

Upheaval in China; Boldly and Subtly, China's Press Tests Limits . . .

By **SHERYL WUDUNN** and **SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES** MAY 24, 1989

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Not many Chinese follow Italian politics, so perhaps it was a bit surprising for People's Daily to carry a small front-page article Sunday on the resignation of the Italian Government.

But in China, where subtlety is a way of journalism as of life, the message was obvious: China's Government should think about resigning as well. Such hints are still as much a part of Chinese newspapers as ink and paper, but the last few weeks has seen a minor revolution in what newspapers can publish.

As a result, the hints are getting ever bolder, and sometimes newspapers even make their point outright. In a dramatic contrast to the press coverage before the student demonstrations began more than five weeks ago, China's news organizations can now cover events that the Government would perhaps rather hush up.

Some say a semi-independent press may be the democracy movement's greatest achievement and a significant spur to further liberalization. 'More Transparency'

"The real victory of student demonstrations may be freedom of the press, and that press freedom is here to stay," said Fei Xiaodong, a journalist in Beijing at China's boldest newspaper, the Shanghai-based World Economic Herald. "Maybe

there won't be as much as there was at the peak before martial law, but it will be better than before the demonstrations."

Journalists hesitate to call the change a revolution, and they caution that whatever independence they have won so far could be lost if the Chinese leaders in control want to clamp down. Much depends on developments in the power struggle now taking place at the highest levels.

But the journalists assert that the demonstrations have helped extend the boundaries of what they may publish in their papers.

"There is more transparency, and all kinds of voices are reflected in the newspapers now," said Fan Rongkang, deputy editor in chief at the official People's Daily. **Journalists Join Protests**

Many Chinese regard freedom of the press as important not only for itself, but also as a key milestone on the road to democracy. They see an independent press as an institution that can supervise the Government and check its power, while at the same time disseminating ideas and information and hastening the entire democratic process.

China's press has always been tightly controlled by the Government and the Communist Party, or at least by factions within them. While the Soviet Union has gone far with glasnost, China has been much slower to liberalize its restrictions on information.

When pro-democracy demonstrations broke out in mid-April, they might as well not have happened, as far as the news organizations were concerned. Newspapers and other news organizations were ordered not to mention the protests except as an outpouring of expression for Hu Yaobang, the former Communist Party leader, who died April 15.

As reporters tired of writing articles that were never published, the journalists sent petitions to the Government and took to the streets, marching under the banners of their own newspapers. Journalists and editors from nearly all the news organizations, including the Communist Party's People's Daily and the Government-run New China News Agency, joined in the student marches for greater press freedom. **Subtle Tactics After Crackdown**

The transformation began with an article or two on the movement in each paper. That multiplied into several articles and numerous pictures in each day's paper.

"It's a milestone, it's very great progress," said Li Datong, an editor at China

Youth News, and one of the organizers in the journalist demonstrations. "For the time being the authorities have relaxed and loosened their control, but since it is not an institutional improvement, they can tighten their control again."

In the last five weeks, news organizations witnessed a startling transformation to what was for a Communist country a remarkably independent press. Then, on Saturday morning, came martial law, and all bets were off.

News organizations suddenly assumed a more cautious attitude, printing fewer articles that were not authorized, but it was not a full-scale retreat. Instead of openly criticizing the Government, newspapers tried more subtle tactics.

Placement of Articles

People's Daily on Monday published a front-page article about a Hungarian leader objecting to the use of army troops to solve domestic problems. That was a slap at Prime Minister Li Peng after his attempt to call army troops to the capital to suppress the democracy movement.

A journalist at the newspaper confirmed that the placement of the article was intended as a criticism of Prime Minister Li and his policies. He recalled the glee in the newsroom when the Hungarian leader's comment was found, and it was realized that it could be printed on the front page.

Television news and radio broadcasts have recently included daily reports on the student protests. In a subtle indication that army troops are dissatisfied with their mission to quell students, the television news today carried an illuminating interview with an officer in the military. The news tonight was clearly trying to embarrass Mr. Li by undermining the likelihood that his order for martial law would be carried out.

"As soldiers, it is our bounden duty to obey orders," the major told the reporter for the Central China Television news agency. "But we will never fire at the people."

Then, the television reporter asked the kind of leading question that is rarely seen, "Haven't you received an order to move away?"

The major answered, "Retreat, retreat."

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