



## China Perspectives

2007/2 | 2007  
Hong Kong. Ten Years Later

---

# Media and politics in Hong Kong: A decade after the handover

Joseph M. Chan et Francis L.F. Lee

---



### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/1673>  
DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.1673  
ISSN : 1996-4617

### Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 15 avril 2007  
ISSN : 2070-3449

### Référence électronique

Joseph M. Chan et Francis L.F. Lee, « Media and politics in Hong Kong: A decade after the handover », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 2007/2 | 2007, mis en ligne le 08 avril 2008, consulté le 28 octobre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/1673> ; DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.1673

---

© All rights reserved

# Media and Politics in Hong Kong:

A Decade after the Handover <sup>(1)</sup>

JOSEPH M. CHAN  
FRANCIS L. F. LEE

**Hong Kong has been through numerous ups and downs in the ten years since the handover. The media have also undergone significant changes in relation to the larger social and political reconfigurations. While the press, driven by market forces and professional ideologies, has continued to provide timely information to the public and to monitor the behavior of power holders, the power center has employed various means to tame the media, and self-censorship remains a haunting issue.**

**W**hat major challenges have journalists and media organizations faced since 1997? How have the media responded to and sometimes shaped political changes in Hong Kong? What is the status of press freedom in the city? This article discusses these questions by analyzing the interplay among the national, the international, and the local. We argue that re-nationalization, internationalization, and localization are the three primary processes of social and political development in post-handover Hong Kong, and that the interplay among these forces has shaped the transformation of the Hong Kong media and their relationship with politics. The following discussion begins with the explication of each of these three processes and how they impinge on the media. We then discuss how the three processes are intertwined.

## Re-nationalization: Recognizing the New Power Center

By re-nationalization, we refer to the process of the political, economic, and cultural reintegration between Hong Kong and China over the past twenty years. This process can be traced back to 1984 when the Sino-British Joint Declaration sparked off a series of societal and political changes. Most importantly, a dual power structure was instantiated in Hong Kong in the transition period. Within the structure, the balance of power gradually shifted from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China as time went on. The British colonial government had to consult the Chinese government and even seek its approval on important political and admin-

istrative policies in Hong Kong. At the same time, the Chinese government began to co-opt local elites to facilitate the smooth transfer of power. Many local elites were invited to participate in the drafting of the Basic Law and/or later to participate in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Preparatory Committee. Some were even invited to become members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and National People's Congress.

Many of the appointed local elites were media owners. For example, Louis Cha was a member of the Basic Law Drafting Committee in the 1980s, at which time he was also the owner of *Ming Pao* <sup>(2)</sup>. This practice of political appointment as a form of co-optation has continued since 1997. Sally Aw was appointed a member of the CPPCC in 1998, at which time she was the owner of the Sing Tao Group. Ma Ching Kwan of *Oriental Daily* and Yang Lan of *Sing Pao Daily* were both appointed in 2003. Other media tycoons who have received political appointments include Peter Woo (Cable TV), Ricky Wong (HK Broadband), Charles Ho (Sing Tao), and Chan Wing Ki (Asia Television Ltd.).

It is widely assumed that the central government is interested in silencing oppositional voices in Hong Kong. However,

1. The work that is described in this article was jointly financed by the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Project no. CUHK4136/04H) and the State Innovative Institute of Studies of Journalism, Communication, and Media Society at Fudan University (Project no. 06FCZD0021).
2. J. M. Chan & Y. M. To, "Democratization, Reunification and Press Freedom in Hong Kong," In *Press and Politics in Hong Kong*, C. Y. K. So and J. M. Chan (Eds.) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 1999), pp. 465-407.

given the promises of “one country, two systems” and a “high degree of autonomy,” overt forms of control and suppression are likely to backfire. Hence, co-optation remains the primary means by which the central government exerts political influence. In other words, political and economic rewards are given to members of the Hong Kong media in exchange for their good will and support<sup>(3)</sup>.

