



CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

*A weekly update of press freedom and censorship news
related to the People's Republic of China*

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The 'Southern Weekly' Controversy

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Credit: *South China Morning Post*



Censored New Year's article sparks revolt at 'Southern Weekly'

When *Southern Weekly*, a Guangdong Province newspaper that is respected for its hard-hitting investigative journalism, published its annual New Year's editorial on the front page on January 3, editors discovered that the article had been altered by propaganda officials without their knowledge, setting the stage for China's biggest standoff over press freedom in years. The original piece had called for political reform and greater respect for constitutional rights as the way to "build a truly free and strong nation" and realize the dream of the Chinese people, a reference to recent speeches by new Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping on the "China dream" and the "great revival of the Chinese nation." The published article, by contrast, praised CCP rule and included factual errors. The last-minute changes were allegedly made on the orders of Tuo Zhen, head of the provincial propaganda department. Although all Chinese media are routinely forced to adjust their coverage per party instructions, the aggressive intervention was seen as an unacceptable violation of a delicate balance whereby the paper's journalists attempted to conform to CCP directives while also reporting truthfully. Moreover, it came after a year of intensified prior censorship at the paper (according to staff, as many as 1,000 stories had been censored since Tuo assumed his position), the appointment of a controversial party representative to the weekly's media group, and other incidents of extreme intervention, such as the last-minute cutting of eight pages of special coverage of deadly floods in Beijing in July (see CMB No. [66](#)). Likening it to "the fuse on a detonator," editorial staff exposed the New Year's affront on their microblog accounts and in open letters, demanding that the company's management investigate the incident, which it reportedly agreed to do late on January 5. Separately, open letters by former staff and former interns at the paper were posted online, criticizing the interference and calling for Tuo's resignation. As public attention grew, managers took over the paper's microblog account early on January 6 and posted claims that the editors had in fact written the published New Year's editorial. The deliberate distortion prompted staff to go on strike that day—a rare show of defiance in response to censorship in China. After further negotiations and mounting public pressure, the strike ended on January 8, and on January 10 the paper was published on schedule.

- **China Media Project 1/3/2013:** [A New Year's greeting gets the axe in China](#)
- **China Digital Times 1/5/2013:** [Unhappy Guangdong journalists protest New Year meddling](#)
- **South China Morning Post 1/5/2013:** [Former 'Southern Weekly' journalists want propaganda chief Tuo Zhen to go](#)
- **China Media Project 1/6/2013:** [Southern Weekly incident update](#)
- **China Media Project 1/7/2013:** [Inside the Southern Weekly incident](#)
- **South China Morning Post 1/7/2013:** [Southern Weekly censorship row escalates as staff strike, hundreds sign petition](#)



Impasse draws wave of public support for free speech

After journalists at *Southern Weekly* took their case to the public online, open letters, petitions, and other statements of support—both for the paper itself and for free speech more generally—began to proliferate on microblogging platforms. Some statements were signed by hundreds of journalists,

lawyers, intellectuals, artists, migrant workers, and students. One petition by over two dozen prominent scholars from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan specifically called for Guangdong Province propaganda chief Tuo Zhen to be fired. A January 6 letter signed by students at Guangzhou's Sun Yat-sen University demanded freedom of speech, warning, "If today we continue to yield and choose silence, what awaits us is a bottomless abyss." Li Chengpeng, a Sichuan Province blogger with 6.58 million followers, told Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* that the "insult toward freedom of speech" had been "lifted up a level," adding, "I cannot stand it, and I believe many other people feel the same." The hugely popular blogger Han Han expressed broader frustration with the system's combination of stifling controls and demands for world-class excellence, saying, "They grab you by your collar, clamp you by the neck, yet at the same time encourage you to run faster, sing better, and win them more honour." Well-known entrepreneur Hung Huang wrote online that Tuo's action had destroyed the reformist credibility of the new Communist Party leadership. Even the famous actresses Li Bingbing and Yao Chen seemed to join the fray. Yao, with nearly 32 million microblog followers, quoted Russian dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in a post that read, "One word of truth outweighs the whole world." Many ordinary netizens conveyed their disgust for propaganda and censorship by likening it to shoveling and eating feces. On January 7, up to 200 protesters moved the campaign offline, gathering at the headquarters of Southern Media Group with banners denouncing censorship and demanding freedom of speech. Police filmed the demonstrators, at times checked documents or engaged in brief scuffles, and brought individuals in for questioning, but they generally did not interfere. Protests continued on January 8, this time featuring confrontations with a small group of progovernment counterprotesters before police separated the two sides.

