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The Toxic Toll of Press Repression

By KRISTIN JONES

The discovery of toxic ingredients in toothpaste, seafood, cough syrup and toys has raised questions about the safety of China's exports. These threats -- and the risk they pose to consumers -- could have been uncovered much earlier had the Chinese government used its best weapon: its own domestic press.

Over the last 30 years, the press in China has developed from a turgid official mouthpiece to a thriving industry, with hundreds of thousands of journalists working across the country. Commercialization, the Internet and increased contact with the outside world have built a sophisticated and dogged press corps with eyes and ears all over the country.

But the media's increasing capacity for ferreting out information is no guarantee that news will make it into print or onto the airwaves. The Party's Central Propaganda Department and local propaganda departments all over the country issue daily do-not-report orders to the press. Journalists who disobey are demoted, fired or even jailed. Crucial news about corruption, public health and safety, and many other contentious issues is often buried.

In the wake of the recent crisis, Chinese officials have accused Americans of exaggerating import risks to bolster their position in a trade dispute. But they know well that improperly regulated products have taken their biggest toll on their own people. For example, journalists in Fuyang in 2004 first revealed the horrific deaths of malnourished infants who had been fed counterfeit milk formula that was devoid of nutritional value. Many other, similar cases have fallen victim to propaganda department orders that silence in-depth investigations, often with the collusion of local officials or powerful businessmen.

When Chinese reporter Zhou Kai discovered in April that patients in the city of Laiyang in Shandong province were receiving intravenous injections of counterfeit medicine, he managed to get inside a hospital to talk to the family and doctors of a comatose patient. Then he interviewed the deputy director of an apparently indifferent local Food and Drug Administration. But before his article could be published, the local Communist Party's propaganda department got word of Mr. Zhou's investigation.

In a move perfectly attuned to the current mix of Party power and capitalist sensibilities in China, officials from Laiyang offered an advertising package to Mr. Zhou's employer at the major national newspaper China Youth Daily. The newspaper's officially appointed management blocked the story from publication.

That would have been the end of it had Mr. Zhou not taken the significant personal and professional risk of posting his chilling account of censorship on an internal office network, where it eventually found its way online. His story remains posted on a Web forum for journalists in China, and the Hong Kong-based blog EastSouthWestNorth translated it:

"I do not produce counterfeit medicine, I do not sell counterfeit medicine, I am not a doctor at the hospital, I am not the Food and Drug Administration, I am not the Publicity Department but I still have a pained conscience," wrote Mr. Zhou. "That is because I have learned the truth but I am unable to inform others. I cannot inform the patients."

With at least 29 journalists imprisoned in China, the wonder is that journalists like Mr. Zhou have the courage to tell their stories at all. If investigative journalism like Mr. Zhou's were rewarded instead of penalized in China, we might be hearing much less from U.S. regulators about the hazards of Chinese imports. A free press has a way of getting to the ugly truth sooner than bureaucrats, whether foreign or national.

Ms. Jones is the senior Asia researcher at the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York.