From the perspective of the media owners, cooperating with China is likely to benefit their (media and non-media) business interests. Media owners understand that developing *guanxi* with the Chinese government is beneficial to their participation in the market in mainland China. Some of them may also believe that owning a media organization will enhance their bargaining power when dealing with Chinese officials.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong newspapers have gradually been taken from the hands of “traditional news people” by profit-oriented corporations. One of the major acquisitions in recent years was the takeover of the ownership of the Sing Tao Group by Charles Ho, a tobacco businessman and CPPCC Standing Committee member. In 2006, PCCW chairman Richard Li Tzar-kai acquired 50% of the ownership of the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* from veteran journalist and famous editorial writer Lam Shan-muk. The case was widely viewed as signifying the death of the traditional “intellectual-operated media” in Hong Kong.

Communication researcher Anthony Fung characterizes the new media ecology of Hong Kong as a manifestation of non-organizational concentration<sup>(4)</sup>. The notion of media concentration usually refers to the ownership of the greater number of media organizations in the hands of a few big players. However, Hong Kong has been spared the trend of ownership or organizational concentration. Rather, Hong Kong media ownership has increasingly been taken over by various pro-China business people who share similar backgrounds and business interests. Sharon Cheung, a journalist researcher, conducted a content analysis of eleven local newspapers. She reported that the owners of five of the eleven papers hold an official appointment in China and enjoy close ties with the central government. These papers tend to approve the policies that are issued by the central government and dilute negative news about the policies. The owners of four other of the eleven papers have business connections in mainland China. These four papers seem to be more neutral in reporting news about China, but they seldom present strong criticism of the policies of the Chinese government. Only the two newspapers without any economic or political affiliation with China do not give the Beijing authorities special consideration when reporting news<sup>(5)</sup>.

Re-nationalization applies not only to the political-economic arena. After the handover, social interactions between Hong Kong people and mainland Chinese have increased tremendously. New immigrants and visitors from mainland China come to the city as Hong Kong people head north for work and leisure. Before 1997, some scholars pointed out that Hong Kong people had long treated mainland Chinese as “the other” against which they defined themselves, but this feeling has faded gradually after the transfer of sovereignty. Poll findings show that the identification of Hong Kong people with China has increased over time<sup>(6)</sup>. In fact, the more concrete contact that a Hong Kong person has with mainland China, the more positive are his or her views about China<sup>(7)</sup>. Media content reflects these changes. In the past, the Hong Kong media portrayed China as uncivilized, chaotic, and authoritarian, thereby defining the cultural boundary between Hong Kong and mainland China. Nowadays, while the co-opted media tend to depict China positively, even the politically critical newspaper *Apple Daily* becomes – intentionally or not – the conveyor and promoter of nationalistic sentiments, as illustrated by their coverage of the news on the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the visits of Chinese astronauts to Hong Kong.

These cultural and media changes have added new complexities to the phenomenon of media self-censorship. On the one hand, self-censorship remains a serious problem in the eyes of professional journalists. In a survey of Hong Kong journalists conducted in 2006, 29.2% of the respondents reported that self-censorship existed and was “very serious,” 51.9% said self-censorship existed “but was not very serious,” and only about 3% reported that there was no self-censorship. The figure of respondents who report serious self-censorship has in fact doubled from the figure of 14.0% reported in a similar survey in 2001<sup>(8)</sup>.

3. J. M. Chan & C. C. Lee, *Mass Media and Political Transition: The Hong Kong Press in China's Orbit*, (N.Y.: Guilford Press).
4. A. Y. H. Fung, “Political Economy of Hong Kong Media: Producing a Hegemonic Voice,” *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 159-171.
5. P. W. Cheung, “Press Barons and Press Freedom – A study of newspaper ownership and its impact on editorial independence in Hong Kong after the decade of rule from Beijing,” unpublished manuscript.
6. F. L. F. Lee & J. M. Chan, “Political Attitudes, Political Participation, and Hong Kong Identities after 1997,” *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 2005), pp. 1-35.
7. E. K. W. Ma & A. Y. H. Fung, “Negotiating Local and National Identifications: Hong Kong Identity Surveys 1996-2006,” *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 172-185.
8. C. Y. K. So & J. M. Chan, “Professionalism, Politics and the Market Force: Survey Studies of Hong Kong Journalists 1996-2006,” *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 148-158.

