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1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Scollon, R., Hong Kong newspapers on the pre-transitional stage, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 2, 1997, 48-59.

Available at:<http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss2/5>

Hong Kong Newspapers On The Pre-Transitional Stage¹

Modern newspapers in Hong Kong have evolved over a period of more than 100 years from mission-based periodicals in an awkward Chinese interlanguage to one of the world's most diverse theatres of public discourse. While Hong Kong newspapers have largely begun as mouthpieces of interest groups, a formula of combining governmental and commercial interests has brought them onto the contemporary stage as vigorous and active representatives of worldwide journalistic practice. This article outlines a view of the public discourse of Hong Kong newspapers as it looks now and in historical perspective as a base for comparison as Hong Kong journalism moves through the current political transition.

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Journalists throughout the world are focusing their attention on Hong Kong as we approach the change of sovereignty from Britain to China. From the beginning Hong Kong publishing has been sensitive to historical governmental changes. The first newspaper opened shortly after the "Toleration Edict" of 1844 allowed James Legge's mission to move to Hong Kong from Malacca. When the Japanese occupied Shanghai in the middle of this century, other newspapers moved from there to Hong Kong.

My purpose here is not to look into some crystal ball to predict whether we will find another round of changes to Hong Kong journalism in the post-transitional period; that is the daily work of journalists around the world. My purpose is to outline a view of the public discourse of Hong Kong newspapers as it looks now and in historical perspective as a base for comparison as Hong Kong journalism moves through the current political transition.

Like newspapers everywhere, Hong Kong newspapers reflect the particular historical and cultural conditions of the communities in which they are read. Since at least the Peking Gazette (*Jingbao*) of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese newspapers have been based in a combination of commercial interest and the affairs of a central government. This formula is at odds with the more familiar separation of official gazettes and commercial press in

Europe and thus may lead to a misunderstanding of the historical relationship between journalism and government in China. This commercial interest in selling the news of the government remains a central function of today's Hong Kong newspapers.

Newspapers in Hong Kong also depart from expectations elsewhere in that the introduction of television did not, or has not yet, produced a major shock to either the diversity of papers available nor to the overall circulations. Linguistically and stylistically, Hong Kong newspapers continue to present a kaleidoscope of genres, stories, features, and other items that parallel and interact with television but do not yet, at least, show any diminishing effects.

While I will not predict what changes we will see, if any, following the change in sovereignty, this historical and contemporary stage setting will give us a basis for seeing that Hong Kong newspapers depart in important ways from journalistic practices elsewhere.

Empire and commerce are the two sources of what have become newspapers in the world--empires publishing official announcements of happenings and commercial interests publishing saleable accounts of newsworthy events. As in the case of the *Acta Diurna* of the Rome of Julius Caesar (c.59BC), the *bao* in China from the Tang (618-907) through to the end of the Qing (1644-1911) were government releases through an official office to private printers who published these 'gazettes' for commercial profit (Britton 1966[1933]:8-9). Thus what was a government monopoly of news in the empire of Rome was a government sourced but privately exploited enterprise in the Chinese empire.²

The *bao* of China contained news of the doings of the imperial court and, as it was the goal of students throughout China to pass the imperial exams and come to participate in the life of this court, the *bao* were read particularly avidly by students and exam-takers throughout China for hints they could glean of the inner workings of the court that would prove the key to success. In addition to such governmental news, the nineteenth century China *Shinwen Zhi* (literally 'news paper') of single events sold in the streets were an adjunct to a printer's other printing business. Earlier at the time of the Han (206BC - 24 AD) as well as Tang (618-907) there were the *Dibao*, also commercially printed accounts of occasional events.

In Britain, up until the eighteenth century, newsbooks were published in which single battles and other major events were recounted. Like the writers of the *yomiuri* in Japan during the

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Tokugawa period (1603-1867) and the *bao* in China, the writers of these newsbooks remained anonymous (EB 1992,26:432). The role of the writers of these texts was, to use Goffman's (1974, 1981) terminology, that of animators. That is to say, they wrote down what they had heard with no claims being made either to unique authorship or to ownership of the text. There were, of course, no forms of copyright legislation. Britton (1966[1933]) points out, however, that in the case of the *bao*, a higher price was paid for the copies made by hand by the printer's scribes than for the block-cut and printed copies. That is to say, while authorship of the text was not considered particularly valuable in commercial practice, the quality of the author's calligraphy was valued.

