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Strategic Interaction, Cultural Co-orientation, and Press Freedom in Hong Kong

Francis L. F. Lee

This article discusses press freedom in Hong Kong since the handover. It argues that in the immediate years after reunification, the strategic interaction between the media and the power holders within a commonly accepted framework has contributed to an 'equilibrium condition' in which there was no huge and apparent loss of press freedom. The equilibrium was maintained by a clear distinction between national and local issues. At the same time, the handover has led to processes of cultural co-orientation which further 'de-problematized' news coverage of certain sensitive national issues. Nevertheless, political developments in recent years have led to the breakdown of the national–local boundary. The original equilibrium was destabilized, which led to renewed concerns of press freedom in the city.

Keywords: Press Freedom; Strategic Interaction; Cultural Co-orientation; National–Local Conflicts; Self-censorship

Introduction

Although Hong Kong has never been an independent and democratic country, a confluence of social and historical conditions has generated a 'tradition of press freedom' in the city. As Hong Kong developed into a refugee society after the Second World War, the press was largely oriented towards Chinese politics. The media were allowed to criticize the Communist regime in the Mainland and the KMT regime in Taiwan insofar as they did not challenge the colonial authority (Lee, 2000).

The media shifted their major orientation towards local issues only in the late 1970s. But this development coincided with the beginning of the negotiation on sovereignty transfer. In the subsequent transition period (1984–1997), Hong Kong

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was marked by a dual power structure in which political power was relatively balanced between the British and Chinese forces. It resulted in an unprecedented level of freedom for the Hong Kong press to criticize both the Chinese and British/Hong Kong governments.

But with China destined to emerge as the sole power center, the media have also begun to adjust to the post-handover situation long before 1997. In the early 1990s, observers already identified problematic developments such as shifts in journalistic paradigms (Chan & Lee, 1991), media self-censorship (Lee, 1998), and infiltration of Chinese and pro-China capital into the media system (Fung & Lee, 1994). Without conspicuously and abruptly undermining press freedom, these processes gradually altered journalistic practices, the media landscape, and the boundaries of media discourse.

Then, how free has the Hong Kong press been after the handover? What have been the major challenges facing journalists and media organizations? How did the Hong Kong media struggle for their freedom? Was self-censorship widespread? And on what kinds of issues has self-censorship been particularly serious? What has been the relationship between press freedom and the process of re-nationalization?

This article discusses these questions and attempts to provide a conceptual account of the development of press freedom in Hong Kong. More specifically, it focuses on three processes which have shaped the post-handover development of press freedom in the city. The first process is the strategic interaction between the media and the power holders. While the Chinese government has employed various strategies to domesticate the Hong Kong media, different types of media responded to the political pressure in different ways. Second, reunification was followed by increased interactions between the Hong Kong media and the Chinese government, as well as between the Hong Kong society and the Mainland at large. The resulting process of cultural co-orientation has reduced conflicts between the Hong Kong media and China on a number of sensitive national issues. Lastly, political developments after 2003 have led to the re-emergence of national–local conflicts, which led to renewed concerns of press freedom. The following sections discuss the three processes in turn, while the concluding section summarizes and discusses the implications of the analysis.

Strategic Interactions in the Struggle for Press Freedom

Legally speaking, the Basic Law, the mini-constitution of the Special Administrative Region (SAR), acknowledges the need to maintain freedom of the press and expression in the city. Article 27 states that Hong Kong residents shall have ‘freedom of speech, of the press, and of publication’. However, the legal framework does not provide unequivocal protection for press freedom. Laws and provisions that can be used to suppress press freedom continued to exist. Article 23 of the Basic Law, in particular, states that the SAR government has to enact anti-secession laws on its own. Moreover, the National People’s Congress of China holds the right to interpret the

Basic Law. As legal scholar Anne Cheung (2001) argues, 'the Hong Kong press may never know the scope of its freedom' under such a legal framework (p. 93).

