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A very hush, hush press conference

The Hongkong and Yaumati Ferry Company confirmed yesterday its plans to operate a hoverferry service between Hongkong and Canton.

The S.C.M. Post reported two months ago that the company sent a hoverferry to Canton on a trial run and was negotiating with the Chinese authorities.

The HYF's general manager, Mr Edmond Lau, yesterday told a press conference - called for the occasion - that he could only announce negotiations are taking place.

He responded to a flurry of questions by saying he could give no details.

When one radio interviewer asked what was the outcome of the trial run to Canton on June 15, Mr Lau clamped his hand over the microphone and said: "I can't say that."

Mr Lau, who also distributed a release on the company's annual report, said the HYF is expanding its hoverferry fleet from six to 10.

It has placed orders in the United Kingdom for three more hoverferries, costing about \$4 million each, with a capacity for 91 passengers and a speed of 33 knots.

Already in operation are four small hoverferries and two of the larger type, such as those on order from the UK.

A seventh recently arrived and is being modified in the company's shipyards.

The hoverferry is very

suitable for running river trips," said Mr Lau.

But he would not confirm if a hoverferry is favoured over a conventional ferry for the proposed Hongkong-Canton run.

He said negotiations with Canton began "a couple of months ago." But he had "no idea" when they would be completed.

Asked if current moves - by both British officials and local people - to improve transport services to China could affect attempts to launch the Canton hover ferry service, Mr Lau said:

"I don't think so. I think this is a general overall plan to improve communications between Hongkong and Canton."

Asked how long the June trial run took to reach Canton, Mr Lau replied: "This is a most kept secret."

Does the ferry company have staff trained in navigating the Pearl River to Canton?

"All this is still under negotiation," said Mr Lau.

Has the Hongkong Government been involved in any of the negotiations?

"I was authorised to say it is in the picture," replied Mr Lau. He added later the Government is not directly involved.

"All you can say is we're negotiating. As to where, when, how - those are most secret," he said.

Then why did the ferry company call a big press conference?

"There's no sense in speculation," replied Mr Lau.

"Ever since your paper [the S.C.M. Post] cracked the story there's all kind of speculation..."

"Some of them [are] saying that we're doing it. Some of them saying we're not doing it, some say it's rumours. Some of them say it's fact.

"Well, I can confirm only one thing," said Mr Lau.

"The fact is that we are in the midst of negotiations with Kwangtung province authorities on the issue."

Mr Lau said if the talks are successful another press conference will be held at which he will give more details.

Could he give any hint how fares would compare with, for example, the train fare to Canton?

"I can't say," said Mr Lau.