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The Erosion of Press Freedom: An Examination of Hong
Kong's Book Publishing and Journalism Industries Post-
handover

Submitted to

Professor Minxin Pei

By

Salonee Goel

For

Senior Thesis

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Abstract

Hong Kong was once touted for the openness of its press and its vibrant independent publishing scene. Now, seemingly reputable news organizations, such as the South China Morning Post, are undergoing editorial shifts and engaging in self-censorship while independent book publishers are being replaced by Chinese state-owned companies. These changes are a result of years of direct and indirect pressure on these industries by the Chinese government, which began even before the 1997 handover. In the past decade, these tactics have become more overt and their effects on the city's news organizations and book publishers are increasingly visible. Through interviews with journalists and book publishers, textual analyses and a look into the operations of Hong Kong's journalism and book publishing industries since the handover, this thesis presents the various methods utilized by the Chinese government to exert control and outlines the toll they have taken on Hong Kong's press freedom.

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Introduction

The midnight of July 1, 1997 marked the handover of Hong Kong from colonial Britain to China, and on the global stage, many questions were raised over the future of the newly established Special Administrative Region. The “one country, two systems” constitutional principle found in the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 and the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s mini-constitution, affirms that there is “one China” but grants Hong Kong autonomy for 50 years after the reunification. Chapter 1, Article 5 of the Basic Law states: “The socialist system and policies shall not be practiced in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years.”¹ Under this principle, Hong Kong’s domestic affairs, including its judiciary, were left to Hong Kong lawmakers and the pre-handover social and economic systems of the city were maintained. At the time of the transition, Hong Kong’s free press was celebrated for its role as a critic of both the colonial power and the Chinese government. Press in China was largely state-owned and far from pluralistic, therefore there were worries that Hong Kong’s journalism industry would eventually follow suite.

This concern was addressed in the constitutional framework of the Special Administrative Region. Freedom of press and freedom of expression are formally guaranteed in both the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law. Article 3(5) of the Joint Declaration states that the Hong Kong law will protect rights and freedoms of the

¹ “Hong Kong: Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China,” July 1, 1997, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b53d0.html>.

Hong Kong people.² This is further supported by Annex I, Part XIII, which guarantees that the rights in place before the handover, including freedom of press and freedom of speech, will be protected. The Basic Law further specifies these freedoms. Article 28 states:

“The freedom of the person of Hong Kong residents shall be inviolable. No Hong Kong resident shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful arrest, detention or imprisonment. Arbitrary or unlawful search of the body of any resident or deprivation or restriction of the freedom of the person shall be prohibited. Torture of any resident or arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of the life of any resident shall be prohibited.”³

The preceding article, Article 27, explicitly guarantees the freedom of press and states, “Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and strike.”⁴ Therefore, there cannot be any policies in Hong Kong that overtly constraints the publication of any content, other than for indecent or pornographic material.

Almost 23 years after the handover, Hong Kong’s press freedom has legally remained unchanged, as proposed Article 23 prohibiting “treason, secession, sedition and subversion” against the Central government failed to be implemented after public

² “The Joint Declaration,” Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.cmab.gov.hk/en/issues/joint3.htm>.

³ “Hong Kong: Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China.”

⁴ Ibid.

backlash.⁵ Despite of this, the reputation of the city's press has taken a severe hit, and claims of self-censorship and economic pressure have become commonplace. While believed by some to have been an immediate result of the 1997 handover, Hong Kong's press industry did not change suddenly after July 1, 1997. In fact, the most substantial changes to and constraints on the industry have been applied in the last decade.

Although China did not initially make an overt effort to curb Hong Kong's freedom of press, the Central government was constantly monitoring the city's news media and book publishing industries. As China became an economic superpower, not only were mainland Chinese becoming wealthier and accumulating capital, but the country's large consumer market became attractive to businessmen globally. The Central government leveraged its status in the global economy and was able to subtly influence Hong Kong's press through economic means. While mainland capital began entering the city, so did the capital of individuals with business interests in the country, who were able to use the ownership of media organizations as strategic collateral in their relationships with China. These relationships and changes in media ownership weren't simply market induced but encouraged, as businessmen with these assets were able to garner clout within China that was used for economic and political favors. The Chinese government, through economic suppression and limiting access to information, also strived to create a correlation between news organizations that were economically successful and those that were favorable to China in their reporting.

⁵ Carol P. Lai, *Media in Hong Kong: Press Freedom and Political Change, 1967-2005*. (Routledge Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia, 2008): 181.

The highly publicized disappearances of the Causeway Bay booksellers brought Hong Kong's independent book publishing industry into the global spotlight. Many believed that the abduction of these booksellers, some of which occurred outside the borders of China, violated the principle of "one country, two systems" and attributed the following collapse of Hong Kong's book publishing industry to these disappearances. While this intimidation played a major role, Chinese government initiatives began affecting the industry years prior. In the case of both Hong Kong's book publishing and journalism industry, the administration of Xi Jinping marked the prioritization and the use of overt tactics in addressing the city's freedom of press. Jin Zhong, veteran book publisher and journalist, stated "The Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao era was more relaxed, but now since Xi Jinping has come into power in the past 8 years, [Hong Kong's book publishing industry] has become tighter and more restricted."

This thesis aims to assess the status of Hong Kong's press freedom more than two decades after the 1997 handover by looking at both the book publishing industry and local press. The first chapter examines the various factors that led to the demise of Hong Kong's previously thriving independent publishing scene. This will include a discussion of the disappearances of the Causeway Bay booksellers and its effect on the industry, but will also address the combination of economic and social tactics used by the Chinese government prior to that event. The chapter that follows will outline the methods used by the Chinese government in limiting Hong Kong's journalistic freedom. This section will include interviews with current Hong Kong-based journalists who discuss their own experiences in the newsroom. Finally, this thesis presents a case study of Hong Kong's most widely read English-language paper, the South China Morning Post, which has gone through major editorial changes since the

handover. By condensing these observations and evaluating Hong Kong's current media landscape, this thesis will argue that Hong Kong's press freedom has considerably eroded after the handover as a result of increasing political, economic and social constraints exerted by the Chinese government, most notably in the last decade.

Chapter 1: Hong Kong's Book Publishing Industry

Cheung Chi-Ping, Lui Por, Lam Wing-kee, Gui Minhui and Lee Bo, all owners and employees of the Hong Kong bookstore Causeway Bay Books and the publishing house which owns it, went missing between October and December of 2015.⁶ With little to no information available to any friends or family, it slowly became clear that Chinese authorities were behind their abrupt disappearances. Although these kidnappings dealt a severe blow to Hong Kong's once flourishing publishing industry, which went into a deep slump soon after, China's attack on Hong Kong's book publishing actually began years before.

Early Beginnings

Thanks to the legal protection guaranteed by the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, politically sensitive books that were banned from publication in China, found their home in Hong Kong's numerous independent bookstores. These "banned books", a term unique to Hong Kong, are usually of the following categories according to Jin Zhong, editor of Open Magazine and known Hong Kong publisher: books related to political scandals or private lives involving the top Communist Party leadership, ethnic separatism and the party history of the CCP.⁷ *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, written by Mao Zedong's private doctor Li Zhisui, was published in 1994 and was one of the first such books that created a worldwide stir, as it exposed

⁶ James Tager, "Writing on the Wall: Disappeared Booksellers and Free Expression in Hong Kong" (PEN America, November 5, 2016).

⁷ Jin Zhong, Interview with Jin Zhong, January 2, 2020.

previously unknown unsavory aspects of Mao's life.⁸ The book was soon banned from publication in China, and mainland Chinese bookstores were not allowed to carry it but the demand from Chinese readers remained unchanged. An appetite was created for similar content and salacious books like these continued to be published and distributed in Hong Kong.⁹ More recently, the downfall of former Communist Party official Bo Xilai in 2012, including his trial on corruption charges and his wife's implication in the murder of a British businessman, created a peak in the demand for political books.¹⁰ Bao Pu, founder and publisher of New Century Press in Hong Kong, said in an interview with PEN America that around 150 books were published on this topic in 2013, and that half of them were published by Mighty Current Media, the publishing house that owned Causeway Bay Books and employed the five men who were abducted.¹¹

People began to depend on Hong Kong's independent bookstores for these usually political gossip books, known as *zhengzhi baguashu*.¹² As an increasing number of tourists from mainland China began to enter Hong Kong, they often returned home carrying these books. With 34.9 million Chinese nationals entering Hong Kong in 2012, a highly profitable market was created that propelled Hong Kong's robust independent publishing industry.¹³ Paul Tang, founder of People's

⁸ Richard Bernstein, "The Tyrant Mao, as Told by His Doctor," *The New York Times*, October 2, 1994, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/02/world/the-tyrant-mao-as-told-by-his-doctor.html>.

⁹ Bao Pu, Interview with Bao Pu, January 6, 2020.

¹⁰ Juliana Liu, "HK Booksellers 'author' Attacks China," *BBC News*, February 4, 2016, sec. China, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-35480229>.

¹¹ Tager, "Writing on the Wall: Disappeared Booksellers and Free Expression in Hong Kong."

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Chris Buckley, "On Hong Kong Shelves, Illicit Dirt on China's Elite," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2013, sec. World,

Recreation Community bookstore in Hong Kong, estimated in a 2013 interview with *The Atlantic* that around 90 percent of his business is from mainland Chinese customers who purchase political books.¹⁴ In 2014, Hong Kong's publishing industry contributed HK\$14 billion to the city and generated 40,000 jobs.¹⁵

Causeway Bay Bookseller Disappearances

While many smaller Hong Kong publishers contribute to the industry, Mighty Current Media made up a whopping third of the market for such provocative books, according to Bei Ling, the director of Independent Chinese PEN, and was known to publish titles such as *Overseas Mistresses of the Chinese Communist Party* and *Women of the Shanghai Gang*.¹⁶ The Chinese government has never revealed an official stance on Might Current or Causeway Bay Books. However, *People's Daily*, a state-owned tabloid that is thought to be a mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party, berated the publishing house for “stirring up troubles on the mainland” in an opinion piece published on January of 2016, months after the incident.¹⁷ In February of 2016, Phoenix TV, a Hong Kong based station, televised the confessions of the five booksellers. Four of them confessed to the illegal trading of books across the border

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/world/asia/exposes-of-chinas-elite-a-big-lure-in-hong-kong.html>.

¹⁴ Chris Horton, “In Hong Kong, a Sanctuary for Banned Books,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2013, sec. China, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/in-hong-kong-a-sanctuary-for-banned-books/274831/>.

¹⁵ Brian Yap, “Literature Lovers Camp out Overnight as Hong Kong Book Fair Begins,” *South China Morning Post*, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1555367/literature-lovers-camp-out-overnight-hong-kong-book-fair-begins>.

¹⁶ Tager, “Writing on the Wall: Disappeared Booksellers and Free Expression in Hong Kong.”

¹⁷ 单仁平, “单仁平: 少数港人不应动辄质疑‘一国两制,’” *People's Daily*, accessed February 23, 2020, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJSR5H>.

from Hong Kong into the mainland, a crime that had no legal precedent in China, identifying Gui as the leader behind the scheme.¹⁸ After Lam's release, he described his detention and stated that the confession was scripted and coerced. In an article for the Hong Kong Free Press, he wrote, "The previous confessions had been based off of the script that I had been given, of which I read off mechanically word by word. Shi was also the director."¹⁹ In February of 2020, Gui was sentenced to 10 years in prison after he was tried in January for "providing intelligence overseas".²⁰ While he was formally released from detention in October of 2017, he was required to stay in Ningbo and was seized once again months later, from a train to Beijing where he was with two diplomats from the Swedish Consulate in Shanghai.²¹

The crime of "illegal smuggling" may sound familiar to those aware of the case of Yao Wentian, another Hong Kong book publisher who was sentenced to ten years in jail in the mainland two years prior.²² Under the impression he was delivering paint to a friend in Shenzhen, he was arrested soon after he crossed the border and

¹⁸ Ned Levin, "Hong Kong Booksellers Confess to Illegal Sales in China," *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-booksellers-confess-to-illegal-sales-in-china-1456747083>.

¹⁹ Wing Kee Lam, "The Missing Bookseller: Lam Wing-Kee's Ordeal, in Full and in His Own Words," *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, September 11, 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/09/11/missing-bookseller-lam-wing-kees-ordeal-full-words/>.

²⁰ Austin Ramzy, "China Sentences Hong Kong Bookseller Gui Minhai to 10 Years in Prison," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/world/asia/gui-minhai-china-hong-kong-swedish-bookseller.html>.

²¹ Chris Buckley, "Chinese Police Seize Publisher From Train in Front of Diplomats," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/22/world/asia/china-police-bookseller-train-gui-minhai.html>.

²² "Hong Kong Publisher Yao Wentian Jailed for 10 Years," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed February 25, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2014/05/hong-kong-publisher-yao-wentian-jailed-for-10-year.php>.

convicted for illegally smuggling industrial chemicals.²³ Prior to his detention, Yao was the chief editor of a Hong Kong publishing house, Morning Bell Press, and had agreed to publish *Chinese Godfather: Xi Jinping* by Yu Jie, a US-based author that was exiled from China. Yu and Edmund Yao, Yao's son, believe that the arrest was intended to stop the publication of this novel. Edmund Yao said to the *New York Times*, "There is no question that they are trying to punish him for his publishing activities through normal criminal charges."²⁴ Another publisher, Wu Yisan, signed on to publish the book until he received a phone call, which he believed was from or linked to Chinese authorities, threatening his safety if he moved forward with the book's publication.²⁵ Yu's book was finally published by Jin Zhong.

While the detention of Yao was worrying for Hong Kong-based publishers, he was in mainland China at the time of his abduction, perpetuating the strength of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle. With the belief that Hong Kong residents were safe till they entered China, the Hong Kong publishing industry, while shaken from the abductions, did not see a large change. However, the abduction of Gui Minhai, from Thailand and of Lee Bo, from Hong Kong, created a different kind of fear as it was understood that China was willing to detain publishers across international borders. Jin, who published *Chinese Godfather: Xi Jinping*, pulled out from publishing Yu's second book on January 3rd of 2016, months after the Causeway

²³ 麦燕庭, "73岁书商姚文田重判10年其子大呼荒谬决上诉," RFI - 法国国际广播电台, May 7, 2014.

