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## The Tug-of-War Over Press Freedom in Hong Kong : From 1st July 1997 to 30th June 2001

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**The Tug-of-war over Press Freedom in Hong Kong:  
From 1<sup>st</sup> July 1997 to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2001**

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## ABSTRACT

The year 1997 marked a significant change in the history of Hong Kong, for it was returned to China after 156 years of British control, and became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China. While the territory was still a British colony, it was considered a stronghold for liberal journalism in Asia. Since the years leading to the handover, mainland Chinese officials have criticised the Hong Kong press for abusing the *laissez-faire* media environment. The flamboyant style of the Hong Kong media contradicted the rigid, socialist ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As the handover drew closer, the differences between the social and political systems became even starker.

This thesis likens China's growing interference in the Hong Kong press and the SAR's corresponding resistance to a game of 'tug-of war', with the meaning of the word 'press' in 'press freedom' being narrowed down to 'print newspapers'. It explores the controversy over Beijing's alleged infringements on the territory's press freedom, by studying three cases involving mainland intervention that occurred during the first four years after the handover. Meanwhile, it stresses that the future of a liberal press in Hong Kong should neither be seen as gloomy nor impossible, by showing how local defenders of a free press have responded to the three incidents. In addition, this thesis provides an insight on the importance of preserving press freedom in Hong Kong, as well as how China and the SAR can reach a compromise on this issue.

In contrast to other work in this area which often highlights the fact that Hong Kong's press freedom has been increasingly under threat and would probably vanish altogether, this thesis hopes to provide a new interpretation of this problematic issue in an optimistic way. It also wishes to offer the reader a better understanding of what is meant by press freedom in Hong Kong.

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## INTRODUCTION

The future of press freedom in Hong Kong hung in the balance when on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1996, more than twenty reporters from the territory were detained in Beijing. They were there to cover a story of a group of Hong Kong activists who intended to deliver a petition to the Chinese government, protesting against the establishment of a provisional legislature that would replace the elected body after the handover (Fong, 1996). The reporters were detained on the count of covering news 'illegally' without Chinese consent, and were forced to write statements of confession and repentance. The journalists feared being blacklisted by the Chinese government, and were also worried about China's stand on the territory's press freedom after this incident.

Four years have passed; with the journalists' fear being intensified by three major attacks on the SAR media from China in the year 2000. These incidents raised concerns about a gradual erosion of press freedom and the increasing practice of self-censorship and censorship. Chapter One discusses these three cases in relation to the highly debated topic of self-censorship and censorship. While the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) has repeatedly pointed out the existence of self-censorship among the SAR news outlets in its annual reports since 1994, Liu (1997) and Zeitlin (2001) attribute the toning down of China coverage in certain newspapers to censorship exercised by the editorial and management level. Using the three cases, this chapter argues that the arguments of both sides are valid. I will conduct a qualitative analysis of how these cases were covered by two local Chinese-language newspapers *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao* (which are very different in nature from each other), as well as the territory's leading English-language daily the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP).

These three papers are chosen due to the following reasons. Chinese-language papers are read by the local Hong Kong population, which is made up of approximately 95 percent of ethnic Chinese (Central Intelligence Agency, 2001). *Apple Daily* is one of the best-selling newspapers in the city, which is no mean feat for a paper that was established in 1995 by pro-freedom entrepreneur Jimmy Lai Chi Ying. It is viewed as 'anti-China' since its confrontational attitude towards the Chinese government can be seen in its comments and features. On the other hand, *Ming Pao* is a more venerable

paper which won the loyalty of the territory's intellectuals and middle-class. Although it was once classified as 'hostile' by China's official *Xinhua* News Agency for its aggressive coverage on the *Tiananmen* Square incident, it is observed to have started softening its voice when the handover was approaching (Kahn, 1997). Similarly, the *SCMP* is believed to have been taking a less antagonistic stance towards Hong Kong's new master (Stone, 1998, p.160). It will be used as a main example to illustrate the conflicts between the political directions of the press and the press owners' business interests in the mainland.

In contrast, Chapter Two explores the brighter side of the situation of press freedom in Hong Kong. The inclusion of this chapter, which also explains the main reason of writing this thesis, is due to the fact that little has been written to present the future of press freedom in the SAR in an optimistic way. In fact, many Hongkongers value freedom of the press as much as their western counterparts do, and some of them have actually been putting great effort in fighting for press freedom. Evidence can be cited in responses (both verbal comments and legal actions) from well-known local press freedom advocates to the three incidents mentioned in Chapter One. These responses will appear in the first half of this chapter. The second half emphasises that local media outlets generally support press freedom, regardless of their political orientations. To achieve this, I will again employ the method of qualitative analysis, with the focus on the editorials on two of those three cases by *Apple Daily*, *Ming Pao* and the *South China Morning Post*.

To understand these press freedom advocates' persistence on fighting for press freedom, it is necessary to understand the importance of preserving press freedom in Hong Kong. Many critics who have touched on this topic tend to put their emphasis on the economic factor. For instance, Neumann (1997) repeatedly stresses that the free flow of information, facilitated by minimal restrictions on the press, is essential for the SAR to retain its status as an international financial market; Bowring (1997, p.23) and Wrout (1997, p.164) reach a consensus that Hong Kong's press freedom has given the territory an advantage over Singapore, each being the other's major competitor as a regional hub in East Asia. Certainly, press freedom plays a vital part in the territory's economic success, but its significance is far more than that.

Neumann, Bowring and Wrouth's arguments will be developed in greater detail to form part of Chapter Three, which assesses the importance of preserving press freedom in Hong Kong based on the hypothetical scenario that press freedom was taken away from the city. Certain relevant current affairs will be discussed so as to provide a new dimension of examining the relationship between press freedom and the SAR's economy. In addition, I will approach the topic by looking from the social and political angles, at both a smaller and larger scale. Supportive arguments for the prediction of the impacts of the loss of press freedom on the SAR journalistic circle will draw heavily from the studies by Chan, Lee and Lee (1996), which focus on Hong Kong journalists during the transition period. When discussing the social and political implications on the community as a whole, academic texts on Hong Kong's social and political history such as works by McMillen (1993) and by Chan and Lee (1999) will be referred to.

The Chinese government's dismissive stance towards the importance of press freedom shows up the still highly divergent views on this issue. It points to the Chinese leaders' "dangerously insufficient understanding of Hong Kong" (Yahuda, 1997, p.204). In his article, Yahuda identifies some fundamental differences between the two places in order to illustrate how China could deepen its integration into the international community if it understood the territory better. Taking a similar approach, I will elaborate on some of the differences and misunderstandings between China and Hong Kong that have resulted in the 'tug-of-war' over press freedom in Chapter Four. In particular, I will argue that Hong Kong is also responsible for this ongoing battle due to its lack of understanding of its motherland.

These differences and misunderstandings will be classified into three main categories: political beliefs and ideologies, differing interpretations of important concepts, and the media's perception of social responsibility. Ting's (1993) article on China's economic development and Morikawa's (n.d.) study on China's political nature are useful information sources for explaining China's apparently anti-western mentality. George's (2000) book on Singapore's politics, which mentions some of the shared attitudes between Singaporeans and mainland Chinese, will also be referred to. In terms of articulating Hongkongers' general political beliefs, I will heavily draw my arguments from literature specialising in identity formation and political movements in Hong Kong, such as work by Thomas (1999) and work by Ma and Fung (1999).

By analysing China's own interpretation of the term 'freedom of the press', Foster (1997) asserts that China's promise of press freedom to Hong Kong is "illusory". However, this could be attributed to misunderstandings between China and Hong Kong because of their different interpretations of 'press freedom'. Observers who have singled out other 'problematic' but important terms include DeGolyer (1993, p.274), Morikawa (n.d.) and Harris (1998, p.234). Aside from the Hong Kong definitions of certain important terms, what China also needs to understand is the SAR media's perception of social responsibility. This idea came in the wake of the local media's strong response to a speech given by Chinese President Jiang Zemin at the celebration of the first anniversary of Macau's return to China. Jiang advised the media in both Hong Kong and Macau to heed their social responsibility, of which the *SCMP* concluded with three words: "toe the line" (Lee, No & Bruning, 2000). To the SAR media, which are strongly western-influenced in general, this is certainly unacceptable. Chapter Four will explore this topic at a greater length by applying Chan, Lee and Lee's (1996) studies on the professionalism of Hong Kong journalists and other relevant literature.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Casting a Shadow: China's Interference

During the first two and half years after the handover, the media in Hong Kong seemed to be free of Chinese interference. There were neither major attacks on the media, nor arrests of journalists. However, serious infringements occurred in the year 2000, where three incidents highlighted the precariousness of the territory's press freedom.

This chapter aims at measuring the extent of China's intervention in the SAR's media in the four years after 1997. It examines the practice of self-censorship and censorship, which is a highly debated topic in Hong Kong. To achieve these, the three cases will be discussed and analysed, with the main focus on the last case. In addition, there will be a brief qualitative analysis of how these cases were covered by three local newspapers: *Apple Daily*, *South China Morning Post* and *Ming Pao*.

The three major cases involved:

- Wang Fengchao, a Beijing official who warned the Hong Kong media against pro-Taiwan reporting on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2000.
- Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who lashed out at the SAR media on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2000.
- Willy Lam Wo Lap, a China editor who was forced to resign on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2000, apparently for one of his 'sensitive' column on China.

These three cases are all evidence of interference from China and can be classified into two categories: explicit and implicit intervention. Explicit intervention refers to comments on and actions against the SAR's media by Chinese officials; implicit interference can be seen in areas of press ownership, self-censorship and censorship. The Wang Fengchao and President Jiang incidents clearly belong to the first group, whereas Willy Lam's replacement belongs to the latter.

### **Implications of implicit interference – Case study of Willy Lam’s removal from the South China Morning Post**

In fact, what was, and still is, really influencing the SAR journalistic circle is implicit interference in editorial decisions. This is where Beijing’s mostly subtle but sometimes heavy-handed actions come in. The Hong Kong Journalists Association’s (HKJA) 1995 report documents various methods that the Chinese government has employed to secure greater obedience from the Hong Kong’s *laissez-faire* media in the run-up to the Chinese rule (Hong Kong Journalists Association [HKJA] & Article 19, 1995, p.23). These methods, also known as ‘inside policies’, which will be dealt with below, were revealed in an interview with Kam Yiu Yu in October 1993 (HKJA & Article 19, p.23). Kam was the former chief editor of the communist-controlled Hong Kong daily *Wen Wei Po*. Indeed, evidence of such implicit interference from China can be cited in the Willy Lam case, as well as several changes within the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP or the *Post*) prior to the handover. It is necessary to provide background information on the Lam case before any further discussion:

#### *Background information on Willy Lam’s removal*

Veteran journalist Willy Lam Wo Lap quit the *South China Morning Post* (on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2000) rather than being sidelined. Having worked for Hong Kong’s leading English-language daily for over ten years, Lam resigned with disappointment and dissatisfaction. He was notified that his job as the paper’s China editor would be given to former *China Daily* reporter Wang Xiangwei. Lam’s replacement was believed to be a result of a column he wrote in June 2000, where he alleged that mainland Chinese government officials agreed to offer favours to 36 Hong Kong business tycoons if they pledged their support for the Beijing-appointed SAR Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa (“Resign under pressure”, 2000). This article became a target of the SCMP’s major shareholder Robert Kuok Hock Nien, who published a hostile letter in the paper slamming Lam’s column as an exaggeration full of “distortions and speculation” (“Regional briefing”, 2000, p.14). The *Post*’s chairman Kuok Khoon Ean (Robert Kuok’s son) emphasised that the organisational change was “purely an editorial management decision”, aiming at “expanding and diversifying the paper’s China coverage” (“Veteran journalist”, 2000).

