Flush with money and brimming with confidence, China’s central state media are rapidly expanding beyond China’s borders to export the government’s official view on world events. At home, meanwhile, the government’s eagerness to control the news shows no signs of weakening, writes Hong Kong journalism professor Chan Yuen-Ying.

CHINA’S STATE-OWNED MEDIA is expanding both at home and abroad at a time when the government is stepping up control of the news media at home. Known as the “go out” (zou chuqu) policy, the global media drive is a strategy crafted over a decade of deliberations by Chinese leaders as they strive to boost the country’s soft power. While most critics are skeptical that China’s propaganda style will win many friends, the international offensive could have far reaching implications. Domestically, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) monopoly on international news means that 1.3 billion people are learning about the world through official newspeak. For the developing world, China’s media is emerging as a source of news and information that promotes China’s official view on world events. And all this is happening at a time when Western media are on the retreat globally. The outlook is chilling.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist Huang Yasheng suggests, in his book Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics, that there are two Chinas — an entrepreneurial China and a state-control China — and that in the 1990s, state-control enterprises, based in urban centers, expanded to the detriment of smaller but more dynamic enterprises. The same observation could be applied to the media in China, where all the news media are state-owned but with different
level of state involvement. At the top of the ownership hierarchy, there are the national powerhouses that answer directly to the central party leadership: China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), Xinhua News Agency, and the People’s Daily and China Daily newspapers. Then there are the regional, provincial and local newspapers, television and radio stations, often banded into media groups based in the provinces. Finally, there are the independent websites, news portals and a smattering of media outlets that seek to promote alternative voices or a niche in the market.

In January 2009, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post first broke the news that the central government was ready to spend 45 billion yuan ($6.6 billion) on overseas expansion of its central media. The figure has never been confirmed officially, nor has it been denied. But last year indeed saw the rapid growth of state media whose global initiative was led by CCTV, which launched channels in Russian and Arabic, in addition to its English-, French- and Spanish-language channels. Then there is Xinhua News Agency, which has expanded its international bureaus and has launched its own 24-hour, global English TV news channel beamed by satellite to the Asia-Pacific region and parts of Europe. It is also being broadcast via satellites, cable systems, the Internet and cell phones. It includes news segments and feature stories.

Meanwhile, Global Times, a subsidiary of People’s Daily, published by the Central Committee of the CCP, launched an English-language edition, while the China Daily launched a US edition. In March this year, the staid China Daily also received a makeover in design, under the guidance of an expert group in newspaper design from the US.

Central state media are also expanding at home. In January, CCTV launched CNTV, an online TV station which features news, sports, entertainment and video-on-demand. It is also the first media organization to secure the coveted state license in online video. Thanks to the CCTV association, the new kid on the block secured the exclusive rights to broadcast the World Cup live from South Africa this year, and from Brazil in 2014, as well as the rights to all FIFA-sponsored games held between the two World Cups. CCTV is reported to have spent $30 million to create this “national team” for its video online venture.

All these initiatives compete directly with the less “central” media. In some cases, the competition is overt. As Hu Shuli, founder and former editor of Caijing, China’s most respected business magazine, waged battle with her publisher, Xinhua News Agency launched a new business weekly titled Economy and Nation Weekly to go head-to-head with Hu’s new venture, Caixin media.

Independent website operators have charged the government with unfair competition in other instances. Prior to the launch of CNTV, CCTV’s online video site, nine state agencies completed a six-month campaign against what they called pornographic websites, which resulted in the shutdown of 1.8 million sites. Hundreds of internet service providers were driven out of business. Another target of the campaign was video and audio websites, of which hundreds were shut down for operating without licenses or for containing pornography, copyright violations or other “harmful” information. However, netizens and critics charged that some shuttered websites featured critical comments on current events. To many, such government actions appear to be a blatant case of guojin mintui (国进民退), advancing the state’s interest while pulling back the public’s interest.

