

**Journalistic ethics questioned at SCMP**  
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**By Our Correspondent**

***So why was Li Wangyang's suicide not news – at first?***

A decision by the South China Morning Post's new editor in chief, Wang Xiangwei, to reduce a major breaking story on the suspicious death of Tiananmen dissident Li Wangyang in a Hunan hospital to a brief has kicked off a new controversy at the paper.

Alex Price, a senior sub editor at the paper, 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?"

Wang answered curtly: "I made that decision." When Price asked in a subsequent email: "Any chance you say why? It's just that to the outside world it looks an awful lot like self-censorship," it generated an explosion from Wang.

"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."

"Li Wangyang, a good man died for his cause and we turned it from a story into a brief. The rest of Hong Kong splashed on it," Price responded. "Your staff are understandably concerned by this. News is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations. Please explain the decision to reduce the suspicious death of Li Wangyang to a brief. I need to be able to explain it to my friends who are asking why we did it. I'm sorry but your reply of "it is my decision, if you don't like it you know what to do" is not enough in such a situation. Frankly it seems to be saying "shut up or go."

The paper subsequently went all-out on the story, carried a full focus page devoted to the matter, plus editorials, two columns by Wang and other stories. "Yet on the day it counted we reduced the story to a nib. Journalistic ethics are at stake. The credibility of the South China Morning Post is at stake. Your staff - and readers - deserve an answer," Price said.

Price subsequently sent the email exchange to a wide range of colleagues and others. He is said to fear for his job.

The exchange has raised fears that what has long been regarded as one of Asia's most influential English-language voices has begun to bow to Beijing under Wang, the paper's first mainland-born editor and a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress.

"I think it's important for the SCMP to come out and clarify the situation," said Mak Yinting, chairperson of the Hong Kong Journalists Association. "From a managerial point of view, it is important for Wang Xiangwei to communicate with his colleagues. Now there has been doubt raised. Wang's reaction seems to close the door for explanation. Second, the Chinese-language papers have questioned why they carried that brief on the first day. It is now a public issue because self-censorship will weaken the credibility of

the paper. I urge the SCMP to explain to the public whether it was only bad judgment or self-censorship.”

Li Wangyang’s suicide came days after he spoke to a Hong Kong TV channel, recounting two decades of harsh imprisonment and torture which left his sight and hearing severely damaged. Hong Kong politicians, including York Chow, Hong Kong’s secretary for food and health, have questioned why a frail man who had survived relentless torture for so long, would suddenly decide to hang himself - or even have the strength to do so. Even incoming chief executive Leung Chun-ying, who himself has been accused of being too close to Beijing, observed a minute’s silence to mourn Li.

Many pro-Beijing comrades in Hong Kong have also uncharacteristically raised their voices asking for full investigation and disclosure. This is an election year in Hong Kong for expanded legislative seats and emotions have run high on Beijing’s unrectified verdict on the Tiananmen students. The pro-Beijing parties fear there could be a backlash. There was a record turnout of 180,000 people for the June 4 anniversary vigil in Victoria Park. The march that erupted on June 10 after Li Wangyang’s suspicious suicide vented more anger against the blatant disregard for human rights in China.

### **Xiangwei the final nail in SCMP coffin?**

When Wang Xiangwei was appointed editor-in-chief of the territory’s 110-year-old paper of record, many industry professionals had misgivings. The more optimistic hoped that the independent journalistic traditions at the century-old paper would prevail over political correctness.

Wang was invited to articulate his intentions for the paper at Hong Kong’s Foreign Correspondents’ Club in April this year. The audience was none the wiser for his talk but Xiangwei pledged to uphold journalistic standards of reporting ‘without fear or favor.’ The spin was predictable.

He did say that two months was too short a time to judge his editorship and asked his FCC audience to invite him back in six months. They should. He has a lot to answer for which is depressing for journalism at one of Asia’s long admired English language newspapers. The sorry journalism at the Straits Times in Singapore, the discredited mainstream media in Malaysia and Burma and the woefully provincial press in Manila, all explain why the SCMP is such a relief to read. For how much longer?

The hiccups which SCMP has gone through with the serial termination of political cartoonists and China reporters continue to reverberate. Is Wang Xiangwei the final nail on the coffin? The spin-doctors at the China Liaison Office (HQ for ‘united front’ activities) could not have wished for a more effective liaison.

### **More insightful China analysis**

It is generally acknowledged that the SCMP’s China news coverage, commentary and analysis is consistently superior to any international newspaper. That is largely due to Xiangwei’s knowledge of and access to the inner networks of the PRC government, party and academics.

As a CPPCC member at the national level, Xiangwei would not be considered a security risk. He is not categorized as a dissident or Westernized liberal. He has considerable leeway in editorial commentary so long as his facts stand up and he stays aloof from factional politics.

The bosses in Beijing are quite relaxed about their man in power at the SCMP. His instinct on 'sensitive' issues are 'reliable' as the Li Wangyang incident has shown. President Hu Jintao is due to visit Hong Kong on July 1 for the 15th anniversary of the handover. The minders at the Hong Kong & Macau Affairs Office and the China Liaison Office are nervous of demonstrations during that high-profile visit.

After the other Hong Kong papers covered Li Wangyang's suicide comprehensively, the SCMP ultimately rejoined the queue with strong features, editorials and commentary. Xiangwei obviously looks over his shoulder before treading on sensitive issues.

### **Editor-in-Chief needs to be a leader too**

What is emerging from the SCMP newsroom is that Wang Xiangwei lacks people skills, organizational ability and respect for time. He has been known to confirm appointments with his subordinates which then drift by for hours or days. He is dismissive of subordinates who query his edicts. He does not share his vision for the paper or articulate any clear editorial philosophy for his journalists. His news conference style is not participative.

Like a mandarin in office, he is imperious and aloof. In a creative environment of writers and analysts, that does not sit well. The lack of inspirational leadership in the newsroom is a damper for most who looked forward to the change from its last editor-in-chief who co-operated in gutting the senior echelon.

More Beijing talent from Xiangwei's network are being appointed to senior positions and Western journalists are feeling unwelcome.

The Malaysian trio who were brought in earlier have departed for a new era of Singaporean chiefs following the appointment of former Singapore foreign minister George Yeo as vice-chairman of Kerry Group (a unit of Kuok Group) from January this year. Kerry Group has a controlling interest in the SCMP.

Replacing western journalists and introducing security department officials into supervisory positions at the Straits Times is well known throughout the industry. The South China Morning Post will have the benefit of this media muzzling expertise from its new advisers.

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