Hong Kong's press takes sides

Saturday, March 4, 1995

Ann Quon, the Canadian-educated deputy editor of the South China Morning Post: “After 1997, is there going to be a midnight knock on their door?" *Photo: Jeff Heinric*h

HONG KONG – Eight hundred and fifty days from now, Hong Kong will become a brave new world. And people in the news business already are preparing for the day the best they can.

Some are covering the news of China's impending takeover. A great many more – self-preservation is a virtue, after all – are simply covering their backs. They don't want, as the saying goes, to offend the sovereign, even if that sovereign isn't yet in his throne.

This is not a new concept in Hong Kong. It is a British colony ruled by foreign governors for the last 154 years. "We don't have a democratic system of government here, quite frankly," says a Hong Kong government official. And as in

any other less-than-democratic state, the press cannot be called truly free, partly because its owners and journalists do not always act freely.

If they offend, they make sure to offend other sovereigns; they attack outside and next door. Up to now, that has meant supporting the British administration as well as Taiwan against China. Soon, however, that will change.

On July 1, 1997, Hong Kong will come under the control of China. The Chinese intend to run Hong Kong as a special economic zone where unfettered capitalism will continue to flourish. As for freedom of the press – the guessing is in full swing. The press is not free in China. Why should it exist in Hong Kong under Chinese masters?


The word on the street now is: Don’t offend China.

"Increasingly, people here are second-guessing what China will and will not accept" from the press, said Christine Loh, a British-educated councillor in Hong Kong's legislature. "The question they ask themselves is: Why should we offend the sovereign? The result is, they don't."

Hong Kong's media have shifted to China after years of deference to Britain's representatives in the colony. The evidence is there in black and white, written between the lines in the national press.

Self-censorship. Young Chinese reporters in Hong Kong are under pressure, sometime self-imposed, not to write controversial stories about the motherland.

"Our reporters, especially the local ones, are asking themselves: after 1997, is there going to be a midnight knock on their door?" said Ann Quon, the Canadian-educated deputy editor of the South China Morning Post, one of Hong Kong's three English dailies. "Will what they wrote four, five years ago come back to haunt them?"

Shifting media ownership. Owners are spreading their money on investments in the communist mainland and thinning out their expatriate staff back home.

"Businessmen who own the press or other forms of the media are like any other businessmen in their search for business opportunities, and many see the

Chinese market as an attractive source of profit in the longer term," said George Shen, editor of the Hong Kong Economic Journal. "And it doesn't pay to offend the future master of Hong Kong."

A clampdown on Hong Kong journalists. Those who dare to work behind the Red Curtain risk their freedom. The jails are full of them: people like Xi Yang, sentenced (after a secret trial in Beijing a year ago) to 12 years hard labor in prison for "espionage regarding state financial secrets" – that is, getting hold of the Bank of China's unpublished plans to change interest rates and buy gold on foreign markets.

Campaigning for Xi Yang's release

"China is sending a message that it won't tolerate an aggressive, inquisitive, independent press in Hong Kong," said John Schidlovsky, Asian director of Freedom Forum, the American freedom-of-expression advocacy group. "The punishment is severe, because information is considered secret."

For their part, pro-China journalists in Hong Kong – and there are many – beg to differ.

"No matter how much of an evil empire you think China is, it is not fruitful to compare how they do things there and how they do things here," said T.S. Lo, chairman of Window, an English-language magazine started three years ago and quickly dismissed by its critics as "window dressing" for China. "We have a more objective view of what's going on," Lo countered, "and it doesn't do us any good to do Western-style, investigative journalism. There are specific rules for doing things in China and I think we should stick to them."

All three aspects of the creeping repression in Hong Kong's press are evident at the Morning Post, Hong Kong's premier English daily, both by reputation, circulation and revenue. With only 110,000 copies a day, the Post boasts the highest operating margins of any daily newspaper in the capitalist world, more than 50 per cent. The buoyant advertising market (its classified advertisements alone run to 150 pages most Saturdays) and a booming economy helped the company and its shareholders make a breathtaking profit of $335 million last year.

But there may be another reason for the Post's wealth. Like every other business in Hong Kong's media industry, it has prepared for the transfer of power to China with an eye on its bottom line and has covered its political bases. Only 17 months ago it was owned by a Western foreigner, Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Now it belongs to an Asian foreigner and outspoken supporter of China, Malaysian businessman Robert Kuok. What better position to be in before the 1997 boom falls on Hong Kong?

