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## All at Sea

*Over the past six decades, the party's greatest success has been to install a policeman in everyone's mind, making us ask, "Can I write this?"*

Beijing bookstore owner Li Shiqiang, quoted in Calum MacLeod, "China hoping to cultivate more influential authors", *USA Today*, 18 October 2009

Around the 10th parallel north, close to where the northern tip of Malaysian Borneo meets the Philippine island of Palawan as it crumbles into the South China Sea, lies a tiny, barely populated archipelago in almost perfect isolation. The Chinese call this group of islands Nansha Qundao, the Vietnamese know it as Quần Đảo Trường Sa, the Filipinos as Kapuluan ng Kalayaan, and the Malaysians and Bruneians as Kepulauan Spratly, which is closest to the name by which we know it in English: the Spratly Islands.

"The Spratlys" comprise so little actual land that, until the early 18th century, cartographers more or less overlooked them. Even today, some maps of the region still omit the archipelago as if it had fallen into the sea, a forgivable omission since much of the Spratlys is submerged at high tide. China's frenetic and much publicized land reclamation on the Spratlys in

recent times have filled out these sandy specks a little more, but still, these islands—if you can even call them that—are tiny, so tiny that on more detailed maps that show the archipelago, the words “Spratly Islands” cover far more space than these miniscule dots themselves.

Right now these tiny dots are holding up my deadline, though I don’t know it yet. It’s evening, after seven. I should have gone to print two hours ago.

“Wang says ‘Cannot,’” my Chinese assistant tells me. “We cannot print a map of China. A map will cause big trouble.”

Wang is my censor. He is also my publisher. To be clear, he is my censor *and* my publisher. Were he to ponder this duality, Wang would find no inherent conflict whatsoever. Of that I’m absolutely sure. These two positions are, at least in his mind, not opposing forces, but complementary ones: *yin* and *yang*.

Wang is a proxy for China’s “Ministry of Truth”, the nickname mainland Chinese journalists, with a nod to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, have given to the Central Propaganda Department.<sup>1</sup> “Minitrue” controls all media on the Chinese mainland from *Renmin Ribao*, known in English as *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party with a daily circulation of around three to four million, to small, exotic fry such as us: a monthly English-language magazine

1 In 1998, the department’s English name was changed to “Central Publicity Department”, but the Chinese name remains the same.

covering Shanghai, with a relatively paltry print run of 50,000 per issue.

I have not met Wang and will never meet him. Some Chinese censors have face-to-face contact with their editors, some occupy the same office, some even lunch together occasionally, but not Wang. He keeps himself strictly at arm's length. This is not difficult, considering I'm in Shanghai and he's in Beijing along with my other censors.

Wang is their point man. My Chinese assistant will speak to him by telephone from our editorial room in Shanghai so that he can relay the changes my Beijing-based censorship team “suggests” (read: insists) we—my section editors and I—make to our copy before we go to print.

These are mostly nips and tucks. The bulk of the censorship work has already been done. By me. The imaginary policeman mentioned in the above quote is a constant companion, patrolling the forefront of my conscience in full riot gear, truncheon in hand, pistol loaded, taser charged. The emperor may be far away, but could not be closer. I know how not to displease him. I know what not to say. My ability to self-censor is well honed. It should be; I have been doing this for six years. In the self-mocking patois of the Chinese Internet I have been “harmonized”.

Even so, I cringe at the term “insider” because I am anything but. I am an outsider, the worst type of outsider, in fact: a foreigner—a *laowai*—subject to a

different set of rules, deep suspicion and abiding distrust. Once my censors' changes have been made, my Chinese assistant will upload the altered pages to Wang for a final check. Only when I get his go-ahead will I send to print. Nothing is taken on trust.

Nor is it left to chance. Every word, every story, every photograph, every advertisement, every classified—indeed every square inch of column space in our magazine—will be pored over, not by one censor, but by a team of five, to ensure we adhere to Minitrue's guidelines. Guidelines that are, at least officially, known only to Minitrue and our censors. This is part of the game, to keep us guessing and second-guessing as to the whereabouts of that forbidding red line.

Still, we do our best. We lick our editorial fingers and stick them in the air to check the prevailing censorship winds. We use VPNs, digital tools which enable us to catapult over, tunnel under and go around China's "Great Firewall" to access blocked sites—*China Digital Times* and *China Media Project*, mostly—for the latest leaked censorship diktats from Minitrue. We can only learn about censorship beyond the Great Firewall because behind the Great Firewall the mere fact of censorship is censored itself.

We also keep track of sensitive dates (CCP conferences, congresses and other confabs), sensitive anniversaries of seismic events (Tiananmen) and momentous ethnic uprisings (Tibetan, Uyghur) to factor in our censors' seasonal paranoia. We read the CCP's rah-rah

nationalist mouthpiece *Global Times* to see what the crazies are saying and to reassure us that the Cold War is just a click away. We are, despite the best efforts of the Chinese government, mildly informed.