Beijing's first application of the inside tactics on the *Post* could be seen in the sale of the paper from media baron Rupert Murdoch to pro-China billionaire Robert Kuok Hock Nien in September 1993. Few people believed that the takeover of the *SCMP* by Robert Kuok was simply a swapping of masters. This was largely due to his background— a Malaysian Chinese businessman with close ties to mainland officials and extensive investments in China such as deluxe hotels, property development, and Coca-Cola bottling projects (Karp, 1993a, p.11). Coupled with Kuok's acknowledgement of the purchase being "facilitated by the Bank of China which provided temporary bridging loans" (Stone, 1998, p.161), an inside tactic that Kam refers to as "acting on the 'economic bases'" of Hong Kong's media seems applicable in this case (HKJA & Article 19, 1995, p.24). This particular method means that China will encourage pro-Beijing investors to purchase a controlling stake in individual newspapers or media groups on their behalf, in order to gain control of editorial policy (HKJA & Article 19, p.24). The issue of press ownership has also led to a question of self-censorship and censorship, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Many were also bewildered as to the reason why Rupert Murdoch decided to divest himself of the highly profitable daily, wondering about the political implications of the deal. One of Murdoch's ambitions was to bring his Hong Kong-based regional satellite broadcaster Star TV into the growing China market (Gilley, 2000, p.30). This was certainly a big challenge for him owing to China's wariness of her citizens being 'corrupted' by pro-democracy Western ideologies. Many analysts believed that Murdoch had sold the *SCMP* in the fear that the paper's pro-British stance would thwart his plan of entering China (Stone, 1998, p.159). Indeed, according to the then *SCMP* editor Jonathan Fenby, the *Post* was the "colonial mouthpiece, whose editor would go to tea with the Governor once or twice a week and come back and write those editorials" (Wrout, 1997, p.163). Other moves to gain Beijing's favour included pulling the BBC's 24-hour news channel from Star TV, for it had upset China (Gilley, p.31). In addition, Murdoch cancelled a book contract with Christopher Patten, Hong Kong's last governor and a pro-democracy advocate. Murdoch openly admitted the political motivation behind it: "We're trying to get set up in China. Why should we upset them?" (Gilley, p.31).

Although Robert Kuok has never been as blunt as Murdoch in terms of admitting moves of befriending China for economic gains in the mainland, the changes in the *SCMP* were somewhat perplexing. In April 1997, Feng Xiliang, the founding editor of Beijing's official English-language newspaper *China Daily*, was appointed to the *Post* as a 'consultant' (HKJA & Article 19, 1997, p.20). *China Daily* is notably the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and is under the control of the Central Committee's Propaganda Department (Haggart, 1992, p.50). This appointment matched the characteristics of what Kam refers to as 'undercover agents', where loyal CCP members, who are often experienced journalists of either official or semi-official media organisations, are sent to work for newspapers in Hong Kong, usually in the China news section (HKJA & Article 19, 1995, p.24). It sparked controversy about the *Post*'s editorial independence, although the then *SCMP* editor Jonathan Fenby declared that a consultant would not affect his full authority to edit the paper (HKJA & Article 19, 1997, p.20). Something similar happened in the Willy Lam case, where former *China Daily* business reporter Wang Xiangwei had taken over Lam's editorial position. Again, this 'organisational change' worried the SAR media because the new China editor would have operational and editorial control over all *Post* correspondents in Hong Kong and China who cover Chinese affairs ("Veteran journalist", 2000).

It is also important to point out that Willy Lam was not the first 'problematic' writer to be removed from the *Post*. Cartoonist Larry Feign's twelve-year-old strip *The World of Lily Wong* was axed in May 1995, after it suggested a citizen who agreed that the then Chinese Premier Li Peng "is a fascist, murderous dog" was killed (HKJA & Article 19, 1995, p.35). Similar to Lam, Feign had dealt with subjects which were of extreme sensitivity to China. While the *SCMP* claimed that the decision to scrub the strip was for financial reasons, Feign contended that it did not make sense for the editor to cut costs by dropping his most popular feature (Cohen, 1997, p.4). It is hard to believe that the removal of two gutsy columnists and the appointment of two mainland 'consultants' are pure coincidence. In fact, the recurrences are more likely to be a reinforcement of one alarming signal: toe the line or you are out.

The Chinese government not only dedicates a particular set of policies to dealing with the Hong Kong media, but also applies the same tactics that it uses to gain control of the mainland's media to the SAR from time to time. Once again, this observation can



be proved by examining the Willy Lam case. After his resignation from the *Post*, Lam revealed in an 'Inside Media' program that editors of the newspapers receive subtle messages from Beijing, where "a media magnate might be invited to dinner with a high ranking government official who just 'casually' makes a critical comment about a certain article" (Arvidson, 2000). This emulates what the Chinese leaders do to gain control of the mainland media, where they arrange regular meetings at which the chief editors are told what they should or should not publish (Haggart, 1992, p.52). To Beijing, giving frequent advice is actually an act of benevolence. According to Haggart (1992, p.53), the Propaganda Department will simply remove obstinate chief editors they find hard to tolerate. Apparently, many people, including Lam himself, believe that that is what happened to him.

Willy Lam's removal was certainly a blow to the freedom of the SAR's media. It intensified the conflict between press ownership and personal business interests, as discussed above; it also led to a current debate on self-censorship and censorship in the media, which has been running since several years before the handover. Chan and To (1999, p.467) observe that as 1997 was approaching, the Beijing government rose as an alternative power centre in Hong Kong. As a result, many local journalists adopted the practice of self-censorship on China's coverage out of ensuring job-security. A study on local journalists' hesitation on criticising China revealed that there were journalists who acknowledged apprehension (Chan, Lee & Lee, 1996, p.119). Chan, Lee and Lee (1996, p.120) suggested the figures were "somewhat of an understatement" since self-censorship was considered "professionally despicable". Another strong supporter of this argument is the HKJA, which has repeatedly confirmed the existence of self-censorship among the Hong Kong media in its annual reports on freedom of expression, as well as its annual anniversary magazines.

On the other hand, there are those who strongly oppose the claim that 'self-censorship poses the greatest threat to Hong Kong's press freedom'. Liu (1997) suggests that frontline journalists seldom censor themselves. Their 'sensitive' stories are usually 'spiked' by the editorial or management level. Thus, what has been disturbing the territory's journalistic circle is actually "plain old censorship". Prior to the handover, there were several incidents to support this argument. For example, *SCMP* columnist Christine Loh Kung Wai apparently touched on the controversial sale

of the *Post* to Robert Kuok in one of her original articles. The article raised questions about press freedom in Hong Kong and was rejected by the daily's editors (Karp, 1993b, p.94). Loh, who was also an outspoken liberal in the colonial legislature, defended herself against the accusation of criticising the sale. Meanwhile, she admitted that it would be naïve to assume the purchase was purely for commercial reasons, simply by looking at Kuok's business background (Karp, 1993b, p.94). Loh's counterpart Margaret Ng encountered the same problem, where her column on press freedom was rejected by the *Post* during the transition period of the purchase (Karp, 1993a, p.11).

Lam's removal is a more recent example that can be used to further enforce the validity of Liu's argument. Lam himself was an editor, in the position to decide what gets published and what does not. Moreover, he was not subject to the same editorial checks and vetting that junior journalists are. This is why his article on Beijing's meeting with Hong Kong tycoons got published without being scanned and censored. If it was, the skirmish would not have happened and he would not have been stripped of his editorial post. However, Lam was subject to censorship of a different kind - from the management level. Instead of having his article spiked or amended, he was simply removed from the China news desk.

Taking the same stance as Liu is Arnold Zeitlin, the chairman of the Freedom Forum Asian Centre. Zeitlin, as cited in Kubiske (2000, p.38), argues that self-censorship is a problem in many countries, and that there is a lack of substantial evidence to demonstrate that self-censorship on China coverage is widely practiced in Hong Kong (Zeitlin, 2001). He defends the professionalism of the territory's journalists, saying that they have covered 'sensitive issues' in a "balanced manner" (Zeitlin, 2001).

While there might not be a preponderance of evidence, the word 'balanced' already implies a sense of compromise. This sense of compromise entails either self-censorship or censorship, but no one can put a finger on what the situation really is. Therein lies the question of whether the 'balanced' report was brought about by an order from the editorial level, or through veiled threats. The ambivalent concept of 'being balanced' can be examined by comparing how Willy Lam's removal was covered by the *SCMP*, *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao*.

Both *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao* accompanied the news of Lam's resignation with reports of the 'war of words' he had with Robert Kuok in June 2000. The two dailies also ran articles on the opinions of certain free press advocates, who generally reached a consensus that the removal was politically motivated. For instance, *Apple Daily* quoted the Hong Kong Journalists Association, which suspected that Lam's "abrupt departure" might involve "pressure from the outside" (Wong, 2000a). The association was worried that the event would affect the international image of Hong Kong. In addition to quoting the HKJA, *Ming Pao* quoted local democrat Martin Lee Chu Ming, who demanded an explanation from the *Post* for its "suspicious move" ("Resign under pressure", 2000). It is noteworthy that both papers published Willy Lam's announcement, which said that Lam himself felt "disturbed" about the *Post*'s decision of removing him from the China desk. He believed that the event would have a chilling effect on the territory's press freedom (Wong, 2000a).

On the contrary, the *SCMP*'s coverage on this 'internal affair' was rather muted. It emphasised that the replacement of Lam was an organisational reshuffle ("Enhanced coverage", 2000), and felt sorry about his subsequent resignation ("Veteran journalist", 2000). The *Post* did not mention anything about the skirmish between Willy Lam and Robert Kuok, nor did it reflect any sceptical views from anyone. It appears that if the *Post* adopted a policy of self-censorship or censorship with regard to its coverage. Which one it exactly was, only those at the *Post* would know.

#### **Beijing, press proprietor and coverage – Case studies of Wang Fengchao's Remarks and President Jiang's 'lecture'**

The topic on self-censorship or censorship is often linked to the growing trend of independent newspapers being bought over by businessmen with substantial economic interests in the mainland (HKJA & Article 19, 2001, p.11). In the light of Robert Kuok's background, it is no surprise that every internal change within the *SCMP* is perceived as proprietorial influence. Indeed, the relationship between the proprietor's principles and the paper's political direction is sometimes reflected in the paper's coverage. A comparison among the headlines of the reports on the Wang and Jiang events by *Apple Daily*, the *SCMP* and *Ming Pao* appear to be a good illustration.

*Background information on Wang Fengchao's remarks*

At a seminar organised by the Hong Kong Federation of Journalists, deputy director of China's local liaison office (formerly the *Xinhua* News Agency Hong Kong Branch) Wang Fengchao issued a grave warning to Hong Kong's media regarding the coverage of Taiwan's political status. He asserted that "the media should not treat speeches and views which advocate Taiwan's independence as normal news items, nor should they report them like normal cases of reporting the voices of different parties" (Ma & Political Desk, 2000). He went on to say that the local media are responsible for upholding the integrity and sovereignty of the People's Republic of China (Ma & Political Desk, 2000). It is believed that Wang was referring to an interview conducted with Taiwan's pro-independence Vice-president Annette Lu Hsiu Lien by Hong Kong-based Cable Television. He insisted that his remarks had nothing to do with press freedom.

*Background information on President Jiang's 'lecture'*

In a meeting with the SAR Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa in October 2000, Chinese President Jiang Zemin lashed out at Hong Kong journalists when he was asked whether it was an 'imperial order' for Tung to serve a second term. In an uncharacteristic outburst of anger, President Jiang accused the journalists of undue aggressive questioning, saying that they lacked knowledge and kept asking "simple and naïve" questions (Ching, 2000). He also criticised their professionalism, saying that the only thing good about them was that they could run faster than their Western counterparts (Ching, 2000). President Jiang's tirade not only surprised the media and politicians in the territory, but also became international news.

