



Reddening or Reckoning?

*An Essay on China's Shadow on Hong Kong Media
22 Years after Handover from British Rule*

Stuart Lau

Journalist Fellow 2018
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism
University of Oxford

August 2019



CONTENTS

1. Preface	2
2. From top to bottom: the downfall of a TV station	4
3. Money, Power, Media	10
4. “Political correctness”: New normal for media	20
5. From the Big Brother: “We are watching you”	23
6. Way forward - Is objective journalism still what Hong Kong needs?	27

Preface

Hong Kong journalists have always stood on the front line of reporting China, a country that exercises an authoritarian system of government but is nonetheless on track to global economic prominence. The often-overlooked role of Hong Kong journalists, though, has gained international attention in summer 2019, when weeks of citywide protests has viralled into the largest-scale public opposition movement ever in the city's 22-year history as a postcolonial political entity under Chinese sovereignty, forcing the Hong Kong government into accepting defeat over the hugely controversial extradition bill.

While much can be said about the admirable professionalism of Hong Kong's frontline journalists including reporters, photojournalists and video journalists, most of whom not having received the level of warzone-like training required amid the police's unprecedentedly massive use of potentially lethal weapons, this essay seeks to examine something less visible and less discussed by international media and academia: the extent to which China influences Hong Kong's media organisations, either directly or indirectly.

The issue is important on three levels. First, it is a matter of public trust in an institution that is long regarded as a necessary safeguard in an undemocratic society. With no end in sight in the long journey to achieving universal suffrage, the executive and legislative branches remain wholly or partially undemocratic in nature, leaving the judiciary and the informally regarded fourth estate as cornerstones guaranteeing Hongkongers' freedoms and values. Declining trust in the mainstream media, especially in their coverage of politically sensitive topics such as the protests in 2014 and 2019, will have a longstanding and irrevocable impact on the population, with many of them turning instead to social media for unfettered information, even at the cost of unverifiability.

Second, it is a matter of China's societal control. As this essay will explain, Hong Kong's media organisations have been increasingly subject to attempts to influence their coverage from the Chinese government or their proxies, through effective network-building, propaganda, threats of operational limitations, and business takeovers. As most global analysts on China agree, Beijing authorities have been stepping up control over mainland citizens under

the leadership of President Xi Jinping, including the use of artificial intelligence to monitor each and every single individual. Its approach on Hong Kong would, to say the least, be a matter of concern to the city's population in relation to their freedoms and values in the future.

Third, it is a matter of the quality of most important source of information the world can receive about China. Decades of a delicate understanding of China, coupled with the general lack of censorship applicable to mainland journalists, have made Hong Kong the crucial base from which information about the world's currently second-biggest economy is disseminated and analysed, even at a time when more and more foreign journalists operate directly from cities like Beijing and Shanghai. For issues like human rights activism and the Communist Party's byzantine manpower structure, Hong Kong journalists' experience is second to none, and it is therefore all the more worrying that the coverage of these important topics could be impacted as a result of self-censorship, when the world needs more, not less, information about China.

The structural threat to Hong Kong's journalism therefore is the issue I have been devoted to examining since I joined the RISJ in 2018, a year perfectly sandwiched between two major social unrests in Hong Kong. In the gorgeous campus I have benefited immensely from the friendships with other Journalist Fellows, some of them from a much more restrictive and even hostile journalistic environment than where I come from. As I am writing this note and summarising the draft, the Hong Kong police announced having used 1,000 rounds of tear gas the day before, while journalists present at the press conference denounced some police officers' attacks on frontline reporters. I write with a heavy heart, both for the fellow journalists and my hometown.

I am indebted to Professor Rana Mitter, Director of the Oxford China Centre, who has provided me with methodological guidance in drafting this paper; Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim and Mr Chow Chung-yan, editors at the *South China Morning Post* who have supported my professional growth and sharpened my editorial judgment; Ms Sharon Cheung, sponsor of the Lion Rock Fellowship; all other Journalist Fellows in my batch; and last but not least my family especially my dear father, who passed away in December 2018.

This essay also would not have been possible without the help of the many journalists who generously but anonymously shared their insights with me.

From top to bottom: the downfall of a TV station

As anti-government protesters continued with their rolling rallies and demonstrations across Hong Kong in August 2019, it was already nearly two months into what started off as a social movement against the government's extradition bill, a law that would have allowed the city's residents to be handed over to mainland Chinese police authorities and tried in a jurisdiction that requires all judges to be Communist Party members. Gradually, the protests evolved into something bigger: calling for a probe into police's use of weapons and violation of human rights regulations; the resignation of Chief Executive Carrie Lam; start of reforms towards democratic elections – all carried under the broad but vague banner: “Liberate Hong Kong; Revolution of Our Era.”

As much as it is politically crucial, the month of August has also become a watershed moment for Hong Kong's mainstream media. Television Broadcasts Ltd, or more commonly known as TVB, which is Hong Kong's oldest and most watched TV news provider, reported that a couple of news vans had been vandalised by protesters. In one incident, journalists suffered injuries.

Even the Hong Kong Journalists Association, which has been running surveys to show how biased the broadcaster's news reports have become, had to come to its defence. “The HKJA condemns such violent behaviour and demands the relevant individuals stop their violent action against journalists. The HKJA believes that every frontline journalist is sincerely carrying out his or her duties of reporting and exercising the role of the fourth estate, which should not be infringed.”¹

The incidents inflicted on TVB are by no means accidents on the side of protesters. Instead, they are targeted attacks – not on journalists generally, but on a news broadcaster that the protesters see as a symbol of biased, pro-police and pro-government news dissemination unworthy of their protection. A Facebook group calling for boycotts of TVB has drawn more than 30,000 followers as of July 14, with a petition against the station having collected

1

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3021828/journalists-union-condemns-attack-hong-kong-tv-station>

100,000 signatures.² In fact, the story of TVB News is a perfect example of what is going wrong among mainstream media in Hong Kong.

