

# Letting in the Wolf: Lurking Challenge to Pluralism of the Chinese Media in Malaysia

by Chang Teck Peng

**T**HE THREAT to press freedom and pluralism of public opinion in Malaysia may be attributed mainly to repressive media laws and media ownership by corporations owned by or linked to the ruling parties.

The fact that it has taken its toll is obvious in the English and Malay mainstream media, especially with regard to TV and newspapers. The same threat exists for the Chinese media, however, it experiences it to a lesser degree since the ruling parties have often paid less attention to it.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society with three main ethnic groups, namely, Malay, Chinese, and Indian, and numerous other ethnic minorities. It has a total population of 25.58 million and the ethnic composition is: 15.70 million (65.7 percent) are *Bumiputra* (Malays and other indigenous groups), 6.07 million (25.4 percent) are Chinese, 1.80 million (7.6 percent) are Indian, and the rest are other ethnic minorities.

Nowadays, the scenario of the Malaysian Chinese media industry is much different from the situation during and prior to the 1980s. Back then, most Chinese newspapers were run as family businesses and were faced with stiff competition and a limited market.

However, changes in the political atmosphere and the booming economy in the 1990s, have contributed to the growth of



The owner of Malaysia's largest Chinese media group, Sin Chew Media Corporation, Tiong Hiew King, has a stake in its traditional competitor, Nanyang Press Holdings.

*Oriental Daily News* (Malaysia)



Journalists from *China Press* protest the move of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) to take over Nanyang Press Holdings and *Sin Chew Daily's* role in the deal. *Oriental Daily News (Malaysia)*

the Chinese media industry. Today, the two largest Chinese newspaper companies are public companies listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange—Nanyang Press Holdings and Sin Chew Media Corporation, listed in 1989 and 2004, respectively.

As of end-2003, Sin Chew Media Corporation is the market leader with the daily circulation of its two dailies (*Sin Chew Daily* and *Guang Ming Daily*) totaling more than 474,000 copies while Nanyang Press Holdings boasts a daily circulation of 358,000 copies for its two dailies (*Nanyang Siang Pau* and *China Press*).

The Chinese media's "relative freedom"

The Chinese media enjoys "relative freedom" in comparison to the English and Malay media.

More room is "given" to the Chinese media in reporting political issues which may not be published in the English and Malay media. The commentary section is also a prominent part in the Chinese newspapers where writers who are critical

of the ruling parties and government are allowed to have their writings published, though their writings may sometimes be edited or censored.

The "relative freedom" could be deemed as an advantage to the Chinese media and the pluralism of public opinion in the Chinese community. Nevertheless, the "relative freedom" is not intentional but comes as a result of its perceived lesser influence on the ups and downs of the Malay elites, the regime of the *Barisan Nasional* and its leading party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Therefore, the UMNO elites would not and need not take too seriously the news coverage and editorials in the Chinese media.

However, this is not to say that this "relative freedom" has not been infringed upon. Key political events have caused these ruling parties to keep a keener eye on the Chinese media.

The first one relates to the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim as the Deputy Prime Minister and the ensuing *Reformasi* movement. Since Anwar was dismissed

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from his portfolio and expelled from UMNO in September 1998, the Malay supporters of UMNO had broken up into two main factions: one remained in strong support of UMNO and Mahathir Mohammad while the other turned to support the opposition.

The Chinese votes, therefore, played a vital role in deciding who would win the election. The outcome of the 1999 general election had proven this trend even as the ruling *Barisan Nasional* had to take the necessary steps to maintain the support of the Chinese community.

On the other hand, they were trying hard to bar the influence of the *Reformasi* from spreading to the Chinese community, by scrutinizing the large volume of news, views, and pictures about *Reformasi* that had been published in the Chinese newspapers. Hence, the influential Chinese newspapers have come under strict monitoring by the government.

The second one concerns the rise of the present Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) President, Ong Kar Ting, and his close linkage with Sin Chew Media Corporation.

The tightened control over the Chinese media practically began when Ong was appointed to the office of the Home Ministry, which is empowered by the 1984 Printing Presses and Publications Act to supervise the print media. Ong was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to the Home Ministry in 1991 and subsequently promoted to be the Deputy Minister to the same Ministry from 1995 until 1999.

The opposition leader, Lim Kit Siang, had described the appointment of Ong into the

Home Ministry as the beginning of a nightmare for the Chinese media. Ong is Chinese-educated and this enables him to read, monitor, and control the Chinese newspapers in more effective ways. Moreover, he is able to respond immediately when contents in the Chinese newspapers are unfavorable to him or his party's policies.

Ong has become more "powerful" and "influential" to editors of the Chinese media when he was appointed a full minister to



The four Chinese dailies controlled by two media groups had joined hands to prevent *Oriental Daily News* from having access to the traditional distribution networks.