²⁴ Chris Buckley, "Hong Kong Man Seeking to Issue Book About Xi Is Held in China," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/29/world/asia/publisher-of-book-critical-of-chinas-leader-is-arrested.html>.

²⁵ Chris Buckley, "A Chilling Phone Call Adds to Hurdles of Publishing Xi Jinping Book," *Sinosphere Blog* (blog), February 19, 2014, <https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/19/a-chilling-phone-call-adds-to-hurdles-of-publishing-xi-jinping-book/>.

Bay incident. Jin stated that “circumstances had changed” and cited fears from his family and friends for his safety if he was to go through with the book’s publication.²⁶

The reason behind the Causeway Bay detentions have called for much global speculation. Some believe that the arrests may be in retaliation to the printing of a specific book, or to pre-empt the publishing of another. Before his disappearance, Lee Bo told Juliana Liu, former Hong Kong correspondent for BBC News, that “he believed his colleagues had been detained to prevent the publication of a particularly sensitive book.”²⁷ Xi Nuo, a U.S. based Chinese author, states that the disappearance may have been to stop the publication of his book, *Xi Jinping and His Lovers*. According to him, Gui had agreed to the publication of his book in 2014, but then pulled out once he was visited by a Chinese official. Xi claims that shortly before the disappearances, Gui had changed his mind about the book’s publication once again and was willing to move forward with it. Xi told *BBC News*, “I’m responsible for this so I want to publish this book and tell the Chinese government: the five booksellers, they are innocent.”²⁸

Despite of this, the more widespread belief is that the abductions were simply part of a larger effort to suppress Hong Kong’s independent publishing entirely. It wasn’t solely Mighty Current publishers who were arrested but Lam Wing-kee who was the owner of Causeway Bay Books. As the manager and former owner of the bookstore, he didn’t have a particular say in which books were chosen for publication as he was concerned mostly with retail. This suggests that the Chinese government

²⁶ Kris Cheng, “Publisher Suspends Launch of Dissident’s New Book on Xi Jinping Due to ‘Fear and Pressure,’” *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/01/12/publisher-suspends-launch-of-dissidents-new-book-on-xi-jinping-due-to-fear-and-pressure/>.

²⁷ Liu, “HK Booksellers ‘author’ Attacks China.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

didn't want to stifle individual publications, but create a stigma around the industry as a whole. To destroy the industry, the Chinese government had to not only scare publishers and employees, but customers as well. "The impact of the kidnapping case is that it popularised the idea that buying these books and publishing these books or having anything to do with these kinds of books is dangerous. The public got the message, so what you see is the diminishing of the customers that come to Hong Kong to buy these books," said Bao Pu in an interview.²⁹ The fear of customers was likely propelled by the testimony of Lam Wing-Kee, after his return to Hong Kong. He revealed in a press conference with Hong Kong lawmaker Albert Ho that he was allowed to enter Hong Kong under the condition that he would return with a hard drive containing records of 4,000 books and over 600 customers.³⁰ Additionally, in the article detailing his detention in *Hong Kong Free Press*, he states that he was instructed to work in the bookshop on his release and report the names of customers who buy politically sensitive books. He writes:

"What was even scarier afterwards then, as the man named Shi had told me, was that I had to continue working in the bookshop after I came back to Hong Kong. He would be in contact then so I could report what was happening, through text or photographs. They wanted to understand what was going on in Hong Kong, especially those who were buying books about political theories. I were to be his ears and his eyes in the future."³¹

²⁹ Bao, Interview with Bao Pu.

³⁰ Kris Cheng, "Banned Book Seller Says Chinese Authorities Demanded Hard Drive Containing Details of Some 600 Customers," *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, June 16, 2016, sec. HKFP Reports, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/06/16/banned-book-seller-says-authorities-in-china-demanded-hard-drive-contraing-details-of-some-600-customers/>.

³¹ Lam, "The Missing Bookseller."

Effect of the Disappearances

The disappearances scared publishing houses, bookstores and customers alike. The most immediate evidence of the aftermath can be seen in the 2016 Hong Kong Book Fair that happened months after the disappearances. The Hong Kong Book Fair is regarded as an annual celebration of Hong Kong's diverse publishing industry, and offers visitors both classic and modern publications of various genres. The 2014 book fair had 570 exhibitors from 31 different countries, with students lining up overnight to be the first few through the door.³² In 2016, the tone of the festival has changed, according to Ilaria Maria Sala of *The Guardian*. She states that there were fewer stands selling banned books, with prominent publishers of politically sensitive books, such as the Mirror Media Group, missing entirely.³³ Greenfield and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) were still present, with politically sensitive books on displays. However, a CUHK editor told Sala, "We have had no problem in printing or distributing our four volumes on Zhao Ziyang but the impact on the fair is very strong. The controls on travellers have been strengthened, and many who came to Hong Kong to buy books censored in mainland China have stopped buying them, as they may get into trouble at the border."³⁴ Other smaller publishers, such as Subculture and Initium, are present, however their sales are visibility scarce. Pang Chi

³² Yap, "Literature Lovers Camp out Overnight as Hong Kong Book Fair Begins."

³³ Ilaria Maria Sala, "Hong Kong Book Fair Subdued after Bookseller Disappearances," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2016, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/25/hong-kong-book-fair-subdued-after-bookseller-disappearances>.

³⁴ Sala.

Ming, director of Subculture told *Apple Daily* that there is a “white terror” in the publishing industry which has repressed the publishing of sensitive books.³⁵

The Hong Kong airport is another place that exemplified the drastic effect of the disappearances. Naturally, the airport was an extremely popular place to purchase politically sensitive books for the mainland Chinese going back home. Renee Chiang, co-owner of New Century Press and wife of Bao Pu, told *CNN*, "The airport was an important part of the independent publishing industry of Hong Kong, as the vast majority of the readers of books on sensitive political topics are actually mainlanders, not local Hong Kong people."³⁶ In fact, in February of 2016, Michael Forsythe of the *New York Times* reported that Mighty Current was still delivering 500 books to Hong Kong's airport on the heel of the disappearances.³⁷ Soon after this, in April of the same year, *CNN* reported that 11 out of the 16 airport bookstores had closed down. Additionally, Page One, a Singapore-owned bookstore, closed down all of its 6 stores in the airport while French owned relay closed 5 of 10, leaving only stores that are accessible after check-in.³⁸ Other Hong Kong independent bookstores, known as “upstairs bookstores” such as 1908 Press, felt the pressure as well, shutting down soon after the disappearances. Ramifications are much more recent as well, with independent bookstore Anyone Cultural announcing its shutdown at the end of 2019.

³⁵ “【明天書展】銅鑼灣書店事件影響印刷至發行都唔敢接中共「禁書」 | 即時新聞 | 要聞 | 20160719,” *Apple Daily*, July 19, 2016,
<https://hk.news.appledaily.com/local/realtime/article/20160719/55380038>.

³⁶ Elaine Yu, “Hong Kong Airport Shuttters Bookstores amid Fears of Eroding Press Freedoms,” *CNN*, accessed February 29, 2020,
<https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/hong-kong-airport-bookstores/index.html>.

³⁷ Michael Forsythe, “Disappearance of 5 Tied to Publisher Prompts Broader Worries in Hong Kong - The New York Times,” accessed February 29, 2020,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/05/world/asia/mighty-current-media-hong-kong-lee-bo.html>.

³⁸ Yu, “Hong Kong Airport Shuttters Bookstores amid Fears of Eroding Press Freedoms.”

With such an immediate and visible aftermath, it is easy to draw the situation of Hong Kong's publishing industry directly to the disappearances of the booksellers. While this case was the most overt and direct attack on Hong Kong's industry by China, smaller and more gradual changes were being instituted for years.

Chinese Government Initiatives

The Chinese government has had concerns over Chinese language media in Hong Kong years before the 1997 handover. "The fact is [the Chinese government] already controlled Chinese language media even when the British were here. Even though the British administration couldn't care less what the Chinese were reading in Hong Kong, mainland China did care," said Bao.³⁹ As early as 1989, months after the Tiananmen Square incident, the Chinese Government launched an initiative named the "Working Group of National Clean Up and Rectification of Books, Newspapers and Audio-visual Markets."⁴⁰ Three tasks were initially proposed through this: to clean up periodicals, books and audio-visual material, to rectify and compress news publications and finally, to do an ideological and organizational reconstruction of publishing housings.⁴¹ To counteract the increasing number of published materials with "severely politically mistaken notion of capitalist liberalism," the government wanted to ensure that the materials circulating within the country promoted strong socialist thinking.⁴² This had immediate and severe effects on China's domestic

³⁹ Bao, Interview with Bao Pu.

⁴⁰ "The Southern Hill Project – China's Campaign Against Hong Kong's Independent Publishing," *PEN Hong Kong* (blog), June 19, 2017, <http://www.penhongkong.org/the-southern-hill-project-chinas-campaign-against-hong-kongs-independent-publishing/>.

⁴¹ 张小刚, 传媒与“新写实小说”的兴起 (Beijing Book Co. Inc., 2016).

⁴² "The Southern Hill Project – China's Campaign Against Hong Kong's Independent Publishing."

publishing industry. Since 1989, the publication of national newspapers went down by 12.3%, periodicals reduced by 14%, 8% of publishing houses were closed while another 11 were consolidated.⁴³

In February of 2000, the Chinese Communist Party began to prioritize this initiative and changed its name to “National Working Group of Anti-Vulgarity and Illegal Publications Campaign” or AVIP.⁴⁴ Liu Qibao, who went on to become Head of the Propaganda Department and a member of the Politburo, was chosen to lead the campaign which was implemented by 27 government bodies; from the Central Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Education to the General Administration of Customs and the Ministry of National Security.⁴⁵ This campaign was publicized as effort to sweep down on pornography and clamp down on illegal publications. Posters showed a broom sweeping away “yellow pages” or indecent material and a hammer coming down on pirated books, while pictures that were circulated showed piles of pornographic material in dumpsters. In reality, the campaign was intended to target a much wider range of material. To the Chinese government, “illegal books” refer to not only pirated materials, as the posters indicated, but publications that violate social stability, endanger national security, incite ethnic division or, as stated above, compromise socialist thinking.⁴⁶ The mission of AVIP, as elucidated on the campaign’s government website, provides a more holistic understanding of the campaign’s goals:

⁴³ 张, 传媒与“新写实小说”的兴起.

⁴⁴ 編張志強, 千禧年後兩岸四地出版業發展報告 (崧博出版事業有限公司, 2017).

⁴⁵ “关于我们-关于我们-中国扫黄打非网,” 中国扫黄打非网, accessed March 8, 2020, <http://www.shdf.gov.cn/shdf/contents/749/236131.html>.

⁴⁶ 編, 千禧年後兩岸四地出版業發展報告.

AVIP is a matter of the regime, a matter of the party and the country's future and destiny. China is currently the largest socialist country in the world and the biggest obstacle to the hegemonic powers. Hostile forces are attempting to destabilize and change people's political beliefs, weaken and slow down the rise of China's overall national strength, and deny and overthrow the party's leadership. In order to further political deception, the methods of ideological and cultural penetration become increasingly clandestine.⁴⁷

Considering this mission, it is clear that AVIP was an ideological initiative focused on maintaining the power of the CCP and therefore their jurisdiction extended beyond the management of vulgar material. The perception of the initiative's success was still, at this time, focused on the seizure of pirated or pornographic material. *Xinhuanet*, a subsidiary of China's official state-run *Xinhua News Agency*, reported that by September 30th of 2005, Beijing's AVIP office had seized 2.14 million illegal publications domestically.⁴⁸

Before 2003, Chinese residents had limited access to Hong Kong and could only visit the country as part of group tours or on business visas, hence the flow of mainland Chinese tourists to Hong Kong and back was relatively controlled. On July of that year, in order to deal with the drop in Hong Kong tourism after the SARS outbreak, the Individual Visit Scheme was issued through which mainland Chinese residents could receive two-way permits to visit either Hong Kong or Macau individually. Following this, the number of Chinese mainland tourists that visited Hong Kong grew drastically and by May of 2004, two million visitors had

⁴⁷ "The Southern Hill Project – China's Campaign Against Hong Kong's Independent Publishing."

⁴⁸ Yan Li, "北京第3季度扫黄打非成果显著 集中行动12500次," September 30, 2005.

come to Hong Kong under the scheme.⁴⁹ With this surge in visitors, there was an equivalent surge in the volatile publications that were being brought back to the mainland. Thus, the *Southern Hill Project* (南嶺工程) was launched as a campaign run by AVIP that specifically targeted “illegal” material that was coming across the border.

The first project meeting was held on May 31st of 2010 in Zhuhai, Guangdong, and included AVIP who met with member units from Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian, Hunan, Anhui and Jiangxi, which, other than Beijing, are the provinces closest to the Hong Kong border.⁵⁰ In this meeting, five primary objectives were established: to raise political awareness, strengthen leadership, promote multi-level cooperation, establish a working mechanism to confront these publications and to observe trends in the flow and publication of illegal material.⁵¹ It was decided that these forums would be held annually, so that multiple provincial representatives can share their findings and unify in their opposition to “politically harmful publications.”

While the development of the project alluded to a focus on the Hong Kong border, the Special Administrative Region was directly mentioned for the first time in 2012, with AVIP’s “Special Action Against Hong Kong’s Politically Harmful Publications.” This initiative emphasized targeting propaganda from Falun Gong groups, publications that were unfavourable towards Party leaders and publications

⁴⁹ Xiaolan Fu, *China’s Role in Global Economic Recovery* (Routledge, 2012).

⁵⁰ Mingfang Lai, “‘扫黄打非’‘南岭’工程正式启动 建协作机制,” May 31, 2010, <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/11737251.html>.