The story started ten years ago, when Anthony Fong, one of TVB's most recognisable journalists, was doing a live reporting at the venue hosting commemorative events in Hong Kong marking the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in Beijing. During his live broadcast, an anonymous man held placards behind him, "TVB News is nothing serious."

At that time, the credibility of TVB News remained high, mainly because it was the only legitimate free-to-air broadcaster. (ATV News, entering its final years, was financed by mainland businesspeople. Cable TV News, which has enjoyed high credibility, is subscription-based.) But it was only five years later - when news organisations in Hong Kong were confronted with the Umbrella Movement, which at that point - that all the accusations of self-censorship became publicly acknowledged by insiders.

On October 15, 2014, TVB aired footage that showed seven police officers apparently attacking Ken Tsang, a pro-democracy social worker, in a dark corner in the middle of the night, when they were arresting protesters involved in the Umbrella Movement protests calling for greater democracy in Hong Kong. In the narratives, the TVB reporter said the following:

A protester, with his hands tied up, was taken away by six police officers. They lifted him up, took him to a dark corner in Tamar Park, and put him on the ground. They hit him with their fists and kicked him. Two police officers later walked away, while the remaining ones continued to kick the protester. In the end, the police officers took him away. The whole scene lasted four minutes.³

Shortly after the news emerged, TVB News' top editor, Yuen Chi-wai, personally intervened and asked for the footage to be removed. Later, it was re-aired with the narratives amended as follows:

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/14/world/asia/hong-kong-protests-tvb.html>

³ <https://www.inmediahk.net/node/1027380>

A protester, with his hands tied up, was taken away by six police officers. They lifted him up and took him to a dark corner in Tamar Park. [Video only, without narratives.] In the end, the police officers took him away. The whole scene lasted four minutes.⁴

The differences in the two versions were quickly spotted by the audience, with the omission of “hitting and kicking” in the updated edition causing not only public outcry, but also internal opposition. In a joint letter signed by nearly 90 TVB journalists, they expressed “regret” at the management’s handling of the report, and said they were “deeply alarmed by the management’s distrust of the original report.”

Instead of trying to retain veteran journalists and regain public trust, however, TVB acted to the contrary. “There is little indication from the management that talents are cherished in TVB and high quality journalism comes first,” a retired senior journalist in TVB, who requested anonymity, told RISJ. “One cannot help but wonder what the management had in mind when dozens of journalists tendered their resignation within several months after the *dark corner* report.”

One of the leading scholars on self-censorship in Hong Kong, Au Ka-lun, who used to be an executive producer in TVB Current Affairs, defines the subject as follows:

For a behaviour to be defined as self-censorship, it has to possess three necessary elements:

- a. The action or failure to act with the purposes of setting a boundary is deliberate;
- b. The purpose is to shed light on the positive and/or to avoid the negative;
- c. The news judgment is as a result unprofessional.⁵

In his painstaking research, Au found strong evidence that showed that TVB’s news coverage of the 2017 Umbrella Movement was subject to less

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Allan K L Au: *Twenty Shades of Freedom: Media Censorship Routines in Hong Kong*, Chinese University of Hong Kong (2017).

self-censorship than what he terms “constitutive censorship”. Through his extensive content analysis exercise comparative to that of the three other major broadcasters in Hong Kong: Cable TV, Now TV and Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), he found: “In most cases that allegedly involve self-censorship, the higher-level journalists would also find a reason to justify the decision. Very rarely would self-censorship be admitted.”

He found further that constitutive censorship in the context of Hong Kong could be generalised into the nine categories as follows: (1) an untrue interpretation of balance and objectivity; (2) an undue emphasis on government officials’ versions and their legitimacy; (3) editors’ passiveness to follow news events; (4) double standards in treating certain news subjects; (5) routinisation of news production and extreme division of labour; (6) an emphasis on soft news and sponsored programmes instead of hard news; (7) staff demoralisation by unfair distribution of resources; (8) restricting or punishing dissents within the newsroom; and (9) misuse of management power to distort the news agenda.

Without going into his theoretical details, I would explain in further details one of Au’s central themes: how the modern-day journalistic canon of balancing has been deliberately misinterpreted by some Hong Kong journalists in order to give more air time or space to those in power in a manner that is disproportionate to the entire issue under discussion. In an historic meeting between government officials and student leaders at the height of the Umbrella movement, for instance, Cable TV gave two sides roughly the same airtime (officials 75 seconds vs students 73 seconds) while TVB gave officials 90 seconds, compared to 56 seconds for students. The “imbalancing act” by TVB also takes the form of content imbalance, Au notes. For example, when a government official makes a certain assertion, TVB would still find a pro-democracy politician to say something in reply, but the quotes it chooses are not always in direct reference to what the politician has said.

Public perception of bias for the government has cost TVB News a significant drop in credibility ratings. In 2016, TVB News was ranked last among six broadcasters in Hong Kong, compared to second place in 2009, according to a study by the School of Journalism and Communications of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

“Over the last few years, the management has failed to address public distrust in any meaningful way. The original way of handling editorial content, namely, giving pro-government voices equal rather than proportional importance, has continued,” an insider told RISJ.

