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Sze, Stephen Man Hung.

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Public Service Broadcasting in Hong Kong: Background, Present Status and Future Prospects

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by SZE, Man Hung, Stephen
Lecturer, General Education Division,
Lingnan College, Hong Kong.

A. The History and Function of RADIO TELEVISION HONG KONG (RTHK) as Public Service Broadcasting in Hong Kong:--

RTHK has a long history in the public service broadcasting of Hong Kong.

"On 12th September, 1929, the Hong Kong Broadcasting programme committee was formed to be responsible for the organising of sound broadcasting in Hong Kong

"In April 1954, Radio Hong Kong became a department (under the Post Master General).

"A new Government Television Unit known as Radio Hong Kong Television (RHKTV) was established in April, 1970, for the purpose of producing public affairs television programmes for transmission by the licensed commercial television companies, the then Rediffusion Television (RTV) and Hong Kong Television Broadcasting (HK-TVB).

"On April 1, 1976, the Educational Television Service (ETS) merged with RHKTV...

The English name of the Government broadcasting unit was changed to Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) while the Chinese name remained the same. The merged unit was under the control of the Director of Broadcasting but the Director of Education was still responsible for the content of the ETV programmes."(1)

The RTHK operates presently 7 radio channels. Radio 1, the most popular radio channel in Hong Kong, is a Chinese channel. It has an audience size of 35% (1994), 1,774,000 listeners. It covers the major political and social events of the city. Public mood of the time is also reflected by the extensive phone-in programmes. Radio 2 is also a Chinese Channel. It provides news bulletins and financial reports on a half-hourly basis. It also broadcasts traffic reports from 0730 to 1900 hours. Its orientation to the young people is reflected by its pop-music and magazine programmes. Radio 3 is a 24 hour news and information channel in English. Radio 4 is a bilingual channel for fine music and the arts. Radio 5 focuses on serving minority groups in Hong Kong like Mandarin programme and entertainment programmes for the elderly. Radio 6 relays the BBC World Service Programmes as well as provides information and entertainment of local interests. Radio 7 started in May 1991. It provides News and financial news, weather and traffic reports, the music in between are oldies.

The television programmes of RTHK occupy a section of the prime time as well as other time slots on the two commercial TV channels. Programmes produced and sent contain public affairs, investigative reporting, dramas and documentaries. They serve not only the purpose of public communication, but also to balance the over-commercialized

programmes of commercial TV. Education programmes are another important component.(2)

The RTHK production fund allocation for 94-5 totals HK\$ 332.2M..

TV	HK\$164.5M.	50%
Radio	HK\$141.3M.	42%
ETV	HK\$ 26.4M	8%

It is understandable that the expenditure of the RTHK as a public broadcaster is rather small. According to the estimation of 1991-2: (3)

COUNTRY	EXPENDITURE in US\$ per capita
Canada (CBC)	48.86
UK (BBC)	37.31
Japan (NHK)	19.76
USA (PBS, TV only)	6.34
H.K. (RTHK, Radio and TV)	5.60

B. The Problems Concerning the Future Status of RTHK:

The problems related to the future role, orientation and status of RTHK originated as early as in 1984. It has, however, come to no definite conclusion until the present, and the main reason for it is political.

The first wave of deliberation of the status of RTHK came up in 1984, it was the time of Sino-British negotiation concerning the future of Hong Kong. The Sino-British Joint Declaration signed on the 19th of December, 1984, attested the ending of Hong Kong as a British colony by the 1st of July, 1997. It was also the time for an opportunity of drastic change in the media landscape of Hong Kong, because the Broadcasting Review Board (BRB) was drafting a blueprint for the whole media environment of Hong Kong in the future. There was a general social outcry for the corporatization of RTHK. The Government considered this policy as a possible way to decentralize its power. The general public would like to see a more independent image of RTHK, instead of remaining a mouthpiece of the Government. Other media operators would like to see more competition of RTHK with them. Another significant voice came from the staff