⁵¹ He Zhang, “‘扫黄打非’‘南岭’工程正式启动--文化--人民网,” June 1, 2010, <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/87423/11745278.html>.

that advocated for “Tibetan Independence” or Xinjiang separatism.⁵² The Southern Hill Project grew from seven member units in its inception in 2010, to twelve in 2014, with the addition of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hubei, Guangxi and Hainan. Guangdong, with its proximity to Hong Kong, continued to lead the project and in just 2014, dispatched a total of 227,000 law enforcement officers, inspected 63,000 publication operation units and seized 122.6 types of illegal publications.⁵³ Since then, the project has not stopped growing and becoming greater prioritized. In 2019, Jiangsu province reported that in the first quarter of the year, they investigated 53 AVIP cases, seized over 200,000 illegal publications, closed nine illegal websites and deleted more than 2,500 pieces of harmful information on the Internet.⁵⁴

Many local government notices that were released between 2012 and 2014 made the scope, departmental involvement and multi-level approach of this project clear. As early as 2012, government notices stated that AVIP issued a list of 14 Hong Kong and Taiwan distributors and 21 types of Hong Kong periodicals to be banned and that school campuses had to be cleansed of these illegal publications.⁵⁵ Local governments were encouraged to restrain the economic and social activities of Hong Kong media outlets with links to reactionary publications, and asked to

⁵² “The Southern Hill Project – China’s Campaign Against Hong Kong’s Independent Publishing.”

⁵³ Sibe Wang, “掃黃打非辦：‘南嶺工程’成員單位增至12個,” *Xinhua News Agency*, April 28, 2014, http://big5.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-04/29/content_2668292.htm.

⁵⁴ Feng Yu, “江苏一季度查办‘扫黄打非’案件53起,” *Xinhua Daily*, April 5, 2019, http://www.zgjssw.gov.cn/yaowen/201904/t20190405_6151070.shtml.

⁵⁵ “Chronicling Local Government Tactics Targeting ‘Politically Harmful’ Hong Kong Publications and Their Distributors,” *Fei Chang Dao* (blog), accessed April 14, 2020, <http://blog.feichangdao.com/2016/07/chronicling-local-government-tactics.html>.

use commercial, tax and other tools to do so. The Public Security Bureau was additionally asked to restrict the return of “special persons” to mainland China.⁵⁶

Another method that was stated was of strengthening the control of domestic printing presses. This is particularly effective considering the cheap cost of labor in China and the fact that many Hong Kong publishers took advantage of these printing presses in the mainland. This was one of the many ways the Chinese government was able to take advantage of the economic volatility of the publishing industry. Jin Zhong expands on such economic measures:

One way they can control publishers is through investment. The publishing industry is often very low margin and publishers often need money to tide them over, so investment from the mainland can be very important. Another way they exercise control of Hong Kong’s publishing industry is by sending people to work in Hong Kong-based publishing houses so they can monitor what’s going on and influence publishing decisions.⁵⁷

In 2013, Suzhou’s Culture and Athletics Office released a notice that outlined their methodologies in countering Hong Kong publications, many of which focused on the flow of physical publications across the Hong Kong border and back into China. They called to strengthen border and portal inspections by increasing the inspection of postal deliveries, tourist luggage and other transport methods, and prosecuting those who carried banned material. Notices also made it clear that Party members would be “dealt with severely” were they to be caught with overseas illegal publications.⁵⁸ A few months later, a notice was issued by the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Jin, Interview with Jin Zhong.

⁵⁸ “Chronicling Local Government Tactics Targeting ‘Politically Harmful’ Hong Kong Publications and Their Distributors.”

General Office of the Fuqing People's Government that called for the Tourism Bureau to ensure that tourists traveling to Hong Kong and Taiwan must be subjected to propaganda and discouraged from buying and bringing politically harmful publications back to China.⁵⁹ Around this time, it was reported that travel agents were threatened with fines if their clients returned to China with illegal books.⁶⁰

While Chinese customs is quick to seize books that they deem politically harmful, there is no released list which states which publications are barred from entry. Considering this, some believe that these decisions are at the whim of the customs officials. "They don't have a list; it's arbitrary. They take books just hoping that you will not have enough energy to argue with them since they are the customs. For me, I'm pretty sure my next book is not on their list but the way that they conduct business I'm pretty sure my next book won't get into China either," said Bao Pu.⁶¹ According to him, the Beijing airport is the loosest point of entry but even there, half a million publications are confiscated in a typical year.

The Chinese customs were sued twice by Chinese citizens who questioned the arbitrary confiscation of their novels, once in 2009 by Feng Chongyi and once in 2013 by Li Nanyang. Feng, a Chinese professor who lives in Australia, filed a lawsuit after 11 of his books which were bought and purchased in Hong Kong were confiscated at the Tianhe Station in Guangzhou. Feng argued that the actions by these customs officials violated Article 4 of the PRC Administrative Punishment

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ilaria Maria Sala, "Creeping Censorship in Hong Kong: How China Controls Sale of Sensitive Books," *The Guardian*, May 19, 2015, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/19/censorship-in-hong-kong-how-china-controls-sale-of-sensitive-books>.

⁶¹ Bao, Interview with Bao Pu.

Law which espouses "principles of fairness and openness."⁶² The Tianhe Station Customs Office defended itself by claiming that the confiscated books fell under the policies outlined in the Measures for Overseeing the Import and Export of Printed Materials and Audio-Visual Materials Through Customs and the List of Prohibited Items for Import and Export.⁶³ As these lists simply restrict materials that are "harmful to China's politics, economy, culture, or morals," Feng argued that a publicized list of books and materials is needed to ensure that the public knows whether their goods qualify. No list was produced as a result of this lawsuit. In fact, Feng was detained in China for a week in 2017 for reasons purportedly related to separate academic research.⁶⁴

Li Nanyang sued Beijing airport customs in 2013 after they confiscated 53 of her father Li Rui's book, *Oral Account of Past Events*, which was published earlier that year in Hong Kong. Li Rui, a 98-year-old ex-Communist Party official still in good standing with the CCP, wrote this book talking about his experience under Mao and the trajectory of his career. After the lawsuit was filed in 2013, a court in Beijing continued to delay it and again, no list of books was released. In fact, Li told *New York Times*, "I don't expect to win but I want to draw attention to the custom office's practices."⁶⁵

⁶² "Chinese Professor Sues Customs Officials for Confiscating Books at Border | Congressional-Executive Commission on China," accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/chinese-professor-sues-customs-officials-for-confiscating-books-at>.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Helen Davidson, "Chongyi Feng: China Lets Sydney Academic Leave after More than a Week," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2017, sec. Law, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2017/apr/02/chongyi-feng-china-lets-sydney-academic-leave-after-more-than-a-week>.

⁶⁵ Ian Johnson, "Lawsuit Over Banned Memoir Asks China to Explain Censorship," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2015, sec. World,

Current Industry Structure

The impact of the Southern Hill Project and the abductions of the booksellers hit the retail market for Hong Kong books hard and subsequently drove many Hong Kong publishers out of business, making way for Chinese state-owned companies to not only enter, but take over the bulk of the market. Currently, Sino-United Publishing, an umbrella publishing group, owns the Hong Kong-based imprints Chung Hwa Book Company, Commercial Press and Joint Publishing and has control over 80% of the Hong Kong market.⁶⁶ Sino-United owns more than half the bookstores in Hong Kong, 53 branches of the aforementioned imprints and almost 30 publishing houses.⁶⁷ According to *Radio Television Hong Kong* (RTHK)'s findings, the umbrella group is owned by Guangzhou-based company which is ultimately controlled by the Chinese Finance Ministry.⁶⁸ In 2015, *Next Magazine* reported that the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government, a Chinese central government organ which already owns media outlets such as *Wen Wi Po*, *Ta Kung Pao*, *Hong Kong Commercial Daily* and *Orange News* through a company titled *Guangdong Xiwenhua Development*, had taken control of Sino-

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/26/world/asia/china-lawsuit-over-banned-li-rui-memoir-censorship.html>.

⁶⁶ Betsy Tse, "Basic Law Violation Seen as LOCPG Tightens Grip on HK Publishers EJINSIGHT - Ejinsight.Com," *EJINSIGHT*, April 9, 2015, [//ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/1025075/20150409-basic-law-violation-seen-as-locpg-tightens-grip-on-hk-publishers](http://ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/1025075/20150409-basic-law-violation-seen-as-locpg-tightens-grip-on-hk-publishers).

⁶⁷ Kris Cheng, "Gov't Should Not Intervene in China Liaison Office's Ownership of Hong Kong Publishing Giant, Says Carrie Lam," *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, May 29, 2018, sec. Community & Education, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2018/05/29/govt-not-intervene-china-liaison-offices-ownership-hong-kong-publishing-giant-says-carrie-lam/>.

⁶⁸ Tager, "Writing on the Wall: Disappeared Booksellers and Free Expression in Hong Kong."

United Publishing.⁶⁹ Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam defended the legality of their action amidst outcries that it violates Article 22 of the Basic Law, which states that “no department of the Central People's Government may interfere in the affairs which the HKSAR administers on its own in accordance with the law”.⁷⁰

The censorship enacted by this takeover of the Hong Kong publishing industry came to head shortly after the 2014 Occupy Central movement, where books that weren't even broadly political were returned to publishers they believed to have been sympathetic to the movement. Bao believes that this social movement was crucial in further restricting Hong Kong's market. His own book, he said, was being sold by Chinese owned bookstores up until the movement.⁷¹ All the imprints under Sino-United were allegedly given instructions not to sell any potentially pro-democracy books.⁷² Up Publications, a smaller, independent publishing house, revealed that Sino-United returned hundreds of books to them shortly after their participation in the frontline of the protests.⁷³ Carmen Kwong Wing-suen, editor-in-chief of the publishing house, stated that her own books were kept out of Sino-United stores as only 28 copies were ordered in lieu of the regular 200.⁷⁴ At the same time, Sino-United was accused of publishing and distributing at least 5 books that were subtly against the movement.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Cheng, “Gov't Should Not Intervene in China Liaison Office's Ownership of Hong Kong Publishing Giant, Says Carrie Lam.”

⁷⁰ Tse, “Basic Law Violation Seen as LOCPG Tightens Grip on HK Publishers EJINSIGHT - Ejinsight.Com.”

⁷¹ Bao, Interview with Bao Pu.

⁷² Sala, “Creeping Censorship in Hong Kong.”

⁷³ Jeffie Lam, “Hong Kong Book Giant in Censorship Row after Returning Titles to ‘pro-Democracy’ Publisher,” *South China Morning Post*, March 8, 2015, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1732853/beijing-criticised-publication-new-series-anti-occupy-books>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

There are many models that exist when one wants to get a book published, the most common of which is the subsidy model. In this model, authors pay for the book's printing and binding process while publishers pay for the editing, distributing and marketing. Since independent publishing houses were going out of business and Chinese state-owned publishers refused to go through with books that were political in nature, if you were attempting to publish a book that may be inflammatory, this model would hardly be impossible. In this case, those who have the resources may choose to self-publish, which would mean that they would pay for all the services themselves, including the printing through a press. However, the impact of the Southern Hill Project and the abductions of the booksellers reached beyond the retail market for Hong Kong publishers, and also badly hit the printing presses. Those who run the printing machines in Hong Kong are worried of being potentially targeted were they to run books that angered the CCP, so they avoided books on the contemporary history of China altogether. Considering this, Hong Kong authors have few options left.⁷⁶ "Say you're brave enough to publish a book on a forbidden topic, you are not going to get it circulated in the major book stores, only the much smaller, independent ones. This will really hamper the number of books you are going to sell and this will discourage publishers from publishing those kinds of sensitive topics," said Jin Zhong of Hong Kong's current publishing climate.⁷⁷ Bao states that many writers he knows have pursued e-book publishing such as Amazon. "You just have to give

⁷⁶ Bao.

⁷⁷ Jin, Interview with Jin Zhong.

up the idea that you will go through the conventional book publishing channel,” he says.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The Chinese government has been attempting to subdue Hong Kong’s publishing industry for decades and through a variety of direct and indirect means has succeeded in doing so. First, the Chinese government hurt Hong Kong book publishers economically by targeting their sourcing and destroying their retail market. As an industry that requires significant economic capital, small changes in production costs and revenue can have a dire impact on publishers. The crackdown on China-based printing presses and the increased regulation of the Hong Kong border have resulted in major losses for Hong Kong publishers. Additionally, the most publicized tactics of abduction and intimidation have played a large role in further damaging the distribution and retail market of Hong Kong-based publishers and authors. The fear and stigma that is now attached to books on Chinese politics have discouraged publishers from printing them, bookstores from carrying them and consumers from purchasing such books. These tactics left the Hong Kong publishing industry highly vulnerable for Chinese companies with large amounts of capital to enter the market. These Chinese state-owned book publishers were able to take advantage of the economic conditions of independent Hong Kong publishers, and effectively replaced them by purchasing large numbers of bookstores in Hong Kong. This has effectively changed the landscape of books being sold in the city, as books critical of the Chinese government in any capacity

⁷⁸ Bao, Interview with Bao Pu.

can only be found in small, hidden bookstores that are slowly becoming harder to find.

Chapter 2: Hong Kong Press – Methods of Control

Hong Kong's reputation as a haven for a free and pluralistic press has taken significant hits in the past few decades. The Special Administrative Region's swift fall in the Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders indicates this change. When the Index was established in 2002, Hong Kong ranked 18th, cementing its place in the top ten countries in the Asia Pacific.⁷⁹ By 2013, this position had shifted to 58 and as of 2020, it now stands at 80, the lowest it has been since the inception of the index.⁸⁰ Reporters without Borders cited the treatment of journalists and media personnel through the pro-democracy protests that began in 2019 and the growing influence of the Chinese Communist Party's Hong Kong Liaison Office in local affairs as reasons for the drop in the ranking. China, ranking fourth from the bottom in the index, has established itself as a country where the state has a strong grip on domestic media. However, the "one country, two systems" principle has allowed Hong Kong's media to remain autonomous even after the 1997 handover. In the past decade, this autonomy has become increasingly challenged through both political and economic means.

As a British colony, Hong Kong legally did not have the freedom of press that it appeared to. The colonial administration had 30 laws, including the Sedition Publications Ordinance and the Control of Publications Ordinance, that could be used

⁷⁹ SC Yeung, "HK Press Freedom Seen Eroding as Beijing Makes Presence Felt EJINSIGHT - Ejinsight.Com," *EJINSIGHT*, February 13, 2015, [//ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/990180/20150213-hk-press-freedom-seen-eroding-as-beijing-makes-presence-felt](https://ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/990180/20150213-hk-press-freedom-seen-eroding-as-beijing-makes-presence-felt).

