

A commitment to press freedom

The year of the dog has so far seen a turbulent time for the media of Hong Kong. Yu Pun-hoi, the chairman and controlling shareholder of listed companies Ming Pao Enterprise and South Sea Development, resigned last night as the chairman of the two listed companies over revelations last week that he had a criminal record and withheld the fact from the stock exchange.

Hong Kong's press has in recent years been undertaking more investigative reporting, whose depth and sophistication, fortunately perhaps, has not yet reached the level of that of the British tabloids on reporting the royal scandals.

Hong Kong readers used to feel uneasy about muckraking as Chinese people traditionally find it immoral to expose anyone's darker side. For a man of power or great social importance, privacy

will inevitably be limited and subject to public supervision. That privacy could affect the public interest. A free and courageous press will safeguard that.

The revelations will thus certainly be a blow to Yu, a rising star who once boasted his ambition of building a comprehensive media empire across the Chinese communities in the world. The stock exchange has, however, taken the right decision to condemn Yu and ask him to resign.

Ming Pao is a prestigious newspaper, popular among the middle classes and students. It would be reasonable to require that its owner should be a man of good personality, as it would be logical to assume that the chairman of the Bar Association does not have a criminal record.

The cupboard of skeletons was forced open by a newspaper -

EASTERN EXPRESS

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thanks to the freedom and independence of the press in Hong Kong. Whether that freedom can be extended beyond 1997 is now of prime concern to the community. Had it not been Yu - a self-made young businessman - but a senior Chinese official in Hong Kong, or someone else with a strong political

background after 1997, it would have taken a great deal more courage for any newspaper to make such revelations rather than exercising selective self-censorship.

It was a victory for the independence and professionalism of the Hong Kong press. But the real

challenge and test will not come until after 1997.

Yu's case has also triggered speculation about the sources of the report. The disclosure of the attempt to emigrate to Canada by Tsang Yok-sing, the leader of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong, has been attributed to a British plot to discredit a pro-China politician.

Yu's case, similarly, has been seen by some conspiracy theorists as a deliberate leak by China to disgrace the owner of an influential independent newspaper which once employed Xi Yang, a respectable journalist jailed by Beijing for "stealing state secrets".

Such speculation is insulting to our journalists, as it assumes reporters are the mouthpiece of political powers. It is also dangerous, as news reporting can easily be

politicised in the prevalent atmosphere of paranoia before the 1997 deadline for all freedoms. It will do as much damage to the public right to know as self-censorship.

The latest example of such speculation has involved this newspaper, after a number of rumours surfaced over the resignation of a few senior staff members earlier this week.

We received enquiries yesterday about a news report that today's edition of *Eastern Express* would be "the last one because of a mass walkout of staff". The reason for these resignations is, according to a mainstream rumour, a protest by some staff over the interference by the management in editorial independence.

The amount of speculation about the imminent closure of this paper or a readiness to practise self-censorship has almost outgrown that of the alleged death of Deng Xiaoping. May we reassure

our readers that neither story is true.

This paper is firmly committed to impartial and accurate reporting as well as an independent editorial policy. We speak for the people of Hong Kong now, and hopefully after 1997. It is the interests of Hong Kong we serve.

Like many other news institutions in Hong Kong, we do have our management problems from time to time. We have been flattered that some have received more coverage by other papers than they deserved, and we have been amazed that some, like the cases of Yu and Tsang, have been politicised.

Only time can prove our commitment to the freedom of the press in Hong Kong. A newspaper's voice has been compared to the barking of a dog. It is the year of the dog. Give it time to show its loyalty to Hong Kong people.

EASTERN EXPRESS
21 OCT 1994