members of RTHK. It was held that the Government image of RTHK did more harm than good to staff morale. Despite the fact that since 1973, all responsibilities for compiling news bulletins were transferred from the Government Information Services to RTHK, with the Director of Broadcasting as the editor-in-chief, the image of RTHK as a mouthpiece of the Government was still firmly implanted in the mind of the general public. Corporatization would mean the shaking off of this image. Mr. Wong Chi-keung, a principal programme Officer and news editor of RTHK Chinese newsroom, told the members of the BRB that the editorial team members regarded their role more as a watchdog of the society than anything. They wanted to keep Government interference at a minimum, and corporatization would realize their professional independence.(4)

The option of corporatization of RTHK was one of the many option that the BRB suggested, and members of the Board, in general, were highly supportive of this particular option. By 1988, a bill for the corporatization of RTHK was to be drafted and to be tabled for the passing by the Legislative Council.(5) This process was delayed with apparently no clear and distinct reason. Yet, it was forecasted that RTHK would corporatize after April, 1989, through the passing of the bill in April and the consequent setting up of a Board of Directors.(6) In July, 1989, it was further confirmed that the issue of corporatization by 1990 was endorsed by the Executive Council (Exco), the main body of decision making in the Government.(7) In fact, the Director of Broadcasting, Miss Man-yee Cheung, informed the public that the corporatized RTHK would be subjected under an RTHK bill and public control, instead of former domination by the Government.(8) In an interview, she expressed that the future role of a corporatized RTHK would be to act in the interest of the public and even criticize the Government, when necessary, without restraint. Furthermore, it was only when RTHK could become corporatized that it could be truly an institution of public responsibility and represent public interests.(9)

This plan was further delayed, but this time it was under the pretext that the Government had difficulties in settling "terms and conditions for the station's 330 civil servant staff".(10) As a matter of fact, a greater complication related to this issue slowly emerged.

According to the Sino-British Joint Declaration, all matters related to the policy of Hong Kong that stretch beyond 1997, should be matters of mutual consultation for the Joint Liaison Group (JLG) set up by the two Governments. Naturally, the corporatization of RTHK is one. The main reason for the neglect of this issue was that there were definitely more important issues on the agenda: the building of a new airport that required as much as HK\$200 billion and the setting up of the Court of Final Appeal. Besides, the preoccupation with the 1991 Legislative Council by all political parties and the Government also dissipated much of the energy.

As early as in July, 1991, the Secretary of Recreation and Culture Branch responsible for the policy making of Broadcasting, James Y.C. So had drawn the attention of the public to the fact that the problem of corporatization of RTHK had to consult the Chinese Government.(11) On the 8th of October, 1991, the agenda of corporatization of RTHK was passed by Exco and the Chinese Government would soon be "notified".(12)

The first reaction of the Chinese Government occurred in January, 1992. The Chinese principal representative of the JLG, F. M. Guo, said that the JLG should investigate this problem, for there were many problems that the Chinese side would have to consider.(13) In February, Jiahuan Luo, the Chinese team member of the JLG remarked that the Chinese Government would like to retain RTHK as a Government-run station to serve the function of public communication for the Government.(14) In March, a Hong Kong Government high official, who asked not to be quoted, remarked that "the RTHK corporatization plan would go ahead even if no agreement was reached in the up-coming Sino-British JLG meeting. The Deputy Director of New China News Agency (NCNA), the official representative body of PR China in Hong Kong, Junseng Zhang, countered strongly that this statement made before the up-coming JLG session was "irresponsible", because this issue "concerned the smooth transition of the territory and the interest of the future (Hong Kong) Special Administrative Region Government."(15) When Lord Caithness, the Foreign Office Minister with special responsibility for Hong Kong said that although the subject could be discussed in the JLG, the final decision would rest in Hong Kong. Ping Lu, the Director of the Chinese State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, the more senior Chinese Official so far, strongly criticized this intention. For this would induce changes that might be unfavourable to the future Hong Kong SAR, which might have to be reverted back after 1997.(16)

