State–Press Relationship in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constant Negotiation amidst Self-Restraint

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ABSTRACT Ten years after the handover, Hong Kong's media faced multiple pressures. There were few cases of outright prosecution of the media, but there were subtle political and economic pressures. Co-optation of media bosses, fear of losing advertising revenue and media takeovers by pro-Beijing figures brought some of the media into line. This brought editorial shift and self-censorship, as the media systematically shied away from stories that might antagonize Beijing, underplayed negative news for the government and gave the democrats less favourable coverage. Interviews with journalists showed little evidence of ostensible intervention from government officials or media bosses, but newsroom socialization and editorial gatekeeping are effective constraints. The constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press and the moral force of professional ethics lent the media the room to defend and negotiate their freedom, but the pervasive fear induced by the political environment invariably overpowered the resistance and constrained press freedom in Hong Kong.

Ever since the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 stipulated the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the press freedom of the capitalist haven has been the centre of attention. Seeing a free press as part and parcel of their "capitalist way of life" guaranteed "50 years unchanged" by the Joint Declaration, the Hong Kong people were worried that the People's Republic of China (PRC) would exercise undue control over Hong Kong's media after 1997. Ten years after the handover, Hong Kong's media were still seen as some of the freest in Asia,[1] but there were warnings against self-censorship and increased state control from local practitioners.

This article discusses the state–press relationship in Hong Kong after 1997, based on analysis of environmental changes in past decades and interviews with practising journalists. The state–press relationship in a society is shaped by a combination of factors including state control, the political economy of the media, media professionalism and actions of civil society. Hong Kong did not

1 The World Press Freedom Report by Reporters without Borders had Hong Kong ranked 18 and 34 in 2002 and 2004 respectively, both the freest in Asia. In 2003, Hong Kong's ranking was 56, and the 2005 ranking was 59, considered less free than South Korea and Japan in both years.

 doi:10.1017/S0305741007002111

see a marked increase in state control or legal prosecution of the press after 1997, but the changing political economy of the media allowed economic influence to creep in, leading to visible trends of self-censorship and editorial shift towards conservatism. With the Chinese and Hong Kong governments intent on keeping an image of free press in Hong Kong, the political context allows the media professionals and the civil society to resist pressure and constantly negotiate the scope of media freedom amidst heavy pressures of self-restraint.

State–Press Relationship in Hong Kong: A New Model

Studies on the Hong Kong media during the transition era were preoccupied with the question "How much press freedom can Hong Kong enjoy after 1997?" Scholars saw the mass media as inherently dependent on power, and believed the power change after the political transition would bring a new state–press relationship in Hong Kong.[2] Some assumed that the new sovereign master would continue the colonial strategy of co-option to control the media.[3] Others predicted a gradual change of the "journalistic paradigms" following the transition.[4] As the PRC did not have a good record of respecting press freedom, many envisaged more control and repression from China and media self-censorship after 1997.[5]

These pre-1997 studies on Hong Kong media, by focusing mostly on the impact of power transition on press freedom, generally failed to appreciate the multi-faceted nature, subtlety and complexity of state–press interactions. First, seeing state control or repression as the major if not only determinant of state–press relations overlooked the impact of other economic, cultural and industrial factors. Secondly, holistic constructs such as "media systems,"[6] defined by the level or method of control, are more useful for comparing the extent of press freedom across societies than for a deep understanding of the state–press relationship within a society. In a more dynamic and interactive perspective, the

2 See Joseph Man Chan and Chin-chuan Lee, *Mass Media and Political Transition: The Hong Kong Press in China's Orbit* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1991); Joseph Man Chan and Chin-chuan Lee, "Power change, co-optation, accommodation: Xinhua and the press in transitional Hong Kong," *The China Quarterly*, No. 126 (1991), pp. 290–312; Paul Lee and Leonard Chu, "Inherent dependence on power: the Hong Kong press in transition," *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1998), pp. 59–77.

3 Chan and Lee, *Mass Media and Political Transition*.

4 Joseph Man Chan and Chin-chuan Lee, "Shifting journalistic paradigms: editorial stance and political transition in Hong Kong," *The China Quarterly*, No. 117 (1989), pp. 97–117.

5 For example, see Lee Chin-chuan, "Press self-censorship and political transition in Hong Kong," *Press/Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1998), pp. 55–73; John Shidlovsky, "Government repression: grim prospects for Hong Kong," *Media Studies Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1996), pp. 45–52; Chan King-cheong, "Jiuqi houde yanlun kongjian" ("Room for freedom of speech after 1997"), in Paul Lee (ed.), *Xianggang chuanmei xinshiji* (*New Perspectives on Hong Kong Media*) (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), pp. 17–34; James Sciutto, "China's muffling of the Hong Kong media," *The ANNALS*, No. 547 (1996), pp. 131–43; Stephen Vines, *Hong Kong: China's New Colony* (London: Orion Business, 1999).

6 For example, Chan and Lee classified the state–press relationship by the level of inducement and repression into four types: (a) repression ; (b) laissez-faire; (c) co-optation; (d) incorporation. See also Paul Lee and Leonard Chu, "Hong Kong media system in transition: a socio-cultural analysis," *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1995), pp. 90–107.

state–press relationship in any society is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated, with power holders in government, the civil society, media organizations and professionals all playing some part in shaping it. Thirdly, proceeding from a macro-perspective, these studies more or less assumed that state–press relationships are structurally-determined, and rarely explored the insiders' views, especially on how control mechanisms operated in media organizations. This void in the literature was aggravated by the paucity of studies on the state–press relationship in post-1997 Hong Kong.

Most non-democracies do not tolerate a free press critical of the government. This led scholars to believe that Beijing and the non-popularly elected SAR government would suppress media freedom in Hong Kong after 1997. However, it is in Beijing's interests to keep the image of a free press in Hong Kong. With economic development China's paramount priority, it is vital for Hong Kong to remain a free city, and free flow of information gives it a major edge over other mainland cities. Other than developmental needs, a free press in Hong Kong also serves symbolic and political ends as it can show Taiwan that "one country, two systems" is a desirable formula for unification. With the Basic Law guaranteeing major freedoms after 1997, the international community sees the preservation of various freedoms in Hong Kong as the major benchmark by which they judge if "one country, two systems," and hence the promises in the Joint Declaration, is being upheld. This means that even if the authorities want to control the Hong Kong press after 1997, they have to do it in a subtler way and cannot use the old-fashioned method of repression. Pigeonholing the state–press relationship into categories defined by the level of repression fails to capture this subtlety.

This article puts forward a new model to explain the state–press relationship in Hong Kong. I argue that this relationship is shaped by four groups of factors: the level and pattern of control from the government; the political economy of the media; media professionalism; and civil society and public opinion. Changes in power structure, government control patterns, the media ecology and the distribution of resources among social and political actors will hence all bring changes to a society's state–press relationship.

Power holders in government, whether authoritarian or liberal-democratic, always have an incentive to control the media to salvage their popularity. The method and pattern of control varies with the nature of the regime, the legal tools, and the resources and policies of those in power. Authoritarian regimes rely more on coercion, intimidation or legal control, while democratic governments depend more on co-option, economic influence, manipulation of information and other subtler means.

