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## COMMENTARY

# Freezing Point

By DAVID BANDURSKI and LIN HUI

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HONG KONG -- When the Chinese government closed down Freezing Point, the highly regarded weekly supplement of the China Youth Daily, China-watchers were shocked. What few outside observers understood, however, is that this move was not purely a throwback to a past era of censorship. Rather it was part of a relatively recent effort to reinforce the culture of self-censorship within an increasingly vibrant media sector.

Spearheading this effort is a shadowy group of Communist Party officials entrusted with tremendous power and almost no accountability.




Known as the News Commentary Group (NCG), this is an elite team of about 10 retired propaganda czars, who wield influence far above their administrative rank. Many are regional editors in chief brought to the capital to clean house at major newspapers. They have crafted quaint monikers to describe themselves: "invisible teachers," "stewards of the forest," even "woodpeckers" (who dig out parasites). Their criticisms suggest a fondness for Cultural Revolution rhetoric: *"These two articles contain*

*serious political errors"; "We cannot promote economists who attack Marxism"; "We cannot promote a watered-down ideology that denies the media's role as mouthpiece of the party."* Phrases like these may seem out of step with a globalizing China, but Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have all used extreme leftist elements to clamp down on "bourgeois liberal" tendencies. The agents of the NCG were behind many of China's most notorious media crackdowns of recent years -- the closure of upstart weekly Xin Zhou Bao, the jettisoning of Southern Weekend's top editors, the recent takeover of Beijing News.

In fact, the NCG represents a new vision for propaganda work. Beijing is pursuing this strategy because of, not in spite of, market reforms. When the NCG celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2004, the deputy heads of the Propaganda Department issued a congratulatory statement on behalf of Politburo member Li Changchun, China's top

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propaganda czar, and Liu Yunshan, head of the Central Propaganda Department (CPD): "Creating a system of news criticism was a reinvention of censorship for a new era."

China's present system of media censorship is unlike that employed by the Kuomintang in the early decades of the last century. The Kuomintang carried out advance checks on content: Officials pored over reports before they hit the presses. By contrast, **China uses fewer advance checks but controls the media by enforcing self-censorship.** The orders and bans issued by the Propaganda Department are a compass by which editors navigate. The NCG squad adds an important, unofficial layer of after-the-fact policing that some officials see as critical in an era of exploding media diversity. When propaganda officials talk about a "new era," they mean the era of rapid economic growth that began in the early '90s. Since 1993 the number of media outlets has increased dramatically; fierce market pressures have them chomping at the bit of censorship.

Within the formal party structure, the NCG is an anomaly. It operates -- nominally, at least -- under the News Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department. It is comprised, however, almost exclusively of retired propaganda officials working on a temporary basis rather than formally employed, and despite its amorphous character, its influence far exceeds that of the various departments of the News Bureau. The reports of the NCG bypass standard reporting channels; they may rise to the upper echelons of the party or travel directly to propaganda offices or media in the provinces. In either case, criticisms can result directly in disciplinary action. With written instructions appended by the CPD, they might bring editorial shake-ups like the Southern Weekend case in 2001. Passing through ministries and commissions or provincial-level leadership, they might bring the closure of publications and the firing of editors, as with the closings of Freezing Point, Guangdong's Tong Chuan Gong Jin magazine and Hubei's Xin Zhou Bao newspaper.

The NCG represents a relatively recent fine-tuning of China's propaganda machine. It was created in 1994, just over a year before Li Datong launched Freezing Point (pictured nearby). As Mr. Li and his colleagues busied away with the finest journalism of a generation, the Sword of Damocles glistened over their heads. In the course of a decade, Freezing Point was the target of two to three criticisms a week from the NCG. Up to the supplement's shutdown, the NCG issued 8,136 criticisms to media in China -- more than two a day. Its main whipping boy through the '90s was Southern Weekend. When that newspaper printed an editorial in 1998 chiding official news reports on disasters for their "falseness and emptiness" in quoting ostensible sources thanking the party for deliverance, the NCG was furious. News Criticism Vol. 326 responded that it was "preposterous and wrong" to attack the phrase "God bless socialism" in such a way.

NCG's criticism mounted in 2000, and Southern Weekend was straitjacketed by Guangdong leaders into running "positive" (pro-party) and "neutral" news articles. It made no difference; the NCG barrage continued. When the paper ran a shamelessly positive story about prison reforms, the censor branded the article "negative" because "prison" had appeared in the headline. At times the criticisms were dyspeptic rants, the censor unable to put his finger on the sin. Southern Weekend was pummeled with a hail of NCG criticisms until finally, in 2001, officials forced an editorial shake-up at the newspaper.

Li Datong, Freezing Point's editor in chief, saw the writing on the wall. He denounced the

assassins in an open letter more than four months before Freezing Point's closure: "Where is it written anywhere in Central Party documents or the rules of the Propaganda Department that the NCG should wield such power?" he wrote. "Nowhere!" The NCG's News Criticism Vol. 34 dealt the fatal blow by excoriating an article by history professor Yuan Weishi that, it said, had "attacked the Chinese people's century-long struggle against aggression and aimed its lance at the Communist Party and the socialist system." Within days, China Youth Daily's publisher, the Communist Youth League, announced it would shut the supplement down.

In subsequent weeks, fissures opened in the party leadership over propaganda work. In a letter of support issued to top party leaders and appearing Feb. 14, 13 intellectuals and ex-officials called the move against Freezing Point a product of China's "disgusting news control system," and called for the supplement's restoration. But doing away with the NCG topped their demands: "The Propaganda Department should file a formal report on the Freezing Point affair with the Central Party, making a self-criticism... and the NCG should be disbanded." Days later, officials announced Freezing Point would relaunch without its celebrated pair of top editors. The controversy has cooled, but the arbitrary power of the censors has again been demonstrated, putting the rest of the media on notice not to challenge this group of irritable old men.

The NCG is a reinvention of censorship that allows the party to ensure "guidance of public opinion" in an unruly market. Party leaders can use the NCG as hatchet men and at the same time confuse, for the sake of China's image, the issue of exactly where they stand on censorship. If the thuggish tactics prove too strong and a case becomes a world-wide story -- as with Freezing Point -- top party leaders can step in and appear magnanimous. The blood, after all, is on the hands of their shadow commissars.

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