Research undertaken as part of this paper shows that the same phenomenon still existed in TVB’s reporting of the anti-government protests in 2019, sparked by the contentious extradition bill. Comparing different media organisations’ editorial judgments on June 9 – when up to a million people marched to demand the suspension of the bill while a much smaller number of participants joined a pro-government rally – TVB News spent 18 per cent of airtime covering the pro-government voices, compared to 16 per cent on Cable TV and 7 per cent on Now TV. TVB’s segment showed four interviewed protesters, compared to eight on Now TV and 11 on Cable TV. The figures match with similar findings by a BBC Chinese report ⁶.

Comparing the even bigger anti-government march on June 16 – where organisers put the turnout at 2 million – TVB is found to have given much less air time to protesters compared to the two other major broadcasters. Now TV spent nearly 17 minutes of the protest, compared to Cable TV’s 11 minutes and TVB’s 6 minutes and 4 seconds.

It is further found that, compared to other broadcasters, TVB has been least critical of police action or strategies throughout the handling of the protests, with the unprecedentedly intensive use of tear gas and rubber bullets having given rise to calls from the likes of the European Union and the United States on whether to suspend further supply of weapons to the Hong Kong police force.

One of the most contentious police actions since early June 2019 has been the Sha Tin incident, where riot police stormed a big shopping mall trying to arrest hiding protesters while at the same time scaring ordinary shoppers and diners. Pepper spray was used, batons were waved, and blood spilled. Reviews of the three broadcasters’ reports showed that both Cable TV and Now TV had attempted to analyse police’s strategy by quoting protester eyewitnesses, who put the blame on police for barring people from leaving the shopping mall. TVB, on the other hand, made no mention of the standoff between police and

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-49001797>

protesters at the exits of the mall, but instead focused on Chief Executive Carrie Lam's condemnation of violence.

I talked to a protester present at the scene where one of TVB's news vehicles were attacked by his fellows. Going only by the name Tom, he said the protesters in general had "zero trust" in TVB. "It's not true that we don't trust mainstream media at all – for example, Cable TV, Now TV and *Apple Daily* newspapers are widely watched or read. What makes TVB News so untrustworthy is that they are clearly on the side of the police, and that is exactly Beijing's instruction.⁷ That's why protesters vent their anger on TVB's vehicles. I understand this may be unfair to the journalists, but why should true professional journalists work for a reddened media?"

"Reddening" is where we will turn next.

⁷ In his meeting with 500 pro-Beijing Hong Kong politicians and business leaders, Zhang Xiaoming, who is Beijing's top bureaucrat on Hong Kong affairs, called on the Hong Kong public to voice support for the police unequivocally.
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3021710/beijing-expected-order-hong-kongs-pro-establishment>

Money, Power, Media

Every other few months, groups of Hong Kong journalists numbering in the dozens would be invited to visit the capital Beijing to “attend lectures” and learn about “the latest developments of the country”. Some of them are hosted by the National School of Administration, an institution that is normally tasked to educate mainland China’s domestic civil servants. Others take place in locations such as the prestigious Tsinghua University, with speakers from key ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Development and Reform Commission.

On the surface, this seems most logical, given that the coverage of national news forms an integral part of Hong Kong media’s jobs. Critics, though, say this is part of China’s all-encompassing *tongzhan* (united front) or *xiniao* (brainwashing) machinery in Hong Kong that stretches from journalists to lawyers, from law enforcement units to the civil service. Lavish welcoming dinners are arranged, and so are visits to tourist spots.

“Most of these trips are organised with the help of the Communist Party’s liaison office in Hong Kong,” an organiser said. “While this is never a stated aim, it is all too apparent that China believes Hong Kong’s frontline journalists are mostly inherently anti-China, and it would help to get them talk directly to Chinese officials in off-record sessions specifically arranged for them.”

The higher the status of the Hong Kong journalists, the better the treatment they receive in Beijing.

“If we take a longer view in retrospect, it’s not difficult to identify a more-than-thirty-year-long ‘united front’ project that spanned across 1997. Before the handover [in 1997], a large number of media bosses and management were nominated as members of the Basic Law drafting committee, of the preparatory committee of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, or as Hong Kong Affairs Advisors [for the central government in Beijing],” Chow Yat-tung, a co-author of *The Theory of Reforming Hong Kong*, wrote.⁸ “It has been through these collaborators that Beijing has pacified one Hong Kong mainstream media outlet after another. As

⁸ <https://hk.thenewslens.com/article/43722>

the China factor has shrouded Hong Kong's news industry, Beijing's political and economic co-optation upon the media sector has formed a cross-border power alliance, a structure under which Hong Kong's media freedom, it is feared, will all but go down."

Chow wrote further that the Chinese government have given ceremonial titles as either "National People's Congress (NPC) delegate" or "Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) member" to certain media bosses or management in Hong Kong. While the two respective bodies yield high-level political power under the Chinese political system, their delegates or members are widely regarded as *jushou jiqi*, or hand-raising machines – few of them would raise opposition voices to the agenda processed by the NPC or CPPCC. The NPC, for instance, is often branded as a rubber-stamp parliament⁹ that has vetoed no law ever put before it¹⁰.

With the exception of the pro-democracy Apple Daily, the top editors or media bosses for nearly all mainstream Hong Kong media are absorbed into Beijing's "united front" apparatus one way or another. One of the most contentious incidents over the last five decade concerned the South China Morning Post's former editor in chief, Wang Xiangwei, who was a member of the CPPCC in Jilin province. In 2012, Wang admitted it was his decision to turn a major Chinese human rights story into a news brief on the newspaper, and had this to say to a subeditor sceptical of his decision: "I don't have to explain to you anything. I made the decision and I stand by it. If you don't like it, you know what to do."¹¹ Unaffected by the incident, Wang stayed in the top job for a few more years before stepping down. Supporters of him say he has been writing critical columns about Chinese politics, and even President Xi Jinping, but Hong Kong's Journalists Association has raised concerns about the suitability of somebody with a clear background of connection to the Communist Party to have led the major English publication of Hong Kong.

