

Self-Censorship and the Press in Hong Kong

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Introduction

In the years prior to the return of Hong Kong from British to Chinese hands, there was a great deal of speculation as to whether freedom of the press would be maintained under new government control. Before 1997 Hong Kong boasted one of the highest degrees of press freedom in Asia (Lee, "Media Structure...", p. 117), and no one was exactly certain what would result from a change in leadership. Under the rule of the British colonial government, an Official Secrets Act was in place in the territory which prohibited the publishing of information believed to be threatening to national security. (Richburg) Although this law had never been utilized, one Hong Kong legislator remarked that if the government saw the need, this legislation could potentially "close down all the media." (Richburg) Many journalists feared that if the Beijing government were granted the same unspecified powers after 1997, it would not be as benign in its usage of the provision. A prediction was made that if Hong Kong's markets remained free, the judiciary remained independent, and the outspoken *Apple Daily* newspaper continued to be published, press freedom would remain intact. (Freedom Forum Asia) With the handover approaching, doubts increased among journalists and the general public as Chinese government leaders hinted at the manner in which the press should operate under new leadership. There was great speculation as the media attempted to decipher the impending government's ambiguous statements. Five years later, uncertainty remains and debate continues as to whether press freedom is truly a reality in Hong Kong. In the opinion of Carol Lai, the former chairwoman of the Hong Kong Journalist Association, "It is self-censoring, rather than direct intervention (from China), that will more likely undermine freedom of expression in Hong Kong." (Freedom Forum

Asia) Within the past ten years, surveys and opinions of journalists support the contention that self-censorship is indeed a primary factor inhibiting the press freedom in Hong Kong.

It is my focus in this article to examine the circumstances contributing to self-censorship in the print media of the territory, including pre-handover warnings from the Chinese government, and the business expansion interests of newspaper owners. There is also a discussion relating how journalists and newspapers have reacted to the presence of self-censorship and what changes have been observed in the press as a result of the altered attitude toward reporting.

The Presence of Self-Censorship

Self-censorship did not appear immediately following the transfer of Hong Kong from British to Chinese control in July of 1997. Instead, it was a growing trend witnessed by journalists and general readers alike both in the years approaching and those following the handover. In 1997 when Carol Lai was asked when she believed that self-censorship had begun in Hong Kong, she responded, “Many local media, including newspapers...have been adjusting their reporting for quite some time, because Hong Kong people knew about the July 1 [handover] date since 1984.” (Nakano, p. 156) Her hypothesis is supported by a survey of Hong Kong journalists in 1990 that discovered that 25 percent expressed fear of criticizing China in their work, and 54 percent believed that their fellow journalists shared the same fear. The cautious approach to journalism did not diminish in the ensuing six years, for a similar survey in 1996 revealed that one in every four journalists expressed concerns regarding criticizing China. (Lee and Chu, p. 65) According to television anchor Claudia Mo, “There’s very little commentary [in the press]” about certain mainland stories. She also claims that Hong Kong reports about

incidents in China “are all factual and safe.” (Stein, “Hong Kong's Press...”) ¹ Legislative Council member Christine Loh has noted the absence of any firsthand reports in the Hong Kong press about Chinese-occupied Tibet. She felt this topic would be important to the people of the territory as an example of Chinese autonomous rule, and it was her opinion that the lack of mention in the press may have been the result of self-censorship. (Richburg) Legislator Loh is not alone in her speculations of a censored press – over 44 percent of respondents in an opinion poll conducted in September 1997 thought the media practiced self-censorship, and 68 percent believed that reporters consciously refrained from criticizing the Chinese government. (Stein, “Specter of Censorship”) Although the existence of self-censorship in the Hong Kong media is often debated, numerous factors suggest that it does occur.