On the other hand, the frequent and regular interaction between Hong Kong journalists and mainland Chinese officials has led the former to develop a greater identification with and better understanding of China. Journalists have thus become less skeptical and more sympathetic towards the nation. A senior editor of a major newspaper in Hong Kong opined that the problem of self-censorship is not as serious as most people think, but he admitted that the media have become more “careful” when commenting on China due to the media’s better understanding of the country after years of reporting<sup>(9)</sup>.

This can be seen as a process of cultural co-orientation, which refers to the generation of a shared culture and a better mutual understanding between two parties through interactions over time. Cultural co-orientation involves changes in people’s attitudes, judgments, and “common sense.” If self-censorship concerns journalists who behave against their “independent judgment” because of political pressure, then changes in the independent judgment of journalists will alter what self-censorship encompasses. An originally conscious act of self-censorship may become naturalized and normalized over time and/or come to be in sync with the new “common sense.” In the end, when the independent judgment of the majority has changed, those who maintain their original judgment may be regarded as unprofessional, impractical, or simply too radical.

An example that can best illustrate this point is the coverage of the Hong Kong media of Taiwan. In the period immediately after the handover, the issue of Taiwan was highly politically sensitive because Hong Kong and China held different attitudes towards the independence of Taiwan. Although the Hong Kong media have never been supportive of Taiwan independence, the topic was largely treated as a legitimate debate. For example, Cable Television interviewed Taiwan Vice-President Annette Lu in 2000 and used the norm of journalistic objectivity to defend itself when it was severely criticized for its reportage by Chinese officials. The underlying assumption of the behavior of Cable TV was that the pro-independence opinion deserved a fair hearing in the public sphere. Yet the Chinese government did not see national reunification as a legitimate controversy<sup>(10)</sup>. Even the “objective reporting” of the Taiwan independence viewpoint was problematic in the eyes of the Chinese government.

Since 2000, however, the Hong Kong media have shut the door on reporting the pro-independence views of any Taiwanese politician. To what extent this is the result of self-censorship? And to what extent this is a result of the fact

that Hong Kong journalists themselves have turned against Taiwan independence? It is hard to clearly separate self-censorship and cultural co-orientation empirically, but the analytical distinction between the two is crucial to our understanding of press freedom in Hong Kong.

It should be noted that cultural co-orientation is not only a media phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. University-conducted opinion polls, for example, have shown that the percentage of Hong Kong people who are against Taiwan independence rose from 58.8% in 1996 to 78.1% in 2006, while the percentage of Hong Kong people who trust the Chinese government increased from 24.5% to 45.5% in the same period<sup>(11)</sup>. In any case, the concept of cultural co-orientation highlights the intricate relationship between cultural changes and press freedom.

At the time of the handover, people and organizations that exhibited a tendency to move closer to China were often criticized as “bending with the wind<sup>(12)</sup>.” Ten years later, integration with China is treated as an inevitable trend. In the recent election of the HKSAR Chief Executive, even the pro-democracy camp candidate Alan Leong had to reiterate his knowledge of China and experience and ability to communicate with mainland China. Re-nationalization involves both structural changes and cultural changes. “Bending with the wind” is no longer widely used in public discourse. Self-censorship is also being redefined.

## Hong Kong media and International Society

Despite the indomitable forces of re-nationalization, the Hong Kong media have yet to become identical to their mainland Chinese counterparts. This is because national forces are to some extent counterbalanced by international forces. In fact, Hong Kong has long been in close contact with the international community. In the last 30 years of colonial rule, the colonial government imported Western values and institutions such as the rule of law, human rights, liberties, and even democracy to Hong Kong. The city’s economic system is also acclaimed as one of the most open and “free” in the world. Many of the said values have been in-

9. Personal interview conducted in August 2006.

10. F. L. F. Lee, “Strategic Interaction, Cultural Co-orientation, and Press Freedom in Hong Kong,” *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 134-147.