The political economy approach theorizes that commercialization, the structure of the media industry, and the state as a producer, consumer and regulator of communication all affect news production and media operation.[7] Critical scholars see the media in modern capitalism as mostly reflecting the

7 See Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication* (London: Sage, 1996).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741007002111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interests of the dominant business class. With increasing commercialization and capitalization of the media, social or political actors who hold economic resources (including the state) can wield a lot of influence and shape state–press relationships in their favour.

While power holders like to control, practitioners can resist. Liberal ideologies and Western media professional ethics both provide normative constraints on state control of the media. Journalists who believe in liberal theories of the press should fight against state control, and a free and vibrant civil society that treasures freedom of speech is their best ally. Their resistance may counteract state control and define state–press relationships.

The next sections delineate the evolution of the state–press relationship in Hong Kong since the colonial era, by analysing how the above factors changed over the years. They also discuss how changes after 1997 created pressures on the media to exercise self-censorship and editorial shift

The colonial era: controlled pluralism

Any serious study of the media in the colonial era reveals that Hong Kong was not a free press haven as commonly believed. The colonial government had in place draconian laws that gave it sweeping powers to control, search and punish news organizations when contents were deemed seditious or anti-government.[8] Writing in 1972, Shen counted as many as 30 laws in Hong Kong that could be used to curb media freedom.[9] These laws were seldom applied, and the very few cases in which they were used were against the leftist press.[10] Many took this as proof that the colonial government had been tolerant towards political dissent. In reality it had been keeping a keen eye on publications that challenged colonial rule. The media in Hong Kong were controlled by co-optation, as publishers of pro-government newspapers were rewarded with British medals of honour, and only a few mainstream papers could carry government advertisements. The government also controlled news flow through the Government Information Service,[11] which orchestrated the dissemination of government information to

8 Major laws included the Seditious Publications Ordinance (enacted 1914), Printers and Publications Ordinance (first enacted 1886, amended 1927), Chinese Publications (Prevention) Ordinance (1907), Emergency Regulations (Amendment) Ordinance (1949), Control of Publications (Consolidation) Ordinance (1951). See Wong, Hon-lung, "Yinshua meijie de jianguan – Xianggang chuban fali (I)" ("Regulation of the printed media – Hong Kong Publication Law (I)"), in Kenneth Leung and Johannes Chan (eds.), *Quanbofa xinlun* (*New Mass Communication Law)* (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 2003), pp. 341–69.

9 James C.Y. Shen, *The Law and Mass Media in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Mass Communications Center, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1972), p. 31.

10 The two most prominent cases included the "March 1st incident" in 1952, when *Wen Wei Po, Ta Kung Pao* and *New Evening Post* were prosecuted for "publishing libelous materials" that "stirred up hatred or contempt against the government." *Ta Kung Pao* was found guilty and banned for six months. All the three papers did was publish a *People's Daily* article criticizing the colonial government of failing to provide relief for fire victims. The second case was the conviction of *Afternoon News*, *Hong Kong Evening News* and *Tin Fung Daily News* during the 1967 riots. The three papers actively stirred anti-government sentiments and were convicted of sedition and false reporting.

11 Lee Chin-chuan and Joseph Man Chan, "Government management of the press in Hong Kong," *Gazette*, No. 46 (1990), pp. 125–39; Chan and Lee, "Power change, co-optation, accommodation."

shape public opinion, used closed-door briefings to release information to selected reporters, and fed the press with a daily news bulletin.[12] A lack of professionalism, understaffing and an urge to maintain a good relationship with the government made some papers more than happy to use government press releases as their own stories. For example, the rightist *Wah Kiu Yat Pao* (*Huaqiao ribao* 華僑日報) reserved half a page daily to print Government Information Service releases disguised as news.[13]

Hong Kong enjoyed its free press reputation largely because it had newspapers with a full spectrum of ideological positions, ranging from the "ultra-rightist" papers sponsored by the Kuomintang (KMT) such as *Hong Kong Times* (*Xianggang shibao* 香港時報) to the "ultra-leftist" papers funded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) such as *Ta Kung Pao* (*Dagong bao* 大公報), both under close surveillance by the government. As the KMT–CCP split was the major political cleavage in Hong Kong before the 1980s, the newspapers were preoccupied with ideological struggles between "rightists" and "leftists." This partisan nature of the press was actually welcomed by the colonial government, as it directed media and public attention to a political struggle outside Hong Kong.[14]

The state–press relationship in Hong Kong before the 1980s was thus a case of controlled pluralism. As long as the media focused on affairs in China, the ideological skirmishes between the party papers were no big problem for the colonial government. The press was free to report on social and economic news, but criticisms against colonialism were scarce because of statutory control and self-censorship. With political power firmly in the hands of the government, the mainstream media seldom thwarted the government's will before the 1980s.

The media in political transition

The political transition kicked off by the Sino-British negotiations changed the media environment in many ways. The politicization brought by the negotiations and the rise of a Hong Kong identity mean that Hong Kong's political development, instead of KMT–CCP rivalry, took on prime importance. Political power became more pluralized, as democratization and decolonization in the 1980s brought new political players into the picture, with social activists, political groups and elected politicians competing for media attention and public opinion support. Seeing the media as vital for propaganda, the PRC government weaved its own web of co-option by providing banquets and gifts, appointing media chiefs into PRC-appointed institutions, and appealing to patriotism (see Table 1).[15]

12 Lee and Chan, "Government management of the press," p. 129.
13 *Ibid*. p. 130.
14 *Ibid*.
15 Chan and Lee, *Mass Media and Political Transition*, pp. 57–61.

Table 1: **Major Media Owners and Executives in China's Co-optation Web (before 1997)**