Before entering into the history of the modern newspaper directly, it is important to focus on the distinction between the government press and the commercial press. Governments of the new European nation states published official gazettes; that is they used publication in these gazettes as the means for the official promulgation of governmental positions, regulations, and laws.

Britton (1966[1933]:8-9) relates that what was called the *Qingbao* ('paper of the Qing government') or the *Jingbao* ('paper of the capitol') in Chinese was called the *Peking Gazette* in English. This led the British government at the time of the Boxer Uprising (1898-1901) to make a serious mistake regarding the intentions of the Qing government. The British understood the *Peking Gazette* to be the official organ of the Qing government and demanded of this government that they publish (that they 'gazette') a formal denunciation of the anti-British activities of the Boxers. Of course, the Qing government was no more or less able to use this source officially than, say, the government of Margaret Thatcher was able to use the Times to promulgate government positions.

What is at issue here is not official as opposed to unofficial releasing of governmental positions so much as the British assumption that a newspaper which published 'official' news must, in fact, not have been a private, commercial enterprise. Nevertheless, the British used what they called the Qing government's refusal to publish a formal statement as the basis for taking a hardened attitude in the affairs which led to the later clashes between British and Chinese.

The first newspapers which are recognizably modern are the eighteenth century British (and other European) newspapers in which two major elements, the local emphasis of the old newsbooks and the foreign translated news of the courants were merged. Added to these two elements were added a strong commercial strand in financial and shipping news, and the modern

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daily newspaper was established. In incorporating these elements, the newspaper embodied the major themes of rational discourse, cosmopolitanism, secularism, scientific exploration, colonization, and commercialism so often associated with the Europe of the Enlightenment. The first modern Chinese newspapers, the papers established by missionary and trading interests, reflected this same mix of foreign, local, and commercial themes.

In Britain, in his tri-weekly paper, *Review* (1704-13), Daniel Defoe introduced editorial and opinion articles to the news and information content and in what is perhaps one of the most important aspects of the development of the modern daily newspaper, the *Daily Advertiser* (1730-1807) introduced advertisements. That is to say, from nearly its inception, the modern newspaper engaged in the Janus-like commercial enterprise of selling news and information to its readers on the one hand and selling its readers and their potential pocketbooks to advertisers on the other. This dual source of funding of the enterprise of making the news by selling the customer (the reader) to another customer (the advertiser) has been the economic basis of virtually all commercial -- that is, non-governmental, non-organizational -- newspapers since the European Enlightenment.

The first Chinese daily newspaper was the *Zhongwai Shinbao*³ which began publishing in Hong Kong in 1858 (Ge 1985[1926], Li Jiayuan 1989) or 1860 (Britton 1966[1933]). Today scores of newspapers of a wide variety of styles and contents are published, some of which have been published continuously, if not since the first paper, at least since early in the twentieth century. Since the 1949 revolution another set of newspapers has arisen in the People's Republic of China which represent the Beijing government if not as direct official gazettes, as party mouthpieces. Furthermore, another group of newspapers has grown up in Taiwan, directly owned either by the government or by the Kuomintang Party. Finally, there are papers in many of the other major Chinese communities around the world.

The first newspapers, following upon earlier publication of Chinese language periodicals published outside of the tradition of the *Jingbao*, were published by British missionaries in the early nineteenth century at Malacca where they would be out of reach of Chinese authorities. Robert Morrison and William Milne, both of the London Mission Society, were not highly competent speakers or writers of Chinese according to Britton. They wrote in a style which in these days we might generously call an interlanguage. A poor and poorly educated Chinese named Liang A-fa was

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schooled by these missionaries in this written Chinese interlanguage of theirs and came to be one of their most prolific writers.

At the same time there was a monthly magazine produced at Canton by one Karl Freidrich [*sic*] August Gutzlaff. While Britton says that there were no Chinese associated with writing for this magazine, it embodied the missionary agenda of improving the Chinese through introducing a view of western society and technology. To this end Gutzlaff went so far as to engage in various hoaxes such as publishing things purportedly by Chinese writers, including a letter "from a Chinese girl in Europe to her aunt in China, describing the condition of women in England" (Britton, p. 25).