11. The poll findings are available at <http://hkpopop.hku.hk>.

12. This is a semantic translation from Cantonese. The literal translation is “making sharp steering turns.”

ternalized by Hong Kong people, who see them as the foundation of Hong Kong's success. Since 1997, Hong Kong has been struggling to position itself as a "Chinese city" or an "international city" (13). The HKSAR government continues to emphasize the importance of connecting to the world, and ex-Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa vowed to turn Hong Kong into "Asia's World City." Internationalization is widely regarded as an effective prescription to enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, China has paid greater attention to its international image. China's determination to participate in the international arena is indicated by its membership in the WTO and bid to host the 2008 Olympics. In addition, to demonstrate the feasibility of the "one country, two systems" formula to Taiwan and the international community, China cannot overtly act against the "universal values" of liberty and democracy that are propagated by the Western world. China must take international responses into account should it ever want to change the course of its policy towards Hong Kong.

More specifically, international influence on the Hong Kong media takes several forms. First, journalistic professionalism is widely upheld by the Hong Kong media. Hong Kong journalists adopted long ago the liberal model of professional journalism from the West. They regard the media as the "marketplace of ideas" or "public sphere" and journalists as autonomous actors who are independent of political and economic power. They believe in the notions of factual and objective reporting, and they also believe that the media should play a watchdog role to monitor the performance of the government and other power holders on behalf of the general public. Surveys of journalists in Hong Kong from 1996 to 2006 show that news reporters still adhere to these core professional values (14).

The performance of the Hong Kong media during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 demonstrated how the media used these international values to confront China. Whereas the Chinese government blocked any news concerning SARS inside mainland China, scattered information and rumors were widely circulated among the market-driven Hong Kong media. Later, the outbreak of SARS in Hong Kong triggered an extraordinary amount of coverage by all members of the local media. *Apple Daily* fiercely criticized China for locking up information and refusing transparency, and accused mainland Chinese officials of being the culprits responsible for the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong. Phone-in radio programs in Hong Kong, especially the highly popular "Tea Cup in a Storm," brought firsthand information from frontline medical staff to the public, and the HKSAR government was accused of try-

ing to deprive the public of its right to information. In China, the news media were in sync with the central government officials in reporting on SARS, covering up the spread of the dreadful disease in the initial stage, whereas in Hong Kong, the media strictly adhered to the principle of reporting the important facts to the public. In fact, the connectedness between Hong Kong and the international community created pressure on the Chinese government. When global coverage collided with the official information of the Chinese government, the government had no choice but to revise its stance. The Minister of Health was dismissed and the central government started to cooperate with international societies and the World Health Organization. Finally, it provided factual data to the WHO and increased transparency in handling the crisis (15).

The case of the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong highlights the connection between the Hong Kong media and foreign societies. In fact, Hong Kong is where information flow is speedy and uninhibited, and it serves as an information hub in Asia in which numerous international media organizations station their foreign correspondents and news bureaus (16). About a dozen international newspapers and more than 30 international magazines are registered in Hong Kong. Those that can be bought on the street include the *Financial Times*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today International*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and *Nihon Keizai Shim bun* (17). When SARS broke out, news instantly traveled around infected cities worldwide, prompting competition among cities and resulting in mutual monitoring. The reporting of the international media on China, to a certain degree, may prevent the Hong Kong media from exercising excessive self-censorship as people with exposure to the international media could develop an unfavorable evaluation of the unprofessional practices of the Hong Kong media. At the same time, the Chinese coverage by international media

13. A. S. Ku, "Postcolonial Cultural Trends in Hong Kong: Imagining the Local, the National, and the Global," In *Crisis and transformation in China's Hong Kong*, M. K. Chan and A. So (Eds.) (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 322-342.
14. Joseph Chan, "The Global-Local Communication (Dis)Synchronization: Interactions among Media, Individuals, State and Global Institutions During the SARS Outbreak." Paper presented at the conference "Epidemics and Transborder Violence: Communication and Globalization under a Different Light." Hong Kong Baptist University, December 17-18, 2004.
15. E. K. W. Ma & J. M. Chan, "Global connectivity and local politics: SARS, talk radio, and public opinion," In *SARS: Reception and Interpretation in Three Chinese Cities*, D. Davis and H. Siu (Eds.) (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 19-44.
16. According to the most updated information that is provided by the Government Information Services Department, as of March 2007 around 100 foreign media organizations have offices in Hong Kong.
17. The most recent raw data were provided by the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority on February 28, 2007, and this paper has re-categorized them.





