

Limp

Pigs

Update 2013

Singing the pews

Ten years on from the day I first set foot in China and three years since *Limp Pigs* first appeared, it's time for a confession.

I admit it. I got it wrong. China *has* changed. It's got a new president, a new premier and a wholly revised line-up of politburo power-mongers, all chosen to help the new president impose his own brand of one-party tyranny on the Chinese people.

On 15 November 2012, Xi Jinping was named as President Hu Jintao's successor and immediately unveiled his plan for transforming the system. It consisted primarily of changing the rules of the game of musical chairs that Hu employed to generate the impression of political flexibility.

While Hu was in power, the nine members of his politburo inner circle were occasionally called on to dance round their chairs until the music stopped then take whatever chair was available. The only difference between this and the regular game was that under Hu's rules no chair was ever removed. At the end of every game the same faces occupied largely the same chairs thus ensuring Hu's top political priorities – stability and order – endured throughout his ten-year term as China's top banana.

Xi, as is now clear, is of the belief that while he takes no great issue with Hu's core political principles, perhaps his *modus operandi* was beginning to show its age and might benefit from a bit of cosmetic surgery.

Once confirmed as Hu's replacement Xi lost no time in applying the knife. While the music played and the politburo danced he stunned everybody with an order to remove two chairs. To those well-versed in interpreting Chinese political machinations this radical action meant only one thing. By putting even more power in the hands of even fewer people Xi was effectively declaring his intention to transform China from a totalitarian state run by a gang of power-crazed politburo mandarins into a totalitarian state run, ultimately, by a gang of one. Himself.

There are those in Beijing who won't be in automatic agreement with this contention. Xi's cabinet-cutting move, will go the chorus of protest, is not designed to give him more power than his predecessor. It is, they'll assert, no more than a streamlining measure intended to accelerate the speed of change initiated under Hu. Change, they'll forcefully remind you, that's put China within touching distance of becoming a completely globally-connected, modern, open economy that's ready to do business with the rest of the world.

If you don't believe us, China's image-enhancement committee will bristle, just look at the facts. If the new People's Republic is just a case of putting old rice in new bowls, would China have overtaken Japan as the world's number two economic power during Hu's term in office? Would Beijing now be in a position to help struggling economies worldwide out of the financial mire? Would so many Chinese millions have been raised out of poverty? Would the internet now be available to every citizen across the country? And, not least, would we be seeing the world flocking to China's door with its tongue hanging out?

It's a powerful argument supported by the undeniable fact that change is, indisputably, happening everywhere you look in the 'new' China. From the number of luxury cars clogging the streets to the perpetually reinvented city skylines, the comparison between present day China and the 2003 version

inherited by Hu has visitors rubbing their eyes in disbelief. Few leave without the feeling of having been privy to the rise of a phoenix from the ashes of a discredited predecessor and without an urgent need to gush news of their discovery to the rest of the world.

Truly, they'll coo to anyone who'll listen, the new China is a wonder of modernisation. The very embodiment of what can be achieved given the political will and determination. The world, such effusive souls will inform you, could learn a lot from China and its wonderful, accommodating people.

How true. The world – especially those representatives of it who've just spent a whole two weeks being whizzed from one architectural marvel to another by their state-appointed tour guide – really could learn a lot from China. Not least that they might do well to treat such marvels with a healthy measure of circumspection. By taking the time to read the small print they might discover that all that glitters in the People's Republic isn't necessarily always gold.

By and large, official tours of China's wonder-sites are conducted at breakneck speed and there's a very good reason why. It's to ensure the visitor sees neither the cracks in the edifice nor the artifice in the three-card trick China employs to dupe under-informed outsiders into believing in the Chinese modernisation miracle. If the tour was conducted at a more leisurely pace, there'd be the danger of visitors leaving China with a rather different message to gush.

Slowed down and viewed through narrowed eyes, the duplicitous, intelligence-insulting sleight of hand in China's presentation of change is unmasked. Close inspection reveals it to be a façade of hollow deceit, one which elicits equally hollow laughs from those who've managed to sneak a look behind the cardboard stage set. Even the briefest of glimpses into the void behind the scenery is enough to prompt enlightenment – that here is a country labouring under the fervent belief that the naked king is fully clothed.

Few examples of the China image-presentation duplicity illustrate the point better than that of the iconic China Central Television tower in downtown Beijing.

