reference news department, the photo-journalism department, the sports news department, the broadcast news department, the online news department and the information centre."

Xinhua also has branches in 31 provinces, as well as in Hong Kong and Macao. There are offices in around 50 Chinese cities and a bureau in Taiwan, until the authorities in Taipei closed it in April 2005 after accusing *Xinhua* correspondents of contributing to "discord" between Beijing and the nationalist island. *Xinhua* is also proud of the fact that it "possesses" branches and offices in the armed Chinese People's Police". *Xinhua* also has branches in 105 countries and eight sub-offices or editorial offices in Hong Kong, New York, Mexico, Nairobi, Cairo, Paris, Moscow and Rio de Janeiro. It is one of the rare foreign media to have a correspondent in both Pyongyang and Rangoon.

But *Xinhua* is also above all a media empire that puts out 40 publications devoted to a variety of subjects (rural life, economy, sports, photography and so on...) Despite privatisation, as far as the Chinese media market goes, nothing is said, nothing is listened to and nothing



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is seen in China without the prior agreement of the governmental agency. Anyone who defies these rules needs to watch out. The misfortune of an agency journalist, dismissed for putting out a report intended for internal consumption only, stands as a warning to all.

The *Xinhua*'s journalists

The recruitment

Students are targeted from the start as potential agency journalists. Candidates are selected both for their ability – they are often the best students at university – and their obedience to the Party, since they are required to spread the good word. In the first years of training they undergo regular sessions of “ideological updating” to inculcate the professional values of a journalist at the service of the sole party.

Entrance exams are held in three Chinese cities: Beijing, Shanghai and Nankin (in Jiangsu province), where the agency has offices. The country's most prestigious universities are also based in these provinces. Every November the agency sends a delegation made up of heads of international and national sections to each city and the exams, with a written paper and an interview.

The written paper consists of a test of the candidates' general knowledge, allowing an evaluation of their culture and ideological orientation. The oral resembles a race against the clock as a small group of examiners frequently interview more than 100 candidates.

For those students seeking work in a foreign branch, the interview usually takes place in English or, less commonly, in another foreign language. The candidate begins by introducing himself and then replies to two questions, always the same ones: “Why did you decide to be a journalist? Why do you want to work for *Xinhua*?”

“The interview often lasts only one minute”, said one young female journalist, the latest addition to the international department. “That was what happened to me. None of the examiners spoke good English”.

The recruitment examination for journalists for domestic news is held separately. These positions are considered to be more political. Journalists who will be responsible later for revising and putting out domestic news to the national media have to demonstrate they are biddable.

They need to show their loyalty to the party and there is a natural preference for politicised students, members of the CCP Youth League, student leaders or presidents of communist organisations.

Nepotism however remains the most reliable method of getting taken on by *Xinhua*. The sons, cousins or nephews of a government official have no need to worry about the results of their written exam. Recruitment based on a person's name is instantaneous.

Indoctrination

Xinhua holds a yearly training session for new recruits lasting about three weeks, in Fang Shan, a district in the southeast of the capital. According to the Chinese description, it consists of “civil and ideological teaching”.

“During these seminars, leading *Xinhua* staffers talk about politics, the rules and laws governing China, the theory of the ‘Three Representations’ of Jiang Zemin, and of course about *Xinhua*, mouthpiece of the government” recalls one young journalist. On the sidelines of these indoctrination seminars, the young students are supposed to learn the techniques of journalism, but as one of them pointed out, “Even during seminars of this type, they never stop telling us about the political nature of *Xinhua*, as well as the essential role of politics in our everyday work but nothing about how to write an article or to get information.”

The physical education part of the programme involves games through which each member has to learn “the importance of solidarity and organisational capacity”.

The other important part of the training comes a few months before young journalists are sent abroad in which they are reminded of the rules they have to obey and their obligations towards *Xinhua*.

The importance of ideology is in contrast with journalists' wretched lack of ability to carry out reporting in the field. Stuck in their offices, that one Chinese correspondent in Paris dubbed “China's second embassy”, *Xinhua* correspondents are to be found throughout the world but rarely out actually reporting.