*Oriental Daily News* (Malaysia)

the Ministry of Housing and Local Government in 1999 and later on elected as the President of MCA in 2003. With his rise to power, the interaction between the Chinese media and Ong has become much closer and the Chinese media became more careful in dealing with the issues that might be considered as unfavorable to MCA and Ong himself.

The MCA has strengthened its influence on the Chinese media when one of its other members, Donald Lim, was appointed the Deputy Minister to the Ministry of Information in 2003. The Ministry runs the state-owned broadcasting station, RTM. Since his appointment, Lim has not only tried to oversee the running of the Chinese section of RTM, particularly the Mandarin News section, but has also taken initiative to establish a cross-media committee to standardize the use of Chinese terms in the media.

The third event has to do with MCA's acquisition of the largest Chinese media company, Nanyang Press Holdings, in 2001 and the birth of a new Chinese daily, the *Oriental Daily News* in 2003.

Nanyang Press Holdings is in control of at least 17 publications, including the second and third largest Chinese dailies, *China Press* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*. The politically-motivated acquisition was supported by the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, who had publicly condemned the 80-year-old newspaper for its "pro-opposition" stance that contributed to the defeat of the *Barisan Nasional* in the state assembly elections in 2000.

MCA's takeover of Nanyang Press Holdings was met with protests from the Chinese community and "anti-takeover movements" were launched by concerned parties.

Columnists and regular contributors to the major Chinese newspapers played vital roles in these movements by launching what they called the "Stop Writing Campaign", i.e. they agreed not to contribute their articles to the four Chinese newspapers involved in the deal, namely *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *China Press*, *Sin Chew Daily*, and *Guang Ming Daily*. The campaign also had led to the establishment of the Writers' Alliance for Media Independence (WAMI).

The campaign did not limit itself to targeting the take over, but also sought to call the attention of the largest Chinese newspaper, *Sin Chew Daily*, for its unwillingness to publish statements and reports in protest against MCA's proposed deal.

The owner of *Sin Chew Daily*, Tiong Hiew King, was said to have been involved in the deal. Though Tiong denied he had any interest in the deal, his two companies were listed in the annual reports of Nanyang Press Holdings as the 12th and 13th largest stakeholders in 2002 and 10th and 14th in 2003 as well 2004.

Political influence and the Chinese media

Following the fall of Nanyang Press Holdings into MCA's hand, a new Chinese daily, *Oriental Daily News*, had hit the street

The politically-motivated acquisition of the MCA was supported by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad.

in September 2002. But the newly born newspaper lived for only one day. It was banned by the Home Ministry on the second day of its publication. It had, however, managed to resume publication in January 2003.

On the other hand, the two largest Chinese media groups had joined hands to prevent *Oriental Daily News* from having access to the traditional distribution networks, thus resulting in the paralysis of the circulation of *Oriental Daily News* to reach consumers. In turn, the *Oriental Daily News* had repeatedly revealed the tactics of sabotage taken by its rivals—including intimidating newspaper vendors who were selling *Oriental Daily News*. Meanwhile, features and articles criticizing the motives and the foreseeable harms of Tiong's intended domination of the Chinese media as well as his ways of achieving it had been published from time to time.

*Sin Chew Daily* had its publishing permit revoked by the Home Ministry during a political crackdown in 1987. It had made use of the experience to build up its corporate image with the motto of "Integrity Above All" since the early 1990s. But now it found itself the target of criticisms that were seen as damaging to its hard-earned corporate image.

Therefore, it was not surprising that Sin Chew Media Corporation would spare no efforts to counter attack its critics. However, it was most unexpected that the media giant would resort to collaboration with MCA in wiping out dissenters. In fact, MCA shared a similar interest as the declining circulation of *Nanyang Siang Pau* was expected to get worse following the publication of *Oriental Daily News*.

Subsequent developments revealed that the two parties had worked in collusion,

initially to deter the publication of *Oriental Daily News* and later on to suppress criticisms from the new print media and the independent writers. *Sin Chew Daily's* increased alliance with MCA in general and Ong in particular was exposed during MCA's intra-party conflict in 2000 and became more obvious since Tiong became one of the major stakeholders in Nanyang Press Holdings, while Ong was elected to the party's top post.

Though not intentionally, the birth of *Oriental Daily News* caused the further shrinking of the space for news and views in the Chinese media industry. The Home Ministry was said to be involved in the plots to discriminate *Oriental Daily News* and the writers who took part in the "anti-takeover movements".

When *Oriental Daily News* started its publication, the Home Ministry had produced a blacklist of individuals who were not allowed to be employed by *Oriental Daily News*. Meanwhile, some writers who took part in the "Stop Writing Campaign" were banned from writing as columnists in the *Oriental Daily News*. Those blacklisted were mostly hardcore members of WAMI who were outspoken in criticizing Sin Chew Media Corporation and MCA. Some other writers were blacklisted later when their writings were seen as having offended the powers-that-be either in politics or in the media industry.