The tower is iconic for two reasons. While it's undoubtedly a one-of-its-kind structure that appears to defy gravity, it also presents the perfect case history of how the mirage of change in China has a habit of being laughably out-ed by the substance the mirage was intended to conceal.

Known as the underpants building to Beijingers after its two-legs-and-a-crotch shape, the structure is, admittedly, staggering. A true wonder of the architectural world that tests one's powers of description.

And the boundaries of one's credulity.

As with any construction project the CCTV tower was not without its difficulties. But there was one difficulty for which CCTV has only itself to blame. Not only did it sanction the use of fireworks inside the building to celebrate the tower's topping-out in 2009 but then went on to compound the felony by trying to black out news of the resulting inferno.

Dubbed by China watchers as the most inflammatory thing ever to have come out of the state TV broadcaster in its fifty-odd years of existence, the fireworks display not only incinerated part of the tower but also caused extensive damage to a new hotel nearing completion next door.

With mobile phone-captured images of the blaze swamping the internet, viewers to CCTV might have been excused for expecting the station's newscasts to feature full, unexpurgated, wall-to-wall coverage of the incident. Here, after all, was a story no CCTV news team could have had an excuse for not covering.

That expectation was to be dashed. Unlike local Beijingers whose pictures of the fire could be immediately uploaded to the web, CCTV's news editors found themselves trapped in editorial limboland. Down the wire had come an order from on high to neither mention the incident on the news nor run any footage of it. Run something else – anything else – was the instruction issued by those with the power to issue them and out came the regulation panda procreation panacea piece to fill the void.

The editors had no need of asking why. Those with greater power than themselves over what does and what does not qualify as 'news' in China considered the incident un-newsworthy – i.e. so much of an embarrassment to the country that it couldn't possibly be allowed space on Chinese state-run

television, aka all Chinese television. Put in plain language, the order was: pretend it didn't happen.

Field day would be too feeble a term to describe the fun the bloggersphere had at the establishment's expense when CCTV and every other state media organ in China ignored the story. Here was a piece of stupidity that gave the phrase 'own goal' a significance new even to a country that on occasion seems barely able to score anything else.

Under normal circumstances, caught in the act with its pants down, any sensible administration might be expected to try taking the wind out of the bloggersphere's sails by simply owning up to certain fallibilities on this occasion, have done with it and move on. At the very least it could have resorted to the old 'technical difficulties' apology for an excuse.

But this was China, a country where 'sensible' carries a meaning foreign to western observers. To China's authorities, 'sensible' means burying bad news so deep it can't be exhumed and used to tarnish Beijing's best-of-all-possible-worlds official image. So, despite the torrent of tower blaze images and comment flooding the web, the authorities dug in their heels and steadfastly refused to allow the official media to publish any footage of the fire until those responsible for the blaze were finally brought to book for their crimes a year later.

While the eventual release of the footage was intended as an internet traffic calming measure, all it did was provide further evidence of China's almost limitless capacity for shooting itself in the foot. To the giggles of Beijingers and the guffaws of the rest of the world, the images finally allowed out into the public domain weren't even official photos. The shots of the fire-damaged tower interior eventually sanctioned for use in the *China Daily* were taken by a non-official blogger, the paper's editors having been unable to persuade the authorities of the sense of using official footage.

But at least the *China Daily* carried something. Not so CCTV. As of late-2013, the station has still to broadcast any footage – official or not – of the blaze, has still not shifted its operation fully from its former HQ to the now-repaired tower and appears quite content to continue acting as China's purveyor-in-chief of state-manufactured anti-news.

If the CCTV tower story is a measure of how China is changing, one wonders what the country would look like if it wasn't officially wedded to change. Something like the China of Mao Zedong?

The very suggestion is enough to make the current administration see red, if that's not an inappropriate choice of colour under the circumstances. Despite having to remain in awe of the great helmsman publicly, in private he's derided for steering the ship of state up the cul-de-sac of backwardness and isolationism. For leaving the Chinese no better off than when he led China's communist forces on their long march to eventual power in 1949.

'Modern-day China is to Maoist China what pork is to tofu,' will be the icy reaction to such a suggestion. 'Both have their merits but only one has the protein of meat,' will be the semi-diplomatic response to this line of enquiry, and before you know it out will come the regulation shopping list of meat production achievements over recent years.

