Self-Censorship Through the Eyes of Hong Kong Journalists

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Through the narratives of Hong Kong journalists on self-censorship, this paper asks – who is the "self" in "self-censorship"? In the attempt to answer the question, this study highlights the journalists' struggle for autonomy within their media organizations and in society in times of political transition. What is most disturbing in the findings is that some journalists are gradually internalizing the norms set by the ruling regime. This paper, therefore, argues that self-censorship is a process of semi-socialization.

Key Words: Self-censorship, Hong Kong, Socialization, Power, Identification, Freedom of the Press

Ever since it was known that Hong Kong would become China's "Special Administrative Region" (SAR),[1] there has been growing concern over the protection of the freedom of expression, specifically freedom of the press. The world is closely watching to see if the British legacy of press freedom[2] survive under China's socialist regime, as the latter has a notorious reputation for suppressing dissenting voices and is one of the most restrictive in terms of censorship and media control.[3] Though the Hong Kong SAR legislature has not enacted any additional regulations restricting the press since 1997, the presence of China's socialist totalitarian regime appears menacing enough to trigger a reaction known as "self-censorship."

Distinct from the overt form of censorship, self-censorship generally refers to a mechanism of anticipatory avoidance of official or social sanctions. In essence, the speakers mute themselves out of a projected fear (Childress 1969; Gans 251). This can be conscious or unconscious based on real or imagined fear. It is prevalent, however, in the media industry. Statistical surveys reveal that about 20% of Hong Kong journalists admitted that they practised self-censorship while 50% perceived that their colleagues do[4] (Chan, P.S.N. Lee & C.C. Lee 120; "Quan Mei" A3). In addition, telling anecdotes of self-censorship have also been documented in the annual reports of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 1994-1999). These include allegations the Mainland Chinese Government's use of the "stick and carrot" method to punish and reward Hong Kong journalists; and stories of forced resignation after the journalists concerned had covered politically sensitive topics.

These studies and others have convincingly established the existence of self-censorship and conveyed to us the extent of the problem in Hong Kong. However, the exact meaning of self-censorship from the journalists' point of view is seldom explored. Without this knowledge, the present focus of self-censorship remains largely a general account of the media's reaction towards authority. Other than the fact that self-censorship is mainly a response based on fear of authority, we know little about the internal struggle's experienced by this group of front line social actors and its implication for society at large. This study, therefore, asks the fundamental question – what does self-censorship mean to the journalists themselves at the time of transition?

To capture the meaning of self-censorship, I conducted interviews with 20 journalists working in Hong Kong.[5] These interviews took place mainly in December of 1998 and July of 1999. I divide the experience of the respondents into three main categories – (1) cases of self-censorship, where the respondents shared their experiences of self-censorship; (2) cases of non self-censorship, where the respondents recounted circumstances that they were absolutely certain that they were not censoring themselves; and (3) ambiguous cases of non self-censorship, where the respondents felt frustrated but did not feel censored or they were self-censoring. For this analysis, I will supplement the respondents' experience with other accounts of self-censorship written by the journalists directly involved.[6]

Through the prism of the above typology, this paper addresses three key issues – (1) whether self-censorship is a mere form of censorship; (2) who exactly is the self that is practicing self-censorship; and (3) the relation between self-censorship and socialization.

This paper begins by highlighting the complexity embedded in the term "self-censorship." Although this concept is difficult to define and a phenomenon almost impossible to prove, scholars argue that self-censorship should be treated as a form of censorship. The distinction between types of censorship is important to formulate the correct strategy to combat suppression of free speech, and to know whether the experience of Hong Kong journalists has been adequately reflected. The outline of the current debate is, therefore, immediately followed by accounts and analysis of the journalists' experience in the second part of this paper.

The aim is to identify the various kinds of pressure from the concrete examples given by the respondents. After reading the respondents' stories on self-censorship, one cannot help asking who exactly is the "self" that is exercising "self-censorship"? Does the "self" refer to the respondent herself or to an external agent? Or does the "self" point to broader institutional limits or social constraints? There is, in fact, no definitive answer to the above questions as there is a constant shifting of the "self" as an evaluative unit.

More significantly, the respondents' stories expose the paradoxical nature of self-censorship and an ongoing process of socialization. This theme will be explored in the last part of this paper. Ironically, in clear cases of self-censorship, where the respondents recounted concrete evidence of self-censorship and where pressure was poignantly felt, the respondents were also enjoying greatest freedom. In contrast, in cases of non self-censorship, where the respondents apparently did not feel any pressure, they might enjoy the least amount of freedom allowed. They might be willingly or unknowingly surrendering their freedom. What is most disturbing is that some journalists were gradually adopting the norms set by the ruling regime and unconsciously modifying their style of reporting. In adopting a new vocabulary, the journalists were also building up new social conventions. In the long run, this may imply that some journalists may fail to fulfil their role in alerting the public of social problems. As a result, the most threatening aspect of self-censorship is not the fear and its entailing silence, but its silent regulatory impact on the profession and on society.

Self-censorship is linked to the intricate and complex process of socialization. It mirrors the dilemma of a society in transition, where there is growing identification with the new ruler despite initial wariness. As this is an on-going struggle, I characterize self-censorship as "semi-socialization" where the journalists are torn by various forces. To a great extent, the experience of the journalists is also the experience of Hong Kong society as a whole. Contrary to the common beliefs that Hong Kong people are exercising self-censorship either because they are opportunistic, eager to please the new regime, or are too scared to fight back (Chow), the "self" exhibits neither of the above. Instead, the "self" must choose between exercising its rights now and facing possible sanctions later, or not exercising its rights but facing further erosion of freedom.

