

**Prize-Winning Reporter Driven out of SCMP  
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By Paul Mooney**

***Editor Wang Xiangwei says the East is Red***

On April 22, Wang Xiangwei, the new editor-in-chief of the South China Morning Post, informed me that my contract with the newspaper would not be renewed when it expired on May 21. I can't say I was surprised.

Sitting in a hotel restaurant in Hong Kong on a hot April day, Wang stared down at the table as the conversation began, seemingly unwilling to make eye contact. After a few minutes of chit chat, I asked him directly about my contract. He fidgeted and said he would not be able to renew it due to budget problems.

To me it was clear that this was a political decision. For seven months, he had basically blocked me from writing any China stories for the newspaper. During that period, I only had two stories in the China pages of the newspaper—one on panda bears and one on compensation for AIDS victims. Some two dozen other story suggestions went unanswered by the China Desk—in one case a story was approved, but the editor told me Wang had overruled him. A half-dozen emails to Wang pleading to write more for the newspaper went unanswered.

It certainly was not about money. Following my departure, Wang hired a spate of new young reporters, many apparently from the mainland. And if there were budget problems, why was I chosen to be let go? Obviously, there were newer people at the newspaper than myself. I had been on contract for two years, and wrote my first article for the newspaper in 1990, some 22 years ago. And I'd won 10 awards for my reporting for the newspaper, more than any other staff reporter.

When I offered to freelance and said I didn't care about the word rate, he hemmed and hawed. When I asked if the newspaper could at least allow me to keep my journalist accreditation with the South China Morning Post, so I could continue to contribute articles to the newspaper, he muttered something about having to think about it. Despite several emails asking about this, he never agreed to do this. And there was no cost in sponsoring me.

When the news came last year that Wang had been appointed the editor-in-chief, I was quite surprised. For one, despite talk of him being a veteran journalist, he had little actual practical experience doing real journalism—far less than a lot of his staff. Wang had worked for the China Daily, done a master's degree in journalism and had gone off to London on a training program, where he worked briefly for the BBC. As far as I know, he never "pounded the sidewalks," as we American journalists say of a reporter who has spent years roaming around doing interviews.

He'd shown weakness in news judgment on many occasions, but more important, he'd long had a reputation as being a censor of the news, which may be what endeared him to Mr. Robert Kuok, the Malaysian tycoon who owns the newspaper, and his son and daughter, who took turns running it.

Talk to anyone on the China reporting team at the South China Morning Post and they'll tell you a story about how Wang has cut their stories, or asked them to do an uninteresting story that was favorable to China.

Last November, I traveled to the US on holiday and decided to take a train to meet Geng He, the wife of rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who had snuck past Chinese security guarding their Beijing home with a young son and daughter, making it all the way to Thailand and eventually political asylum in the US.

During a three-hour interview in a highway Burger King, Ms. Geng gave me unreported details about the harrowing escape through Southeast Asian jungles, much of it in the middle of the night. She cried as she talked about her husband's treatment by brutal security people, and she smiled when she recalled her husband's dedication as a lawyer. Tears fell as she described the difficulties the family was facing in the US. Both children had been seriously affected by the treatment of their father here in China, which included serious torture and forced disappearances for lengthy periods.

An editor expressed interest in the story, but got back to me later in the day to tell me that Wang had spiked it. No reason was given.

When I was the second foreign reporter to see Gao during his brief respite from being disappeared, Editor-in-chief Reg Chua and Deputy Editor David Lague had a bitter argument with Wang, who was not keen to run the story. They wanted it on the front page, but Wang wanted it buried inside. They compromised by putting the story inside and cutting it slightly. Gao Zhisheng was obviously on Wang's list of people not to be reported about.

When the government began its nasty crackdown against rights lawyers and other dissidents last year, one that saw people have black hoods thrown over their heads before being stuffed into cars, and then being taken to hidden locations, where most endured horrible torture, I saw an unprecedented pattern of intimidation and pain that clearly marked a new and frightening trend and so I suggested a story to the China Desk (David Lague, the deputy editor, was on holiday at the time). The story was immediately rejected by a China Desk editor, who said the newspaper had reported on tortured lawyers already. I wrote a short note saying this was a new and different trend, but I knew it would go unanswered.

