China plays victim for its audience

Government media images of Tibetans as the aggressors stoke support at home.

By Mark Magnier, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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LANZHOU, CHINA -- Even as China faces global criticism for its crackdown on Tibetan Buddhists, it's winning the battle that it most cares about: support for its policies among Chinese back home.

One key factor is a media strategy that, while still blunt and heavily reliant on censorship and propaganda, shows more nuance than usual for the lumbering Communist Party.

This last week the government has used something it traditionally viewed as a big negative, any suggestion that it's not in total control, to its advantage by going large with print, still and video coverage of Tibetans attacking Han Chinese in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, and destroying their property.

Not only does this rather ironically paint the Chinese government's archenemy, the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, as masterminding the protests from abroad and the atheist government's assertion that its crackdown on Tibetan Buddhists, it's winning the battle that it most cares about: support for its policies among China's back home.

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Many of the videos of the riots on the state-run CCTV website have been shot and edited to point up crimson-robed monks bashing and burning with the best of the mob. And to the extent the Dalai Lama has stopped short of outright condemning the monks and the protest, China gains points.

"In this crisis, their strategy has been pretty effective," said Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet Project at UC Berkeley. "They've been able to portray it as 'we Chinese' versus 'they Tibetans' and seen public opinion go their way."

This policy is a case of making a virtue of necessity given that absolute control of information has become increasingly difficult.

The state's information guardians have also picked up a few other tricks. They're using more individual stories of Han families who were victimized in Tibet, aware that a personal narrative is far more powerful than vague propaganda language. And
they’ve sprinkled their official dispatches with such terminology as "bloggers," "netizens" and "blogosphere" to look more current and inclusive.

At the same time, the approach is more of a paint job than a renovation as China’s propaganda ministry continues to use many traditional tactics honed in dusty Soviet offices decades ago.

Unrest is blamed on "outside" elements, Tibetans are urged to report on other "troublemakers" and there are hints, although no guarantees, of leniency for those who turn themselves in.

On other fronts, the "Great Firewall," China's Internet filtering and monitoring system, has been in overdrive during the last week, deleting comments furiously and blocking Internet searches of such terms as "Tibet," "Lhasa," "demonstration" and "March 14" -- the day of protests in which at least 10 people were killed.

Some pro-government comments have found their way onto the Internet, though many are anonymous and there is no fast way to determine their origin.

"I strongly condemn the Dalai clique trying to undermine China's prosperity," said an anonymous posting from the southern city of Guangzhou on the popular Sohu portal.

Independent views opposing the government are strongly discouraged. The government has banned travel by foreigners to Tibet.

"The control strategy comes from the very top and it's well orchestrated," Xiao said. "It's more intense than I've ever seen."

Although international opinion is important, particularly as Beijing prepares to hold the Olympics in August, all politics are local, even in China. And for the party, maintaining its monopoly political grip on its far-flung empire is central to its strategy and continued existence, underscoring its vow that Tibet will never be allowed independence.

The strategy has been well received among members of the country's often strongly nationalist Chinese-language community. The government "should send more auxiliary police and arm each one with a rubber stick" against protesters, said a post on the Internet bulletin board Douban.

The themes of national unity and respect for the integrity of the motherland have also struck a chord with many in the more sophisticated overseas Chinese Internet community.

"The government has done well," said Robert Liu, a blogger who has been studying economics in the U.S. for the last six months. "They're doing better and have a more mature approach, although they still have a long way to go."

Growing domestic support of its policies gives the Chinese government political cover to restore order to the restive ethnically Tibetan areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region and Qinghai and Gansu provinces as it sees fit, underscoring its vow that Tibet will never be allowed independence.

This is a different dynamic than in 1989 when many Chinese identified with the students rather than the government in Tiananmen Square.

Images of Tibetan rioting are also being employed to bolster the government's core message that foreign human rights groups and activists such as the Dalai Lama are bent on ruining the Olympics to keep China down. The Dalai Lama said Sunday that China deserves to host the Olympics and that the Games should not be boycotted.

Although China lacks the democratic institutions, vocal critics or opinion polls that would gauge the effectiveness of its strategy and public perception of its Tibet policies, one indicator may be its censorship of coverage by television networks BBC and CNN inside the country.

Instead of blacking out all such Tibet reports, leading to long and annoying instances of blank screens early in the week, the government allowed more of them to air as the week wore on. A BBC report that aired Sunday in Beijing ran 20 minutes, including a five-minute excerpt with the Dalai Lama.

"The government is showing more confidence and learning more about spin," said Michael Anti, a well-known Chinese blogger on a Nieman fellowship this year at Harvard. "They've learned more PR tactics from Western people. They see the way the White House and the Pentagon do it."

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