The Difficult Concept of Self-Censorship

Despite frequent invocation of the term "self-censorship," it is a difficult concept to pin down. Currently, there are two dominant approaches to studying the issue. One group of scholars invests its energy mainly in formulating an all-embracing definition to capture the elusive character of self-censorship (Gans 251; Lee 57). The major concern for this group is overcoming the descriptive and evidential problems. On a very different front, another group advocates treating self-censorship as a subset of censorship in general (Post 5; Childress 1969). This group considers that any distinction between the two only hinders the fight to protect free speech, and the present understanding is a normative misconception. Though these two views differ, they are not mutually exclusive. Understanding the present debate is, therefore, essential for us to appreciate the conceptual nuances of self-censorship, and to discern whether the experience and concerns of Hong Kong journalists have been adequately reflected.

The first approach is adopted mainly by scholars in the communication field. There is an acceptance that self-censorship is different from the overt form of "real" censorship (Lee 58, Gans 251). The "self" is added to signify the difference between this form of implicit, self initiated censorship from the explicit, external harsh brute case of legal censorship. The latter belongs to a precise category where the state invokes its legal powers with mandatory requirement and prohibition. Regulations determine who shall speak and what he or she shall say. One is subject to direct and external force with explicit rules backed up by sanctions, and is reduced to an object, clearly defined in opposition to the state as the subject (Butler 247). In extreme situations, one may even witness the "high drama of repression and suppression" (Post 4), where rights are denied and freedom quashed.

In contrast, self-censorship is often subtle and indirect. Gans defines it largely as a conscious response to anticipated pressure (251). He includes situations where the journalists may unconsciously respond to pressure. The challenging aspect in the study of self-censorship is its difficulty to prove. Since it is the "self" who exercises the choice, the individual is unlikely to come forward. The individual may also easily explain away her silence by relying on numerous seemingly objective and extraneous reasons. For example, an editor may drop a story based on poor reporting style, and a reporter may fail to do a thorough investigation due to time constraint. In addition, if the "self" is responding to pressure unconsciously, she is probably not aware that she is bowing to pressure, not to mention admitting it or proving it. All the above characteristics render the nature of self-censorship to be "secretive, deceitful, shameful . . . oblivious and unintentional" (Hong Kong Journalists Association and Article 19, *1997* sec. 4).

In addition to its elusive character, self-censorship manifests itself in various modes. Snapshots of self-censorship have been provided by authors in different societies. Barendt and his teammates studied the "chilling effect" of long and expensive libel suits on reporters in England (150-156). Thompson recounted cases where the Reagan administration used various means to control the leak and flow of information inducing journalists to co-operate and censor themselves (138). Lo studied how Hong Kong reporters were deterred from offending potential advertisers. After considering the experiences of several countries, Brown summed up the "tricky" nature of self-censorship by grouping it under three main categories (23). He argued that self-censorship had either an institutional, a moral or a conformist dimension. Institutional limits reflect the desire not to offend one's media owner. Moral aspect refers to situations where journalists have to co-operate with authorities for information or to hold back information to save life, as in wartime. In Brown's opinion, the most problematic form of self-censorship is caused by the constraints of conformity, the fear of going against social expectation.

Given the universal existence of self-censorship in different countries and different contexts, self-censorship can be seen as an inevitable part of journalistic practice. This is also true for Hong Kong. In fact, commentators (Lau 160; Wrout 163) have pointed out that the Hong Kong press has been practising self-censorship since the British colonial regime. The sudden interest in and awareness of self-censorship is largely a phenomenon of political transition. It is linked with the dramatic change in the political landscape since 1984. When the British Government agreed to return sovereignty over Hong Kong to the Chinese authority, Hong Kong experienced a period of political awakening. There has been growing desire to fend off any conscience intimidation and limits on political expression by the new ruler. This anxiety is evident in the current study. The Hong Kong Journalists Association defines self-censorship as the

[a]ction of individuals or organizations, whether deliberate or routinised and subconscious, in moderating or altering or stifling the expression of their views or the disclosure of information because of a fear – whether real or perceived – of repercussions by China and its various agents and authorities (*1997* sec. 4).

In the Chinese University's statistical studies, self-censorship was measured by the fear of journalists in criticizing the Chinese and the Hong Kong authorities. Lee one of the principal investigators in the statistical study, defines self-censorship as

. . . a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organizations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishments from the power structure (57).

These definitions express a desire to capture self-censorship in all forms. Namely, self-censorship may be exercised by individual journalists, by media organizations, even by the entire community. It may be a "conscious" or "unconscious" response to "real" or "perceived" fear from the entire power structure.

If self-censorship is largely a response to power, another group of scholars pushes the debate further and argues that self-censorship is essentially a form of censorship. On a very different plateau, this group of academics questions the status of "self-censorship" as a fundamental concept. Though they do not dispute the definition of self-censorship as mainly an anticipatory action to avoid punishment, they argue that it is a misleading term. Schauer (1998) suggests that the "self" has added nothing to censorship, as the "non speech of the agent" (165) is a reaction to the fear of legal or social repercussions. The prefix "self" is redundant. Since the "self" is reacting to external constraints, self-censorship is in fact a form of censorship. For example, Childress points out that often it is the cumbersome legal procedure and excessive litigation costs that forced the individuals to abandon pursuing administrative actions against the state (1969). They argue that self-censorship only signifies an implicit form of censorship. The concept of self-censorship is predicated on an in-built awareness that one needs to pay a price for free speech and very often the self cannot afford it. At this point, public control merges successfully with private control. The mere difference between self-censorship and censorship is, hence, reduced to a matter of time. The self kills the message before the institution intervenes. In their opinion, it is meaningless to view self-censorship as a different category. They advocate that a united front should be formed for effective lobbying against such legal and social sanctions.