Nevertheless, like its colonial predecessor, the Chinese and SAR governments have been reluctant to activate the legal minefield. Weakness in legal protection, hence, may not prevent the presence of at least a certain degree of press freedom, if by the latter we mean a situation in which government censorship and media self-censorship are relatively absent. This situation can be the result of the strategic interactions among actors with different concerns and interests. In fact, the handover marked the beginning of a new strategic game between the local media and the Chinese and SAR governments. Understanding this strategic game is crucial to our understanding of press freedom in Hong Kong.

Broadly speaking, China was motivated to demonstrate the feasibility of 'one country, two systems', especially to Taiwan. Hence it has largely refrained from openly and publicly intervening into Hong Kong affairs in the first few years after 1997.¹ There was no formal, pre-publication censorship system imposed in the city. Unlike in the Mainland, the SAR government does not have any power to remove top level editors or close down media outlets in Hong Kong.

It does not mean that the Chinese government did not attempt to control the Hong Kong media. Even before the handover, Chinese officials had already stated a 'three nos' policy for the Hong Kong media: no advocacy for Taiwan/Tibet independence, no engagement in subversive activities, and no personal attack on national leaders (Lee & Chu, 1998). This policy sets up the limits of acceptable press coverage. Yet noticeably, the three no-go areas are all concerned with national issues. The policy does not touch upon local matters at all. Again, the Chinese government did not want to be criticized for encroaching upon freedom in Hong Kong. Hence it turned to strategies aiming at inducing media self-censorship. It thus kick-started the strategic interaction between the media and the power holders. Three strategies adopted by the Chinese government are particularly noteworthy.

First, the Chinese government could influence the Hong Kong media through co-opting media owners, who may have various kinds of business interests in the Mainland (see Fung, this volume). The owners may not dictate daily news operation, but they can exercise influence through making basic allocative decisions, such as the use of resources and hiring of top level personnel. In fact, after the handover, concerns with press freedom were occasionally raised by the major personnel decisions of media organizations. Among the most prominent cases was *South China Morning Post's* decision in November 2000 to relieve Willy Wo-lap Lam, a famous China-critic, from his role of director of the paper's China coverage. Lam subsequently resigned. Another example was radio broadcaster Metro Finance's decision to sack its managing editor Paul Cheung Chung-wah in August 2002. Cheung claimed that his sacking came after he was ordered to tone down reports on the then Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, the Falun Gong spiritual movement, and business tycoon and station owner Li Ka-shing (HKJA & Article 19, 2003). It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these decisions were politically motivated.

But as long as journalists take them as such, they signal what is and is not appropriate. In other words, these decisions could effectively set up norms for news coverage.

Norms of 'political correctness' were also set up by Chinese officials' occasional comments on and criticisms towards the Hong Kong media. In 1999 and 2000, Chinese officials have more than once criticized the Hong Kong media's handling of the pro-Taiwan-independence viewpoint. In October 2000, in response to a question from a Hong Kong journalist about the Central government's attitude towards the Chief Executive election, then Chinese President Jiang Zemin infamously criticized the journalist and the Hong Kong media as 'naive'. Then, in the wake of the July 1 demonstration in 2003, in which 500,000 citizens protested against national security legislation, Chinese officials pinpointed a number of Hong Kong media outlets as major mobilizers behind the demonstration.²

The Hong Kong media did not simply succumb to the political pressure. Instead, these occasions of overt criticisms from Chinese officials marked the times the Hong Kong media went directly and openly against the Chinese government by re-emphasizing the principle of press freedom and their understanding of journalistic professionalism (Lau & To, 2002). Yet the messages from the Chinese officials were sent out nonetheless. The Hong Kong media came to know what would irritate China.