⁸⁰ "Hong Kong : Erosion of Press Freedom | Reporters without Borders," Reporters Without Borders, accessed April 26, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/hong-kong>.

to prevent and punish news organizations that undermined the state.⁸¹ However, in practice, these laws were rarely applied, as there was little reason to. Ma Gnok describes the relationship between the colonial power and the press as one of controlled pluralism.⁸² Prior to the 1980s, the ideological divide was between the rightist KMT-funded papers and the leftist CCP-funded papers. The subsistence of this cleavage created a semblance of an open and free press, despite the fact that criticisms of the colonial government were few and far between.⁸³ The British government carefully chose the newspapers in which they ran advertisements and through the Government Information Service, they had a rigid pipeline of information that reached selected reporters who would print it disguised as news. Additionally, members of pro-government news organizations were given British medals of honors as a form of co-optation.⁸⁴

After the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, Hong Kong's political future was formalized and increasingly became the focus of news media. As a result, citizens began to look for a greater degree of press freedom and the Hong Kong Journalist's Association began checking the government with a stronger voice.⁸⁵ The 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown encouraged both the British government and the Chinese Communist Party to transition away from the previous relationship they had with the Hong Kong press. An estimated one-fifth of Hong Kong's population actively showed their support for the student protestors in China through protests and

⁸¹ Ma Ngok, "State: Press Relationship in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constant Negotiation Amidst Self-Restraint," *The China Quarterly*, no. 192 (2007): 952.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Stephen Hutcheon, *Pressing Concerns: Hong Kong's Media In An Era Of Transition* (Cambridge, Mass: Joan Shorenstein Barone Center Press, 1998): 3.

vigils, making clear their desire for democracy.⁸⁶ Christopher Patten, who became Hong Kong's governor in 1992, therefore began to prioritize democratization efforts, which included overturning colonial laws such as those that were used to curb the freedom of press. Subsequently, the Hong Kong press did not hold back their criticisms of the Chinese government's response to the student uprising, resulting in the Chinese government harboring fears of similar subservience from the city's population. Thus, the Chinese government began to immediately heighten their involvement with the city's press. The *Xinhua News Agency*, officially owned and run by the Chinese state, was asked to engage in "monitoring and guiding" the Hong Kong Press, to the point of creating a list of Hong Kong's news organizations classified into four categories based on their relationship to the Chinese government.⁸⁷

While the British eradicated some of the laws that were in place, many were left for Hong Kong's new government to inherit. As per the precedent set by the British, these laws were seldom enacted and provisions within Hong Kong's Basic Law explicitly protected the freedom of press. However, this contradiction created a legal framework that bred uncertainty amongst the local press, leading to self-censorship by Hong Kong journalists. Additionally, during the transition era, the media industry in Hong Kong became increasingly profitable and economically lucrative. Some major newspapers, including the *Oriental Daily*, *Ming Pao* and the *South China Morning Post*, became publically listed and went from smaller, local businesses into conglomerates.⁸⁸ The capital going into the industry grew rapidly and so did the competition. *Apple Daily*, at its establishment in 1995, undercut the prices

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ma, "State: Press Relationship in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constant Negotiation Amidst Self-Restraint": 955.

previously set by the Newspaper Society of Hong Kong and quickly became the most popular daily paper.⁸⁹ This put pressure on the media industry and created a new political economy. In this landscape of news media, the Chinese government began to use particular methods, some adopted by the previous colonial power, to exert control over Hong Kong's press. Hong Kong, constituting two-thirds of China's foreign investment in 1999, is an important strategic asset to the mainland.⁹⁰ Thus, there was significant economic incentive for the Chinese government to maintain an appearance of press freedom, as a free flow of information is crucial to maintaining Hong Kong's position as one of the prominent financial centers of the world. Considering this, constraints on Hong Kong's press were largely incremental and subtle. The primary methods used were the co-optation of media ownership, financial pressure, limiting access to information and utilizing a vague legal framework intended to induce self-censorship amongst journalists.

Co-optation of Media Ownership

One form of media control similar to that of the colonial power was that of co-optation through political favors. Starting from years before the handover, prominent Hong Kong media executives and owners were given medals and prestigious positions in the Central People's Government. A chart published in 2007 outlined this "co-optation web" and listed 27 members of the Hong Kong media industry who were awarded with such medals, including the Grand Bauhinia Medal and Star, or positions such as deputies to the National People's Congress and the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Anne Cheung, *Self-Censorship and the Struggle for Press Freedom in Hong Kong*, *Self-Censorship and the Struggle for Press Freedom in Hong Kong* (2003): 46.

Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.⁹¹ The founder of the *Ming Pao* Group and Chairmen of Asia Television (ATV) and the *Hong Kong Economic Times* were a few of the elites that received such honors. This strategy has continued to evolve and in a similar chart compiled in 2018, 15 media owners and executives were listed including major shareholders of ATV and Cable TV.⁹² These political favors often gave way to immediate editorial shifts. Once high-level executives of *Sing Tao Daily News* and *Oriental Daily News* were granted such honors and positions, the papers went from being pro-KMT to criticizing the democrats.⁹³ This co-optation was done through informal means as well, such as banquets, dinners and building friendships. In earlier days, *Ming Pao* editors have been invited to dinner by the head of Xinhua's propaganda department on many occasions.⁹⁴ Additionally, a column in the *Oriental Daily* that was sometimes critical of China disappeared in 1996 after an executive in the newspaper was reported having dinner with the propaganda head of Xinhua only days prior.⁹⁵ Jin Zhong saw this "dinner diplomacy" first-hand after publishing the book of a defector of Hong Kong's Underground Party and inviting the columnist for an event. He was invited for dinner by a friend who discouraged him from doing so and pushed him to call off the event, which he refused to do.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Ma, "State: Press Relationship in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constant Negotiation Amidst Self-Restraint.": 954.

⁹² Francis L. F. Lee, "Changing Political Economy of the Hong Kong Media," *China Perspectives* 2018, no. 2018/3 (September 1, 2018): 10, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.8009>.

⁹³ Ma, "State: Press Relationship in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constant Negotiation Amidst Self-Restraint.": 957.

⁹⁴ Paul Lee and Leonard Chu, "Inherent Dependence on Power: The Hong Kong Press in Political Transition," *Media Culture & Society - MEDIA CULT SOC* 20 (January 1, 1998): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344398020001005>.

⁹⁵ Lee and Chu: 67.

⁹⁶ Jin Zhong, Interview with Jin Zhong, January 2, 2020.

The economic pressure of Hong Kong's media environment made it easy for businessmen to take ownership of prominent news organizations. By having ownership of an especially strategic commodity, there were able to gain social and political capital within China and further their business interests. Malaysian tycoon Tiong Hiew King saw his reputation significantly grow in China after his purchase of Ming Pao, stated an article in *The Initiative*.⁹⁷ This incentive provided an explanation for how media organizations that were economically failing, such as ATV and Ming Pao, were able to attract investors and be sustained.⁹⁸ By 2017, 9 of the 26 mainstream media outlets in Hong Kong had mainland Chinese stakes.⁹⁹ Businessmen owners in the media industry often have a wide portfolio and aren't involved in the day-to-day operations of their organizations. However, they exercise a form of allocative control by managing upper level staff and making strategic hiring and promotion decisions. A large part of this is making sure the "right" journalists, who are sympathetic to China, are in roles that give them significant editorial power. A 2009 study done by Francis L.F. Lee and Joseph Chan showed that top-level managers, including chief editors and deputy, assistant or executive chief editors, are more politically conservative than those that work under them.¹⁰⁰ The shift in editorial leadership of *Ming Pao* during the 2014 Occupy Protests indicates the importance of an editor with a particular stance or with the willingness to comply with the organization's owner. The previous chief editor was moved to a different position within the organization and the position was filled by a rookie journalist flown in

⁹⁷ Lee, "Changing Political Economy of the Hong Kong Media": 10.

⁹⁸ Ibid: 10.

⁹⁹ Ibid: 14.

¹⁰⁰ Francis L.F. Lee and Joseph Chan, "Organizational Production of Self-Censorship in the Hong Kong Media," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 1 (November 3, 2008): 120, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208326598>.

from Malaysia with a closer relationship to the owner.¹⁰¹ Additionally, roles that directly report on China are more likely to be filled by journalists from the mainland or those that are politically sympathetic to China. The same study showed that similarly, China news journalists were more pro-China in their personal views than journalists in other positions.¹⁰² This also affects which journalists are assigned which stories, as politically sensitive stories would be given to journalists whose personal stance aligns closely with that of China's. By intentionally managing high-level staff, media owners are able to induce an editorial shift.

Newsroom Socialization

Chin-Chuan Lee defines self-censorship as “a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to choice of rhetoric devices by journalists, their organizations and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward or avoiding punishments in the power structure.”¹⁰³ These editorial actions can be a product of a various methods of control exerted by the Chinese government. An 1997 annual report by the Hong Kong Journalists Association divides self-censorship into three categories: “direct and indirect external pressure on a media organization, pressure within a media organization and assimilation of values by journalists.”¹⁰⁴ Considering this, it is visible in both the political and economic constraints faced by the Hong Kong press.

¹⁰¹ Lee, “Changing Political Economy of the Hong Kong Media”: 11.

¹⁰² Lee and Chan, “Organizational Production of Self-Censorship in the Hong Kong Media”: 120.

¹⁰³ Chin-Chuan Lee, “Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Hong Kong,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 3, no. 2 (March 1, 1998): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X98003002005>.

¹⁰⁴ Hong Kong Journalists Association, “The Die Is Cast: Freedom of Expression in Hong Kong on the Eve of the Handover of China,” Annual Report, 1997.

Strategically appointed editors engage in this censorship and are the gatekeepers to the information that is eventually published. Some editors, such as those working for online news site *HK01*, are overt in their methods by, for example, adding disclaimers when articles are published to distance their organization from controversial stances.¹⁰⁵ *HK01*, however, is notorious for a very clear editorial stance dictated by its owner, who is also chief editor. Most censorship is much subtler, making it sometimes unclear if an editorial choice was, in fact, censorship at all. A journalist for *Bloomberg China* discusses how she is able to distinguish self-censorship from regular editing of her pieces. She says:

When you get censored, you just know. When your piece is edited, if the editing is done well, you know why the editor has taken something out or changed something. There will be a really concrete reason, such as the flow of your piece was not clear enough or you need another interview. For censorship, they don't give you reasons. Most of the time, when you write about politics, you know the part that they took out is the most important in the story.¹⁰⁶

Like all the journalists that were interviewed, she believed that in the last few years, she was having many more conversations with her editors over why they had decided to take out sections of her pieces. When she questions them, their answer is usually: "I am trying to protect you."¹⁰⁷ For new journalists, these editorial decisions have the potential to dictate the way they write their articles, as witnessing repeated censorship would instill in them a set of norms to follow in order to move up within

¹⁰⁵ "News Outlet HK01 Hits Back after Press Freedom Watchdog Questions Its Taiwan Independence 'Disclaimer,'" *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, December 28, 2018, sec. Hong Kong, <https://hongkongfp.com/2018/12/29/news-outlet-hk01-hits-back-press-freedom-watchdog-questions-hong-kong-independence-disclaimer/>.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Bloomberg China journalist, January 19, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

the organization. While overt control is likely to result in a backlash from journalists, more informal and tacit measures are tolerated, as to respond would be unprofessional. This results in socialization in the newsroom. Lee writes, “In Hong Kong, those journalists who do not feel subjected to strong control by company guidelines far outnumber those who do. They have, in short, “naturalized” the organizational perspectives as a standard of taste, conduct, and judgement.”¹⁰⁸ According to the Bloomberg China journalist, this behavior is, more often than not, top-down and doesn’t directly reflect the personal stance of editors, but the instructions given to them by formal and informal cues from owners and investors.¹⁰⁹

Some journalists also self-censor due to the clear indications given by China that some topics are entirely off the table. In a 1996 interview with *CNN*, Lu Ping, the Director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs at the time, stated that after 1997, “advocating for two Chinas” would be banned. Responding to follow-up questions, Lu clarified that writing about Hong Kong and Taiwan independence was “definitely not allowed.”¹¹⁰ Another indication was given by Qian Qichen, then Chinese Foreign Minister and Vice-Premier, who said in 1996 interview with the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, that personal attacks on Chinese leaders would not be allowed as there was a difference between an attack and criticism.¹¹¹ Since then, this sentiment has only intensified. All the journalists interviewed stated that it was understood industry-wide that talk of Taiwanese independence, along with Chinese separatism and *falun gong*,

¹⁰⁸ Lee, “Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Hong Kong”: 59.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Bloomberg China journalist.

¹¹⁰ Cheung, *Self-Censorship and the Struggle for Press Freedom in Hong Kong*: 39.

¹¹¹ Paul Lee and Leonard Chu, “Inherent Dependence on Power: The Hong Kong Press in Political Transition,” *Media Culture & Society - MEDIA CULT SOC* 20 (January 1, 1998): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344398020001005>.

could not be published.¹¹² In 2018, Victor Mallet, who was then vice-chairman of the Foreign Correspondents' Club and the Asia news editor of the *Financial Times*, invited pro-independence activist Andy Chan for a lunchtime talk.¹¹³ Both the Chinese and Hong Kong governments encouraged Mallet to cancel the talk, which he refused to do. A few months after the talk, on his return from Thailand, Mallet was denied a working visa and was given no explanation as to why, leading people to believe that it was a response to the event he chaired. This controversy has perpetuated the anxiety journalists face to broach topics that are publically out of bounds. While some censorship is done to preserve the business interests of the owners, others are done to protect the organization's more general financial interests.

Financial Pressure

The competitive nature of Hong Kong's press paired with the prevalence of the smartphone and internet has made journalism an industry that requires significant financial capital. Small reductions of profit could mean a threat to the survival of the news organization. Because of this, journalists can be encouraged to self-censor in order to maintain business interests in China and refrain from hurting advertising revenue. *Ming Pao*, an initially centrist paper, stated that the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Office had a blacklist of 19 newspapers and magazines including *Ming Pao* which the Bank of China group was asked not to advertise in.¹¹⁴ Another

¹¹² Interview with Bloomberg China journalist; Interview with Initium Media journalist, Interview with Apple Daily journalist, Interview with Jin Zhong.

¹¹³ Casey Quackenbush, "Financial Times Editor Barred Entry Into Hong Kong," *Time*, September 11, 2018, <https://time.com/5450061/hong-kong-financial-times-journalist-barred/>.

