

C H I N A T O W N D A I L I E S

by

LOUIS K. HA

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Advisor: Prof. Frederick T.C. Yu

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It is 10 a.m. on January 11. Snow is falling lightly in New York City. Sixteen Chinatown reporters, armed with loudspeakers and placards, are picketing The United Journal. They shout: "Stop exploiting reporters!" "Down with King-fu Ng!" "Down with the newspaper warlord!"

This was no ordinary demonstration. The reporters - all members of the East American Chinese Reporters Association - were not demanding higher pay or better working condition.

Louis Liu, chairman of the reporters association says, "We protest against an editorial of The United Journal, which referred to our association as 'so-called reporters association.' We are displeased that Mr. Ng questioned the fair representation of our association."

To King-fu Ng, 76-year-old publisher of The United Journal, his is the only local paper in Chinatown and all the other eight Chinese-language newspapers are mouthpieces of Taiwan or Beijing. To him, the East American Chinese Reporters Association is biased and has to be pro-Taiwan because it holds its meetings at the pro-Taiwan Chinese Community Center in Chinatown.

But to the reporters, the political adherence of their employers is one thing, the friendly solidarity among themselves is quite another. Besides, many of them have worked for papers of both political groups. The protest, therefore, was to demonstrate their common disgust at being labeled politically. They have been trying to build up their journalistic credibility and to keep away from the political whirlpool, in which the nine Chinatown dailies are deeply involved.

Actually, Chinatown dailies do not conceal their political preference or purpose. All the pro-Beijing papers celebrate the national day of the People's Republic of China on October 1, while pro-Taiwan papers do the celebration on October 10 - 'Double Ten' - the national day of the Republic of China.

Pro-Taiwan papers are easily distinguished by their year-counting system. Four papers refer to 1985 as the "74th year of the Republic of China," which was established in 1911. They are: The World Journal (Shi-jie ri-bao), The China Post (Niu-yue ri-bao), The China Tribune (Hwa-mei ri-bao), and Sing Tao Daily (Sing-tao ri-bao).

The other five Chinatown papers use the Gregorian calendar; four of them pro-Beijing, one claimed to be neutral. They are: The Centre Daily News (Zhong bo), The Sino Daily Express (Hua-yu kuai-bao), The China Daily News (Hwa-qiao ri-bao), The Peimei News (Pei-mei ri-bao), and The United Journal (Lian-he ri-bao).

"It is a lot easier to distinguish the Chinatown dailies politically than to determine their actual dates of publication," says a reader of Chinatown dailies. On a Saturday afternoon, for instance, readers are at a loss to know which paper to buy, because they can find papers dated Saturday, Sunday, and Monday on the 30 and more newsstands in Chinatown. The ones dated Saturday are published on Friday, those dated Monday come out on Saturday, and only those dated Sunday are Sunday papers.

"It is a confusing tradition," Sum-yuen Cheng, director of The Sino Daily Express, admits. "At first, there were only evening papers and naturally enough, the date was for the following day. Two years ago, some evening papers became morning papers, but they still carried the date of the following day." So, on Mondays one reads Tuesday's papers, but on Saturdays, one buys Monday papers. The two Sunday papers are published on Saturday afternoon and on Sunday morning.

"This is a dead end issue," says Kuo-chi Yu, chief editor of The Peimei News. "I tried to change it sometime ago, but failed. The readers could understand the change, but the newsstand keepers would not. They kept asking, 'Why send us yesterday's paper?' After a few days, we had to bow to tradition."

Why don't all the publishers agree to change it? "Well, how could we agree? I doubt if we could hold a meeting together," says Andrew M.L. Kwan, chief editor of The China Daily News. "Publishers of the nine papers do not even want to stand under the same roof." In fact, some pro-Taiwan papers still refer to Deng Xiao-ping as 'mobster Deng,' and call Beijing (northern capital), the capital of China after 1949, by its old name Peiping (northern peace)."

"Some Chinatown organizations even hold separate press conferences for papers of the two political groups," says Samson Wong, a Chinatown reporter. But many journalists have nourished antipathy to this practice. K.F. Ng of The United Journal, opposes the interference of politics in journalism. He dislikes papers supported by Beijing, Taiwan, or Hong Kong, and disapproves any kind of grouping which, in his opinion, is either leftist or rightist and which brings only troubles to readers.