Personal testimony

I myself had been a victim of this "blacklisting" practice.

Here is my story: When *Oriental Daily News* resumed publication on January 1, 2003, I was invited to be a columnist. However, my column was unexpectedly banned after the publication of the fifth article despite the fact that I had been careful not to touch on the so-called "sensitive issues", nor did I criticize the power elites. However, I did criticize the way the two Chinese newspapers groups had attempted to block the distribution network of *Oriental Daily News*. This triggered the Home Office to "pressure" the editor to terminate the column.

A year later, *Oriental Daily News* once



MCA's proposal to takeover Nanyang Press Holdings was met with protests from the Chinese community.

*Oriental Daily News* (Malaysia)

again invited me to write a new column focusing on media critique. They were willing to "test the waters," i.e. the column would continue if no "pressure" came from the Home Ministry.

This time, however, the problem did not come from the two articles but from a TV news program featuring an interview with me aired over the state-run TV2's Mandarin News.

I was interviewed on the topic "Chinese dailies and their cultural role," wherein I had commented that Chinese newspaper conglomerates had generally intended to build up their corporate images by organizing various cultural activities. Though I did not specify any Chinese daily, the narrator had mentioned several Chinese newspapers and the cultural activities they had organized.

After the first segment of the interview was aired, the head of the Mandarin News received a call from Deputy Information Minister Lim. Following the call, the second segment, which was scheduled to be aired the next day, was axed and the TV editor who produced the feature was sacked. Previously, TV2 had also axed a special feature on the controversial acquisition of Nanyang Press Holdings.

Afterwards, the editor of *Oriental Daily News* informed me that they had to remove my column as they once again received

“pressure” from the Home Ministry. The column became the most short-lived column in my writing career—only two articles were published before it was banned.

Moreover, two days after the news feature was aired, *Sin Chew Daily* published an article written by its deputy editor in chief, to condemn TV2’s Mandarin News for “misusing public facility to gain personal interest” by throwing mud at *Sin Chew Daily*.

My experience is not an isolated case. Since its resumption, the *Oriental Daily News* has been the target of the Home Ministry and the Sin Chew Media Corporation. To survive, it has had to remain low-key by rejecting writers who attack media monopoly in their articles.

There is no doubt that political influences have been used to safeguard certain media from being criticized. Discussions on issues like media monopoly, Tiong’s intention of building a media empire, and the political control over media ownership can now hardly find their ways into the Chinese media, including the newspapers and Mandarin news on TV.

While critiques on media monopoly and Tiong’s intention to dominate the Chinese media industry had been eliminated, *Sin Chew Daily* had introduced a prominent new section called “Interaction Platform” (*Goutong Pingtai*) on page three of its national edition. The new section published the so-called “letters to the editor” received from its readers and the replies from its editorial personnel. However, the main function of the section appeared to be an initiative to not only counter attack the critiques on Tiong’s cross-ownership in Nanyang Press Holdings, but most importantly, to legitimize his intended domination of the Chinese media industry. Among the “letters” published were those praising and justifying Tiong’s ambitious move in “commanding” the Chinese media industry, as well as attacking those writers who had criticized Tiong and Sin Chew Media Corporation but who now had no platform to voice their opinions.

“Forbidden areas”

There are many “forbidden areas” that have been informally set and carefully

avoided by the mainstream media in Malaysia. The mainstream media have no courage to publish views or articles criticizing the politicians who hold influential portfolios. For example, when the former authoritative Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad was in power, if an article mentioned his name in a negative way, it would be replaced by some general term like “an Asian leader.” In worse cases, the whole article will be archived. The situation remained the same after Abdullah Badawi had taken over as the new Prime Minister.

The mainstream media are also not allowed to carry unfavorable comments on controversial policies or decisions of the government, issues causing “racial disputes” or threatening “national security.” Otherwise, the editors receive “pressure” from the Home Ministry.

While all these are nothing new in Malaysia and are realities to be faced in media industry, the worrying trend today is that the scope of these “forbidden areas” have expanded. It now includes topics ranging from corporate takeovers to business monopolies, such as the Chinese media industry.

Another worrying phenomenon is that the Chinese community has become more tolerant of the compromising attitude of the Chinese media in addressing political pressures and the monopoly in the Chinese media industry. Even if it is being dominated by a single media tycoon like Tiong, they rationalize that it is still owned by Chinese and therefore, it is assumed that it is doing its part in safeguarding the interests of the Chinese community even as the company sponsors a lot of cultural events. This, unfortunately, has made many Chinese-Malaysians lukewarm when it comes to fighting for press freedom in the Chinese community.

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