

In Xi's China, even internal reports fall prey to censorship

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BEIJING (AP) — When the coronavirus was first detected in Wuhan in late 2019, reporter Liao Jun of China's official Xinhua News Agency told conflicting stories to two very different audiences.

Liao's news dispatches assured readers the disease didn't spread from person to person. But in a separate confidential report to senior officials, Liao struck a different tone, alerting Beijing that a mysterious, dangerous disease had surfaced.

Her reports to officials were part of a powerful internal reporting system long used by the ruling Communist Party to learn about issues considered too sensitive for the public to know. Chinese journalists and researchers file secret bulletins to top officials, ensuring they get the information needed to govern, even when it's censored.

But this internal system is struggling to give frank assessments as Chinese leader Xi Jinping consolidates his power, making it risky for anyone to directly question the party line even in confidential reports, a dozen Chinese academics, businesspeople and state journalists said in interviews with The Associated Press.

It's unclear what the impact has been, given the secretive nature of high-level Chinese politics. But the risk is ill-informed decision-making with less feedback from below, on everything from China's stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine to its approach to the coronavirus.

"Powerful leaders become hostages," said Dali Yang, an expert on Chinese politics at the University of Chicago. "They actually are living in cocoons: protected, but also shielded from information that they should be open to."

The reports are classified as state secrets, giving them an air of mystery in China. They are called "neican," which is pronounced "NAY-tsahn" and means "internal reference."

They report on what would be considered staples of journalism in many other countries: corruption, strikes, public criticism, industrial accidents. In China, such matters can be too sensitive for public consumption, as they "could damage the Party's reputation," a 2020 Chinese academic paper says.

Newspapers, think tanks and universities across China each have their own classified reporting channel, sending intelligence up to local and provincial officials. They monitor air pollution in industrial Hebei province and guide the disposal of spoiled pickles in Hunan, a region famed for its cuisine.

But a few outlets, such as Xinhua and the state-controlled People's Daily, supply intelligence directly to China's rulers. Their confidential reports have toppled officials, changed policy, and launched government campaigns against poverty and waste.

The Communist Party calls internal reporting a secret weapon, acting as its “eyes and ears,” while propaganda acts as its “throat and tongue.”

Those who write internal reports are thoughtful, open-minded and often critical of the government, says Maria Repnikova, a Chinese media expert at Georgia State University.

They can face threats or intimidation, even when backed by the state, with officials taking extreme measures to block bad news from reaching their superiors.

“They are quite cautious about what goes in there, because they still have gatekeepers,” Repnikova said.

Xi is intimately familiar with the power of this internal reporting system, said Alfred Wu, a former reporter who met Xi when he governed Fujian province. Xi cultivated ties with reporters from Xinhua and the People’s Daily, the outlets with direct, confidential lines of communication to Beijing — and thus, the power to influence his career.

“He’d always mingle and socialize with journalists,” Wu said. “Xi’s street smarts helped him so much.”

After coming to power in 2012, Xi stifled dissent and launched an anti-corruption campaign that jailed rivals. The crackdown has made reporters more cautious about what they write in internal memos.

Xi took control of Xinhua, which nominally reports to the No. 2 official, the premier. Under Xi, Xinhua at times began to ignore Premier Li Keqiang, whose frustrations boiled over in an internal meeting, said Wu and a state media journalist with knowledge of the matter, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive subject.

During a visit to Xinhua, Xi called internal reference reports “very important,” saying he had paid attention to them throughout his career.

But a Xinhua journalist famed for internal reports that helped take down a senior executive at a state company is now unable to publish, according to a close associate. Though the internal reference system remains powerful and active, they said, the risks of reporting sensitive information have grown.

“Before, he could make these disclosures because Xinhua had the power to protect him,” the associate said, declining to be named for fear of retribution. “Now, they say he can’t report these things anymore.”

The internal reports system was also vulnerable to corruption. Officials and businesspeople manipulated it to lobby for their interests. In one incident, Shanxi province officials gave cash and gold ingots to reporters to cover up a mine accident that killed 38 people.