Protest against plans to reform the RTHK, July 2007.

also enables the Hong Kong media to resort to remediation as a method of covering sensitive issues on China – “passively” quoting and reprinting what has been reported in the international press<sup>(18)</sup>.

Moreover, international authorities have usually been referred to by Hong Kong journalists as sources of legitimacy to safeguard press freedom. In a survey of journalists that was conducted in 2006, more than 60% of the respondents chose international media organizations as the ideal media organizations<sup>(19)</sup>. In fact, when facing political pressure in their work, the Hong Kong media can point to international journalistic standards for self defense. For example, after the handover, Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) was repeatedly bashed by the pro-China camp, which argued that it should not criticize the government. In response, RTHK proclaimed that it is modeled after international (or mainly European) public broadcasting systems that cherish editorial independence. At the individual level, international recognition can also alleviate the pressure that journalists face. A current affairs program producer acknowledged that international awards can help otherwise sensitive programs to avoid critique from within the news organization<sup>(20)</sup>. In addition, it is worth noting that even Chinese officials sometimes use international instead of mainland Chinese standards when crit-

icizing the Hong Kong media. The most famous example is the reproach of Hong Kong journalists in 2000 by Jiang Zemin, China’s former president, in Beijing. He urged Hong Kong journalists to learn from Mike Wallace of CBS, rather than asking them to follow any mainland role models. In addition to international values and beliefs, other types of international forces are also important. In the age of media globalization, expanding business to overseas markets is a way for media corporations to increase their revenue. For example, *Ming Pao* publishes North American editions in Vancouver, Toronto, San Francisco, and New York, while *Apple Daily* is published in Taiwan. The former has made good profits in Canada, with a turnover of 0.2 billion Hong Kong dollars by mid-2006<sup>(21)</sup>. The performance of the latter continues to thrive, and the circulation of *Apple Daily* in Taiwan has recently reached half a million<sup>(22)</sup>. Although we

18. A. S. Y. Cheung, “Hong Kong Press Coverage of China-Taiwan Cross-straits Tension,” *In Hong Kong in Transition*, R. Ash, P. Ferdinand, B. Hook, R. Porter, and F. Ash (Eds.) (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 210-225.

19. The survey of journalists was conducted from June to November in 2006.

20. A personal interview that was conducted in August 2006.

21. “Revenue of *MingPao* Corporation’s Publishing Business Cut in Half,” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, (December 18, 2006), p. 22. (In Chinese)

22. “Securities Report-DBS lowers Revenue Prediction on Next Media,” *AFX*, (February 1, 2007). (In Chinese)

should not exaggerate its impact here, investing overseas may indirectly weaken the influence of China to the extent that the Chinese market is not the sole consideration of business people<sup>(23)</sup>.

However, while various international forces prevent the Hong Kong media from falling completely in line with China, international forces do not always work against China. For example, the flow of international and China-friendly capital into the Hong Kong media, represented by the acquisition of the *South China Morning Post* and *Ming Pao* by Malaysian Chinese tycoons Robert Kuok Hock-nien and Tan Sri Datuk Tiong Hiew King, respectively, is very much a part of the trend towards non-organization concentration that was discussed in the previous section. Even transnational companies such as Yahoo can succumb to the pressure that is exerted by the Beijing authorities. There is a limit to the countervailing force that internationalization can bring about.

## Local Interests as the Bottom Line

The media cannot operate effectively in a social vacuum. The Hong Kong media are located within specific political, economic, and cultural systems that contribute to their forms and roles. The members of the Hong Kong media serve a local audience, and thus their contents and social functions are inseparable from local interests. The formation of a “local society” in Hong Kong can be traced back to the mid-1970s when the Hong Kong economy began to prosper in tandem with the emergence of the second generation of the post-war refugees, thereby contributing to the rise of the Hong Kong identity. Into the 1990s, as Hong Kong underwent decolonization and democratization, political changes ignited the expectations of Hong Kong people. The dual power structure representing the Chinese and British power centers and the low degree of interference from the colonial government provided the conditions under which Hong Kong people articulated their own views, negotiated their identities, and expressed their hopes and fears.

