

A Blind Eye on China

“In the Chinese Gulag” by Harry Wu, in *Index on Censorship* (July–Aug. 1996), Writers & Scholars International Ltd., Lancaster House, 33 Islington High St., London N1 9LH.

The world press has not been nearly as tough on Chinese communism as it was on the Soviet variety, asserts Wu, the American human rights campaigner. Although Western reporters have gained increasing access to Chinese society, he says, they have been reluctant to ask Chinese authorities about the Laogai—China’s gulag. They have failed to ask the most basic questions: How many labor camps are there? How many prisoners are in them? How many have died? And what products are made in the camps?

As a young man, Wu spent 19 years in Chinese camps before emigrating to the United States in 1985 and becoming a citizen. His own efforts to investigate the system led to his imprisonment for two months in 1995, an event that generated intense international concern.

The forced labor camps, he contends, are “an integral part of the national economy.” According to Wu, 60 percent of China’s rubber-vulcanizing chemicals are produced in a Laogai camp in Shenyang city; one of the largest exporters of hand tools is a camp in Shanghai, and one-third of China’s tea is produced in Laogai camps. Recently, he adds, it came to light that auto parts made in the Beijing Laogai were being used in a joint venture with the Chrysler Corporation to build Jeeps in Beijing.

The world news media have also paid little attention to what is happening in the countryside, where 80 percent of China’s 1.2 billion people live. “Reporters have so far concentrated on trends within the major cities,” Wu says, “but it is in the countryside that the future of China will be determined.”

Journalism’s Little Dragons

“The Strength of Weeklies” by Judith Sheppard, in *American Journalism Review* (July–Aug. 1996), 8701 Adelphi Rd., Adelphi, Md. 20783–1716.

Like comedian Rodney Dangerfield, most weekly newspapers “don’t get no respect,” at least not in the newsrooms of big-city dailies. But that may be changing, writes Sheppard, a former reporter who teaches journalism at Auburn University, in Alabama. While many daily papers are grimly struggling to keep readers, weeklies devoted strictly to local news have seen circulations soar.

In 1985, according to the National Newspaper Association, which promotes community newspapers, there were 7,704 “weeklies” (publishing one to three times a week), with a collective circulation of 49 million; a decade later, 8,453 weeklies reported 79 million readers, with the greatest growth taking place in the suburbs of major cities.

The weeklies’ lifeblood, Sheppard writes, is the local news that most dailies, as well as television, ignore. Many weeklies publish every reported crime, arrest, or other activity recorded in the local police blotter. “One issue of the Ellsworth, Maine, *American* carried 60 inches of crimes such as the theft of 20 sets of Christmas lights from a home that was a finalist in the neighborhood decoration contest and the names of everyone arrested

for drunk driving or assault.” Many weeklies also cover local government and school board meetings in great detail. But quality varies. Most weeklies are given away free, and many are merely platforms for advertisements.

Weekly editors, Sheppard observes, “don’t need focus groups and market surveys to keep them abreast of readers’ concerns.” When he walks across 235th Street in the Bronx, says Bernard Stein, co-owner of the *Riverdale Press*, he is “stopped 12, 15, 20 times by people who want to know why the Kiwanis Club was on the left-hand page and the Rotary Club was on the right, or why I wrote that stupid editorial. Folks in Riverdale feel they’re stakeholders; they’ve got ownership rights. It’s their newspaper.”

Daily newspapers, especially in big cities, are starting to view weeklies as serious rivals, newspaper industry analyst John Morton told Sheppard. This is reflected in the dailies’ zoned editions, which offer targeted local news. Champions of weeklies claim that, as one put it, such efforts just provide “generic news that doesn’t get into the heart and soul of the community.”