In May, the position of the Hong Kong Government softened, for fear that the dead-lock might jeopardize the Sino-British talks over the financing of the building of a new airport, news from the top level of the administration disclosed the intention to give up the idea of corporatization. However, the Director of Broadcasting, Miss Man-yeet Cheung, still explained the advantages of corporatization of RTHK, she also had to admit of the great obstacles for it.(17) The new Governor, Chris Patten, in answering the question of when to corporatize RTHK put forward by the staff members of RTHK, said that the Government had more important issues to tackle than this. He set the new time for reconsideration at the end of the year.

By the end of 1992, Sino-British relations worsened, because of the political reform plan of the new Governor which met with strong criticism from China that this was a conspiracy to make Hong Kong ungovernable after 1997 through speeding up the process of democratization, thus breaching the Sino-British agreement of smooth political transition with as little political change as possible. Talks over the political system of Hong Kong began. Overshadowed by this dispute, the Government of Hong Kong

avoided the issue of corporatization to prevent from further irritating the Chinese side. Nevertheless, the position of the Government was not clear. On the 18th of Feb., 1993, James So, the Secretary of RCB, mentioned “shelving” the issue in the morning, and not “having reached any decision” in the afternoon.(18)

By the end of the year, the Sino-British talks on the political system of Hong Kong broke up, and a high official disclosed that the Government of Hong Kong would resume the consideration of RTHK corporatization again, as the need to refrain from irritating the Chinese Government no longer existed.(19) Two days after this, James So, Secretary of RCB, said quite the opposite. He considered the political atmosphere unsuitable for handling this issue.(20) This was further confirmed in June, for he pointed out that it made no sense to do so when the Chinese side had made very clearly that the changes would be reverted after 1997.(21)

It was not only in the issue of the corporatization of RTHK that the Government of Hong Kong was very indecisive and timid. There were other related issues. With the advent of Cable TV since September, 1993, the public has been banging for a “public access TV channel”, and RTHK also lobbied for a public service channel, as according to the tender agreement, the Government can take up 3 channels for its own disposal if Cable TV can reach up to 16 channels of its own. The Government rejected both the suggestions for fear of losing control of the situation. Finally, since 1994, the Government of Hong Kong has promised to draft a Broadcasting Bill to cope with the totally new electronic media landscape, but it has failed till now to do so. A high official of RCB disclosed that the plan had to be shelved because it would antagonize China in the run-up to 1997. However, this point was contradicted a few days later by the Acting Chief Secretary, saying that: “We are still working on a draft broadcasting bill. It is a very complex piece of legislation and we have to consult widely before we forward the bill to Legco.” No specific time-table was given.(22)

In face of this confusion, some politicians began to lose their patience. The Legco members of the Democratic Party, the most progressive of all the different political orientations in Hong Kong, (and the largest party after the Sept., 1995 election,) have been planning for tabling a private bill for RTHK corporatization.(23)

C. The Public Debate on the Issue of RTHK Corporatization:

Looking at the ups and downs concerning this issue, it is necessary to scrutinize the different positions related to this issue.

a. The RTHK Administration:

It is generally held that to be a government official means a good guarantee of job security and fringe benefits; they are also shielded from commercial competition often in a cut-throat form; efficiency is never a great concern in government offices. However, the administration of RTHK, in general, are in favour of corporatization. The conceivable advantages have been stated rather thoroughly:-

1. Administration:

- Reorganization of the cumbersome structure.
- More flexible private sector-like personnel policy, rewarding the outstanding and firing the incompetent staff members.
- Less constraint and bureaucracy than as a government department.
- Maximization of the use of available resources.
- Supervision from a Board of Governors from a representative cross-section of the community.

