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China's Tradition of Public Shaming Thrives

Murong Xuecun MARCH 20, 2015

ZHUHAI, China — I got caught cutting class. My teacher was a strapping 30 year old. I was a puny sapling of 14. He gripped my collar and dragged me all the way from our dorm to a classroom, dealing thumps to my head along the way. In a loud voice he denounced me in front of most of my classmates and other teachers.

Two days later, my teacher summoned me before an assembly of the whole school to read a 600-word essay of self-criticism that he had made me write. I admitted I was lazy. I said I didn't respect discipline and had let down my teachers and parents. My classmates appeared amused and my teacher satisfied. For me it was like I had been exposed naked to all.

This kind of scene is not uncommon. From primary school to university, I witnessed countless such public humiliations: for fighting, cheating or petty misdemeanors. Caught committing any of these offenses and you may have to stand before the student body, criticizing your own "moral flaws," condemning your character defects, showing yourself no mercy, even exaggerating your faults. Only those who have endured it can know the depth of shame one feels.

This Chinese tradition has flourished in new forms in the past two years since President Xi Jinping took the helm. The Communist Party under Mr. Xi has made public shaming an exquisite Chinese art, like our fine silk and porcelain.

Compared to the brutal rituals of the past, modern televised confessions may appear gentler, more sincere and even inspiring. But their frequency shows that our “people’s government” doesn’t actually care much about the people’s personal rights, dignity or privacy.

The leading media outlet CCTV has provided a platform for many of the public shamings, which have included those of business people, screenwriters, celebrities, editors and journalists — anyone deemed to be on the wrong side of the Communist Party’s latest self-serving campaign. They speak to us from behind bars, their prisoner status made clear from their uniforms and (sometimes) shaved heads, their serious expressions and tearful faces.

Marshaling the full power of the state, CCTV has influence far beyond most of the world’s TV stations. Its reporters are given access to tightly guarded detention centers where they oblige criminal suspects to talk. An old man might enlighten viewers about his penchant for soliciting prostitutes, or a young girl charged with prostitution might be required to explain how she would meet with clients. At the time of broadcast, these cases usually haven’t come to trial, but the reports already assume their guilt.

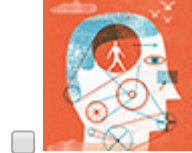
Nearly all of these public confessions are grist for the mill of some government campaign. In September 2013, when the government was cleaning up what it perceived as a swamp of online criticism and discussion, CCTV broadcast a public exposé of the venture capitalist and influential blogger Charles Xue’s arrest for solicitation of prostitutes. Mr. Xue was an investor in the Chinese Internet industry who had more than 12 million followers on the social media network Sina Weibo.

And as part of Mr. Xi’s ongoing campaign to keep the media in line, CCTV broadcast the repentant statements of the likes of journalists Chen Yongzhou and Gao Yu and the respected editor Shen Hao. These influential figures appeared before the nation pressured to admit that they had blackmailed companies or to show regret for leaking national secrets.

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Seventy-year-old Gao Yu, arrested for giving state secrets to foreign media, dressed in prison clothes, said to the camera, “I admit that what I’ve done touched on legal issues and threatened national interests.” She continued: “My actions were very wrong. I have sincerely learned my lesson, and I admit my guilt.”

Her lawyer later said that she had made her televised statement only because the government had threatened her son. As for Charles Xue and others, we have no evidence that similar tactics were used, but considering their predicament after arrest, noncooperation would have called for great courage.

Socialist countries tend to emphasize national and collective interest ahead of individual rights and dignity. This has been a constant throughout 66 years of Communist rule in China, but in the past two years the tendency has become increasingly strident. Cases of public shaming show us how in the name of some great cause, individual rights, dignity and privacy can all be sacrificed.

Respecting the rights of individual citizens — even wrongdoers — is a fundamental principle of a moral society. But to China's government this means nothing. Even though our country now boasts the second-largest economy in the world, our freedom hasn't increased much at all, and remains imperiled.

We live amid big posters with the slogan “The China Dream” that ask us to strive for the strengthening and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but in China the word “nation” is synonymous with the Communist government. For me, if a “stronger” country does not mean a freer one, then this is not a beautiful dream.

On April 16 of last year, Mr. Xue, then 61, was released from prison on medical grounds. Within days he reappeared on Weibo and apologized to his family and his millions of followers. Then he pledged to never again post rumors. Instead, he would strive to “spread positive energy,” and to help young people to realize their “China Dream.”

Murong Xuecun is a novelist and blogger and the author of “Leave Me Alone: A Novel of Chengdu.” This article was translated by Harvey Thomlinson from the Chinese.