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<th>Professionalism among Hong Kong journalists in comparative perspective</th>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Lee, Chin-Chuan; Chan, Joseph Man; Lee, Paul S. N.</td>
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Professionalism Among Hong Kong Journalists
In Comparative Perspective

By

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Joseph Man Chan,
Paul S N Lee
PROFESSIONALISM AMONG HONG KONG JOURNALISTS
IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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PROFESSIONALISM AMONG HONG KONG JOURNALISTS
IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Historically, media professionalism -- defined as segregation of facts from value and adherence to certain occupational codes of practice -- can be said to be a product of Western middle-class liberalism. In the United States, media professionalism has replaced partisanship since the 1830s due mainly to the rise of a market democracy (Schudson, 1978). The same pattern has been observed in Britain (Curran, 1977), France (Freiberg, 1981) and Scandinavia (Suine, 1987; Hadenius, 1983). Journalists claim to adhere to cannons of objectivity and neutrality, but these norms are by no means ideologically free -- in fact, they are predicated on a generally unarticulated commitment to the established order and deeply anchored in the enduring values of the social system (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; Bennett, Gressett and Haltom, 1985; Schlesinger, 1978).

Media professionalism as a construct (if not necessarily as a practice) has been widely transported from the West to many parts of the world through institutional links, training programs, and educational curricula (Golding, 1977). Professionalism appears to be legitimated as a journalistic goal even though it might be beyond reach in practice. In other words, professional culture has thus become a "common language" and an ideological commitment among the subculture of journalists across various cultures; it is closely linked to mainstream.
social values but not identical to them. Weaver and Whilhoit (1986) concluded that there is some evidence of "similarity of professional attitudes across cultures." McLeod and Rush (1969) also found resemblance between the professional values of Latin American and U.S. journalists.

This similarity should, however, not be so exaggerated as to gloss over the differences. Arno (1984) argues that these professional norms may not be universally shared or adopted. Not only do journalists in the United States, Germany and Britain employ a wide range of ethical standards (Weaver and Whilhoit, 1986); they also conceive of their professional role differently (Donsbach, 1983; Donsbach and Klett, 1993). The German and Italian presses stand closer to "advocacy journalism," whereas the U.S. and British media purport to be more neutral (Mancini, 1993; Kocher, 1986). Seymour-Ure (1973) used "press-party parallelism" to refer to a close linkage between the press system and the political party system in terms of their ideological commitment, organizational affiliation, and audience loyalty. Patterson and Donsbach (1993) place the United States at the low end of press-party parallelism and Italy at the high end of the scale -- with Germany, Britain, and Sweden falling in between. Hong Kong also typifies a strong pattern of press-party parallelism, albeit in a different context (Chan and Lee, 1991).

This paper seeks to compare aspects of media professionalism between Hong Kong journalists and their colleagues in other countries. Our study was based on a comprehensive and representative survey of 522 journalists from 25 media organizations conducted in July 1990 (see Chan, Lee, and Lee,
1992 for a description of the sampling procedure). Data for other countries are drawn from published reports, including Johnstone et al. (1976) and Weaver and Whilhoit (1986, 1992) for the U.S.; Henningham (1993) for Australia; Donsbach and Klett (1993) for Germany, British, and Italy. In this paper we shall trace the origin of media professionalism in Hong Kong, then compare selected indicators of media professionalism across several countries, and finally discuss how media professionalism is being threatened by political transition in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Media System

The Hong Kong press is part of the Chinese press tradition, whose history is at once long and brief. The long history could be traced far back to Di Bao in the Song dynasty, which was a system of interconnected horse carriage stations for transmitting official documents and proclamations from the capital to the entire nation. Yet the modern Chinese press did not emerge until the late 19th century when China came into contact with Western powers and thus sharpened its national consciousness. Published primarily in the British colonies of Shanghai and Hong Kong, the Chinese-language press prior to the 1890s was usually owned by foreign missionaries and businessmen. Throughout the twentieth century, the press was mobilized as an essential instrument of public enlightenment, moral uplifting, reform, and revolutions. The Hong Kong press has from the beginning reflected this instrumentalist orientation and nationalist sentiment (Lin, 1937; Tseng, 1966).

Journalism education as an American invention reached China quite early. Elite U.S. universities had followed traditional
European disdain of journalism as lacking in intellectual backbone. It took the land-grant universities, part of whose central missions was service to the community, to institute in the 1930s journalism and other practical subjects as legitimate domains of university curriculum (Boorstin, 1978). Journalism education could be seen in part as the public university’s response to community pressure for upgrading occupational status in the name of "profession." Characteristic of media development in the U.S., its journalism schools have prescribed norms of professionalism and objectivity -- defined as segregation of facts from judgment -- as central values (Schudson, 1978).