Chinatown readers, however, are interested in China politics. "The papers," says a Chinatown sociologist, "serve as an umbilical cord connected to China and to Chinese politics and culture for the first-generation immigrants." The growing groups of second- and third-generation immigrants have less interest in China politics, but then most of them cannot read Chinese anyway.

The first-generation immigrants are faithful readers of Chinese-language papers. Kuo-chi Yu, chief editor of Peimei News, says, "The first-generation immigrants care for their home-town news at least for five years. And these eager readers flock to Chinatown." Every year, 40,600 Chinese migrate to the United States: 20,000 from Taiwan, 20,000 from China and 600 from Hong Kong. And a few thousand more business people, students, and illegal Chinese immigrants are staying in the States. At least 12,000 of them will flock to New York Chinatown every year, according to a recent survey sponsored by the "Local 23-25, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union."

Shirley Yan of The American Asians for Equality, an 11-year-old organization on East Broadway, says, "Chinatown is the place where the first-generation Chinese immigrants tend to live, because they can survive here without knowing English."

"Men get jobs in Chinese restaurants or groceries," she says, "and women in garment factories. With Chinese-speaking doctors, lawyers, bankers, and social workers taking care of every facet of their life, the Chinese seldom have to leave lower Manhattan. Then, commuting in New York is a problem for them; subway announcements for changing train cars, for instance, often make them lose their way. That makes them stick around Chinatown."

Chinatown runs from Broadway to East River and from East Houston Street to Fulton Street with nearly 52,000 Chinese residents.

"Chinatown is small for so many residents," says David Mui, manager of Sing Tao Daily. "That has an effect on Chinatown journalism. We just don't report everything we know. We have to follow certain rules." For example, shootings in theaters are not always reported, so as not to disturb business or to damage image of the community.

Yung Li, reporter of The World Journal, says, "It is our common agreement with the underworld that Chinatown crimes will be covered only after checking with police reports. So we depend on the 9 p.m. briefing of the Fifth Precinct for violence stories."

"In Chinatown, they have their own set of ghetto rules," says Te-kong Tong, professor of Asian Studies at City College of New York. "The American law seems being taken lightly in Chinatown. Once, I watched an X-rated film with embarrassment, not because of the film, but because a mother was sitting there feeding her baby while her six-year-old child watched the scene of naked bodies in bed."

When Edward T.C. Chan was identified as the leader of a Chinatown crime group by the 'President's Commission on Organized Crime' on October 23 last year, The New York Times ran a 25-inch-long story with Chan's photo. Out of the nine Chinese newspapers, only two mentioned Chan's name. One of them, The World Journal, had to write an editorial apologizing to Chan the next day. The other one, The United Journal, was threatened to have business withdrawn by advertisers. A Los Angeles-based Chinese daily, also on sale in New York, translated and ran The New York Times story on Chan. Shortly after that, two New York correspondents of the paper left their jobs. This raised speculations that their leaving was related to the issue.

Although some editors were ready to publish the news, their reporters were worried about their personal security. So, most of the papers delayed the news till Chan gave a press conference in his own defense. James C. Hsiung, professor of politics at New York University comments, "The Chinatown press is still afraid of local powers, of their revenge."

Apparently, Chinatown press is trapped in a dangerous triangle formed by political pressure, power of organized crime, and the interest of readers. The survival struggle is hard.

However, the nine Chinatown dailies have somehow survived. They range in size from eight to 48 pages, and are of very uneven quality. Some have big staffs of nearly 200 employees and modern equipments such as computers and four-color printing plants; some are shoe-string operations. Eight sell for 25 cents; one sells for 15 cents.

The China Tribune, for instance, is an eight-page daily sold for 15 cents. The 42-year-old paper has a circulation under 200, and is estimated to spend only \$100 a day for printing, including material and labor. It relies almost entirely on clippings from Hong Kong or Taiwan papers and does very little reporting of its own. The paper runs only one or two local stories every day; most of them are translations from the New York Post and Daily News.