Third, the Chinese government was also adept in employing 'strategic ambiguity' (Cheung, 2003) in inducing self-censorship, particularly by giving out warnings without defining the key terms. This strategy was evident even before the handover. In 1994, *Ming Pao* reporter Xi Yang was sentenced to 12 years in jail in Mainland China for stealing state secrets. What were troubling to the Hong Kong media were not only the severity of the punishment and the opacity of the trial process, but also China's refusal to clearly define 'state secret'.³ Similarly, while the Chinese government has repeatedly warned the Hong Kong media not to 'advocate' Taiwan independence, the difference between 'advocacy' and 'reporting' has never been clarified.

When a boundary is clearly drawn, people can stand as close to the boundary as possible. When a boundary is blurred, the safe strategy is to stay away. As Lee (1998) explicates, self-censorship results from journalists *imagining* that an action would incur punishment. Strategic ambiguity is effective in widening the space of such imagination.

Nevertheless, self-censorship was far from the only response from the Hong Kong media towards political pressure. The Hong Kong media are mostly commercial organizations. They have to compete with, and hence respond to, each other. Besides, journalists in mainstream media are professionals largely adhering to the norms of liberal journalism (Chan, Lee, & Lee, 1996). Most citizens also support the principles of press freedom and media as independent actors monitoring the power holders (Lee, Chan, & So, 2005). Certainly, the Hong Kong society and media market are pluralistic. Some media outlets have become more pro-China over time, while others have de-politicized themselves.⁴ But when defending press freedom is concerned, it is

significant that some media organizations, because of their concerns with credibility and professional integrity, have attempted to develop methods to handle the political pressure without hugely compromising their professionalism.

Drawing upon Tuchman (1978), Lee (2000) called such responses ‘strategic rituals’, defined as the ‘peculiar and twisted ways that media organizations routinize their news work in order to credibly meet extraordinary political pressure and to uphold their own limited legitimacy’ (p. 317). Examples of strategic rituals include the increasing use of juxtapositions between positive and negative views towards the power holders, the increasing use of polls as ‘scientific’ indicators of public opinions, the increasing use of academics as ‘a-political’ authorities on public affairs, and the adoption of rhetorical strategies to construct ‘neutral and objective’ editorials and commentaries.

With these techniques, ‘professionalism’ becomes a self-defense when the media are criticized. Arguably, part of the Hong Kong media has intensified their objective approach to news since the handover. However, objectivity is a two-edged sword. Practices of objective journalism—e.g. emphasis on hard facts, concerns with formal titles of sources, balance of viewpoints—have long been criticized for leading to the lack of journalistic responsibility and a bias towards the establishment (e.g. Glasser, 1992; Tuchman, 1978). In Hong Kong, whether journalistic objectivity is a helpful tool to fight against political pressure or merely a disguise of self-censorship has to be evaluated in a case-by-case manner.

Structurally speaking, whether an objective media can provide diverse viewpoints would depend on whether critical opinions in the society are vocal enough and whether alternative channels exist to allow such opinions to be expressed. This is the background against which the talk radio phenomenon can be understood. Rising in prominence since the mid-1990s (Lee, 2002), several radio talk shows and their hosts have acquired additional significance after the handover. Besides being popular among radio audience, the shows were highly rated by professional journalists as a ‘representative’ channel of public opinion expression. As Lee, Chan, and So (2003) explained, journalists rated talk radio highly partly because the medium allowed them to adopt the gesture of ‘objective reporting’ when covering the critical views aired through the shows.

The popularity of talk radio and the newspaper *Apple Daily*, which adopts an anti-government and pro-democracy editorial line, demonstrates the existence of a market for media outlets critical towards the power holders. The few outlets which dared to tap into this market thus served as *boundary testers* in the media scene. They enlarged the space for other media outlets to operate. The demise of critical talk radio, to be discussed later, thus represented a significant loss.

But at least before 2004, the strategic interaction outlined above had maintained a more or less stable equilibrium. Political pressure was applied by China only with indirect methods, and media organizations interested in maintaining their professionalism responded with a range of defensive strategies. The presence of a few

boundary testers further ensured the apparent robustness of press freedom, even though self-censorship remained a recurrent concern.