Xi's crackdown has reined in corruption, but also sidelined many of Xi's competitors and paralyzed low-level officials, who are reluctant to act without clear permission from the top.

The government's tightening grip on the internet under Xi is also warping the internal reports.

Decades ago, there were few ways for officials to know what ordinary people thought, making the reports a valuable channel of insight. But the internet "handed everyone their own microphone," the People's Daily wrote, resulting in an explosion of information that internal reports struggled to analyze.

The internet also posed a threat: Critics bonded online, organizing to challenge the state.

Xi tackled both challenges. Under him, China beefed up big data analysis to harness the vast tide of information. Internal reports now cite the internet more and more, with some bulletins made up largely of social media posts.

Xi also launched a campaign against "online rumors" and put millions of censors to work. One of the first to be detained was an investigative journalist accusing an official of corruption.

So while internal reports now draw heavily on online information, the internet itself has become strictly censored, which can distort the message sent to the top.

Electronic surveillance has also become pervasive under Xi, making it tougher for sensitive information to be shared, one current and one former state media journalist said, speaking on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak to foreign media. Communications are heavily watched, keeping officials and experts, not just dissidents, under the gaze of the state.

As a result, people withhold critical information — sometimes, with catastrophic consequences.

In the early days of the virus outbreak in Wuhan, Xinhua's Liao reported the arrest of eight "rumormongers" for spreading "false information."

In fact, they were doctors warning each other about the emerging virus in online chats. Her story discouraged others from speaking up, leaving the central leadership blind to the virus' spread.

She also wrote an internal report alerting Beijing to notices from Wuhan health authorities leaked online. But instead of galvanizing swifter action, her reports lulled officials into thinking the outbreak was under control, according to Yang, the University of Chicago professor.

"It's a systemic issue," Yang said. "They operated in a system that choked off channels of information for good decision-making."

The information department of the State Council, China's Cabinet, declined to comment. Xinhua did not immediately respond to an AP request for comment.

The virus story illustrates a paradox of the internal reports: The tighter controls are, the more valuable the reports become. But tighter controls also make it harder to find reliable information.

Interviews with Chinese academics suggest when it comes to decisions made by the top, there's now little room for discussion or course correction.

Though China hasn't expressed direct support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Beijing's stance is clear: Under Xi's "no limits" partnership with Russia, officials voice sympathy with Moscow's grievances with the West, portraying the U.S. as a hypocritical bully and NATO as the aggressor.

But in private conversation, many Chinese foreign policy experts express views that diverge from the party line. That diversity of opinions, though, isn't being conveyed to China's leaders, some intellectuals fear.

"There's much more diversity of opinions than one would assume," said one academic, declining to be named because they were not authorized to speak to the press.

At the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a book published in Russia wasn't allowed to be translated into Chinese because it had sections critical of Putin, according to an academic familiar with the academy's Russia experts.

One expert wrote an internal report suggesting China's foreign minister call his Ukrainian counterpart, the academic said. When the call took place about a week later, many academics congratulated the expert in a group chat.

Then, one of the academics said the expert should recommend Xi call Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. "If I do that, I won't be able to write another report again," the academic recounted the expert writing, speaking on condition of anonymity because of fear of retribution.

Xi hasn't spoken with Zelenskyy since the invasion began.

Many experts worry China has alienated Europe by favoring Russia. A landmark investment deal with the European Union looks all but dead, and Europe is increasingly aligning its China policy with the latter's biggest rival, the United States.

One scholar took a calculated risk to get his views heard. Government adviser Hu Wei published an online essay in March criticizing the war and arguing Beijing should side with Europe.

Hu wrote publicly because he worried his bosses wouldn't approve an internal report, according to Zhao Tong, a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Even if the piece was censored, he reasoned, it might get the attention of senior officials.

“The information bubble is very serious,” Zhao said. “I’m not sure even the authorities have a grasp of how popular a certain view really is.”

More than 100,000 people viewed Hu’s essay online. Within hours, it was blocked.

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