'Just look at how well the country is doing,' will go the battle cry of self-justification. 'So well, in fact, that China hasn't just pulled itself out of poverty, it's helping others do so too. We're now not only helping prop up some of the world's hardest-hit economies but keeping any number of non-Chinese companies afloat. Even,' your China image-enhancement committee representative will smugly inform you, 'companies in well-developed countries like the UK' and under your nose will be thrust a catalogue of British infrastructure projects and near-bankrupt UK firms China has saved from going to the wall, largely courtesy of the China Investment Corporation, Beijing's sovereign wealth fund.

If ever you find yourself on a train in Britain breakfasting in the company of a China-deriding, Savile Row-suited fellow passenger en route from London to Birmingham, your China image-enhancement friend will slyly suggest, why not alert your companion to the fact that China was behind the saving not only of the company which made the suit he's wearing but of the train he's travelling on, the supplier of the water that made the tea he's drinking, the electricity that heated the water to make the tea he's drinking and the football club in the city he's travelling to. Chinese money, he'll gleefully inform you, not only prevented the Savile Row tailoring major Gieves & Hawke from ending up in the hands of the receiver but is funding the operations of Britain's Weetabix breakfast cereal company, the UK rail

network, its power sector, Thames Water and Birmingham Football Club. And next time your breakfast companion flies from Heathrow airport, he might also be interested in knowing that one tenth of the airport is now Chinese-owned. That, your Chinese friend will say, should focus his mind nicely.

In case it doesn't and your argument fails to sway him from his belief that, fundamentally, China remains shackled to its former closed-off past, your friend will then suggest you switch to listing instances of how the People's Republic has, since 2011 in particular, begun cementing its place on the international stage. Educate your companion, he'll say, with the information that since 2011 all Chinese loans to fellow BRICS members – Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa – have been made in the Chinese renminbi currency, not in dollars as previously, that a similar arrangement is now in place with China's historic nemesis Japan and that China's loans to the developing world are exceeding those made annually by the World Bank. And now that the Gulf States have agreed to accept oil purchase payments through a basket of currencies which include the renminbi, the Chinese currency is one step closer to being added to the dollar, the euro and the yen as one of the world's premium reserve currencies. That, he'll say with a self-satisfied smile, should shut the bugger up.

It might. But if Mr Savile Row Suit has any grasp at all on things Chinese there's every possibility of him countering such arguments with a few of his own. Offerings that are likely to leave dyed-in-the-wool China trumpeteers like your image-enhancer friend struggling for a response.

While 2011 was definitely the year in which China came of age economically, there's ample evidence to suggest that, in all other respects, China remains as locked in the mentality of the Mao era as ever it was.

What else could explain China's reasons for disrupting and blacking out news of a central Beijing democracy demonstration shortly after the first of several Middle Eastern tyrants was deposed in the wake of the Arab Spring? Why else would China still be blocking websites devoted to criticising and lampooning Chinese officialdom? Why won't the state release its stranglehold over the Chinese media? Why do hundreds of journalists and lawyers remain behind bars in Chinese jails? And while we're at it, why else would a democracy demonstration have been considered necessary at all?

Could it be that under both Hu and Xi, there's been something of a communications breakdown with the West? That while the rest of the world

was using the word 'change' to mean transformation of the system, China's leaders thought they were referring to something else?

'Whatever makes them think there's no change in China?' one can almost hear Hu and Xi thinking. 'There's so much change here it's wearing a hole in our pocket.'

As flippant as that sounds, there's more truth in it than you might think. Hu Jintao as good as confirmed it in what has become known as his 'cultural system reform' speech delivered shortly before he left office. While calling for greater economic contact with the outside world, Hu saw no contradiction in simultaneously denouncing the creeping westernisation of Chinese society and urging more stringent blocks on the internet to counter it. *Plus ça change...*

Hu's call for cultural reform was but the last of any number of double-edged pronouncements made by the former president and his entourage in the years since *Limp Pigs* first appeared – pronouncements that do nothing to dissuade political theorists from the belief that Hu's administration was congenitally incapable of giving a present to which a length of industrial strength elastic wasn't attached.

Nothing illustrates this better than the tsunami of media-hobbling measures that have returned to engulf the press since the Olympic circus left town in late 2008.