This mentality was shared by Liu Kin-ming, the former chairperson of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, when he announced loud and clear the "death of self-censorship."

I am very happy to announce that self-censorship, a phenomenon that has been disturbing the journalistic circle in Hong Kong for many years, is dead. As a matter of fact, it never existed. Let's be realistic. We should stop calling the sickness self-censorship and name it what it really is censorship. Front-line journalists seldom censor themselves. Their superiors usually kill their stories . . . ("Self-censorship")

Though Liu was essentially denying the fact that front-line journalists would censor themselves, he pointed out that self-censorship would not exist in a vacuum. Implicitly, he supports the notion that self-censorship is a result of a chain effect that begins with pressure exerted externally, projecting inwards to different levels of an organization, and ending with the individual. The focus of the following discussion is to investigate who the "self" is in the process of self-censorship and to identify the pressure that the journalists face.

The Experience of Self-censorship by Hong Kong Journalists

Despite the vagueness of the term, self-censorship, the journalists interviewed for this study and those who have written about their own experience did not demonstrate difficulty in grasping with the concept. When the respondents were asked about experiences with self-censorship, none asked for a definition. There seemed to be a "spontaneous consensus" (Ang 242), a shared formula that all were using to define the situation. However, at closer analysis, each was referring to distinct shades of self-censorship.

I divide these stories into cases of self-censorship, cases of non self-censorship and ambiguous cases. In each category, further differentiation of their experiences is made according to the source of pressure they referred to.

Cases of Self-censorship

In the category of cases of self-censorship, respondents provided powerful stories of how their freedom was curtailed. The stories referred largely to either an external force outside the media organization or internal pressure within the organization.

(a) Struggle "Out There"

Among the 20 respondents, one gave an example of self-censorship grounded in external force. Sham Yee Lan, the news editor of *Apple Daily,*

Around the time of 1993, eastern China suffered from a serious flood. We sent our reporters to cover the incident. However, the New China News Agency called to express anger as we were portraying the incident in a negative tone and that we had not applied for report permit. In response, we had to keep changing our reporters, sending them to different areas to divert the attention. That's what we called 'policy from above, strategy from below.'[7]

The case illustrated a clear battle between the journalists and the organization on the one hand, and an external political force on the other.

(b) Struggle Inside the Media Organization

The other examples of clear cases of self-censorship fell into the category of struggle internal to the media organizations, representing most often disagreement between the respondents and editors.

One example was the experience of Liu Kin-ming, the former chairperson of the Hong Kong Journalists Association and a vocal spokesperson concerning self-censorship. He noted, for

example, that virtually no media in Hong Kong today would describe what happened on June 4 1989 in Tiananmen Square as a "massacre." He wrote,

Look how editors treat the name for what happened on Tiananmen Square on June 4 1989, for example. A local television station recently issued a memo to its news staff: You may call it an incident or even a crackdown, but not a massacre. I still write down the word massacre almost every week. However, every time I do it is changed into incident or event by those above me in the editorial food chain. The rationale is that because Beijing claims no one was killed in the square itself, technically it is not correct to call it Tiananmen Square massacre.[8] (Liu "Self-censorship")

In this account, the distinction between self-censorship and censorship does not exist. Other situations were where reporters surmised that they were not the "self" who censored the message was evident. When asked to give concrete examples of his own experiences of self-censorship, Tim Hamlett, a columnist of *the South China Morning Post* and a university professor, responded,

This is difficult. Most of us believe that self-censorship is what other people do. We ourselves merely exercise a wise discretion.

Cloaking self-censorship in the guise of discretion may make the former more acceptable.

Though clear cases of self-censorship from the respondents' experience could be safely described as disagreements between reporters and editors, they are not necessarily incidents of political self-censorship. These stories revealed the blurry distinction between responsible journalism and censorship. Editors were likely to defend their decisions to "kill stories" on the basis of credibility and objectivity. For example, Man Cheuk Fei, the editor of the commentary page for the *Hong Kong Economic Journal,* recounted one specific incident,

As an editor, I need to be very careful . . . It can involve lawsuit of defamation. I remember a writer wrote an article criticizing the former Taiwan provincial leader, Sung Chu Yu. The article said, Sung in supporting Taiwan building a relation with China was 'mai tai qiu yong' (betraying Taiwan for personal wealth and fame). I crossed out the phrase as it was attacking one's moral character. Our aim is to be objective. Otherwise, in the long run, it affects the credibility of our newspaper.

More often, editors would not specify the reasons for dropping a story. The reasons given to journalists were often cloaked in ambiguous, non-political terms. This is illustrated in the case of Christopher Leung, [9] a former producer of CTN who filmed "The Wolves are Howling in Tianshan," a program about the independence movement in Xinjiang. When CTN refused to show his program, the explanation that Leung received from his superior was;

He said the timing was not ripe. He didn't say censorship. Nobody mentioned censorship. He said the program would be broadcast at the right time. What was meant by the right time, you'll never know. I have no idea what the right time means. But at least I know that after I'd finished the production many incidents happened in Xinjiang. There was even an explosion at the Chinese embassy in Turkey. But he won't allow broadcast. I knew there was no hope to be on the air.[10]

At other times, the "explanation" was not that mild. Liu, on a different account, shared his own unpleasant experience with self-censorship. He recalled an instance where an interview was killed because the editor suggested that 'there's no substance in your story,' 'readers are not interested in what you're writing,' and 'there's no news angle in it.' (Liu "Hong Kong"). When

the competence of the journalist was questioned, the battle turned personal and emotional. In defending free speech in this case Liu was also defending personal honor. Other interviews reflect similar tension.