The Government Prepares the Press

The subject of press freedom was frequently addressed as Hong Kong’s legislation underwent changes with the approaching handover. Government officials from the mainland issued statements that Hong Kong journalists viewed as warnings as to how they should proceed. One particular comment made to CNN in May 1996 by Lu Ping, the Director of the Hong Kong and Macau Office (China’s highest authority handling Hong Kong affairs), put journalists on high alert. In the course of the interview, Ping stated that journalists “can say anything they like, but if they put it into action, they’ve to be careful.” When asked if it would be permissible for Hong Kong journalists to write in favor of independence of Taiwan or Hong Kong (thereby advocating the creation of two Chinas), Ping replied, “It is not allowed, definitely not.” (Lee and

¹ Her claim may be opinion only. Following the sentencing of the political dissident Xu Wenli in Beijing in 1998, *Ming Pao* printed an editorial critical of the Beijing government’s decision. The *Hong Kong Standard* editorialized with a message supporting Beijing, while the *South China Morning Post* chose not to editorialize at all. (Stein, “Hong Kong's Press...”) These varied editorials illustrate the presence of multiple approaches to commentary in the press.

Chu, p. 61) Within the same week, Ping clarified the difference between “advocating” and “objective reporting” and said, “Advocating is not a press freedom issue; advocating itself is an action.” (Lee and Chu, p. 61) He also stated that “advocacy of Taiwan’s independence could be prosecuted under Article 23.” (Gargan, 1995) Journalists had long been wary of Article 23 of Hong Kong’s Basic Law,² for it allowed for the Special Administrative Region (SAR) legislature designated by Beijing to draft regulations prohibiting “treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central Government or theft of state secrets.” (Cohen) This could greatly impact freedom of the press, as reporters may feel a need to exercise extreme caution when writing in order to avoid accusations of committing the crimes outlined in Article 23.

During a visit to the United States in March 1995, Mr. Ping attempted to assuage the fears of supporters of press freedom worldwide when he remarked: “The freedom of the press and of speech are all guaranteed.” However, his next words were not as comforting: “After 1997, anyone who wants to criticize the [Hong Kong] government will be free to do so.” (Richburg) This comment could indicate to journalists that while opposition to the governmental affairs in Hong Kong was acceptable, any disapproval of China’s policies from the press would not be tolerated after the handover. According to John Schidlovsky of the Freedom Forum Asian Center, Ping’s attitude toward the press does not guarantee freedom of speech. In an article for the *New York Times*, Schidlovsky was quoted as saying, “Advocacy is a part of free speech and should be allowed. If he rules that out, that’s suppression of free speech.” (Gargan, 1996) In the opinion of Hong Kong journalist Frank Ching, without freedom of speech Hong Kong newspapers will be unable to fulfill the role of the modern newspaper, which is not merely to

² The post-handover constitutional document for Hong Kong.

report but also to analyze and interpret the news. Ping's comments suggest that the press should limit itself to presenting the arguments of the Chinese government and not attempt to dissect or disagree with those statements; in the environment established by Ping's comments the press would not be free but instead controlled by the threat of interference from the Chinese government. (Ching, 1996)

Lu Ping was not the only official to speak out regarding the future of the Hong Kong press following the handover. In July 1996, China's information minister, Zeng Jianhui, forewarned that the press would be "managed" after the Chinese took control of the colony in 1997. (Gilley) As he put it, "Hong Kong's press can do what it does now, namely report what other people say. But if the press says 'We should do something [deemed harmful to China],' that's different. No country would allow that." (Gilley) The Chinese Foreign Minister and Vice Premier Qian Qichen also warned the media to be aware that journalists "can put forward criticism, but not rumors or lies. Nor can they put forward personal attacks on the Chinese leaders." (Lee and Chu, p. 61) Three years after the handover, officials continued to feel it necessary to remind the press how to handle matters pertaining to Taiwanese independence. The *South China Morning Post* reported that Xing Guishan, the Taiwan affairs director of the central government's Liaison Office in Hong Kong, advised local reporters to avoid interviewing advocates of independence for Taiwan. (Ching, "Freedom with Limits") Additionally, a deputy director of the Liaison Office, Wang Fengchao, informed the territory's press 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. Hong Kong's media have the responsibility to uphold the integrity and sovereignty of the country." (Chan, "Crouching Tiger...")

