

## Press freedom in China three months before the Olympics

There were 14 journalists and 10 cyber-dissidents in prison in July 2001, when the Chinese government promised the International Olympic Committee that press freedom would be fully guaranteed before and during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Today there are about 100 journalists, cyber-dissidents, Internet users and free speech activists in prison in China. The latest to be arrested was blogger Hu Jia last December. He has been sentenced to three and a half years in prison for posting three critical articles on a website based abroad and for answering questions put to him by foreign reporters.

Press freedom is still not guaranteed in China despite the attempts of certain news media to push back the limits imposed by the Propaganda Department. The Chinese media still operate under the thumb of state censorship. As recent events in Tibet highlighted, the government still retains a monopoly of news coverage of sensitive subjects.

“At the newspaper, whenever there is a story involving Party leaders, official appointments or international issues such as North Korea, we know we have to wait for the *Xinhua* dispatch,” a *Beijing News* journalist told Reporters Without Borders, referring to the official news agency. “It is too risky to publish anything before that. “Everyone knows what the forbidden topics are – minorities, religious freedom and the Falungong.”

The government does not hesitate to call liberal news media to order. The business magazine *Caijing*, a favourite source of news and information for the international community, was forced to censor an article in March 2007 about the adoption of new legislation on private property. The magazine was also forced to remove articles from its website.

The crisis in Tibet and the international protests during the Olympic torch relay have reawakened the demons of Chinese nationalism. With the government’s blessing, Internet users, certain journalists and ordinary Chinese citizens have embarked on a war against “Tibetan separatists” and all those who support them, including the international media. Journalists with liberal media such as the newspaper *Nanfang Dushi Bao* have been harassed for editorials considered too timid.

### “Olympic prisoners”

Dissidents who have campaigned about the situation of human rights and freedoms in the run-up to the Olympic Games are dealt with ruthlessly. The case that has received the most media attention is that of activist Hu Jia. His imprisonment was prompted by the key role he was playing in reporting human rights violations to the foreign press and diplomats. In arresting and punishing Hu, the government sent a very clear message to Chinese dissidents: “Watch out. You will suffer the same fate if you talk to foreigners about the Olympic Games.”

The authorities also sent a warning to the foreign press: “You see. The one you adore to interview, we can arrest him at any time and sentence him to several years in prison without anyone being able to stop us.” The government has also thumbed its nose at the western embassies, especially the European ones, who had found Hu to be a moderate and charismatic dissident they could meet in Beijing.

In an act of extraordinary cynicism, the indictment prepared by the political police and prosecutors included mention of two interviews Hu gave to foreign news media.

Other people have been jailed for speaking out. Human rights activist Zheng Mingfang was sent to a reeducation-through-work camp for two years at the start of this month because she wrote an open letter about the Olympic Games. Yang Chunlin, the initiator of the “We want human rights not Olympic Games” campaign, was sentenced to five years in prison in March by an intermediate court in the northeastern city of Jiamusi. Two other promoters of the campaign, Wang Guilin and Yu Changwu, were also arrested. Wang Lianmin, the resident of a Beijing neighbourhood being torn down to make way for Olympic installations, was arrested in mid-April for objecting to the demolition of his home.

Chinese contributors to news websites based abroad have also been the targets of repression. Around 10 contributors to *Boxun*, a site based in the United States, are currently in prison. *Boxun* correspondent Sun Lin was arrested on 30 May in the eastern city of Nanjing after reporting cases of abuse of authority, including by means of videos posted on the site. Huang Jinqiu, another regular *Boxun* correspondent, has been held since 2003 and is serving a 12-year jail sentence for “subverting state authority” in the eastern province of Jiangsu. Cyber-dissident and blogger He Weihua was forcibly confined to a psychiatric hospital in the southern province of Hunan in August 2007. His family said it was because of entries in his blog ([www.boxun.com/hero/hewh/](http://www.boxun.com/hero/hewh/)).

### **Journalists held in appalling conditions**

Prison conditions are harsh and most prisoners of conscience are forced to work. Hong Kong-based reporter Ching Cheong was held in a prison in Guangzhou until he was freed on 5 February, two years before completing his sentence. Prior to his release, his wife described his prison conditions to Reporters Without Borders: “He is in a cell with 12 other inmates, most of them criminals serving long sentences. There are two factories in the prison. He has to work eight hours a day, with additional hours twice a week, until 9 pm. He makes police uniforms. The prisoners are not paid.”

His wife added: “Ching had a problem with high blood pressure before his arrest, but it flared up only two or three times a year. Now he has it all the time. He is suffering as result of the military discipline in the prison. He has lost 15 kilos since his arrest. You already know that the first month, when he was held in Beijing, was extremely tough. The way he was treated could be regarded as mental torture.”

Shi Tao, a journalist serving a 10-year prison sentence for sending an email abroad whose content was classified, is made to polish jewels and his health has deteriorated as a result of this forced labour.