Gutzlaff's propagandistic attempts to forge a view of English women as an ideological standard for Chinese can be seen, of course, as a crude bit of nineteenth century colonialism. What should not be lost sight of is that in doing so he was participating in an ideological move in which this same view of women was being forged for and enforced upon English women themselves (Shevlow, 1989).

These earliest periodical publications--they were not dailies, but appeared on a wide variety of publication schedules--emphasized scientific and technological topics on the theory that these would be most attractive topics from the point of view of the Chinese. It seems likely that this strategy was borrowed from earlier Jesuit missionaries to China such as the famous Matteo Ricci (Spence 1984), though apparently without the same linguistic or literary erudition.

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When the December 1844 "Toleration Edict" ended the prohibition on missions, James Legge, principal of the Anglo-Chinese College, 'moved college and press in 1843 from Malacca to HK' (Britton, p. 34). Apart from the minor anachronism of Britton's account, it is clear that the Chinese newspapers owed much to English missionary activity. Legge's influence was considerable from the beginning through his assistant Wang T'ao who worked with Legge in translating and editing his monumental editions of the Chinese classics. Wang T'ao founded the *Shunwan Yatpo* (*Xunwan Ribao*, 'The Universal Circulating Herald'), which combined the features of both *Jingbao* and the foreign newspaper. There were sections of edicts and memorials in the fashion of the *Peking Gazette* as well as sections of local Guangzhou and Guangdong news, and also sections of China and international news. The style of Wang T'ao's newspaper ran to literary in the main sections.

The first Chinese newspapers were 'born out of' English papers, a phrase used in both English and Chinese language historical accounts. The first paper, the *Zhongwai Shinbao* was printed on the press of George N. Ryder's The Hongkong Daily Press. This paper remained in publication for sixty-one years up to 1919. Britton emphasizes, nevertheless, that these early papers were 'wholly financed and managed by Chinese' (p. 39). From the beginning they manifested considerable managerial and economic independence from their counterpart papers on whose presses they were printed.

Britton as well as Li Jiayuan (1989) argue that the early Chinese writers and editors achieved considerable influence in both Chinese and foreign circles. For many of them establishing a newspaper was an initial step in an auspicious public career. Li points out that from the founding of the Republic in 1911, the editors in Hong Kong and Guangzhou emphasized editorials over news reporting and as a result became extremely powerful. While virtually all Chinese papers in both Hong Kong and Shanghai were begun as mouthpieces of movements, newspapers with a strong political or ideological position tended to die off quickly.

For most of the Chinese papers as well as the English ones, the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during the Second World War produced either a suspension of their activities or brought their publication to an end. In some cases, such as the *South China Morning Post*, the Japanese took over the newspaper to turn to their own wartime uses (Hutcheon 1983).

While Hong Kong was the first center of publication of Chinese periodicals and has remained a major center of such publication, Shanghai came to be China's main publishing center and remained so up until the Japanese occupation at the beginning of the Second World War. Publication in Shanghai was not only in Chinese and in English, but in many other languages as well. Of European languages, Russian publications outnumbered English, Portuguese, French, German, Italian. Of Asian languages Japanese was the most widely used language of publication (p.62).

One should not forget, however, that when one writes 'Chinese' there is a serious ambiguity involved. This might mean a half-learned interlanguage of missionaries as taught to an otherwise illiterate Chinese assistant in some cases. In Shanghai it often meant what was called 'easy *wenli*', that is, documentary or book syntax, using only the most familiar and frequent characters, and the complete absence of literary allusions. These three features in themselves would make this language, if not unintelligible, at least unacceptable, to literate Chinese. While such

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'easy *wenli*' or the missionaries' rudimentary interlanguage Chinese might, in fact, represent an early influence in the later development of the *baihua* or vernacular form of writing, at the time it was largely regarded as being beneath educated Chinese to read these so-called 'Chinese' publications. The appeal of these publications remained largely to the masses of lesser educated Chinese. Furthermore, in addition to publications in foreign languages and this strange form of Chinese, there were publications in Chinese regional languages or dialects such as Amoy, Hakka, Taiwanese, Swatow -- in some cases written in romanized form.

In the turmoil leading up to the Second World War, the publishing strength of Shanghai began to decline. For example, at least one of Hong Kong's current papers *Ta Kung Pao* moved from Shanghai in 1938 to avoid being closed by Japanese, according to Li Jiayuan (1989).