Robert Kuok owns the South China Morning Post

"There will be no bloodshed, and journalists won't be thrown in jail here in 1997," predicted Hong Kong Journalists Association's deputy president, Fong So. "It will be far more effective for China if it can influence and control the media bosses. That will be the scenario after 1997, and in five to 10 years we'll turn into a kind of Singapore: on the surface, no problems, but underneath, the government will be present at every level, starting with the press."

Will the Post and others in the English-language press escape the tendency? Some in the business – even at the Post – think not. Fears over Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule are usually most pronounced in the Chinese-language press, read by the bulk of the colony's six million highly literate readers. After all, when things get rough, native reporters and editors will not have the luxury of fleeing the way expatriate journalists will.

The dilemma for the Post these days is that half its staff is Chinese. And increasingly they and college graduates like them are being promoted higher into the organization. As they get promoted, however, the Chinese reporters are more likely to feel exposed to the gaze of media watchers from Beijing.

"They have an inferiority complex," So said of Beijing's officials. "They're worried about the so-called peaceful evolution, the bad effect Hong Kong's influence will have on the mainland press. So they make lessons of people."

The Post's Sunday edition got an early warning of this last summer. In an unreported incident, one of its young journalists was kicked out of China after she tried to report on a mining disaster in a northern province. She had entered China on short notice without a journalist's visa; she used her Hong Kong residence permit card to enter the country.

When the regional authorities found out who she was, they arrested her, stripped the film out of her photographer's camera and questioned the reporting team for several hours before sending them back to Hong Kong.

For press people used to bending the rules in China to gather information, such treatment is all in a day's work. Other reporters, as well as their sources, have been dealt with much more harshly – some, like the Bank of China official who fed Xi Yang his information, have been imprisoned for life.

But the Post was an unusual target, for it enjoys good favor in Beijing because it is owned by a supposed friend, Kuok. If the Post isn't immune to intimidation, people in the industry wondered, who is?

After the incident last summer, the Post decided to test Beijing's powers by trying to send the same reporter back in, this time only after applying for a regular journalist's visa.

The request was refused. Beijing had not forgotten the reporter's transgression. And that fact worries the Post management – and has shaken up the reporter – far more than her arrest and expulsion did.

"The lesson is that the mainland is not as accessible as we might want to think," Quon said. "And after 1997 Hong Kong will be like the mainland. It does gives pause."

In the short-term, journalists like Quon – who was trained at Carleton University's school of journalism – are optimistic. But the writing on the wall is getting more legible.

"I don't think anything is going to change radically after 1997," said Quon, 34. "But after the turn of the century, the international spotlight will be off Hong Kong and all it could take is one little hiccup to start things off."

Media under fire: 12 months of controversy

March, 1994. After a secret trial, the Chinese government in Beijing sentenced Hong Kong business reporter Xi Yang to 12 years in jail for stealing state financial secrets. He is now doing hard labor.

Man vs tank: Tiananmen Square, 1989

June. Six ATV television journalists resigned and more than 2,000 people protested after the broadcaster's management tried to ban a documentary its own reporters had produced on the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989.

July. Chinese officials had to apologize for bullying Hong Kong newspaper baron Ma Ching Kwan at an official reception in Shenzhen. His hosts had told him that he would be held accountable for unflattering reporting of China in his new populist English-language daily Eastern Express, once the Chinese take control in 1997.

August. Legislators and journalists complained that Hong Kong laws inhibiting press freedom – such as the Official Secrets Act – were taking too long to amend to prevent Chinese abuse after 1997.

Stephen Vines, Eastern Express editor

September. Eastern Express editor Stephen Vines resigned over differences with his newspaper's publisher, Ma, apparently over the issue of managerial interference in editorial decisions. In October, the Eastern Express lost the rest of its editorial executives when Vines' successor and seven others resigned over managerial interference in a story about China.

November. China secretly sentenced a contributor to a pro-Beijing Hong Kong monthly to six years in jail. Gao Yu, a Chinese citizen, was convicted of "illegally providing state secrets to overseas people." The 50-year-old veteran journalist had written about structural reforms of the Chinese government, was paid a small fee for her articles, and was arrested two days before leaving for New York and a fellowship at the Columbia University School of Journalism.

January, 1995. The Standard stopped publishing its Beijing edition after China shut down another newspaper with Hong Kong links, the Guangzhou daily Modern Mankind.