(http://www.chinafile.com/sites/default/files/assets/images/article/featured/51346118.jpg)

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Ten thousand Tai Chi martial artists move in unison in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in this archival panoramic photo taken in 1998. The demonstration was the first ever martial arts display allowed at the political heart of Beijing since the start of Communist Party rule in 1949.

China: The Anaconda in the Chandelier

BY PERRY LINK APRIL 11, 2002

In China's Mao years you could be detained and persecuted for talking with your neighbor about your cat. The Chinese word for "cat" (*mao*, high level tone) is a near homonym for the name of the Great Leader (*mao*, rising tone), and a tip to the police from an eavesdropper who misheard one for the other and took you to be disrespectful could ruin your life.[1] Such things no longer happen. The importance of the Chinese government in the daily lives of ordinary Chinese people has receded markedly over the last quarter-century. The space in which unofficial life takes place has expanded, and informal speech is much freer than before. Although there are still no barbed political cartoons in newspapers, sarcasm no less biting is rampant in jokes and rhythmical ditties on oral networks throughout the country. Some of these sayings flatly blame the Communist Party ("If we don't root out corruption, the country will perish; if we do root out corruption, the Party will perish"). Others dare to satirize Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and other top leaders by name.

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Yet repression remains an important problem, and its extent and methods are still poorly understood in the West. To appreciate it one must re-visit a dull but fundamental fact: the highest priority of the top leadership of the Communist Party remains, as in the past, not economic development, or a just society, or China's international standing, or any other goal for the nation as a whole, but its own grip on power. Thus it continues to ban any public expression of opposition to itself and continues to crush any organization that it does not control or

could not easily control if it needed to. The fate of *qigong* breath exercises is a good illustration. In the 1980s the Party encouraged *qigong* as an expression of Chinese essence and a symbol of national pride. The central government even set up a national *qigong* association, complete with its own bureaucracy. But in the 1990s, when some *qigong* masters (Li Hongzhi of Falun Gong was not the first) decided to build their own organizations outside Party control, the same Chinese-essence breath exercises overnight became an "evil cult" and a target for brutal repression. The founders of the Chinese Democratic Party, all of whom are in prison today, ran afoul of the same principle. Their crime was not the word "democratic" in their group's name (China has long had eight "democratic parties," all subordinate to the leadership of the Communist Party); their crime was to declare that their organization was independent.

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Censorship in intellectual matters broadly follows the same pattern. Nearly anything can be said in private, which is a big advance over the Mao years. And because academic journals have such small circulations, they are given somewhat more latitude than other publishing media. As long as scholars don't confront the top leadership head-on, they can write in scholarly journals pretty much as they choose. Moreover, in recent years, what many of them have chosen to write has been more favorable to the Party leadership than what they were inclined to write in the 1980s.[2]

But when an intellectual does want to express a politically sensitive idea in public, it remains the case that he or she must take a risk. As in the past, taking risks is not just a matter of personal courage, although courage of course is important. It helps as well to have allies or backers with whom to share the risk. It can also help to use indirection, such as pseudonyms, surrogates, or Aesopian expression. Even highly placed people, such as the sponsors of *The Tiananmen Papers*, a collection of internal documents on the genesis of the 1989 Beijing massacre,[3] choose to be indirect when going public.

Although repression under Jiang Zemin has applied to a narrower range of expression than it did under Deng Xiaoping, its essential methods have changed little. These methods have "Chinese characteristics"; they have always differed, for example, from those of the Soviet Union. The Soviets published periodic handbooks that listed which specific phrases were out of bounds, and employed a large bureaucracy to enforce the rules. China has never had such a bureaucracy or published such handbooks. The Chinese Communist Party rejected these more mechanical methods in favor of an essentially psychological control system that relies primarily on self-censorship. Questions of risk—how far to go, how explicit to be, with whom to ally, and so on—are to be judged by each writer and editor. There are, of course, material punishments that anchor a person's calculations. If you calculate incorrectly you can lose your job, be imprisoned, or, in the worst case, get a bullet in the back of the head. If you live overseas you can run the risk of being cut off from your family and hometown. But most censorship does not directly involve such happenings. It involves *fear* of such happenings. By "fear" I do not mean a clear and present sense of panic. I mean a dull, well-entrenched leeriness that people who deal with the Chinese censorship system usually get used to, and eventually accept as part of their natural landscape. But the controlling power of the fear is impressive nonetheless.