*Headlines of the reports on the Wang case by*

- *Apple Daily*: "Beijing official gruffly threatens media" ("Beijing official", 2000)
- *SCMP*: "Media warned on Taiwan reports" (Ma & Political Desk, 2000)
- *Ming Pao*: "Wang Fengchao puts limitation to Taiwan reports" ("Wang Fengchao", 2000)

*Headlines of the reports on the Jiang case by*

- *Apple Daily*: "Jiang Zemin blows his top - a complete indelicacy" (Ching, 2000)
- *SCMP*: "Jiang attacks 'naïve' media" (Kong & Cheung, 2000)

- *Ming Pao*: "Support different from imperial order, says Jiang" (Leung, 2000).

While the headlines by the *SCMP* and *Ming Pao* are not provocative, the ones by *Apple Daily* stand out as the bluntest and the most emotional among the three. They clearly reflect the paper's marked antipathy and opposition towards Wang's advice and Jiang's 'lecture'. A brief qualitative analysis of the contents of these reports will further single out the uniqueness of *Apple Daily* from the other two papers.

#### *Analysis of reports on the Wang case*

*Apple Daily* began the report with rather strong statements: "The 'gunfire' from Beijing's cannonade pointing towards Taiwanese independence has finally spread to Hong Kong...Wang Fengchao warned the Hong Kong media in a fiery manner..." ("Beijing official", 2000). Aside from employing strong words, the paper devoted about half of the article to reporting the opinions of several local press freedom defenders. While *Ming Pao* and the *SCMP* also ran reports on several free press advocates' responses towards the issue, the number of paragraphs they devoted was significantly less than in *Apple Daily*. Furthermore, the two dailies simply narrated the event in a factual manner, without highlighting the conflict.

#### *Analysis of reports on the Jiang case*

Among the three newspapers, *Apple Daily* had the most detailed report of the event, in which an overwhelmingly large part was composed of direct quotes from Jiang Zemin. To further emphasise Jiang's fierceness towards the SAR journalists, the paper described his gestures and facial expressions with phrases that carry negative connotations, such as "blustered with grouchiness", "ranted at", "scowled at" and "spoke with increasing wrath". On the other hand, reports by *Ming Pao* and the *SCMP* were not as detailed, and terms with derogatory meanings were not found.

Some may attribute the differences in the style of both the headlines and contents to fair and objective reporting as opposed to sensationalism in *Apple Daily*'s case. However, the factor of owner's influence may not be ruled out when one looks at the history and changes of the three papers.

The changes in the *SCMP* newsroom, as mentioned above, are deemed as politically motivated moves aimed at toning down the paper's coverage on Chinese affairs. Many believe that *Ming Pao* has also been making changes for the same reasons. Being identified as Hong Kong's most influential newspaper, *Ming Pao* was a thorn in the side of the Beijing government. It was once classified as "hostile" by the *Xinhua* News Agency (China's *de facto* embassy in Hong Kong), due to its aggressive coverage of the *Tiananmen* Square incident in 1989 (Kahn, 1997). Malaysian-Chinese timber and publishing magnate Tiong Hiew King purchased the daily in 1995, partly because of his "patriotic instincts" and his desire to "make contributions to the Chinese people" (Kahn, 1997). The word 'Chinese' is ambiguous, since no one can be sure if Tiong was referring to the Hong Kong Chinese or the mainland Chinese. However, several changes in *Ming Pao* following Tiong's takeover seem to indicate that his "contributions" are geared towards the mainland Chinese.

Firstly, a senior opinion writer from Shanghai who once worked for a mainland government propaganda department joined the daily (Kahn, 1997). Secondly, the paper has begun following the style of mainland papers, referring to Taiwan as a province of China. Thirdly, coverage of dissent in the mainland has been significantly reduced, and stories on Chinese politics have been discouraged (Kahn, 1997). *Ming Pao* reporters noticed the editorial changes, and one of them said, "The editors feel more comfortable if we just wait for the official version to come out" (Kahn, 1997). Those who were disgruntled with the changes, simply left the paper. The daily's former political editor Lai Pui Yee, who was also a former chairperson of the HKJA, once commented that there were strange things going on at *Ming Pao* and she did not want to be part of it (Kahn, 1997).

The environment in *Apple Daily* is an entirely different story. It is not surprising, for the pro-democracy paper's owner Jimmy Lai Chi Ying is known as a solid defender of press freedom. His brashness was once compared to that of Allen H. Neuharth, the founder of *USA TODAY* and the Freedom Forum (Sandeem, 1998). According to Lai, his bold move of entering the highly competitive local newspaper market was encouraged by the increasing kowtowing stance of the media, which led to a drop in readership (Lai, 1996, p.256). He saw an opportunity for a new independent voice and therefore launched *Apple Daily*. Lai goes against the trend of self-censorship and

censorship, encouraging criticism even in the coverage of Chinese news (Steinberger, 1996).

Despite the fact that his *Giordano* clothing stores in China were forced to close down temporarily after his magazine *Next* published an article insulting the then Chinese Premier Li Peng (Steinberger, 1996), the flamboyant entrepreneur has never become submissive. Both the daily and the magazine have continued lambasting China's leadership as well as satirising the SAR government. However, there is one price that Jimmy Lai is still paying, which once again confirms the existence of Beijing interference. The reporters of both *Apple Daily* and the *Next* magazine have been refused official accreditation to go to the mainland to cover news. This is attributed to Beijing's carrot-and-stick tactics: while 'friendly' journalists will be invited for briefings and be granted speedy access to information, those 'unfriendly' ones will get blacklisted or even punished (HKJA & Article 19, 1997, p.53).

## Conclusion

It is undeniable that the Chinese authorities had been attempting to intervene in the operation of the Hong Kong's media during the first four years after the handover. With both explicit and implicit methods, Beijing had exerted pressure on some media organisations, which gradually led to an erosion of the SAR's press freedom. Evidence of such influence can be cited in three major incidents occurred in the year 2000, namely Wang Fengchao's remarks, Jiang Zemin's 'lecture' and Willy Lam's removal.

A brief qualitative analysis of how these cases were covered by *Apple Daily*, *South China Morning Post* and *Ming Pao* suggests that self-censorship was neither a myth nor the greatest enemy to press freedom in Hong Kong. Censorship exercised by the editorial and management level also accounted for the toning down of certain local newspapers' coverage on China, with the economic interests of the papers' owners in the mainland being a main factor.

While the existence of Beijing's interference is certain, the survival of pro-democracy *Apple Daily* shows that press freedom in the SAR has no lack of sunshine. In fact, *Apple Daily* is not fighting alone. Chapter Two will introduce more defenders

of press freedom in the territory, so as to examine the result of the ‘tug-of-war’ in the first four years after the handover.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Looking on the Bright Side: Hong Kong's Resistance

Chapter one paints a rather gloomy picture of press freedom in Hong Kong during the first four years after the handover. However, the identification of major incidents and the acknowledgement of the existence of both censorship and self-censorship do not necessarily signal that this thesis takes a pessimistic stance towards the issue. As its title indicates, there has been a tug-of-war over the SAR's press freedom. The mainland's intimidation, which has been illustrated in the previous chapter, is only one side of the story.

This chapter seeks to point out that there are people in Hong Kong who have constantly pulled the rope from the other side, fighting for the freedom of the press. Arguments will be based on responses from well-known press freedom advocates to the three controversial incidents which occurred in the year 2000: Wang Fengchao's remarks, President Jiang's 'lecture' and Willy Lam's removal. These prominent figures include pro-democracy legislators Martin Lee and Emily Lau, the former SAR Chief Secretary for Administration Anson Chan, as well as the Hong Kong Journalists Association. In addition, a qualitative analysis of the editorials on the first two cases by *Apple Daily*, *Ming Pao* and the *South China Morning Post* will be conducted, in order to articulate one argument: while different local newspapers might hold different political directions, all of them show no tolerance towards Beijing's verbal attacks.

#### The Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA)

Founded in 1968, the Hong Kong Journalists Association has emerged as an outspoken pressure group that dedicates its effort in defending press freedom and dealing with issues related to the journalism profession (Chan, Lee & Lee, 1996, p.32). It has been recognised by many foreign organisations as a "vocal and respectable force" in these aspects (Lau, 1998, p.30). This is no exaggeration when one looks at how the association responded to Wang Fengchao's warning to the SAR media regarding reports on Taiwan issues.

The HKJA refused to accept Wang's 'advice', for it believed that damage would be done to the media's independence and credibility (Hong Kong Journalists Association [HKJA] & Article 19, 2000, p.6). It also strongly denounced the comments as a breach of China's promise to retain Hong Kong's administrative autonomy after the handover (HKJA & Article 19, p.6). To further express its antipathy against the remarks, the association wrote to Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, hoping that Zhu would help prevent any recurrences of similar 'advice' from Beijing ("The HKJA", 2000). In addition, it staged a 24-hour industry-wide signature campaign in order to convey "the opposition of Hong Kong journalists being asked to be tools to promulgate state policies", and to show their "commitment to editorial independence" ("The HKJA", 2000).

Regarding President Jiang's 'lecture', the association condemned any strong remarks from the central leadership like Jiang's, as they would put the media under direct pressure (HKJA & Article 19, 2001, p.9). While Jiang accused the SAR journalists of always asking simple and naïve questions, the HKJA chairperson Mak Yin Ting argued that the questions posed were "sensible and legitimate" (Hon, 2000). She went on to explain that whether Tung Chee Hwa was 'the emperor's choice for re-election' was certainly related to the implementation of the 'one country, two systems' principle. The journalists simply represented the people of Hong Kong to express one of their main concerns (Hon, 2000). Furthermore, Mak suspected that Jiang deliberately overreacted in order to conceal his reluctance to clarify Beijing's stance on the re-election ("It's their responsibility", 2000).

The HKJA has been sensitive to China's attempts to intervene in the SAR media. It doubted that Lam's abrupt departure was due to an internal reshuffling of staff. Instead, the HKJA believed that "pressure from the outside" was involved, which aimed at making the *South China Morning Post's* China coverage more acceptable to the Beijing government (Wong, 2000a). Mak Yin Ting was worried that the *Post's* decision would signal an erosion of editorial freedom of Hong Kong's English-language newspapers, which would in turn affect the territory's international image (Wong, 2000a).

The HKJA has put in an impressive amount of effort to safeguard press freedom in Hong Kong. It has not only showed overwhelming support for the local journalists with regard to attacks from Chinese officials, but also suggested ways and means in its annual reports as to what could be done to preserve freedom of expression in the territory.

### **Martin Lee Chu Ming – Head of the Democratic Party in Hong Kong**

Martin Lee has been one of the most outspoken advocates of democracy in Hong Kong. He has always criticised China's human rights record as well as its communistic state policies which, in his opinion, would have adverse effects on the SAR. Viewed as a "subversive" by the Beijing government and as a "future martyr" by the territory, Lee sees himself as "a man of principle", who will "stand by what he believes is right for Hong Kong" (Lee, 1996, p.233). Undoubtedly, press freedom has been a fundamental element to the success of the territory in Lee's eyes.

While Lee appreciates Beijing's promise of 'one-country, two systems', he has a constant fear of the mainland abandoning this principle which ensures Hongkongers' rights and freedoms. This was reflected in his views towards Wang Fengchao's remarks, which he saw as an infringement on the SAR media's freedoms, thus rendering it an empty promise ("Different responses", 2000). Lee encouraged SAR journalists to try their best to safeguard this principle (Ma & Political Desk, 2000), and condemned Wang for providing the media a classification of whom they can and cannot interview (Ma & Li, 2000). With reference to the belief that Wang Fengchao was voicing his displeasure over the television interview with Taiwan's pro-independence Vice-president Annette Lu Hsiu Lien, Martin Lee expressed his antipathy in a satirical statement: "If Annette Lu Hsiu Lien is today's target, then the Democratic Party will be tomorrow's" ("Various responses", 2000).