Name	Position	Titles
Cha, Louis	Founder of Ming Pao Group	BLCC, BLDC, PC
Chang, Wan-fung	Former deputy editor-in-chief and hon. director, *Wen Wei Po*	BLCC, CPPCC (1993–98), SC
Chiu Te-ken, Deacon	Director, Asia Television	AA, CPPCC (1988–93)
Chow, Yei-ching	Director, Television Broadcasts Ltd	SC
Fei, Yi-min	Former publisher, *Ta Kung Pao*	BLDC, NPC (1988–93), CPPCC (1988–93)
Fong, Mona	Deputy chairperson, Television Broadcasts Ltd	SC
Griffin, Nick	Former principal reporter, Television Broadcasts Ltd.	BLCC
Ho, Man-fat	Publisher, *Sing Pao* (1939–2000)	BLCC
Ho, Sai-chu	Director, *Tin Tin Daily News* (1985–87)	CPPCC (1993–98), SC
Ho, Ting-kwan	Director and general manager, Television Broadcasts Ltd	BLCC
Hu, Chu-jen	Editor-in-chief, *Pai Hsing Semi-monthly*	BLCC
Kuok, Hock-nien	Chairman, *South China Morning Post* (1993–97)	HKAA
Lee, Cho-jat	Chairperson, Hong Kong Commercial Newspaper Co. Ltd	CPPCC (1993–98), PC, SC
Lee, Tse–chung	Former publisher, *Wen Wai Pao*(–1989)	CPPCC (1988–93)
Ma, Lik	Deputy publisher, *Hong Kong Commercial Daily* (1997–)	HKAA
Poon, Chun-leung	Former editor-in-chief, *Sing Tao Man (Evening) Pao*	BLCC
Pun, Chiu-yin	Former assistant general manager, Commercial Radio	BLCC
Shaw, Run-run	Chairperson, Television Broadcasts Ltd	AA, SC
Shum, Choi-sang	General manager, *Wah Kiu Yat Pao* (1985–95)	AA, BLCC, SC
Sze, Cheung-pang	Consultant, *Hong Kong Commercial Daily*	CPPCC (1993–98), SC
Tsang, Tak-sing	Former chief editor, *Ta Kung Pao*	AA, NPC (1993–98) PC, SC
Tsui, Sze-man	Publisher, *Mirror Monthly* (1997–)	AA, BLCC, CPPCC (1978–), PC, SC
Wai, Kee-shun	Publisher, *Tin Tin Daily News* (1961–77)	NPC (93–), SC
Wong, Guo-hua	Publisher, *Ta Kung Pao*	CPPCC
Wong, Wai-sing	Former secretary, Asia Television Ltd	BLCC
Wong, Yat-huen	Former programme officer, RTHK	BLCC
Woo Kwong-ching, Peter	Founding chairman, Hong Kong Cable Television Ltd	HKAA

Key:
BLDC Basic Law Drafting Committee
BLCC Basic Law Consultative Committee
PC Preparatory Committee of the HKSAR
SC Selection Committee for the First Government of HKSAR
HKAA Hong Kong Affairs Adviser
NPC Hong Kong Deputies to the National People's Congress
CPPCC Hong Kong Members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

The media also saw a remarkable rise in professionalism in the 1980s. Before 1970, journalism was very poorly paid and many reporters did not have any professional training. At a time when corruption was rampant, it was not uncommon for reporters to take bribes in reward for writing or not writing certain stories.[16] Tertiary institutions in Hong Kong began to offer journalism degrees and diplomas in the 1960s.[17] With most of the college teachers trained in North America, the new generation of journalists was inclined to Western theories of journalism and liberal values. A survey of journalists in 1990 showed that 95 per cent of interviewees saw "objective reporting" as important, 88 per cent saw the press as a watchdog of the government and 97 per cent saw taking money as unacceptable.[18] Rise in profitability and intense competition in the media industry also pushed up journalists' pay, allowing the retention of talents.

The economic take-off made the media an increasingly lucrative business. Aggressive media bosses turned former family businesses into conglomerates. Newspapers such as the *South China Morning Post*, the *Oriental Daily* and *Ming Pao* (*Mingbao* 明報), all became public-listed companies that extended their business overseas and into non-media dealings.[19] The media business also became increasingly capital-intensive and competitive. The arrival of the *Apple Daily* in 1995 fundamentally changed Hong Kong's media ecology. Before that, the Newspaper Society of Hong Kong as a cartel fixed the price of all Chinese-language papers and worked out agreements with distributors and retailers' associations. Newspapers that tried to set their own prices were boycotted by the cartel and the distributors.[20] The *Apple Daily* broke the cartel rules by setting the price at two dollars, instead of five dollars as fixed by the Newspaper Society. Combining sensationalism with a firm pro-democracy stand, the paper quickly enjoyed the second largest circulation in the territory. With colourful printing, bold graphics, large pictures, rich entertainment and leisure news, together with sensational reporting and critical commentaries, the paper had "a little bit of everything" tailored to the tastes of Hong Kong people. It was really a daily magazine, the production of which called for large investments in reporting and graphic staff and printing apparatus. The invasion of *Apple Daily* brought diminished market shares to almost every Chinese paper. Within one year nine

16 Joseph Chan, Paul Lee and Chin-chuan Lee, *Hong Kong Journalists in Transition* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1996), p. 15.

17 Chinese University offered a journalism degree programme in 1965, followed by diploma courses in Baptist College (1968), Zhuhai College (1968) and Shue Yan College (1971). A 1990 survey of journalists showed 78% of journalists had some tertiary education. See Chan, Lee and Lee, *Hong Kong Journalists in Transition*, pp. 55–57 and 29.

18 *Ibid*. pp. 104, 90, 131.

19 Anthony Fung, "Meiti jingzheng, yongyouquan ji zhengzhi guodu" ("Media competition, ownership and political transition"), in Paul Lee (ed.), *Xianggang chuanmei xinshiji* (*New Century of Hong Kong Media*) (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), p. 80.

20 For example, in the 1970s the *Kung Sheung Yat Pao* (*Industrial and Commercial Daily*) tried to set its price at 20 instead of 30 cents as set by the Newspaper Society. It led to objections by both the distributors and retailers, with the latter selling the paper at 30 cents. See Fung, "Media competition, ownership and political transition," pp. 76–77.

dailies and weeklies folded. The price wars among the Chinese press that followed put less competitive papers into financial trouble.

The transition period thus saw contrasting developments that affected the state–press relationship in Hong Kong. Decolonization and democratization led to a more pluralized power structure, weakening the colonial government's control, and introduced China as a powerful player that could control the media. Commercialization and competition brought a new political economy of the media that made them more susceptible to economic pressures. Partial democratization, a growing civil society and rise in media professionalism provided new centres of resistance against state encroachment. These contrasting pressures brought a much more pluralized press, with different media taking up a wide variety of political positions during the transition era.

Post-1997 trends of change

At the statutory level, while the SAR government inherited most of the draconian colonial laws, the media after 1997 were almost free of legal prosecution. These laws co-existed with many liberal provisions in the post-1997 statutory books and were embedded in the constitutional context of the Basic Law which explicitly guarantees freedom of speech. Cheung pointed out that the SAR judiciary was usually conservative and failed to see their constitutional duty to protect press freedom, and so invariably made conservative verdicts against press freedom.[21] The dual nature of the legal framework means the press will never know exactly their scope of freedom, creating an inherent pressure to exercise self-censorship, as not too many in the media are willing to test the true legal limits in court.[22]

Hong Kong media were also quick and firm in resisting legal control and police intrusion after 1997. In 1999, a government advisory committee proposed a press council to protect against media intrusion into privacy. The media feared the body could be used to curb their freedom, and 11 newspapers and three major professional organizations joined together to set up their own press council as a self-regulating professional body to pre-empt the government proposal. Incorporated in 2000, the Press Council receives and listens to complaints, and can give a public verbal censure but not impose penalty or fines.[23] In 1999, the police raided the *Apple Daily* to search for evidence connected to a bribery case in which an *Apple* reporter bribed police officers to get information. In July 2004, officers from the Independent Commission Against Corruption raided seven newspapers to search for evidence related to a fraud case. Both incidents aroused public outcries and strong objections from the media, and those involved took court actions to retrieve the

21 Anne S.L. Cheung, *Self-Censorship and the Struggle for Press Freedom in Hong Kong* (Norwell: Kluwer Law International, 2003).

22 *Ibid*.