Any argument regarding "newsworthiness" of a story easily exposes the conflict and the hierarchy in the newsroom (Turow 31), and makes the battle more difficult for the reporter. When editors decide to drop a story, what are censored are not merely the specific messages, but the journalists' ability, and professional judgement. In order to challenge the editors, journalists need to build a certain status and reputation. A case of self-censorship, therefore, depends on the stature, reputation and experience of both the editors and the journalists (Turrow 38). An established reporter will be advantaged.

It is indeed very hard to set a definitive guideline to separate cases of self-censorship from cases of responsible journalism. As is often remarked by different journalists, "you can 'feel' self-censorship, that only you yourself know."

The irony of self-censorship in these cases is that the "said" is rested on the "unsaid." The accusation is obvious and stories of suppression are "colorful" but they rest on a dim and silent premise. None of the accounts have portrayed the chief editors as having said explicitly that they experienced pressure from owners or ruling authorities.

Cases of Non Self-Censorship

In contrast to the personal narratives of self-censorship, the narratives of non self-censorship took on a different form, with the respondents giving concrete examples to refute allegations of self-censorship or showing that their abstention from using certain expressions was due to the latter's inappropriateness.

(a) Counter-examples Demonstrating that Sensitive Topics are Covered

In marked contrast to concrete samples of self-censorship, where the respondents identified a third party as the culprit; the respondents in this group identified themselves as the "self" in "self-censorship." Respondents turned defensive and often were offended by this label. Another characteristic of these respondents was that most were in editorial position, usually chief editors. They identified themselves with the newspaper, and with the media organization. Only one front-line reporter gave a counter-example.

When asked to speak on self-censorship, Edgar Yuen, the Deputy Editor in Chief of *Ming Pao*, replied that the issue of self-censorship had been blown out of proportion, that it was an exaggerated problem. He noted that before 1997, self-censorship existed as it was natural to fear for the unknown, but not after 1997.[11] Jonathan Fenby, the former Chief Editor of *the South China Morning Post*,[12] made similar remarks. He suggested that self-censorship had simply no relevance to reality. For example, he cited the evidence that *The Post* still used the term "massacre" to describe June 4.[13] Another facing accusation of self-censorship was the *Hong Kong Standard*, which was owned by a PRC official until 1999. Terry Cheng, Chief Editor of the *Hong Kong Standard*, refuted the accusation suggesting that the paper must "reflect and understand the viewpoint before criticizing the authority . . . We support democracy but we want mature democracy."

As the final decision-makers, it was expected that chief editors would not perceive that they themselves were censoring the newspapers or their journalists. By defending themselves, editors were defending the newspapers. This sentiment was obvious in the case of Sham, a news editor. She proudly noted,

When Wei Jiangshen was jailed for the second time, it was between 1995-96), only *Apple Daily* put it on the front page. When Wang Dan could finally leave China, our newspaper was the only one that covered the story in 4 full pages.

Though Sham gave a counter example of non self-censorship, she was referring not to herself but to the news organization. Only in one interview was there a clear emergence of the "self" as a front line reporter. Jesse Wong of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* was offended and angry at the request to give an example of self-censorship. Instead he provided counter example emphasizing professional integrity. Wong took questions of self-censorship as personal and professional. His reaction illustrates the degrading and offensive connotation embedded in the term for practicing journalists.

(b) Examples to Show that Sensitive Words Should Not Be Used

On a different level, some journalists offered examples that from their view they did not practice self-censorship. These cases most often involve decisions against using certain politically sensitive terms.
Sham explained that,

Even before 1997, there was awareness not to describe Taiwan's day as 'national day.' We call it 'double-10' celebration day. We still report any celebration activities. We still print pictures of the Taiwan flag. As for June 4, we don't call it *tu cheng* 'massacre', nor *feng bo* (incident)[14] but we use *zhen ya.* (suppression) It's not because of self-censorship. 'Massacre,' in my personal view, is too serious as if signifying the whole city has been murdered.[15] 'Incident' is too mild. It's a term more frequently used in China. I prefer to use 'suppression.'

Similarly, another respondent, who asked to remain anonymous, said,

I didn't use the term 'massacre' to describe June 4. It had nothing to do with self-censorship. It is just an inappropriate term. To me, massacre implies there is a pre-meditated murder, which was not the situation. I will say it was a 'bloody crackdown.'

It was unclear whether such intense awareness, heightened sense of responsibility and self-reflection on words used was a special feature at this time of political transition.

The Ambiguous Case of Non Self-Censorship

The last category of self-censorship was problematic because it represents choices by respondents not to discuss self-censorship. Their reasons for not speaking were divided into two categories.

(a) "I would like to say but it is not appropriate . . ."

The dilemma was most apparent for reporters working in China practice. Willy Lam, the associate editor and China editor of *the South China Morning Post*, for example, admitted there was widespread practice of self-censorship and he was pessimistic over freedom of the press in Hong Kong. Commenting on his own experience, he remarked,

When doing China news reporting, the nature of the business requires us to be more cautious, especially on taboo areas. We will pay attention to the presentation. The high-risk areas are stories on dissidents and Tibet.

Lam made it clear that China was a "special case" and he did not think "self-censorship" aptly described the situation. Jesse Wong of *the Asian Wall Street Journal* also shared the same view. He said,

I don't like to use the term self-censorship. I can't call it self-censorship but we need to be very cautious. It's very stressful to report on China's issues.