The pro-democracy legislator's response to President Jiang's 'lecture' was even blunter. He described Jiang's outburst as an act of "tainting Chinese people's honour" (Wong & Chan, 2000), for he dispraised the Hong Kong reporters in a foreign language (English) and compared their professionalism with that of a veteran Caucasian journalist (Jiang eulogised American journalist Mike Wallace, who has had sixty years journalistic

experience and interviewed Jiang for the CBS's 60 Minutes). Lee supported the SAR reporters, saying that they were asking the questions in good faith (Wong & Chan, 2000). Other members of the Democratic Party added that Jiang's outbreak revealed Beijing's "subconscious" tightening of its control over Hong Kong ("April 5 Action", 2000).

Lee also expressed his concern over Willy Lam's removal. He revealed that he was a loyal reader of Willy Lam's, whose columns, according to Lee, had consistently provided "accurate information" ("Editorial independence", 2000). He was dissatisfied with the *SCMP*'s decision, saying that the newspaper owed the public a justifiable explanation for this "suspicious" move ("Editorial independence", 2000).

Given his intrepid and pro-democratic spirit, it is no surprise that Martin Lee and his colleagues from the Democratic Party have been refused any dialogue with the Chinese government (Lee, 1996, p.234). Lee once revealed his fear for his party as well as the local press being pressured under Chinese rule. Nevertheless, he confidently promised that the Party would "soldier on" and "continue to be the voice of Hong Kong" ("Hong Kong's Martin Lee", 1997).

### **Emily Lau Wai Hing – Head of the Frontier**

Emily Lau has been no less enthusiastic than Martin Lee when it comes to fighting for press freedom. Being a former journalist and former chairperson of the HKJA, Lau fully understands the concerns of local reporters, and is renowned for her outspokenness.

Lau was disgruntled with Wang Fengchao's Taiwan remarks, saying, "if mainland officials were to point a finger here and there, telling us what we should do and what we should not do, it would have a big impact on Hong Kong's press freedom" (Ma & Li, 2000). She added that the remarks had an implication of urging the media to exercise self-censorship ("Anger erupts", 2000). Together with other members of the Frontier (another pro-democracy party), Lau staged a demonstration outside the Central Government Offices, calling for the SAR government to defend press freedom ("Anger erupts", 2000).

Also when it came to commenting on Chinese President Jiang Zemin, the legislator spoke without reserve. Lau said that Jiang's behaviour in the outbreak had not been "statesmanlike", suspecting that his original motivation was to "maintain the fake belief" that the SAR Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa was elected (Hon, 2000). She added that Jiang mishandled the situation and thus resulted in an "indelicate performance" (Wong & Chan, 2000).

As for Willy Lam's removal, Emily Lau believed that it was directly related to his skirmish with Robert Kuok in June 2000. She referred to the event as a "nail in [the] coffin" for both press freedom and the *SCMP*'s credibility (Goff, n.d.). She openly criticised the daily's political inclination, claiming that the incident signalled a tendency to buck under criticism from "the rich and the powerful".

#### **Anson Chan-Fang On Sang – Former Chief Secretary for Administration in Hong Kong**

Like Martin Lee and Emily Lau, Anson Chan is a democracy advocate. Before her retirement in April 2001, Chan won the popularity of most Hongkongers. She was honoured as 'Hong Kong's conscience' for her forthright manner in standing up for the interests of the community, campaigning for a wide range of rights and freedoms that the citizens have enjoyed.

As a defender of freedom, Chan responded promptly and firmly to Wang Fengchao's remarks: "Press freedom is guaranteed by the Basic Law as are the freedoms of speech and publication", and therefore the Hong Kong media is "free to comment and report on all matters of current interest" in accordance to the SAR's mini-constitution (Ma & Political Desk, 2000). She further pacified the anxiety caused by Wang's comments, saying the SAR government perfectly understood the importance of press freedom to an open and free society like Hong Kong. Chan promised that the government would work with the media and the whole community to protect their rights and freedoms ("Mrs Chan", 2000).

Although the Chief Secretary did not make any specific comment on President Jiang's 'lecture' and Willy Lam's removal, she once again put great emphasis on press

freedom shortly after Lam's departure. In a conference on 'Press, Power & Politics: Asia' held by the Freedom Forum, Anson Chan pointed out that press freedom is a "bedrock guarantee" of Hongkongers' way of life, and is imbedded in their "hearts and minds" (Fliess, 2000). She incisively asserted that a free press must be accepted "warts and all. You can't have a virtually free press or a more-or-less free press. That's like a little pregnant" (Fliess, 2000).

### **Occasional participants and foreign support**

The groups and individuals mentioned above are the more vocal and 'die-hard' defenders of press freedom. In fact, there are also participants who occasionally stand up for the territory's interests. For example, Wang Fengchao's remarks outraged many organisations, such as the Bar Association, human rights activists and university students. They reached a consensus that Wang's warning was unacceptable because a free press is "an inalienable right" of Hongkongers (Hon, Shiu & No, 2000). Moreover, student representatives from City University, Shue Yan College and the University of Hong Kong marched to the Liaison Office, protesting against Beijing's interference. They declared that the media would refuse to be the "government mouthpiece", and demanded a public apology from Wang ("University students", 2000).

It is important to point out that the local press freedom defenders have also been gaining support from the international community. Since its return to China on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1997, Hong Kong has been placed "under the international limelight", being monitored for China's implementation of the 'one country, two systems' formula (Liu, 1998, p.63). The local International Relations Sub-committee has been invited to give speeches in seminars held by many foreign organizations, such as the International Federation of Journalists and the Canadian Committee to Protect Journalists (Liu, 1998, p.64). According to the sub-committee, the support it receives has been enormous. Indeed, Britain and the United States entered the row over Wang Fengchao incident, saying that they were very concerned and shocked by the Chinese official's comments ("America shocked", 2000).

### **Analysis of newspapers' editorials**

No matter how stalwart these free press advocates are, their efforts would have been futile if the local news agencies themselves were not concerned or firm enough about the issue. Chapter One has shown the reader a worrying sign, whereby among three local newspapers *Apple Daily*, *Ming Pao* and the *South China Morning Post*, the first paper seemed to be the only one which is tough and critical on China regardless of Beijing's interference. As a matter of fact, this observation is only valid to the comparison of their report sections. The following qualitative analysis of the three dailies' editorials on Wang and Jiang incidents, seeks to emphasise that all of them see press freedom as a fundamental value.

#### **Apple Daily**

As mentioned in Chapter One, *Apple Daily*'s owner Jimmy Lai has been a tenacious defender of press freedom. Despite the legal actions that China has taken against him, Lai continues publishing critical coverage of China. He even hired the dauntless columnist Chan Ya, whose series of articles criticising China was dropped by her former editor at *Express Daily News* which eventually led to the termination of her contract (Steinberger, 1996). Lai's persistence in standing by his principle "fight for freedom and democracy" is often reflected in the paper's editorials.

Since the day after Wang Fengchao made his remarks, *Apple Daily* serialised its concern over the issue in its editorials on three consecutive days. The daily began the first editorial with strong comments that reflected its disapproval of Wang's advice: "It will not only curtail the media's editorial independence as well as press freedom, but will also turn 'one country, two systems' into an empty promise. Thus, both the SAR's media and citizens should say 'no' to Beijing's advice" (Lo, 2000a). In the latter part of the editorial, the paper modestly requested the Beijing government to understand the belief that "accurate and objective reporting is beneficial to everyone" (Lo, 2000a).

The second editorial was written from a historical perspective, where *Apple Daily* commented that Wang's remarks simply reflected the Beijing government's persistence in cracking down on dissent against official state policies, many of which had resulted in catastrophic mistakes (Lo, 2000b). The paper cited as one of the

examples - the 'Great Leap Forward' launched by the CCP government in the 1950s, where rice fields were ploughed to make way for steel foundries and tractor factories in order to push ahead in China's drive to industrialization. As a result, millions were starved to death due to a sharp decrease in the supply of food, and the situation was further confounded by natural disasters. The aim of the editorial was to emphasise that the freedom to publish objective and accurate reporting of different voices is fundamental to reducing any country's chances of making such mistakes (Lo, 2000b).

*Apple Daily* wrote the third editorial in response to the Local National People's Congress deputies Ng Hong Mun and Wu Wai Yung's accusation that the SAR media had been overreacting to Wang Fengchao's remarks. They shared the same view that the remarks were not a promulgation of a piece of law, but "advice out of good intentions for the media" (Kong, 2000). The paper contended that the media responded pertinently and "there was no way they should have kept quiet" (Lo, 2000c). It perceived Wang's comments as a clear threat to the territory's press freedom, which would turn the media into a machine for government propaganda. According to *Apple Daily*, the comments also defied the Hong Kong media's perception of 'social responsibility', which is to provide their readers with different kinds of opinion so as to enable them to make informed judgments (Lo, 2000c).

As compared to its strong response to Wang Fengchao's remarks, *Apple Daily* seemed more moderate towards President Jiang's 'lecture'. While one may accuse *Apple Daily* of being afraid of taking on Jiang, the fact is that Wang Fengchao had issued a 'warning' to the Hong Kong media, whereas President Jiang was merely criticising the professionalism of the SAR journalists. In its editorial, *Apple Daily* commended Jiang's ability of previously handling such questions with ease, which he had shown before (Lo, 2000d). The paper presumed that Jiang's uncharacteristic outbreak was due to the extreme sensitiveness of the 'one country, two systems' principle to both Beijing and Hong Kong. It suggested that Jiang's anger was understandable in the sense that the question of 'the SAR leader being appointed by Beijing' would have a negative impact on international confidence in the 'one country, two systems' principle. Nevertheless, *Apple Daily* asserted that this was one of the



main concerns in the SAR and the question was therefore valid. In the paper's opinion, the SAR journalists posed a fair question, but Jiang did not answer in a thoughtful way.

These editorials clearly show *Apple Daily's* political stance: pro-democracy but not anti-China. However, China does not seem to understand the fact that there is not necessarily any conflict between the two positions. This topic will be further explored in Chapter Four.

### **Ming Pao**

While *Ming Pao's* reports seem to be more 'fair' and 'objective' as compared to that of *Apple Daily*, the paper is capable of being quite critical in its editorials when it comes to standing up for its beliefs.

*Ming Pao* likened Wang Fengchao's remarks to a "depth bomb thrown at the Hong Kong press" ("Beijing must not", 2000). It pointed out that such advice not only infringed upon the territory's freedom of the press, but also went against 'one country, two systems', Beijing's pledge to the SAR. The paper suggested some negative consequences that might occur if China was to go back on its words, such as a drop in both local and international confidence in the promise, and Hong Kong being a less convincing model for Taiwan in China's hopes of reunification.

The daily showed its emphasis on the promise of 'one country, two systems' again in its editorial on President Jiang's 'lecture'. *Ming Pao* asserted that the question of whether the SAR Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa was a Beijing appointee for the re-election had been asked so many times for good reasons. If it were so, it would reflect on "how strictly" the Chinese government would adhere to the pledge ("We will ask", 2000). In addition, the paper demanded a clear explanation from Jiang of his equivocal statement "supporting Tung's second term but not issuing any imperial decree".

Lo (1998) suggests that *Ming Pao's* editorials "appear to tilt toward Beijing". However, the above two do not seem compatible with his observation.

### **South China Morning Post**

Many believe that the *South China Morning Post* has adopted a policy of self-censorship or censorship in its coverage due to its proprietor's business connections. Indeed, the daily seldom explicitly criticises Chinese leaders even in its editorials. However, its support for press freedom has been subtly presented.

