

What we know about the *South China Morning Post's* 'red lines'

Carsten A. Holz, 6 October 2020

In September 2020, I submitted my article “Is Hong Kong academia “perfectly safe” or is it “dead?”” ([here](#), or see my homepage)—a response to a colleague’s Opinion in the *South China Morning Post*—to the *South China Morning Post*.

The Opinion editor of the *South China Morning Post* responded that as a direct response to an opinion article, my article would best be suited as a maximum 400-word letter to the editor; I could also rework it into a standalone Opinion.

[Here](#) is a (counter-) example of the *South China Morning Post* publishing an Opinion as a direct response to an Opinion.

I submitted a standalone Opinion to the *South China Morning Post* and received the response that the piece is “not really something that I think will engage our readership.” My Opinion was then published by the *Hong Kong Free Press* ([here](#)).

I suspect that my original article crosses a number of ‘red lines’ for the *South China Morning Post*. It crosses two ‘red lines’ that I am somewhat confident the *South China Morning Post* maintains, and it may well cross more than two.

(1) The Chinese “Communist” “Party” must not be associated with the term ‘mafia,’ even if the news are all about the consequences of someone calling this organization a mafia

On 18 August 2020, *The Guardian* in an article titled “‘He killed a party and a country’: a Chinese insider hits out at Xi Jinping” ([here](#)) reported:

For years, Cai Xia, a former professor at China’s elite Central Party School, has watched the ruling Communist party decay from the inside. Now she is out.

On Monday she was expelled from the party, two months after [an audio recording](#) of her describing the country’s leader, Xi Jinping, as a “mafia boss” was leaked online.

This was repeated in a *The Guardian* article of 21 August 2020, titled “China’s Cai Xia: former party insider who dared criticize Xi Jinping” ([here](#)), with “On Monday, she was expelled from the party after comments of hers calling the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, a “mafia boss” were leaked online in June.”

The *South China Morning Post* in an article of 17 August 2020 titled “China’s Communist Party expels outspoken retired professor over speeches” reports “Former Central Party School professor loses her pension after making comments with ‘serious political problems’.” ([Here](#)) The *South China Morning Post* continues with:

An outspoken retired professor from the Communist Party’s top top academy has been expelled from the party and lost her pension as punishment for speeches “that damaged the reputation of the country”.

Cai Xia, a former professor at the Central Party School, was punished because she had made speeches with “serious political problems”, according to a notice on the school’s website.

Her speeches were of “extraordinarily execrable nature”, and seriously violated the political discipline of the party, the notice said.

Cai told the *South China Morning Post* that she was safe and well in the United States but declined to elaborate.

The school’s decision came after a joint investigation by anticorruption officers within the party school and the Central Organisation Department, the party’s top organ in charge of personnel, according to the notice. The statement did not refer to the content of the speeches in question.

The *South China Morning Post* continues by describing Xai Xia as a critic; at no point in the article does the term ‘mafia’ appear.

Cai Xia appears a second time in a *South China Morning Post* article of 20 August 2020, titled “China’s Communist Party school told to ensure loyalty after outspoken academic purged” ([here](#)):

Cai, 67, was expelled from the party weeks after a leaked recording of her carrying out a scathing attack on the political environment in China was circulated online.

According to the recording, Cai proposed in a speech that the party’s top echelon replace its leader, though she did not name general secretary Xi Jinping. She also took aim at the political restrictions in the country and described the party as a “political zombie”.

Cai Xia appears a third time in a *South China Morning Post* article of 9 September 2020 titled “Tycoon who criticized China’s ‘emperor’ and ‘clown’ faces corruption trial” ([here](#)):

Cai Xia, a former professor with the Central Party School, was expelled from the party after penning an article in July in defence of Ren. Now in the United States, Cai called Ren “the firmest and the most outstanding member of a group dedicated to pushing forward constitutional democracy” in China.

She also lost her pension as a punishment for speeches deemed to have “serious political problems”, which the party school said violated the party’s political discipline.

Throughout the *South China Morning Post*’s reporting on Cai Xia, the term ‘mafia’ never appears. – Alternatively, one could question *The Guardian*’s account of the matter.

(2) From a different event with the *South China Morning Post*, on which I cannot provide details, I conclude that any association of the Chinese “Communist” “Party” with fascism or the “Third Reich” is not publishable in the *South China Morning Post*.

Beyond red lines, the experience of my colleague with the substantially altered title of his Opinion (see addendum to my article, linked at the beginning of this write-up)—and possibly further altered elements of his Opinion—makes one wonder if the *South China Morning Post* uses Opinion writers, in this case with the authority of a senior professor, to convey particular political messages (which I would interpret as “everything is safe, no worries, the “National Security” “Law” doesn’t threaten you).

Beyond the *South China Morning Post*, we know that the *China Daily* (local English edition) pays handsomely for ‘friendly’ (or non-political) articles by authorities such as professors.

I wonder to what extent the various media in Hong Kong are each assigned a particular notch along the continuum of press freedom: some being no more than a “mouth piece” of the regime, others operating with severe ‘red lines,’ and yet others with only a minimum of ‘red lines.’ The next question is how such assignments of degrees of press freedom or red lines are organized (through the “United Front” operations?). Given the three-quarters of a century history of successful propaganda in the service of oppression, how precisely does this work in Hong Kong?

-- I welcome graduate students interested in exploring the potential ‘Gleichschaltung’ (more on this term [here](#)) of the media in Hong Kong, both in terms of progression over time and in terms of how the Gleichschaltung is being organized.