This indoctrination does produce highly satisfactory results. It's instructive to watch the demeanour of *Xinhua* journalists during press conferences given by Chinese officials. They ask only favourable questions and applaud the



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remarks made by officials. During a December 2004 EU-China summit, a *Xinhua* journalist stood up to make sure that the EU supported Beijing's stance on Taiwan. Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao appeared pleased at the reporter's dedication. *Xinhua* journalists were the first to stand and applaud the head of government when he said that China "fears no one in imposing the reunification with Taiwan."

Almost 80 % of the agency's journalists are members of the CCP, according to internal figures. Either through conviction, fear of their bosses or to speed up their career advancement, *Xinhua* journalists are faithful to the hand that feeds them.

Even more surprisingly, *Xinhua* takes a keen interest in its employees' personal lives. It is not unusual for a journalist to be punished for a moral lapse. Young journalists are very closely watched, especially when they are abroad. "You, *Xinhua* and your wife" jokes one young journalist, who said that more than half of the agency's journalists are married to a colleague.

The work of journalists in Beijing

"In Beijing, I have to translate and edit reports and articles published in the foreign press to make them available to the Chinese general public. These articles are then published in the local media (...) It's hardly very satisfying from a journalistic point of view. The news is second hand and we never have the time to go back to the original source", said one journalist who has worked for the agency for five years.

Journalists working in Beijing, responsible for following national news are inundated with so many releases from ministries, Party organs and companies so as to never need to go out reporting. The activities of the top leadership remain *Xinhua*'s highest priority.

For the agency, "news flashes and information from the government and official press conferences" remain one of the major sources of information.

Even more than the journalists based in the capital, correspondents in the provinces are supposed to closely follow public politics throughout the country. They also have to report union issues and natural disasters that occur in the regions. News about disasters – recently removed from the list of state secrets – is increasingly in evidence on the *Xinhua* wires. However riots and strikes mostly go

unreported. These reports are marked "internal reference" and go directly to the offices of the Party bosses.

After two years working for the agency in Beijing, young journalists are sent abroad. The country they are sent to obviously depends on which section they have been working for. Africa for the French section, South America for the Spanish section and so on. They are not told their exact destination until the last moment. They are appointed for two years. Those whom they replace then return to *Xinhua* headquarters in Beijing. They can then apply to the most coveted posts such as Paris, Brussels or Geneva.

Internet connections are a rarity in *Xinhua* offices. Although they were introduced into the agency's bureaux at the start of 2003, the Web remains tightly controlled. Most journalists still do not have a direct connection and have to make do with the *BBC World Service* to follow international news. The website, inaccessible to most Chinese, is censored when it reports on subjects such as the Tiananmen Square massacre, activities of Falungong or the Dalai Lama.

Work of journalists abroad

"If you want to get the latest news, go to AFP. If you are interested in how it is presented, you can look at *Xinhua*", one Asian journalist commented ironically. This succinct analysis provides an insight into a significant feature of *Xinhua*: As far as foreign news goes, the agency is never at the origin of information. It has neither the means nor the desire to do so. It confines itself to picking up reports from international agencies or articles from the local press, which it summarises, often clumsily, and mixing in the regime's political orientation.

"Given our lack of funds and equipment, it is virtually impossible to be the first to break a story, even if we get the information first," explained one *Xinhua* correspondent.

So as not to miss major news, most of the agency's journalists spend their days glued to international TV and domestic TV of the countries to which they have been posted. *Xinhua* correspondents lap up the official releases of countries friendly to China. The Rangoon bureau systematically takes the exultant releases put out by the military junta but never mentions the plight of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi and the thousands of other political prisoners.



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Relations between the Propaganda Department and *Xinhua*: “I decide, you do it”.

In the service of the communist party, the agency produces two types of news: that intended for the general public and news destined for the regime leaders. The general public receives only superficial and distorted news. The same double system applies to every structure in China. Each administrative body is replicated by a party structure. At *Xinhua* the administration and the party are so alike that they are hard to separate. The members of the editorial board are the same as those of the agency Party committee. Each section is controlled by a Party cell (just as in the factories and neighbourhoods). The strength of the CCP rests on this ubiquitous surveillance.