The same concern also extends to TVB, the leading TV news provider touched upon earlier on in this paper. In April 2015, TVB announced that media tycoon

9

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2136605/how-will-chinas-legislature-vote-changes-constitution>

10

<https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/03/15/470533082/chinas-legislative-session-may-stars-but-little-power>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2012/jun/20/press-freedom-china>

Li Ruigang, owner of the major Shanghai Media Group and dubbed “China’s Rupert Murdoch,” had acquired a majority stake in TVB through his state-backed private equity fund China Media Capital and was joining its board, alarming many journalists. Before joining TVB, Li briefly held the position of deputy general secretary of the Shanghai Communist Party bureau in 2011. In one Hong Kong media article¹², Li is described as having used his “knowhow to make the propaganda apparatus commercially lucrative”, which “has since been much emulated by other state-owned media groups as Beijing seeks to streamline its pompous, reactionary media outlets to make them savvy and profitable to suit people’s changing tastes.”

The growing trend of media takeovers by mainland Chinese businesspeople, or those from Hong Kong with vast business interests in mainland China, is causing alarm to media observers, who speculate on the motives behind such media acquisition deals and on the potential implication to future editorial directions, especially whether reports critical of China would remain fit to print.

Just a few months after the TVB takeover by Li’s group in Shanghai, the South China Morning Post announced that its Malaysian owner has sold all the shares to someone even more influential than Li: the Alibaba group founded by Jack Ma. The chairman of the SCMP has since then been fielded by Joe Tsai, executive vice-chairman of Alibaba. In an interview with the SCMP’s executive editor Chung-yan Chow, Ma said that Alibaba’s management would not take part in the newsroom operations. “As I said to Joe [Tsai], you are going to the Post as a representative of its readers. You don’t have to represent shareholders. You speak for the readers,” Ma said, adding that his decision to buy the newspaper was out of his “love for Hong Kong”.¹³

With Ma’s takeover leading to the SCMP’s greater familiarity among mainland officials (the content of SCMP is censored in mainland China), some of the stories it ran have given rise to criticism that it was working too closely with the Chinese government. One such instance concerned Gui Minhai, a Swedish passport-holder who was one of five Hong Kong booksellers kidnapped or

¹²

<http://www.ejinsight.com/20170526-li-ruigang-china-s-rupert-murdoch-comes-to-hong-kong/>

¹³

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/1937256/alibabas-jack-ma-reveals-why-he-bought-south-china-morning-post>

arrested by mainland Chinese authorities for publishing gossipy books about Communist Party officials, including Xi himself, and illegally distributing them over the mainland. When the SCMP published an interview with Gui¹⁴, who under Chinese detention confessed to his crimes, his Cambridge-educated daughter Angela Gui wrote a letter to the editor in chief Tammy Tam:

“I don’t know if the publicity department at the Communist Party of China called or emailed you, or contacted someone else; but, in the end, as editor in-chief, you decided it was a good idea to send a journalist to cover the ‘interview’. The ‘interview’ – a scripted point-by-point rebuttal of the criticism against China’s treatment of my father – might as well have been a statement from the Foreign Ministry. You know this of course. Yet, after [the] dispatched reporter ... returned, you still decided to run the story, knowing these could not possibly be my father’s own words. Why?”¹⁵

In an unusual arrangement, the editor in chief replied to Gui’s daughter and published the reply side by side with the incoming letter, in which Tam stated that:

“... we did not collaborate with the Chinese authorities to portray your father as speaking freely while in custody, as the report incorrectly alleges. We provided the facts and context, including a photograph showing him between two guards, and our reporter also talked to your father’s friends so as to shed more light on the circumstances. All this allowed our readers to judge for themselves whether he was under duress.

As journalists, we are often faced with difficult decisions. In this case, we were required to choose between interviewing your father in a **stage-managed setting** [emphasis added] and having no access at all. We made the decision to go ahead on news merit, and stand by our professional judgment.”¹⁶

¹⁴

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/2132797/sweden-using-me-che-ss-piece-says-detained-hong-kong>

¹⁵

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/2142228/exchange-between-gui-minhais-daughter-and-posts-editor-chief>

¹⁶ Ibid.

This case was all the more sensitive to Hong Kong's media watchers because China has been increasingly resorting to what has been dubbed "televised confessions" for cases involving human rights violations that attracted Western media attention. "By broadcasting these so-called 'confessions,' state media and Chinese authorities are rejecting the basic norms of a rule-of-law system, including the presumption of innocence and due process rights. Trial by state media is not the kind of trial held in a country ruled by law," Frances Eve, a researcher at Chinese Human Rights Defenders, said.¹⁷

While conventionally such televised confessions would be broadcast by state media such as CCTV, or Phoenix TV, which has a clear mainland background despite being registered and headquartered in Hong Kong, the Gui case has raised eyebrows as the confessions were made to Hong Kong media (including, apart from the SCMP, also Oriental Daily newspaper), clearly suggesting that the Chinese propaganda officials have been eyeing Hong Kong media as a platform on which to spread their desired narratives. While the attraction of exclusive access to otherwise inaccessible interview subjects (such as those locked up in Chinese jails) is undoubtedly big, it also raises timely questions about the ethical standards for Hong Kong media and the degree to which such invitations should or could be accepted. "The reason that dictatorships are so keen on using the services of patsies is that, in their heart of hearts, they know that while their propaganda machines might just about be effective in a society where access to information is severely curtailed, in the wider world party publications tend to be treated with extreme scepticism. Thus, media purporting to be independent are key to the role in influencing the hearts and minds outside of the dictatorship," wrote Stephen Vines¹⁸, a long-time contributor to the SCMP who decided to stop writing for the newspaper following the Gui reports. "I have had a very long association with this paper, but the negatives of association now mightily outweigh the positives."