¹¹⁴ Ma, "State: Press Relationship in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constant Negotiation Amidst Self-Restraint": 359.

paper that has suffered financially due to a lack of advertising revenue is *Apple Daily*, an openly pro-democracy and anti-communist newspaper published by the media group Next Digital. The Next group's public listing in 1997 was terminated after Sun Hung Kay International, the purported guarantor, suddenly withdrew their support.¹¹⁵ In 2003, 8 years after the paper's inception, prominent real estate developers refused to advertise in the paper.¹¹⁶ A decade later, Standard Chartered, Hang Seng and HSBC pulled millions of dollars of advertising from the paper.¹¹⁷ The financial institutions maintained that it wasn't due to their political stance, however *Apple Daily* believes it was a result of pressure from Hong Kong's liaison office. The paper has also had a turbulent relationship with the former chief executive of Hong Kong, C.Y. Leung. Starting from March 16 of 2019, Leung began posting pictures on his Facebook page of advertisements in *Apple Daily*, asking his followers to no longer support those businesses, further discouraging companies to advertise in the paper.¹¹⁸ A journalist for *Apple Daily* stated that this difficulty in procuring advertising revenue has moved the paper to push a subscription model by charging readers for online access in order to ensure its financial survival.¹¹⁹ This model is used by *the Initium* as well, a centrist paper, that doesn't have any advertisements at all and relies on

¹¹⁵ Lee and Chu, "Inherent Dependence on Power: The Hong Kong Press in Political Transition": 66.

¹¹⁶ Ma, "State: Press Relationship in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constant Negotiation Amidst Self-Restraint": 359.

¹¹⁷ Anne Marie Roantree and Lisa Jucca, "Thousands Denounce HSBC Board Member's Likening of Hong Kong People to Freed Slaves," *Reuters*, October 31, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-china-idUSKBN0IK0DV20141031>.

¹¹⁸ Kris Cheng, "Press Freedom Concerns as Ex-Leader CY Leung Attacks Firms Advertising in pro-Democracy Apple Daily," *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, March 29, 2019, sec. Hong Kong, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/03/29/press-freedom-concerns-ex-leader-cy-leung-shames-firms-advertising-pro-democracy-apple-daily/>.

¹¹⁹ Interview with *Apple Daily* journalist, November 1, 2020.

investors and subscriptions.¹²⁰ “Naming and shaming” is a method used often to exert control according to Jin Zhong, who stated that pro-Beijing papers do the same with him by criticizing him publically in an effort to discourage him from speaking out.¹²¹

Access to Information

A significant way that China is curbing Hong Kong press is through limiting the access Hong Kong journalists have to the mainland. Much more overt in its application, this method been used significantly in the last decade under Xi Jinping, according to journalists that were interviewed. Jin Zhong stated that he was the first Hong Kong journalist to be banned from China in 1996 and the list of journalists facing the same has only grown since then.¹²² China has been increasingly limiting the journalists that are able to enter the country, with journalists from known pro-democracy papers, namely Apple Daily, finding getting press passes to go to the mainland very difficult.¹²³ A journalist from Apple Daily indicated that there is a list of journalists that are barred from entering the mainland.¹²⁴ New journalists have a lower chance of being on this list, therefore pro-democracy papers often send rookie journalists who can slip through the cracks to China to report for them. She claimed that a decade ago, the restrictions were not nearly as strict, as Hong Kong journalists were still able to enter China for exclusive stories. In fact, fear of being detained in China has led to reporters that may still be allowed abstaining from going in the country at all. A journalist for *the Initium* stated that since the start of the 2019

¹²⁰ Interview with Initium Media journalist, January 19, 2020.

¹²¹ Jin, Interview with Jin Zhong.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Lee and Chu, “Inherent Dependence on Power: The Hong Kong Press in Political Transition”: 66.

¹²⁴ Interview with Apple Daily journalist.

protests regarding the extradition bill in Hong Kong, she had not gone in to China at all as she was afraid of any potential repercussions.¹²⁵ In recent years, these press restrictions have begun to apply to the Special Administrative Region of Macau as well. Ahead of Xi Jinping's visit to Macau to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its handover from Portugal to China, multiple journalists and media personnel were denied entry.¹²⁶ RTHK, NowTV, Commercial Radio, TVB and South China Morning Post all reported that their journalists weren't allowed through the border, although they had been granted press accreditation weeks prior.¹²⁷ Macau authorities stated that their entry was being obstructed under the Internal Security Framework Act as their actions could potentially jeopardize public safety, despite the fact that many of them were initially invited by the Macau Information Bureau for the event.¹²⁸

For Hong Kong press, the quality of reporting, namely, on China, plays a large role in the success of news organizations. Because of this, the Chinese government is intentional in selecting the media it engages with thereby gatekeeping the access to information. Papers that have a more pro-China stance are more likely to receive interviews, access to mainland events and officials and exclusive information directly from the Chinese government.¹²⁹ Officials from the Hong Kong and Macau Office set up meetings with particular news executives and perpetuate information through the

¹²⁵ Interview with Initium Media journalist.

¹²⁶ Jeffie Lam, "Post Reporter Denied Entry into Macau to Cover Xi Jinping's Visit," *South China Morning Post*, December 17, 2019, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3042488/south-china-morning-post-reporter-denied-entry-macau-cover>.

¹²⁷ Holmes Chan, "Macau Denies Entry to Hong Kong Activists and Journalists Ahead of Chinese Pres. Xi Jinping Visit," *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, December 18, 2019, sec. Hong Kong, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/12/18/macau-denies-entry-hong-kong-activists-journalists-ahead-chinese-pres-xi-jinping-visit/>.

¹²⁸ "RTHK Reporter Barred, Macau Shuts out More HK Media - RTHK," December 18, 2019, <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1498300-20191218.htm?>

¹²⁹ Lee, "Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Hong Kong": 58.

Government Information Service, a colonial institution that has been maintained.¹³⁰ In fact, a journalist from Initium claimed that China is increasingly sending their own state-sponsored journalists to report on events to ensure that it has full control over the information being released.¹³¹ Finally, the potential of losing important data and information from China encourages even international news organizations to comply with the Chinese government. For example, Bloomberg was embroiled in controversy after it axed an expose on Xi Jinping's family wealth written by Michael Forsythe, a veteran investigative journalist.¹³² While he was given no explanation, Bloomberg's editor-in-chief Matthew Winkler stated in a call, "It is for sure going to, you know, invite the Communist Party to, you know, completely shut us down and kick us out of the country."¹³³ While some believe that this censorship was done to preserve China's role as a large client for Bloomberg's sale of terminals, others think that the primary driving factor was to maintain access to Chinese data that if lost, would compromise the quality of their terminals altogether.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Ma, "State: Press Relationship in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constant Negotiation Amidst Self-Restraint": 966.

¹³¹ Interview with Initium Media journalist.

¹³² Edward Wong, "Bloomberg News Is Said to Curb Articles That Might Anger China," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2013, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/09/world/asia/bloomberg-news-is-said-to-curb-articles-that-might-anger-china.html>.

¹³³ David Folkenflik, "Bloomberg News Killed Investigation, Fired Reporter, Then Sought To Silence His Wife," NPR.org, April 14, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/14/828565428/bloomberg-news-killed-investigation-fired-reporter-then-sought-to-silence-his-wi>.

¹³⁴ James Fallows, "Bloomberg in China: It's Not About the Terminals, It's About the Data," *The Atlantic*, March 26, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/bloomberg-in-china-its-not-about-the-terminals-its-about-the-data/359655/>.

Conclusion

According to a 2012 survey administered by the Hong Kong Journalists Association, 79% of the 663 local journalists surveyed believed that self-censorship has risen since 2005, and 36% claimed that they or their supervisors directly practiced self-censorship when it came to reports that the owners of their organizations, advertisers or the Chinese government could find disagreeable.¹³⁵ While the Chinese government has been using a combination of colonial and new methods to exert control over the Hong Kong press since before the handover, this control has only intensified with significantly less effort to be overt under the administration of Xi Jinping. Many journalists cited the 2019 pro-democracy protests surrounding the extradition bill as a turbulent period for Hong Kong press, where editorial constraints have begun to show more recognizably in their reporting. Two journalists listed *Ming Pao*, *South China Morning Post*, *HK01*, *Xing Bao* and *the Hong Kong Economic Times* as news organizations whose editorial staff and owners have put pressure on how the protests should be framed and reported on, down to the specific verbiage that is used.¹³⁶ This further reaffirms that the control of Hong Kong's Press has only increased in the last few years. Through the takeover of media ownership by pro-China businessmen, financial constraints through advertising, established editorial norms within the newsroom and the gatekeeping of Chinese information, Hong Kong's press freedom has continued to be constrained by the Central government.

¹³⁵ Te-Ping Chen, "Hong Kong Journalists Warn of Self Censorship," *WSJ* (blog), June 28, 2012, <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/06/28/hong-kong-journalists-warn-of-self-censorship/>.

¹³⁶ Interview with Initium Media journalist, Interview with Bloomberg China journalist.

Chapter 3: Case study – South China Morning Post

South China Morning Post (SCMP), Hong Kong's leading English-language paper, has maintained its image as a reputable source of information by the general public and journalists alike since the handover. While the Hong Kong public's trust in paid newspapers has considerably waned since 1997, SCMP has been consistently identified as one of the most credible papers, up until the most recent survey administered in 2019.¹³⁷ Despite this, the reliability and objectiveness of several major newspapers were questioned in their reporting of the 2019 pro-democracy protests, with SCMP being one of the largest receivers of such criticism.¹³⁸ Since its establishment, it has gone through major changes of ownership through which it has fielded claims of self-censorship. Under businessman Robert Kuok and then the Chinese internet group Alibaba, numerous editorial decisions and the hiring and firing of staff have been the focal points of public criticism. The major controversies that have fueled these claims can be viewed through the established framework: the co-optation of media ownership, newsroom socialization and the skewed access to information, all of which have resulted in an increasingly visible editorial shift in SCMP's reporting.

¹³⁷ Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, "Tracking Research - Public Evaluation on Media Credibility Survey Results" (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, n.d.), http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/ccpos/en/research/Credibility_Survey%20Results_2019_ENG.pdf.

¹³⁸ Interview with Apple Daily journalist.

Under Robert Kuok's Kerry Group

As one of Hong Kong's oldest surviving papers, SCMP was founded in 1903 by Tse Tsan-tai, an anti-Qing dynasty political reformer, and journalist Alfred Cunningham.¹³⁹ Just after World War II, the paper was controlled by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC). After some time as a publically listed company, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation purchased the paper as part of its foray into the Chinese market in 1986. At this time, SCMP had established itself as a well-regarded source for reporting on China and was read mainly by a small but influential group including expatriates and the Chinese elite.¹⁴⁰ Without a clear political stance, it was largely known as a pluralistic, establishment paper which seldom critiqued the colonial power. The former director of Xinhua News Agency's Hong Kong branch, Xu Jiatur, revealed that China had attempted to purchase the highly-respected paper through a third party in the 1980s but failed to do so. Robert Kuok, a Chinese-Malaysia businessman who already had a 24% share of television station TVB at the time, bought a 34.9% majority share in the paper in 1993 from Murdoch, who prepared to move from print media to television.¹⁴¹ Kuok already had significant investment in China at the time of this purchase, was a member of the Preparatory Committee and the Selection Committee for the transition of Hong Kong and was named a Hong Kong Affairs Advisor by Xinhua.¹⁴² His relationship with

¹³⁹ Yu Huang and Yunya Song, *The Evolving Landscape of Media and Communication in Hong Kong* (City University of HK Press, 2018): 25.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid: 38.

¹⁴¹ Stephen Hutcheon, *Pressing Concerns: Hong Kong's Media In An Era Of Transition* (Cambridge, Mass: Joan Shorenstein Barone Center Press, 1998): 8, <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/Pressing-Concerns-Hong-Kongs-Media-Transition/20378546818/bd>.

¹⁴² Ming K. Chan, *The Challenge of Hong Kong's Reintegration with China: Modern Diasporic Femininity* (Hong Kong University Press, 1997): 127.

China was by no means subtle, as in a 1997 issue, the Economist newspaper referred to Kuok as the “largest individual investor in China.”¹⁴³ Reportedly, Kuok was rewarded for this purchase and was able to further his real-estate ventures in China, namely the Shangri-La hotels owned by Kuok’s Kerry Group.¹⁴⁴

Kuok’s clearly pre-existing relationship with China aroused fears that his ownership would influence the editorial stance of the newspaper. In fact, another English-language paper published by the Oriental Daily News Group, Eastern Express, began to call itself “the *only* independent English-language newspaper” shortly after this deal.¹⁴⁵ There is little doubt that pressure was exerted by this new owner but editorial changes appeared very gradually due to resistance by the journalists and upper-level management. Initially, Kuok’s presence was little felt, possibly due to the highly publicized worry over censorship and external pressure to retain editorial independence. One of the first incidents that was heavily reported on was the 1995 dismissal of cartoonist Larry Feign amid the cancellation of his popular comic strip *The World of Lily Wong*. The last published issue addressed the sale of organs of prisoners by Chinese authorities and called Chinese Premier Li Peng a “fascist murderous dog.”¹⁴⁶ SCMP editors, such as David Armstrong and Jonathan Fenby, defended these changes as part of regular cost-cutting measures, but the fact that Feign was number one in the Hong Kong bestsellers chart at the time and the editor’s refusal to publish a backlog of pre-paid strips made that claim difficult to believe.¹⁴⁷ There are accounts of Jonathan Fenby, who had become chief editor of

¹⁴³ Hutcheon, *Pressing Concerns*: 8.

¹⁴⁴ Carol P. Lai, *Media in Hong Kong: Press Freedom and Political Change, 1967-2005*. (Routledge Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia, 2008): 126.

¹⁴⁵ Chan, *The Challenge of Hong Kong’s Reintegration with China*: 127.

¹⁴⁶ Hutcheon, *Pressing Concerns*: 12.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

SCMP, asking for changes in articles as early as 1996. Nury Vittachi, a former SCMP columnist who was also let go around this time, gave an example of such a change when he shared that the headline “Fear for press freedom as Lu lays down ground-rules” was changed to “Lu sets out ground-rules for press freedom after 1997.”¹⁴⁸ For the same article, the scrap headline initially quoted Lu saying, “Will someone be allowed to write there should be two Chinas? ...absolutely not,” but this was edited by Fenby to highlight the quote, “They can criticize, they can object to our policies. They can say anything they like.” In this way, this piece was alarmingly changed from being one that criticized Chinese authorities to one that praised their response. These editorial changes became more common as the date of the handover neared, likely because Fenby wanted to prevent angering the incoming regime, rather than on direct instructions from the new owner. Another overt move by Fenby was the creation of the ‘China Advisor’ position, which was filled by Feng Xiling, founding editor of *China Daily*, an English language paper owned by the Publicity Department of the CCP.¹⁴⁹ This was believed to have been done on Kuok’s instruction, as the role appeared to be a superficial goodwill gesture towards China but had little editorial impact. From then on, multiple changes of staff occurred that were believed to have been fueled by Kuok’s desire for the paper to take a more pro-China stance and to thus remove veteran journalists that may pose a threat.