You would think I was running a serious news journal, but I am the chief editor of a general-interest city magazine—an “expat rag” if I am being derisory about it—whose entire contribution to the intellectual life of the Chinese nation amounts to a momentary diversion over a Starbucks mochaccino for a few thousand people. Even this might be overstating it. We’re a bit of froth, a glorified listings mag, with the occasional pretentious outbreak of sober journalism in our cover stories and features. Plus we’re in English, an irrelevant minnow in a vast sea of Chinese-language publications.

This is not the brave frontline of investigative reporting. It is not the brave frontline of anything. I occupy a cozy little trench on the outskirts of the country’s vast media empire. And the war, I regret to say, has already been lost. I hoisted the white flag before the first campaign. I am under no delusion that I can slay my Goliath, nor even inflict the slightest flesh wound with a well-slung pebble.

Even so, I cannot afford a censorship slipup. Magazines get penalized like motorists incur demerit points. Too many errors and your publishing license is revoked. Livelihoods depend on that license, not least of which my own, that of my staff, my colleagues and my Chinese employer, Li, who owns the business which

produces the magazine. He has already been in to ask about the delay.

I have a trust deficit with Li, too. He has also examined every page of the magazine, as he does each issue, to ensure I do not slaughter his cash cow. As an additional measure, he has enlisted my Chinese colleagues in our art department—the designers who lay out the pages—to act as “gatekeepers” should my expatriate section editors or I get a wild urge to insert something into our copy that we shouldn’t. I do not have the heart to tell him this never occurs to us.

Li does not technically own the magazine. Our censor holds the publishing license and Li merely has a contract with them to provide the editorial services. The contract can be cancelled at any time, giving Li a Damoclean incentive to behave. Not that he needs one. He is not in the business of dissent—neither am I for that matter—he is simply *in business*.

Even more precarious is my own position. I am not the magazine’s official chief editor, merely its de facto one. Although Li employs me as the magazine’s editor-in-chief and though I carry out that role in every practical sense, the official title is held by my top censor. Again, someone whom I will never meet. Our masthead shows the hierarchy of editorial positions held by my censors—“Editor-in-Chief”, “Supervisor of Magazine Department”, “Executive Editor”—before listing us lesser vassals who actually put the magazine together each month.

Our magazine is a peculiar beast: state-controlled but not state-run (they don't tell us what to say, only what we can't), a hybrid of capitalism and communism, of market forces and enforced censorship, of *laissez-faire* and Leninism. A situation which sees Li take on the entire commercial risk of the operation, but has my censors getting paid their monthly fee whether the magazine is making money or not. Nice work if you can get it, and the amount is not insubstantial: 100,000 *renminbi*, the local currency—about A\$20,000—against revenues of around RMB1 million, approximately A\$200,000.

My censors earn their keep by being risk-averse. There are a few progressive censors in China, but not at this magazine. My censors keep me on a tight leash. Their natural tendency is not to take risks, but to err on the side of caution. Instead of the forward-looking enquiry “How can I push the envelope?” their enduring refrain is “Do not open.”

The basic query they will ask themselves in any censorship deliberation is: *Does it conform to the guidelines?* But there is always a related, more important, question at the forefront of their perpetually troubled censorial minds: *If I allow this, will it land me in trouble?* If the answer is veering toward the affirmative they will almost certainly disallow it. I say “almost” because even after six years I cannot tell with any certainty whether something will fly with my censors or not.

My censors also have their pedigree to consider. They

fall under the aegis of the State Council Information Office, the chief information agency of the Chinese government. “We represent the State Council,” Li never fails to remind me. The way he says it you would think our magazine was passed around the corridors of power as required reading. Sometimes I fantasize that it is, that someone in a position of great power is reading us on a toilet in Zhongnanhai.

This map has my censors spooked, but I can’t tell why. It covers barely half a page of a 12-page feature. And it’s just a map. A simple, diagrammatic map of China, which my art director has made with a couple of hundred digital dots about the size of circle confetti. It’s part of our cover story on the Shanghainese children of the “lost generation”, the urban youth Chairman Mao dispatched to the countryside in the late ’60s and early ’70s to learn from the peasantry. Our story focuses on the identity issues of the children of those youth who were born and raised in the countryside, but then returned to Shanghai, the city of their parents’ birth.

We’ve interviewed over half a dozen of them, but our map shows the full reach of where Mao’s “sent-down youth” were sent: Heilongjiang, Jiangxi, Anhui, Yunnan, Guizhou, Jilin, Inner Mongolia, Liaoning and Xinjiang. I have been careful, fastidiously careful, to include all the territories which China lays claim to, including Taiwan—*especially* Taiwan—which gets two dots of its own across the expanse of white space representing the Taiwan Strait. I cannot see the problem,

but I am not Wang who inhabits a universe parallel to my own.

“Can you please ask him why,” I say to my Chinese assistant. “Ask Wang why we can’t print a map of China.”

My request irritates her and I know why. I have put her through this drill several times before. She knows all too well that there is nothing more capable of infuriating Wang than being questioned. This is not my intention. I really do need to know on the off-chance there’s some wiggle room, but Wang will be displeased nonetheless. He already thinks I am *mafan*: trouble.