Both Lam and Wong stated that the interests of third parties might be harmed. The reporters felt responsible for the informants, and the editors felt responsible for the journalists. It became a case of responsible journalism, not self-censorship, or what Brown called "self-censorship with a moral side" (23). Alan Castro, the former Editor in Chief of *the Hong Kong Standard* conceded that,

... what is self-censorship and what is good sense, is a very thin line you know ... One must draw a balance between responsible journalism and being afraid to publish because you think they may come down and put you in jail.

The fine distinction between self-censorship and responsible journalism rested mainly on the legitimacy of the given reasons.

Another explanation as to why respondents resisted the term "self-censorship" is due to the fact that they viewed themselves as having a choice. The respondents considered themselves decision-makers with "freedom" to pursue sensitive stories but were forced to make a professional decision. Even with this narrow "slim" choice, and with the safety of a third party threatened, they did not want to bear the stigma of practicing "self-censorship." In a profession where autonomy and freedom are highly prized, as long as the journalists "feel" that they still have room to maneuver, they resent using the term "self-censorship."

(b) "I want to speak but no one is interested to listen ..."

Another situation when the self would like to speak but chose not to involved questions of who was listening. As with previous situation, respondents did not consider such betrayal self-censorship.

Wei Chengsi, the editorial writer of *Ming Pao,* observed,

The pressure is more from the market. It is not self-censorship. According to our newspaper's survey with readers and opinion poll, the interest is on Hong Kong issues, not on China issues.

Sham Yee Lan expressed a similar view,

According to our weekly Focus Group, our opinion survey on readers shows that readers are not interested in China news. They are more concerned with Hong Kong's financial problem and immediate day-to-day affairs.

These respondents saw the lack of interest as a problem of society at large.

Self, Socialization and Censorship

Regardless of which category the respondents experienced, these stories reflect constant redefinition of the "self" in "self-censorship." Sometimes respondents referred to themselves as the "self" in "self-censorship" while at other times, they pointed at a third party. In addition, these narratives reveal the paradoxical nature of self-censorship. The louder the cry of self-censorship, and the more concrete evidence that the respondents could produce, the more freedom the victims were in fact enjoying. The cry of self-censorship turned out to be an attempt to re-stage the battle from the newsroom to the public forum. In exposing the event and rallying public support, this group of journalists changed from being victims to heroes. Yet the quiet cases of non self-censorship may prove to be the most powerful form of self-censorship, where

TABLE 1

Variation of the Forms of Self-Censorship and the Relative Positioning of the "Self"

Forms of Apparent Self-censorship	Examples Given by the Respondents	Who is the "Self"-Using Respondents as a Referential Unit	Censor/Pressure	Perception of Self-Censorship
Clear cases	Struggle out there	-the "self" is either the editors or political authority	-external political force	-self-censorship does exist and
	Struggle inside media organization		-Editorial pressure within the organization	the journalists are the victims
				-self-censorship is in fact a form of censorship
Clear cases of non-censorship	Counter examples	Respondents as editors	Nil	Nil
	Sensitive words should not be used	Respondents themselves	Responding to social change	Nil
Ambiguous cases of non self-censorship	"I like to say but it is not appropriate . . ."	Respondents became the "self"	Moral responsibility to third party especially in China reporting	Nil
	"I want to speak but no one is interested . . ."	Respondents	Market pressure and social values	Nil

the respondent is silencing himself without being aware of it. The narratives on non self-censorship, therefore, bring out the complicated issues of power and socialization.

Who is the Self?

The respondents' experiences highlighted their own constant redefinition of self-censorship. The nature of self-censorship varied with the individual respondent's position as either the referential unit or the censor. In this sense, the concept or the study of self-censorship may be viewed as a collection of "domain-specific individual interpretative structures" (Markus, Mullally and Kitayama 14). The self drifts along resulting in constant modification of the boundaries defining self-censorship. Different characters would play the role of the "self" as the unit of analysis under various conditions. In clear cases of self-censorship, the respondents all identified the "self" as an external agent. In cases of non self-censorship, the respondents identified themselves as the "self." They contemplated whether they had ever been the censors who nipped the inner desire of expression. In all cases, they gave a negative reply. In the ambiguous cases, where the respondents seemingly still had a choice, they viewed themselves as the "self." Instead of refuting that they practiced self-censorship, they resisted using the term self-censorship.

The variation of the forms of "self-censorship" can be expressed in Table 1.

The meaning of self-censorship fluctuates depending on the relative positioning of the respondent. For example Sham's narratives fall into each category. In one clear case of self-censorship, she was the victim fighting against authority. In a case of non self-censorship, she identified with and defended the newspaper. She also engaged in a reflexive mode to choose particular words in her responsible way. In ambiguous cases of self-censorship, she could stand on her "self," feeling the frustration under the vast social and economic climate. It is an exemplary case where one notices that the more abstract the form of "power"[16] and the more isolated the self was, the more likely that the respondent would use herself as a referential unit

and the more likely that she would resist using the term self-censorship. On the other end, the more concrete the form of "suppression" experienced, the more likely that the respondent would identify a third party as the censor. From this perspective, what is censored is not merely the content of the message but the perception of the individual.