¹⁴⁸ Nury Vittachi, “HK20: 20 Things People Hope No One Remembers about the 1997 Handover,” *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, June 29, 2017, <https://hongkongfp.com/2017/06/29/hk20-20-things-people-hope-no-one-remembers-1997-handover/>.

¹⁴⁹ Hong Kong Journalists Association and Article 19 (Organization), *The Die Is Cast: Freedom of Expression in Hong Kong on the Eve of the Handover to China, 1997 Annual Report*, 1997.

Many of these changes were put into motion by Kuok's son, Ean Kuok, who replaced him as chairman shortly after the handover. At the same time, SCMP's CEO stepped down, and his role was absorbed into the role of the chairman.¹⁵⁰ After this "buffer" between the proprietor and editorial staff was removed, the proximity between the chairman and the day-to-day functions of the paper thereby increased. It was reported that at one point, Ean Kuok received a nightly list of headlines that he had to approve before publication the next day.¹⁵¹ Amongst the loss of many key members of staff, the decision met with most public scrutiny was the demotion of Willy Lam from the role of China editor. After 12 years at the paper, 10 in a senior role, Lam had established himself as a well-respected journalist both inside and outside the organization, so to be demoted without warning was unprecedented.¹⁵² Shortly before his dismissal, he had written on a group of businessmen, including Kuok, that had met with Chinese leaders to pledge their support for Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa's second term in return for business favors.¹⁵³ This article upset Kuok, who wrote an angry letter to chief editor Robert Keatley. Keatley decided to go through the regular procedure and publish the letter in the "Letters to the Editor" section as sent by "former SCMP chairman."¹⁵⁴ Soon after, Lam was replaced as China editor by Wang Xiangwei, who was formerly at pro-China newspaper *China Daily*. Lam resigned shortly after his demotion and many journalists within the

¹⁵⁰ Carol P. Lai, *Media in Hong Kong: Press Freedom and Political Change, 1967-2005*: 127.

¹⁵¹ Ibid: 132.

¹⁵² Anne S. Y. Cheung, *Self-Censorship and the Struggle for Press Freedom in Hong Kong* (The Hague, Netherlands ; New York : Norwell, MA: Kluwer Law International ; Distributed in North, Central, and South America by Kluwer Law International, 2003): 144.

¹⁵³ Carol P. Lai, *Media in Hong Kong: Press Freedom and Political Change, 1967-2005*: 127.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid: 128.

organization followed him and wrote letters protesting his treatment.¹⁵⁵ Danny Gittings and Jasper Becker were some of the next high-profile dismissals. While editor Thomas Abraham, close family-friend of Kuok's, argued that Becker's firing was due to insubordination as he refused to work with China editor Wang, Becker told the Hong Kong Journalists Association, "Our copy was being changed or watered down. They're trying to make the coverage more pro-China and they're just trying to find ways to avoid offending people and trying to tone the coverage down a lot."¹⁵⁶ Fenby, who was constantly defending the paper and its decisions during his tenure as chief editor, stated, after he was let go, that "a word from the owner was sufficient to dictate editorial policy."¹⁵⁷

Wang served as chief editor of the paper from 2012 to 2015, and was embroiled in his own controversies regarding censorship and his purported pro-China stance. In 2012, SCMP reported the death of Tiananmen Square dissident, Li Wangyang, by publishing a short brief, while other reputable papers examined the suspicious circumstances of it in length.¹⁵⁸ An email was leaked through the Asia Sentinel which showed sub-editor, Alex Price, questioning Wang on this decision and even writing that it could be read as self-censorship, but the chief editor simply stated that he did not need to defend his decision. After the leak of these emails, SCMP proceeded to run numerous stories on the death, but the controversy had already done

¹⁵⁵ Ibid: 129.

¹⁵⁶ Article 19 (Organization) and Hong Kong Journalists Association, *The Line Hardens: Tougher Stance on Civil Rights Threatens Freedom of Expression in Hong Kong; 2002 Annual Report*. (London; Wanchai: Article 19; Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2002).

¹⁵⁷ Jonathan Fenby, *Dealing with the Dragon: A Year in the New Hong Kong*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Arcade Pub, 2000): 168.

¹⁵⁸ Roy Greenslade, "Hong Kong Journalists Complain about Editor's Self-Censorship," *The Guardian*, June 20, 2012, sec. Media, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2012/jun/20/press-freedom-china>.

damage to the paper's reputation. Under Wang, numerous former SCMP journalists have claimed that it was particularly difficult to report on China without facing censorship.¹⁵⁹ Paul Mooney, an award-winning China reporter, wrote a revealing piece in the *Asia Sentinel* on the circumstances surrounding his dismissal from the paper. He claimed that his desire to write a story on Geng He, the wife of human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, marked the end of his tenure at SCMP, and stated that many journalists were let go before him for writing a story that did not show China in a good light. He writes, "Talk to anyone on the China reporting team at the South China Morning Post and they'll tell you a story about how Wang has cut their stories, or asked them to do an uninteresting story that was favorable to China."¹⁶⁰ He gave the example of Leu Siew Ying, a Malaysian journalist who was let go after fighting to do a follow-up story on the Taishi protests but was not permitted to do so by then China editor, Wang. Mooney attributed the selection of Wang as chief editor to his close ties to China as member of the Jinlin Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and believed that he received special treatment from Kuok for this very reason.¹⁶¹ After his dismissal, Mooney stated that there were no more foreign journalists reporting on China in the organization. SCMP's online editor under Wang told the *New York Times* that while it was clear censorship was occurring within the organization, it was done in a subtle manner, so was not always visible externally. He

¹⁵⁹ Hugo Restall, "The Censor at Hong Kong's Post," *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2012, sec. Opinion,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304898704577477932515774016>.

¹⁶⁰ Paul Mooney, "Prize-Winning Reporter Driven out of SCMP," *Asia Sentinel*, June 29, 2012, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/prize-winning-reporter-driven-out-of-scmp>.

¹⁶¹ Paul Mooney.

said, “It was often done in a very hush-hush manner. You could see that people were not exactly free to speak their minds.”¹⁶²

Under the Alibaba Group

After 22 years under Kuok’s Kerry Group, mainland Chinese multinational technology company Alibaba announced that they were acquiring the paper for HKD\$2.06 billion.¹⁶³ Jack Ma, founder of the group, and Joseph Tsai, executive vice chairman, moved away from SCMP’s previous subtlety by making clear what the group’s intentions were by acquiring the paper. In an interview with SCMP on the day the purchase was announced, Tsai claimed that their editorial policy would be to provide a perspective on China that was different than what was commonly presented by Western media outlets. He said:

The coverage about China should be balanced and fair. Today when I see mainstream western news organisations cover China, they cover it through a very particular lens. It is through the lens that China is a communist state and everything kind of follows from that. A lot of journalists working with these western media organisations may not agree with the system of governance in China and that taints their view of coverage. We see things differently, we believe things should be presented as they are.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Javier C. Hernández, “A Hong Kong Newspaper on a Mission to Promote China’s Soft Power,” *The New York Times*, March 31, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/31/world/asia/south-china-morning-post-hong-kong-alibaba.html>.

¹⁶³ Huang and Song, *The Evolving Landscape of Media and Communication in Hong Kong*: 25.

¹⁶⁴ Chow Chung-yan, “Alibaba Buys the South China Morning Post: Full Q&A with Executive Vice Chairman Joseph Tsai,” *South China Morning Post*, December 11, 2015, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1890057/alibaba-buys-south-china-morning-post-full-qa-executive-vice-chairman>.

Ma reaffirmed this goal in his own interview when he stated, “The more I come to know about the outside world’s perception of China, the more I feel there are all sorts of misunderstandings and, to a certain extent, people do not get the full picture from the media.”¹⁶⁵ These comments raised alarm bells for a lot of journalists and activists, as they implied that SCMP’s reporting on China was going to be generally positive, rather than objective.¹⁶⁶

In the same interview, Tsai stated that the vision of SCMP under Alibaba would be to focus on global readership through technology and digital means of distribution. On the first official day of Alibaba’s ownership of SCMP, 5 April 2016, the paywall on the site was removed and a new SCMP Mobile app was launched. The chief editor, Tammy Tam, stated that this was to “grow its readership globally” as “China plays an increasingly critical role in world politics and the economy.”¹⁶⁷ A few months later, SCMP took down their Chinese-language website, nanzao.com, in order to “integrate resources” according to the organization.¹⁶⁸ Now TV reported that in an internal meeting, management told staff that SCMP’s main audience should be English not Chinese readers.¹⁶⁹ Additionally, SCMP under Alibaba discontinued many subsidiary publications include HK Magazine, a popular alternative magazine

¹⁶⁵ Chow Chung-yan, “Alibaba’s Jack Ma on China’s Economy, Hong Kong and the South China Morning Post: Full Q&A,” *South China Morning Post*, April 21, 2016, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/economy/article/1937278/alibabas-jack-ma-chinas-economy-hong-kong-and-south-china-morning>.

¹⁶⁶ Hernández, “A Hong Kong Newspaper on a Mission to Promote China’s Soft Power.”

¹⁶⁷ “South China Morning Post Announces Removal of SCMP.Com Paywall,” *South China Morning Post Publishers Limited* (blog), April 5, 2016, <https://corp.scmp.com/south-china-mornscmp-com-paywall/>.

¹⁶⁸ Ilaria Maria Sala, “The South China Morning Post Has Suddenly Shut down Its Chinese-Language Website,” *Quartz*, September 9, 2016, <https://qz.com/777906/the-south-china-morning-post-has-suddenly-shut-down-its-chinese-language-website/>.

¹⁶⁹ “南華早報中文網站停止運作,” Now 新聞, September 9, 2016, <https://news.now.com/home/local/player?newsId=192857>.

that had a largely local readership, and even announced that its archive would be deleted, a decision that they overturned later after significant backlash.¹⁷⁰ Although SCMP claimed this was due to the market conditions for print media, Zach Hines, former editor-in-chief of the magazine, believed that this was part of their prioritization of overseas readership.¹⁷¹ Although the newspaper, which relied on its print publication for a large part of their profit, was not profitable, the changes made by Alibaba seemed to have the desired effect. Since January of 2017, SCMP saw its international readership increase by eight times, according to SCMP CEO, Gary Liu.¹⁷² Additionally, as of 2018, SCMP was more read digitally than in print and its largest audience was American readers.¹⁷³ This decision to pivot to international readership over local falls in line with what an Initium journalist believes is China's larger press strategy. She says, "They have realized that they can't influence Hong Kong readers very much, but can influence mainland Chinese readers and readers overseas."¹⁷⁴

SCMP under Alibaba has also been the subject of criticism for numerous interviews published under mysterious circumstances or without the inclusion of sufficient context. In an interview published first on SCMP's Chinese site in July 2016 and then translated for their English site, Zhao Wei, legal assistant to a human

¹⁷⁰ Zach Hines, "A Sad End: HK Magazine Was the Canary in the Coal Mine," Hong Kong Free Press HKFP, September 30, 2016, <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/09/30/a-sad-end-hk-magazine-was-the-canary-in-the-coal-mine/>.

¹⁷¹ Grace Tsoi, "The Death of an Irreverent Hong Kong Magazine," *BBC News*, October 7, 2016, sec. China, <https://www.bbc.com/news/37481134>.

¹⁷² Chad Bray, "Newspaper Bets on Digital Growth as It Celebrates 115th Anniversary," *South China Morning Post*, November 6, 2018, sec. Business, <https://www.scmp.com/business/companies/article/2171041/digital-international-growth-are-way-forward-south-china-morning>.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Initium media journalist.

rights lawyer, was interviewed over the phone by an unnamed “SCMP journalist” who reported that Zhao regretted her activism.¹⁷⁵ The article claimed that she stated she had been released on bail a week prior and was staying in her parent’s house, although the paper could verify her location.¹⁷⁶ Considering that her husband and her lawyer had been unable to reach her, many believe that this interview was facilitated by the Chinese government, a claim that SCMP did not refute or agree to. In 2018, SCMP participated in a government-arranged interview of Gui Minhai where he made a confession that was believed to have been coerced by the Chinese government.¹⁷⁷ This significantly hurt the credibility of SCMP as an independent news organization, and many academics and journalists expressed outrage at the publication of this interview.¹⁷⁸ Stephen Vines, former SCMP journalist, in an article he wrote in the Hong Kong Free Press, believed that SCMP’s participation in the interview gave it a sense of undeserved legitimacy and cited this decision as one of the factors that lead to him leaving the organization.¹⁷⁹ SCMP has also lost a number of journalists over

¹⁷⁵ Sala, “The South China Morning Post Has Suddenly Shut down Its Chinese-Language Website.”

¹⁷⁶ SCMP reporter, “Young Chinese Legal Activist ‘Regrets’ Civil Rights Activism,” *South China Morning Post*, July 11, 2016, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1988501/young-chinese-legal-activist-regrets-civil-rights>.

¹⁷⁷ Phila Siu, “Sweden ‘Using Me like Chess Piece’, Says Detained Publisher Gui Minhai in Government-Arranged Interview,” *South China Morning Post*, February 9, 2018, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/2132797/sweden-using-me-chess-piece-says-detained-hong-kong-bookseller-gui>.

¹⁷⁸ Magnus Fiskesjö, “Confessions Made in China,” *Chinoiresie* (blog), May 3, 2018, <http://www.chinoiresie.info/confessions-made-in-china/>.