From Self-censorship to Cultural Co-orientation

As stated earlier, media self-censorship has long been highlighted as a major problem in Hong Kong. After the handover, perceptions of self-censorship remained widespread among professional journalists. In a recent survey of Hong Kong journalists conducted in 2006,⁵ 26.6% of journalists reported that self-censorship existed and was 'very serious', while 47.2% reported that self-censorship existed 'but is not very serious'. Only 3.2% reported that there was no self-censorship at all.

Perceptions of self-censorship also existed, though to a lesser extent, among the general public. A series of university-conducted polls show that, since September 1997, the proportion of citizens regarding the practice of media self-censorship as existent has been fluctuating around the 40% level.⁶

Of course, perceptions are not proofs of the existence of self-censorship. So, are there concrete evidence pointing to the problem? Unfortunately, self-censorship is notoriously difficult to pin down. As the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) acknowledged in its 2005 Annual Freedom of Expression Report, 'it is difficult to determine whether the slant of a story, or its omission, is the result of self-censorship or a justifiable editorial decision, a sense of fair play or a fear of libel action' (HKJA & Article 19, 2005, p. 21).

The report then highlights an incident. On July 1, 2004, 200,000 citizens joined a demonstration calling for quicker democratization. Most local media outlets treated the story as the lead item of the day. But Asia Television (ATV) put the story as the third item in the evening's newscast, following reports on the celebrations of the handover anniversary. Unsurprisingly, top level personnel at ATV's news department denied self-censorship. The HKJA report also does not claim that self-censorship was committed. It only cited an academic in conclusion: 'I think it was very poor judgment . . . I hope it is an honest mistake rather than somebody instructing the news desk' (HKJA & Article 19, 2005, p. 21). There is basically no way for observers to ascertain if a questionable decision represents an act of self-censorship or the editor's truly independent, if poor, judgment.

The problem is further complicated by the possibility that what started out as a more or less self-conscious act of self-censorship may become rationalized and naturalized over time. In fact, as Hong Kong journalists interact with Chinese officials more frequently and regularly after the handover, they may develop 'a better understanding' of China. This can result in more sympathetic and less skeptical attitudes towards the Mainland and the Chinese government. A top level editor at a major newspaper acknowledged the happening of this process. He opined that the problem of self-censorship in the Hong Kong media is not as serious as most people think. Yet he acknowledged that the news media have become more 'careful' in

rendering judgments of China and China-related issues because journalists came to know the country better after years of coverage.⁷

This can be understood as a process of cultural co-orientation. Following a tradition in communication research focusing on balance, congruence, and convergence in interpersonal interactions (McQuail & Windahl, 1993, pp. 27–37), co-orientation is defined here to refer to the acquisition of better information and achievement of increased understanding between two individuals or groups through interactions, which may lead to convergence in attitudes towards external objects and mutual agreement on issues. For Hong Kong journalists, co-orientation can be the result of a combination of factors, including their increasing interactions with officials and other established sources in Mainland China, the increasing importance of these sources to their work, and attempts of co-optation on the part of the Chinese government and other major institutions in the Mainland. In any case, the overall result is that journalists' 'independent judgments' shifted gradually over time and came closer to China's official views on various issues.

The desirability of this process can be debated. On one hand, we may question if the 'better understanding of China' journalists acquired is a biased understanding derived from a limited range of established sources. On the other hand, it is probably unreasonable to expect journalists not to adjust their attitudes after they experienced more about the country. But regardless of its desirability, cultural co-orientation has important implications on the question of self-censorship. If self-censorship involves journalists acting against their independent judgments, then changes in journalists' 'independent judgments' would alter what is regarded as self-censorship.