Early in the century some Chinese students returned from their study in the U.S. with the methods of running Western-style newspapers. Subsequently many of China’s most prominent intellectuals-cum-journalists (including Liang Qichao) became strong advocates of news objectivity, even if they might not have strictly adhered to that proclaimed goal. Most notably, Da Gong Bao (The Impartial Daily), a paper founded in the northern city of Tianjin in 1926, was the first to consciously model itself after the New York Times and to uphold as fundamental principles bu dang (non-partisan), wu si (unselfish), bu mai (no falling sway to commercial influence) and bu man (no blind following of any ideology). Early on, China’s journalism education closely imitated the programs developed at the University of Missouri and Columbia University (Li, 1994). Thus the liberal tenet of U.S. journalism education was taught amidst rigid state control on the one hand; it also defied (and more accurately, mixed with)
traditional Chinese moral and intellectual tradition that regarded the press as an instrument of social purposes rather than a "neutral" carrier of information.

Liberal journalism education has been banished in mainland China since 1949, for this "bourgeois" press concept runs deeply counter to the Communist ideology that subjugates the media to the state’s propaganda organ (Li, 1994). Although the concept of objectivity was twisted to suit political needs in Taiwan, it provided moral justification for Taiwanese journalists in their struggle against state stricture (Lee, 1993). Hong Kong’s journalistic practice retains traces of profound Western influence, whereas its journalism education is primarily American in style and content (Leung, 1992).

In Hong Kong, the partisan press has coexisted side by side with the professional press, but media professionalism gradually replaced partisanship in the 1970s as a main current of thought, thanks to improved material conditions made possible by sustained economic growth. Partisanship is now operating in an increasingly weakened albeit still symbolically powerful position (Chan and Lee, 1991). Our study reveals that most Hong Kong journalists profess to endorse the ambiguously defined norms of media professionalism even though their actual performance may fall far short of ideals. As the professional press owes its primary loyalty to the dominant center in both ideological and market terms, our study shows that most journalists seem to display a commitment to press freedom, a more democratic order, and the existing capitalist way of life.
Traits of Media Professionalism

Our study paints a substantially disparate picture about aspirations and reality of the Hong Kong journalists, in ways rather similar to the gaps experienced by their counterparts in the U.S. (Johnstone et al., 1976; Weaver and Whilhoit, 1986) and Britain (Tunstall, 1971). Many seem somewhat idealistic, attracted to the "heroic tradition" of the profession as dramatized by the images of getting scoops and defending social justice. As Table 1 shows, with 66% of them aged less than 34, Hong Kong journalists are younger than their U.S. colleagues. They are as well-educated as U.S. journalists (with eight in ten having a college degree) and much better educated than Australian journalists (39%). Moreover, six in ten Hong Kong journalists with a college degree majored in journalism and communication; this proportion is twice or thrice larger than that in Australia, Canada or the U.S. On the other hand, as Table 2 shows, only four in ten Hong Kong journalists are "very" or "fairly" satisfied with their work, while eight in ten U.S. and Australian journalists are positive about their jobs. Sources of job satisfaction cited by Hong Kong journalists include opportunities for autonomy, creativity and self-growth, as well as more flexible control over work.

Half of Hong Kong journalists used "so so" (a category nonexistent in comparable foreign surveys) to describe their degree of job satisfaction. This answer is open to various
interpretations, but their overall job condition can be described as precarious. Their low pay is not commensurate with high qualifications, while prospects for promotion and career advancement seem slim. They also feel that they wield little impact on the making of the media's editorial policy. Consequently, the media industry is filled with an inexperienced bunch with short professional and organizational ages. They maintain little organizational loyalty, with a high turnover rate. Journalism thus seems to be a "bridge profession" for them to land a more gainful position in advertising or public relations (Chan, Lee, and Lee, 1993).

The division of labor in Hong Kong's media organizations is relatively underdeveloped and task assignments are rather undifferentiated, thus requiring the staff reporter to cover several beats. Traditionally, the repertorial task was restricted primarily if not exclusively to local events (especially government and crime stories) but political transition has necessitated creating a China beat in specific. Most papers have established the "China news" page staffed primarily by former mainland journalists. They might be disaffected with the Communist system but appear to take a China-centric perspective with respect to Hong Kong issues. The impact on their news selection and interpretations calls for further scrutiny.

A study by Chan, Lee, and Lee (1995) suggests a broad consensus among journalists regarding the hierarchical structure of press prestige and significance. Television news is perceived to be most credible, followed by the English-language
South China Morning Post and the elite Chinese-language Ming Pao and Hong Kong Economic Journal, although many also feel compelled to compare notes with the Oriental Daily, the best-selling mass paper noted for crime reporting. As a group these papers claim to steer an ideologically neutral course, aloof to the traditional KMT-CCP strife. Functioning informally as opinion leaders, they collectively set the agenda for the Hong Kong press by providing a point of reference and a standard of reality check for rank-and-file journalists. The partisan press that plays a mouthpiece role is generally held in low esteem.

Tables 3, 4 and 5 about here.

The goal of objectivity seems to have generally been accepted across several cultures. Seven in ten Hong Kong journalists regard objectivity as "very important," compared with eight in ten German, British, or Italian journalists and nine in ten U.S. journalists (Table 3). But media professionalism is so ambiguously defined as to give rise to a sharp gap between ideals and practice. According to another related study (Lee, Chen, Chan, and Lee, 1994), Hong Kong journalists find it easier to accept the abstract ideals of professionalism (such as "objective reporting") than to implement its practical norms (such as "balanced reporting").