Newspaper columnists, a group of influential intellectual writers, have not only played a critical role in shaping Hong Kong journalism but also provided

¹⁷

<https://qz.com/453477/china-is-using-televised-confessions-to-shame-detained-lawyers-journalists-and-activists/>

¹⁸

<https://www.hongkongfp.com/2018/11/13/i-will-no-longer-write-south-china-morning-post/>

Hongkongers with a crucial perspective to the developing “Hong Kong identity” – as opposed to, or at least side by side with, the nationalistic narratives imposed by the Beijing government on the special administrative region that until two decades ago was a British colony. The South China Morning Post is far from the only publication having issues with this group of writers.

In 2015, three writers decided to leave their columns in Ming Pao newspaper blank in protest of then chief editor Chong Tien Siong’s decision to sack the executive editor Keung Kwok-yuen – on the grounds of saving resources and cutting costs – on the same day the paper published a front page story analysing the Panama Papers and the Hong Kong politicians and businesspeople named in the documents leaked from a Panamanian law firm. Chong, who was supposed to be on leave the evening when the newspaper was being printed, rushed back to the newsroom, asked for the printing machines to stop and suggested to fill the blank columns with something else. Internal negotiations ensued, with Chong finally agreeing to keep their columns blank but insisting on adding an “editor’s note” in the second edition.

Like the South China Morning Post, Ming Pao newspaper’s ownership is also a matter of constant interest or concern for observers. Unlike the Jack Ma deal which took place within the last few years, the current owner of Ming Pao, Tiong Hiew King, took over the newspaper in 1995. For most of his life at that point, Tiong was a successful timber businessman in Malaysia, while also planning to expand into the Chinese market. Gradually, he started owning Chinese-language newspapers in his home country, before turning his attention to Ming Pao, a traditionally middle-class and elite newspapers split between liberal news reports and conservative editorials. Soon after Jack Ma bought the South China Morning Post, there were rumours that the Chinese tech millionaire’s next plan was to buy Ming Pao, which did not materialise.

According to Francis Lee, a media scholar from the Chinese University of Hong Kong¹⁹, Ming Pao’s rumoured takeover bid can be juxtaposed with the recent change of shareholding for Cable TV, which like Ming Pao is regarded as media organisations that champion a relatively liberal editorial stance.

¹⁹ Francis L. F. Lee, *Changing Political Economy of the Hong Kong Media*, China Perspectives [Online], 2018/3.

Cable TV was founded in 1993 by Wharf Cable Ltd., owned by Wharf Holdings (HK), a real estate company. The pay-TV broadcaster did not break even until February 1998. The company was renamed “i-Cable” and started providing Internet services in February 2000. The offering of Internet service helped stabilise the business of the company. i-Cable consistently made profits between 2001 and 2007. From 2008 onwards, however, losses were sustained, reaching HK\$313 million for i-Cable and HK\$277 million for its TV operations in 2016. Finally, after nine years of continual losses, Wharf Holdings (HK) Ltd. decided not to continue to support the operation of i-cable and sold it to a new group of investors in April 2017²⁰:

- The biggest shareholder in the consortium is New World Development chairman Henry Cheng, who is a standing committee member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). He will control 45.5 percent of shares.
- The original head of the consortium, CPPCC member David Chiu, who is the son of the now-closed ATV founder Deacon Chiu, holds 24.5 percent.
- The other shares are held by two mainland Chinese entrepreneurs — Guangzhou R&F Properties chairman Li Sze-lim (16 percent) and Hony Capital president Zhao Huan (14 percent).
- That means capital from mainland China will account for 16.2 percent of i-Cable’s shareholding.

There are two questions arising from Cable TV’s situation. First, is it a pure commercial decision for Wharf to sell the broadcaster? Second, what is the impact on the editorial content?

In terms of the first question, Francis Lee argues that it is becoming less and less attractive for Hong Kong business people to own media outlets - let alone liberal ones such as Cable TV and Ming Pao newspaper.

The two cases, according to him, show that business moguls are potentially tired of playing the role as owners of liberal news outlets that, more than anything else, are viewed with distrust by those Communist Party cadres in the liaison office in Hong Kong. “One might question if the value of ‘being a Hong Kong media owner’ has declined. Although it is difficult to directly examine the

²⁰ https://www.hkja.org.hk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Annual_report_2017.pdf

logic of exchange in the Chinese business field, we can at least raise a question by comparing the 1990s to the 2010s. While many Hong Kong corporations were only starting to enter the Chinese market in the 1990s, 20 years later, they have already established their foothold in the mainland, as illustrated by the huge growth in profits in the case of Wharf [which used to own Cable TV]. Influential business people in Hong Kong have established their alliance with the Chinese state, to the extent that they can even bypass the SAR [special administrative region] government and communicate with the Central Government directly to seek their own interests,” Lee says.²¹

Lee continues: “The political pressure associated with owning a Hong Kong media organisation may have become more severe in recent years. Among Hong Kong mainstream media, both Cable TV and Ming Pao have been regarded as relatively liberal. Cable TV’s China news team, in particular, had received critical acclaim for their in-depth and occasionally daring coverage of China. Yet the possibility of a pro-China businessman holding a relatively liberal media outlet is premised on both the state’s level of tolerance and the businessman’s bargaining power.”

In the most recent years, as the political situation in Hong Kong has worsened and as the Chinese government has tightened ideological control over the media and society, the state’s tolerance level could have been declining.