Chinese newspapers, while beginning as mouthpieces for particular points of view, ⁴ succeeded only to the extent they developed a commercial base of financing. Nevertheless, the role of editors and their editorial viewpoints has remained strong since the early revolutionary period. In addition to the editors, translators of foreign news have played a major role in the development of Chinese papers since, except for news collected by *Xinhua* (New China News Agency, the news gathering organ of the government of the People's Republic of China) most foreign news is received by Chinese newspapers in languages other than Chinese.

Throughout this century there has been considerable debate among Chinese analysts about what might be the characteristics of good or bad journalism. Lin (1936:136), for example, contrasts 'Chinese' and 'good' newsworthiness.

CHINESE	GOOD
official	impartial
correct	truthful
friendly	provocative
time tested	quick
untouched	well-educated

He chides various Chinese newspapers for not upholding the standards of 'good' journalism, standards which, of course, reflect values now widely trumpeted among journalists of the West. On this point it should be born in mind that even in Western journalism the appearance of 'objectivity' could not be taken for

granted. The American Federal Communication Commission in wartime 1941 ruled that 'the broadcaster cannot be an advocate' (EB 1992 8:661). This view, specifically regarding electronic broadcasting, was echoed by the National Association of Broadcasters which stated, "Since the number of broadcasting channels is limited, news broadcasts shall not be editorial" (EB, 1992 8:661).

There may be a matter here of invidious comparison of Chinese newspapers with foreign (i.e. 'good') newspapers in the case of Lin. There is a revisionist assumption that standards created to regulate the limited number of radio and television channels and also reflecting wartime conditions should be applied to print media for which no such limit need be imagined. There remains today a tendency to see 'Chineseness' in a newspaper as representing the characteristics named by Lin and 'good quality' as being those of Western, foreign or internationalist values.

This latter view is clearly expressed in a recent article comparing news reports of the Gulf War in the *People's Daily of Beijing* and the *Oriental Daily News of Hong Kong* (Li Tsze Sun 1993). This report written by a scholar and former newspaperman chides the Beijing paper, naming qualities much like those mentioned by Lin. On the other hand he commends the Hong Kong paper for its quality of independence, delivering the following summary statement of what it means to express the highest quality in a newspaper, independence. "A newspaper cannot be truly 'independent' if it fails to meet two requirements: (1) having its own voice, style and preferences; and (2) adopting an international perspective based on fundamental human values, such as mutual respect, justice, equality, freedom, human rights and peace" (Li Tsze Sun 1993:20).

In this regard it is interesting to see that in some cases the objectivity of a newspaper is prejudged by readers. In a study of 14 versions of the same *Xinhua* news story in papers ranging from *The People's Daily* to the *South China Morning Post* it was found that there were often very minor alterations made in the versions appearing across the political and popular spectrum; nevertheless, fairly large judgments of difference were assumed (Scollon and Scollon, 1997). In one case what was virtually an identical story word for word in *The People's Daily* and in *Ming Pao* was said to be propaganda in the first case and an example of thoughtful, independent journalism in the second. It is clear that these judgments were not based on the texts themselves which did not vary but on the readers' assumptions about how each news organization would present the news.

In summary, from the beginning in the nineteenth century, newspapers in Hong Kong, Chinese as well as English ones have

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been associated with 'foreign' news and interests, much like modern newspapers everywhere. They have been established and maintained as mouthpieces of highly particularistic points of view, often maintaining not only the same editorial policy but the same editor for as long as sixty years (Li Jiayuan, 1989). At the same time, no papers have survived for any length of time which have not consolidated their survival as strong commercial enterprises.

The number of newspapers for sale in Hong Kong compared with the population of Hong Kong indicates that most adults read newspapers and most readers of papers read more than a single newspaper. A conservative estimate is that there are some 2.5 million daily newspapers sold, not including entertainment papers, horse racing, or newspapers for which circulation figures are not registered with the International Yearbook (Phillips 1993) in a population of approximately six million residents).⁵ This estimate is confirmed by interviews which indicate that newspaper reading is common among both men and women (though, of course, with some significant differences in topical and sectional interests).

While I have not established in my own research just how the different newspapers are distributed demographically in Hong Kong, Lo and Wong (1990), Chiu (1991), Fan and Lo (1993), Li (Tsze Sun 1993), and McIntyre (1995) provide some information on the social and class ranking of papers.