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Outsiders to this system can be puzzled by its use of vagueness. The puzzlement was rife, for example, in the well-publicized cases of the sociologists Gao Zhan and Li Shaomin, one a legal US resident and the other a US citizen, who were arrested last year during research trips to China. They were accused as spies and charged with collecting classified "internal" documents. But particulars remained unclear. What did they actually do? What line did they cross? How does the government

define "spying"? Why were these two people arrested for using "internal" materials (of which there are many kinds and levels, some of which are openly available in bookstores) while so many other scholars both inside and outside China routinely do the same thing and are not bothered?

The answers to these questions in the cases of Gao Zhan and Li Shaomin indeed remain a puzzle, but the "vagueness" of the charges is hardly new. Such vagueness is purposeful and has been a fundamental tool in Chinese Communist censorship for decades. It has the following four advantages:

—A vague accusation frightens more people. If I, like Gao Zhan, am a Chinese scholar working in the US, and I don't know why she was arrested, then the reason could be virtually anything; therefore it could be what I am doing; therefore I pull back. (Result: many people begin to censor themselves.) If, on the other hand, I could know exactly why Gao Zhan was nabbed, then I could feel fairly confident that my own work was all right—or, if not, how to make it all right. (Result: few people would pull back.) Clarity serves the purpose of the censoring state only when it wants to curb a very specific kind of behavior; when it wants to intimidate a large group, vagueness works much better.

—A vague accusation pressures an individual to curtail a wider range of activity. If I don't know exactly why I was "wrong," I am induced to pay more attention to the state's strictures in every respect. This device has been used in literary and social campaigns in China since the 1950s. Who can say—or ever could—what exactly is meant by "spiritual pollution," "bourgeois liberalism," or other such terms for ideological misbehavior? (Is long hair "spiritual pollution"? How long? Why were some people with long hair punished in the 1980s and others with the same length not? And so on.) The cognitive content of key terms is purposefully vague; only the negativity is unambiguous. To be safe, a person must pull back in every respect, and moreover must become his or her own policeman.

—A vague accusation is useful in maximizing what can be learned during forced confessions. When Li Shaomin was arrested, he asked his captors the reason and they answered, "You yourself know the reason."[4] It was up to Li to "earn lenience" by "showing sincerity" through "confession." This word game is standard. The police routinely say that they already possess an exhaustive amount of information on your crimes and that the purpose of interrogating you is not to get information but to measure your sincerity by observing your confession. In fact, though, this is often a lie. Usually the point is precisely to extract new information, which can then be used either against you or against someone else. Clarity about the accusation would obviously destroy this tactic.

—A vague accusation allows arbitrary targeting. Leaders who exercise arbitrary power like to disguise the real reasons for their actions. In a culture like China's, where the leader's "face" represents his morality, which in turn is the basis for his political legitimacy, the need to pretend that one is acting legally and morally is especially important. The need for pretense only increases as a leader's moral behavior worsens. In this context, the availability of vague and even self-contradictory laws can be extremely useful to a leader. For example, a rule might state "It is forbidden to collect internal materials" at the same time that at least some internal materials, such as government reports, are easily available and it is well known that many people collect them. This situation makes it possible for me, the authority, to use the rule to arrest Gao Zhan or Li Shaomin or whomever I like—*for who knows what reason*—and at the same time to have a ready, face-saving justification for my exercise of arbitrary power. China's constitution itself illustrates this handy flexibility. It provides that citizens have freedom of speech, of assembly, and of the press. But its preamble also sets down the inviolability of Communist Party rule, Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong-Thought, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the socialist system. The huge space between these two contradictory poles (both of which, by the way, are poor descriptions of the

actual patterns of life in China) gives leaders immense room to be arbitrary while still claiming to be legal.