“The political economic structure is not fixed and unmoving. It is argued that, while business tycoons have established their footholds in China, ‘being a Hong Kong media owner’ may no longer be as valuable as it was. At the same time, due to both social and technological changes, the media business is facing huge challenges. The opportunity costs of running a Hong Kong media organisation have increased, thus further reducing the incentives for Hong Kong business people to own media organisations. The development has paved the way for the entrance of Chinese capital into the Hong Kong media scene,” Lee concludes.

As regards the second question, i.e. whether this shift in business ownership will have an impact on the editorial content, the Journalists Association, which represents Hong Kong’s frontline journalists, is not optimistic.

²¹ Ibid.

“A rosy picture was drawn by the consortium, but some employees were not so optimistic. Newspapers quoted anonymous staff who expressed worries about interference by the new China investors. They specifically pointed to the 500-strong news department. They thought the China desk, whose critical reports revealing malpractice in the country have won frequent awards, could be hit hardest. They also worried about the future quality of news reports on property developer New World,” the association said in its 2017 annual report.²²

It did not take long for the worry of the staff to be justified. In January 2019 – the time around which Hongkongers are usually preparing for the Lunar New Year – Cable TV journalists had a “terrible” meeting with COO Irene Leung. She announced that the company would sack 500 members of staff though the news department would – for now – be unaffected. “Sources of income have to be diversified, spending has to be cut, and firing people would be a last resort,” she reportedly said.²³

In May 2019, a month before the start of the extradition bill fiasco, one of Cable TV’s owners vowed to expand the mainland Chinese market. “With a population of 70 million, the Greater Bay Area market is incomparable to that of Hong Kong. If Cable TV can collaborate with the mainland on content and technological sharing, this would help Cable TV access the mainland market, thereby increasing the chance of the continued operation of the media business,” David Chiu, the 24.5 percent owner of the station, said.²⁴

Journalists are unimpressed. “Cable TV news is censored and blocked on mainland China for good reasons – because we are doing our job and produce critical reports wherever appropriate. Does our new boss mean that we should now reduce critical reports in order to get into the mainland Chinese market? Or does he mean only those contents that are safe and uncritical will be aired

²² https://www.hkja.org.hk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Annual_report_2017.pdf

²³

<https://www.hk01.com/%E7%A4%BE%E6%9C%83%E6%96%B0%E8%81%9E/288795/%E6%9C%89%E7%B7%9A%E7%82%92%E4%BA%BA-%E7%AE%A1%E7%90%86%E5%B1%A4%E6%99%A4%E6%96%B0%E8%81%9E%E9%83%A8%E5%93%A1%E5%B7%A5-%E7%A8%B1%E6%9A%AB%E4%B8%8D%E8%A3%81%E5%93%A1-%E7%82%92%E4%BA%BA%E4%BF%82%E6%9C%80%E5%BE%8C%E4%B8%80%E6%AD%A5>

²⁴

<https://www.hk01.com/%E8%B2%A1%E7%B6%93%E5%BF%AB%E8%A8%8A/335111/%E6%9C%89%E7%B7%9A%E9%82%B1%E9%81%94%E6%98%8C-%E9%80%A3%E7%BA%8C4%E5%80%8B%E6%9C%88%E6%B2%92%E6%9C%89%E5%AE%A2%E6%88%B6%E6%B7%A8%E6%B5%81%E5%A4%B1-%E7%BA%8C%E7%99%BC%E5%B1%95%E5%A4%A7%E7%81%A3%E5%8D%80%E5%B8%82%E5%A0%B4>

across the border?” a senior journalist in the station, speaking anonymously, told RISJ. Another journalist points to Chiu’s political affiliation to the CPPCC. “I’m not surprised that he mentioned the “Greater Bay Area”, which is a new Chinese strategy plan attempting to connect Hong Kong and Macau with the Guangdong province. It is politically correct for him to mention it. What surprised me is his naivete – what makes him think China’s National Radio and Television Administration would consider his proposal for a split second?”

“Political correctness”: New normal for media

The year 2012 is widely seen as a watershed moment for Hong Kong politics. That was the year when Leung Chun-ying won the election (of 1,200 voting members, mostly loyalists to Beijing) to become Hong Kong’s chief executive. In his five-year tenure, Leung upheld the absolute standard of political correctness, Communist Party style: clamping down on “Hong Kong independence”, honouring China’s attempts to limit the degree of autonomy, appointing Beijing loyalists with few professional credentials to key government positions, labelling pro-democracy politicians as “the opposition”, among other things.

When Carrie Lam succeeded the wildly unpopular Leung in 2017, it was initially hoped that she would return Hong Kong politics to being more professional than ideological. After all, her background as a civil servant dating back to the colonial government was a reassuring sign to some.

Until she waged a war on journalists.

In October 2018, British newspaper Financial Times announced that its Asia news editor, Victor Mallet, was denied a routine visa renewal, in what it said is “believed to be the first de facto expulsion of a foreign correspondent from the former British colony since its return to Chinese control in 1997”²⁵.

Mallet was the first vice-president of the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Hong Kong and chaired a speech by Andy Chan, the leader of a pro-independence political party, in August. Local officials and authorities from the Chinese mainland strongly criticised the club for hosting the discussion.

Refusing to go into details for the decision, Lam, the chief executive, said the immigration department would “not disclose the individual circumstances of the case or the considerations of the decision”, but reiterated that the territory would “not tolerate any act that advocates Hong Kong independence and endangers national security and territorial integrity”. “Freedom of expression, freedom of reporting are core values in Hong Kong,” she added, dismissing as

²⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/6322a9fc-cb73-11e8-9fe5-24ad351828ab>

“pure speculation” suggestions that Mallet’s visa was denied over his role at the FCC.