The agency's first priority is to handle news produced by the Propaganda Department, now named the Publicity Department, that comes under the CCP Central Committee. The various ministries, particularly the foreign affairs ministry, can also send *Xinhua* news that is picked up and sent to the country's various media.

The Propaganda Department controls *Xinhua*, defining the orientation and subjects of reporting. Each article or report has to fulfil a number of ideological and journalistic criteria before being released for publication. It could be a case of general ideas (ban on criticising a member of the government or the CCP, benefiting countries that are “friends” of China. Problems of syntax arise or the correct way to describe places, “Chinese province of Taiwan”, “Taiwanese of China”, “autonomous region of Tibet” and so on..

The Propaganda Department frequently updates or modifies its instructions in relation to news events. Its monitoring of *Xinhua* was particularly close during the Sars epidemic, the war in Iraq and more recently in cases of bird flu.

It appears that the Propaganda Department pays closer attention to the domestic news department given that their reports are for the Chinese public consumption, than to those put out by the international department.

News output

Domestic news department (news for the Chinese general public)

Heads of section in this department select the stories, the editor-translators translate them, the foreign experts correct them, then they go back to the heads of section, who decide to put them on the wire, after checking, according to the criteria laid down by the Propaganda Department.

If the story is about a sensitive subject, such as relations between China and Taiwan, or Falungong, it is very unlikely to be put out. These “pulled” reports are not actually deleted but sent to a limited circle of top leaders so as to inform them about the real situation, indicated by the words “internal reference”. Currently all reports about the unrest among peasant farmers, dissatisfied with government compensation after the seizure of their land are classified as “internal reference”. Sometimes these reports are leaked and make it into the press in Hong Kong or Taiwan. If they are unmasked, the “traitors” are named and *Xinhua* posts their names, faces and offences in the agency's entrance hall.

Xinhua journalists are supposed to be able to identify news that is suitable for the leaders and not for the public. One former agency boss said, “The ministers and provincial leaders no longer read the official press. The first thing they do each morning is to read the internal reference reports.”

Some officials threaten or corrupt *Xinhua* journalists to avoid their misdoings becoming known by top leaders. Correspondents for the agency in Fanzhi, Shanxi Province de Shanxi were sacked by *Xinhua* after taking bribes from the owner of a mine where several dozen employees lost their lives in 2004.

Xinhua journalists have been arrested and given harsh prison sentences for having betrayed the agency and thus the Party. Wu Shishen, a journalist with the internal political service, was sentenced to life imprisonment on 30 August 1993 for “divulging state secrets abroad” as well as loss of his political rights. He was accused of sending a colleague on the daily *Hong Kong Express* a copy of a speech that Jian Zemin was due to give a few days later at the 14th CCP Congress. The same speech was broadcast on television one week later. Wu's wife, Ma Tao, also a *Xinhua* journalist, spent six years in custody for complicity in the this crime against



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the Party. It was learned that China's justice ministry had reduced Wu's sentence in November 2004 and he was released in July 2005.

International Department (reports to be sent abroad)

Fewer reports are classified "internal reference" in this department. As before, the head of section will decide where to send the report or refer it up the hierarchy if there is a problem.

Since 2004, it is noticeable that the international department has a tendency to publish news on the situation in China that is at the same time censored by the managers in the domestic news department. This strategy is designed to give the impression to foreign media and officials that China does not impose a blackout on major events. But in fact the Chinese themselves do not get the information. In this way, in November 2004, *Xinhua's* English service put out a report of clashes between members of the Muslim minority and the Han majority in Zhongmou district in central China. But this news could not be found on the Chinese wire. The propaganda services would have decided the subject was too sensitive for the Chinese readers.

Abroad

Journalists sent abroad are supposed to be well versed in the criteria to be used in selecting articles, for which they have undergone a long training, the main component of the "civic and ideological courses". Any report deemed dangerous to the state is given the heading "internal reference" and sent directly to *Xinhua* managers who send it on to the Propaganda Department and the State Council.