Unlike *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao*, the *SCMP* did not show any strong opposition to Wang Fengchao's remarks. Rather, it conservatively commented that his remarks had "everything to do with press freedom", and would be an obstacle for Hong Kong to create a knowledge-based economy ("Dangerous policy", 2000). The paper also suggested that it is important to protect press freedom if Hong Kong "is ever to become a world class city along the lines of New York and London" ("Dangerous policy", 2000). Furthermore, the *Post* emphasised that accurate reporting and advocating are fundamentally different. In so doing, the daily identified itself as a responsible medium, where it has presented information from both sides in order for readers to make an informed decision.

Similarly, the *SCMP* seemed to keep a relatively neutral stance on the President Jiang issue. It attributed Jiang's unprecedented outbreak to his lack of acclimatisation to the SAR's inquisitive media, who are vastly different from their deferential counterparts in the mainland ("Press and president", 2000). Meanwhile, the daily defended the professionalism of Hong Kong journalists, saying that the simple questions asked were not necessarily wrong. It pointed out that due to their highly restricted access to Chinese leaders, it is normal for the SAR reporters to pose as many questions as they can when the opportunity arises. The *Post* concluded the editorial with the statement: "The more remote the leadership, the more frantic the scramble from the media to know their minds" ("Press and president", 2000).

While the *Post's* editorials seem fairly tame as compared to *Apple Daily's*, they reflect the paper's concern over the situation of press freedom in Hong Kong, as well as its values of justice in an implicit way.

## Conclusion

In contrast to Chapter One, this chapter has presented a more optimistic view of press freedom in Hong Kong. Firstly, the territory's significant resistance to serious infringements from China in the year 2000 was shown. The persistence of some of the prominent free press advocates certainly played a major part in the fight, but the efforts of the occasional participants and support from the international community should not be neglected.

Secondly, the *South China Morning Post* and *Ming Pao* were shown no less tolerant than the pro-democracy *Apple Daily* when it came to the verbal attacks from Beijing. Despite their seemingly toned-down China coverage, the former two dailies did comment critically on both Wang Fengchao's remarks and President Jiang's 'lecture' in their editorials. The words they employed reflected ('clearly' in *Ming Pao*'s case and 'subtly' in the *SCMP*'s case) their strong support for press freedom.

On the whole, the ensuing 'tug-of-war' in the first four years after the handover seemed to be in Beijing's favour in the light of the removal of Willy Lam and his subsequent departure. Negative consequences might result if Beijing became the final winner of the battle, and this will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Importance of Preserving Press Freedom in Hong Kong: A Social, Political and Economic Perspective**

As can be seen in Chapter One and Chapter Two, Beijing's interference in the SAR media can sometimes be quite heavy-handed, and anyone who champions press freedom (or democracy in general) is basically considered a subversive. Some may wonder why stalwarts like Martin Lee and Emily Lau still soldier on so confidently and intrepidly. The reason could be as simple as this - Hong Kong cannot afford to lose its freedom of the press.

This chapter examines the importance of preserving press freedom in Hong Kong from three perspectives: social, political and economic. It will explore the topic by working on the hypothetical assumption that press freedom was taken away from the SAR. It will predict the negative impacts that might result, and supportive arguments for these hypotheses will be based on the study of cultural, social and political history of the territory. In addition, it will discuss the significance of a *laissez-faire* media environment to maintaining Hong Kong's economic success.

#### **In microcosm: Press freedom and the Hong Kong journalistic circle**

The loss of press freedom in Hong Kong will certainly have the most direct impacts on the local newsroom, and hence the journalism profession. Studies by Chan, Lee and Lee (1996, p.33) on Hong Kong journalists during the transition period of the handover revealed that half of the respondents held a bleak view of the future of press freedom under Chinese rule. Many of them doubted the feasibility of the 'one country, two systems' scheme, and expressed uncertainty over their career prospects. The emergence of self-censorship and censorship, which has resulted from Beijing's interference in the media, has already caused some of the top local journalists to quit their jobs. Willy Lam Wo Lap's resignation from the *South China Morning Post* is a more recent and well-publicised example. Another two highly respected editors Daisy Li Yuet Wah and Carol Lai Pui Yee left their jobs at *Ming Pao* even before the handover, as they noticed the link between editorial changes and press owners' business interests on the mainland (Neumann, 1997). Thus, it can be assumed that a complete

curtailment of press freedom would frustrate the apprehensive journalists and further shake their confidence in staying with the local press.

Willy Lam, Daisy Li and Carol Lai can be regarded as journalists with ideals, who quit their jobs but remain active in the journalistic circle. However, there are additional factors that have been encouraging local reporters to leave the profession, the most major being that journalism has never been well paying in the territory. The Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) noticed this problem over ten years ago, pointing out that the average minimum wage for a reporter at a Chinese newspaper was just slightly higher than that of a Filipino maid (Mosher, 1988, p.29). Moreover, there exists a different pay scale in certain bilingual news agencies, where Chinese-language reporters are paid less than their English-language counterparts (Mosher, p.29). Chan, Lee and Lee (1996, p.70) draw a more contrasting comparison, saying that the salary of university graduates working for news media is usually one-third less than their fellow graduates in other professions that require equally high qualifications. These factors explain why many young people see journalism as a stepping-stone, where they can gain experience before hunting for more lucrative jobs in other fields such as public relations (Chan, et al., p.43). Switching from one field to another is no problem for them, since most of the new reporters are degree holders, with good command of both Chinese and English (Chan, et al., p.29).

What also plays a part in accounting for the brain drain phenomenon in the Hong Kong journalistic circle is emigration. Since Hong Kong's reversion to China was made certain in 1980s, many locals have started emigrating to secure their future after 1997. The outflow rate peaked after June 4, 1989, when thousands of mainland Chinese demonstrators who had been calling for democratic reforms at the *Tiananmen* Square in Beijing for days, were eventually cracked down upon and killed by China's military forces. The journalism profession has been affected, with a number of reporters either having applied or desiring to apply for emigration (Chan, et al., p.37). Some American congressmen expressed concern over press freedom in the territory, and "tried to introduce a bill to protect the Hong Kong journalists by allowing them to emigrate to the United States" (Lo, 1998). The 'assistance' from America would simply aggravate the brain drain.

Those who have no intention of leaving would also need to worry about whether they would remain employed for long. Thus, they may choose to adopt self-censorship in order to survive. That being said, the possibility of doing a good job with the absence of freedom and independence is imaginably low. The unsatisfactory working conditions (low pay and lack of autonomy) would also discourage fresh graduates from considering journalism as a career option. Journalistic standards would drop if under-qualified people who have no relevant background knowledge had to be relied upon as reporters. With a lack of talent in the profession followed by a decline in quality, Hong Kong's vibrant press scene would severely shrink.

It is important to point out that not all journalists who stayed behind are willing to compromise. A survey by Chan, Lee and Lee (1996, p.117) has revealed that an overwhelming percentage of the respondents agreed that "the media should fight to maximize Hong Kong's autonomy", under which press freedom could flourish. There is likely to be social and political disorder if China decided to infringe on the SAR's freedom of the press and other individual rights. This will be discussed at length in the next section.

### **In macrocosm: Press freedom and the SAR citizens**

To predict how the whole community would be affected by the disappearance of press freedom, it is necessary to mention the Basic Law, the mini-constitution of the SAR in which press freedom is enshrined. Chapter Three, Article 27 of the Basic Law states that "Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication" (Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education, 1999, p.108). Article 39 further assures these freedoms by promising to comply with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (p.109). Taking the fact that press freedom is recognised as a fundamental civil right for local residents, the curtailment of this particular freedom would mean that China is in the position to reduce other rights currently enshrined in the Basic Law, such as the freedom of association, the right to strike and form unions. This would outrage a majority of the SAR citizens due to their political attitudes, beliefs and way of life.

Hong Kong people are nowadays generally considered as “outspoken” and “being able to react promptly and cleverly” (Ma & Fung, 1999, p.507). This is vastly different from the impression of them prior to late 1980s, when they were observed apathetic and inactive towards politics (McMillen, 1993, p.3). This view was demolished after the occurrence of the *Tiananmen* Square massacre, which brought about profound effects on the territory both socially and politically. On one hand, Hongkongers’ confidence in China’s ability to keep its words was badly shaken. Those who were terrified of what might come next chose to emigrate, of which the majority was middle-class professionals. On the other hand, it began their political awakening and unity, with a million of them took to the streets and called for speedier democratisation in both China and Hong Kong (McMillen, p.5). It also sparked off the formation of various formal political parties, with the United Democrats of Hong Kong (the UDHK, now the Democratic Party) being the pioneer.

The Hong Kong people’s political inclinations have been made clear during the direct elections to the Legislative Council in 1991 and 1995, where the Democratic Party and its former body the UDHK won an overwhelming number of seats (Lee, 1996, p.241). Their support for democratisation was also reflected in the “unusually high popularity” enjoyed by Hong Kong’s last governor Christopher Patten (Blyth & Wotherspoon, 1996, p.277), who introduced a reform package to accelerate the development of democracy in the territory and therefore became a thorn in China’s side. In addition, Hongkongers started to express their concerns over their interests in a more explicit and vocal way. Public protests and demonstrations have become common occurrences in the territory since the June 4 (*Tiananmen*) events. As pro-democracy legislator Martin Lee (Lee, 1996, p.243) points out, those who chose to stay in the territory are likely to have developed the “people in the same boat” mentality, whereby even ordinary citizens would be willing to “do a little bit more to preserve their own liberties”. In particular, local citizens expect the Hong Kong government to be “tolerant of different and opposing views” (Lo, 1998) as an effect of the *Tiananmen* Square incident. Evidence can be cited in the outrage triggered by a Chinese diplomat in France who warned a Hong Kong journalist not pose any sensitive questions to visiting Chinese premier Zhu Rongji in April 1998 (U.S. Department of State, 1999). A more

recent example is the outrage resulting from Chinese official Wang Fengchao's warning to the SAR media regarding Taiwan reports in April 2001.

If verbal attacks could cause community-wide protests, it is imaginable that social and political upheavals would result if the CCP was to take direct actions against the SAR. McMillen (1993, p.9) observes that Hong Kong people have developed "a sense of bitterness and betrayal as well as a loss of trust" in the Chinese authorities. Surveys have also revealed that they "are prepared to defend social stability almost at any cost" (Chan & Lee, 1999, p.72). Furthermore, Hongkongers can be people of extremes in the sense that they would go to great lengths to put a point across. For example, in March 2001, a local citizen set himself on fire in front of the Supreme Court as a way of protesting against a proposed government regulation. This case was followed by another person who seriously injured himself at the headquarters of the Social Welfare Department, because he thought he did not get enough welfare benefits from the government. Although these cases only relate to two individuals out of the population of seven million, a huge uproar will most definitely result when it comes to a tangible threat that affects everyone.

The worst and the most extreme scenario would be that of the Hong Kong people emulating Taiwan by breaking away from the mainland, perhaps even declaring independence. This would put the territory in jeopardy because history has shown that China values national stability above all (Ting, 1993, p.258), as can be seen in the June 4 events. Hongkongers' calls for greater social and political freedoms in both the mainland and the territory were already seen as attempts to subvert the Chinese government (Ting, p.265). If Hong Kong were to commit acts detrimental to China's national stability or even its position of power, the Chinese government would most likely declare a state of martial law in the territory and deploy troops to quell civil unrest. It is noteworthy that the People's Liberation Army (the PLA, China's armed forces) has been stationed in the territory for the purpose of "defence" since the handover (Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education, 1999, p.105). While the PLA will not intervene in the territory's internal affairs according to the Basic Law, Beijing could easily violate the law in the name of securing national stability and unity.