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But the big story in Beijing's pressuring of overseas scholars is not in the high-profile cases of Gao Zhan, Li Shaomin, Wu Jianmin, Xu Zerong, and others. The pressures penetrate far deeper than those cases taken individually would suggest. The great majority of the other cases never come to light. Kang Zhengguo, writing in *The New York Review*, estimates that "hundreds and thousands" of Chinese who return to their homeland are invited for "chats" in which the police warn and threaten them in various ways ("Do you want to come back to China again?" "Do you wish the best for your friends and relatives?"). The police also specifically warn people not to say anything about these threats when they go back to the West. ("Let's not have any loose tongues"; "Remember to preserve the positive image of State Security"; etc.)[5] I cannot corroborate Kang's estimate that there are "hundreds and thousands" of such "returnee interviews," but would note that just within my own circle of friends I have heard a dozen or so such stories in recent years.

For example, I am acquainted with a woman—a well-known critic of the Chinese government—who lives in the West but recently went back to China under a pseudonym so that she could visit her ailing mother. (Use of pseudonyms for this purpose is common among overseas dissidents.) When she arrived in her Chinese hometown the police knew who she was, and let her know that they knew it, and yet both sides played the language game of pretending that her "returnee interview," where specific threats were delivered and received over tea and snacks, was simply a social event. Back in the West, she still abides by certain rules, one of which is not to reveal the very threats that she is obeying.

In addition to the number, whatever it may be, of Chinese people who are directly affected in this way, a far larger number feel the pressures indirectly. For every person who is threatened with forced exile or mistreatment of relatives, many more hear about such threats and censor themselves accordingly. In summer 2001, after the Gao Zhan and Li Shaomin arrests, probably a record number (my surmise; statistics are not available) of overseas Chinese scholars canceled research trips to China. At one major university a young professor made this decision even though her research was on the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). Her problem was not that she thought her topic would cause trouble; it was that she had no idea what behavior did cause trouble. Could it be one's friends? One's itinerary? In such cases active fear is rare. Conservatism and self-censorship are merely practical. With the passage of time, threats and prohibitions come to seem normal, even natural. Most Chinese wend their ways through the political landscape without questioning all of its boulders and ditches, but simply skirting them, getting where they want to go with minimum trouble. By contrast the dissident, who does raise questions, or states principles, can seem a bit blockheaded, and even in a sense deserving of the trouble he or she gets into.

China scholars from non-Chinese backgrounds are affected as well. For example in 1999, when the quasi-religious Falun Gong organization suddenly made itself felt in China and the world, a major US news organization invited one of the US's top scholars in a relevant field for a television interview. The scholar, a Caucasian American, declined. He didn't want to lose access to fieldwork in China by publicly discussing a politically sensitive issue. He knew that foreigners who displease Chinese authorities can be denied visas, or, even if allowed into China, denied interviews or access to archives. He faced no specific threat in this regard, but chose to comply voluntarily under the same kind of general and vague guidelines that affect overseas Chinese. (It is unusual for anyone, Chinese or not, to receive a specific demand from the Chinese government, but this does happen. For example, a number of the Americans who worked to bring out *The Tiananmen Papers* are now denied visas to travel to China. But one of them, after requesting a reason for the denial, received a

letter from a PRC official who explained that he could not help because he was "unable to guarantee to the relevant authority that you will extend certain apologies on your involvement in *The Tiananmen Papers* so as to clear your visa problems." Unusual specificity is used when the aim is to achieve a specific result—in this case, apparently, the discrediting of a troublesome book by one of its supporters.)

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How often such things happen and what kind of self-censorship results are difficult things to measure. The problem is most salient, and unusually complex, for political scientists who study the Chinese government and need to nurture their contacts among Chinese officials. The effects are hard to measure not only because people are reluctant to speak about them (no scholar likes to acknowledge self-censorship), but because the crucial functions are psychological and sometimes highly subtle. They happen within the recesses of private minds, where even the scholar him- or her-self may not notice exactly what is happening.