2. Finance:

- Saving staff costs through reduction of about 970 to 770 people of different terms of employment and increasing revenue.
- More systematic planning and cost control.

3. Programme Production:

- Independent image in the eyes of the public.
- Greater freedom in programme production and programming.
- Greater ability to respond to rapid change in the media landscape.(24)

b. The Mainland Chinese Official Point of View:-

The Chinese official point of view is most explicit in an article of public affair commentary dated Feb.29, 1992. The idea of corporatization was brought up by the BRB in 1985, immediately after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. This move is considered to be "unusual" and "have a purpose". During the promotion of corporatization, the Director of Broadcasting, Miss Man-yea Cheung, mentioned in an interview in 1989 that "corporatization would lead to a legally protected independence of RTHK such that after 1997 the Government of SAR would not be able to change its broadcasting policy and to remodify the role to act as a mouthpiece of the Government easily". This move is seen as a British conspiracy for RTHK to attain total independence from the control of the SAR Government, an anticipation to meddle with the internal affairs and policy of the SAR Government.(25)

A sympathizer with the Chinese official viewpoint also pointed out the necessity of retaining the official control and status of RTHK. He even compared the role of "BBC as a successful mouthpiece of the British Government" with that of a state controlled RTHK.(26) This shows that either he is ignorant of the difference between Government channel and public broadcasting service, or that he refuses to acknowledge such a difference.

Another piece of commentary found in "*Bauhinia*", a pro-Chinese periodical accused the British Hong Kong Government of using the pretext of saving resources and increasing efficiency to corporatize RTHK, the true underlying motive was to bring it out of government control after 1997, for it has served the purpose long enough as a mouthpiece of the colonial Government. This is against the spirit agreed upon in the Joint Declaration that as little change of the political and social structure as possible should happen in order to facilitate a smooth transition.(27)

c. Other Critics and 3 Decisive Factors of Deadlock:-

Even critics more hostile to the inefficient and bureaucratic operation in comparison with the commercial players deemed that corporatization could jack up the efficiency. The famous economic commentator and owner of the Hong Kong Economic Journal, Mr. Hlang Tzi Lam, assessed the significance of RTHK corporatization in two of his editorial articles from 3rd-4th, March, 1992. He suggested that the Chinese Government should make use of indirect means of control of RTHK like what the British Government did to the BBC, through the appointment of a board of directors and through parliamentary as well as legal means of control. For him, corporatization of RTHK was a continuation of the spirit of privatization in Thatcherism. This process had great success in the case of Kowloon and Canton Railway. The corporatization of it led to greater efficient and lower cost. RTHK could also benefit from this, for this would set up meritocracy and reduce redundancy among the members of staff.(28)

From 1992 till now, it becomes clearer and clearer that there have been three factors that lead to this deadlock. The first explicit factor emerged in 1992, when Chinese officials and their mouthpieces in the media stressed the significance of a government controlled broadcaster, a continuation of the colonial tradition of control of RTHK. It is only through this that the SAR Government can promote its policy, disseminate important messages, and promulgate laws and ordinances.(29) This confirmed the ground for the objection to corporatization of RTHK on the Chinese side.

Secondly, some media critics also pointed out that even the Hong Kong Government has been reluctant to corporatize RTHK, during the Sino-British dispute and negotiation over political system and financing the building of the new airport, and also at the later period of transition, the "Sunset" Government of Hong Kong required this last mouthpiece to

legitimize its power and prestige with the ascension of the influence of the Chinese Government as a competitor for public allegiance.(30)

Finally, the reluctance of the top officials in the Hong Kong Government to take action in corporatizing RTHK also lies in the fact that they are thinking and acting in their own interests. The least they do to infuriate Chinese, the better stands their chance of smooth transition, retaining their high positions in the hierarchy, because the Chinese high officials have been continuously trying to convince the local top bureaucrats that the SAR Government would appreciate their loyalty. It makes no sense to undertake something that will be demolished after 1997, and thereby sacrifice their prospects of smooth transition.