Wang (1991) gives a list of 'the most important Hong Kong newspapers' in alphabetical order which, perhaps coincidentally places the two papers which represent the views of the Beijing Government in first and second places and others less sympathetic to that view considerably further down the list. While this is might be an accidentally political oriented ordering of the papers, one should not lose sight of the fact that the 'standard' ordering of papers by circulation numbers also represents an ideological commitment to the commercial/advertising aspect of newspaper production.

Linguistically it is clear that the readership of newspapers is not so bifurcated into distinct communities as is otherwise found in the speech community (Luke and Richards 1982, Pierson to 1997). Hutcheon (1983), for example, reports that while the *South China Morning Post* is an 'English' newspaper, sixty percent of its readers are Chinese, by which he means local Hong Kong Chinese residents. It is likely that not so many expatriates are regular readers of Chinese language newspapers as the number of bilingual expatriates is generally very low.

Overview
Of Present
Stage

There are a number of points of comparison and contrast by which Hong Kong journalistic studies might enrich our understanding of public discourse in general. For example, it is perhaps commonly thought in the West that there is a close connection between a privately owned, commercial press and freedom or independence of editorial material. Conversely, it is thought that the control of the press by autocratic governments can be fended off by the establishment of a privately owned, commercial press. Nevertheless, the existence of the *Jingbao*, newspapers of official court news, as a privately owned, commercial press at the service of the court of the Qing and earlier Chinese empires belies both of these assumptions.

A second truism in Western journalism has been that the introduction of television has always and everywhere lead to the eclipse of the daily newspaper as a source of editorial material and to the massive increase of the role of advertising in newspapers. This has not been the case in Hong Kong. The introduction of broadcast television did not, apparently, have a significant effect on the newspaper industry, nor has the more recent impact of home video seriously undermined the very high levels of daily newspaper circulation.

For well over one hundred years newspaper publishing in Hong Kong has been an active theatre of public discourse which is multilingual, diverse in interests, socially and topically compartmentalized, and tightly associated with commercial interests. Furthermore, there has been a strong association with scientific, technological, and industrial 'utilitarian' values, whatever the editorial slant taken on these values might be. The language of these newspapers has been pragmatically grounded in the common language of the readers with the relatively anti-elitist point of view inherited from the earliest journalists and their readers. Finally, the role of the editor is the dominating role, not that of the individual journalists, translators, or reporters.

While the Hong Kong newspaper shares much in common with modern newspapers around the world, and while the Hong Kong newspaper also continues a long Chinese tradition of public reporting of news, what remains most distinctive in the present is the variety of styles, points of view, and, indeed, of separate publications and publishing companies. It has been argued that elsewhere commercial pressures have been the main pressures which have forced consolidation, monopolization, and homogenization of the media of public discourse (Bagdikian 1990). In spite of the strong alliance of Hong Kong newspapers with similar commercial interests and pressures, at least as of this writing, Hong Kong newspapers represent one of the world's most diversified theatres of public discourse.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on a research conducted at City University of Hong Kong supported by a grant 'Two Types of Journalistic Objectivity' and in part by the Public Discourse Research Group, Department of English.
2. A full history of newspaper publishing in Hong Kong has yet to be written. Britton (1966 [1933]) provides a number of insights as of the pre-World War II period as does Ge (1985 [1926]), a primary source for both Britton and Li Jiayuan (1989). Early historical studies of Chinese periodicals are Wang (1924) and Lin (1936). Recent historical treatments of *South China Morning Post* are Hutcheon (1983) and Fong (1992).
3. It is always difficult to choose a Romanization of historical Chinese names. Here I use the *pinyin* system of Romanization, but Britton, for example, uses an earlier, Cantonese-based spelling *Chung Ngon San Po* as do many of the Chinese newspapers to this day.
4. According to Hutcheon, the major contemporary English newspaper, *South China Morning Post*, founded in 1903 by Tse Tsan-Tai and Alfred Cunningham, also fit into this pattern of partisan identification. He writes, 'their aim was to use the newspaper as the mouthpiece of China's reform movement' (1983:11).
5. Kent (1994) is a useful general survey of both the methods used in making such estimates of readership and the problems entailed in such methods. Because newspapers sell advertising space on the basis of the number of readers they can promise, independent surveys are somewhat more reliable than the newspapers' own accounts.

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