Since the SAR does not have its own military forces like Taiwan does, it might result in a situation worse than that of the *Tiananmen* Square incident.

### **Significance of press freedom to Hong Kong as a major financial marketplace**

Hong Kong economist Y. C. Yao believes that the Hong Kong financial markets have thrived under the stable political climate as well as the legal system that Britain provided (Wang, 1994, p.193). Combining this fact and the assumption that Hongkongers would create a major uproar if press freedom and other civil liberties were taken away, it is imaginable that the territory's economy would no doubt be seriously affected. Massive protests or worse would mean that the stable political climate that the city has enjoyed will be adversely affected; the disappearance of freedoms and rights guaranteed in the Basic Law would also imply that the constitution is being violated.

Hong Kong's current economic system, which is a capitalist system adopted under British rule, is also enshrined in the Basic Law. Chapter 1, Article 5 states that the SAR's previous social and economic systems will remain unchanged for 50 years after the handover (Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education, 1999, p.103). The free market economy, together with a strategic location and ease of transport, has made Hong Kong an ideal place for many international corporations to run their Asian operations (Wang, 1994, p.193). However, what plays a more vital role is freedom of the press. According to Neumann (1997), there exists an "inextricable relationship between the free flow of information and the strength of financial markets". This means that rapid exchange of accurate and uncensored economic information is necessary for the smooth functioning of the regional economy. The Hong Kong government's hands-off attitude towards the press makes this possible, hence a climate of free expression is created. Foreign investors have come to rely on the continual supply of information by the local press, in order to understand the financial changes that are underway in the region (Neumann, 1997).

In addition to trust and confidence from foreign investors, the free flow of information and the free market economy has also earned Hong Kong memberships in a variety of international and regional organisations, such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) and

its successor, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Yahuda, 1997, p.209). If the Chinese government were to violate the Basic Law and impose its socialist policies on the SAR, official corruption that is pervasive in the mainland might start to proliferate in the territory with disastrous effects. As Yahuda (1997, p.211) predicts, international corporations will have to reassess the value of Hong Kong if it is infected by corrupt practices. This might result in a scaling down of these companies' presence in the territory or even total departure. Considering the fact that an unfavourable human rights record had given China a hard time in gaining entry to the WTO, it would also be difficult for Hong Kong to regain its status if damage was done to its international image as well as confidence.

### **Press freedom and the implications of China's economic liberalisation on Hong Kong's economy**

There is another way to examine the implications of China's WTO accession on the relationship between Hong Kong's press freedom and its economy. Hong Kong and China have long been each other's largest trading partner. The territory is often seen as the mainland's gateway to and from the rest of the world, for it serves as the main channel for China's imports, exports and re-exports (Hong Kong Trade Department Council, 2001). China also has substantial business interests in Hong Kong, with diversified investment like banking and property development (Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office (Canada), 2001).

However, this cosy and reciprocal economic relationship may undergo changes that would be to Hong Kong's disadvantage. Bowring (1997, p.22) suggests that international companies based in Hong Kong that have business and investments in China now "feel the need to expand their presence in the mainland". Moreover, China's main commercial city Shanghai has been enhancing its attractiveness by improving its infrastructure and transportation, as well as the living and working conditions for foreign expatriates (Bowring, 1997, p.22). Besides, the WTO membership will speed up economic restructuring, promoting China's direct foreign investments as well as imports and exports (Global Resources, 2001). As a result, the significance of the territory's role of functioning as the intermediary for capital flows into China will be largely reduced. Therefore, a free press that provides accurate economic information, in

addition to a well-established legal system that discourages corruption and protects press freedom and other individual rights seems to be the only safeguard to sustain the competitive edge of Hong Kong's economy.

### **Significance of press freedom to Hong Kong as a regional media centre**

The loss of press freedom would not only endanger Hong Kong's status as a major financial marketplace, but also its status as a regional media centre. By virtue of the reasons mentioned above, the territory has attracted a vast network of both regional and international news organisations for many years. An additional factor is that journalists are not required to have licenses or special visas in order to operate in Hong Kong like they do in many other countries in Asia (Neumann, 1997). The city is currently a South East Asian base for many international newsgathering agencies like Associated Press; it is also a base for regional and international publications such as the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and the *Asian Wall Street Journal* (Information Services Department, 2002).

Singapore has long been a major competitor of Hong Kong for being a regional communications hub in East Asia. With equally modern infrastructure and advanced communication technologies, a free press is a crucial element that gives the territory an advantage over Singapore and makes the foreign newsgathering agencies stay (Bowring, 1997, p.23). However, with Hong Kong's reversion to China and a potential restriction on press freedom, bureau chiefs of these organisations have been looking at alternative locations (Wrout, 1997, p.164). Being aware of these concerns, Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew had been in Hong Kong promoting his country as an alternative regional media hub (Wrout, 1997, 164). Lee has pointed out in an interview that the SAR is less "organised" than Singapore, and is less flexible due to its currency link with the U.S. dollar ("Singapore's Lee", 1999). In fact, the substantially lower rental costs also make Singapore more attractive than the SAR once the issue of press freedom is put aside. If the SAR were to lose its comparative advantage, these organisations would move without hesitation. It is noteworthy that international news agency Reuters, which was once based in Hong Kong, has already relocated to Singapore.

### **The Hong Kong press as a reliable source on China news for overseas Chinese**

Aside from attracting regional and foreign new agencies, press freedom helps the Hong Kong press win the hearts of both local and overseas Chinese readers. The wide range of political opinions available in the vibrant local press enables Hong Kong to enjoy profits from both the domestic and international markets. Many locals are observed to have a strong need for information, approximately 797,000 of them reading at least two newspapers a day (McIntyre, 1998, p.36). However, as Chan (1997, p.231) points out, Hong Kong's domestic market is too small to sustain an economy of scale with the population of about seven million. Its smallness is actually compensated by an international market, where media products made in Hong Kong are consumed by readers from the Chinese diaspora in many countries. In particular, the Hong Kong press has become an important channel in spreading news on China around the world. In contrast to the strict control of the mainland media by the Beijing government, the local *laissez-faire* media environment with virtually no restrictions allows credible and accurate information to be published without being heavily censored.

Apart from the free flow of information, the territory's geographical proximity to China enables fast and easy access to information about the mainland (Chan & To, 1999, p.486). Furthermore, the Hong Kong journalists have an advantage over their Western and Asian counterparts by virtue of their "extensive Chinese connections", as well as "good knowledge in the Chinese language and culture" (Chan & To, p.486). All of these factors explain why the local Chinese-language press has served as a trusted source on China news for overseas Chinese. If press freedom were restrained, Hong Kong would no longer be a "safe haven" for professional and independent Chinese-language reporting on Chinese affairs (Neumann, 1997). Hence, Chinese from all over the world would only get to read what the mainland wants the world to know about China.

### **Conclusion**

Given the unsatisfactory conditions and uncertain future of the Hong Kong journalistic circle, press freedom is an important instrument to soothe the local reporters' anxiety towards their career prospects. It helps maintain the SAR's vibrant press scene by preventing a drop in journalistic standards caused by the loss of good

reporters. Looking at a larger scale, the respect and preservation of press freedom and other civil rights would help stem the brain drain phenomenon and regain Hongkongers' confidence in both the Chinese and the SAR's authorities. It would also aid preserving social and political stability in the SAR.

From the economic point of view, freedom of the press is necessary to attract foreign business corporations and news agencies to operate in Hong Kong, especially when the territory is facing constant and increasing competition from Singapore and China respectively. With the lack of a climate of freedom in these two countries, the SAR press' ability of providing accurate and uncensored economic information is a safeguard to sustain the territory's robust economy.

Simply understanding the importance of keeping press freedom in Hong Kong would not be effective enough to put an end to the 'tug-of-war'. Chapter Four will show how China and the SAR can reach a compromise on press freedom by discussing what they need to understand about each other.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Agree to Disagree: How Hong Kong and China Can Reach a Compromise on Press Freedom**

The discussion in Chapter Three has created the impression that China is in the wrong in trying to curb Hong Kong's press freedom, which is essential for the SAR's survival. However, Hong Kong is no innocent victim either and is also responsible for the ongoing 'tug-of-war' due to its insufficient understanding of China.

This chapter stresses that in order for China and Hong Kong to reach a compromise on press freedom, it is necessary for the two to develop a better understanding of each other as well as themselves. It will elaborate on the fundamental political beliefs and ideologies adopted by China and the SAR. It will also discuss their different interpretations of important terms as well as their respective media's perception of social responsibility. In addition, the recent development of liberalisation in China will be mentioned, in order for Hong Kong to rethink its negative impression of its motherland.

#### **What Hong Kong needs to understand: Reasons for China's rejection of western liberal concepts**

While Hong Kong and the West are not wrong in sharing their message of freedom and democracy with China and other authoritarian regimes, it is necessary to understand that western values such as respect for human rights and the free market economy are not universal and applicable to every country. Chapter Three has pointed out that political stability, the legal system and the climate of freedom provided by Britain were key elements that made Hong Kong a major regional financial and media centre, as well as a trusted source on China news. Thus, the territory appears to be a good example to support the western idea that economic progress is dependent on democracy (Human Rights Internet, 2000). However, the breakdown of the Soviet bloc had shown that this formula for success is open to debate. Former Soviet Union leader Gorbachev adopted the policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) for domestic reform (Ting, 1993, p.250). His liberation of civil society and nationalism

created the impetus that not only caused an economic decline, but also the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself (Ting, p.251).

However, being an authoritarian regime as well, China's economic status tells a different story. China's economic growth has been consistently dominating Asia for a number of years, whereas other places in the region have been affected by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the recent global economic slowdown (Asia Pacific Management Forum, 2002). Being aware of its own economic success and the failure of the Soviet Union, it is no surprise that China holds sceptical views towards the "new international climate", where formerly authoritarian countries like South Africa and Nepal started to followed the 'three-D's' – democratisation, de-ideologisation and development (Ting, 1993, p.251). While retaining its favouritism towards socialism and its scepticism towards western capitalism, China's position on the conflict between the two polar systems is rather neutral. It believes that "mutual interaction and absorption can promote progress in human civilisation", but no country should impose their social systems and ways of life on others (Ting, p.252).

What Hong Kong and the West have been urging China to adopt is not only the capitalist economic system, but also the western definition of the term 'human rights'. As part of the western ideal of democracy, human rights are regarded as a set of natural rights that is higher than any statute law (Morikawa, n.d.). However, many seem to overlook the fact that China is not a democracy. As indicated by its name, the People's Republic of China is fundamentally a republic. A republic is defined as a state in which "all segments of society are enfranchised and in which a state's power is constitutionally limited" (Encyclopedia.com, 2002). In other words, both the citizens and their elected representatives are subject to law. Thus, instead of 'human rights', China describes the rights enjoyed by its people as "citizen's rights", which are subject to the law provided by the constitution (Morikawa, n.d.). Chinese President Jiang Zemin has also made clear that "there is no absolute freedom above the law" (Fong, 1996). This explains why there is seemingly no freedom in China although there are various kinds of freedom guaranteed in the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* (1994), such as freedom of speech, of the press, of demonstration and of religious belief (p.29-30).

Aside from economic reasons and the political nature of China, there is another factor which accounts for the mainland's refusal to heed the calls for speedier democratisation and adoption of western concepts. George (2000, p.52), a commentator on Singaporean politics, points out that the reason why Singapore refuses to adopt the Western liberal ideologies is because there exists a "shameful memory of white imperialism, military intervention and economic exploitation" in its people's minds. Unlike Singapore, which was formerly a colony of Britain, China was not colonised by any one nation. However, its numerous defeats at the hands of western powers in the 1840s rendered it a virtually landlocked country when the foreign victors demanded treaty ports. The return of Hong Kong from the British and that of Macau from the Portuguese marked the end of colonialism in China, and more importantly, the restoration of Chinese national pride. Thus, if Singaporeans hold a "deep suspicion and sensitivity towards the slightest hint of post-colonial condescension" (George, p.52), it can be assumed that the mainland Chinese share the same mentality. Indeed, China explicitly expresses its antipathy against colonialism in the preamble of its constitution by stating that it consistently "supports the oppressed nations and the developing countries in their just struggle to win and preserve national independence" (Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 1994, p.6).