While all news media in China are restricted in their news content, state media have been given a clear mandate to present the views of the government at all times. Editors and reporters must think as if they were President Hu Jintao or Premier Wen Jiabao, said one commentator for official media. Reporters at state media such as Xinhua and CCTV also have two jobs: internal and external reporting. They file stories for their editors and producers, but they also need to produce internal reports for the party-state leadership. In a lecture that was leaked to the media, Xia Lin, a top Xinhua official, pointed to decisions made by his agency to withhold pictures of the Xinjiang riots “for the sake of social harmony.” He also detailed the fact that his reporters, after they joined international reporters on the govern-
ment-sponsored local “tour,” were sent off to the hospitals to interview and photograph Han patients who were victims. The resulting reporting transmitted to President Hu caused him to return from overseas prematurely when he recognized the seriousness of the situation.

As China enters the fourth decade of its reform era that began in 1978, its media system has emerged as a version of market Leninism in which the central state media maintains commanding heights both in the market and in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Media organizations like CCTV have begun to produce programs that aim to generate ratings and observe market principles, but it also wields enormous power by virtue of a monopoly on resources — in monetary terms, as well as in distribution and news sources — vested in it by the party-state. When Sichuan was hit by a magnitude 8 earthquake on May 12, 2008, the city and provincial media did not report the news until 18 minutes later, after Xinhua had broken the news. According to government guidelines, the local media have to defer to Xinhua in natural disasters of such enormous scale. They have no choice but to allow the honor of being the first to report such news to the paramount state agency.

Under this commanding heights media system, the government serves as financier, management

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and regulator of central state media organizations. With government support, the state media in turn generate significant revenue. With its state monopoly, CCTV has garnered one-third of the total television advertising spending in China. To outsiders, the Chinese government may appear schizophrenic in its handling of the news media, alternating between crackdowns and calls for media commercialization. But the fact is that the party-state has never wavered from the principle that the party must maintain absolute control of the media.

According to media scholar Wei Yongzheng, the principle of “the party governs the media” (dangguan meiti, 党管媒体) became enshrined in writing in an internal document circulated among senior cadres in 2001. The crux of the dangguan meiti system is that the party must decide on all major issues concerning media organizations, including control over assets, rights to censorship and review, and the right to appoint and dismiss leading cadres, editors and managers. Commercial portals, flush with cash, are barred from generating news on current events, though some do. Individuals must be licensed by the government to become reporters, otherwise they cannot report.

Under this principle, the government has installed a set of institutions and regulations to manage the media both online and offline. In a lecture in April to top party officials, Wang Chen, director of China’s State Council Information Office, outlined in detail government policy on continuing to maintain Internet control, and to block anything considered subversive or threatening to “national unity.” The same view was confirmed in a White Paper on Internet policy released by the office this June. Under the policy, China has developed the world’s most sophisticated system of Internet control through filtering and blocking of content, domain name controls, surveillance and a regime of self-censorship imposed on key stakeholders in the Internet system such as universities, commercial websites and Internet service providers. Alarmied by the quick rise of social media, officials have blocked social networking services such as Twitter, Facebook and lately Foursquare, as well as YouTube. The determination to control was reinforced by the events of 2008, a year of rude awakening for top Chinese leaders. The riots in Tibet, followed by the Xinjiang bloodshed, and the controversy around the parade of the Olympic torches, put China’s policies under the international spotlight. The critical reporting and outcry from around the world did not go unheard by Chinese leaders.

When President Hu and Premier Wen took power in 2003, both journalists at home and observers abroad expressed hope that the new regime would usher in an era of transparency and openness. The hope was bolstered during the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), when China took a 180-degree turn from its initial cover-up of the epidemic and allowed the extent of deaths and infection to be reported in the media. But developments since have been disappointing to those who believe in the core values of freedom of speech and expression. As China moves towards 2012, when the CCP will hold its 18th Party Congress to announce successors to Hu and Wen, the government will remain even more mindful of the need to assure “harmony” and suppress dissent.

With the state media infrastructure in place and expanding abroad, China has become bolder in preaching its media model and philosophy to the world through lectures and conferences at home and abroad. Its rhetoric on the China model of media freedom has become more nuanced and confident. It would be a grave error to dismiss the impact of China’s media on the world, especially in developing countries. Meanwhile, citizens and media entrepreneurs will continue to wage the tough battle against the monopoly of state media back home. It remains to be seen how Chinese media and the Great Firewall are used to control the information on what appear to be a rapidly escalating number of mass protests such as labor demonstrations that have heretofore been rare in China.

Chan Yuen-Ying is Professor and Director of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at The University of Hong Kong. She is conducting research on China’s transitional media, including ownership and development issues.