"The pandas"

Known as the "pandas" by agency staff since "*they snooze throughout the day*", these agency cadres rank above the heads of section in the hierarchy. They act as editors-in-chief and are the final link in the editorial chain. It is they who check reports grammatically and ideologically and take a final decision in case of argument. "The checked news is written in Chinese and intended for Chinese clients. It is there very important to check what is given out to be read. Self-censorship is constant," said one head of section. Every morning at around 9.30am, all heads of section attend a meeting at which they decided their daily work plan: news to handle, news not to be handled, the key points of government policy to be played up in the re-

ports or the unavoidable translations from each section.

There is no discussion during the meeting. The heads of section listen to their orders, heads down and taking notes. The pandas regularly order their subordinates to include attacks in their reports against foreign media, particularly the *BBC World Service* and *CNN*, accused of deliberately seeking to show China in a bad light.

The "pandas" are also responsible for co-ordinating translations into all the languages for the most important stories. A trusted foreign corrector is summoned and told to treat this news with the greatest attention since it will become the "truth" of the agency. According to several journalists, the hierarchical bosses, in contact with the propaganda services, are relied upon to add in the necessary dramatisation when it comes to denouncing China's internal or external enemies.

"The sixth affliction of the propaganda department is that it has taken on the mantle of the cold war: support whoever fights the enemy, fight whoever the enemy supports. That is still the stance of the Department of Propaganda when it comes to putting out news", says Jiao Guobiao, journalism lecturer, in his "Manifesto for a Free Press". For *Xinhua*, it turns into unconditional support for Slobodan Milosevic during the US intervention in the former Yugoslavia, then for Saddam Hussein during the first war in Iraq, for Robert Mugabe, Fidel Castro and so on.

The case of Yang Zidi

The fate that awaited an agency journalist, sacked for accidentally putting out a report classified as "internal reference", is particularly revealing of the editorial policy of *Xinhua*.

Yang Zidi, editor in chief of the national section for foreign departments, made use in April 2003 of a paper about Sars produced by the CCP Central Committee. It was a simple summary of steps taken against the epidemic, but the editor did not realise where the paper had come from or notice a heading banning all publication. He sent the information to a correspondent in the "Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan" section (that deals with news throughout Chinese territory) who put it into an article. The news, that should have remained secret, did not escape the notice of members of the Central Committee nor the State Council. *Xinhua's* president and editor-in-chief were both severely reprimanded by



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the CCP and the head of news was forced to resign. Yang Zidi was sacked, after writing a self-criticism.

But that was not the end of it. One month later, the *Xinhua* management announced it was stopping housing allowances for a large number of agency journalists, payments that often amounted to more than 50% of a journalist's basic salary. As many as 500 of the agency's journalists were affected by this step, for which the management refused to give any explanation. Many believed it was a collective punishment for Yang Zidi's mistake. A protest letter reportedly circulated for a time but many of the journalists were reluctant to sign for fear of "upsetting the big chiefs". "We are being punished for working for *Xinhua*," said one of them. "Everyone wants to leave the agency: the bosses hate their own teams."

Leaders and led

Xinhua is de facto run by the Propaganda Department. The agency gets its editorial line from this organ of the CCP and sticks to it slavishly. One directive – revealed by the Hong Kong press in 2004 – laid down that the regional committees of the CCP should be consulted before publication of any information about a corrupt cadre. The Propaganda Department therefore, through *Xinhua*, gives orders to the entire press: "Don't talk too much about Iraqi mass graves (...) Concentrate on the American invasion."

The "internal reference" reports reach the highest levels of state. For the different government clans it is also a way of doing battle through the media. It is not unusual for a Party cadre to slip sensitive information to a journalist so as to damage a rival. But the sole victims of these little internal games remain the editors, accused of having defied the established order. The retaliation measures that can be applied after the publication of "reference news" escalates like this: withdrawal of newspapers from the newsstands, a ban on publication for a specified period, salary attachment for the offending journalist/editor, dismissal and even imprisonment. At least 32 journalists are currently imprisoned in China, 12 of whom worked for official media.

