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By Timothy Weston

In recent weeks, the Chinese press has struggled to cover a series of major and difficult stories. Moreover the Chinese press itself is being watched and critiqued by the Western world with intensity and curiosity. What we are seeing in the Chinese press now is a world in transition and flux.

First was the Chinese press’ discussion of the Tibetan demonstrations, its virtual refusal to acknowledge the validity of any foreign criticism, and its exposure of a reflexive, threatening, and brittle nationalism, especially among some Chinese youth. However, that was followed by its honest and educational reporting during the hand foot mouth crisis in Anhui in April and May, and then, of course, came the biblical earthquake of May 12. The earthquake may well have shot fissures into the long stalemated relationship between the Chinese media and the Chinese Party-State. In the West, the earthquake—in large part because of the way the Chinese media reported it—opened up another Chinese face, one that, following on several months of largely negative coverage, can be loved. The news stories about the earthquake have been truly moving. It appears that the Olympics will not be the “It’s Legit to Hate China Games,” after all, and that is a good thing.

The Chinese government encouraged full coverage of the natural disasterdomestically and around the world (very different from the kind of “anti-coverage” it promotes in response to most human-caused disasters, such as mine collapses, about which I have written). The coverage in Shanghai on CCTV starting the day of the earthquake itself was much like it might be in the United States: the reporters wore resolved looks, humanized by a sense that they, too, were stricken by the sadness of the story. For what I saw, it seemed the network was truly trying to calm people, to be informative and to be caring. The loops on the videotapes from the earthquake zone that first night were tight. Not many images had come out yet, so the coverage was especially numbing. It reminded me of American disaster news coverage—such as of Hurricane Katrina— which panders to our prurient interests by showing us searing and horrific images of what most of us fortunately will never experience personally. Somehow, though, in China this amount of information—tragic though it was—felt like a healthy thing. Most important, it felt open and thorough.

After watching the first few days of the earthquake coverage on Chinese TV, I returned to the United States on May 14. During the flight home I had a strange experience that made me think more about Chinese press liberalism and public relations. This involved the recent, special issue of National Geographic on China that came out last month. I had taken that issue with me to China, started reading it, and found myself pulled in by Leslie Chang’s (who has recently contributed to The China Beat) story on middle class anxiety and stress in China. I wanted to read more, but before having a chance to do so I gave my copy of the magazine to an interested Chinese friend. So later, as I prepared to board my flight home at the sleek and modern Pudong International Airport in Shanghai just two days after the earthquake and the astounding openness of the early coverage, I bought a replacement copy of the special issue to read on the plane.

I was probably four hours from Shanghai and six from California, when I came to a couple places in the magazine that had very thick pages, which I realized were actually several pages stuck together. They didn’t just pull apart with a hissing static sound. They were really stuck together, with glue. They had been censored. I wondered, why was someone or some agency in China directing people to put glue stick X marks on certain stories in the special issue of National Geographic? Why were they trying to block people from viewing those stories? And why, of all things, people who read the magazine in English? What was it that we English readers should not see either? In any case, I found the clumsy attempt at censorship annoying and old school.

Of course, I wanted to read those sections of the magazine now more than ever. To my surprise, I was able to pull the pages (grudgingly) apart, to see what I was not supposed to see, though some strips of paper tore off at the ends of key explanatory sentences I wanted to read. Yet, the question for me after prying the pages apart was what in the world was anyone doing censoring those things in
particular? After discovering what the censors had tried to prevent me from seeing, I couldn’t sustain feelings of anger. Instead, I was puzzled. The stakes seemed so minor.

The first pages that had been glued together were 44-45. After working for a few minutes to pull them apart, I have to admit that I was disappointed. They contained a country map of China. I saw nothing on those pages that could in any way be deemed new or sensitive. The lines of the glue stick X mark were unmistakable and the map was badly damaged by my efforts to get access to what had been denied me, but had this been a mistake? Had the censor not been paying attention to what he or she was doing? The next thing I was not supposed to view was a short piece entitled “Mao Now” (pages 100-101). At least this had to do with a political figure. Yet it is hard to see why the few pop-culture images of Mao Zedong reproduced there or the accompanying commentary were deemed sensitive. One need only spend a few days in China to see equally irreverent images of one sort or another. This really did not seem like dangerous stuff.

The last two off-limits sections made a bit more sense. The two-page map of China on pages 126-127 depicting the country’s ethnic minorities—where they live and how many of each there are—focuses on a subject that, owing to the recent demonstrations in Tibet, may be deemed “sensitive.” Still, it is hard to see why a map that simply illustrates China’s ethnic diversity (which, one would think, is a good thing to make known) without any accompanying commentary should be considered offensive. Only the last glued pages made any sense to me; the short entry entitled “Cutting off Dissent” that appears on pages 128-129 deals with an obviously political and sensitive subject. There is delicious irony in the fact that my pages on the suppression of dissent and censorship contain a bold X mark and are difficult to read. It would be a good image to show in a lecture on censorship.

But all in all, pretty tame stuff. Was this censorship really worth the effort, and if so, according to whom? Who actually glued the pages together? At what level was the decision to censor those pages made? Were those deciders the same people who are allowing more press openness now during the ongoing earthquake coverage? If so, they seem to have shifted direction very fast. If not, is the press opening the earthquake space on its own, with other muscle?

Would I have run into the same thing if I had instead bought the magazine at the new Beijing airport, or the one in Canton? Fresh from viewing the open coverage of the earthquake on Chinese TV, I realized this is a moment of incredible possibility in China, one when greater press openness is emerging around anatural disaster, but also one that feels like it could close down again at any moment, especially after the Olympics. And if the next disaster should be humancaused, perhaps in a way that implicates the political leadership itself, the frightened and rather arbitrary logic of the page gluers may once more prevail.