

1-1997

Whither press freedom in Hong Kong post-July 1997?

T. Tak-sing

Ta Kung Pao newspaper, China

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Tak-sing, T., Whither press freedom in Hong Kong post-July 1997?, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 2, 1997, 78-82.

Available at:<https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss2/8>

Whither Press Freedom In Hong Kong Post-July 1997?

Will July 1, 1997 mark the beginning of a slow "death" of press freedom in Hong Kong? TSANG TAK-SING, editor of the Chinese newspaper, Ta Kung Pao, believes Hong Kong media will continue to prosper under the Chinese model of "press freedom". However, MAK YIN-TING, president of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, argues the Chinese model is an anachronism completely alien to Hong Kong journalists. The opposing views were extracted from speeches delivered at the Commonwealth Journalists Association conference in Hong Kong on Jan.23-28, 1997.

Hong Kong Media In Transition

Tsang Tak-sing

No matter what rhetoric you might have heard about democracy and press freedom in Hong Kong, there is no denying the fact that this here is a colonial administration set up by the British through forceful occupation after the Opium War a hundred and fifty years ago.

For those of you who may not be familiar with history in this part of the world, the Opium War was caused by the British selling opium to China in exchange for silk, tea, and silver dollars. When the Chinese government tried to put a stop to this trade, the British dispatched their gun boats.

In my student days here, history was taught in English and the cause of what they called the First Anglo-Chinese War was said to be the conflict between the British modern concept of free trade and the outdated closed-door policy of mandarin China. So we should all thank the British agents of progress.

The Opium War was among one of the early steps by Great

Britain to build the Empire on which the sun never set, and this eventually also led to British occupation of many countries, which they regarded as the "white men's burden". But now the royal yacht "Britannica" has set sail on her last voyage, and as the British press says, come June 30 this year, the sun will finally set on the British Empire.

We have only had some semblance of democracy and freedom of the press since the signing in 1984 of the Sino-British Joint Declaration regarding Hong Kong. The Joint Declaration spells out clearly that Britain is to return Hong Kong to China. Only after they saw the writing on the wall, did the British colonial administration start to implement changes.

We call the period between 1984 and 1997 the transition period. This is a period distinct from the previous one hundred and forty years. If you have just flown in here for the first time and have just taken a still photo of the present situation, without a historical background, the picture still lacks perspective. But if you have grown up here, you cannot escape the fact that this here is very much a colonial administration, not too much different from former colonial days in other countries.

The "Control of Publications Ordinance" was only repealed in 1986, two years after the signing of the Joint Declaration. There had been other "draconian" laws that stifled the freedom of the press. The government had closed down newspapers, and thrown publishers, editors, and reporters into jail. In addition to many administrative measures of control, there have been other subtle pressures; and it used to be on the law books up to the eighties that even owners and members of the top management in TV stations had to be British and all newsreels, just as all public buses, have to be bought from the UK.

We only had the first election to the Legislature in 1990, six years after the signing of the Joint Declaration. All senior officials in the administration, the police, and leading judges of the judiciary, all used to be British: they only started to "localise" in recent years. British colonial officials used to say "we do not have democracy here in Hong Kong, but we have freedom of the press here".

Now this is a very interesting theory, that you can have freedom of the press under an authoritarian regime. As you can see, the British are master inventors of social theories, but we are still waiting for the proof. You may only need to look back into

your own history to understand how little democracy and freedom of the press one could in reality have under colonial rule.

You can find earlier Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong with little blank spaces where the censors had deleted the contents, or worse, they wouldn't allow the appearance of blank spaces, and the sentences and paragraphs had to be arbitrarily joined together making readers at a loss to understand. For over a hundred years we never had democracy; for over a hundred years we never had freedom of the press.

It is in Article 27 of the Basic Law, promulgated by the National People's Congress of China in 1990, which stipulates that "Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication". This is the first time ever that we have these freedoms stipulated in the law books of Hong Kong. It was only after the promulgation of the Hong Kong Basic Law by China in 1990, that the British administration here passed the so-called "Bill of Rights Ordinance" in 1991, but again in that effort they tried to sabotage the protection of civil rights provided in the Basic Law.

I don't think I'll keep using indirect attribution. The British Governor Mr. Patten had assumed the role of a judge here, not too long ago, in stating whether one piece of legislation or the other conformed with the Basic Law. Recently he has also assumed the role of spokesman for the Chinese government, such as when he declared that Mr. Xi Yang was released on parole by the Chinese authorities out of consideration for demonstrations in front of the office of the Xinhua News Agency in Hong Kong. (Xi Yang was a reporter from mainland China employed by a local newspaper here.)