When the torch of the XXIX Olympiad arrived in Beijing, hopes soared that its flame would light up a lot more than the Bird's Nest cauldron. The touch paper of press freedom was, it seemed, also being prepared for ignition. As the torch toured China, the authorities stunned the world with an announcement that a goodly number of media shackles were coming off, not least that journalists no longer needed official permission to travel around China or to interview the average China man-in-the-street. The foreign press pack, to whom the de-restrictions applied in particular, blinked in disbelief. There had to be a catch.

They were right. There was.

Along with the departure of the torch went any hope that what looked like China's version of Russia's glasnost wasn't the result of the authorities having a little fun at the media's expense. With the world's spotlight now trained elsewhere, bit by bit the de-restrictions were either overturned or simply ignored until the media found themselves as much under the cosh as in pre-Olympic days.

More, even. Like a gathering storm the re-restriction crescendo gradually built until what the International Federation of Journalists has described as a new media ice age struck in 2011.

Panicked by that year's events in the Middle East, the IFJ reports that China's various media-overseeing authorities tightened the screw ever further leaving both the local and foreign press backed into a corner, unable to report any incident that had even the hint of a mass gathering to it.

For anyone brave enough to flout the restrictions the penalties were severe. Human Rights Watch reports that hundreds of local journalists were sacked or suspended in 2011 and thirty-four were jailed for indulging in activities deemed likely to either incite subversion or result in state secrets being revealed to the world.

If anyone thought China's media re-shackling frenzy might ease off once it was clear that the authorities had nipped China's own 'Jasmine Revolution' in the bud, they had another think coming. The big Chinese media freeze continued throughout 2012 and, as of late-2013, there's little sign of a thaw.

If anything, things look set to get chillier still. China proved it in 2012 when, for the first time in fourteen years, it deported a foreign journalist. No one in the foreign press pack knew why and, as of the time of writing in November 2013, the world still awaits China's reasoning.

Did Al Jazeera's Melissa Chan get her marching orders for covering the flight of blind human rights lawyer Chen Guangcheng into sanctuary at the US embassy? Or was it for getting too close to unveiling the reason behind the purging of a prominent member of the state apparatus?

The smart money's on the latter. The man purged from the Party was one Bo Xilai, the Communist Party's boss in Chongqing and a man so powerful in his own right that many believe he was undone by Xi Jinping himself to prevent Bo making a lunge for the presidency.

Bo's undoing had all the ingredients of a crime fiction blockbuster linking Bo to all manner of dastardly deeds. Not only was Bo connected to the death

in mysterious circumstances of the China-based British businessman Neil Heywood but to the Chongqing police chief who'd made an unsuccessful attempt to seek the protection of the US embassy in the wake of Heywood's death.

Initially declared to be the result of a massive drinking bout, Heywood's demise was ultimately attributed to cyanide poisoning, the finger of suspicion coming to rest on someone with whom Bo could hardly deny having a close association – his wife, Gu Kailai.

Eventually convicted of Heywood's murder, Gu received a suspended death sentence whilst the policeman – found guilty of being an accomplice in the crime – got fifteen years. Tainted by the incident, Bo was considered such a liability to the image of the Communist Party it ousted him from his post, expelled him from its ranks and stealthily removed him from sight... all with hardly a flicker of public comment from Beijing.

Bo eventually reappeared in August 2013 charged with corruption and abuse of power. One mock trial later Bo found himself in possession of a life sentence and you could almost hear the dusting of hands as Xi & Co. congratulated themselves on having put a troublesome potential contender for the throne beyond the bounds of rehabilitation.

While Bo, Gu and the police chief are the prime casualties of this politically explosive affair, they aren't the only ones. Any progress China has made in convincing the world of its intentions to liberalise the system is another, blown comprehensively out of the water by that self-same system's laughably artless attempt to hoodwink the media into believing Bo was getting a fair trial.

On the surface, the most remarkable thing about the trial was that the media were treated to a blow-by-blow account of proceedings via Weibo, China's version of Twitter.

The press pack gawped. Never before had they been allowed this degree of 'access' to such a high profile case prompting some to go so far as to declare the trial a watershed moment in the history of Chinese press freedom.

They might have had a point were it not for one not inconsequential aspect of the whole affair. Apart from CCTV and the state-run Xinhua News Agency, no media organisation was allowed into the courtroom and the

Weibo trial update posts were streamed by accredited court officials, every one of them appointed by the system they served.