All these help to explain why the issue of corporatization of RTHK has turned out to be a farce.

D. Conclusion:--

The future prospect for the eventual corporatization of RTHK is dim, although for it to remain as a Government-run broadcaster is detrimental to its credibility, especially when the future SAR Government has the intention to tighten its control and end the relative autonomy in news editing and programme production. Furthermore, tax-payers will have to bear the burden of inefficiency, staff redundancy, cost ineffectiveness and low morale. The operating staff members and the administration alike had anticipated a more rosy future, but the beautiful dream has ended up in total frustration and disillusionment. It would be really over-optimistic for anyone to hope that the Chinese Government might eventually introduce corporatization of RTHK after 1997, when the SAR Government has a strong grip of the political situation.

How about the public? In early 1995, an SCMP survey showed that 58% of the Hong Kong people questioned were opposed to RTHK becoming the mouthpiece of the SAR Government after 1997. The survey of the Express at more or less the same time showed that 68% of the interviewed supported the corporatization of RTHK, expecting thereby greater efficiency and higher quality of service, only 23% were against and 9% had no opinion.(31) To what extent should we trust the public and its awareness of its own interests?

(END)

FOOTNOTES:

- (1) Handout introducing RTHK, 1995, p.2, Part I -- Historical Background.
- (2) Handout introducing RTHK, 1995, p.3-7, Part III -- Functions and Services.
- (3) Handout of RTHK prepared for The Broadcasting Steering Group of the Consumer Council, 1995, p.1-2.
- (4) "Govt Image Hurting RTHK Staff Morale", *H.K. Standard*, 16-01-85.
- (5) See *Sing Tao Jih Pao*, 26-07-1988.
- (6) See *Sing Tao Jih Pao*, 09-02-1989.
- (7) See *Ming Pao*, 19-07-1989.
- (8) See *Sing Tao Jih Pao*, 26-07-1989.
- (9) Interview conducted by a reporter of *Wen Wei Po*, published on 10-08-1989.
- (10) See *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), 17-06-1990.
- (11) See *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 22-07-1991.
- (12) See *Shing Pao*, 09-10-1991.
- (13) See *H.K. Economic Times*, 28-01-92.
- (14) See *Ming Pao*, 18-02-1992.
- (15) See *SCMP*, 02-03-1992.
- (16) See *SCMP*, 05-03-1992.
- (17) See *Ming Pao*, 15-05-1992.
- (18) See *Express*, 19-02-1993.
- (19) See *Ming Pao*, 28.12-1993.
- (20) See *H.K. Economic Times*, 30-12-1993.
- (21) See *Sing Tao Jih Pao*, 14-06-1993.
- (22) See *SCMP*, 27-05-1995.
- (23) See *H.K. Economic Journal*, 26-05-1995.
- (24) See section on the "Benefits of Corporatization" in the RTHK document on Corporatization.
- (25) See "What is the Purpose of the Independence of RTHK?", *Wen Wei Po*, 29-02-1992.
- (26) See "Why does RTHK want to corporatize now?", by Yau Lun Chu, *Wen Wei Po*, 04-03-1992. Chu is a pro-Chinese business administrator and commentator.
- (27) See *Bauhinia (Zijing) Magazine*, April, 1992, p.9-10.
- (28) See *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 03 to 04-03-1992.
- (29) See article "History proved that Hong Kong Requires a Government-run Broadcaster", by Ho Chi, in "Free Forum", *Ming Pao*, 20-02-1992. Ho Chi is a pro-Chinese news and public affairs commentator.
- (30) See "RTHK -- Independence without Autonomy", *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 21-02-1992. Also "RTHK Independence", Yiu Ming To, *Ming Pao Monthly*, April, 1992, p.61-3.
- (31) See "What are the Reasons for Non-corporatization?", by the RTHK Editorial Committee, "Free Forum", *Ming Pao*, 25-05-92.