Admittedly, the notion of cultural co-orientation and the phenomenon of changing journalistic judgments have yet to receive much systematic empirical examination. Yet we can illustrate the argument here with Hong Kong media's coverage of Taiwan, which has been one of the most sensitive areas for the media in the immediate years after the handover. It can be noted that the topic was sensitive mainly because the Hong Kong media and China used to hold different attitudes towards Taiwan independence. Without supporting Taiwan independence, the Hong Kong media have nonetheless used to treat the issue as a 'legitimate controversy' (Hallin, 1994). When Cable Television defended its interview with the pro-independence Taiwan vice-president Annette Lu in year 2000 by referring to the norm of journalistic objectivity, the broadcaster was essentially arguing that the pro-independence viewpoint deserves a fair hearing in the public arena. For the Chinese government, however, Taiwan independence is not a legitimate controversy. National reunification cannot be subject to debate.

But after the controversies in year 1999 and 2000, Taiwan has not become the center of conflicts between the Hong Kong media and China again. In one sense, it is simply because the media have, since then, refrained from providing a platform for Taiwan politicians to freely explicate their views. Yet underlying this change is probably changing editorial judgments regarding the Taiwan issue rather than the mere exercise of self-censorship. That is, it is plausible that Hong Kong journalists, on

average, have themselves become more pro-unification. In fact, Hong Kong media's treatment of Taiwan independence and pro-independence politicians (such as Chen Shui-bian and Annette Lu) has become more critical over the years. To the extent that the media adopt the view that Taiwan independence is undesirable, Taiwan news is 'de-problematized'. It is not because the media have become more daring or China has become more tolerant. It is because self-censorship becomes a lesser issue when journalists' independent judgment and China's policy line converge.

One may label this internalized self-censorship. But to be fair to the Hong Kong media, a significant proportion of journalists still regard self-censorship as serious. Co-orientation is a matter of degree. Self-censorship, meanwhile, remains a widely discussed issue within the industry itself. Second, if some journalists' and media organizations' attitudes towards China have changed, the attitudes of the Hong Kong public have also changed. Social interactions between Hong Kong people and Mainlanders have increased tremendously since the handover. Although re-nationalization is a complicated and conflict-ridden process, there have been signs showing that Hong Kong people's identification with China has been on the rise (Lee & Chan, 2005). Opinion polls have shown that the percentages of Hong Kong people trusting the Chinese government has increased from 24.5% in 1996 to 45.5% in 2006. Proportion confident in 'one country, two systems' has risen from 42.3% to 70.3% during the same period, while proportion against Taiwan independence has increased from 58.8% to 78.1%.⁸ Co-orientation, in other words, occurs not only between the Hong Kong media and the Chinese government, but also between the Hong Kong society and the Mainland at large.

It is probably not a coincidence that increasing positivity towards China and negativity towards Taiwan independence were accompanied by an increase in the proportion of common people indicating that media self-censorship is absent. According to polls conducted by the University of Hong Kong, although proportion of citizens perceiving the presence of self-censorship has been fluctuating around 40%, the proportion of citizens perceiving 'no self-censorship' has increased from 31.2% in 1997 to 44.8% in 2006. At the same time, the percentage of people claiming that the media did not have any scruple when criticizing China increased from 21.6% right after the handover to 35.3% in April 2006. These poll findings show that self-censorship has become a lesser public issue over the years. They also explain why changes in media's handling of China and Taiwan issues are not likely to be perceived as particularly problematic by the citizens.

The Re-emergence of National–Local Conflicts

As a result of the twin processes of strategic interactions and cultural co-orientation, many observers agreed that a significant degree of press freedom was maintained after the handover (e.g. Holbig, 2003). For a while, the main threat to media freedom seemed to be coming primarily from within the media themselves, as declining ethical standards led to people's distrust in the media and receptivity to the idea of

government media regulation (Yeung, 2000).⁹ The situation changed in 2002, however, when signs began to show that Article 23 of the Basic Law would finally emerge in the SAR government's policy agenda.