Self-censorship and Socialization

More significant, perhaps, is the constant shifting of the "self" as a referential unit points to the larger issue of socialization within media organizations and society at large. According to Gecas, socialization refers mainly to the individual's adaptation and conformity to the role expectation, values and norms of society at large (165). One important element is the development of a sense of identification and a sense of belonging to social institutions and to society at large. Under Kelman's model on power and social influence, an individual's submission to power can be wielded through three different processes, compliance, identification and internalization (62). Under compliance, an individual is forced to submit to achieve a favorable reaction. Only opinions that are "correct" will be publicly expressed. Alternatively, an individual may be coached to believe in the values of relationship and in role performance. Induced opinions will be expressed when the appropriate role is activated regardless of surveillance. During the final stage, an individual will have internalized the values of the ruling regime. This represents acceptance of submission without awareness or strain. In other words, submission becomes a product of the individual's own moral social sense, what he feels to be right and good. The individual is completely socialized into the system.

Kelman's framework provides a useful tool for our analysis of the respondents' experience. Their stories can be characterized in any of these three ways. In his study on self-censorship in Hong Kong, Lee also applies Kelman's model and concludes that self-censorship is primarily an act of compliance because Hong Kong's media seems inherently suspicious of China (58).

Yet the experiences of the respondents indicate two additional important features. First, there is only a thin line between compliance and internalization. Second, between the two extremes of "public conformity" and "private acceptance" (Kelman 61), there was a struggle inside the minds of the journalists. They were negotiating a middle way out of being crushed and being absorbed entirely into the system. The following is a re-examination of the journalists' experiences and their relation with socialization.

Inside the News Organization

Except for one example that involved a political struggle against the ruling regime, all respondents that gave clear cases of self-censorship stood apart from their media organizations. When the journalists declared that they were victims of self-censorship, they were accusing the organizations for failing to uphold certain professional ideals and ethics. From the journalists' perspective, editors' condemnation of their work as lacking "newsworthiness" was often motivated by political or economic concern. In turn, they denounced the editors' or the media organizations' lack of professional "competence," and refused to accept the institutional justification. As a result, self-censorship is not a mere description of the fate that the journalists are forced to encounter. Rather, it is a degrading term used to censure the media organization in the public discourse. Indirectly, it is also a protest against the broader economic and political pressure that the journalists face.

In contrast, cases of non self-censorship displayed better identification and integration with the organization and signified a more successful process of socialization. Nearly all respondents who gave clear counter-examples of non self-censorship belonged to the editorial ranks. Within the organization, the higher the editorial position held, the closer they identified with the

organization, which made it easier for them to identify with their roles. Even in the case of Wong, a front line reporter who gave the only example of non "self"-censorship from personal experience, he identified himself closely with his organization and defended rigorously the reputation of his newspaper.

The close link between one's position and one's sense of belonging was best illustrated by the case of Fenby. When Fenby was Editor in Chief of the *South China Morning Post,* he defended the position of *the Post.* His position changed markedly, however, when his title was stripped. Only after his contract was not renewed did he reveal that he had experienced self-censorship. He confessed that the situation worsened after the handover of Hong Kong. Government officials approached him and told him to recognize the newspaper's responsibility, and the newspaper's executives suggested he stop using the word "massacre" to describe the June 4 incident (Landler 4). The examples that he gave on self-censorship made him fall right out of the category of clear cases of non self-censorship. Fenby no longer identified himself as the "self" in the concept of self-censorship. Rather, he pulled himself away from "self-censorship." The "self" switched from a faithful agent in an organization to be a victim at the hand of an imposing oppressive external agent. Self-censorship became censorship, only without the legal edge. Fenby's case also fits neatly into Kelman's analysis of identification, that one's submission and value are dependent on the role performed (65).

In Society

Apart from socialization that is taking place in the newsroom, there is an ongoing socialization process in society at large.

(a) The Conformists

In ambiguous cases of non self-censorship, the respondents were aware that they had to change their reporting style so as not to agitate the ruling regime or to upset the sales target set by the company.[17] They felt uncomfortable within the power structure as evidenced in the field of China-reporting, and they were frustrated with Hong Kong culture and readers' expectation. One respondent, Wei, who admitted his disappointment with his job and with Hong Kong, no longer worked for the newspaper industry.

This group of forced conformists might also turn into deviants.

(b) The Deviant

Different from the conformists, the respondents in clear cases of self-censorship were also aware of the pressure but they refused to compromise. They were at odds with society and their experiences were stories of failed socialization. One respondent, Leung, was so frustrated and disappointed when his TV program was cut, he decided to leave Hong Kong. Those who resigned from their organizations or were forced to leave, however, fought back quickly when they saw that freedom of the press was at stake in society at large. They also encouraged fellow journalists to fight back (Liu "Self-censorship; Leung).

(c) The Follower: Internalization of Values

At the other end of the spectrum of socialization, some respondents felt completely at ease within the power structure. At a first glance, respondents under clear cases of non self-censorship were qualified candidates for successful socialization as they did not perceive self-censorship as a problem. Upon careful observation, however, non self-censorship cases could be further classified into two distinct groups, depending on the reasons given by the respondents. Only in cases where the respondents did not give any substantive reasons for their

positions did these cases appear to be cases of successful socialization, characterized as "followers."

Besides feeling completely at ease in abstaining from certain politically sensitive expressions, this group of respondents treated it as self-evident that certain politically sensitive phrases should not be used. For example, when the respondents pointed out that "Communist thieves" and "Taiwan national day" were obsolete terms, this might show that there was a gradual alignment of this group of social actors with the ruling authority.

