

China Removes Top Editors

By: Radio Free Asia

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Chinese authorities have removed from their posts top editorial staff at a Shanghai newspaper and the editor-in-chief of a cutting-edge Guangzhou newspaper that was published in truncated form this week. In what appears to be an increased censorship drive ahead of a crucial leadership transition later this year, the New Express newspaper in the southern city of Guangzhou was published without most of its sections for a second day running on Wednesday, Hong Kong media reported.

In Shanghai, Lu Yan, who headed the Eastern Daily News, and deputy editor Sun Jian were removed from their posts in recent days, according to a former reporter at the paper, Feng Jun.

"Several of my former colleagues at the Eastern Daily have told me this, so it is likely to be correct," said Feng, when asked to confirm reports of the sackings on China's hugely popular microblogging services. "I don't yet know the reasons behind it."

Feng said the sackings were likely to be directly linked to the paper's content, however.

"They have always been pretty liberal, and quite daring in some of the reporting they do, including their reports on last year's [high-speed rail] crash," he said.

The paper had also produced cutting-edge reports on the melamine-tainted milk scandal and the controversial Three Gorges hydroelectric power project, Feng added.

"They did a lot of really excellent reports," he said.

Calls to Lu Yan's office at the paper went unanswered during office hours on Tuesday.

Guangzhou's New Express

Meanwhile, an employee who answered the phone at the New Express newspaper in Guangzhou, which is published by Nanfang newspaper group, confirmed that the paper's editor-in-chief Lu Fumin was no longer working there.

"Lu Fumin isn't here any more. He has already left," the employee said. "It was a few days ago."

A journalist who answered the phone in the paper's newsroom declined to give further details, however.

"I don't really know right now," the reporter said, when asked about Lu's departure. "It's not convenient for us to give interviews right now."

Lu wrote on his microblogging account on Monday, "It has been the greatest happiness of my life to grow alongside the New Express. But according to the requirements of my job, as of today, I will be moving back to the political commentary team at the Yangcheng Evening News."

Lu said he had requested the transfer last year, adding, "Today, my wish has been granted."

Leadership transition

China's government has maintained its stranglehold on the media, ignoring increasingly vocal calls for greater press freedom.

Veteran journalist Wen Yunchao, who formerly worked for the state-run media, said Lu Fumin's transfer probably had to do with an article speculating about which Chinese politicians would make it into the all-powerful Politburo standing committee of China's ruling Communist Party at the 18th Party Congress later this year.

The article described the experiences of vice-president Xi Jinping, vice-premiers Li Keqiang, Wang Qishan, and Zhang Dejiang, and Party personnel chief Li Yuanchao during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when young intellectuals were sent to the countryside.

"Perhaps some high-ranking officials want to prevent China's domestic media from writing anything too early that touches upon the selection of candidates [to the standing committee], and that this is why the axe has fallen," said Wen, who is known online by his nickname Bei Feng.

Guangdong politics

The paper may also have fallen foul of current Guangdong provincial Party secretary Wang Yang, whose ambitions to make it into the next nine-member Politburo standing committee have been highlighted since the fall of his political rival, former Chongqing Party boss Bo Xilai, he said.

Shenzhen-based veteran journalist Zhu Jianguo said controls on Guangdong's relatively freewheeling media appeared to be tightening, possibly in response to growing public unrest in the province.

"One reason is that there has been an increase in the number of mass incidents, social conflict and violent confrontations in Guangdong," Zhu said.

"Another reason is the 18th Party Congress, because everyone knows that Guangdong leader Wang Yang is looking to move a step higher, and press freedom has to be restricted in Guangdong so as to protect his plans and aspirations," he said.

Last July, authorities in Beijing removed the editor-in-chief of the state-run China Economic Times newspaper, days after its investigative reporting team led by veteran journalist Wang Keqin was disbanded.

The investigative unit had earned praise for its steadfast coverage of various issues, including official complicity in the fatal distribution of bad vaccinations in the northern province of Shanxi and the suspicious death of a land-rights advocate

The 2010 survey of global press freedom carried out by the Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders put China 171st out of 178 countries and territories for journalistic autonomy.

Chinese authorities retain blocks on foreign social media platforms like Twitter and have tightened controls on investigative reporting and entertainment programming in advance of a sensitive leadership change scheduled for 2012, according to a recent survey by the U.S.-based Freedom House.

Detailed party directives—which can arrive daily at editors' desks—also restrict coverage related to public health, environmental accidents, deaths in police custody, and foreign policy, among other issues, the report said.

Chinese journalists and millions of Internet users continue to test the limits of permissible expression by drawing attention to incipient scandals or launching campaigns via domestic microblogging platforms, it added.

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