Nevertheless, since the handover, the local government is authorized only by the Chinese government and does not have high levels of legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In late 1997, the political reality collided with unfulfilled political expectations and coincided with the Asian financial turmoil. In the following years, as the economic decline has continued and social crises have recurred, social grievances have accumulated. Some media outlets have taken advantage of weak governance and grown in popularity. They have used po-

litical criticism as their selling point, and they position themselves as the guardians of local and public interests (as opposed to the interests of the government and business people). A populist and confrontational media, spearheaded by *Apple Daily* and a number of critical talk radio programs, have been cultivated. They serve as channels for the expression of public discontent, while at the same time reinforcing such discontent<sup>(24)</sup>. After the highly controversial national security legislation debate and the SARS outbreak in early 2003, the accumulation of grievances finally led to the July 1 demonstration in 2003, in which 500,000 people marched on the street to vent their anger at the HKSAR administration. Against this background, Joseph Chan and Clement So have argued that on local matters, the Hong Kong media have served a “surrogate democracy function” in Hong Kong. Within the context of the underdevelopment of democracy in Hong Kong, the media fill in the gap and have become the most important platform for public opinion formation and expression. Besides allowing people to voice their opinions, the media also promote communication between officials and citizens, criticize the government, and promote social reform<sup>(25)</sup>. The surrogate democracy function supplements the lack of democracy in the formal political institutions and contributes to social stability in post-handover Hong Kong.

The close relationship between local interests and the media can best be illustrated through the aforementioned case of the July 1 demonstration in 2003. After the historic protest, some Chinese officials pinpointed *Apple Daily* and several radio phone-in programs as the major mobilizers behind the event. Indeed, *Apple Daily* adopted the advocacy approach to the extent that it printed the headline “See You in the Streets” on its front page on the day of the demonstration. Putting aside whether *Apple Daily* and the radio phone-in programs really had huge mobilization power, arguably all of the Hong Kong media played an important role in facilitating

23. A. Y. H. Fung, “Media Competition, Ownership, a Political Transition,” in *Hong Kong Media in the New Millennium*, P. Lee (Ed.) (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), pp. 71-98. (In Chinese)
24. F. L. F. Lee, “Radio Phone-in Talk Shows as Politically Significant Infotainment in Hong Kong,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 57-79; F. L. F. Lee, “Talk Radio Listening, Opinion Expression and Political Discussion in a Democratizing Society,” *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2006), pp. 78-96.
25. J. M. Chan & C. Y. K. So, “The Surrogate Democracy Function of the Media: Citizens’ and Journalists’ Evaluations of Media Performance,” in *Indicators of Social Development: Hong Kong 2001*, S. K. Lau, M. K. Lee, P. S. Wan, and S. L. Wong (Eds.) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2003), pp. 249-276.
26. J. M. Chan & F. L. F. Lee, “Media and Large-scale Pro-democracy Demonstrations in Post-handover Hong Kong,” *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 215-228.

the formation of the protest. First, the tremendous amount of coverage of the national security legislation debate and the upcoming demonstration helped set the public agenda. Second, the media reported the calls for action made by social elites and political groups, thus broadcasting the messages by leaders such as the Catholic Bishop Joseph Zen and the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union. This reportage also certified and legitimized the demonstration. Third, the media were crucial in transmitting "action-facilitating information" to readers and listeners and assisting their participation<sup>(26)</sup>. But it would be wrong to say that the public simply followed the lead of the media. The powerful expression of public opinion through the July 1 demonstration also called for responses from the media. Most notably, after the protest, different media outlets overwhelmingly used positive words such as "rational" and "peaceful" to describe and eulogize the rally. Facing what we called energized public opinion, the media felt pressure to side with the public. Newspapers that espoused different political stances converged in their portrayal of the protest and discussions of its implications. Although this convergence was by no means complete, political parallelism in Hong Kong did diminish for a period of time. When political parallelism re-emerged, the configuration of discourses had already changed<sup>(27)</sup>. The case of the July 1 demonstration in 2003 shows that the Hong Kong media, riding on the wave of re-nationalization, had to adjust in the face of the powerful expression of local opinions in the form of collective action. At the same time, those media that attempt to struggle against re-nationalization can treat public opinion as their capital and resource.