I don't know how Mr. Patten can be privy to the thinking of the Chinese judiciary. But here in Hong Kong we have had countless demonstrations in front of Government House, and I do not think that they have affected Mr. Patten's decisions that much. I remember the occasion when a large number of air stewardesses staged a "sleep-in" under cold weather for days outside government house, to air their complaint, but with very little consequence.

I understand the feelings of the demonstrators who demanded Mr. Xi Yang's release. But I also notice that the Chinese government, up to this date, has insisted that his arrest, trial and sentence had all been done according to law, and that he was allowed parole for his repentance and good behaviour. In that

sense, those who denounced the arrest and imprisonment as illegal could hardly make any headway with the Chinese authorities. I do know of people who had tried their best to speak for Xi Yang to the Chinese authorities, and to vouch for his good character and behaviour.

Come July 1 this year, Hong Kong shall be returned to China and set up as a Special Administrative Region under the concept of "one country, two systems". China has made clear that it is in her interests to implement the "one country, two systems". Hong Kong is to continue to develop into an international centre of commerce, finance, shipping, transport and communication, as well as an international centre of information. This will imply a free flow of information. We stress "one country, two systems". We realise that the operation of the press is different in the two systems. Properly managed, this can only be of benefit to China.

So come July 1, we will see a change from the "freedom of the press" under Patten, to freedom of the press under Mr. C. H. Tung, who is our Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Is that the same freedom of the press; will there be differences? I will contend that there will be differences. Let me cite two examples.

When Mr. Patten arrived in Hong Kong to be Governor, the press here covered it, writing about how he dressed in his suit, how cute his daughters looked in their hats, how Mrs. Patten was impressed with the so many rooms in Government House, and how "Whisky" and "Soda" were the names of their two dogs. None of the cowed press ever raised the questions: what right does Mr. Patten have to govern Hong Kong? How much did he know about Hong Kong, and how much did the people of Hong Kong know about him? (The answers to the last two questions are both practically nil.) This was the "free and lively" press after 150 years of colonial rule.

But when Mr. C. H. Tung ran for Chief Executive of the SAR last year, the local press queried his qualifications, his background, and his business associates, asked questions about the electoral process, whether it was democratic enough, and conducted public opinion polls to gauge his popularity as compared to other candidates. Would you say this is manifestation of the same freedom of the press?

Second example, we have a suspected case of government cover-up recently in Hong Kong. Last summer our Immigration

chief suddenly retired. The government initially said that he retired voluntarily "for personal reasons". Now we know that in fact the government fired him. But in the later part of 1996 there appeared quite a number of negative reports in the British press about this former Immigration chief, a Chinese named Leong. The British press quoted government sources saying that Leong was a spy recruited by the Chinese government, that he passed along confidential information, that he handed, as a favour, the lucrative contract for the printing of the SAR passport to a Chinese firm. None of these were true, and have been established to be entirely groundless, though the British press never published any retraction. The local press did not report these stories, because it would be libelous. But the British press did, and they quoted government official sources. You can see that there sure is press freedom, but WHOSE press freedom?

So you may end up having two views about press freedom in Hong Kong. Mr. Patten will want you to believe we have had press freedom since the early colonial days, and this press freedom is now threatened by Communist China.

Just as in the past when the Opium War was presented as a conflict between progress and China's backward closed-door policy, so now the return of Hong Kong to China is couched in Cold War ideological terms: that a "free" society is being threatened by Communist authoritarianism. One so-called "democrat" highly regarded by Mr. Patten had likened the return of Hong Kong to China to "the handover of six million Jews to the Nazis". This is undoubtedly one point of view.

But there is another view, the Chinese view, and I believe also the view of all people who had lived and suffered under colonialism. And that view is that real freedom of the press can only be achieved with the ending of colonialism. Of course even after we get rid of colonialism we still have to work for our freedom, or even struggle for it, because I believe freedom can only be won, and is never bestowed. But the ending of colonialism gives us hope for freedom of the press, as the transition period has already given us indications.

With these two different views there are different attitudes. Those who take the first view feel sadness. Those who take the second view welcome July 1 with jubilation. Do you share our joy or their sadness? Which side are you on? ■