Some Chinatown dailies are big. The World Journal, for instance, is a seven-day paper with color printing. It has 48 pages, including 30 pages of advertisement. On weekends, it attaches a 48-page tabloid-size complimentary magazine. The paper, founded nine years ago with nine editions in the United States and Canada, claims a circulation of 30,000, and is the largest Chinese-language paper in the United States.

The paper with the largest readership in Chinatown, however, is the 33-year-old United Journal. This 20-page journal, with its average 12 pages for advertisement, is the only paper claiming to be making money. It gets local support, because it was set up by local businessmen and tried to be neutral politically by standing apart from papers supported by Hong Kong or Taiwan resources.

The journal has numerous advertisements on garment factory jobs, apartment rentals, and votes of thanks. It has almost monopolized all the advertising by funeral halls.

Yuk-tsun Wang, the chief editor of the journal, is proud of its advertising rates and policy. He says, "We never push for ads, and clients are to pay in advance. Yet we manage to maintain the highest rates in Chinatown papers." In January this year, The United journal charged \$1,600 for one full page. That was already very costly by Chinatown standard.

The oldest existing Chinatown paper, The China Daily News, was founded on July 7, 1940, to commemorate the day in 1937 when Japan invaded China. The paper organized an anti-Japanese movement, which raised funds to buy two Ford cars for China.

Andrew M.L. Kwan, the chief editor, in his early forties, is frank on disclosing the political stand of his paper. "During the Chinese civil war of the 40s, our paper stood for the Communist party. And we immediately recognized the Beijing government on Oct. 1, 1949."

"But the policy of our daily is to remain an American Chinese paper, fighting for civil rights, working for the unification of China, and promoting cultural and economic relationship between China and the United States." Kwan says this whole sentence in a breath, as if he had learnt it by heart.

Beginning from the early '50s, the paper suffered from the American anti-China policy and from the boycott of pro-Taiwan groups for more than 20 years. The situation was so bad from 1963 to 1976 that the paper was forced to publish only twice a week with about 300 copies each issue.

"At that time," Kwan says, his round face slowly reddened, "news-stands were prohibited to sell our paper and Chinese applying for U.S. citizenship were asked whether they had subscribed to our paper."

Recently the paper, which runs 20 pages now, started doing business with China, and things began to turn better. Last April The China Daily News moved to a big house at 15 Mercer Street - a sign of its final breakthrough from the underground. Kwan says the paper also plans to install equipment for satellite transmission.

In Chinatown journalism, emphasis on local reporting is a recent practice. It was led by The Sino Daily Express, founded five years ago.

"When I came to the States in the 60s," says Sum-yuen Cheng, the director of the paper, "there was the heated discussion on the issue of Diao-yu Tai." Diao-yu Tai is an island with disputing territory claim between China and Japan. "People sided either with Beijing or with Taiwan on this issue. I didn't see why people bother to get involved in this partisan dispute. After all, it was not a political reality in America."

So, Cheng devoted his journalism career entirely to local Chinese community reporting, and trained reporters according to his conviction. Since The Sino Daily Express is not paying its reporters well, very often other newspapers pay higher salaries to lure reporters from Cheng. It turns out that reporters of many Chinatown papers are Cheng's disciples.

The 12-page Sino Daily Express was the first and only seven-day paper till March last year. The paper has another first: it runs a give-away paper in Queens.

"At first," Cheng explains, "the give-away paper was only a temporary strategy to bar the advance of the newly founded pro-Taiwan papers toward Queens. But it worked out well. With only one editor and one advertising manger, we make money. So we continue to run it."

The Centre Daily News can be regarded as a paper in exile. Its owner, Chao-shu Fu, had a prosperous Taiwan paper, which he was forced to sell to the Nationalist party. Fu then moved to Hong Kong to start a paper, which was not a success. Four years ago, he moved the main force of the Hong Kong paper to New York, with an edition in Los Angeles. After all these shifting, The Centre Daily News attempts to maintain a middle-of-the-road position politically, but it is considered as left of middle. A Chinatown journalist says, Fu can never be objective toward Taiwan anymore.