I do not say this to denigrate my fellow scholars. Over the years I have noticed the phenomenon in myself as well. It is always somehow more difficult than it should be for a China scholar to write or speak in explicit contradiction of what the Beijing government has pronounced to be a "fundamental principle." Beijing's "one-China principle" is an example. It somehow causes the very phrase "Taiwan independence" to take on negative connotations in discussions among contemporary China specialists. In a similar way analysis of human rights often tiptoes around Beijing's principle "not to interfere in internal affairs." As in the case of overseas Chinese, China scholars who bear these taboos in mind for an extended length of time eventually feel them to be natural. To violate them comes to seem not just politically incorrect but somehow culturally insensitive, as if one does not pay due respect to the "other side" in a meeting of cultures. But the taboos are not cultural in their origins so much as political, indeed political in a partisan way.

In sum, the Chinese government's censorial authority in recent times has resembled not so much a man-eating tiger or fire-snorting dragon as a giant anaconda coiled in an overhead chandelier. Normally the great snake doesn't move. It doesn't have to. It feels no need to be clear about its prohibitions. Its constant silent message is "You yourself decide," after which, more often than not, everyone in its shadow makes his or her large and small adjustments—all quite "naturally." The Soviet Union, where Stalin's notion of "engineering the soul" was first pursued, in practice fell far short of what the Chinese Communists have achieved in psychological engineering.

For years the intimidation was aimed only at Chinese citizens, but now it has been projected overseas. As China's international involvements continue to grow (soon maybe faster than ever because of the country's entry into the World Trade Organization) it becomes important for the rest of the world to notice this problem. What are the effects of censorship—and induced self-censorship—on the flow of good information between China and other countries? I do not wish to argue that Chinese censorship is the only, or even the main, problem in this regard. (The slowness of Westerners to learn the Chinese language, for example, is at least as big a problem; today the ratio of Chinese who study English to Americans who study Chinese is several thousand to one.) But regardless of what else is involved, the role of Beijing's censorship is demonstrably harmful. It contributes to distortions both in Chinese perceptions of the West and in Western perceptions of China.

When the World Trade Center was destroyed, some Chinese—primarily young, male, and educated—exulted on the Internet and cheered the flaming images. Later a group of twenty Chinese scholars issued a statement in which they decried this reaction and then sought to explain it. Chinese young people, they wrote, choosing their words with great delicacy, had been "led astray by certain media

themes and education guidelines in recent times."[6] They were referring to how, when the Deng Xiaoping regime began in the early 1990s to stoke Chinese nationalism as a way to recoup its popularity after the debacle at Tiananmen, it began to employ images of the US as a swaggering hegemon. The US, it was said, set out to frustrate China's Olympic hopes, interfered in China's domestic affairs in human rights, sought to "contain" a rising China, and so on. The unsubtle images were not, for the most part, intended as accurate portrayals. They were caricatures produced and spread by Chinese journalists who, themselves living beneath an anaconda in the chandelier, may or may not have agreed with what they themselves were writing—and indeed may not even have put the question of accuracy to themselves in exactly this way. What they wrote was by no means the only factor in why some Chinese youths cheered the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, but it had a part.

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The costs in the other direction, in Western perceptions of China, are harder to measure but perhaps even more far-reaching. Scholarship is affected more than journalism. When a Chinese-American scholar cancels a research trip to China, and therefore does not write as much, or perhaps as well, about China's society, or economy, or even its Tang dynasty, how much is lost, in both the short and long runs? When certain questions are avoided, or written up in less than fully candid ways, how much less well informed is the Western public? When a leading scholar chooses not to share what he knows on a topic, how much does the public lose by listening instead to second-best answers from other sources?

A similar problem affects the international business world. While scholars, journalists, and overseas Chinese can be threatened with being cut off from their access to China, for businesses the primary threat is exclusion from China's huge potential market. (Grand hopes in the West about this market date from the late nineteenth century. The hopes have yet to be realized, yet the allure, understandably, persists.)[7] The threats against businesses seem, if anything, even more effective than those against scholars and even more shrouded in sensitivity.