Lawyer and cyber-dissident Guo Feixiong was mistreated during the interrogation sessions that followed his arrest in September 2006. His wife wrote to the United Nations special rapporteur

on torture in June 2007. He was tied to his bed for weeks and then was prevented from sleeping for several days. He went on hunger strike for nearly 40 days to protest against the way he was being treated. The authorities have never forgiven him for his book "The political earthquake in Shenyang" exposing the corruption of officials in Shenyang, in the northeastern province of Liaoning.

### **Tibet – blackout and propaganda**

The Chinese news media in China and abroad have been ordered to portray Tibetans as "rioters" and "terrorists." The official news agency *Xinhua* reported on 16 April that the authorities had found firearms, dynamite and satellite dishes in 11 monasteries in Gansu province. Tibetan singer and TV presenter Jamyang Kyi was arrested on 1 April in her office in the state-owned *Qinghai Television* station in Xining, the capital of the western province of Qinghai.

To prevent the Tibetan population from getting access to uncensored news reports, the authorities have stepped up the jamming of international radio stations such as *Voice of Tibet* and *Radio Free Asia* that broadcast in Tibetan. "We have noted a significant increasing in jamming since 16 March, especially in the cities where the government has invested tens of millions of dollars to install antennae to prevent Tibetans from listening to us," *Voice of Tibet* manager Oystein Alme told Reporters Without Borders.

In Xinjiang, whose original inhabitants are Muslim Uyghurs, the lack of freedom of expression is especially dramatic. Ablikim Abdiriyim, one of the sons of the well-known exiled activist Rebiya Kadeer, was sentenced to nine years in prison last year for posting "separatist" articles online. *Xinhua* said he had misrepresented "human rights and ethnic policy in China."

### **Will journalists be free to work during the games?**

A climate of tension and hostility awaits the tens of thousands of journalists who are going to arrive in Beijing and other parts of China. The government boasted that it would offer ideal conditions for the foreign press, stressing the progress achieved thanks to the adoption of new rules in January 2007 guaranteeing that, until October 2008, foreign journalists would have an unprecedented degree of freedom to circulate and interview people.

These very real improvements were cited by both the Chinese government and the International Olympic Committee, which was pleased to be able to say the games were bringing press freedom to China. But the crisis in Tibet has shattered the slim progress that was made. The region has been closed to the press and more than 60 journalists have been arrested, intimidated or forced to retrace their steps when they tried to visit regions with a Tibetan population.

The authorities have compiled files on around 30,000 journalists who will be accredited for the Olympic Games. Officially, the aim is to identify "false journalists" and to help Chinese officials respond to interview requests. But the government has not said exactly what kind of information is being collected. The plan to keep files on foreign reporters was confirmed by a foreign consultant working for the committee organising the games. The State Security Department has been given the job of drawing up a list of reporters and activists who could "disrupt" the games.

## **Impossible to report**

The police have orders to turn back foreign journalists who try to visit the homes of dissidents or supporters of reform, or villages where there has been unrest. Seven journalists were arrested or attacked in 2007 when they tried to visit the village of Shengyou, south of Beijing, where thugs in the pay of local officials killed six people and injured 40 others in 2005. Among those who tried unsuccessfully to cover the story were journalists from *Agence France-Presse* and the *BBC World Service*, and Swiss TV correspondent Barbara Luthi, who was hit by policemen. Thugs recruited by the police threw stones at German reporters who tried to approach the home of the wife of imprisoned blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng.

Only a very small minority of the thousands of foreign reporters speak Chinese and, if they want to do non-sport stories, they will have to find Chinese journalists and translators ready to take risks. In the Handbook for Olympic Games Correspondents that was written by the Chinese authorities, journalists who need an interpreter are advised to contact bodies accredited with the government.

“Fixers” – people who not only interpret but also help foreign reporters organise everything they need for story – are still thin in the ground in China and are liable to be harassed by the police. The case of Zhao Yan, a Chinese journalist who worked as a researcher for the *New York Times*, showed that fixing continues to be a risky trade. He has just served a three-year jail sentence that was designed to intimidate any other Chinese journalists thinking of “betraying” their country by working for the foreign press. Chinese law still does not allow foreign news media to hire Chinese as journalists.

## **Open hostility to the foreign media**

Since 10 March, when monks staged their first protest march in Lhasa, there have been a number of more or less spontaneous demonstrations against foreign news media that are perceived as being anti-Chinese. As the last journalists were being forcibly expelled from Tibet, Internet users and the official press began their attacks against the “Dalai Lama’s clique” and the western media which, according to them, were paying excessive and biased attention to the new Tibetan revolt.

Although it is impossible to post a message about Tibet on the Chinese Internet without it first being filtered and checked by cyber-censors, calls for death to the “Tibetan separatists” appeared online. A few days later, after the fiasco of the organised visit to Lhasa for 20 foreign correspondents, there were death threats against the foreign news media.

This virulent campaign has in particular targeted *CNN*’s correspondents, who are accused of being “leaders of the liars” and racists. An “Anti-CNN” website ([www.anti-cnn.com](http://www.anti-cnn.com)) condemns the lies of the Atlanta-based network and other western media and urges Chinese to send faxes and emails to *CNN* to demand that it apologise. Mistakes in identifying the origin of photos or video footage are portrayed as clear evidence that foreign reporters are “anti-Chinese liars.” And when a *CNN* commentator voiced a rather crude attack on the Chinese government, the entire Chinese nation was “insulted” and insisted on an apology.