The China Post is a paper ready for auction. Anyone wishing to start a paper in Chinatown first considers buying The China Post. Ming Leung, the publisher of the 15-year-old paper, is admittedly pessimistic about the paper. "The present staff is old," he says, "and new people are not coming because of the low pay."

Only three pages out of its normal 12 pages are written by its staff; the rest is a collage from clippings of Hong Kong and Taiwan papers. The policy of the paper is to maintain a minimum expenditure to survive the competition, and to avoid Chinese politics by having editorials only on local and international issues.

Sing Tao Daily is the only paper that runs picture-ads of bikini girls for massage parlors in Chinatown. Yet, it is a serious paper connected with a newspaper chain that has 30 more offices over the world. Its Hong Kong headquarters supplies almost 60 percent of the content through satellite transmission. So, although it is a licensed American Chinese newspaper, Sing Tao Daily is regarded by many as a Hong Kong paper. In Chinatown, however, eight genuine Hong Kong papers are on sale. These American editions are each condensed into eight pages with no local news and no advertisements.

Among the nine Chinatown papers, the most promising one is a strange hybrid. The Peimei News grew out of Sing Tao Daily ten years ago, and has recently absorbed most of the editorial staff of a successful Chinatown daily, which was closed last year.

"The founder of The Peimei News, Kuo-kuan So, was the east coast distributor of Sing Tao Daily," says Kuang-fu Chu, the former publisher. "He was also in charge of local editing in New York. In the early '70s he employed reporters suspected to be pro-Beijing. Sing Tao's owner, who had real estate in Taiwan, was pressured to keep the paper rightist. Kuo-kuan So, who held half of the paper's shares brought the matter to court and won the case. As a result, he was given the printing plant and some money for leaving Sing Tao Daily to start a new paper."

The Peimei News started with a circulation of 17,000. But after the fall of the Chinese 'gang of four' in the late '70s, the paper lost most of its readers. Now it has a circulation of about 3,000. Newspaper clippings from Hong Kong or China are reprinted in the paper without being retyped.

However, people now speculate that The Peimei News will become one of the best Chinese papers because in January this year it hired a new chief editor, who, in turn hired 14 people from his former team in The China Times (Zhong-guo shi-bao).

The China Times was undoubtedly the watershed of Chinatown journalism. All the nine Chinatown dailies were no equal competitors of this pro-Taiwan paper closed a few months ago. The paper started the four-color printing in Chinatown dailies, dedicated more than three pages to local news, paid reporters the record monthly salary of more than \$2,000 and sent correspondents to other cities. Before The China Times came to the scene, most of the papers had only one reporter, who doubled as photographer, translator and artist.

The China Times had a circulation of 28,000 and a staff of 170; both were records in Chinatown journalism. It had invested \$15 million in its 26 months of existence, and had just spent \$600,000 installing a Chinese computer system before it abruptly ceased to publish.

Its last issue, dated Nov. 12, 1984, mentioned only the economic reasons for the closing. The immediate cause seemed to be the fault of the owner, who was a high Chinese Nationalist official and owner of a Taiwan chain of papers. He failed to transmit \$5.5 million from Taiwan to subsidize the New York operation, which lost about \$250,000 each month. The owner did have the money in Taiwan. Only the transferral of funds to New York was reportedly barred by the Taiwan Government, which bargained with the owner to run the paper according to Nationalist interest and under tighter government control. This was not the first time The China Times received political pressure from Taiwan, though it was the last.

In September, 1984, the Taiwan government objected to an editorial criticizing the Reagan Administration. That editorial argued that the "Church and State" dispute was not a real problem; the underlying issue was Reagan's religious intolerance in the disguise of religious freedom.

Before that incident, the Taiwan government warned the paper about its full coverage of the achievements of mainland China athletes at the Olympic games, charging that coverage promoted the Communist success.

In October, The China Times ran a front-page story on the assassination in San Francisco of the author of a biography of Taiwan President Ching-kuo Chiang, saying that the author "was not a man with money or women trouble." Taiwan again regarded the report as an innuendo of a political murder by Nationalists.

After the closing of The China Times in November, in an interview by the pro-Beijing Chinatown paper, Professor James C. Hsiung deplored the interference of Taiwan with The China Times. However, after a short trip to Taiwan Professor Hsiung changed position. He wrote an article in a pro-Taiwan Chinatown daily to retract all his previous opinion, and apologized to Taiwan government. He affirmed in that article that he had found no political pressure exercised on the paper.

