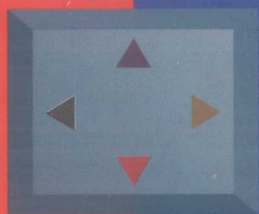


HONG KONG JOURNALISTS IN TRANSITION



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Hong Kong Journalists in Transition

Preface

Journalists see, feel, report and interpret. They set public agendas, stimulate policy discourses, contribute to the shaping of cultural identity and help to sort out political uncertainty. They stand sentry over Hong Kong's momentous political transition to Chinese sovereignty. The crucial role they played in the Tiananmen movement was genuinely shocking to the Beijing leadership. This incident may have inadvertently dramatized the importance, in the eyes of China, of Article 23 in the Basic Law which seeks to outlaw what may be seen as subversive activities against the future sovereign. Will the press bear the brunt of any significant change?

Hong Kong journalists profess to hold a strong commitment to Western norms of professionalism, but they also seem to be attached to ideological partisanship. They are a mixed lot: idealistic yet practical, strong yet weak, self-assured yet reserved, confident yet anxious, relatively well-educated yet poorly paid, full of opportunities to make a difference yet seemingly doubtful about their ability to do so.

They deserve to be understood. This monograph is a collective story of the Hong Kong journalists, without whose support it could never have been written. The analysis is based on a survey of Hong Kong journalists — the only comprehensive and representative academic survey available to date — which aims to present their profiles, values, work settings, aspirations and frustration. This project is part of our larger and continuing attempt to make sense of the significance of media politics in Hong Kong

from the perspective of political communication in theoretical and comparative contexts. Among the authors, Joseph Man Chan drafted Chapters 1-3, Paul Siu-nam Lee drafted Chapters 4-5, and Chin-Chuan Lee drafted Chapters 6-7, but the entire manuscript reflects our broad consensus.

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The authors

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Hong Kong

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Evolution of the Hong Kong Journalist

Many Chinese are taught that their ancestors had made four technological inventions that had tremendous impact on the world: the compass, paper, printing and gunpowder. All but gunpowder happened to be communication technologies of their times. The compass was instrumental in bringing people together who would otherwise have been separated by long distance. The paper and printing were the technological foundation of the print media. If technology were the sufficient cause of the first form of mass media — the press — China would have witnessed the birth of the world's first newspaper. But the newspaper was invented in the West where it flourished for more than a century before it spread to China. Obviously, technology alone could not account for the birth of the newspaper. China appeared to have lacked the social conditions of the West, such as increase in literacy, the development of capitalism and the expansion of the middle class, which were conducive to press growth (Schudson, 1978; DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1982).

While the press developed into a common cultural form in the West, China was still under feudal rule where printing and paper were used to publish "official gazettes" which registered imperial decrees, officials' movements and other matters related to the bureaucracy. From its inception in the Han dynasty (around 150 BC) to its heyday in the late Qing dynasty, such gazettes had evolved from manual copies that had been distributed strictly among government officials to printed copies that had also circulated among a limited public (Ge, 1964; Lai, 1978:8-21). However, they never made the breakthrough to become a modern newspaper by carrying news and commentaries, targeting the public. Their primary function was to facilitate communication within the feudal bureaucracy. It was not until the Western powers forced open China's doors around the mid-nineteenth century that the Chinese learned of the modern press. Hence, began the history of Chinese journalism which interwove with that of Hong Kong.

Humble Beginning

Out of cultural pride and ignorance, the Qing dynasty was unwilling to learn from foreign countries when it first encountered the West in the nineteenth century. It took several military defeats before the Qing dynasty awoke to Western superiority in technology and later in political arrangement and culture. The first shock happened when Britain subdued China during the Opium War that ended in 1842 with the cessation of Hong Kong and the opening up of five ports — Shanghai, Hankou, Tianjin, Ningpo and Nanjing — for foreign trade. It was mainly through Hong Kong and these ports that the modern press diffused into China. Even a cultural form like the newspaper, that is taken for granted nowadays, took several decades to take root in Hong Kong and China.

The prototypes of Chinese newspapers were the religious periodicals started by Western missionaries. The *Chinese Monthly Magazine*, first of its kind, was published in 1815 in Malacca. Many

more cropped up when Hong Kong, Shanghai and other ports became accessible to Western missionaries, registering some 76 in the period 1842-1891 (Lai, 1978:28).¹ The influence of these publications went beyond the sphere of religious conversion. They often extended their coverage to include current events, science, geography, history, commentary and other topics (Lai, 1978:38). They also introduced some Western concepts of journalism, such as judging news by its accuracy and significance, and the strategic importance of editorial writers. The functions of the press, according to them, were to expand people's knowledge, bridge the gap between the ruler and the ruled, and distinguish the good from the bad. The press was supposed to be used for the promotion of public rather than private interest.

But the religious publications did not lead directly to the first Chinese dailies which were born out of partnership arrangement with English newspapers or Western business interests (Ge, 1964). For instance, two of the earliest Chinese newspapers were published in Hong Kong, one as the Chinese version of the English *China Mail* in 1858 and the other as that of the *Daily Press* in 1860.² Other better known dailies that were launched as business joint ventures by Westerners and Chinese included Shanghai's *Shen Pao* of 1872 and *Shanghai Journal* of 1883, Tianjin's *Times* of 1886, and Hong Kong's *News Daily* of 1893.