- *South China Morning Post* 1/7/2013: [Southern Weekly censorship row escalates as staff strike, hundreds sign petition](#)
- China Media Project 1/6/2013: [Students speak out against censorship](#)
- *Asahi Shimbun* 1/9/2013: [Li Chengpeng: China needs one truthful newspaper, not an aircraft carrier](#)
- *New York Times* 1/7/2013: [Protest grows over censoring of China paper](#)
- *South China Morning Post* 1/7/2013: [There is always a power: a tribute to Southern Weekly](#)
- China Media Project 1/8/2013: [Web users attack press censorship](#)
- Reuters 1/8/2013: [Scuffles flare at liberal Chinese newspaper in protest over censorship](#)



Authorities clamp down, defend media controls

Faced with angry journalists and growing public support for their cause, the Chinese authorities attempted to assert control over the *Southern Weekly* controversy through defiant editorials in state media, instructions to news outlets, and censorship of the topic on the internet. A series of relevant keywords were blocked on the popular microblogging platform Sina Weibo beginning on January 4, including references to the weekly's name, the name of provincial propaganda chief Tuo Zhen, the January 7 protest at the paper's company headquarters, "freedom of the press," "constitutionalism," "open letter," and "propaganda department." Meanwhile, one of several official media directives

from the Central Propaganda Department declared on January 7 that the Communist Party's control of the media is an "unwavering basic principle." Insisting that Tuo had nothing to do with the *Southern Weekly* incident, the directive blamed "external hostile forces" for exacerbating the situation. It ordered all news outlets to republish a January 7 editorial by the party-owned *Global Times* that toed the official line and dismissed demands for media freedom as "radical" and "out of step" with China's overall development process. Many outlets were slow to comply, and in a rare act of resistance, *Beijing News* president Dai Zigeng flatly refused to publish the *Global Times* piece on January 8. However, according to *South China Morning Post*, he offered his resignation late that day, and his paper reprinted the editorial on January 9 under threat of closure, though it was buried deep within the paper. Major web portals like Sina and Sohu also published the piece, but added disclaimers to note that the opinions it expressed did not reflect those of the companies. One Sina Weibo manager argued on his microblog that his colleagues had done their best, under extreme pressure, to allow discussion of the *Southern Weekly* incident to go on while complying with orders from the authorities, in part by inefficiently deleting individual posts rather than suspending entire accounts. That message was itself deleted, however, and the account was closed. A number of users also reported having their accounts suspended.

- *South China Morning Post* 1/12/2013: [Rare display of mainland media defiance of censorship](#)
- *China Digital Times* 1/4/2013: [Sensitive words: The rape of Southern Weekly](#)
- *China Digital Times* 1/7/2013: [Sensitive words: Southern Weekly Tempest](#)
- *China Digital Times* 1/7/2013: [Sensitive words: Southern Weekly tempest \(2\)](#)
- *China Digital Times* 1/7/2013: [Ministry of Truth: Urgent notice on Southern Weekly](#)
- *Global Times* 1/8/2013: [Southern Weekly issue prompts soul-searching over media's role](#)
- *South China Morning Post* 1/9/2013: [China censorship storm spreads, Beijing paper publisher resigns in protest](#)
- *Washington Post* 1/9/2013: [A Chinese web censor snaps, goes on public rant](#)



'Southern Weekly' returns to 'normal'

The end of the standoff at *Southern Weekly* on January 8 reportedly came after intervention by newly appointed Guangdong Communist Party chief Hu Chunhua. According to media reports, the agreement had several dimensions. Staff would end their strike and return to work, the paper would print as usual on January 10, and staff would cease to publicly call for the dismissal of provincial propaganda chief Tuo Zhen. In exchange, most of the staff involved in the outcry would not face punishment, the chief editor who had forced publication of a misleading microblog post would be removed, and propaganda authorities would no longer engage in the sort of intrusive prior censorship that had arisen during Tuo's tenure. Tuo would not be removed from his post, despite widespread public calls for his dismissal, but officials hinted that he might be replaced at some future "more moderate time." While some interpreted the resolution as "concessions" by Hu and the party leadership, reporters at the paper and other analysts expressed disappointment that the ultimate outcome was more or less a return to the status quo before Tuo's appointment rather than a step forward for greater freedom. David

Bandurski of the China Media Project said it was a “small victory” in the sense that it returned to “a normalcy of censorship that journalists have become accustomed to” and could persuade officials not to further tighten controls. Al-Jazeera reported that staff at the publication were “indignant,” with some considering resignation. A new issue of the paper hit newsstands on January 10, but it included no mention of the dispute and was missing certain content, including a planned editorial celebrating its 30th anniversary and role as a beacon of reform. Instead, the paper republished an editorial by the party mouthpiece *People’s Daily* proclaiming that while it is “fundamental that the party regulates the press,” such controls must “keep pace with the times.” Despite promises that journalists involved in the dispute would not be punished, many continued to fear, based on past experience, that belated reprisals would be meted out. Outside the newsroom, several popular cultural and business figures who had circulated comments supporting the paper to millions of microblog followers reported being “invited to tea”—meaning summoned for questioning or reprimand—by authorities. In its January 17 edition, the newspaper ran a correction for factual errors that had appeared in the published New Year’s editorial that sparked the dispute.