23 The authority of the Council was much affected because the *Oriental Daily* and the *Apple Daily*, the two papers with largest circulations, did not join.

seized material, citing the right to protect press freedom and sources of information.

The fight against national security legislation in 2002–03 was the most remarkable case of resisting legal control after 1997. According to the Basic Law, the SAR government should enact laws on its own to forbid treason, secession, sedition, subversion, theft of state secrets and offences that threatened the national security of the PRC. Space does not allow a thorough discussion of the government's proposed bill,[24] but critics found it overbroad, with key terms so vaguely defined that it could be abused by the authorities to curb freedom of speech or peaceful dissidence. Journalists feared that the law could be used against them, or at least it would instill a "chilling effect," inducing journalists to acquiesce and toe only the government line. A survey of journalists in December 2002 showed 59 per cent opposed to the legislation. About 10 per cent said they would quit the profession if the bill was enacted, and 34 per cent said they would "consider doing so."[25] A petition by the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) was supported by 26 international media and human rights groups and 859 local journalists.[26]

Selected newspapers played a major role in stirring opposition against the bill, culminating in the 500,000-strong demonstration on 1 July 2003, which effectively forced the government to withdraw. The *Apple Daily* and *Next Magazine* were relentless in attacking the government throughout the debate, and both openly called on the public to join the 1 July protest. A survey of the participants in the demonstration showed that about 50 per cent usually read *Apple Daily*, showing its strong opinion leadership.[27] The owners of the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (*Xinbao* 信報), the most influential financial daily in Hong Kong, said they would consider selling or folding the paper if the bill was passed, raising eyebrows in the business community.[28]

While legal control met strong resistance, political control took other forms. Co-option by Chinese authorities continued unabated after 1997 (see Table 2). Media executives and owners were appointed "advisors" to the central government or granted "Bauhinia medals," equivalent to pre-1997 British badges of honour. Co-option brought editorial shifts to some newspapers, most notably the *Sing Tao Daily News* (*Xingdao ribao* 星島日報) and *Oriental Daily News* (*Dongfang ribao* 東方日報), both pro-KMT papers before the 1980s.[29] After their bosses were granted SAR honours and made NPPCC delegates, the two papers became strong critics of the democrats.

24 See Ma Ngok, "Civil society in self-defense: the struggle against national security legislation in Hong Kong," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 14, No. 44 (2005), pp. 465–82.

25 *Apple Daily*, 21 December 2002, p. A6.

26 *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 25 November 2002, p. 8.

27 Joseph Chan and Robert Chung, "Shuineng fadong wushiwanren shangjie?" ("Who can mobilize 500,000 people on to the streets?") *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 15 July 2003, p.9.

28 *Sing Tao Daily News*, 5 July 2003, p. A6; *Ming Pao Daily News*, 4 July 2003, p. A6.

29 Both papers used the "Republic of China" calendar system until the 1980s. That is, instead of using "1 January 1975" on the header, both used "1 January the 64th year of the ROC," which was a political gesture of identification with the KMT regime.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741007002111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 2: **Media Personnel in PRC and SAR Co-optation Web (after 1997)**

Name	Media position	Titles
Cha, Louis	Founder, Ming Pao Group	GBM 1998
Chan, Wing-kee	Chief Executive, Asia Television (2002–)	NPC (1998–2003), CPPCC (2003–08), GBS 2000
Aw Sian, Sally	Publisher, *Sing Tao Jih Pao* (–1999)	CPPCC (1998–2003)
Chan, Suk-mei	Director, News and Public Affairs Department, Commercial Radio	BBS (2000)
Chang, Wan-fung	Former deputy editor-in-chief and hon. director, *Wen Wei Po*	CPPCC (1998–2003)
Cheung, Man-yee	Director of broadcasting (1986–99)	SBS (2002)
Chiu Te-ken, Deacon	Former director, Asia Television Ltd	CPPCC (1998–2003)
Fong, Mona	Deputy chairperson,Television Broadcasts Ltd	SBS (2000)
Fung Siu-por, Lawrence	Chairman, Hong Kong Economic Times (Holdings) Ltd (1988–)	GBS (2003)
Ho, Tsu-kwok	Chairperson, Global China Group Holdings Ltd, chairperson, Sing Tao Media Holdings, Ltd (2001–)	CPPCC (1998–2008)
Ho, George	Chairperson, Commercial Radio (–1992)	GBS (2001)
Lee, Cho-jat	Chairperson, Hong Kong Commercial Newspaper Co. Ltd (–2003)	CPPCC (1998–2008), SBS 1998
Leung, Nai-pang	Director, Television Broadcasts Ltd (2003–)	GBS (2000)
Lo, Wing-hung	Executive director, Global China Group Holdings Ltd (2001–)	BBS (2004)
Ma Ching-fat, Ricky	Director, Oriental Press Group Ltd	BBS (2003)
Ma, Lik	Deputy publisher, *Hong Kong Commercial Daily* (1997–)	NPC (1998–2008)
Shaw, Run-run	Chairperson, Television Broadcasts Ltd	GBM (1998)
Sze, Cheung-pang	Consultant, *Hong Kong Commercial Daily*	CPPCC (1998–2008), BBS 2003
Tsang, Tak-sing	Former chief editor, *Ta Kung Pao*	NPC (1998–2008)
Tsui, Sze-man	Publisher, *Mirror Monthly*	CPPCC (1998–2003), GBM 1997
Wong, Guo-hua	Publisher, *Ta Kung Pao*	CPPCC (1998–2008)
Wong, Po-yan	Chairman, ATV (1988–)	GBM (1998), NPC (1998–2003)
Wong Raymond, Roy	Assistant general manager, Television Broadcasts Ltd (1994–2004)	SBS (1998)
Woo Kwong-ching, Peter	Founding chairman, Hong Kong Cable Television Ltd	GBS 1998, CPPCC (1998–2008)
Zhang, Guo-liang	Director and publisher, *Wen Wei Po*	CPPCC (2003–08)
Chow, Yei-ching	Director, Television Broadcasts Ltd	GBS (2004)

Key:

NPC	Hong Kong Deputies to the National People's Congress
CPPCC	Hong Kong Members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
GBM	Grand Bauhinia Medal
GBS	Gold Bauhinia Star
SBS	Silver Bauhinia Star
BBS	Bronze Bauhinia Star

The post-1997 media market was increasingly competitive, with the conventional media facing challenges from cable and satellite television, 24-hour news on CNN or local pay television, web broadcasting and other new media.[30] Cut-throat competition and the post-1997 economic downturn in Hong Kong brought financial difficulties to many media. Cost-saving was the order of the day, as pay cuts and lay-offs drove out many experienced journalists and put immense pressure on those who survived. The media became more market-driven, with sex, violence and sensational "infotainment" the chief marketable commodities. Serious news-gathering, capital intensive but seldom audience-attracting, gave way to the sort of sensationalism that sold papers, and media professionalism suffered.[31]