When David Lague returned weeks later, I submitted the story to him and he immediately said to go ahead. I finished the story, but it sat on the China Desk for about three months, a practice I later learned was not uncommon when Wang wanted to let a story shrink in importance. When I wrote to David Lague, he pleaded he no longer had the authority he used to have. Silence of the Dissidents ran three months later, and I went on to win two awards for the story the China Desk tried to kill.

During their time at the newspaper, the two veteran journalists frequently battled fiercely with Mr. Wang over stories, with the daughter of Mr. Robert Kuok, the Malaysian owner of the newspaper, frequently siding with Wang. Insiders say the Kuoks long coddled Wang, believing he had influence in China.

Nor was I the only foreign reporter to be pushed out of the newspaper—I follow a long

line of foreigners—each with long experience—who saw their contracts allowed to run out by Wang—this way he could plead innocence: You’ve not been fired, your contract ran out. There are now no foreign reporters working for the South China Morning Post in China—a first in a long while.

One good example is the case of former Guangzhou correspondent Leu Siew Ying, a native of Malaysia, who won the European Commission’s Lorenzo Natali Grand Prize in 2006 for her reporting on protests in the village of Taishi the previous year.

“She left the paper in 2007 after disputes with Mr. Wang about following up on Taishi and pressure from the Guangdong authorities,” Wall Street Journal Asia editor Hugo Restall wrote.

During Wang’s time with the newspaper, several foreign editors were offered the job of editor-in-chief, but most left after fighting a losing battle with the former China Daily reporter and member of the Jinlin Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. The Kuoks always made it clear where their loyalties lay.

But this is not just a case of foreign reporters being harassed. Talk to just about any one of the excellent Chinese or Hong Kong reporters writing about China for the newspaper, and, if they’re willing to talk, they’ll quietly tell about Wang spiking perfectly good stories or of being told to write more “positive” articles.

It’s interesting that the story that finally exposed Wang was one about the mysterious death of June 4 activist Li Wangyang, which barely got coverage in the newspaper.

After a sub on the desk questioned this gap in the newspaper’s reporting, about a story that other Hong Kong media had jumped on eagerly, Wang curtly told the sub off. “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.”

When the news gained international attention, and his own reporters signed a letter asking for an explanation, a worried Wang responded with a statement to staff that he decided to run the story as a brief on the first day because he felt the newspaper didn’t have enough hard facts for a full story.

But what Wang failed to say was that the newspaper had in fact run a much longer story on Li’s death in its first edition and that Wang had chosen to yank it, shave it down to a brief for the next edition, and replace it with an article about former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui and a conversation he had with a group of students—a story that had already run two days earlier.

What few have noticed, is that self-censorship is not the only problem. Possibly more worrying is the newspaper’s new-found proclivity under Wang to publish dubious stories that reflect Beijing’s views.

Earlier this year, deputy editor Tammy Tam gushed like a high school girl over a story about the Chinese Panchen Lama, asking only one serious question of a person who has never appeared in the Western media before. Eric X. Li, a well-known apologist for China, has been writing regular columns for the South China Morning Post. In one recent

article he slapped Hong Kong citizens on the wrist for not welcoming mainland women to have their babies in the territory, and then wondering aloud if a people like this deserved the right to vote. Last week came a story by Professor Jiang Shigong, deputy director of Peking University's Centre for Hong Kong and Macau Studies, that claimed "Hongkongers accept Beijing's rule."

In his own weekly commentary, Wang had egg on his face after predicting that disgraced Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai had escaped any serious trouble. "Firstly, Bo's political career looks safe for now and he has apparently managed to push back the pressure from his opponents within the party," Wang wrote just before Bo fell hard.

Another article described Tibetans in Lhasa happily celebrating the Tibetan New Year, with quotes coming from one unidentified "middle-aged Tibetan man." Meanwhile, more objective reports were reporting a dire situation in the Tibetan area. The article read like a China Daily story.

While the South China Morning Post continues to publish good critical reportage on China, the newspaper no longer has the status it had in the late 1990s, or more recently under three years direction under Chua and Lague, when the newspaper made great advances.

Under Wang's stewardship, the newspaper has lost credibility with Hong Kong and international readers and is now often the butt of jokes in the local Chinese media there.

Sadly, the South China Morning Post, which has a history of more than 100 years of reporting on Asia, may be beyond the point of return. With credibility and morale at the newspaper sagging, and with controversies on the rise, competent journalists will now be reluctant to join the newspaper, and it can only sink deeper into mediocrity. The prospects for English-language journalism in Hong Kong is not good and this is sad.

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