As Gans points out, the phrase and expression used in reporting often reveals "paraideology," on the enduring values, assumptions and judgment in journalistic practice (68). Distinct from ideology, which is "deliberate, integrated, doctrinaire" (68), paraideology has a close connection with the socialization process for it is a reflection of one's state of beliefs and values. These examples also illustrate that the orthodox of today may have its root in the past. In turn what is censored in the present may become the potential orthodox of the future (Harrison 91). The social actors are no longer thinking about and questioning their choice of words, and they are gradually developing a disposition that is more in line with authority thinking and more in tune with the ruling voice.

The trend in Hong Kong is disturbing as shown in the remarks of Frank Ching, a famous political commentator of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Ching was optimistic about freedom of the press in Hong Kong at the time of interview. He expressed that though Mainland's leaders had clearly warned Hong Kong not to advocate the independence of Tibet and Taiwan,[18] it did not affect freedom of the press as;

This is a 'theoretical right' only. The parameter may have been narrowed but it does not have any actual effect. Hong Kong never wants to advocate the independence of such.

Ching pointed out that the world had changed, one had to do things differently, be aware of the consequences and this attitude was not a form of self-censorship.

Ching's example and the justification that he offered illustrate perfectly that the most successful and powerful form of socialization was the internalization of values. When one's personal choice coincides with the social demand, the self does not feel there is any constraint. The self no longer realizes that her "own" choice is the consequence of elimination of choices by higher authority. One may even go further and defend the authority, thereby fostering the legitimacy of the new regime.

Political socialization as a form of censorship is more powerful, effective and harder to detect. The real danger of self-censorship may not be "preference frustration" but "preference formation" (Schauer 151).

In addition to not feeling any pressure or constraints, individuals who share the same values of the ruling regime may also deny the existence of conflict. In a profession where autonomy and objectivity are highly valued, its members will be eager to deny any existence of self-censorship and eager to rationalize their decision. To a certain extent, the present debate on self-censorship in Hong Kong is entering the realm of contention. This may come as a welcome relief from the "rigors of personal thought and decision" (Galbraith 59). The entailing result is that an illusion of independence and autonomy is generated. Stein notes, Hong Kong's press freedom becomes "self-evident" and turns into a "non-event" (49) after the transition. There is a sudden change of attitude from anxiety to complacency. For instance, Ying Chan (a former reporter and a current academic) contended that self-censorship was never a problem in Hong Kong. Instead she considered that the Hong Kong press had enjoyed too much freedom and was

abusing it. She wrote, the Hong Kong press "remained as freewheeling and rambunctious" as before (84).

(d) The Moderates

The last group of respondents, who gave examples to show that they had not experienced self-censorship were termed moderates. Unlike some respondents who gave counter-examples to demonstrate that they could use politically sensitive words to challenge the regime, they explained their "silence." They gave examples as to why they abstained from using certain politically sensitive words. The difference between the "moderates" and the "followers" was that the former would offer substantive reasons. This group of respondents was lying between the outright deviant and the docile follower. They were treading in the zone of semi-socialization because they had not yet been completely absorbed into the power structure. They retained "loyal" sentiment to their profession and probably felt they could work within the system (Hirschman 76-8).

Sham, for example, admitted that she would not call the June 4 incident a "massacre," but would use "suppression." An anonymous respondent also chose an alternative, to describe the event as a "crackdown." Both demonstrated a highly reflexive and critical attitude explaining why they would not use the phrase "massacre." These respondents did not completely succumb to pressure. They were groping for a partial solution out of the unfavorable political environment. In this sense, moderatism was a defensive mechanism. Further, in offering an alternative vocabulary, these respondents also contributed in the building of a new set of social conventions.

It is, in fact, very difficult to draw the line between compliance and moderatism, dependent on the state of mind of the respondents. To a certain extent, the respondents who were forced to conform but resisted using the term self-censorship also belong to this category of moderates. How much to compromise, how much leeway one had, and how to create an alternative route to get across the same message with a slightly different meaning is a personal decision.

Self-Censorship Revisited

From this discussion, self-censorship through the perspective of Hong Kong journalists can be summarized with the five following scenarios:

(i)   Forced compliant; Failed socialization journalists were forced to silence under pressure to avoid punishment or to win favor;

(ii) Deviant fighter; Failed socialization journalists were "shocked into outspokenness" (Bourdieu *Language* 138), they were forced to resign from their media organizations or to leave the profession;

(iii) Conditioned role performer; Conditioned socialization identification with the values of the ruling regime was dependent on the roles performed, very often editors belonged to this category;

(iv) Moderate; Semi-socialization journalists made compromises, offered an alternative vision and stayed in the game, hoping to change it from inside.

(v)   Follower; Complete socialization silence due to own belief, they adjusted very well under this new regime but in remaining silent, they contributed towards self-censorship in the media industry and fostered legitimacy of the new ruler.

Only (i) and (iv) were cases of direct self-censorship, in the sense that the respondents actually felt the need to modify expressions. In other cases, the respondents were censored by external force or they became part of the disciplining force.