There are those who were in China at the time of the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 who'll be experiencing feelings of *déjà vu* in relation to this sequence of events. Just change the names and dates and you could be back in the days when Mao's wife Jiang Qing and her Gang of Four Marxist fundamentalists were purged from the Party, forced to stand trial for political crimes carried out during the Cultural Revolution, given suspended death sentences and all the outside world knew of it was through brief reports put out by the state media. Time, it would appear, has not stopped *déjà vu* happening again and again in China. *Plus ça change...*

Time, it would seem, has also done little to help China with its image presentation skills. If you really don't want to attract snorts of derisive mirth from the West – as I kept telling the Xinhua overlords during my time there – if you're going to do propaganda, at least do it well.

They didn't listen then and there seems no evidence that they're listening now. Anyone on the receiving end of what passes for news in the People's Republic will be in no doubt that the same old turds, as Kiwi Craig might have put it, are still being flushed down the same old golden toilet. And what seems certain is that the turds will continue to be flushed until the sewage system blocks up so completely that even the most vigorous rodding won't shift it and someone somewhere is forced to have a total system rethink.

That day still looks some way off. Not only is the Chinese press still being expected – indeed forced – to dance to the Party tune but so are China's half billion or so social media site habitués. Any newspaperman stepping out of line and making a brave attempt to tell it like it really is soon discovers who's really pulling the paper's strings and any Chinese 'netizen' openly questioning the system does so in the full knowledge that he/she could well be hearing an authoritarian rap on the door almost before he/she has finished posting it.

In a way that's exactly what happened in the case of the *Southern Weekly*, a rare example of a progressive Chinese newspaper priding itself on

its investigative reporting. After treading too close to the line of acceptability on a number of occasions in 2012, a clearly antagonised government stepped in and replaced the editor with one of its own.

Seething with resentment, the paper's staff tried to publish an editorial calling for media reform. When it was spiked in favour of a propaganda agency-crafted attack on anti-censorship activists, the journalists' patience finally snapped. For the first time in the history of the Chinese press, the staff walked out and staged a picket outside the paper's gates.

Since the word 'strike' is effectively illegal in China, the action was described by its participants as a protest. That, of course, didn't stop the foreign media and the bloggersphere using the term and soon the 'strikers' found themselves joined by others with a gripe against the system.

In all the stoppage lasted a week, ending only when the participants were made an offer they couldn't refuse – get back to work or...

With great reluctance they chose the former. By appearing to cave in they'd at least be spared the full wrath of a system not best known for allowing challenges to the state's much-treasured social harmony policy to go 'unrewarded', as the reprisal warning is euphemised.

As the *Southern Weekly* strikers wrestled with their consciences and fretted over the degree of reprisal savagery that awaited them, at least they could console themselves with the fact that they weren't alone. The bloggersphere had been made a similar offer. Use your real names or else, went a government directive imposed in the wake of a rash of system-taunting internet jibes.

To prove it was serious, state internet snoopers swooped, closed down thousands of sites that failed to comply and prosecuted a raft of serial offenders – a crackdown which only served to harden the hardcore's resolve. Every time a bloggersphere ruse to circumvent the rules was uncovered and eliminated, China's netizens just came up with a better, more ingenious one.

Most are based on the use of the homophone, an authority-mocking tool bloggers used to especially good effect during the *Southern Weekly* strike. With the name of the newspaper blocked while the action continued, the Chinese word for porridge – almost identical to the paper's name – was found to be a more than adequate substitute. It even inspired the *Beijing News* to carry a guardedly strike action-supporting commentary dressed up as a cookery item.

‘Just placed upon the table,’ said the paper as the *Southern Weekly* strike began, ‘the porridge writhes still with heat. Perhaps it has a heart of courage yet. There are so many troubles in this world and all you can count on for warmth is this bowl of porridge.’

A noble sentiment indeed. But unfortunately one that’s unlikely to be anything more than that in the real Chinese world. Warmth will only be forthcoming should the ‘porridge’ be allowed to do its job and be a real newspaper.

As things stand in China, that’s the last thing it’s being allowed to do. In one day alone in 2013, says a report leaked to the foreign press from the censor’s office, China’s editors received a list of fourteen banned subjects, from the arrival of US military vessels in the Southern Ocean to an attack on government officials by residents of the village of Dongxia. And woe betide anyone having the audacity to dare mention the 170,000 yuan (\$28,000) dinner bill run up by Party provincial bureau deputy director Yu Laishan.