One example of an attempt of the Hong Kong press to unify the country and impress its impending government occurred following the death of Deng Xiaoping in February 1997. With the handover approaching in less than six months, the Hong Kong media was cautious in the manner in which it reported the story of the passing of one of the influential figures in the Chinese Revolution. The *South China Morning Post* held the presses until his death was confirmed in order to print a poster-size photograph of the leader on the front page and to publish five pages of related news. The newspaper also published a special eight-page lunch edition about his economic reforms and the role he had played in the handover. (Cohen) The Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* chose to use a black border around the masthead for two days and wrote stories that stressed the leader's great deeds, with little mention of his role in the violent government opposition of the Beijing students' pro-democracy movement. Although the editor of the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* said, "In days of grief, we should not talk too much about Deng's faults," Paul Lee and Leonard Chu contend that "in light of the previous uniform stand of the media against the Chinese authorities, with Deng as the paramount leader during the 1989 Beijing students' pro-democracy movement, such a shift of attitude could not be more ironic and grotesque." (Lee and Chu, p. 74)

A Climate Of Fear

The "climate of fear" (Gilley) encompassing the Hong Kong press was not created solely by China's veiled and ominous verbal warnings, but also by its actions. In October 1993, Gao Yu, the former deputy editor of the Hong Kong publication *Economic Weekly*, was arrested. She was not heard from for one year, until the Chinese government revealed that she had been convicted of "leaking state secrets" (Marks) in a series of articles she had written for two of Hong Kong's pro-China newspapers, the *Monthly Mirror* and the *Overseas China Daily*.

(Eckholm) The government insisted that her articles,³ which she had written using a pseudonym, were based on information derived from secret official documents, an accusation which she continually denied. (Eckholm) Although she suffered from heart and kidney ailments, she was not released from prison on medical parole until five years into her sentence; it appeared as though her release was conveniently timed to precede a visit to Beijing by then United States Secretary of State Madeline Albright (Laris).⁴

A similar event occurred in September 1993 when Xi Yang, an economics specialist and reporter for *Ming Pao*, was arrested and sentenced to 12 years in prison, accused of espionage regarding state financial secrets. (Mufson) While visiting Beijing to attend his mother's funeral (Richburg), Xi had written a story about the interest-rate strategy of China's central bank. (Gargan, 1995) Fortunately, the reporter was released only three years into his sentence due to the efforts of Hong Kong and foreign journalists who launched a campaign to free him. (Chan, "Hong Kong...", p. 85) Although the Chinese government claimed that the imprisonment should not be viewed as a freedom of the press issue, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) stated in its June 1994 report that "Xi's case had sent shock waves through the local journalist community and is more than likely to exacerbate the caution and self-censorship toward China already prevalent in the media." (Mufson) Another representative of the HKJA claimed that this event was "a warning signal [to journalists] that [they] better behave [themselves]." (Gargan, 1995)

³ One article analyzed the continual influence in the government of the retired Deng Xiaoping, and the other discussed how the Communist Party did not separate the party and government as promised. (Eckholm)

⁴ According to reporter Michael Laris, the Chinese government often strategically arranges dissident releases in order to improve diplomatic relations. (Laris)

In October 2000, Hong Kong journalists were reminded of the extent of the scrutiny of the Chinese government. During a photo opportunity for Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Hong Kong's chief executive Tung Chee-hwa, Hong Kong cable television reporter Sharon Cheung inquired if it was an "imperial order" for Mr. Tung to serve a second term as the SAR's top official. (Hon) The question was asked in order to clarify a statement made by Chinese official Qian Qichen the previous day in which he appeared to endorse Mr. Tung. (Landler) The enraged Mr. Jiang leapt from his chair, shook his finger, and scolded the Hong Kong journalists saying:

You are very familiar with Western ways, but you are too young.⁵ You go everywhere to follow the big news, but the questions you ask are too simple, sometimes naïve. I am not a journalist, but I have seen a lot. I need to teach you a lesson about life. If there is any discrepancy in reporting, you will be held responsible. (Landler; Gittings; Yin)

Many in the Hong Kong journalistic community were shocked by the President's response. However, the chairman of the pro-government Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong, Jasper Tsang Yok Sing, claimed that Mr. Jiang was justified in losing his temper because any allegations or suggestions that the central government "had appointed Mr. Tung to a second term were very serious and a breach of the Basic Law." ("Journalists Deny...") Mak Yin Ting, the chairwoman of the HKJA, did not feel that such insinuations had been made: "The questions were sensible and legitimate. Simple questions are good questions. The interviewees have no room for maneuver." (Hon) The *South China Morning Post* attributed the President's reaction to the fact that he was more accustomed to the "deferential journalists of the Beijing press." ("Jiang Loses...") In any case, the event did not assist the Hong Kong journalists in clarifying their role

⁵ Veteran journalists and academics in Hong Kong have noted that many frontline journalists are in their 20s, and often appear at press conferences in unprofessional attire such as jeans and running shoes. (Lee, "Reporters Earning...")

in the new government, nor did it reaffirm that press freedom was alive and thriving in the territory.

Newspaper Editors and Self-Censorship

When journalists bear the wrath of governmental admonitions, it is not always administered directly from the government. Instead, the pressure applied by China usually has a strong impact on the editors and owners of newspapers, and they, in turn, apply pressure to their staff. In the opinion of former HKJA chairwoman Carol Lai, the influence of editors may have impacted journalists' writing more than any governmental threats. As she states, "Most of the front-line journalists do have the integrity to do their jobs, to report accurately and objectively, and seldom censor themselves.... Some chief editors... have been doing Beijing's dirty work by watering down criticism or spiking offensive stories. It is plain old censorship." (Stein, "Specter of Censorship") If media owners and editors do monitor the work of their journalists, the motive would likely be to prevent interference from the Chinese government in order to keep the newspaper in business and increase profits. However, some owners may wish to expand their business ventures, media or otherwise, into China. (Lee and Chu, p. 66) If they owned a newspaper that published news and information that was anti-China, China may inhibit this expansion. Therefore, in an attempt to allow a newspaper to receive approval from China, editors often "avoid ruffling Beijing's feathers" by avoiding controversial commentary. (Stein, "Hong Kong's Press...") The chief editor of the Hong Kong Economic Journal, George Shen, told a reporter from the *Far Eastern Economic Review* that it would be logical for newspaper owners interested in expanding their businesses into China to request that the publishing staff exercise self-censorship so their newspaper and business would not face difficulties after 1997. (Gilley) Publisher Jimmy Lai shares a similar view: "If they [owners] have to exist in business,

they have to be flexible in editorials, to make themselves acceptable to the new rulers. Gradually, gradually, they conform. You can feel it. It's a very slow metamorphosis." (Gargan, 1995) In the years surrounding the handover, the Chinese government has employed several tactics to "encourage" media owners and editors to closely monitor their journalists as explained below.

Relationship between Government and Press

Observation of the relationship of the Chinese government and the media owners and editors reveals that there are three methods the government uses to influence the manner in which the press operates in Hong Kong -- public relations, rewards, and punishment. (Lee and Chu, p. 66) Public relations and rewards are often linked, for it is not uncommon for the Chinese government to dine with leaders of the Hong Kong press in order to exert influence. For example, the government may invite editors to a dinner and then express distaste for the work and/or opinions of a particular columnist, which could then result in the column being removed from publication. An *Oriental Daily* reporter who was known for his critical opinions of China's relations with Taiwan and Hong Kong found his column discontinued in June 1996 without explanation. It was later revealed that a high-ranking employee of the newspaper had recently dined with someone from the government propaganda agency, and it is speculated that this interaction may have contributed to the removal of the column. (Lee and Chu, p. 67) Also, if a reporter were to criticize China too often, he/she could find themselves excluded from the "reward" of an invitation to press gatherings hosted by Chinese authorities in Hong Kong, thereby making it more difficult to report news from the mainland. (Stein, "Hong Kong's Press...") For example, because of their tendency to criticize China, reporters from the *Apple Daily* were

denied permission to cover a reception planned by the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong in 1997. (Stein, “Specter of Censorship...”)