The content of reports: a propaganda handbook

The "journalist translators" have to fulfil a quota of about 60 reports a month. They are paid

"per item", 40 yuans, which explains the fact that many subjects appear to be cock and bull stories, selected arbitrarily. But what happens when the quota of reports has been reached. Well, in fact, nothing. Work stops. The stakhanovists of news put down their tools. Those who see China from the outside, this triumphant country with 9% annual growth, gleaming buildings and broad avenues, probably do not realise the extent to which the core of the regime has not changed in 50 years. Here are a few examples of reports on the subject of news handled or unreported by *Xinhua*.

Sars

In the first months of the epidemic, *Xinhua*, in line with the Chinese authorities, denied the existence of Sars in China. Internally, staff were gathered to be told not to worry. However temperature controls were installed at the entrance to the agency's premises and masks were handed out. Agency managers got more modern masks than the staff.

Once the government acknowledged the epidemic, *Xinhua* was put on full alert to produce practical information and boast of the authorities' work to halt its progress. "We put out nothing but Sars reports for two months", said one of the agency's journalists.

In a 9 July 2003 comment piece headlined, "China shows greater openness through transparency in news", one agency journalist wrote: "China's transparency in news about the fight against Sars shows a greater openness towards the outside world. The Chinese government undertook to share news about the atypical pneumonia with the world in real time, according to the World Health Authority (WHO), which found that its efforts were very successful (...) China promotes transparency in news in many areas: since the start of the year, China revealed major events in real time, including the Xinjiang earthquake, explosions in Beijing universities and so on". It continued in the same vein with a catalogue of dramatic events, reported without delay and supposed to show that China had now become a democratic country. The report concluded: "From now on, the people are encouraged to make suggestions and comments on the activities of the authorities. All these measures are evidence of a greater openness in Chinese society, a professor at the University of the People of China said."

But the piece made no mention of the nearly six-month blackout on all information about the epidemic. As scores of people died worldwide,



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the Propaganda Department in Guangdong Province in southern China pinpointed and censored all information put out on the subject. Managers at *Xinhua* knew about the Sars epidemic that was ravaging the south of China but they only informed the communist leaders who waited weeks before mobilising the country to fight the epidemic.

Moreover, *Xinhua* said that transparency in China was now irreversible, but a few months afterwards, three managers of the famous liberal daily *Nanfang Dushi Bao* were arrested for having revealed – without the agreement of the authorities – a new Sars case in the south of China. Two of them, Yu Huafeng and Li Minying, remain in prison.

The Zhao Ziyang case

The death, on 17 January 2005, of former prime minister, Zhao Ziyang, ex secretary general of the CCP, was reported by *Xinhua* in a cryptic story of about 60 words. His functions within the Party were not even referred to and there was no photo to go with the story. It came with a note to Chinese TV and radio heads not to put out the news.

For fear of demonstrations in tribute to a leader who had been banished since June 1989, the Party imposed a blackout on his death. *Xinhua* was in the forefront of this generalised censorship.

In the same way, in June 2005, the death of Rui Xingwen, a dismissed former head of propaganda, went unreported on the pages of the agency website *Xinhuanet.com*. The death of the former leader who in 1989 relaxed the controls on the media, was however the subject of a brief announcement on Chinese television.

Press freedom

Xinhua does not confine itself to openly scorning the most elementary rules of journalism, it also likes to give lessons. Its favourite target is the United States. During the second war in Iraq, *Xinhua* chose to take the information provided by the Iraqi information minister rather than that of the *Associated Press* (renamed “AP of the United States”). *Xinhua* thus became one of the last mouthpieces of Saddam Hussein’s propaganda machine.

The war in Iraq also provided the Chinese authorities with ideal arguments to condemn “reporting by western media, coming from countries that purport to respect press freedom,

objectivity and justice”. American press reports were regularly termed “fraudulent” or “huge practical jokes” leading *Xinhua* to conclude on 28 March 2003 that it would be “difficult to extol the methods of some western media”. In reports about the progress of the conflict in Iraq, the United States was referred to as “faithless, lawless aggressors”, “the invaders” and even “killers of women and children”, picking up, word for word, the terms used by the regime in Baghdad.

Xinhua does not hesitate to give lessons on issues of journalistic ethics. Its website bears the slogan: “Truth, objectivity, impartiality and promptness, these are the principles that the *Xinhua* agency strictly observes in putting out news.”