Hundreds of insulting messages such as “You [American] running dogs are not welcome in China, you are going to pay for your biased reports” and threatening ones such as “Sooner or later I am going to kill you” are being sent to Beijing-based reporters. And the personal contact details of many journalists, including those of the *Associated Press*, the *Wall Street Journal* and

*USA Today*, were posted on Chinese websites at the end of March, thereby offering easy targets for nationalists who have been given the green light to protest.

In view of the scale of the crisis, the Foreign Correspondents Club sent a security circular to all its members on 7 April. It advised them to contact their embassies, not give out their personal contact details, inform colleagues about their movements and to make a note of the most significant threats.

The Chinese foreign ministry said the government, which has never made a priority of the safety of foreign journalists, was not in a position to control the messages.

### **Doing propaganda's bidding**

The Chinese press is very enthusiastic about the games. Several publications, radio stations, websites and TV channels have been created specially for the occasion. But as always, the censors are vigilant. A Propaganda Department order at the end of 2007 reminded the media that pollution and public health stories had to be covered in a positive manner.

In November, an internal document detailed the different forms of censorship. The Propaganda Department warned publications, in the form of a glossary, to comply with "the rules of discipline set up for news." The instructions were clear: "(1) 'Reporting banned' means it is forbidden to write a report on this subject. (2) 'Don't send a reporter' means permission to publish the standard article from the *Xinhua* agency or to copy the reports, article (contribution) from a local media. (3) 'Ban on criticism' means no comment on the remarks, including with a cartoon."

The news media know they cannot defy orders from Beijing. Dozens of journalists are the victims of purges every year. Huang Liangtian was ousted from the editorship of the monthly *Bai Xing* (The Masses) at the start of 2007, and appointed to a small agricultural magazine, after he investigated harsh conditions in rural areas. He had also revealed that the administration of a poor region of central Henan province had built a square larger than Tiananmen in Beijing.

"I doubt that freedom of the press will improve for government media and I am sad that my life as a journalist stops here," Huang told Reporters Without Borders. In July, it was the turn of Pang Jiaoming of *China Economic Times* to be sanctioned by the authorities for publishing a story about the poor quality of construction materials for the rail tracks of China's first high speed train, linking Wuhan to Quanzhou.

Despite repeated calls from the European Union and the United States, the Chinese government refuses to change the rules governing foreign news agencies in China in order not to lose its monopoly of domestic news agency operations and the resulting political control. The government continues to insist that, when it joined the World Trade Organisation, it did not sign any provision that requires it to open up the financial news market. The Chinese media do not have the right to buy news reports, photos or videos directly from foreign news agencies.

### **Chinese version of Big Brother**

Control of the Internet is another area in which China excels. Patrolling by "cyber-police" has been established in several big cities since 2007 in order to monitor Internet connections and encourage people to report violations. More than 20 companies, some American, were forced to sign a "self-discipline pact" that forces them to censor the content of the blogs they host in China and to ask bloggers to provide their real identities.

Many website were closed during the 17th Communist Party Congress in Beijing in October. The best-known forums on news websites were closed “as a precaution” for the duration of the Congress so that no reports should stray from the official line fixed by the authorities. Reporters Without Borders marked the occasion by releasing a report, compiled by a Chinese Internet technician, detailing the Internet censorship system in China. Five government offices have services dedicated to surveillance of the content of websites and emails.

At least 50 cyber-dissidents are currently in jail in China for exercising their right to freedom of expression online. Chinese authorities have closed websites in Tibet, in particular the discussion forum most used by Tibetan students (<http://www.tibet123.com>), depriving them of the means of expressing their opinion about government policies. In July, the authorities closed the Mongolian Youth Forum ([www.mglzaluus.com/bbs](http://www.mglzaluus.com/bbs)), a discussion forum that is very popular in the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia. One of its organisers said the authorities complained that discussion frequently addressed “ethnic problems” in the province.

Highly sensitive firewalls have also been put in place. The Reporters Without Borders Chinese-language website ([www.rsf-chinese.org](http://www.rsf-chinese.org)) was blocked within hours of its launch at the end of May. The cyber-police evidently use software that filters keywords. Without any concern for the consequences for Chinese Internet users, all IP addresses linked to a website deemed undesirable are blocked without warning.

Access to Internet sites such as the English-language versions of Wikipedia, YouTube and Blogspot were unblocked on 1 April at the request of the International Olympic Committee and certain European governments. But the Chinese-language versions of these sites are still blocked as are most of the Chinese news sites that are based overseas.

### **Broken promises**

The promise made by Olympics Games organiser Wang Wei in Moscow in July 2001 “to give foreign media complete freedom of reporting” is far from being respected. And most China-based foreign reporters agree with this assessment. When the Foreign Correspondents Club asked its members last year if Wang Wei’s promise had been kept, 67 per cent replied “No” and only 8.6 per cent said “Yes.”