

Former SCMP Hacks Appeal to Change Paper's Direction
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By Our Correspondent

Open letter to Exec Director Hui Kuok expresses concern that paper seeks to please Beijing

Twenty-three journalists who formerly worked for the South China Morning Post have written an open letter to the paper's group executive director, Hui Kuok, expressing their concern that critical coverage of China is being abandoned in order to please the Communist authorities in Beijing.

The letter, signed by journalists who are now based in different parts of the world including Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Beijing, Australia and the UK, expressed concerns about the developments at the Post. It is the latest salvo in the war over the English-language daily's journalistic soul in the era of editor-in-chief Wang Xiangwei, the mainland-born journalist who traces his antecedents to the Chinese government's state-owned China Daily and his membership in the Jilin Chinese People's Consultative Congress.

Critics both inside and outside the paper say Wang has been steadily getting rid of western journalists and replacing them with colleagues from Beijing, particularly the China Daily. Hui Kuok is the youngest child of Malaysian sugar tycoon Robert Kuok, who bought a controlling interest in the newspaper in 1993. She is responsible for the media group's operations and businesses. It has long been pointed out that the Post, while never particularly aggressive, has throughout the last several decades been one of the most complete recorders of news about China from its vantage point in Hong Kong. Both Willy Lam and Jasper Becker, bureau chiefs in Beijing, were fired long before Wang came on the scene in February.

"The South China Morning Post has never been a radical publication, but it has served the people of Hong Kong for 100 years by providing them with accurate and timely information," the letter said. "It is now widely believed that the paper's main priority is no longer to continue this fine tradition, but to please the authorities in Beijing."

The current controversy at the paper broke open in early June when Alex Price, a senior sub-editor at the paper, questioned a decision by Wang to reduce a major breaking story on the suspicious death of Tiananmen dissident Li Wangyang in a Hunan hospital to a brief.

Price sent Wang an email saying "A lot of people are wondering why we nibbled the Li Wangyang story last night. It does seem rather odd. Any chance you can shed some light on the matter?" That generated a series of emails during which Wang said "I don't have to explain to you anything. I made the decision and I stand by it. If you don't like it, you know what to do."

After some additional exchanges, Price sent the emails to some colleagues who leaked them to outsiders. Asia Sentinel broke the story on June 19 and subsequently Hong Kong's Chinese press had a field day with it. Remarkably, Price has so far managed to keep his job.

Wang later sought to justify his decision to the staff by saying the story over Li's death had received little or no coverage on CCTV, the Chinese government's stated-owned television news service.

"The latest dispute over the curtailed coverage of the Li Wangyang story has angered a great many of the Post's traditional readers and supporters," the former Post journalists said in the letter. "It suggests that the charges of the paper's critics are justified. We understand that news judgments have to be made in haste and occasional errors are to be expected. "Some of the explanations for the Li Wangwang decision suggest, though, that a change in policy has taken place. The idea that the story needed to be downplayed because it had received little or no coverage on CCTV is unworthy of the Post's traditions as an independent and enterprising newspaper. CCTV no doubt has a role as a source of information. If used as an indicator of news values it is a source of ignorance.

"We are distressed to hear that a senior editor who asked about the decision was told that "if you don't like it you know what to do". We would like to believe that this was a careless piece of phraseology penned in a moment of excitement but it sounds suspiciously as if staff are no longer expected to understand or support the newspaper's policy, merely to follow instructions.

"We are concerned by all this not only because we were once happy and proud to work for the Post, and do not like to see its reputation deteriorate, but also because the newspaper has historically been an important civic resource for the people of Hong Kong. It will be a serious public loss if the newspaper continues to go downhill.

"The constant changes in the editorship of the Post suggest that either the owners do not know what they want, or they want something that no credible senior journalists will provide. We urge you to protect and cherish the South China Morning Post's traditions of independence, truthfulness and service to its readers.

"We urge you to ensure that stories are evaluated on the basis of their interest to Hong Kong readers. We urge you to ensure that Post journalists are able to work according to an explicit and understood editorial policy. We urge you to encourage the newspaper's management to give civil answers to civil questions. We hope that our connections with the Post will continue to be a source of pride, in its continuing commitment to independence, accuracy and public service."

Inside the paper, there seems to be little indication that Wang and his management team are paying any attention to the criticism. One source told Asia Sentinel the editor continues to tighten his grip, extending his influence to the editorial page and arguing that more pro-China and pro-Hong Kong government editorials appear.

The signatories to the letter follow:

- Kitty Au
- Jonathan Braude
- Jasper Becker
- Ellen Chan
- Will Clem

- Steve Cray
- David Evans
- Katherine Forestier
- Danny Gittings
- Tim Hamlett
- Fong Tak-ho
- Lydia Ho
- Carol Lai
- Chloe Lai
- Willy Lam
- Angel Lau
- Shirley Lau
- Eddie Lee
- Lieu Siew Ying
- Sheila McNamara
- James Moore
- Paul Mooney
- Dustin Shum

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