Punishment is the final common, silent, coercion technique. On more than one occasion, the Hong Kong tycoon Jimmy Lai has found his business enterprises the victim of China’s punishments for unfriendly newspapers. In 1995, Jimmy Lai started the independent, apolitical *Apple Daily* newspaper. (Lee and Chu, p. 62) According to Lai, his newspaper would focus on “sin and evil” because “without Eve biting the apple, we wouldn’t be in business – there wouldn’t be any sin and there wouldn’t be any newspapers.” (Gargan, 1995) Lai was known to be a supporter of the students’ democratic movement in Beijing in 1989, and five years later he wrote an article in his magazine *Next* criticizing the Chinese Premier Li Peng. (Steinberger) In the July 22, 1994 issue, Lai referred to Peng as “the son of a turtle’s egg with zero IQ”⁶ (Richburg), stating that Peng was a “shame to the Chinese people” and suggesting that he “drop dead.” (Mufson) Because of Lai’s opposition to the communist Chinese government, reporters from the *Apple Daily* were later denied entry into China (Lee and Chu, p. 66), and the newspaper does not have any advertisers from companies under the control of China. (Cohen) Lai also suffered financial punishment when the government temporarily closed the Beijing outlet of his clothing store, Giordano, when his insulting article was published. (Steinberger) The store’s board of directors urged Lai to resign because they felt the closing of the store was related to the publication of the article. As a result, he did surrender voting rights to his controlling block of the company, acknowledging that, “The media is a sensitive business. If the media work affects Giordano, it is not fair to other shareholders.” (Mufson) Lai’s publishing business suffered further financial trouble in February 1997 when the guarantor of Lai’s

⁶ This is a Chinese expression used to imply doubts about paternity. (Kristof)

publishing group withdrew its support, and the company could no longer be publically traded on the Hong Kong stock exchange. (Lee and Chu, p. 66) The reason cited for the guarantor's withdrawal of support was "pressure" and the fact that one bank admitted that political motives prevented its involvement. (Lee and Chu, p. 66)

Although the *Apple Daily* has met with much opposition from the Chinese government, it has continued to thrive and remains popular with the citizens of Hong Kong, boasting the second largest readership in the territory in 1996. (Lee and Chu, p. 62) Still, Lai believes he is safe from Beijing's ultimate vengeance, a demand for him to cease publication, because "Beijing will be eager to show that it can maintain Hong Kong's prosperity; silencing the colony's most prominent publisher will not boost investor confidence." (Steinberger) Other editors and journalists are not as confident as Jimmy Lai, however. Fong So, an editor of the monthly publication *The Nineties*, expressed the concerns of many in the publishing business when he stated: "If that sort of thing can happen to a businessman like Jimmy Lai, then for ordinary journalists things can be a lot worse. People are going to be very cautious about what they say, especially about the Chinese leadership." (Mufson)