Fu King-wa, a professor at the University of Hong Kong’s Journalism and Media Studies Centre, said the decision “signals strongly to the international community that the Hong Kong government would follow similar authoritarian measures as mainland China to take action against those the government dislikes”.²⁶ The EU’s representative in Hong Kong said the decision “appears politically motivated and therefore raises serious concerns about freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Hong Kong. It risks damaging Hong Kong’s international standing and trust in the ‘one country, two systems’ principle.”

The *Global Times*, a state-owned Chinese tabloid known for its nationalist views and occasionally privy to internal governmental information, offered its verdict in an editorial²⁷: “If Mallet was indeed denied a visa renewal because he hosted Chan’s speech at the FCC against Hong Kong authorities, that has no relationship to his work reporting in the city. Hosting Chan demonstrates a sense of political provocation that goes far beyond the scope of freedom of speech.”

If Mallet’s case is an extreme and isolated one, other examples where local media are subject to the undefined line of “political correctness” are also notably on the rise.

One aspect of this is the rapid emergence of new sections in different Hong Kong media organisations dedicated to China’s national projects, such as the “Belt and Road initiative” (where China is expanding globally through building infrastructure and other projects), the “Greater Bay Area” or “innovation and technology” (which President Xi Jinping has vowed to boost investments). TVB’s news channel launched a series of new programmes such as “Log In Greater Bay Area”, “Life in the Greater Bay”, “Look at Greater Bay Area”, “Focus the Greater Bay Area”. Even Now TV, which is considered a liberal news channel that has prominent pro-protester coverage, also runs the “Bay Area in 1 Minute” show.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1121960.shtml>

Veteran journalists from major newspapers and TV stations say it is usually the direct order from the management – rather than the initiative of frontline journalists – to add new programmes or online sections of this kind. While the usual reason given by the management. Some programmes also enjoy sponsorships, which add to the incentives of some TV management. But as the Greater Bay Area remains a new concept – and much of it is all but “delusion”²⁸ in the words of one commentator – begs the question why media organisations are so eager to focus on an area that few Hongkongers talk about in everyday life.

A middle-level journalist from a pro-China newspaper in Hong Kong offers an explanation to the RISJ: “The answer is rather simple – because all media bosses (except the Apple Daily) are on good terms with the Chinese government’s liaison office in Hong Kong, which always ask them to help promote national projects, such as the Greater Bay Area. Those people in liaison office do so because they are also under some pressure from their masters in Beijing, especially the propaganda department. For media bosses, they would start a column or run a programme only for the purposes of showing to the liaison office: ‘We have done our job.’ In short, those articles or those shows are not for Hong Kong people. They are only a necessary price to pay in order to satisfy Beijing.”

28

<https://www.scmp.com/news/article/2106571/great-delusion-greater-bay-area-project-holds-nothing-hong-kong>

From the Big Brother: “We are watching you”

Satisfying Beijing, according to multiple journalists who talk to this project, means giving face to the officials personally more than avoiding critical coverage, for mainland officials have been well aware of the nature of freedom of speech in Hong Kong under the “One Country, Two Systems” formula 22 years into its practice. They know the Communist Party is not well-liked in the city where over half of the population are refugees fleeing the Cultural Revolution, or their descendants. They also know that the Great Firewall of mainland China means that the critical reports from outside, including Hong Kong, would be effectively censored. Therefore, when it comes to dealing with mainland China’s propaganda or united front officials, it’s more about attending their events, occasionally having a few sips of wine, and most importantly showing respect.

From the Chinese perspective, I managed on a recent trip to Beijing in 2019 to talk to one organiser of the kind of trips for Hong Kong journalists to visit the mainland. According to this person, the mainland officials are especially eager to lavish warm welcome on media bosses and top editors, because they would be the one to guide the editorial direction and come up with “fair and positive” coverage of mainland Chinese development. To have the top brass in different media organisations paying visits to Beijing is also about “giving face” to the Chinese officials, this person says.

It is always a secret as to what actually is shared behind closed doors between Hong Kong’s top editors and the Beijing officials on the central government level. On one recent occasion, according to media reports, a group of top editors from several newspapers and TV stations in 2018 met with Wang Kunming, head of China’s propaganda department, the institution to which all mainland Chinese media outlets (but not Hong Kong ones) are answerable. The event became contentious, when one of the Hong Kong journalists present – Sing Tao News Corp CEO Siu Sai-wo – recounted the meeting in a live TV interview, he quoted Wang as telling them “not to make Hong Kong media become a base on which to interfere with mainland politics.”

The content was so sensitive to Hongkongers that, within hours, several media who had a representative in that Beijing meeting deleted this mention from their reports.

- Commercial Radio removed the assertion and stated only that “Propaganda chief: Hong Kong media should cover opportunities China has for Hong Kong.”
- The *Hong Kong Economic Journal* made similar changes, with the new edition titled: “Propaganda Department calls on media to push for Hong Kong’s integration into mainland development.”
- Cable TV deleted an original Facebook post containing the live interview.
- The *Hong Kong Economic Times*’ original article was removed, with the link redirected to a completely irrelevant story about Hong Kong’s local election.
- The *Sing Tao Daily*, where Siu works, did not quote their CEO’s live remarks in its report.

There are conflicting accounts explaining the row from other media. Some say Siu overstepped the line by quoting the unquotable, leading to a gagging order from Beijing; others say he might have slightly misquoted the propaganda chief’s words. Either way, this event is an example of a long line of the same kind of “closed door meetings” between the central government on the one hand, and representatives from Hong Kong society on the other, in which the former would usually make very limited public comments, leaving the latter with the job to “recite” what they had talked about. The practice, as shown in this example, could lead to misinterpretations, especially because Mandarin Chinese is not the lingua franca for most Cantonese-speaking members of the Hong Kong public. What is special in this case, of course, is that this incident concerned journalists from Hong Kong, and how a campaign of censorship was swiftly and comprehensively applied to all media participating in the meeting.

