

China: Chronology of the Intervention on Press Freedom in the Nanfang Weekend Incident

Thursday 10 January 2013, by [IHLO](#) (Date first published: 8 January 2013).

As one of the most important official press groups based in Guangdong province with a track record of speaking the truth, the Nanfang Press Group is the career choice for many young journalists who are committed to their profession despite the day-to-day intervention of the invisible hand. In 2012 alone, a total of 1034 articles written by the journalists of the weekly magazine *Nanfang Weekend* were rejected or “revised”, meaning about 20 articles were not published every week due to intervention. The journalists stay in their posts bearing all the pressures, trying to find cracks and marginal space to tell the truth to readers. In the current struggle about the 2013 New Year Editorial, the conscientious Chinese journalists from *Nanfang* and other news houses, academics, activists and netizens are demonstrating various means of rebellions within their respective limited space. This ranges from pressing the Share and Like button on weibo (the Chinese tweeter), writing news commentaries in metaphors to forwarding transformed pictures, posting pictures holding a placard of support message, or simply placing flowers in front of the *Nanfang* office building etc. From “Kneel down rebel” to “Stand up rebel” [1], a Hong Kong journalist writes to reveal the rebellion of Nanfang Weekend’s journalists and editors against censorship in the last seven days:

2 Jan The editors of *Nanfang Weekend* were off from work after they have finished the proof reading of the New Year Editorial to be published the next day. The Head of Guangdong provincial Propaganda Department was said latter to call up the Chief Editor instructing him to revise and re-write the New Year Editorial, a rare move of direct instruction as recalled by the journalists despite the regular censorships they have been under.

3 Jan The first issue of *Nanfang Weekend* for the new year was published. The editorial, from the text to the title was completely different. The editors and journalists began to post the three different versions of the editorial: the original version, the edited version and the propaganda department’s version on the magazine’s official *weibo*. The censorship engine of Sina, the server of the magazine’s official *weibo*, was started to block and delete the posts and related discussions on the internet. At least 25 journalists/editors’ posts on *weibo* were deleted and the access of 5 of them to the magazine’s official *weibo* account were cancelled. The journalists and editors of the sister newspaper *Nanfang Metropolitan* and another online newspaper, *Caijin*, as well as the journalists, commentators in other media joined the relay to forward the posts on *weibo*. Some of them are celebrities on weibo followed by tens of thousands of ‘fans’ on the internet.

People are competing with time, and the speedy deleting engine of the internet police.

The *weibo* is administered with real name and ID registration. The Deputy Director of the Image and Video Section of *Nanfang Metropolitan* Online was bold to leave the following message: “Why were we silent? Because this is a time when somebody can take away your job by a phone call, because you have to feed your family, because you’d endanger your colleagues and the newspaper if you dare to rebel. We stand up to speak because we cannot bear it any longer; because what’s done to one is done to all; because there is a knife hanging over the head of all the media workers; because we

know people fighting for justice and freedom are not alone.”

A post written by one of the editors appeared on the official *weibo* account of *Nanfang Weekend* in the afternoon to point out that the “revision” of the New Year Editorial was done without the awareness of the journalists and editors. The post asks for an investigation of the incident. It was forwarded on the internet before it was soon deleted.

On the same day, the spokesperson of the Department of Foreign Affairs declined to comment on the incident but reiterated that the Chinese government protects freedom of press according to law and the press censorship system does not exist in China.

5 Jan The Economy Section of *Nanfang Weekend* posted an open letter to readers in the magazine’s official *weibo* to thank their support. The call for investigation was not heeded and more people were silenced. According to the letter, 1034 articles written by the journalists were rejected from publishing or “revised” in 2012.

The ex-staff, interns and readers of *Nanfang Weekend* co-signed a joint statement of support. They protested against the censorship and demanded the Head of the Guangdong Provincial Department of Propaganda to step down. More than 5000 people have signed the statement by now. Twenty-seven academics, writers and media workers from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China also issued a joint statement.

6 Jan One of the editors, also the administrator of *Nanfang Weekend*’s official *weibo* account posted a message around 9pm to say that he was pressured to hand over the password access. Soon afterwards, a Letter to Readers appeared on the magazine’s official *weibo* claiming that the New Year Editorial was written by one of the editors and the accusations on the internet about the direct intervention of the Propaganda Department were rumours. Around midnight, it was rebutted by a joint statement of 97 journalists and editors of *Nanfang Weekend*, and the staff of the Economy Section announced a strike in protest of the intervention on press freedom.

To counterbalance the public outrage, the editorial of *Global Times*, the official English newspaper published in China, claimed that the “revised” New Year Editorial of *Nanfang Weekend* was not written by the provincial Head of the Propaganda Department of Guangdong. The article accused the incident and the “split” within the *Nanfang Weekend* as one initiated by “the outsiders” attempting to fight against not one particular media but the whole institution behind it. In today’s China, according to the article, it is not practical and possible to find the kind of “press freedom” these people champion for. The development of all forms of media in China must follow the reality situation and the media reform should be part of the wholistic reform of China, rather than assuming itself to be the “special political zone”. It warned further against any public struggle taken by the media against the government because in the end the media would be the loser.

7 Jan The Journalism Ethics Committee of *Nanfang Weekend* released a statement claiming that the Letter to Readers released two days ago was from the Chief Editor who was delegated to do so after the emergency meeting of the editors. The statement also said an investigation of the incident would be taken.

For the whole day, hundreds of protesters went to the office building of *Nanfang News Group* in Guangzhou city to give support to the journalists and editors. It is echoed with similar actions taken in Beijing, and even more solidarity messages, articles and the one-person-one photo campaign on the internet which is participated by thousands of students, activists, academics and netizens in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Up to now the central and Guangdong government have not given official comment.

IHLO, 8 January 2013

P.S.

* Wed, 01/09/2013 - 07:09 — LabourWorld:
<http://www.worldlabour.org/eng/node/536>

Footnotes

[1] By Cheung Kit Ping, posted on 7 Jan 2013, <http://opinion.cw.com.tw/blog/profile/68/article/64>