- **Reuters 1/8/2013:** [Guangdong chief offers deal in Chinese paper censorship row—source](#)
- **Al-Jazeera 1/10/2013:** [China paper prints first issue since dispute](#)
- **Agence France-Presse 1/9/2013:** [Censored China paper to publish ‘as normal’](#)
- **South China Morning Post 1/10/2013:** [China ‘must keep pace with the times’—Southern Weekly](#)
- **Associated Press 1/17/2013:** [Southern Weekly issues correction for Chinese censor’s mistakes](#)
- **BBC 1/16/2013:** [Tea? Reining in dissent the Chinese way](#)



What it all means

Chinese and foreign analysts have struggled to interpret the ramifications of the *Southern Weekly* incident for the future of press freedom in China, particularly under the new Communist Party leadership headed by Xi Jinping. The following are a selection of their more compelling observations:

- **Exposing the extent of censorship:** As Qian Gang, a former *Southern Weekly* editor, explained, the “incident is important first and foremost because it exposes what has been happening behind the scenes.” Although many Chinese are aware of the censorship system, and some may have detected weaker reporting or increased official jargon on the pages of the *Southern Weekly*, most were likely unaware of the extent to which controls had tightened and censorship had grown more intrusive over the past year, particularly since Tuo Zhen’s appointment.
- **Fending off further deterioration:** The pushback from the *Southern Weekly* staff appears to have served mostly to roll back some of the tighter controls and fend off even more intrusive practices that may have been coming down the pike. However, the incident has not apparently affected the broader system of “normal” media controls in China. As one

reporter told the *Financial Times*, “*Southern Weekend* is a special case and always has been. A partial victory fought by them doesn’t mean a thaw in the broader censorship climate.”

- **Outcry outside the newsroom:** Perhaps the most significant aspect of the story was the way in which the incident motivated Chinese citizens from a wide array of backgrounds—from students and retirees to famous actresses—to voice their dissatisfaction with the Communist Party’s heavy-handed censorship and the system as a whole, rather than the more typical, localized grievances. It was among these outside actors that one saw banners and slogans calling for freedom of expression, human rights, and democracy.
 - **Censors’ passive resistance:** The signs of passive resistance within private companies that are obliged to censor—like popular web portals’ disclaimers about the *Global Times* editorial, or the acknowledgement by a Sina Weibo manager that his colleagues had let news circulate until they were explicitly told to suppress it—highlight some of the challenges the party faces in enforcing ever more stringent controls.
 - **Continued uncertainty on the new leadership:** The incident was widely perceived as a test for the new party leadership under Xi. There was no harsh crackdown on protests, but the eventual solution was fairly conservative, and if anything it illustrated the regime’s ability to nip calls for reform in the bud through a calibrated mixture of rigidity and minor concessions. There did appear to be some disagreement on the proper approach within the central and provincial governments, but the Central Propaganda Department—which ultimately controls media policy—clearly took a hard line in its directives to news outlets. It remains to be seen whether the public outcry over censorship will yield some meaningful future opening or instead reinforce claims that tighter controls on microblogs are needed. Meanwhile, China watchers will be on the lookout for a delayed fallout in the form of dismissals or detentions for those who spoke out on the Southern Weekly incident.
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- **China Media Project 1/11/2013:** [Why Southern Weekly said ‘no’](#)
 - **South China Morning Post 1/10/2013:** [Southern Weekly row won’t lead to a loosening of rules on China’s media](#)
 - **Atlantic 1/11/2013:** [A press renaissance? The legacy of China’s ‘Southern Weekend’](#)
 - **Financial Times 1/8/2013:** [China censors and journalists end dispute](#)
 - **New Yorker 1/8/2013:** [Solzhenitsyn, Yao Chen, and Chinese reform](#)
 - **Epoch Times 1/17/2013:** [Southern Weekly incident: Root, failure, and future](#)
 - **Wall Street Journal 1/15/2013:** [China’s journalists are no revolutionaries](#)

For additional information on human rights and free expression in China, see:

[*Freedom in the World 2012*](#)

[*Freedom on the Net 2012*](#)

[*Freedom of the Press 2011*](#)

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