That China has been closely scrutinising Hong Kong’s media became all the more apparent during the latest anti-government protests in mid-2019, when the Communist Party mouthpiece, *People’s Daily*, published a critical report about Hong Kong’s journalists. Without naming any organisations, it accused Hong Kong journalists of being biased to the protesters:

“They take rumours as evidence ... and replace the full picture with selected facts. As the situation develops, they get astray further and further; the opposition camp’s marches exaggerate the scale; radical extremists’ riots are described as the supreme glory; hardworking and fair police officers

are denounced in the most outrageous language ... They call themselves neutral, but they take sides; they claim to be objective, but keep blowing the dark whistle; they enjoy freedom of the press, but come up with unlimited free-style fake news and rumours. Citizens know full well whether these anti-China, Hong Kong-harming media are good or bad...

Whenever radical extremists are interviewed, the media are like movie directors asking the rioters to emotionally express themselves like in a script. Whenever Hong Kong-loving patriots speak the truth and say no to violence in large-scale demonstrations for peace, their voices disappear. The fact is, [for these anti-China media] the fact is only the fact they like, the truth is the truth they want, the story is the story they've pre-written, and objectivity and fairness is anything but. They are more like a political group than a news organisation.”²⁹

While it is common sense that some media organisations in Hong Kong – like most of its Western counterparts – do have a clear political stance, none of them is as closely affiliated to any single political grouping than the *People's Daily* is to the Communist Party of China. On the surface, this particular commentary piece seems to take aim at *Apple Daily* – a traditional target of the Beijing government due to the founder Jimmy Lai's close ties to the US government. It is especially the case during the 2019 protests as Lai was prominently received by high-profile US politicians including Vice-President Mike Pence³⁰ and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo³¹.

But a closer look at the *People's Daily* clearly indicates it is referring to more than one media organisation. In the last paragraph, it seems to offer some hint: “For today's Hong Kong journalists, do they still have the sense of duty ... to record the entirety of history and of the fact? ... We believe so – just not those 'xx brother' or 'xx sister' that the rioters keep talking about.”

²⁹ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0812/c1003-31288708.html>

³⁰

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-2nd-annual-religious-freedom-ministerial/>

³¹

<https://www.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-hong-kong-businessman-and-publisher-jimmy-lai/>

This is a clear reference to Stand News, an independent news platform that shot to prominence during the coverage of the protests. “Stand News brother” and “Stand News sister” became a catchphrase on LIHKG, a secure platform on which most protesters plan their strategies throughout the ongoing movement. Stand News has been producing videos and articles sympathetic to protesters, with some of the footage showing police’s use of weapons against civilians. In fact, the website itself does not shy away from its editorial approach, explaining its position in an editorial dated two days before 2 million people took to the streets on June 16:

“We can proudly declare our stance: We ‘target’ the police. We ‘target’ not individual members of the police force, but the force as the only law enforcement unit that is legally permitted to use force against the public in Hong Kong. Their behaviour shall be scrutinised in the strictest standards. Their power shall be monitored. And journalists play the biggest role in exercising such a duty in monitoring it.”³²

So far, there is little the Beijing government could do to any news organisation it does not like in Hong Kong, apart from publishing articles on state media to indirectly criticise them. But as the situation worsens, media freedom could become increasingly at risk. There were, for instance, mainland Chinese scholars floating the possibility of a state of emergency, under which Hongkongers’ rights and freedoms, such as the freedom of publication, could be put on hold. Extreme though the proposal sounds, Hong Kong is quickly entering uncharted waters at the time of writing, the future less predictable and more risky than ever before since the end of British rule in 1997.

32

<https://thestandnews.com/politics/%E7%82%BA%E4%BD%95%E6%88%91%E5%80%91-%E9%87%9D%E5%B0%8D-%E8%AD%A6%E5%AF%9F/>

Way forward – Is objective journalism still what Hong Kong needs?

I will end this paper with an open question: For those living in a city like Hong Kong that is undergoing not only an unprecedented social movement but also an untested political experiment, i.e. a civilised, open city with rights and freedoms being controlled by an authoritarian state, what kind of journalism do they need? For decades, the four or five main journalism institutes in Hong Kong have by and large upheld US journalistic definitions of objectivity, while the city's media law is largely based on the UK model. These two sources of journalistic practices, however, are from jurisdictions that are fundamentally different from Hong Kong: They are full-fledged sovereign states and democracies. Increasingly, Hong Kong journalists are faced with an urgent call: Should they – could they – continue to be balanced and objective in a social movement like the 2019 one, when the police have stepped up the use of weapons against civilians, when the Hong Kong government showed few signs of acknowledging public demands, and when hundreds of demonstrators are arrested, some charged with the serious offence of rioting? On the other hand, is it not best practice as long as Hong Kong journalists simply stick to professionalism and let the facts speak for themselves, rather than resorting to emotional outbursts like one journalist who asked Carrie Lam: “Many people would like to know when you will die”? With mainstream media embroiled in mixed feelings from the public, many are turning to independent new media such as Stand News, which are playing a critical role in consolidating a “Hong Kong identity” as opposed to the Chinese Hong Kong identity superimposed by mainland officials, Hong Kong officials and, to a certain extent, mainstream Hong Kong media, which as this paper has discussed are increasingly under the influence of mainland capital and political pressure alike. How will the latest political epic redraw the media boundary, news consumption, and journalistic standards?

All this will have to be answered by future scholars.