Nevertheless, local opinions and interests do not necessarily contradict re-nationalization, because Hong Kong and China do not stand on opposite sides on every issue. Moreover, while re-nationalization largely implies a move towards more conservative political values in the context of Hong Kong, Hong Kong society and culture themselves also have a fair share of conservatism. For example, Hong Kong has little tolerance towards "radical" behavior. More precisely, many acts that are regarded as "normal" and commonplace in social struggles in other countries are often treated as "too radical" in Hong Kong. "Law and order" and "rationalism and pragmatism" form part of the deep-rooted cultural codes of Hong Kong society. Therefore, the symbolic resistance of social movement activists against established institutions can hardly win the support of the media. Acts of civil disobedience may receive sympathy or even support from the media during the early stages of an event, but as the event unfolds, the media often return to the baseline of "order" or "rationalism"<sup>(28)</sup>.

This means that the performance and future development of

the Hong Kong media is also partly dependent on the future development of the local political culture.

## Media Politics as the Interplay of the Three Forces

As stated previously, media politics in post-handover Hong Kong can be understood as the interplay among the forces of re-nationalization, internationalization, and localization. Since 1997, the HKSAR government has had to toe the line of the central government on important issues. However, when there are serious conflicts between the central and the local governments, the HKSAR government has to address the demands of the Hong Kong people. China cannot frequently and overtly intervene in Hong Kong affairs because of its concern over its profession of "one country, two systems." As reflected in the performance of the media, the power transition has indeed induced scruples on the part of the media in reporting certain issues. Some media outlets have allied themselves with the new power center. However, market considerations remain important to the commercial media in Hong Kong, and many journalists still adhere to professional values and norms. Coupled with international concerns regarding press freedom in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong media have yet to become fully submissive. Self-censorship has been one of the responses of the media to political pressure. However, under the twin considerations of market competition and professionalism, some members of the media have come up with a set of strategies to manage political pressure and professional credibility at the same time. These include the increasing use of juxtapositions between positive and negative opinions towards the power holders, the increasing use of polls as "objective" indicators of public opinion, the increasing use of non-political authorities (such as academics) as commentators, and the adoption of rhetorical strategies to produce "rational and objective" editorials<sup>(29)</sup>. With these techniques, "professionalism" becomes a weapon for self-defense when the media are criticized.

27. J. M. Chan & F. L. F. Lee, "Energized Public Opinion and Media's Political Parallelism: A Case Study of the 1 July 2003 Rally in Hong Kong," *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, No. 31 Autumn/Winter (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2006), pp. 71-95. (In Chinese)
28. A. Ku, "Constructing and Contesting the 'Order' Imagery in Media Discourse – Implications for Civil Society in Hong Kong," *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 186-200; F. L. F. Lee, "Election Interpretations, Post-election Campaign, and Institutional Repair: The Case of the 2004 Legislature Council Elections in Hong Kong," *The Chinese Journal of Communication and Society*, No. 1 (2006), pp. 69-90. (In Chinese)
29. See note 10 above, and also C. C. Lee, "The Paradox of Political Economy: Media Structure, Press Freedom, and Regime Change in Hong Kong," in *Power, Money, and Media*, C. C. Lee (Ed.) (Illinois: Northwestern University Press), pp. 288-336.



In other words, objective journalism can be a helpful tool in resisting political pressure in Hong Kong. However, the emphasis on “objectivity” has at the same time hampered the function of the press as the fourth estate. For example, in a study of how the editorials of two newspapers responded to the democratic reform debate in 2004, it was discovered that *Ming Pao*, a paper that proclaims its professionalism and credibility, positioned itself as a neutral commentator situated between the democratic camp and the Chinese government. It also repeatedly advocated rational discussion in its editorials<sup>(30)</sup>. However, this stance of neutrality and rationality proved feeble as the paper did not publish any strong critiques of China when China unilaterally vetoed universal suffrage for Hong Kong in 2007-2008.