While papers like the *Southern Weekly* and the *Beijing News* do, on occasion, test the boundaries of censor acceptability – even mocking the system they serve on occasion – even they wouldn’t toy with China’s most enduring censorship directive. Still in force after nearly a quarter of a century, it warns of the most stringent penalties for making any reference to the Tiananmen Square massacre or to the date on which the massacre took place – June 4, 1989.

And so that the bloggersphere doesn’t fill the void, those charged with maintaining ‘social harmony’ on the internet go to extraordinary lengths to block even the most oblique reference to the date. ‘May 35th’ and ‘April 65th’ are both blocked by the Great Firewall of China and, much to the chagrin of Chinese cricketers and game console users, so are the terms ‘six four’ and ‘Nintendo 64’ (even though this version of the console was discontinued in 2002).

But as exasperating as the blocking of such terms is to China’s bloggers, they pale into insignificance next to the censor’s finest achievement – the block imposed on the phrase ‘big yellow duck’.

Banned on the grounds that it could be a reference to the sculpture of that ilk erected in the then-separate Hong Kong to symbolise the column of tanks sent to Tiananmen Square to crush, quite literally, the democracy movement taking root there, the bloggersphere reacted with a typically sniggering tongue-poke at the establishment. Almost immediately, a banned picture of the tanks' entrance to the square began circulating – photoshopped to replace the tanks with a column of huge, bright yellow, ducks.

While the internet community has the luxury of being able to keep banned issues live on the net through the use of homophones and allusions, the conventional media just has to knuckle under or face the consequences. Even the foreign media at times.

Although there's little the authorities can do to prevent the external press reporting China as it sees it, few resident foreign reporters are prepared to risk tweaking the dragon's tail too hard lest they find themselves and the news outlets they represent being accorded special authoritarian attention.

While this generally takes the form of invasions of privacy and the removal of privileges, these aren't the only reprisals at the Chinese censor's disposal. When *The Economist* ran a critical review of China in 2012, for example, the offending articles were manually snipped out of editions reaching Chinese newsstands. And when *Bloomberg* ran an exposé of the huge wealth accumulated by the family of Xi Jinping, it found its website blocked for an indefinite period.

Even the gloriously anodyne *National Geographic* found it wasn't immune from the censors' attention. Readers of the magazine found the pages of a China feature glued together, presumably to protect them from having their minds sullied by the allegedly subversive travelogue contained therein. It was enough to spur even the generally understated *Financial Times* to come out of its shell and conclude that 'the Party has cranked up its propaganda machine to levels not seen in years.'

You don't need a Nobel Prize-winning brain to work out why. In the wake of the Arab Spring and threats to the status quo from the likes of Bo Xilai and the internet, the authorities' normally extreme state of paranoia has morphed into one of obsessive wagon-circling. The system, China's politicians have decided, has to be preserved at all – some would say any – cost. Which

would explain why China now spends more on internal security than on national defence – an aspect of Chinese budgetary policy which, in itself, is something of a giveaway. China's drive to achieve social harmony paradise status is clearly not going quite according to plan.

The same could be said for a couple of other, interlinked, policy areas that don't seem to have produced the desired effect no matter how hard the authorities try to convince the world otherwise.

Environmentally, China's headlong rush into the fires of hell shows no sign of slowing and continuing internal communication problems between ministerial departments don't seem to be helping.

With unparalleled pollution levels now a prime factor behind overseas workers thinking twice before signing up with China-based companies, you'd have thought the issue might have received an airing of sorts in the Chinese press. It hasn't, primarily because a problem that was inherent in the system when I was a state media employee back in 2003 has yet to be eradicated. Pollution hazard warnings published on official databases failed to attract the attention of state news organisation editors then and all indications are that little, if anything, has changed.

Despite this – and many other – examples of the left hand still not knowing (or not wanting to know) what the right is doing, the authorities remain keen to impress on us that miscommunication problems between ministerial departments are a thing of the past. If they are, perhaps they'd like to explain this. How could a report from the country's official Xinhua News Agency announcing the sacking of Bo Xilai from his Party post possibly become a casualty of the state censorship machine? Could it be that nobody told the machine that the automatic block on any mention of Bo's name didn't apply to Xinhua reports?

Not unexpectedly, on finding its reports being mangled by the machine, Xinhua's editors were not amused. Even the irony of seeing China's prime propaganda propagator fall victim to the system it serves failed to raise a smile amongst agency staff.