#### **What China needs to understand: 'Pro-democracy' differs from 'anti-China'**

The Hong Kong people do not seem to show the marked resistance and disgruntlement towards colonialism and western liberalism, unlike those in China and Singapore do. It is partly due to the territory's economic success, political stability as well as modernisation under British rule. A study has revealed that Hong Kong's living standards, economic development and the political system are what many locals base their claims of Hong Kong identity on (Thomas, 1999, p.87). Nevertheless, it is important to make clear that being western-minded and pro-democracy does not translate into anti-China feelings. This can be explained by the formation of 'Hong Kong identity'.

Instead of being anti-China, it is more appropriate to say that Hong Kong is inherently opposed to communism. By the late 1940s, the people of Hong Kong were largely made up of refugees from China, who were escaping from the communist regime's rigid socio-political doctrine (Thomas, 1999, p.79). Local democrat Martin



Lee, whose father came as a refugee, points out that freedom was what brought this first generation to the territory (Callick, 1998, p.141). With their cultural roots linked to the mainland and the absorption of western values from the colonial rule, they developed a distinctive Hong Kong way of life over time (Ma & Fung, 1999, p.499). For the subsequent generations who were locally born in the territory, and made up over seventy percent of the population by the 1990s, Hong Kong is the only place they identify themselves with (Thomas, p.83). Although being committed to Chinese culture, everyday experiences and a process of social and political changes have further tied these generations to the territory as well its local culture (Thomas, p.83). Hence, they have become more concerned with local public affairs and more assertive about their rights and interests (Chan & Lee, 1999, p.69).

Having been ruled by the British for over 150 years, Hongkongers' interests are inevitably western-influenced. They tend to see the liberal concepts imported from Britain such as individual rights and freedoms as fundamental values. While many locals are proud of the Hong Kong identity, the Chinese authorities have perceived it as "a token of colonial power and a historical insult" (Ma & Fung, 1999, p.499). They seem to translate the Hongkongers' pro-democracy spirit into an anti-nationalistic sentiment. Despite China's implicit disapproval of the territory's social and political systems, which are vastly different from those of China, the two places had worked on the principle of 'well water does not mix with river water' – a Chinese idiom meaning not to interfere in each other's affairs (McMillen, 1993, p.20). Hong Kong was seen by China as having broken this unwritten rule, when a large number of its citizens took to the streets, protesting against the Chinese government's crackdown on the pro-democracy movement at *Tiananmen* Square in Beijing in 1989.

In terms of the 'well water' principle, the Hongkongers' calls for democratisation and greater freedoms in China after the *Tiananmen* crackdown could be considered as interference with China's internal affairs. However, they did so due to several reasons, but had no intention of overthrowing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). According to Thomas (1999, p.207), anger erupted over China's brutal actions because the people in the territory sympathised the demonstrators, who "based their ideological position in the liberal-democratic school of thought" like they did. More importantly, it held significant implications for Hong Kong's future after the handover.

Due to the fact that rights and freedoms have become part of the Hong Kong way of life, the local citizens have expressed their desire for democracy and have protested against China's intervention in the territory more frequently and in a more explicit way since the *Tiananmen* incident. This turns into a misunderstanding when the Chinese leaders interpret all these demonstrations as acts of anti-nationalism. They view the territory as a base for subversive activities, and in particular frown on the vocal Democratic Party.

As a matter of fact, the Democratic Party as well as the westernised and pro-democracy Hong Kong people have never styled themselves as an alternate government (Thomas, 1999, p.210). Ma & Fung's (1999, p.519) survey on Hongkongers' attitudes towards the handover has revealed that 75 percent of the respondents generally agreed that Hong Kong is part of China, and therefore were very positive about the reunification with socialist China. Unlike the Chinese government, they do not see the return of sovereignty and safeguarding the autonomy of the territory as opposites to each other (Ma & Fung, p.517). While Hongkongers admit that they might not be as patriotic as their mainland comrades (Ma & Fung, p.508), they certainly are not anti-China. The fact that they have been trying to share the message of democracy with China suggests that they want China to be just as modernised and sophisticated as the territory. They run on the assumption that what is good for Hong Kong would be good for the mainland (although this has been proved arguable earlier in this chapter).

### **What Hong Kong and China need to understand: Different interpretations of terms and concepts**

The problem of Hongkongers' 'assertion' being viewed as 'subversion' by mainland Chinese leaders can be attributed to their different interpretations of the terms 'patriotism' and 'nationalism'. To China, patriotism and nationalism require "unconditional support for the actions of the Chinese government", whereas Hongkongers feel that "allegiance to their country needs not to extend to approval of its government" (DeGolyer, 1993, p.274). This reflects that people of Hong Kong perceive the term 'democracy' in its purest form, where everyone in a society has a right to participate in making every decision regarding state policies (Xrefer.com, 2002). On the other hand, China takes 'democracy' to mean that sovereign power resides in and is exercised by the proletariat class directly or indirectly through a system of representation (Morikawa, n.d.). To borrow Morikawa's (n.d.) term, there is "internal

democracy” for all except those who are opposed to the CCP government. By virtue of such definitions, China tends to see those who protest against state policies as opponents, or even subversives.

Apart from being pro-democracy (in their own definition), what has made Hongkongers assertive and persistent about their rights and freedoms is that they have been granted a ‘high degree of autonomy’ by China. This is guaranteed in both the Sino-British Joint Declaration (an agreement signed by China and Britain in 1984) and the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s mini-constitution in the post-1997 era. A ‘high degree of autonomy’ contains the concept of ‘self-rule’, which is another term open for misinterpretation. On one hand, ‘self-rule’ means “full independence”, which is the way Hongkongers perceive the term (Harris, 1988, p.234). A survey by Ma and Fung (1999, p.519) has reaffirmed Harris’ assertion, where 68 percent of the respondents agreed that the SAR should be free of the central government’s interference, and over 80 percent assented to the item “mainlanders should not attempt to use their standards to change Hong Kong people”. Nevertheless, to China, ‘self-rule’ is a “mere euphemism for something more akin to subordinate status” (Harris, 1988, p.234). Harris (p.234) further explains that China’s definition of ‘self-rule’ originates from the ancient Chinese empire, which was “well aware of the role of tributary states within an overall suzerainty”. It would seem that Harris’ assessment of China’s view on ‘self-rule’ is applicable to the years following the handover, taking into account the interferences in Hong Kong’s affairs by the Chinese government despite the promise of a ‘high degree of autonomy’.

The problem with a ‘high degree of autonomy’ seems to echo Hong Kong’s last governor Christopher Patten’s remarks on the Sino-British Joint Declaration - “the mystery begins when Chinese officials start to say what they think that means” (Patten, 1996, p.281). Expressing a similar concern, Foster (1997) asserts that ‘freedom of the press’, which is also enshrined in the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, is simply an “illusory promise”. He points out that in the original Chinese-language text of China’s constitution, the term ‘freedom of the press’ only refers to the acknowledgement that freedom is granted to the act of publishing (*chuban*), but does not extend to freedom of seeking and obtaining information. In addition, the government’s authority to constrain or annul its promises is ‘protected’ by Article 51 of China’s constitution, which

prohibits the citizens from any infringement upon societal or state interests when exercising their guaranteed rights and freedoms (Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 1994, p.36). These explain why the editorial independence of the mainland media is tightly controlled and interfered with by the Chinese government, even though there exists the promise of 'freedom of the press'. Chinese President Jiang Zemin has also specifically stressed that "there is no press in the world that is not subject to laws" (Fong, 1996).

Applying such a definition to Hong Kong, China has extended its pressures to the territory's press as well (as discussed in Chapter One). However, the Basic Law gives China no reasonable ground to do so. Article 27 of the English version of the Basic Law states that Hong Kong residents shall enjoy freedom of the press and of publication (Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education, 1999, p.108). In the Chinese version, 'the press' is translated as "*xinwen*", meaning news information; and 'publication' is translated as "*chuban*", referring to the act of publishing (Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education, p. 79). The clear separation of the terms 'the press' (or '*xinwen*') and 'publication' (or '*chuban*') implies that they hold different meanings and that they are not interchangeable in either the English or Chinese version. Thus, the SAR media are allowed to report and publish any news items freely in accordance to the Basic Law.

### **What China needs to understand: The Hong Kong media's perception of social responsibility**

The different interpretations of the term 'freedom of the press' result in two different modes of press operation as well as differing perceptions of 'social responsibility' between Hong Kong and China. President Jiang gave a speech on how the media in Hong Kong and Macau should operate. He advised them to heed their 'social responsibility', which is to aid the mainland in promoting values such as loyalty to the nation as well as working towards economic and social stability (Wong, 2000b). In response to Jiang's speech, the pro-democracy paper *Apple Daily* ran an editorial elaborating on the SAR's own perception of 'social responsibility'. The paper asserted that it is part of the media's obligation to provide the public with different voices, including "the most radical, reactionary and anachronistic" (Lo, 2000e). It is because this is the only way in which readers can make informed opinions and judgements by

sifting through a host of differing opinions. *Apple Daily* further commented that the Hong Kong media would turn out to be irresponsible only when they were given a “political mission” – to suppress opinions and reports which are ‘politically incorrect’ in the eyes of the CCP (Lo, 2000e).

Remarkably, newspapers with different political orientations from *Apple Daily* also hold the same belief. For instance, the *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP* or the *Post*) made a similar comment in its editorial on Chinese official Wang Fengchao’s warnings to the SAR media on Taiwan reports. It emphasized that accurate reporting is necessary for readers to make intelligent decisions (“Dangerous policy”, 2000). Surveys on Hong Kong journalists by Chan, Lee and Lee (1996, p.87) have also shown that an overwhelming majority of their respondents regard “objective reporting” and the role of “neutral disseminator” as important.

In addition, local media outlets, regardless of their political inclinations, generally believe that it is their social responsibility to serve as a watchdog of government and dignitaries (Chan, Lee & Lee, 1996, p.90). This belief is a mirror of the concept of the ‘Fourth Estate’, whereby the news media act as the fourth branch of the government (the other three being executive, legislative, and judiciary), keeping the government in check so that it does not abuse its power. According to Schultz (1998, p.6), the Fourth Estate should always be “watching, questioning, analysing and informing” in order to ensure that the government will enforce the current rule of law. Indeed, renowned for their outspokenness and investigative spirit, the Hong Kong media accept a “participant-interpretive” role, where they will speak for the people as well as analyse and interpret complex issues (Chan, et al., p.87).

With the increasingly close ties between media proprietors and Beijing (as discussed in Chapter One) and the growing sensationalism found in certain newspapers, the idea of the local press being the Fourth Estate can be questioned; however, there have been cases showing that the press does fulfil this role from much of the time as far as Hong Kong is concerned. In July 2000, Robert Chung of the University of Hong Kong alleged in the *SCMP* that Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa had attempted to gag his opinion polls on Tung’s popularity via a “special channel” (Hong Kong Journalists

Association [HKJA] & Article 19, 2001, p.16). Apparently, Tung's senior special assistant Andrew Lo raised doubts on Chung's polls during a meeting with the university's vice-chancellor Cheng Yiu Chung. Cheng and Professor Wong Siu Lun were later found guilty by an inquiry panel for trying to put a stop to Robert Chung's polls and inhibiting his right to academic freedom. They resigned from the university under public pressure (HKJA & Article 19, p.16). Another recent example is a scandal involving former legislative councillor Gary Cheng Kai Nam. *Apple Daily* revealed that Gary Cheng had failed to declare a consultancy company that he had set up for more than two years, and had leaked confidential government documents to a business contact (Cheung, 2000). He bowed to the pressure formed by the media and the public, and relinquished all his public and political positions. At the end of 2001, Gary Cheng was convicted and sentenced to prison on four counts (Or & Choi, 2001).