Capitalization of the media also meant the media owners had more investments at stake, heightening the influence of commercial factors.[32] With rising mainland economic influence in Hong Kong, an anti-government stand could mean commercial misfortune. The centrist *Ming Pao* claimed the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Office had instructed that organizations of the Bank of China group in Hong Kong should not place advertisements in a blacklist of 19 newspapers and magazines, including *Ming Pao* itself. *Apple Daily*'s outspokenness meant that it had almost no advertisements from real estate developers and China-funded enterprises in Hong Kong, and obstructions to its public listing of the Next Media Group.[33]

The difficult media environment also enabled pro-Beijing businessmen to take over troubled media such as *Sing Tao* and Asia Television (ATV). With its owner Sally Aw in deep financial trouble after 1997, in 1999 some 50.4 per cent of the stakes of the *Sing Tao* Group were sold to Charles Ho, son of a tobacco tycoon and a NPPCC delegate after 2003. ATV, a terrestrial TV channel with a limited number of viewers, had not been profitable since the 1980s. After its owner Lim Por-yan got into financial trouble after 1997, a consortium formed by Chan Wing-kee (Chen Yongqi 陳永棋) and Liu Changle (劉長樂) bought its shares. Chan is a NPC delegate while Liu has extensive links with the People's Liberation Army, and his purchase was mostly funded by the Bank of China. In August 2002, the Guangdong government allowed ATV to be broadcast legally in the Pearl River Delta region, giving a boost to its advertising potential. This drove it to tailor its programmes to suit the mainland audience, bringing a notable editorial shift towards conservatism. In June 2007, CITIC Guoan, a subsidiary of CITIC,[34]

30 The most recent challenge was the launching of three dailies that were freely distributed, causing a sharp drop in circulation of many Chinese newspapers.

31 For impact of *Apple Daily* on the Hong Kong media environment, see Chin-chuan Lee, "The paradox of political economy: media structure, press freedom, and regime change in Hong Kong," in Chin-chuan Lee (ed.), *Power, Money and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp. 306–11; Leung Lai-kuen, *Pingguo diao xialai* (*Fall of An Apple*) (Hong Kong: Subculture, 2006).

32 Chin-chuan Lee, "The paradox of political economy," p. 310.

33 Leung Lai-kuen, *Fall of An Apple*, pp. 170–74.

34 The CITIC (China International Trust and Investment Corporation), set up by then PRC vice-president Rong Yiren in 1979, was one of the first China-funded enterprises that engaged in overseas investment. By the end of 2006, it owned 44 subsidiaries all over the world, with a total assets value of RMB 929 billion.

bought 15 per cent of the shares of ATV, the first time a mainland enterprise became a significant shareholder in Hong Kong's electronic media.

Views from Within: Self-Censorship and Editorial Shift

The above changes reshaped the post-1997 state–press relationship in a subtle manner. The media were still free to report on government misdeeds, and criticisms of government scandals and policies were sometimes vehement. However, insiders' views revealed significant self-censorship and editorial shift after 1997. The following analysis was based on interviews with 15 practising or former journalists in 2005, who had worked in a total of 19 media organizations with different political stands. About one-third of them currently serve at management level, with quite a few having worked in more than one media organization, which allows them to compare experiences in different organizations and in different ranks. (For background of the interviewees see Appendix.)

Self-censorship

The 1997 Annual Report of HKJA warned that "it is self-censorship, rather than direct intervention, that will be more likely to undermine freedom of expression in the future."[35] Chin-chuan Lee defines self-censorship as a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion and change of emphasis to choice of rhetoric devices by journalists, their organizations and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward or avoiding punishments from the power structure.[36] It manifests in the media's tendency to dodge political controversy, shift editorial tone in line with Beijing policy, fire high-risk contributors, disseminate writing guidelines for sensitive stories and place sensitive stories in obscure positions.[37] A survey in February 2005 showed that 39 per cent of citizens believed that the Hong Kong media practised self-censorship, with 68 per cent believing that the media had reservations about criticizing the Chinese government.[38]

HKJA's reports after 1997 were packed with cases of alleged self-censorship. For example, in November 2000 famous China-watcher Willy Lam resigned from *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*). An article by Lam in May 2000 criticized Beijing for interfering in Hong Kong affairs by openly supporting Tung Chee-hwa's (Dong Jianhua 董建華) re-election bid. His article brought a rebuttal from *SCMP* owner Robert Kuok, who chose to write to *SCMP*'s "Letters to the editors" page to make his views known. In November Lam was relieved of his reporting duties at the China desk, although he could keep his column, and he resigned in protest. In 2002, after being dismissed by *SCMP*, Lam's former colleague Jasper Becker claimed in the *Washington Post* that

35 HKJA, *The Die is Cast*, p. 4.
36 Chin-chuan Lee, "Press self-censorship and political transition," p. 57.
37 *Ibid*.
38 Public Opinion Program, University of Hong Kong, press release on 24 February 2005, on the public's appraisal of the media, available at http://hkupop.hku.hk.

SCMP had become more pro-Beijing after Kuok bought it in 1993.[39] He said that *SCMP* reporters began to avoid reporting anti-government activities in China, and reports on Tibet, *falun gong* (法輪功) or worker unrest were left to the agencies. "Copy was edited to make it more and more bland. Anything personal about China's leaders was taken out." "The China editor urged us to attend more official briefings and stick closely to what officials said."[40]

Another HKJA investigation was into the case of Paul Cheung, the managing editor of Metro Finance Radio, who was fired in 2002. He lodged a complaint to HKJA, claiming that his dismissal was due to disputes with superiors over self-censorship. Cheung cited six cases of self-censorship at Metro, concerning withholding reports on *falun gong*, and reports unfavourable to C.E. Tung and Hong Kong Electric.[41] His superiors said in defence that the decisions were normal editorial judgement. After hearing evidence from six other former or serving Metro reporters, HKJA concluded that the situation involved multiple individuals exercising self-censorship.[42]

My interviews with practising journalists showed that Taiwan independence, separatism in China and *falun gong*[43] had become minefields which journalists tried to avoid after 1997. A television producer told of the rules of thumb in handling China news in his channel. "There should be no direct attacks on central leaders, but it was okay to report on crime, disasters or economic fraud. Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) face and messages were to be minimized; same as the Dalai Lama's." Producers from two different television channels told of reporters who were interested in reporting on Tibet or Xinjiang separatist activities, but eventually gave up. The reporters knew the story needed to be very careful and "balanced," and they were sure it would be thoroughly vetted or edited to avoid political incorrectness, to the extent that it would not be worthwhile or meaningful.

A former television reporter told of cases of self-censorship involving *falun gong*. In early 2004, the morning news of her channel showed a 30-second clip of Li Hongzhi (李洪志), the spiritual leader of *falun gong*. She said the editor on duty was under attack for the whole morning, and in the noon newscast the footage was cut without explanation. She also said that during pro-democracy rallies in Hong Kong, their television camera would avoid *falun gong* placards or banners, and reporters would avoid interviewing *falun gong* participants in the rallies.[44]

39 As a Malaysian businessman who made his fortune from the sugar business, Robert Kuok was commonly seen as having good connections with the Chinese government.