It should be noted that the 'equilibrium condition' regarding press freedom discussed above was premised upon the successful maintenance of the distinction between national and local affairs. The 'three nos policy' identified three national matters as no-go areas for the Hong Kong press, whereas the Hong Kong media were happy to pay more attention to local issues. Given Hong Kong's economic downturn and the Tung administration's incompetence in handling various social crises, both the public and the media were highly critical towards the SAR government. As far as local matters were concerned, the media not only played the watchdog role but also carried a 'surrogate democracy' function (Chan & So, 2004): by communicating public opinions and providing forums for policy debates, the media supplemented the underdevelopment of democratic institutions in the city.

The distinction between national and local affairs was finally breached when, in late 2002, the Tung administration decided to act upon Article 23 of the Basic Law and put forward national security legislation. Religious groups, lawyers, and journalists were among the most skeptical towards the proposed law. The government was heavily criticized for not allowing enough time for public consultation, and the proposed legislation was also criticized for providing the government with too much power. The controversy—combined with other social and economic problems—finally led to the historic 2003 July 1 protest (Chan & Lee, this volume). The SAR government was forced to postpone the legislation 'indefinitely'.

Half a year later, the issue of democratic reform, especially the methods for electing the Chief Executive in 2007, came to the fore. Learning from the failure of national security legislation, the Chinese government took up the leading role and insisted from early on that democratic reform in Hong Kong is not only a local issue. The role of the Tung administration was diminished.

The re-emergence of national–local conflicts since 2003 represents a significant new development which has strong implications on press freedom. Such conflicts highlight the contradictions within the 'one country, two systems' formula and foreground the differences in the interests of the city and the interests of the nation on certain key issues. These conflicts can also put the ongoing process of cultural co-orientation into question, as they can highlight some of the fundamental cultural differences between Hong Kong and China. When such conflicts arise, the Hong Kong media have to determine whether they are willing to confront the Chinese government and stand by local public opinions and interests.

How will the media respond to such challenges? No conclusive answer can be given at this stage, but some observations regarding media performance during the Article 23 and democratic reform debates in 2003 and 2004 can be offered here. First, it is obvious that most media organizations have tried to avoid directly confronting China. In the case of Article 23, China remained at the backstage. Although it was widely assumed that China has set certain deadlines and bottom lines for the Tung

administration, the latter remained the target of criticisms. The media thus provided a kind of 'split coverage'. On the one hand, news analysis often focused on what kinds of bottom lines the Chinese government has set for the Tung administration, thus assuming China as the real decision maker. But on the other hand, any criticisms in news coverage and editorials remained targeting at the SAR government.

Attempts to avoid directly confronting China can be seen also in the democratic reform debate. Lee and Lin's (2006) analysis of newspaper editorials showed that even the *Apple Daily*, presumably highly critical towards China, adopted a number of rhetorical strategies to smooth out the radicalism of its criticisms. One strategy employed is de-centralization of the Chinese government. The editorials sometimes criticized mid level Chinese officials for failing to communicate public opinions in Hong Kong to the Central government, while the Central government was treated as an abstract entity beyond the fray.

Direct confrontations with China can also be avoided by turning to objectivity. Lee and Lin's (2006) study pointed to how *Ming Pao's* editorials posited the newspaper as a neutral commentator on a debate between the democrats and the Chinese government. The editorials also emphasized the importance of rational discussion to resolve the issue. As pointed out earlier, the implications of journalistic objectivity in Hong Kong can differ on a case-by-case basis. In the case of democratic reform, a neutral stance may be questionable when the majority public opinion is clearly in favor of quicker democratization, and the emphasis on rational discussion is certainly misplaced when political power is fundamentally unequally distributed.