There have been a few rare occasions on which reports have raised the problem of press freedom in China, including when local officials prevented journalist from covering an explosion in a mine. *Xinhua* can also take an interest in the difficulties for journalists in other countries. In August, 2005, one story, headlined “Chad: the justice system has the private press in its sights”, went so far as to quote Reporters Without Borders. But once again, the story supports Beijing interests: Chad is one of the few African countries recognizing Taiwan.

Human rights

Xinhua has the role of leading the counter-attack when international human rights organisations and western countries draw attention to the appalling state of freedoms in China.

In one report, on 4 April 2003, a Chinese expert (who oddly asks for anonymity), takes issue with the US State Department 2002 report on human rights in other countries. He condemns the report as “irresponsible” and “not objective”, saying it had “collected unfounded claims and unscrupulously distorted the facts to lie about the state of human rights in China”. This was followed by claims that “major progress has been chalked up in the protection of human rights” claiming among other things that the “Tibetans live with democracy for half a century”.

On the eve of publication of the American report, the agency produced its own four-page report on “the state of human rights in the United States”. It particularly refers to the existence of the death penalty. “The United States is one of very few countries in the world that allows the death penalty for adolescents and the men-



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tally ill: The American authorities confirm that more than 200 of its citizens have been wrongly accused since 1973". The term "American democracy" appears within quotation marks.

Likewise, in April 2005, *Xinhua* devoted a long report to the publication of a white paper by China's State Council on human rights in China in 2004. The agency stresses that the "Chinese enjoy freedom of religious belief". International criticism on the plight of Buddhists in Tibet, Muslims in Xinjiang, Catholics of the Vatican faithful church or followers of Falungong received no mention at all.

Socialist mythology

Finally, there all those reports that pander to the permanent edification of the communist myth through a glorification of the past. They mark the path towards a future of wealth and splendour. The classic one is the rehabilitation of the Great Helmsman. "Film on Mao Zedong revives the inspiration of Chinese film-makers" (27 December 2002). "Some Chinese directors feel great interest in president Mao. His life is of capital importance and is worthy of uninterrupted broadcast even more so since the charm and personality of the glorious deceased continues to speak to the Chinese from one generation to another, said Wang Xuexin, who made the film *Mao and Snow* on the 109th anniversary of the great man's birth."

The article hastens to specify: "This is not at all an order from the government but a voluntary choice of the artists themselves, says Mr Wang, adding that the works in tribute to the revolutionary spirit of Mao were enjoying success with the public, who continue to avow a particular feeling of emotion for Mao (...) The influence of Mao will never die, and abroad many people are impatiently waiting the great artistic works retracing the life of the great helmsman, who influenced the history of the world (...) Film-maker Wang said he was convinced that with the deepening of historical theory and the progress of cinema technology, viewers will be able to see more and more works devoted to Mao." In three paragraphs the name Mao crops up 13 times.

The anti-Japanese demonstrations of April 2005

On 10 April the agency posted a story on its website about violent demonstrations that had taken place in several Chinese cities against the approval by the Japanese education ministry of a history book that played down the crimes committed by the Imperial Army during World

War II. *Xinhua* said: "China is not responsible for the current state of Sino-Japanese relations, according to the spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry (...) The government had called for demonstrators to remain calm, has worked to guarantee the safety of Japanese citizens and organisations in China." At the same time, the international press was revealing that the police had only intervened belatedly to prevent violence.

As anti-Japanese protests spread, the splash story on the front page of the China section of *Xinhuanet.com* was devoted to the opening of an international peony festival...

What Xinhua says and what it hides

A Belgian student in political science carried out an analysis in April 2005 of the content of the French pages on the *Xinhua* site. He found that 80% of stories on Chinese news gave a positive view of the situation in the Middle Kingdom. In detail, most of the stories were based on the activities of an official. The study quoted the headlines for the main stories on the China section for 5 April: "A Chinese vice premier meets Japanese guests", "A ranking Chinese military official seeks more cooperation with Italy" and so on. China's friendly and well meaning role in Asia is particularly stressed.

This study sheds light on the constant feature of *Xinhua's* handling of news: the systematic absence of critical voices. Official comments are reproduced exactly, which is supposed to be an indication of credibility.