40 Jasper Becker, "Why I was fired in Hong Kong," *Washington Post*, 4 May 2002.

41 Hong Kong Electric is a subsidiary of Hutchison Whampoa Group, which is the owner of the Metro Broadcast Corporation.

42 Hong Kong Journalist Association, *Report by the Ad Hoc Group to Inquire into the Complaint of Paul Cheung*, available at http://www.hkja.org.hk/ben_act/download/PCHEUNG%20Report.doc.

43 The *falun gong* was banned in 1999 as an "evil cult" (*xiejiao*) after its practitioners staged a 10,000-people protest outside *Zhongnanhai*. However, the *falun gong* Hong Kong chapter has been operating as a legally registered society in Hong Kong since 1999.

44 After 1999, *falun gong* practitioners in Hong Kong strongly accused the central government of persecuting their fellow practitioners on the mainland. Since then they have become active participants of pro-democracy and anti-government rallies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741007002111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A television reporter who had served as a Beijing correspondent said she was supposed to report on official news and government press conferences only. When she covered overseas visits by top Beijing leaders, the instruction was she should not ask politically sensitive questions that might embarrass the leaders.[45] Another former Beijing correspondent revealed that her superiors did not allow her to cover the funeral of former reformist leader Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽) in early 2005, because "it was dangerous getting there." The reporter did not see any danger as reporters from all over the world were in Zhao's house. She tendered her resignation shortly after she came back to Hong Kong.

A common form of self-censorship was to minimize criticism of Tung Chee-hwa. Interviewees who worked in conservative newspapers[46] said they would usually underplay government scandals and policy mistakes (and sometimes ignored them), and overplay positive news about the government or the economy.[47] The bottom-line was to avoid a "purely negative" story about the government. If the news itself was negative, the reporter needed to find a commentator who would make positive comments. A reporter who used to work in a conservative paper said that when former financial secretary Antony Leung was embroiled in the "Lexusgate" scandal,[48] she was instructed to ask pro-government politicians the question: "Do you think the mistake was unintentional?" The interviewees duly obliged and said it was an unintentional mistake.

A lot of self-censorship was done in the name of "balance reporting." A television reporter said the first thing she learnt in office was that political news needed to be "balanced," meaning the airtime of conservative and pro-democracy views should be roughly the same. Reporters from different media said there would be pressure from seniors if the views were mostly pro-democracy in a story (but it would be all right if they were predominantly conservative). The balance was sometimes "artificial." A television editor said his superiors considered a report of an anti-government demonstration to be "unbalanced" (since all participants were anti-government) and ordered reporters to ask opinions from bystanders who were critical of the protest. The reporters gradually learned the trick and would include interviews with critical bystanders in later reports on demonstrations.

45 "Politically sensitive questions" usually include Tiananmen, human rights problems in China, Tibet, etc.

46 "Conservative papers" here denotes those that adopt a conservative stand on democracy, but are not CCP-funded. For the purposes of this article, they include *Sing Tao Daily, Oriental Daily*, the *Sun, Hong Kong Economic Times* and *Sing Pao*.

47 The exception was of course the anti-government *Apple Daily*, which might do things the other way round: it overplayed government misdeeds and scandals, and underplayed its achievements and praises. It should also be noted that the level of restriction for different organizations was different, although it is difficult to compare which was more restrictive.

48 In February 2003, it was revealed that financial secretary Antony Leung had bought a luxury car (a Lexus) before he announced in his budget a new tax levied on luxury cars, thus evading some $180,000 of tax. This soon became a major personal scandal for Leung and a scandal for the government.

Self-censorship is a tricky thing. It is difficult to prove how many stories were "censored," since the censored items never appeared in the news. It is also difficult to draw an objective line between self-censorship and editorial judgement. Some interviewees at management level agreed that sometimes they could not tell if their careful choice of wording or "balanced reporting" belonged to the realm of self-censorship or regular editorial practice. Some said it was possible that their judgement had been biased by the current political situation, and the self-censored practices had already been internalized as normal journalistic practices.

A television producer told a story which showed the subtlety of self-censorship. After the July 2003 rally, he did a feature on youth political participation. He filmed a play directed and acted by teenagers, in which some teenagers were rallying and then collectively chanted "Down with Tung Chee-hwa!" During editing he found the clip too long and decided to cut away the few seconds of anti-Tung chant at the end. "Was it really because the clip was too long? Or was it already an act of self-censorship? It could be that I subconsciously avoided the anti-Tung chant to avoid trouble. I really can't tell." Of course, if it had become part of his subconscience, the journalist would not be able to tell.

Editorial shift

If self-censorship is hard to determine objectively, editorial shift for some media after 1997 was more unambiguous. Since the 1980s, the Hong Kong media had gradually changed their attitude towards the PRC government from non-acceptance to grudging acceptance and then a positive view.[49] A content analysis of the editorials of five major newspapers in 1997 showed that the Chinese government was portrayed in a much more positive light than the Hong Kong government (see Table 3).[50]

During the debate on political reform in Hong Kong in early 2004, a content analysis of 14 newspapers found that 55 per cent of the news items were in favour of Beijing's position, while only 15 per cent supported the democrats. The *Apple Daily* was the only newspaper that had more items favourable to the democrats (50 per cent) than to Beijing (12.7 per cent), with 90 per cent of its editorials supporting the democrats (see Table 4). Apart from CCP-sponsored papers such as *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po* (*Wenhui bao* 文匯報), the *Oriental Daily*, *Sing Bao* (*Cheng bao* 成報), *Sing Tao* and *The Sun* all lent overwhelming support to Beijing, with almost no news items favourable to the democrats.[51] A content analysis of four major papers during the 2004 Legco election showed

49 Chan and Lee, "Shifting journalistic paradigms."

50 Kenneth W.Y. Leung, "How free is the press of Hong Kong: 1997 and after?" in Larry Chow and Fan Yiu–kwan (eds.), *The Other Hong Kong Report 1998* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), p. 132.

51 Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) and Article XIX, *Beijing Turns the Screws: Freedom of Expression under Attack* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2004), pp. 15–17.

Table 3: **Positions of Editorials in Five Major Newspapers**

Content	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Mixed	Sub-total
China	29 (36.3%)	11 (13.8%)	5 (2.8%)	25 (16.4%)	80 (8%)
Hong Kong	57 (15.0%)	213 (38.0%)	138 (77.5%)	66 (43.4%)	560 (56.2%)
Taiwan	0 (0%)	5 (71.4%)	0 (0%)	6 (3.9%)	7 (0.7%)
China + Hong Kong	30 (39.5%)	13 (17.1%)	13 (7.3%)	21 (13.8%)	76 (7.6%)
Others	57 (33.1%)	59 (34.3%)	22 (12.8%)	34 (19.8%)	172 (17.2%)
Total	173 (17.3%)	301 (30.2%)	178 (17.9%)	152 (15.2%)	997 (100%)

Source:
Kenneth Leung, ''How free is the press of Hong Kong: 1997 and after?'' in Larry Chow and Fan Yiu-kwan (eds.), *The Other Hong Kong Report 1998* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), p. 133.

similar differential treatment. The *Oriental Daily News* had almost no positive news items on the Democratic Party (DP) throughout the campaign. The *Apple Daily* had more favourable coverage of the democrats, while the SCMP and the *Ming Pao* tended to steer the middle course.[52]

Reporters who worked in conservative newspapers told how their daily practices systematically marginalized anti-government voices, especially those of the DP. A reporter said her paper's unspoken rule was that pro-government parties such as the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) would be given more prominent coverage, while DP news would be downplayed (unless it was negative). She told of cases when she wrote a largely balanced story on the DP with both positive and negative points, but found the positive ones edited away. After covering a DAB campaign event in the 2004 election, she decided the event was not newsworthy, but her superiors told her to write a story anyway. On a night when the DP and DAB held similar campaign events, the DAB story was twice the length of the DP one, and in a much more positive light. A reporter who worked in another conservative paper remembered how reporting instructions were different when candidates of the DP and DAB were involved in similar scandals during the 2004 Legco campaign. The DAB's scandal received ordinary coverage with little follow-up reporting, while her superiors directed her to ask many pointed questions of the DP candidate, followed by a much more voluminous coverage in the paper.