But what am I to do? I may be harmonized, but I have a 140-page magazine to get out. It’s the end of the cycle; my editorial staff are climbing the walls and eating each other. I *want* to close. I *must* close.

A phone call is made to Beijing. My Chinese assistant acts as intermediary, my human shield in the field of battle. Some anxious minutes later I get a response. As anticipated, Wang is not pleased.

“He says someone might see it,” my assistant tells me.

I think to myself: Someone might see it? Of course, someone might see it. That’s why we publish our magazine each month. We *want* them to see it.

I probe further.

“What *specifically* is wrong with it?” I ask my assistant.

“The Spratlys,” she says.

“The Spratlys?” I ask.

“The Spratlys,” she repeats.

The Spratlys? A figurative scratch of the head. I know *where* the Spratlys are, of course. More importantly, I know *what* the Spratlys are: a troubled skein of competing territorial claims, the fiercely contested surf-and-turf wars between half a dozen governments. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei have rival claims to the barren rocks, sunken reefs and sand bars masquerading as islands in the South China Sea.

But what have the Spratlys got to do with my cover story? Had we lost something in translation? Perhaps there’s another problem with the story?

I check with my Chinese assistant. Yes, she confirms, the problem *is* the Spratlys. No, there are no other problems with the story. No, nothing has been lost in translation.

It never is. My censors have excellent English. They correct spelling errors my native English-speaking proofers fail to spot. But why the Spratlys? And why now?

I consult the day’s news on the Internet, including all the blocked sites because you never know what they’re keeping from you.

A quick perusal reveals the following: “territorial disputes”... “recently intensified”... “heightened tensions”.

Heightened tensions in the South China Sea? This is not good. Not good at all. But what’s it got to do with

my map? This feature has absolutely nothing to do with the South China Sea. Quite the opposite; it's about the legacy of a rustication program. Our story is looking inland, but my censors are all at sea.

“Wang says there's a law which requires maps to include all areas claimed as Chinese territory,” my assistant says.

I have no problem with this. No problem at all. I'm not here to adjudicate territorial claims. What business do I have in the geo-political disputes of half a dozen Asian governments?

I'll offer to amend the map. I'll add in the Spratlys. China's territorial integrity can remain uncompromised by adding an extra dot of confetti.

We can solve this.

I ask my assistant to make another call to Beijing to diplomatically convey my suggestion. She does so, but Wang isn't budging. He is still saying I cannot print a map, not even a revised one with the Spratlys added. Such is the nature of censorship—the baby, the bathwater, the bath even—all of it, cast into the sea.

Wang knows I want to close. This is also part of the game. He knows the nature of the editorial animal. He knows I am likely to take the easiest line of resistance. Anything, *anything*, just to put the magazine to bed.

But in this instance the easiest line of resistance is to resist. This is not one or two words which can be sliced and diced quickly, not even the axing of an entire story which can be fixed with repagination. This is the

worst kind of censorship change: a redesign. And it's my cover story. *Mafan*.

I need to stand my ground, to match Wang's intransigence with my own. I ask my assistant to call Wang for a third time. He is now clearly riled. My assistant does her best, caught between an aggressive censor and a passive-aggressive chief editor.

She speaks to me while Wang is on the other end. I ask her to tactfully explain to Wang something he must already know: that the Spratlys are really so tiny as to be barely visible on regular, detailed maps. I ask her to explain another thing which must be apparent to him: that our map isn't that type of map, that it is representational only, to give our readers a general idea of where Mao sent Shanghai's urban youth for reeducation. I ask her to further explain that if I put an extra dot of confetti on our map to indicate the Spratlys then it will be half as big as Taiwan, and that even a quarter of a dot—which is about as small as I can make it without it becoming indiscernible—would be totally out of proportion given the Spratlys' actual size.

There is a pause while Wang considers this.

A few moments later he talks to my assistant again. "He says he needs to check," she tells me.

I know what this means: Wang is uncomfortable making this call himself and wants to go upstairs for a decision from one of his superiors.

While I wait I learn from one of my designers that our printer has called asking when he might expect

to receive the electronic production file. He's been waiting two hours, she says. I tell her soon, hopefully. She throws me the same querulous look my boss and editorial staff gave me earlier. I have people waiting, but can do nothing but wait myself for my censors to reply.

About 20 minutes later Wang rings my assistant with an answer. She relays his message to me while he stays on the line.

If my censors allow me the map, she says, will I give them an assurance that this will never happen again? That I will not produce any more maps?

By now I'm a spent force. Drained by the high drama over tiny dots.

Yes, I say. I give a solemn undertaking: No. More. Maps.

My censors allow me the map. Wang says we can publish it, in its original form, without the Spratlys. My censors have assessed the risk and concluded, finally, that they can live with it. But not without making a point first. Not without making me sweat.

I send the magazine to print. My censors have made a rare concession and it feels like a small victory. In a war already lost you celebrate the small victories.