



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on July 30, 2011

## Chinese Bloggers Reveal Coverup of Bullet Train Crash That Killed 40

China's *Xinhua News Agency* almost at once began to blame foreign technology for the crash. Later, state television portrayed Premier Wen Jiabao in photo-ops creating an image of government concern: He was shown visiting crash victims, holding the hand of an injured child, and bowing to family members of victims to show his sympathy.

However, the *New York Times* reports that since the train crash,



[China](#)'s two major Twitter-like microblogs — called weibos — have posted an astounding 26 million messages on the tragedy, including some that have forced embarrassed officials to reverse themselves. The messages are a potent amalgam of contempt for railway authorities, suspicion of government explanations and shoe-leather journalism by citizens and professionals alike.

The swift and comprehensive blogs on the train accident stood this week in stark contrast to the stonewalling of the Railways Ministry, already stained by a bribery scandal. And they are a humbling example for the Communist Party news outlets and state television, whose blinkered coverage of rescued babies only belatedly gave way to careful reports on the public's discontent.

While the blogs have exposed wrongdoers and broken news before, this week's performance may signal the arrival of weibos as a social force to be reckoned with, even in the face of government efforts to rein in the Internet's influence.

Yesterday, Communist China's Premier, Wen Jiabao, was joined by President Hu Jintao in promising an open and thoroughgoing investigation of the cause of the train wreck, which occurred near the coastal city of Wenzhou when a high-speed train slammed into a stalled train.

Critics noted that the Premier spoke just as do all officials in a nation controlled by the Communist Party:

Society and the public had many suspicions about the accident and the way it was handled. I believe that we should earnestly listen to the public's views, treat them seriously and provide the public with a reasonable explanation. ... Whether the problems are with machinery and equipment or administrative accounting or problems with manufacturing, we will investigate them to the very bottom. If the investigation turns up hidden corruption, we will also deal with this according



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to the law and there will not be any soft-pedaling.

Observers say anyone who has followed the history of communist regimes during major disasters notices a consistent pattern. Regardless of the reason for the accident, which could involve the incompetence of communist-controlled operations, the regime tries to ignore it. In 2002 and 2003, for instance, the Chinese government attempted to cover up the spread of the deadly SARS respiratory epidemic. Likewise, in the Soviet Union, families of those who died in airline crashes did not read about the accident in *Izvestia* or *Pravda* and Tass made no announcement to the world. Bad news which could reflect on the state or the party was simply ignored.

Another common reaction of communist regimes is to blame foreign companies. Before any investigation into the train accident in China began, *Xinhua* announced that foreign technology was the cause of the crash.

It has also been common for communist officials to blame “wreckers,” as they were called in the Soviet Union — certain individuals who were punished for “criminal neglect.” Three mid-level officials in the Chinese Railways Ministry have already been discharged, almost before the investigation had gotten underway. In 2008, when there was a similar train disaster in China, the dismissal of mid-level officials was also the response.

Because the [Communist Party](#) styles itself as the defender of the masses, the Premier’s comments about “society and the public” having suspicions which the communist-controlled government will uncover is consistent with the Communist Party and the government representing the people in a search for the guilty.

This is despite the fact that the Communist Party itself has claimed credit for the new high-speed rail system, which was announced with great fanfare at the end of June in order to coincide with the 90th anniversary of the Communist Party. This system was not created because of market demand; rather, it has in fact raised the price of train travel in China by reducing the number of slower, but cheaper, passenger trains. The system is intended to showcase the technological progress of China under communism.

But according to the *New York Times*,

The government censors assigned to monitor public opinion have let most, though hardly all of the weibo posts stream onto the Web unimpeded. But many experts say they are riding a tiger. For the very nature of weibo posts, which spread faster than censors can react, makes weibos beyond easy control. And their mushrooming popularity makes controlling them a delicate matter.

Saturday’s [July 23] train disaster is a telling example — an event that resonated with China’s growing middle class, computer-savvy, able to afford travel by high-speed rail, already deeply skeptical of official propaganda.

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