From Macro- to Micro-Pressure: Newsroom Socialization and Resistance

Although much has been said about co-option, changing ownership and economic pressure, the interviewed journalists had little evidence of overt control from the SAR government, the central authorities or the media owners.

52 Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, "Xin wen chuanmei zai xuanju zhong de yiti sheding" ("Agenda setting of news media in the election"), unpublished research report.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741007002111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 4: **Newspapers' Coverage during the ''Patriotism'' Debate**

Newspaper	**News items**				**Editorials and commentaries**			
	Support democratic camp	**Neutral/ uncertain**	**Support Beijing camp**	**N**	**Support democratic camp**	**Neutral/uncertain**	**Support Beijing camp**	**N**
HK Commercial Daily	0 (0%)	1 (5.6%)	17 (94.4%)	18	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (100%)	8
Ta Kung Pao	0 (0%)	17 (14.2%)	103 (85.8%)	12	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	14 (100%)	14
Wen Wei Po	0 (0%)	5 (9.4%)	48 (90.6%)	53	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (100%)	10
The Sun	0 (0%)	14 (25.9%)	40 (74.1%)	54	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	5
Oriental Daily News	1 (4%)	5 (20%)	19 (76%)	25	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	5
Sing Pao Daily News	0 (0%)	7 (31.8%)	15 (68.2%)	22	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)	4
Sing Tao	2 (3.4%)	15 (25.4%)	42 (71.2%)	59	0 (0%)	6 (37.5%)	10 (62.5%)	16
HK Economic Times	8 (25%)	11 (34.4%)	13 (40.6%)	32	1 (4.8%)	16 (76.2%)	4 (19%)	21
HK Daily News	10 (22.2%)	19 (42.2%)	16 (35.6%)	45	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	3 (37.5%)	8
Ming Pao Daily News	12 (21.1%)	15 (26.3%)	30 (52.6%)	57	1 (9.1%)	8 (72.7%)	2 (18.2%)	11
South China Morning Post	8 (19.5%)	27 (65.9%)	6 (14.6%)	41	4 (44.4%)	4 (44.4%)	1 (11.1%)	9
HK Economic Journal	10 (23.3%)	17 (39.5%)	16 (37.2%)	43	3 (37.5%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0%)	8
The Standard	3 (10%)	19 (63.3%)	8 (26.7%)	30	7 (70%)	0 (0%)	3 (30%)	10
Apple Daily	51 (50%)	38 (37.3%)	13 (12.7%)	102	30 (90.9%)	3 (9.1%)	0 (0%)	33
Total	**105 (15%)**	**210 (30%)**	**386 (55%)**	**701**	**48 (29.6%)**	**45 (27.8)**	**69 (42.6%)**	**162**

Source:

Hong Kong Journalists Association and Article XIX, *Beijing Turns the Screws: Freedom of Expression under Attack* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2004), p. 16.

The most common form of government pressure came from the Government Information Service and government information officers, who would invariably call news directors, editors or reporters if they were not happy with certain reports. The interviewees claimed they seldom worried about these image management exercises. A couple of reporters claimed that Hong Kong and Macau Office officials met news directors on a regular basis and pressured them to toe a conservative line, but these could not be substantiated. Interviewees at the management level admitted such meetings, but said the officials usually talked about broad principles – such as that Hong Kong should focus on economic development, social harmony was paramount and so on – and did not talk about news practices. They also said they never saw media owners intervening into daily operations.

If there was no overt control from the authorities or the media owners, why were there visible editorial shifts and self-censorship? How were the pressures in the macro-environment translated into behavioural changes at the micro-level in the newsroom?

When asked this question, some reporters thought the management was only second-guessing the views of the media owners or the central government, and was playing safe when facing politically sensitive issues. The lower levels then second-guessed their superiors, creating a vicious circle that imposed self-restraint on the press. Interviewees at the management level usually denied self-censorship and pressures from owners or government officials, although some admitted they would be more careful in handling news in some areas.[53] A deputy news director explained editorial shift towards conservatism after 2004 by "change in political climate." "As the overall sentiment is now less confrontational and anti-government, we would give less coverage to radical views." Interview data do not allow me to penetrate this decision-making black-box of how influence was exerted at the top level. It is also difficult to tell objectively if the news controllers consciously change their editorial policy because of pressure, or if they have already internalized certain political values as normal journalistic practices.[54]

At the operational level, control within the media organization was achieved through newsroom socialization. The interviewed reporters said there was no written editorial policy on treatment of politically sensitive issues, on differential treatment to parties or on taboos and editorial slants,[55] but they would learn it in the newsroom "by bits and pieces." Sometimes senior journalists would tell them the norm, sometimes their superiors would give them "instructions," or say those were instructions from above. Some said they acquired the norm by "watching the end products" after editing. If they "stepped out of line" once or

53 Anne Cheung's interviews of journalists in 1998–99 had a similar finding. See Cheung, *Self-Censorship and the Struggle for Press Freedom,* p. 179.

54 See also *ibid.* ch. 9.

55 Note that the interviewed journalists covered about 20 media organizations which includes a wide range of political positions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741007002111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

twice, and saw their copy edited, they would write in a way to avoid editing in the future, which in effect brought them into line. A television reporter said: "When you have been on a policy beat for a certain time, and suddenly the boss sent somebody to do a story that belonged to your beat, you know you have done something wrong." "If some others get a lot of work, and you observe their stories, then you will learn how to do it to get your story on the cast." Reporters in conservative newspapers admitted that gradually they would habitually include fewer pro-democracy views in their stories, thus "internalizing" the practice. A reporter said she did not have a strong feeling of bias during her two-year service in a conservative paper, but now that she had left, sometimes she found it "outrageously biased."

The editors served as gatekeepers. Reporters who worked for conservative newspapers said that while in some cases they thought the stories they wrote were fair to both political camps, they found the editor's headlines clearly biased, to the extent that they did not match the theme of the story. It was quite common for editors to remove contents positive to the democrats, and editors in electronic media sometimes cut away pro-democracy sound-bites or stories on the grounds of "insufficient airtime."