As can be seen, Hong Kong reporters favour and adopt western journalistic practises and liberal ideologies. This is partly due to the fact that Hong Kong's *laissez-faire* media is a legacy of British rule. According to Lo (1998), the colonial state allowed the pluralistic existence of leftist (pro-China), rightist (pro-Taiwan) and centrist press because they could "check and balance the influence among themselves". As a result, an image of protecting freedom of the speech and of the press was created. The traces of western influence can also be attributed to the style of education Hong Kong journalists receive. Journalism education in the territory adopts an American style of curriculum and teaching materials, due to the fact that a significant number of teaching staff getting their degrees in communication from major universities in the United States (Chan, Lee & Lee, 1996, p.59). Moreover, many young people who cannot get through the narrow entrances of the local universities opt to further their studies in Taiwan, in which journalism education is equally American-influenced (Chan, et al., p.55).

Being western-influenced does not mean that the SAR media are anti-China, just as the same theory applies to the territory's citizens in general. In fact, they played a vital role in "re-sinicisation", a process of nationalisation among Hongkongers during the run-up to 1997 (Ma & Fung, 1999, p.511). The media "rediscovered" the territory's cultural, historical and economic ties with the mainland in the wake of the political transition; they presented icons and images of China, so as to "accelerate a mainland blending into the Hong Kong cultural mosaic" and help "refigure and reproduce the

cultural transformation” (Ma & Fung, p.512). It suggests that the SAR media are not troublemakers who only know how to satirise and criticise the Chinese leaders, and break ‘unfavourable’ or ‘sensitive’ news about China. Rather, they can serve as intermediaries, promoting mutual understanding between the territory and its motherland. In this way, the Hong Kong media are also fulfilling Beijing’s interpretation of ‘social responsibility’, as they are promoting national unity through their re-sinicisation efforts.

### **What Hong Kong needs to understand: China’s steps towards liberalisation and greater tolerance of press freedom**

China’s strict control over the mainland media, increasing interference in the Hong Kong press and its continuing suppression of dissent seem to suggest that it will require some time for the country to reach a compromise on press freedom with the SAR. However, there are encouraging signs showing that China is willing to step towards liberalisation, and perhaps greater tolerance towards press freedom. One such sign is China’s entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The granting of China’s WTO membership was mainly due to the country’s agreement to “undertake a series of important commitments to open and liberalise its regime”, in which China is required to revise its existing domestic law and enact new laws that are fully compliant with the WTO agreement (World Trade Organisation, 2001). As Cao (2000) mentions in *Asia Week*, international trade and investment demand “legal transparency, political openness and clean government”. Given China’s current business environment where corrupt practices are rampant and government policies are opaque, the mainland needs to implement reforms in order to comply with WTO standards. Cao (2000) further suggests that a free press will play a vital role in improving the efficiency of China’s fight against corruption, by providing a channel for citizens to expose corrupt practices. In this case, China will inevitably have to grant the mainland media greater press freedom not only to the act of publishing but also to freedom of content.

Like its entry to the WTO, China’s successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games will also bring about economic growth as well as liberalisation. The western media generally believed that Beijing’s failure to win the 2000 Olympics bid in 1993 was a result of its unfavourable ‘human rights’ record, especially the fresh memory of the *Tiananmen Square* massacre in 1989 (Towson, 2001). Indeed, there were calls for votes

against Beijing by the European and American press during the bidding process (Korporaal, 2001). Thus, China's victory in this recent bid implies that the West has acknowledged China's improvement in its 'human rights' record, despite the fact that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had received e-mails and letters from human rights groups opposing Beijing's successful bid (Korporaal, 2001). More importantly, China has promised a "gradual loosening of restrictions on reporters", whereby it will ensure "complete freedom" for those who will come to cover the Games (Gilley, 2001, p.30). From this statement alone, it can be concluded that journalists from Hong Kong would also be granted the same freedom of reporting as their foreign counterparts.

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to the adoption of western values, China and Hong Kong hold different attitudes. The former is opposed to the idea partly because of its own economic success achieved without wholesale adoption of the capitalist system. Moreover, China insists on the republican principle that everything is subject to law, including the God-given and unalienable 'human rights' which the West advocates. China's emphasis on national pride and its antipathy towards colonialism and western imperialism are other contributory factors. On the other side of the fence, the political stability and robust economy which flourished under British rule have made Hongkongers in general western-minded and pro-democracy. Distrust has then been developed when China mistook the territory's 'pro-democracy' stance as 'anti-China'.

The development of distrust can be attributed to the different ways of how the two places interpret certain terms, with 'freedom of the press' being one of those. This leads to different perceptions of the media's social responsibility by the SAR media and by the Chinese government, which can be considered as a main cause for the 'tug-of-war'. Conflicts arise when one sees the media as institutions to prevent abuses of power, whereas the other sees them as tools for promoting state policies and enhancing nationalistic sentiments.

While insisting on its socialist ideals, China is gradually stepping towards liberalisation, which will speed up political restructuring. Its recent entry to the World Trade Organisation and its successful bid for the 2008 Olympics provide hope for



Beijing journalists who wish to be granted greater press freedom, as well as hope for the disappearance of China's interference in the Hong Kong media.

## CONCLUSION

The tug-of-war over press freedom in Hong Kong had assumed an air of urgency following Wang Fengchao's remarks, President Jiang's 'lecture' and the removal of Willy Lam. Press freedom advocates were particularly concerned with the future state of the SAR's media, as those three incidents occurred within the year 2000. The interferences from Beijing were thus construed as a stepping up of the central government's attempts to rein in the *laissez-faire* press system of Hong Kong to conform to the strict press model in the mainland.

While many critics believe that self-censorship poses a great threat to press freedom in Hong Kong, some argue that censorship is the main nemesis of the SAR journalists. There have been studies backed by facts and figures which reveal that self-censorship has been practiced by a number of journalists. The case study of Lam's removal from the *South China Morning Post* is confirmation in this long-running debate, corroborating that the practice of censorship exists. The rejection of two 'sensitive' columns by the *Post*'s editors, and the removal of Willy Lam are examples of editorial censorship and managerial censorship respectively.

Closely related to the 'self-censorship debate' is the controversy over the link between proprietorial influence and the paper's political direction. Some attribute the alleged kowtowing stance of the *SCMP* and *Ming Pao* to the influence of their respective owners Robert Kuok Hock Nien and Tiong Hiew King, who both have 'patriotic sentiments' towards China as well as substantial economic interests in the mainland. Indeed, proprietorial influence seems to be at work in these two papers when one compares the headlines of their reports on the Wang and Jiang cases, to those of the pro-democracy paper *Apple Daily*. This argument is further underpinned by the qualitative analysis of how the two cases were covered by these three dailies, with *Apple Daily* standing out as the bluntest and most confrontational. It is no surprise, as its owner Jimmy Lai Chi Ying is a freedom advocate who encourages criticism even on Chinese leaders.

The toning down of the coverage on China and the removal of Willy Lam suggest that Beijing has built up a lead in the tug-of-war over press freedom in Hong Kong by the end of the fourth year after the handover. However, by looking on the other side of the issue, this thesis has pointed out that the center marker of the rope did not move too far away from the pro-press freedom side. Through presenting certain prominent figures' verbal comments and public reactions to the Wang, Jiang and Lam incidents, the SAR's resistance to China's interference in the press has been shown as significant. These figures, namely Martin Lee, Emily Lau, Anson Chan and the Hong Kong Journalists Association, were not fighting alone. They had received support from other groups and individuals in the territory, as well as from the international community.

A qualitative analysis of *Apple Daily*, *Ming Pao* and the *SCMP*'s editorials on the Wang and Jiang cases brings about a more encouraging sign. Despite their differences in nature and the controversies over the latter two dailies' changing political stances, all of the three papers showed their strong support for press freedom in their editorials. They reached a consensus that Wang Fengchao's remarks on Taiwan reports and President Jiang's accusation of the SAR journalists for asking simple and naïve questions, were not acceptable. *Ming Pao* was almost as assertive as *Apple Daily* when criticising Wang's advice and defending the professionalism of the Hong Kong journalists. While the *SCMP* did not explicitly express its disagreement with the two Chinese officials, the subtle objection was noticeable.

Hong Kong's resistance to China's interference in press freedom is largely due to the significance of preserving a free press in the territory. This can be examined from social, political and economic perspectives. From the social point of view, press freedom is essential to enhance the SAR reporters' confidence in the local journalistic circle. Aside from the existing unsatisfactory working conditions like low pay, the lack of autonomy caused by Beijing's intervention is observed to be another factor that frustrates journalists and encourages them to leave the profession. In fact, China's respect for rights and freedoms of all kinds would not only prevent a loss of good journalists, but also a loss of other skilled and talented local professionals, many of whom have left Hong Kong after being unnerved by the *Tiananmen* Square massacre in 1989.

The *Tiananmen* Square massacre on one hand shook Hongkongers' confidence in the Chinese government. However, it also began their political awakening and deepened their desire for democracy. Many post-*Tiananmen* studies and real-life cases have shown that the people of Hong Kong have become bolder and more assertive when it comes to defending their liberties. Thus, a massive upheaval is likely to result if press freedom and other guaranteed civil rights were to be taken away. This would endanger the territory's social and political stability, and hence adversely disrupt its dynamic economy. Some observers point out that stability, together with the climate of freedom and the free market economy in Hong Kong, are the main factors attracting foreign investments. In particular, a free press that provides uncensored and accurate information plays a vital role in maintaining the investors' trust and confidence in the territory. It also serves as a reliable source on China news for overseas Chinese. Moreover, with Singapore's challenge for the status as the regional media centre and China's liberalisation of its economy, press freedom seems to be one of the main safeguards to sustain the SAR's competitive edge.

Apart from understanding the importance of preserving press freedom in Hong Kong, it is necessary for China and the SAR to develop a better understanding of each other, in order to put an end to the 'tug-of-war'. Based on its own economic success and political stability achieved under colonial rule, it is understandable that Hong Kong tends to believe that certain western values such as the capitalist system and respect for 'human rights' are universal and would be good for China as well. However, China has various reasons to reject this belief. It has achieved steady and remarkable economic growth under a socialist system in recent years. Moreover, as a republic, the western concept of inalienable 'human rights' has no legal weight in China.

Without realising the 'non-universality' of western liberal concepts, Hongkongers have consistently called for speedier democratisation in both the territory and the mainland. Well-known for its sensitivity, China has translated their pro-democracy spirit into an 'anti-nationalistic' sentiment, and hence developed distrust towards the territory. What also accounts for the development of distrust is that the two places interpret key terms in different ways. Together with their different interpretations of the term 'freedom of the press', their differing perceptions of the media's social responsibility, partially explain the origins of the 'tug-of-war'. Being

western-influenced, the SAR media's perception of fulfilling their social responsibility lies in serving as a watchdog of government. They strongly oppose taking up the role of being a government mouthpiece, as which socialist China regards the mainland media.

Despite its preference for socialism, China is integrating into the international community, stepping towards liberalisation. With its entry to the World Trade Organisation and its successful bid for the 2008 Olympics, China will inevitably have to inure itself to certain western liberal concepts, including press freedom. This provides an optimistic view of the 'tug-of-war', bringing a silver lining to the cloud that seems to hover over the future of press freedom in Hong Kong.

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