

Commentary  
The truth about truth in China

By FRANK CHING

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In the 1980s, when I was a Beijing-based correspondent for The Wall Street Journal, I had occasion to interview an official in Shanghai. How much of China's trade, I asked, pass through Shanghai? The official responded: "I don't think that figure has appeared in the newspapers."

That official was keeping himself from running afoul of China's numerous laws on state secrets. In fact, then --and even now -- anything that has not appeared in the official press can be considered a state secret, no matter how innocuous.

Well, things are improving, we are told. Earlier this month, China announced that, from now on, the number of people killed in natural disasters will no longer be considered a state secret. And why this relaxation? According to Shen Yongshe, spokesman of the National Administration for the Protection of State Secrets, "declassification of these figures and materials will facilitate our disaster relief work and also ensure the people's right to know."

The decision, he said, marks a major step by the government toward "administering according to law" and "building a transparent government." Well, it may be a major step, but many more such steps are needed for China to become a normal country. The prevalence of state secrets is holding back China's development and making it more difficult for the country to tackle its problems.

Thus, for example, an AIDS activist, Wan Yanhai, was arrested for disclosing details about China's HIV problem. Information about infectious diseases, it turned out, could not be disclosed because they were state secrets.

That is also why, two years ago, when the deadly SARS virus emerged, Chinese officials were caught lying to the world. By keeping details of SARS a secret, they allowed the disease to spread to Hong Kong and, through Hong Kong, to other parts of Asia and to Europe and North America.

Because of its obsession with state secrets, China hurts not only itself but the rest of the world as well. If reliable information on infectious diseases is not available, then doctors and researchers would not be able to fight them effectively.

What is a state secret? According to Human Rights in China, "the state secrets law and its implementing regulations provide a list of categories of what may be state secrets, but the lists are so broad and vague as to encompass essentially all conceivable information."

China's decision on casualties from natural disasters is a welcome one. But it should

move quickly to declassify other areas as well, so the country can move ahead. For example, if the number of casualties from natural disasters is no longer secret, one wonders why the number of war dead and wounded need to remain classified.

Currently, things such as the number of drug addicts, of HIV/AIDS sufferers, of people executed each year, the seriousness of the unemployment problem, the frequency and seriousness of public protests, can all be considered state secrets. In addition, the strategy and overall plan of land-use development, environmental quality reports, data on public health disasters caused by environmental pollution, information on serious accidents or industrial illnesses, unemployment and poverty of workers, and accusations against party leaders can all come under the rubric of state secrets.

These are all issues that need to be confronted. Sweeping them under the carpet does not solve the problem and does not help China.

Besides, the prevalence of secrets lends itself to abuse. Officials often make use of the charge of disclosing state secrets in order to keep a veil over their own mistakes from prying eyes, including those of central government officials.

Bizarrely, the fact that something is a secret can in itself also be a secret. Thus, some Chinese are in a Catch-22 situation: They cannot tell the truth and, at the same time, cannot explain why they cannot tell the truth.

After Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, he repeatedly called on people to seek truth from facts, to be practical, to recognize reality and to overcome problems. But if facts are covered up, if they are stamped "state secrets," then it no longer becomes possible to seek truth from facts, because truth is not available.

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