Compared with U.S. and Australian journalists, Hong Kong journalists feel more positively about using the media as a watchdog of the government but more negatively about using them to publicize government policy (Table 4). This might reflect
Hong Kong journalists' perception about the declining legitimacy of the current colonial government and their even greater anxiety about the future government under Chinese rule. As a whole, Hong Kong journalists are quite pessimistic about the outlook of the political transition, but the degree of that pessimism varies with ideological orientations of media organizations. But in any case, very few of them seem to hold confidence about the future of press freedom in Hong Kong.

From a comparative perspective (Table 5), Hong Kong and British journalists are more likely to consider "badgering news sources" as justifiable than do U.S. or German journalists, while U.S. and British journalists are more likely to regard "using personal documents without permission" as justifiable than do Hong Kong and German journalists. Among the four groups, Hong Kong journalists are least likely to justify using false identification or employment to get inside information. In all countries being examined, divulging confidential sources is a strict taboo.

Media Professionalism in Transition

How will journalists maintain their commitment to professionalism in the face of increased political pressure as Hong Kong draws closer to official changeover of sovereignty in 1997? Media ownership is being acquired at a frenzied pace by international capitalists who eye on the huge China market, and by pro-China business people eager to ingratiate themselves with the Beijing authorities (Fung and Lee, 1994). It is disclosed (Chan, Lee, and Lee, 1992) that journalists perceived their
colleagues to have experienced apprehension when it comes to criticizing the future sovereign, even though they seem less inhibited now than ever to castigate the lame-duck colonial regime. The press has also reported cases of self-censorship among journalists to avoid possible recrimination in the future.

China does not have a good record for respecting press freedom. Since 1989 China has in fact taken a more hardline position toward theHong Kong press, contrary to the reasonably successful strategy of cooptation taken in the 1980s (Chan and Lee, 1991). This hardened position reflects Beijing’s point of view that Hong Kong is within reach, the question over sovereignty is effectively closed, and China will reclaim the territory on time. China resents and distrusts the Hong Kong press which actively supported the Tiananmen movement in 1989, and thus attacked the press as a "rumor mill" conspiring to subvert the socialist system in the motherland. Moreover, China has scorned Governor Chris Patten’s ill-fated political reform and seems to regard the press as his ally that, in Beijing’s eyes, deserve punishment.

But if China is truly serious about the "one country, two systems" policy, press freedom must be maintained. To contain the Hong Kong press within tolerable limits, China cannot resort to naked forces, but must sooner or later return to the mixed tactics of overt threat and subtle incorporation. Market economy is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, amidst the increased political pressure, the press must attend to its own credibility and legitimation in order to survive the intense competition in the market. The press will have to strike a working (or
workable) balance between political demands and market imperatives. As a result, the future news order will be uneven, indeterminate, and full of internal contradictions which entail partial compromises, advances and withdrawal. The effect of political pressure cannot be uniform, and market forces will ensure some (albeit reduced) degree of media autonomy. On the other hand, trends toward vulgarization with explicit sex and violence content that are edging out serious political commentary are notable. This can hardly be regarded as professional.

As said before, most journalists in Hong Kong are vibrant and idealistic. While some have reportedly imposed self-censorship, many others are guarding with vigilance against any signs of infringement on press freedom. The whole process is likely to be a continual contest between control and anti-control, pressure and counter-pressure. While there are many reasons to believe that press freedom will decline, market competition will ensure that Hong Kong’s transparency will remain relatively high -- even if the process will be twisted and indirect. In conclusion, media professionalism will probably suffer, but it will not be lost in toto (Lee, 1994).
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Table 1: Age Distribution of Journalists (in percentage)

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<td>Under 24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>65 and older</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>101%</td>
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**Sources:**
- Hong Kong (1990): Our survey.

**Notes:** "--" indicates that this category did not exist in the original survey.
Table 2: Journalists' Job Satisfaction (in percentage)

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<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So-so</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat dissatisfied</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very dissatisfied</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>

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Notes: "--" indicates that this category did not exist in the original survey.
Table 3: Perceived Importance of Objectivity by Journalists (in percentage)

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<th></th>
<th>HK</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Italy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral (so so)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unimportant</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

101% 100% 100% 99% 100%

(n) (501) (278) (292) (216) (292)

Sources: Hong Kong: Our survey.

Notes: "--" indicates that this category did not exist in the original survey.
Table 4: Perceived Media Roles by Journalists  
(Percentage saying "extremely important")

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get information</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze complex issues</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicize gov’t policy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serve as watchdog of gov’t</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop cultural interests</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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Sources: Hong Kong: Our Survey.  

Notes: "--" indicates that this category did not exist in the original survey.
Table 5: Professionalism (Percentage saying "may be justified")

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<tr>
<td>Divulging confidential</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badgering sources</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using personal document</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without permission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using false identification</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment for inside</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying for information</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
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Sources: Hong Kong: Our Survey.

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