So no change there then. As workplaces go, the Xinhua, CCTV, China Radio International and *China Daily* word factories are about as joyous as a Scottish Presbyterian funeral on a damp day in November and don't even mention the *People's Daily*. By comparison, China's answer to sensory

deprivation makes the country's other state media organs look like palaces of unrestrained fun, frivolity and merry-making.

Set up as the Chinese Communist Party's personal mouthpiece, the *People's Daily* is known to Chinese media workers as the repository for those who are too drear and po-faced even for Xinhua. Little wonder then that its editorial cadres didn't see the joke in the '*Raping People Daily*' nickname applied by China's netizens to the paper. Nor that they failed to spot a rash of double entendres posted on the web to get around a blocked word to describe the shape of the new *People's Daily* HQ.

With the word 'penis' banned on the net, the cadres are said to have been quite pleased at finding bloggers referring to the building as the headquarters of the Party's main organ, standing erect to impregnate the masses with the message of social integration.

But as sense-of-humour-deprived as the *People's Daily* is, even it failed to match CCTV for robotic reporting on one memorable occasion.

On what was a slow day at the station, CCTV's news editors were only too delighted to receive and transmit verbatim a press release from Virgin Atlantic boss Sir Richard Branson informing them that his company was about to add a glass-bottomed plane to its fleet. Only after having it pointed out to them by a tidal wave of sniggering bloggers that here was one snippet of news that really did deserve the censor's attention did the editors remove the item from the news agenda. The dateline of the release, the bloggers pointed out with glee, was 1 April 2013.

Whether CCTV found itself embarrassed by the incident isn't recorded. But one might be forgiven for assuming that its editors are now in possession of a memo advising them to check press release datelines rather more carefully before accepting their contents as incontrovertible fact.

It's a piece of advice that editors throughout the Chinese state media might also care to take on board. Especially, one might suggest, when it comes to government statements. In the light of the evidence available, editors would be well advised to view with a healthy measure of scepticism vows to tackle corruption, to overhaul and reform the system and to propel China, finally, into the twenty-first century. When it comes to Chinese state pronouncements it can sometimes seem like 1 April every day.

That's certainly the way a substantial proportion of the country's blogger community treats such pronouncements. Despite the state's reported two million-strong blog-monitoring force, the severe penalties imposed for ignoring government internet rules and the millions of paid volunteers posting pro-government blogs at a reported fifty cents per blog, China's cyberspace still buzzes with authority nose-tweaking and mischief-making. And the irony is that with every new restriction comes a new wave of recruits to the mischief-making cause, all keen to join in the bloggersphere's own non-stop game of virtual musical chairs designed to keep the authorities busy chasing their own tails.

If they had any sense, China's internet control force would recognise what's happening and stop providing them with fuel to stoke the fires of ridicule. With mass gatherings effectively outlawed, the internet is rapidly becoming the rallying point for Chinese dissent and the authorities really ought to be wondering if they've done the right thing.

In committing to making the worldwide web available to every Chinese citizen across the country, what they've done is put a loaded gun – or at the very least a custard pie – in the hands of an increasingly dissatisfied populace. With the internet at their disposal, the formerly voice-deprived have not only been handed a megaphone but the power to create Chinese democracy by proxy.

Ai Weiwei, the famously openly dissident Chinese artist who the authorities tried to gag through the imposition of a gargantuan and unpayable tax bill, believes the only way the government will ever silence dissent is by shutting the net down.

While he may well be right, therein lies something of a dilemma for the state's gagmasters. Allow it to continue and dissent will prosper. Shut it down and there's the risk of a far heavier price to pay. If there's one freedom the Chinese have got used to and won't tolerate being denied, it's the freedom to poke a virtual tongue out at the country's ruling elite over the internet airwaves. If China wants another cultural revolution, there'd be no more certain way of making it happen than by shutting off the internet tap.

But if the authorities don't, the conditions are rife for another form of revolution. One in which the voice of the politburo of the Chinese Communist Party is gradually drowned out by that of the cyberworld.

For sixty years the Party has ruled by keeping the masses in ignorance. With the advent of the internet, those days seem rapidly to be coming to a close.

Mao Zedong once said that change comes only through the barrel of a gun. Twenty-first century Chinese revolutionaries are in the process of proving him wrong. They're harnessing the power of a far less destructive, but no less potent, weapon to achieve the same result.

Change can come, they're discovering, through the barrel of a pun.



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