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- 1 Trudge through the muck and mist of China's media terrain and you will quickly feel lost. Government policies fog up with official jargon, and the gritty facts of the media and censorship at work can be even more mystifying. Fortunately, readers of Chinese can now navigate by the compass of He Qinglian's *China Locked in Mist*, a thorough review of PRC media controls. The book is a welcome expansion of the slim and simply titled "Media Control in China," He's 2003 research report prepared for the international NGO Human Rights in China.
- 2 *China Locked in Mist* begins with a sweep through the history of press and thought control in the People's Republic of China, from the creation of the "socialist news system" before 1949 to the "thought liberation movement" of the 1980s and the post-Tiananmen regime of "public opinion guidance" that adheres to this day. The first four chapters deal largely with the mechanics of control, including relevant laws, regulations, and the party and government apparatus. These sections, for the most part current, serve as a valuable reference, and in them He Qinglian covers a range of important issues – how secrecy laws are applied to the press; where various media fall within China's political pecking order and how this impacts reporting; and how political indoctrination is carried out in the press ranks.

- 3 As the author slices through the complexity of her subject, however, she is often tempted to unfortunate oversimplifications. In most cases, these arise from an overbearing emphasis on control as the primary impulse and point of analysis for any and all media-related matters. In chapter one, for example, He Qinglian uses the word “purge,” or zhengdun, to refer to a July 2003 State Council notice cracking down on forced subscriptions, a common practice by which government bodies routinely squeezed subordinate offices (and businesses) into paying substantial sums to subscribe to departmental publications. The notice, known as Document 19, outlawed this practice in order to “reduce the burden on peasants and the grassroots.”
- 4 The author points out, rightfully, that Document 19 was a death sentence for hundreds of publications, which lost their financial lifelines and had to sink or swim in a competitive commercial market. But the policy was certainly not, as He suggests, a press “purge” rolling back the gains of the 1990s, when commercialization spawned a variety of new publications. It may be true that these closures benefited core official media such as People’s Daily by shutting out unnecessary propaganda noise (offices and businesses were no longer deluged with official rags). But while He interprets them as a woeful loss of press diversity, they in fact had no material impact on the quality of journalism in China. Why? Because these publications weren’t concerned with journalism – they were honey pots for greedy government officials.
- 5 When it was happening, hard-hitting journalism was happening elsewhere, at the likes of Southern Weekend and Southern Metropolis Daily, both commercial spin-offs of Guangdong’s official Nanfang Daily, at older press strongholds such as China Youth Daily, published by the Chinese Communist Youth League, and at commercially oriented magazines such as Caijing and China Newsweekly (the latter a venture of the official China News Service).
- 6 The strange and tense love triangle between party control, commercialisation, and professional journalism in China is one of the key puzzles any scholar of China’s media must work out. How does one reconcile the independent strain in Chinese journalism – investigative reporting, a growing diversity of editorial views, etc. – with a draconian system of censorship controls? While controls are an ever-present reality in China, they are not the only or necessarily the best way to decode the complexities of China’s media.
- 7 The distorting lens of control misdirects He Qinglian’s conclusions again at the outset of chapter two, in which the author reviews the various laws and regulations relevant to media control. She follows a helpful list of notices and statutes with this windup:
On the surface, the abovementioned laws and regulations might be more concerned with regulation than with political control, but combine these with the media control actions of the Communist Party’s propaganda authorities and you understand that their true purpose is control. Under the strict control of the government, these so-called ‘media’ are in fact merely a massive mechanism for propaganda, true to the name they have been given by the Chinese government: ‘mouthpieces.’
- 8 While control is the primary motivation behind these laws and regulations, He’s broad application of the misleading and historically loaded term “mouthpiece” sweeps away a rich body of complicating facts, not least a growing gap in coverage between “party” newspapers, or dangbao, and commercial papers.

- 9 The strength and utility of He Qinglian's book lies in its compilation of relevant facts about media control in China – key cases, dates, and regulations. But it seems at times that the author has set out to write a tragedy, and that her reading of the facts is held captive by this narrative vision.
- 10 In chapter eight, for example, we are treated to a generally sound re-telling of the birth of the muckraking Southern Weekend, including its commercial and intellectual foundations. But the image that hangs at the end of the chapter – which is given the slightly melodramatic title, “A thorny rose nipped away” – is of a newspaper destroyed, a white chalk outline at the murder scene. While one could validly argue that Southern Weekend is not quite the troublemaker it used to be, it is premature to declare the newspaper's death. The same is true of other media on the author's list of casualties at the end of chapter eight, notably the China Youth Daily supplement Freezing Point. He Qinglian makes no mention of the supplement's eventual re-launch in 2006, nor does she account for the fact that many within China's media – including Freezing Point's former top editor Li Datong – read the affair as an illustration of change as well as control.
- 11 Control is real and at times savage. As scholars of China's media we must shrewdly observe the party's determined attempts to refine and improve censorship. But we cannot deny that China's media today are alive, changing, and full of surprises. If all we can manage to see as we train our eyes through the mist is a row of melancholy grave markers, then we must ask ourselves whether that fog might be our own.