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1. The more famous included *Chinese Serial*, *Chinese and Foreign Gazette*, *Shanghai Serial*, *Shanghai Miscellany*, *Chinese and Foreign Weekly News*, as well as *Chinese Globe Magazine* (Ge, 1964:67-72).
 2. According to Ge (1964), the *China Mail* and *Daily Express* were not totally owned or operated by Chinese. The short-lived *Xiaowen Daily* published in Hankou in 1873 was the very first all-Chinese newspaper. However, Lai (1978) argued that Hong Kong's *Daily Press* was in reality owned by a Chinese although it was published under the name of an English daily. He treated Wang Tao's *Xunhuan Daily* published in 1874 as the first newspaper that was independently and fully owned by a Chinese.

These foreign or semi-foreign Chinese newspapers prevailed in the second half of the nineteenth century (Ge, 1964). Original news and commentaries were of marginal importance in these newspapers because the Qing imperial court which made the national decisions was virtually closed to the press (Lai, 1978:46; Ge, 1964:100-101). The common content categories found in these newspapers included reproduced information from the official gazettes, entertaining stories, poetry, commodity prices, shipping schedules, opera themes and advertisements. All these added up to perpetuate the image of the newspaper as one form of Western business, a commercial extension of the official gazettes, or a carrier of trivial information and untrue stories. The newspapers were so lowly regarded that elders often forbade or dissuaded their juniors from reading them (Lai, 1978). Both circulation and advertising were limited largely to foreign companies and locals who had to do business with foreigners.

Limited resources restricted the employment of each newspaper to just a few who often worked in rather poor conditions. For instance, the *Yue Pao* started in 1885 had only two editors and one translator; all three had to do reporting as well (Lin, 1977). The newspaper workers did not command much respect from both government officials and the population at large. Many thought the educated turned to newspaper work only when they failed in other more respectable endeavors, such as getting into the Chinese bureaucracy through public examinations. As if to inspire the humble newspaper workers in China, the foreign Chinese publications often stressed the prestige and influence that an editorial writer in the West enjoyed. The position of an editorial writer was proclaimed to be so important that it should not be traded for any government position (Lai, 1978:38-39). To be qualified for the post, one had to be far-sighted, insightful, expressive, well-versed in current affairs and unbending in face of suppressive power.

The Awakening of Intellectuals

The importance of newspapers did not dawn on Chinese elites on a large scale until China lost the war to Japan in 1894 which was traditionally regarded only as one of China's inferior neighbors. Newspapers which were instrumental in enlightening the public came to be recognized as part of a reform package that had successfully transformed Japan (Lai, 1978). This belief was reinforced when Japan won the war over Russia, a Western power, in 1904. By then, even the Qing government had begun to realize the importance of newspapers in reforming itself.

The intellectuals who advocated reform were among the most prominent pioneering journalists. Wang Tao, an intellectual who had sought refuge in Hong Kong for alleged affiliation with the Taiping rebels, was one of the very first Chinese to launch an independent newspaper, the *Tsun Wan Yat Po* (*Xunhuan Daily*), which was credited for starting the tradition of making press commentaries (Lai, 1978:61-63, 1979:93-153).³ The function of the press, according to Wang, was to expedite communication between the rulers and the ruled, and between the foreigners and Chinese nationals (Lai, 1979:130-134). He attributed the high social status and influence of editorial writers in Western societies to their sense of fairness and sincerity. His notable success as a press commentator was found to have influenced Chinese intellectuals, like Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, who founded newspapers by the end of the nineteenth century. That well-respected intellectuals, such as Liang and Kang, engaged in newspaper work helped reduce the initial social contempt for newspaper men (Ge, 1964).

Chinese intellectuals have long-cherished traditions such as self-imposed concern for the welfare of the nation and the people (*yi guo yu min*), and speaking out against social wrongs even at

3. See Note 2.

the risk of irritating the rulers (*yanze* and *yanjian*). In the past, the major channel for realizing such traditions had been to become part of the imperial bureaucracy. Journalism opened up a new channel independent of the state (Lai, 1978:83-84). This explains why the press at the time was often valued for its roles in eradicating public ignorance, raising public social consciousness and advising the government.

The intellectual journalists were the first to emphasize the importance of professional discipline or ethics (Lai, 1978:85-86). While accusing journalists at the time of rumor-mongering, basing their commentaries on personal considerations and appeasing the powerful, they argued that intellectuals should maintain their integrity, live up to their honor, and keep up their social responsibility and credibility.

Liang Qichao, a leader of the reformist movement and an ardent journalist, was the most articulate in summing up the ideals of journalism. According to him, there were two major functions of the press: One was to supervise the government and the other was to enlighten the general public.⁴ The press, on behalf of the public, should criticize and advise the government with all its heart. If the press were doing its job, politics would be cleansed. To enlighten the public was to show them the way ahead by looking at the historical trail. Influenced by Western liberal philosophers, Liang came to embrace the freedom of thought, expression and publication as "the mother of all civilizations" and the necessary conditions for the popularization of knowledge among the people.⁵

At the media level, Liang quite systematically laid out rules for making press comments and news, respectively.⁶ These could

4. As cited in Lai (1978:85).

5. As cited in Lai (1979:227).

6. Based on an account of Liang's thoughts on these issues as reproduced in Lai (1979:232-233).