Certain newspapers have taken measures to appease China and prevent repercussions from the government. Some newspapers have employed former mainland journalists in order to appear to take a more China-centric view of Hong Kong. For example, the newspaper *Ming Pao* has attempted to remain in China's good graces by establishing an editorial staff in which 11 of the 14 editors are former mainland reporters; in 1997 the *New York Times* noted that *Ming Pao* had "reduced the space given to columnists critical of China and has toned down its previously aggressive reporting of China." (Kristof) The *South China Morning Post* went a step further by employing Feng Xiliang, a Beijing journalist and former editor of an English language

newspaper that reported Chinese governmental news, as an editorial consultant in April 1997. (Lee, "Media Structure...", p. 127) The intent to become more "China friendly" was not received positively by all journalists and readers, however, especially in relation to the resignation of the *Post's* well-respected journalist Willy Lo-Wap Lam in November 2000. Lam's decision followed the newspaper's announcement that he would be removed from his position as coordinator of Chinese coverage. The *Post* said this choice was made "to expand and diversify" its coverage of China, but Lam stated that he and many of his colleagues believed there were "increasing attempts to de-politicize the China coverage to steer away from sensitive political matters." ("Hong Kong Press Freedom") In the June 28, 2000, edition of the *Post*, Lam authored an article entitled "Marshalling the SAR's tycoons." The opening line of the article read: "Overt influence? Evidently not. Indirect, subtle interference? Apparently so." (Lam) The article continued with implications that Hong Kong businessmen attending a meeting in Beijing had been encouraged to support the Hong Kong chief executive Tung Chee-hwa in return for business favors in mainland China. ("Hong Kong Press Freedom") Lam wrote: "It is understood that hints were given that...Beijing would rather hand lucrative deals to 'patriotic' executives than foreigners." (Lam) One of the newspaper's major shareholders, Robert Kuok (who attended the meetings in Beijing), was offended by Lam's inferences and wrote a letter to the *Post* stating that the article was "full of distortions and speculation." ("Hong Kong Press Freedom") His irritation arose primarily because of his own close ties with China (he had been appointed as the Hong Kong affairs advisor and was a member of the SAR Preparatory Committee and Selection Committee), and it was noted by the HKJA that the *Post* had reduced and diluted its coverage of China since Kuok became an owner in 1993. (Lee, "Media Structure...", p. 127) Mr. Lam, on the other hand, was supported by his co-workers, 115 of whom signed a petition "reaffirming their

commitment to editorial freedom.” (Goff) Although it appears as though the press was reorganizing in order to combat the interference of China, this adjustment made by the *Post* may have been intended to increase profits and may have contributed to the deterioration in the quality of reporting in Hong Kong.

The Changing Standards

A 1990 Chinese University of Hong Kong study of journalists in Hong Kong revealed that achieving journalistic integrity was a priority for most members of the press. Of those surveyed, 95 percent of journalists considered “objective reporting” and “rapid dissemination” an important element of reporting, and 92 percent believed that analysis and interpretation of complex issues was essential to their work. (Reported in Lee and Chu, p. 60) Unfortunately, the actions of the Chinese government in the following ten years may have squelched their noble endeavors, and the focus of reporting has been slowly changing. According to Pan Zhongdong, a professor of journalism at Chinese University in Hong Kong, the goal of maintaining “objective reporting” may have been overridden by economic motives inspired by political influence. Mr. Zhongdong told the *New York Times* that newspapers and reporters “want to reach a mass audience, and to avoid partisanship.” (Faison) Since the late 1960s, the major newspapers of Hong Kong have become increasingly less partisan and have avoided taking stances that would not be widely well-received, and instead have concentrated more on the market economy and middle class liberalism in order to increase profit. (Lee, “Media Structure...,” p. 127) An examination of the political stance of the three newspapers groups with the largest readerships in Hong Kong reveals this fact. The two newspapers with the greatest popularity are deemed apolitical and independent/apolitical, and the third most popular newspaper is classified as pro-Beijing. While the first and second most popular newspapers have readerships of 1.5 million and

1.3 million, respectively, the pro-Beijing paper trails considerably, with a readership of only 593,000. (Lee and Chu, p. 61) In order to survive economically, newspapers had to survive politically and therefore covered stories that would be inoffensive to the government and that would appease their readers.