After Li Shaomin was imprisoned in China, for example, faculty members at Princeton University, where Li had finished a Ph.D. in sociology in 1988, urged their university president to write to Chinese officials asking fair treatment of Li, and the university president complied. Around the same time some of Li's former colleagues at AT&T, where he had worked for seven years after finishing his Ph.D., asked their company to join in the effort to free him. They received only a brief reply from Public Relations: "We appreciate your commitment to this cause, but we believe it is not appropriate for AT&T to take an active role in publicizing it."[8]

Such regard for the sensitivities of Beijing is not unusual. When an analyst at a leading international investment firm last year released a financial report on the China Petro-Chemical Corporation, a large Chinese oil company run by the Chinese state and now listed on the New York Stock Exchange, Chinese officials found the report excessively negative and demanded an apology. Two executives of the investment firm, with the writer of the report unhappily in tow, traveled to Beijing to deliver it. Will that analyst, next time around, again write the truth as he sees it?

Gordon Chang, formerly a lawyer at the prestigious American law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, worked for many years introducing US businesses to China and grew accustomed to what he saw as a double standard between what Westerners said about the Chinese economy in private (that it was mired in corruption, bad loans, triangular debt, and bureaucratic excess, had no effective recourse to law, and faced more labor unrest than was generally known) and what the same people wrote for public consumption ("analyses from major investment banks and other businesses…are bland, uninformative, and generally too optimistic").[9] At the end of 1999

Chang withdrew from his law practice to write a book called *The Coming Collapse of China*,[10] in which he dramatically contradicts the rosy predictions of China's prosperity and at the same time flouts the taboos against frank talk in public. Chang has decided to retire from law practice, and this may be for the best because, he estimates,

> I would not be able to practice in a major firm because I would be too controversial.... I know many lawyers, fine and upstanding individuals otherwise, who refuse to utter a critical word about the regime except in private conversation. I know that they would not hire me now, and I would not even think of putting them in the position where they would have to say "no."[11]

Here we see just how far that anaconda in the chandelier can project its power. Not only can it induce scholars to lie low, businessmen to pull punches, and lawyers to mince words, but even a whistle-blower like Gordon Chang can "understand." He steers clear of causing more problems for others who are already steering clear of problems. So does Perry Link, by the way. Why, in the above, do I not name my scholar friends who canceled research trips to China or declined to appear on the evening news? Or my associate whom Chinese officials urged to denounce *The Tiananmen Papers*? Or the dissident who holds her tongue so that she can continue to visit her family? The anaconda reaches me through these friends, and I give in. The subtlety of how it all happens masks the super-sensitivity of the feelings that are at stake. People can get extremely nervous. At least one of my friends will almost certainly be angry with me for mentioning him in this essay, even anonymously. (I don't believe the reference hurts, or wouldn't make it.) In the case of the investment company that obliged its analyst to apologize to Beijing, I withhold the names involved because I would rather not risk a lawsuit, even though I have no doubt about the facts. The anaconda, itself outside the law, can ride on the law of others. And in the end it intervenes even between you and me, dear reader, on this very page.

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1. See "Mao" ("Cat"), a story by Cao Guanlong in *Anhui wenxue*, No. 1 (1980), translated by John Berninghausen in *Roses and Thorns*, edited by Perry Link(University of California Press, 1984), pp. 123–130.↩
2. The reasons for this shift are complex—some have to do with government pressures, others with shifting perceptions of China's place in the world; to probe this topic properly would require a separate essay, beyond my scope here.↩
3. Public Affairs, 2001. Reviewed in *The New York Review*, by Jonathan Mirsky, February 8, 2001.↩
4. Lecture at Princeton University, October 1, 2001.↩
5. "Arrested in China," *The New York Review*, September 20, 2001, pp. 6–8.↩
6. Wang Dongcheng et al., "Guanyu '9 11' shiijian de san dian gongshi" ("Three Items of Common Understanding on the September Eleventh Incident"), September 14, 2001.↩
7. See Joe Studwell, *The China Dream: the Elusive Quest for the Last Great Untapped Market on Earth* (England Profile Books, 2002).↩
8. E-mail letter from Dan Lawler, AT&T Public Relations, to Salvadore Cordo, June 15, 2001.↩
9. E-mail to Perry Link, November 20, 2001.↩
10. Random House, 2001.↩
11. E-mail to Perry Link, November 20, 2001.↩

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