Moreover, earlier discussion has highlighted the importance of alternative channels for the expression of critical views. Hence significant damage to press freedom in Hong Kong was done when three radio phone-in talk show hosts, all famous for their criticisms towards the Chinese and SAR governments, resigned in quick succession in mid-2004. The event turned particularly ugly when Allen Lee, a veteran politician and one of the three resigned hosts, claimed that one Mainland official has called him at night, praising his wife and daughter before saying that he wanted to talk about his radio show. Lee said his decision to quit was driven by the fear of possible harassment of his family.

It is difficult to prove the exact content and intent of the telephone call. Lee might have been oversensitive and overreacted. But even if it was an overreaction, it happened because of the political pressure building up at the time. Moreover, one may infer from the episode that the Chinese government is willing to mobilize people in its network to apply pressure to specific media personnel through informal and interpersonal channels.

Dubious personnel decisions made by radio broadcasters further undermined the vibrancy of public affairs talk radio. When Albert Cheng, another radio host in the trio, was ready to return to his program, the broadcaster Commercial Radio decided not to renew his contract. In fact, Commercial Radio ended the program *Teacup in a Storm*, which was at the time the most popular radio show in town (including shows of all kinds), and replaced it by a new talk show called *Beginning the Journey on a*

Clear Day. At Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), the public broadcaster in the city, pro-democracy talk show host Ng Chi-sum was transferred from hosting talk shows in the morning, which is prime-time for Hong Kong radio broadcasting, to hosting shows in the afternoon. Expectedly, both broadcasters denied that such moves were politically motivated.

Therefore, critical talk radio emerged as the main casualty in the confrontation between Hong Kong and China from 2003 to 2004. Phone-in talk radio still exists, but their value as the boundary tester for other media outlets has declined.

And it is far from certain whether this will be the last casualty in the media scene. Most recently, the situation facing the public broadcaster RTHK has also been raising concerns. Structurally speaking, RTHK is a government department. Yet RTHK has long vowed to follow the BBC model and maintained its editorial autonomy from any government influence. Of course, even the BBC has been criticized for exercising self-censorship on specific issues, and it is always questionable if a public broadcaster can ever be completely independent. But after the handover, RTHK at least has continued to produce programs critical towards the SAR administration. Paradoxically, the government-funded broadcaster has become a major source of political criticisms in the public arena. During the Tung administration, the political satire offered in several public affairs programs of the broadcaster attracted particular criticisms from conservative politicians, who argued that a public broadcaster should promote government policies rather than undermine the credibility of the government (see HKJA & Article 19, 2006).

There have not been overt attempts to impose government control of RTHK. However, since Chief Executive Donald Tsang assumed office in 2005, there were signs of government attempts to domesticate the broadcaster. Mr. Tsang first attracted criticisms in 2005 by commenting on RTHK's entertainment programming. In January 2006, the government announced the set-up of a committee reviewing public service broadcasting, and critics were concerned if it is a disguise of an attempt to change the role of RTHK. Then, in April 2006, the government's Audit Commission issued a report criticizing RTHK's management for failing to adhere to government regulations on uses of funding. In response, many journalists pointed out the impracticality of asking a news organization to follow a set of rules designed for government bureaucracies. Some journalists believed the government was using the report to undermine the credibility and independence of RTHK (HKJA & Article 19, 2006).

Up to this moment, the future of RTHK seems to remain in a delicate balance. The possibility of the broadcaster acquiring formal independence through corporatization does not seem high. But the Chinese and SAR governments remain interested in maintaining at least the appearance of press freedom in Hong Kong, thus overt control of RTHK is also unlikely. What is certain is that any demise of editorial independence in RTHK would mean the loss of another professional and critical media outlet, which will further reduce the plurality of voices in the public arena.

Conclusion

In sum, the return of Hong Kong to China did not lead to immediate and abrupt decline in press freedom. China is constrained by its own promises of 'one country, two systems' and 'high degree of autonomy'. Although these slogans can be subject to manipulative interpretations, they provide a discourse that the local people can appropriate to defend their own way of life, of which freedom of speech and of the press are a key aspect.