One way Hong Kong's newspapers avoid devoting space to politically sensitive topics is to assign their reporters to cover other, non-controversial topics. For example, the *Oriental Daily News* employs only 10 political reporters, but 20 economic, 80 “spot news” and 30 societal reporters. (Lee, “How Free Is the Press...,” p. 130) The *Apple Daily* also has a disproportionate number of reporters for each main section of its coverage (100 lifestyle, 90 crime, versus 40 political reporters). Lai insists, however, that this breakdown is representative of the interests of his readers. (Steinberger) Kin-Ming Liu, the general manager of the *Apple Daily*, claims that newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* could not survive in the Hong Kong market, because readers do not like to be lectured and the press “is not trying to educate people.” (Liu) The *Apple Daily* is a market-driven newspaper, according to Liu, and it provides the type of scandalous information people prefer to read for entertainment. Some observers would disagree, however, and assert that this distribution of reporting staff is not a commercial endeavor, but rather an endeavor linked to an attempt to avoid governmental implied restrictions.

Research conducted at the Chinese University in 1997 suggests that perhaps Hong Kong has chosen to focus more on internal issues in order to prevent clashing with China. When the content of the editorials of major newspapers was systematically analyzed throughout the 1997 handover year, it was determined that 56.2 percent of the editorials focused solely on issues in Hong Kong. Only 8 percent of editorials focused on issues in China, and 7.6 percent on issues pertaining to the interactions between Hong Kong and China. (Leung, p.131) Incidentally, these

figures (8 and 7.6 percent) were the third and fourth highest percentages in a ranking of the amount of editorial coverage granted to topics in Hong Kong editorials.⁷ Also, the research found that there was a tendency for newspapers to focus on the sensational, rather than on factual and unbiased stories. Some reporters had no qualms about invading the privacy of others, or twisting and fabricating facts to create a scandalous piece of news. (Stein, “Hong Kong’s Press...”) With the assistance of bugging devices on police communication, the *Oriental Daily News* boasted of its ability to get to the scene of a crime faster than the police. (Lee, “Media Structure...,” p. 130) Meanwhile, the *Apple Daily* pays readers to participate in weekly focus groups that inform the newspaper as to what information most interests the public at any given time. (Steinberger) As a result, it is not uncommon for a front page to contain a headline such as “Corpse Did Not Decompose in Three Years; Police Suspect Dry Ice,” as one *Apple Daily* headline did the week before the handover in 1997. (Faison) The change in reporting focus and style has not gone unnoticed by the public. When polled in September 1998, 29 percent of readers felt that the media was irresponsible. In January 1999, this number increased to 41 percent (Ching, “The Hong Kong Press...,” p. 162). Although it was difficult to pinpoint exactly why, the press in Hong Kong was noticeably changing, and no one knew the extent the change would reach.

Conclusion

The Hong Kong Journalist Association Report in 1999 cited self-censorship as an ongoing problem; Mak Yin-ting, the HKJA chairperson stated that it was perhaps “the main threat to an independent and free press in Hong Kong.” (Kubiske) In the *World Press Freedom*

⁷ The second highest percentage, 19.1, belonged to a category entitled “all other,” meaning editorial space devoted to an assortment of unspecified countries.

Review of 1999, he also made mention of an experiment in which a live frog was placed in a pot of cold water, and the water was heated so slowly that the frog did not attempt to jump out until it was too late. The frog was unable to escape because it had adapted to the increasingly hot water and could not recognize the approaching harm. (Mak) According to Mak, this may be the fate of press freedom in Hong Kong, the analogy being that the Chinese government “heats the water,” and as the Hong Kong press “adapts” to the raising temperature, it loses its “life,” that is, its freedom. Identifying the presence of self-censorship is not a simple matter, because it is not something a respectable journalist would prefer to admit. However, it appears as though many individuals familiar with journalism and the press in Hong Kong find self-censorship to be a serious threat. As Hong Kong continues to define itself in the post-1997 environment of “one country, two systems,” journalists and citizens alike hope that press freedom will not suffer as a result of the transition.

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