More broadly speaking, the media’s show of neutrality when the public is expecting a strong critique of the government on certain issues is likely to be perceived as a form of self-censorship. A survey that was conducted in 2006 showed that close to half of Hong Kong people said that the media should side with Hong Kong when there is a clash of interests between China and Hong Kong. These people are also more inclined to say the media have practiced self-censorship on controversial issues between China and Hong Kong<sup>(31)</sup>. These findings show that on controversial issues which involve conflicts between China and Hong Kong, “objectivity and neutrality” cannot satisfy the majority of the public. In the foreseeable future, issues that are caused by China-Hong Kong conflict will pose a great challenge to the Hong Kong media.

Nonetheless, we are not completely pessimistic about the situation of the Hong Kong media. In fact, after the handover, even in times during which overt political pressure was applied (e.g., through public criticisms by central government officials), the Hong Kong press still stood firm and stressed the principle of press freedom and journalistic professionalism<sup>(32)</sup>. With regard to the problem of self-censorship, the Hong Kong Journalists Association called for members in the field to retain their professional standards<sup>(33)</sup>. As noted above, Hong Kong journalists adopted long ago Western professional journalistic practices, and view the media as independent gatekeepers for monitoring the government’s performance. Press freedom is a universally recognized value – even the Chinese government cannot deny or overtly infringe upon it. The open and free media system in Hong Kong remains more or less intact structurally. It can be said that, as a professional norm and a symbol in public discourse, professionalism is the most powerful weapon of the

Hong Kong media. The problem lies only in how “professional” journalism is practiced.

Meanwhile, economic forces work both for and against political influences. Capitalists have the tendency to be co-opted by the political power center. Media market forces, however, can serve to restrain the media from getting too close to the power center too fast. Media outlets that completely disregard professionalism and independence will likely be shunned by the public. *Apple Daily* captures a specific niche market by taking a critical stance against the HKSAR and Chinese governments, and hence has become one of the most popular local newspapers. If other competitors want to secure a share in the local market, they cannot afford to deviate too far from local interests. The existence of *Apple Daily* also serves as a buffer for other media, because as long as their viewpoints are less critical than the viewpoint of *Apple Daily*, political pressure on them is alleviated. The commercial success of *Apple Daily* illustrates that its market-led advocacy journalism and the intensified objective journalism that is practiced by other media can cover each other politically.

Although Hong Kong has returned to China, it retains its international status. Numerous foreign news agencies are based in Hong Kong, and the free flow of information in Hong Kong makes it difficult to restrict the news system in Hong Kong. With the scheme of “one country, two systems” enshrined in the Basic Law, the constitutional document of Hong Kong, the HKSAR government and the Beijing authorities are held accountable for maintaining press freedom in Hong Kong. As Chinese society becomes more pluralistic and as China further integrates with Hong Kong and the rest of the world, the pressure on China to comply with international standards of openness and transparency will increase. However, this will take time to take effect. In the last analysis, press freedom in Hong Kong is subject to the interplay among the forces of re-nationalization, internationalization, and localization. The key to press freedom in Hong Kong lies in the extent to which Hong Kong and China are democratized. •

30. F. L. F. Lee & A. M. Y. Lin, “Newspaper editorial discourse and the politics of self-censorship in Hong Kong,” *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 2006), pp. 311-358.
31. F. L. F. Lee, “Hong Kong Citizens’ Belief in Media Neutrality and Perceptions of Press Freedom: Objectivity as Self-censorship?” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (May/June 2007).
32. T. Y. Lau & Y. M. To, “Walking a tight rope: Hong Kong’s media facing political and economic challenges since sovereignty transfer,” In *Crisis and Transformation in China’s Hong Kong*, M. K. Chan and A. So (Eds.) (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 322-342.
33. The Hong Kong Journalists Association released its survey results on February 10, 2007, at a seminar on “Press Freedom in Hong Kong: Ten Years On.” They urged members to stay unwaveringly committed to their duty, maintain their professional standards, and rebuild the confidence of Hong Kong people in them.