The condition for press freedom thus evolved through a complex dynamics of strategic interactions between the power holders and the local media. The plurality of the Hong Kong media means that there would be no simple and singular response adopted by all, while the fact of market competition means that media organizations have to respond to each other. As Lee (2000) argues, insofar as a significant part of the Hong Kong media have a strong commercial and/or professional orientation, the media would be 'cyclically bold and tame, public-spirited and self-serving', and media reactions to political and economic pressures would be 'highly situational, erratic, partial, and even contradictory' (p. 323).

However, underlying the seemingly erratic fluctuations in media discourses and the continual plurality of media outlets is a trend towards co-orientation between the Hong Kong media and the Chinese government. Changes in media personnel, practices of self-censorship, the turn to objective journalism by some news organizations, rise and fall of critical media outlets, changes in journalists' attitudes, and changes in public opinions at large combine to generate a press that has become less critical towards China over the years. Coverage of national issues has become less 'problematic'. This particular aspect of the Hong Kong experience in the past 10 years thus demonstrates how the media can be domesticated without the application of formal and overt control. The process does not even rely completely on the success of strategies to induce self-censorship. The key to the domestication of the media resides in the interplay between politics and culture, the production of 'common sense' that legitimizes certain social and political orders. As Gramscians would argue, domination without overt coercion is made possible by the manufacturing of consent.

But it does not mean that conflicts between the Hong Kong media and China would completely disappear. There are limits to the processes of co-orientation. The Article 23 debate, for instance, has not only damaged the SAR government's credibility but also reignited Hong Kong people's sense of difference from China. Such conflicts can generate headaches for the Chinese government, because it is much more difficult for China to acquire the consent of the Hong Kong society on such issues. Therefore, issues involving conflicts between Mainland China and Hong Kong have now arguably replaced national issues such as Taiwan independence as the topics that posed the most serious challenges to the Hong Kong media. During such conflicts, the media can be trapped between heightened political pressure from China and potentially powerful local public opinions.

How national–local conflicts will shape the contours and dynamics of press freedom in Hong Kong remains to be seen. More precisely, national–local conflicts will interact with the ongoing processes of strategic interaction and cultural co-orientation to shape the future of press freedom in Hong Kong. How the interaction among the processes will play out is largely a matter of historical contingency. The future cannot be easily predicted, but this article should have pointed to the places where future attention is most deserved.

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Notes

- [1] This, of course, does not mean that China did not pull strings from behind. For example, the SAR Chief Executive election was widely assumed to be tightly controlled by the Central government.
- [2] After 2003, a notion widely circulated in the media was that the Chinese government has pinpointed ‘one newspaper, one magazine, and two mouths’ as the major cause of anti-government sentiments in Hong Kong. The phrase refers to the *Apple Daily*, the *Next Magazine*, and two highly prominent radio talk shows. For examples, see Ng Chi-sum (2004, May 4), ‘Today you have reached the same end’, *Ming Pao*, p. A27; Li Yee (2004, May 17), ‘Tired body, tired mind’, *Apple Daily*, p. E13.
- [3] The ‘state secrets’ reported by Xi Yang included samples of new banknotes, information about the selling of gold by the country, adjustment of exchange rates, and the plan to raise interest rates.
- [4] See Chan and Lee (2006) and Lee (2006) for empirical studies of media contents.
- [5] The author conducted the survey in collaboration with Clement Y. K. So and Joseph Man Chan.
- [6] The poll findings can be accessed at <http://hkupop.hku.hk>
- [7] Personal interview conducted in August 2006.
- [8] Poll findings are available at <http://hkupop.hku.hk>
- [9] Amidst public discontent towards the sensationalist media in 1999, the SAR government proposed setting up a statutory press council to monitor media ethics. Opinion polls at the time showed a majority support for the proposal, although the idea was aborted because of strong opposition from professional journalists. An independent press council was set up instead.

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