The stance of foreign officials are extensively reported when they are in the interests of China. A Colombian government statement on 7 April backing Beijing on Taiwan and human rights, was the subject of a long report. In the same way, no critical reaction – although there were many – was picked up by *Xinhua* to the anti-secession law adopted by China against Taiwan. But support from Romania, a Croatian parliamentarian, from Algeria and the president of Sir Lanka, were put out by the agency.

Despite all this, *Xinhua* should not be compared with the North Korean news agency. It is possible to find critical messages on the agency's discussion forums on the Internet. China's problems are also cautiously raised. There are also articles on the very large number of mining and other industrial accidents. The figures are sometimes minimised, the reasons for the trag-



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edies hidden, but the agency is always quick to point out that the authorities have ordered an investigation. A report on 5 April 2005, announced that 300,000 people had died in accidents in the first third of the year, but nothing is given about the various types of accidents involved. On the other hand, the journalist does specify that the figure has fallen by more than 4 %.

***Xinhua*: spokesman for the worst regimes**

Again recently, *Xinhua* described as “modern agrarian reform” the expropriation of farmland in Zimbabwe. And Chinese journalists never called Saddam Hussein a dictator, while Coalition forces in Iraq were called invaders. Moreover Fidel Castro should never be called a dictator. A North American journalist working for *Radio China International* found that out the hard way a few years ago. The blunder got him sacked.

Burma, Sudan and Pakistan are all equally well treated by the agency. North Korea has favourable treatment. During 2005 talks over North Korea's nuclear programme, the United States was, in the eyes of *Xinhua*, always responsible for any stalling in negotiations. On the other hand, the attacks against the imperialists by the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il were extensively reproduced.

Iran, which in April 2005 was in outright conflict with the United States over nuclear weapons, got favourable treatment. Ten stories were published in ten days, almost all replicating the point of view of the Tehran authorities. Same thing on 7 April 2005, a story headlined “Iran: Khamenei calls for resistance to the American plan for the Middle East” made very clear China's support for countries fighting against the “western democracy” model.

Conclusions

Journalism professor at Beijing University, Jiao Guobiao, posted a pamphlet online in which he enumerated the “14 afflictions of the Propaganda Department”. The academic considered that this organ of the Party “using methods worthy of Nazi Germany”, “murders the Constitution”, betrays “the high ideals of the Chinese Communist party”, shows “insensitivity and stupidity”, and protects “malicious and corrupt people” Jiao, born in 1963, author of this new “J'accuse” was forced to leave his country under official pressure.

Jiao Guobiao's crime was to have attacked the heart of the censorship and propaganda system. In fact, this body, bastion of the conservatives, is one of the military wings of the regime. Its heads, summon media bosses and journalists, lay down which subjects are banned and go all out to purge website of subversive content. The Propaganda Department also has the goal of maintaining *Xinhua*'s monopoly on news production.

In May 2005, an organ of the Communist Party Central Committee, handed the media a new series of regulations reinforcing the predominance of official national media. This banned journalists in the regional press from “criticising” the authorities of provinces other than their own. It also ordered journalists to contact representatives of the Central Committee or every individual involved before putting out negative news. These decisions are clearly designed to strengthen the predominance of *Xinhua*.

Likewise, in January 2004, the government began a series of reforms of the written press so as to “rejuvenate the news industry”. It immediately stressed that semi-private press groups which would emerge, would have to continue to adhere to the ideas of the CCP and respect its quota of articles and commentaries put out by the official agency.

As Michel Wu explains it, a journalist who was dismissed from *Xinhua* after refusing to work following the 1989 Beijing Spring, “Basically, the procedures of the Chinese Communist Party have remained unchanged for 50 years, and this despite international protest campaigns”. Centralised news and information is always de rigueur and the sole party aims to keep control of the press when it comes to sensitive issues.

Three years before the start of the Beijing Olympic Games, the Chinese authorities must urgently begin serious and far-reaching reform official media. It is also the duty of the international community and particularly the International Olympic Committee, to remind Beijing of its commitments on the issues of transparency and freedom of information.