¹⁷⁹ Stephen Vines, “Why I Will No Longer Write for the South China Morning Post,” *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, November 13, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://hongkongfp.com/2018/11/13/i-will-no-longer-write-south-china-morning-post/>.

claims of censorship by editors.¹⁸⁰ Alice Woodhouse shared on Twitter that before she left SCMP in 2016, “balanced and fair” city desk reporters were faced with editors who would put a spin on their work and select headlines.¹⁸¹ Journalists from Bloomberg China and the Initium both shared that their friends at SCMP complained that pressure from editors when writing articles increased significantly after the 2019 protests.¹⁸²

Textual Analysis of Editorials from 1995, 2005, 2019

Observing news editorials, often written by editors significantly high up in the organizational hierarchy, can be a method through which to gauge the editorial stance of a news organization. SCMP’s editorials are never attributed to a particular author, and instead are placed above the names of SCMP’s editorial board. Thus, the implication persists that the opinions shared in the editorials are those of the editorial staff. Considering this, SCMP’s editorials provide a window into the stance of the entire organization and by analyzing those published in October of 1995, October of 2005 and October and November of 2019, any editorial shift that may have occurred in the past two decades will emerge.

¹⁸⁰ “Leading Columnists Purged at Hong Kong’s Paper of Record,” Asia Sentinel, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/putsch-columnists-south-china-morning-post>.

¹⁸¹ Olivia Woodhouse, “Tweet,” Twitter, October 28, 2019, <https://twitter.com/alicemuwu/status/1188655324531527682>.

¹⁸² Interview with Bloomberg China journalist, January 19, 2020; Interview with Initium Media journalist, January 19, 2020.

October 1995

In 1995, SCMP had only just come under the ownership of Kuok, who was being careful to preserve SCMP's image of editorial independence. However, this was merely a few months after the dismissal of Larry Feign, indicating that there was a line that could not be crossed. Approaching the July 1, 1997 date of the handover, many of SCMP's editorials were on the future of Hong Kong under China, therefore providing significant material through which to analyze SCMP's reporting of China at the time. An October 25, 1995 editorial described SCMP's expansion plans which included a new plant, facilities and possibly a new China edition of the paper. The editorial stated that this venture was "an expression of confidence in the strength of the newspaper as an independent organ of news and opinion" and that the Post "believes in the future prosperity of Hong Kong and China and the dynamism of the region."¹⁸³ Another editorial praised China's decision to work with Britain in securing visa-free privileges to those with the Special Administrative Region passport, stating that "joint efforts were off to a good start."¹⁸⁴ Despite this, there were, surprisingly, more editorials critical of China than those that painted the Chinese government in a particularly positive light. Five editorials from the month were explicitly critical of the government, with two harshly rebuking China's plans to amend Hong Kong's Bill of Rights.¹⁸⁵ "China's planned emasculation of the Bill of Rights is an outrageous act

¹⁸³ "Forward - Post Haste," *South China Morning Post*, October 25, 1995, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

¹⁸⁴ "Joint Efforts a Good Start," *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 1995, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

¹⁸⁵ "China Reacts to HK Ire," *South China Morning Post*, October 30, 1995, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post; "Disorder and the Law," *South China Morning Post*, October 9, 1995, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post; "Reassurance Welcome," *South China Morning Post*, October 28, 1995, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post; "Rights and Wrong," *South China Morning Post*, October 19, 1995, ProQuest Historical

which raises doubts about Hong Kong's promised autonomy after 1997," starts one such editorial, which states that China's proposal to revive colonial laws is a violation of the Basic Law.¹⁸⁶ At the same time, the writer believed that critics were wrong to suggest that this has dire consequences for human rights in Hong Kong, as civil liberties "cannot simply be legislated into existence." Another critical editorial discussed the conviction of a Chinese-Australian businessman and stated that the arbitrary application of Chinese law will discourage foreign businessmen from investing in the region, therefore proposed removing ambiguity from the businessman's sentence and trial.¹⁸⁷ These editorials suggest that in 1995, SCMP journalists were able to write freely on China as long as they adhered to a certain level of respectability. Editorials that were overtly critical tended to include the other side, at least to a degree, and didn't end without suggesting ways to move forward, therefore indicating that there was room for improvement.

October 2005

Ten years later, SCMP's proprietors had managed to make significant changes to the management of the paper and had a much stronger grasp on the day-to-day editorial functions of the organization. The shift in the subject areas of the editorials was clear, as there were significantly fewer written on the Chinese government. A much stronger focus on international news can be noticed, with multiple editorials on Japan's prime minister, Iraq's constitutional referendum, Pakistan's earthquake disaster, and even the functioning of international organizations including the United

Newspapers: South China Morning Post; "Making Contact," *South China Morning Post*, October 2, 1995, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

¹⁸⁶ "Rights and Wrong".

¹⁸⁷ "Disorder and the Law."

Nations and the International Monetary Foundation.¹⁸⁸ More local cultural trends were written about, including editorials on trendy Hong Kong women breaking stereotypes or the dating habits of expats, and a surprisingly high number were dedicated to the reform of Hong Kong's public places.¹⁸⁹ Hong Kong's chief executive at the time, Donald Tsang, received a healthy amount of criticism, however no editorials were particularly aggressive towards the official.¹⁹⁰ On October 1, the National Day of the People's Republic of China, one editorial discussed the "common bond" between those who identified as Hongkongese and Chinese, and stated that both groups felt proud of their Chinese heritage.¹⁹¹ Another few editorials celebrated China's second manned space mission, shared hopes for China to become a leading

¹⁸⁸ "Koizumi Needs to Take Stock of His Actions," *South China Morning Post*, October 2, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Koizumi Must Make Amends for Shrine Visit," *South China Morning Post*, October 18, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "United Effort Needed for Quake Victims," *South China Morning Post*, October 10, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Fuel Price Rise a Test of Susilo's Credentials," *South China Morning Post*, October 2, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Iraq Needs a Constitution Accepted by All the Players," *South China Morning Post*, October 7, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Iraq's Rebirth a Time for Careful Judgment," *South China Morning Post*, October 17, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "UN Must Rally Force to Tackle Disasters," *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

¹⁸⁹ "Trendy Women Overturn Stereotypes," *South China Morning Post*, October 8, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Expats out of Fashion with Maturing Society," *South China Morning Post*, October 9, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Tourism Project Can Boost Disco Bay's Quality of Life," *South China Morning Post*, October 6, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Think Again on Stanley Park Site - and Get It Right," *South China Morning Post*, October 21, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "The Harbourside Should Be for the People," *South China Morning Post*, October 27, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

¹⁹⁰ "Actions Speak Louder than Words on Pollution," *South China Morning Post*, October 23, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Tsang's Blueprint May Not Work Miracles," *South China Morning Post*, October 13, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

¹⁹¹ "A Day to Celebrate Common Bond," *South China Morning Post*, October 1, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

space power and showed support for President Hu Jintao's five-year economic program.¹⁹² Because editorials on China were so rare and generally positive, the only two that were overtly critical were highly noticeable and stood out. On October 11, an editorial called for Beijing to put a stop to the violence inflicted on Taishi villagers, who were fighting for their corrupt chief to take accountability, and highlighted the fact that no senior officials had publicly addressed the attacks.¹⁹³ Another editorial ten days later commented on Hong Kong's slow road to democracy and asked Beijing for a time table on when universal suffrage was going to be introduced.¹⁹⁴ Like before, both these editorials ended with suggestions for the Chinese government. With a smaller number of editorials on mainland politics, it seems that writing on the Chinese government or on potentially controversial issues is avoided altogether. The editorials that were critical were possibly included to uphold the reputation of SCMP as an independent paper and follow the lead of other liberal news organizations, as not publishing any comments about the Taishi villagers would have been noticeable and attracted criticism.

October and November 2019

Now under Alibaba, SCMP was facing increased scrutiny over censorship and critics claimed that the editorial board had a pro-China stance. In the second half of

¹⁹² "China's next Step to Becoming a Space Power," *South China Morning Post*, October 12, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Time to Welcome China into Space Nation Club," *South China Morning Post*, October 18, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; "Mainland Blueprint a Step in Right Direction," *South China Morning Post*, October 14, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong..

¹⁹³ "Beijing Should Step in to Stop Taishi Violence," *South China Morning Post*, October 11, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

¹⁹⁴ "Bigger Steps Needed on Road to Democracy," *South China Morning Post*, October 20, 2005, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

2019, Hong Kong was in the midst of massive pro-democracy protests by students against a proposed extradition bill. Most of the editorials published by SCMP from the end of October to the end of November were regarding these protests, and illustrated clearly the stance of the organization towards the crisis. As the protests escalated through November, the editorials became increasingly hostile towards the protestors. Three different editorials in the span of this month advocated for extradition treaties in the context of the Taiwan murder case, clearly indicating that SCMP was not sympathetic to the demands of the protestors.¹⁹⁵ Despite of this, the editorials published initially were not particularly aggressive and called for the police to respect journalists, asked the Hong Kong government to protect the public from doxxing, and uphold the rule of law and the “one country, two systems” principle in responding to the protests.¹⁹⁶ However, this changed midway through November and the editorials went from referring to the protests as “unrest” or a “political crisis” to “acts of violence.”¹⁹⁷ One editorial stated that the death of the student that occurred during the protests called for a show of respect, “not further violence.”¹⁹⁸ It referred to the protests against the police that were occurring in response to the death as “a

¹⁹⁵ “Surrender of Murder Suspect Just the Start,” *South China Morning Post*, October 21, 2019; “Focus Should Be on Justice Not Politics in Taiwan Murder Case,” *South China Morning Post*, October 24, 2019; “Why We Still Need Extradition Deals,” *South China Morning Post*, November 11, 2019.

¹⁹⁶ “Police Must Respect Role of Journalists,” *South China Morning Post*, November 1, 2019; “Protect Police from Doxxing, but Don’t Forget the Rest of Us,” *South China Morning Post*, October 29, 2019; “Rule of Law Must Not Be Sacrificed to Deal with Political Crisis,” *South China Morning Post*, November 2, 2019; “Safeguarding ‘one Country, Two Systems’ Must Be the Priority,” *South China Morning Post*, November 4, 2019.

¹⁹⁷ “District Council Polls Must Not Be Delayed by Acts of Violence,” *South China Morning Post*, November 8, 2019; “Reconciliation Needs Dialogue, but First the Violence Must End,” *South China Morning Post*, November 12, 2019; “As Violence Escalates, Put Public Safety First,” *South China Morning Post*, November 13, 2019.

¹⁹⁸ “Death of Student Calls for Show of Respect, Not Further Violence,” *South China Morning Post*, November 9, 2019.

worrying example of people forming strong views before they get the facts.” Two editorials discussed the universities’ involvement in the protests. One stated that “universities must not become breeding grounds for violence” and that the use of the campus for “illegal activities” calls into question “the academic freedom and independence that make universities special in societies.”¹⁹⁹ Another claimed that “universities have to meet expectations of society or fear the worst.”²⁰⁰ Finally, an editorial titled “Spirit of Hong Kong is alive and well” celebrated the help of the public in the city’s clean-up as a response to “six months of protests, violence and vandalism [which] have stretched Hong Kong’s resources and patience.”²⁰¹ While some editorials offered suggestions to the Chinese government in regard to proposed policies, criticism of the government was entirely absent. This observation, coupled with the clear stance against the pro-democracy protests, suggests that the editorial stance of SCMP under Alibaba aligns closely with that of the mainland government. This overt position marks a departure from the management of SCMP under Kuok, as there are no noticeable attempts to uphold the appearance of SCMP’s editorial freedom.

Textual Analysis of SCMP’s reporting on major Hong Kong events

While editorials directly signify a news organization’s stance, the observation of general reporting by the newspaper may highlight cases of censorship through the way events are framed and the headlines that are selected. SCMP’s reporting of

¹⁹⁹ “Universities Must Not Become Breeding Grounds for Violence,” *South China Morning Post*, November 17, 2019.

²⁰⁰ “Universities Have to Meet Expectations of Society or Fear Worst,” *South China Morning Post*, November 30, 2019.

²⁰¹ “Spirit of Hong Kong Is Alive and Well,” *South China Morning Post*, November 25, 2019.

Governor Patten's 1994 democratic reforms, the 2003 Article 23 protests and the 2019 pro-democracy protests may reveal the changing editorial practices over the years and under different ownership, as well as the approach of the organization towards the politicized events.

Patten's democratic reforms

Chris Patten became the last Governor of Hong Kong in 1992 and took the lead on reforming Hong Kong's electoral system by widening the eligible electorate to the point that all of Hong Kong's working population would be able to vote for members of the Legislative Council.²⁰² The CCP did not respond well to these reforms and consistently attacked the Governor, often through state-owned media agency, *Xinhua*. Patten was also publicly an advocate for the freedom of press, and believed in necessary legal reform to ensure it.²⁰³ When Patten announced the reforms in 1992, SCMP was still under Murdoch and there had been no claims made of censorship. The newspaper's reporting on Patten's reforms seems to adhere to this assumption. Public opinion of the reforms was written about often and multiple opinion polls were taken to gage the Hong Kong public's perception.²⁰⁴ It seemed that initially, these reforms were seen as too drastic and thought to potentially jeopardize

²⁰² Christine Loh, *Underground Front: The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2010): 181.

²⁰³ Carol P. Lai, *Media in Hong Kong: Press Freedom and Political Change, 1967-2005*: 151.

²⁰⁴ Jeremy Lau, "HK Still Supports Patten Reforms," *South China Morning Post*, October 26, 1992; Jonathan Braude, "Tide of Public Opinion Swings behind Patten," *South China Morning Post*, December 14, 1992, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

Hong Kong's transition in the future.²⁰⁵ As China aggressively opposed them, the public, which was previously undecided, followed suite.²⁰⁶ However, by December of 1992, the Legislative Council voted in support of the reforms and the majority of those polled by SCMP were also behind Patten's reforms.²⁰⁷ SCMP's reporting seemed to follow the perception of the public and an editorial stance on the issue did not emerge. Much of the reporting followed Patten's negotiation with China on the reforms and initially, most articles portrayed Patten as idealistic but then changed to viewing China's assumption that Patten will back down as "unrealistic."²⁰⁸ Politics writer at the time, Andy Ho, wrote often on the subject, but merely assessed the circumstances of the reforms and offered Patten light suggestions, therefore did not take one side over the other.²⁰⁹ In December of 1992, SCMP posted a full-page notice that was signed by many financial services professionals who opined that Patten's reform package was sacrificing stability and prosperity for a "Utopian democracy" and would harm Hong Kong's economy.²¹⁰ Despite of this, this notice appeared to be published as an advertisement rather than the organization's endorsement.