Reporters responded differently to these control mechanisms. Some experienced journalists said they would usually not resist the superiors "at this stage of their career." One reporter said that since she respects her immediate supervisor she would sometimes oblige because she did not want to put her supervisor in a difficult position. As the above cases show, some quit conservative media to look for organizations with more autonomy, or even quit the profession. The interviewees mostly agreed it was difficult for junior reporters to resist orders as they had little bargaining power or knowledge to argue against their superiors' decisions. Most interviewees concurred that arguing with superiors about the line of reporting or resisting orders were rare occurrences in today's newsrooms.

There were journalists who would try their best to enlarge or negotiate the realm of freedom. One reporter said she would try the boldest way of reporting to test the limits of the organization. If the superior did not explicitly say something was forbidden, then she would try what was in her mind. Some forms of resistance were subtler. A couple of television reporters said since pro-democracy sound-bites were usually cut on the grounds of insufficient time, they would put the sound-bite in the middle of the story, making it awkward for the editors to cut it. Resistance did sometimes serve to enlarge the freedom of frontline journalists. A Metro editor said while there were many instructions from above in the past, after the Paul Cheung complaint the pressure subsided, as the management was somewhat embarrassed. It showed that public opinion and pressure of professional ethics could still play a role in maintaining media autonomy. Of course, not too many journalists are willing to risk their jobs by defying self-censorship orders to protect the freedom of fellow professionals.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741007002111 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Conclusion

Table 5 summarizes the evolution of the state–press relationship in Hong Kong over the years. Compared with pre-1997 days, the economic and co-optional pressure is higher after 1997, which, together with intense media competition, brought greater pressure on media organizations and frontline journalists. On the other hand, the constitutional protection in the Basic Law, public support for freedom of speech and the political need of the government to maintain the image of a free press all give support to resistance by the media. With overt control infeasible both legally and politically, the control has to be subtle and ambiguous, which allows room for media practitioners to resist and negotiate their autonomy.

The normative constraint of media ethics and market competition pressures somehow explain the ambiguous and conflicting state of affairs in the post-1997 media. When there are ostensible encroachments, the media felt they needed to stand up to maintain the integrity and image of a free press.[56] As the media organizations have to compete for an audience, even the conservative media would not want to be seen as government mouthpieces. Ostensible rules of editorial bias or newsroom control are avoided. Political correctness is ensured in the name of professional pretexts of "balanced reporting" or "insufficient time" and the subtle means of newsroom socialization. Just as this author and other writers find it difficult to prove objectively that there is self-censorship, media supervisors can ensure a professionally secure position that is defensible in front of their fellow professionals and the larger community. This ambiguity in turn allows journalists room to manoeuvre.

Ten years after the handover, public perception on media freedom in Hong Kong has been impaired. In a 2007 survey of the population, about half of the respondents believed Hong Kong's media practised self-censorship and 61 per

Table 5: **Evolution of State–Press Relationship in Hong Kong**

	Pre-1980s	Transitional era	Post-1997
Government control	Tight statutory control + co-optation	Loosening, with numerous sources of influence	Legal control uncertain + stronger co-option
Media professionalism	Weak	Stronger and growing	Strong but declining
Media competition	Low, protected by cartel	Growing	Intense
Civil society and public opinion	Weak	Moderate and growing	Strong
Political economy	Moderate control	Moderate control	Strong influence from state
State–press relationship	Controlled pluralism	Pluralism	Self-restraint

56 Note that in the ICAC raids, even the *Ta Kung Pao* and other conservative papers that were searched criticized the government for infringing press freedom, citing the professional need to protect sources of information.

cent believed that the media are apprehensive about criticizing the central government. A survey of journalists in January 2007 showed that about 30 per cent admitted practising self-censorship themselves, with 58 per cent considering that press freedom had deteriorated since 1997.[57]

While the pressure is immense, the state–press relationship in post-1997 Hong Kong has a dual nature. The press is largely free from state prosecution and repression, and the media community was also quick to resist new statutory controls. However, a multitude of political and economic pressures brought self-censorship and an increasingly partisan press. The political imperative of Beijing and the SAR government to maintain Hong Kong's image as a free city, public expectation of a free press and the normative constraint posed by media ethics mean that public outcries against encroachment on the press and resistance against self-censorship (like the Paul Cheung case) sometimes served to defend or enlarge media autonomy.

A key link in the chain of influence is psychological. To some, a contagious fear induced by the political ambience was being constantly reproduced in the newsrooms, driving journalists to refrain from fully exercising their freedom, for fear of bringing unknown punishments. A television reporter/producer gave me an interesting story:

> One day I had a dream. A new supervisor walked in. She called a meeting the first day in office, and she walked around the room, looking at us and said, "All I want to do is to make you fear." I looked back at her, and said, "Fear what?" Then I woke up. And I asked myself, "Fear what?" I realize when you are asking this very question, you are already playing their game. They just want you to be afraid. Fear what?

As a 20-year-old journalist said to the author: "Defending press freedom is a daily affair." To him, there have always been many political forces that try to control or influence the press, both before and after 1997, from the government or from outside it, and it is up to the media community to resist and defend their own freedom. Sometimes the media succeed (as in the case of Article 23) because of civil society support and legal protection; sometimes media autonomy is enhanced because of the moral force of professional ethics (as in the Paul Cheung case). In many other cases the forces of control overpower the resistance, but for the time being these forces have not yet brought a totally subservient press in Hong Kong. There is still a lot of room for the post-1997 SAR media community and individual professionals to negotiate their freedom; the difficult part is to overcome the fear.

Epilogue

The writing of this article was in itself an exercise of self-censorship by this author. Most of the interviews were done with the promise of anonymity, and

57 HKJA, *Shrinking Margins: Freedom of Expression in Hong Kong Since 1997* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2007).

many interviewees were quite concerned that their names would be disclosed in my article. Some of them worried that their views or cases would hurt either their career or the careers of their colleagues. As a result of this concern, some of the more instructive cases of self-censorship or editorial control have not been included in the article because their description would allow insiders to identify the interviewees. The concern of the interviewed journalists reflected the pervasive fear or at least uneasiness among journalists in Hong Kong regarding the freedom they can enjoy. I dared not put the question, "Fear what?" to my interviewees, but I consider their anonymous representation in this article to be necessary and be of interest to the interviewed journalists and to the study of press freedom in Hong Kong.

Appendix: Background of Interviewed Journalists

Code	Rank and media	Journalism bachelor or masters degree	Years of experience
1	Newspaper and TV reporter	Yes	2
2	TV producer and sub-editor	Yes	15
3	TV reporter and producer	Yes	15
4	Radio and TV reporter	Yes	10
5	Newspaper and weekly magazine reporter	No	12
6	Newspaper reporter	Yes	4
7	Former TV reporter	No	8
8	Newspaper reporter and writer	Yes	21
9	Radio reporter and editor	Yes	12
10	TV reporter (more than one station)	Yes	10
11	Reporters and editors for five organizations (including radio, newspaper and TV stations)	Yes	21
12	Newspaper reporter	Yes	3
13	Newspaper and TV reporter	No	5
14	TV and radio reporter	Yes	4
15	Newspaper reporter	Yes	6