The experience of Hong Kong journalists confirms that socialization has a reverse relation with the pressure felt and perception of self-censorship by the journalists. The relation can be expressed in the following diagram (Figure 1):
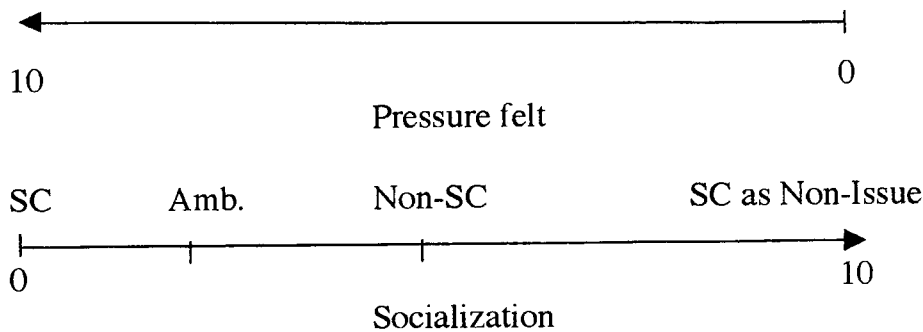
SC: self-censorship
Amb: ambiguous cases of non self-censorship

FIGURE 1: A MODEL OF SELF CENSORSHIP

Conclusion

If the socialization process is complete, one will not hear dissenting voices from the media. As long as one hear protests of self-censorship, the media conscience is still awake, reflecting its position and questioning authority. In fact, the more colorful the stories of self-censorship, the safer and more open Hong Kong society is likely to be. These voices are signs of the unrelenting and uncompromising spirit of the front line social actors. More problematic is the group of moderates who are faltering along the path of "semi-socialization." They are caught in the dilemma of having their voices heard and face the fate of being crushed or they comply unwillingly. A number of them stay on and fight for an alternative vision. Their position is precarious as the political awakening in Hong Kong is a relatively recent event. The roots of liberal ideas are shallow and fragile. The alertness may be dimming and it is tempting for the journalists to succumb to the comfort of complete socialization. What may signal a completion of the socialization process is when one no longer hears any stories of self-censorship from Hong Kong.

Furthermore, the journalists' symbolic interaction with the dominant social norms has a larger implication and impact on society as a whole. Though it is accepted that the media should be a watchdog against government abuse of authority, it is equally well known that the media is an important apparatus of the state. It is an essential tool to condition, educate and cultivate beliefs (Galbraith 148). Therefore, when journalists are restraining themselves, they are also exerting a disciplinary effect on the citizenry. The most powerful and threatening nature of self-censorship is its self-disciplining, self-perpetuating and self-generative impact inside the media industry and in society at large.

In summary, self-censorship from the perspective of the journalists is a metaphor denoting the individual journalist's relation with the power structure. As Bourdieu points out, censorship does not need to manifest itself in any external forms; it is embedded in the structure (*Sociology* 90). The speaker, the content and the manner are determined in the discourse. The most

successful form of self-censorship will be the silent on-going process of socialization that prevents journalists from even thinking certain ideas. They gradually learn the official propriety and scan out the "literally unthinkable" (Bourdieu, *Language* 139). They no longer question what ought to be questioned.

Notes

1. Britain agreed to return Hong Kong's sovereignty to China after July 1, 1997 under the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984.
2. Some authors have disputed the British legacy of free press (Keller 371; Klein 1).
3. One example of this perception is the report on human-rights conditions of the United States State Department. It stated that the Hong Kong government generally respected human rights but the problem was media self-censorship. The report noted that the media had been enjoying continued freedom but that there was a "widespread impression among both journalists and the public that is prudent to engage in a degree of self-censorship" (Snyder "SAR").
4. The surveys were conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1990 and 1996 respectively. 51% of the journalists admitted that they were apprehensive about criticizing China and 23% considered that most other journalists were also hesitant in doing so in 1990, while 50% admitted that they were apprehensive while 21% perceived others to be in 1996. The total sample was 692 about half of the population of journalists in Hong Kong.
5. I am very grateful for the valuable time and opinions of the journalist workers who participated in this project. Without their generosity, this research would not be complete.
6. This includes quotes from a TV interview, from a newspaper story written by the journalist experiencing self-censorship, and from an interview done by Alan Knight.
7. The newspaper that was referred to in the story was not *Apple Daily*. The specific Chinese phrase is "shang you zheng ce, xia you dui ce."
8. This is Liu's hallmark example, which he reiterated in the interview with the author and several of his other writings. It is so well known that other respondents commented on it and refuted it on their own initiative. At the time of interview, Liu was the chairperson of the Hong Kong Journalists Association and the opinion editor of the *Hong Kong Economic Times*. Currently he is working for the *Apple Daily*.
9. The TV program is a documentary on freedom of the press in Hong Kong. It interviewed the 9 journalists who had won the Amnesty International Human Rights Press Award for Journalists in 1998.
10. CTN issued a response denying the allegation, saying the decision was based on editorial policy.
11. Yuen is also the vice-chairman of the Hong Kong Federation of Journalists, which was formed in 1996. The Federation is seen as a counter-balance to the Hong Kong Journalists Association. The former is described as pro-China.
12. At the time of interview, Fenby was the chief editor. Robert Keatley took over the position in the summer of 1999. Ironically and sadly enough, the *South China Morning Post* decided not to renew Fenby's contract in the summer of 1999. Only after his forced resignation that Fenby revealed the pressure that he had faced from the Hong Kong Government and the management (Landler 4). This point will be further discussed under the section of "socialization."
13. The example of the June 4 "massacre" was definitely a response to Liu's well-rehearsed story that no newspaper dares to use such term.
14. Feng bo has a connotation in between a "crisis" and an "incident." This is to convey the negative connotation within the terms.
15. The literal meaning of massacre is "murdering the city."
16. The forms of power range from concrete attempted censor from the editor, criticism from the mass that the media organization is exercising self-censorship, general criticism that the non-use of certain vocabulary is self-censorship to the broad category of market demands.
17. This can be explained by the fact that one rarely sees vast social force in terms of readers' taste as self-censorship. Plus, the respondent resisted the negative connotation carried by the word "self-censorship."
18. Expressed by former Director of the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office in May 1996 and the former Foreign Minister Qian Qichen in 1995 (The Hong Kong Journalists Association and Article 19 *1996* 19).

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