Considering SCMP's reporting in the months following Patten's announcement of the

²⁰⁵ Connie Law and Louis Ng, "China Keeps Patten Reforms off Agenda," *South China Morning Post*, December 9, 1992, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

²⁰⁶ "Patten Warned on Electoral Reform," *South China Morning Post*, October 7, 1992, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

²⁰⁷ Jonathan Braude, "Tide of Public Opinion Swings behind Patten," *South China Morning Post*, December 14, 1992, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

²⁰⁸ Andy Ho, "No More Back-Pedalling on Patten's Road to Reform," *South China Morning Post*, November 13, 1992, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

²⁰⁹ Andy Ho, "Patten's Reforms Should Open up the Advisory Board," *South China Morning Post*, July 16, 1993, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post; "No More Back-Pedalling on Patten's Road to Reform".

²¹⁰ "Mr. Chris Patten's Political Reform Package," *South China Morning Post*, December 4, 1992, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: South China Morning Post.

reforms, the paper at this time seemed to be dependent on public perception rather than an editorial stance.

Article 23 Protests

Article 23, the bill prohibiting acts of “treason, secession, subversion against the Central People’s Government” which was unable, was drafted into the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s 1997 mini-constitution.²¹¹ In February of 2003, the National Security Bill was introduced to the Legislative Council and was met with significant backlash from the Hong Kong public, who believed that it would curb the freedom of press in the city.²¹² On July 1 of 2003, before the vote on the Article was held, a major demonstration took place that was spearheaded by pro-democracy news organizations such as Apple Daily.²¹³ At this time, Kuok had made important changes to SCMP’s management and complains of censorship were plenty, namely after the resignation of Willy Lam. Despite of this, SCMP reported heavily on these protests. Up to a week after the demonstration, a few pages at the beginning of every issue were dedicated solely to news on Article 23 and a countdown to the day of the vote on the bill was updated every day. The day after the demonstration, SCMP ran a story on the front page titled “500,000 take to the streets.”²¹⁴ The headline was accompanied by a brief but powerful statement: “The government says the national security legislation will not limit the freedoms of Hong Kong people. Yesterday, the people staged the city’s

²¹¹ “Hong Kong: Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China.”

²¹² Carol P. Lai, *Media in Hong Kong: Press Freedom and Political Change, 1967-2005: 181.*

²¹³ Carol P. Lai: 168.

²¹⁴ “500,000 Take to the Streets,” *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2003, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

biggest protest since 1989 to show they are not convinced.” SCMP’s reporting on the demonstrations was consistently this emotive. Another article a few days later was headlined, “Shows of angers that brought change.”²¹⁵ A week after the demonstration, the paper even addressed the Chinese government directly on the front page through the headline, “Beijing remains silent on Tung crisis.”²¹⁶ Additionally, the protestors were characterized in a distinctly positive light, as one article claimed that a survey showed that they were well educated and another, published the day after the July 1 demonstration, highlighted that no arrests were made due to the protest being orderly.²¹⁷ Although by this time, SCMP journalists were already conscious about not upsetting their editors and pro-China owners, SCMP had a strong incentive to maintain its reputation as an independent publication. This would mean that the paper had to openly report on major local news in a way that is honest and matched the gravity of the issue. SCMP has maintained, since its initial purchase by Kuok, that it is committed to the freedom of press. With Article 23 challenging that, it would make sense for the paper to extensively report on the demonstrations and the bill while making it clear which side they stand on.

Pro-democracy protests of 2019

In the summer of 2019, protests began in Hong Kong after the introduction of a bill that would allow the extradition of those convicted in Hong Kong to mainland

²¹⁵ Gary Cheung, “Shows of Anger That Brought Change,” *South China Morning Post*, July 5, 2003, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

²¹⁶ Wang Xiangwei and Jimmy Cheung, “Beijing Remains Silent on Tung Crisis,” *South China Morning Post*, July 8, 2003, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

²¹⁷ Louisa Yan, “July 1 Marchers Were Well-Educated, Says Survey,” *South China Morning Post*, July 7, 2003, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Elaine Wu, “No Arrests throughout Orderly Protest,” *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2003, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

China. Protestors believed that this bill would undermined the principle of “one country, two systems” as it would infringe upon the legal autonomy of the Special Administrative Region. As these protests escalated, demands moved from the rejection of the extradition bill to larger pro-democracy objectives including universal suffrage. SCMP’s coverage of the protests was looked at critically by many journalists. A journalist from the Apple Daily stated that she noticed SCMP using a lot of extreme descriptions of the protestors in their reporting, such as referring to them as rioters or even anarchists.²¹⁸ Looking at the verbiage used in the paper’s articles on the protests, its stance against the protests is clear. While, for example, Bloomberg reported that “Hong Kong pro-democracy activists demonstrated for the 21st straight weekend,” SCMP reported that “Hong Kong marked its 21st straight weekend of anti-government protests as radicals went on a rampage.”²¹⁹ Articles on the protest are often accompanied by pictures of protestors or destruction that some deem sensationalist. One such article was on the front page of SCMP’s print newspaper on September 1, 2019.²²⁰ It was headlined “The night the city was set ablaze” and was printed alongside a large picture of a raging fire. Numerous journalists shared their disapproval of this on social media, and stated that it implied that a large fire ran through the city when in actuality, the fire was extinguished very

²¹⁸ Interview with Apple Daily journalist.

²¹⁹ “Hong Kong Protests Flare for 21st Weekend Amid Global Unrest,” *Bloomberg.Com*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-25/hong-kong-protests-set-for-21st-weekend-as-unrest-circles-globe>; “Hong Kong Hit by Violence and Chaos as Protests Continue into 21st Weekend,” *South China Morning Post*, October 27, 2019, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3034750/hong-kong-police-fire-tear-gas-anti-government-protesters>.

²²⁰ “The Night the City Was Set Ablaze,” *South China Morning Post*, September 1, 2019.

quickly.²²¹ SCMP has also maintained a pro-police stance in its coverage of the protests and has published articles such as one headlined “How Hong Kong’s embattled police force is holding the city back from the brink against all odds.”²²² When a video surfaced that showed the police beating up protestors at the Prince Edward MTR station, most local news organizations reported on the police brutality that was witnessed. While the headline of SCMP’s article on this reflected the same, the actual article dedicated the first few paragraphs to describing the vandalism by the protestors and only mentioned the brutality further down.²²³ Finally, Yonden Lhatoo, SCMP columnist and news editor, wrote an article discussing the existence of a silent majority, however included poll data in that very article that indicated that the majority of those surveyed were sympathetic to the protestors’ demands.²²⁴ Lhatoo relied on anonymous letters received by SCMP to make his point. The same unsupported claim can be found in the reporting of CCP-owned newspaper, *China Daily*.²²⁵ With a primarily global readership, SCMP has the unique power to be the window into Hong Kong for foreign readers. This is why their reporting is significant

²²¹ Ilaria Maria Sala, “Twitter Post,” Twitter, September 1, 2019, <https://twitter.com/ilariamariasala/status/1168060885459324928>.

²²² Yonden Lhatoo, Christy Leung, and Clifford Lo, “How Hong Kong’s Police Are Holding City Back from the Brink,” *South China Morning Post*, August 19, 2019, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3023324/police-story-how-hong-kongs-embattled-law-enforcers-are>.

²²³ Phila Siu, Alvin Lum, and Zoe Low, “Police Arrest 63 after Chaos on Hong Kong’s Train Network,” *South China Morning Post*, September 1, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3025241/chaos-hong-kongs-mtr-network-police-chase-protesters>.

²²⁴ Yonden Lhatoo, “Does Hong Kong Have a Silent Majority Yearning to Condemn Protests?,” *South China Morning Post*, October 21, 2019, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3033770/there-silent-majority-hong-kong-yearning-speak-out>.

²²⁵ Paul Yeung, “Silent Majority Should Speak up to Stop the Violent Protests,” *Chinadailyhk*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/175/53/249/1565200042806.html>.

in shaping the narratives of the protests on the global stage, as their readers are unlikely to read other local papers and have no basis of comparison. Thus, the clear pro-China stance that is observed through their reporting of the events is particularly worrying.

Conclusion

While SCMP is still globally regarded as a reputable source for information on Hong Kong and China, its purchase by Kuok and then the Alibaba group has created a culture of censorship within the organization that has curbed its ability to report objectively and critically on China. Under Alibaba, the stance of the news organization became increasingly overt and as the group has enough capital to sustain the news organization even when it is in the red, the economic incentive to uphold an image of editorial freedom no longer applied and its primary readership, which is foreign, is less likely to be aware of the editorial censorship. However, the organization is seemingly conscious of the diminishing trust in its reporting. In March of 2020, the SCMP website began showing a tab with the words “Why you can trust SCMP” under the author bar of every article, which on-click, redirects to a page that outlines their policies and standards, including information on their ownership structure and affirmations that the paper is functioning independently.²²⁶ Additionally, SCMP became the first news organization in Asia to join the Trust Project in the same, which is an initiative that “provides standards of news production to help

²²⁶ “Policies and Standards | South China Morning Post,” South China Morning Post, n.d., https://www.scmp.com/policies-and-standards?fbclid=IwAR1M3bi_ACKS2D3fCtQ9GMjSRplZx6odILJBIA0hb3CY6xHkVfa5p5vz8ls#mission-statement.

readers identify credible journalism.”²²⁷ Although SCMP is being criticized often by local journalists and Hong Kong’s population has become increasingly aware of its censorship, it is difficult to say whether its global reputation will be affected due to its well-established status as a respected news source for much of the world.

²²⁷ Tammy Tam, “SCMP Is First News Organisation in Asia to Join the Trust Project,” *South China Morning Post*, March 18, 2020, sec. Announcements, <https://www.scmp.com/announcements/article/3075726/south-china-morning-post-joins-trust-project-becoming-first-news>.

Conclusion

As we move to towards the 2047 date which signifies the expiration of the “one country, two systems” principle, journalists are largely pessimistic about the future of Hong Kong’s press freedom. With China already significantly tightening the controls on Hong Kong’s book publishing and journalism industries under Xi Jinping, there is an assumption that this will continue to be the trend as Hong Kong faces increasing pressure from China. The fear and uncertainty surrounding the publishing of critical political content has slowly discouraged Hong Kong authors and journalists from challenging China’s arbitrary limits. This indicates that journalists and writers in Hong Kong are now much less willing to even approach the line of what is permitted. Jin believes that this attitude has created a culture of self-censorship within the book publishing industry that has prevented the publication of books that would have been perfectly acceptable. This has taken a toll on not only the profession of publishing but on Hong Kong-based authors as well, as those who are willing to test the boundaries are left with few prospects for publication.

Numerous journalists have suggested that the journalism profession in Hong Kong similarly appears to be at risk. An *Apple Daily* journalist stated that investigative journalists are increasingly changing professions due to a variety of factors.²²⁸ The tolerance for stories exposing Chinese elite has considerably decreased and the barriers to accessing information have made it difficult for them to do their job. Additionally, she expressed that there is less money in journalism than there has ever been. While journalism was never a high-paying profession, news organizations are facing a lot of financial pressure, especially if they are overtly pro-democracy like

²²⁸ Interview with *Apple Daily* journalist.

Apple Daily. Those that work in this industry are often very passionate about the work that they do, therefore are willing to take a lower pay.²²⁹ This is adding downward pressure to the wages of journalists. The same journalist stated that *Ming Pao* was known to pay especially low wages to highly experienced journalists if they don't explicitly request a pay increase.²³⁰

As the 2014 Occupy Movement played a large role in increasing restrictions on book publishers, the 2019 pro-democracy protests may have a similar impact on journalists by increasing the level of danger associated with the profession. Journalists that attended the protests were treated in a noticeably aggressive manner from the police, to the extent that Reporters Without Borders attributed this treatment as one of the reasons they lowered Hong Kong's ranking on the Press Freedom Index.²³¹ From being pushed around to being pepper sprayed and hit by rubber bullets, Hong Kong journalists were victims of significant brutality.²³² This harassment has extended outside the context of the protests. On April 29, 2020, two Next Magazine reporters who were allegedly doing a story on a senior police official were arrested for loitering.²³³ Although they were later released, the police expressed no regret for their actions. There have also been concerns over the privacy of journalists reporting on the protests. A Bloomberg China journalist expressed that in August of 2019, more than

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ "Hong Kong : Erosion of Press Freedom | Reporters without Borders," Reporters Without Borders, accessed April 26, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/hong-kong>

²³² Kris Cheng, "'Aggressive and Obstructive': Hong Kong Journalists Association Files Legal Challenge against Police over Treatment of Press at Protests," *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, October 4, 2019, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/10/04/aggressive-obstructive-hong-kong-journalists-association-files-legal-challenge-police-treatment-press-protests/>.

²³³ "Arrest of Next Magazine Reporters Condemned - RTHK," accessed May 11, 2020, <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1523354-20200429.htm?>

30 ethnically Chinese, female journalists were doxed by an anonymous Twitter account, with one of them being her.²³⁴ After this, she began receiving a lot of hate comments on her Twitter. She stated that a similar thing was happening in China through a website named HKLeaks which was releasing the name, organization, photo and even the phone numbers of journalists who were covering the Hong Kong protests.²³⁵

Although the events surrounding the pro-democracy protests have further damaged the journalism profession in Hong Kong in certain ways, they have also reaffirmed the commitment of the Hong Kong public to objective reporting. Jin discussed the prevalence of “we media” in Hong Kong, which began with the popularity of the smart phone.²³⁶ As the general public became increasingly suspicious of formal news outlets, especially in the reporting of the protests, people became their own news sources and shared pictures and videos of events through the internet. While China is able to put up firewalls and censor this information, Hong Kong has complete freedom of information and information can be easily disseminated in this manner. The Bloomberg China journalist also shared that in her opinion, the protests have made the Hong Kong public more aware of the censorship the media is facing. There has been an uptick in the support of independent newsrooms and there is a greater sense of which news sources are reliable. In this way, she believes that the protests have improved media literacy among Hong Kong’s population.²³⁷ This goes to show that while China’s efforts to curb Hong Kong’s press freedom have been largely successful and there is no doubt that China will exercise

²³⁴ Interview with Bloomberg China journalist.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Jin, Interview with Jin Zhong.

²³⁷ Interview with Bloomberg China journalist.

increasing pressure in the coming years, the Hong Kong people have demonstrated that freedom of speech and expression is something that they are willing to fight for.

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