A former reporter of The China Times, Derek Lee, however, says, "Professors need grants to maintain their position in universities. It is quite normal that they are subject to political pressure too."

The China Times incident did have some chilling effect on the remaining Chinatown papers. Kuo-chi Yu, the former chief editor of The China Times, points out, "Recently the papers tend to go for extremes. The leftist goes further left, the rightist further right. Nobody dares to stick his neck out to be neutral."

Now, Chinatown newspapers just follow a system which they have developed throughout the years; they run similar local news stories, vary a bit in international news coverage and differ a lot in China news coverage. They all try to please their readers.

For example, eight out of the nine Chinatown dailies recently ran front-page stories on the Chinatown Evergreen Pine House project for senior citizens, showing their almost identical news judgment on local news. But on international news, only six papers ran a front-page story on the Vietnamese control over a Cambodian camp last month, while the other three dailies ignored it and carried news of the fifth anniversary of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan on that day. The difference on Chinese news coverage is evident. Last year, for instance, only four dailies mentioned Chairman Mao's 91 birthday; one paper placed the AP story on the front page, two ran the UPI story, and a fourth one ran a quarter-page feature on Mao.

The topic that received the most attention last year was the Immigration Reform and Control Act, known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act. Legislation on immigration concerned not only the readers, but also reporters; many of them are receiving low salaries in exchange for getting their employers to help them get permanent resident status, which is the first step to acquire an American citizenship.

Keith Fung, for instance, had a master's degree in audio-visual communication. But he had to work for three years as a reporter receiving \$200 a week. After he became a permanent resident, he quit the job and started a photo developing shop. Some newspapers are suspected to have received money bringing in unqualified staff to the States.

Another common practice concerning their contents is: all dailies have three to eight pages produced in Hong Kong or Taiwan. The bigger newspapers operate by satellite, some have print-ready films done and sent over by 24-hour-express delivery, and some just clip from newspapers they received and do a paste-up job for off-set reprint. One reason for having materials sent over is economic. It saves money. Another reason is that news from Hong Kong and Taiwan appeal to the readers.

The pages from Hong Kong or Taiwan usually carry soft, life-style features and sensational stories, such as the latest gossip on movie stars in Taipei or Hong Kong, or the latest startling crime in those cities. A recent issue of a pro-Taiwan paper devoted nearly a full page to the first tattoo parlor in Taipei, complete with huge color photos of women's tattooed backs and thighs.

Serialized fiction, common to all Chinatown papers, occupies at least one-fifth of each issue. Crime, sentimental, and sex stories can run for a few hundred installments. Many readers buy the newspaper mainly to follow the serialized stories.

Loop-poon Yau, editor of The Centre Daily News, notes that a lot of the Chinese immigrants are of the middle class, with low-brow or middle-brow tastes. They differ from Chinese immigrants 30 years ago, when the overseas Chinese were either intellectuals, such as diplomats, scholars and graduate students, or uneducated seamen, waiters, and seamstress.

A common question for Chinatown newspapers is their number. New York has only three dailies for more than seven million people. Does Chinatown need nine newspapers for its 58,000 residents?

"There should be only 3 to 4 dailies," says David Mui, the manager of Sing Tao Daily. "I think within three or four years, many will be squeezed out." Arthur S. Liu, the chairman and president of The Sino Daily Express, also says, "It is abnormal to have nine papers now. But at least five will remain."

Kuang-fu Chu, the former publisher of The Peimei News, agrees: "The market is too small for nine newspapers. Five is enough: one local, one left, one right, one central, and one Hong Kong oriented."

Joan Wai, a woman journalist, does not think the number of dailies will decrease. She says, "No existing paper could take the place of others."

The most serious problem for Chinatown journalism is to build up its credibility. In the partisan dispute on China politics, papers discredit one another, resulted in having readers discrediting all. The protest of the reporters association on that snowy day was to defend the professionalism of Chinatown reporters. At least the reporters try to have an objective and fair local reporting.

But in fact, even "neutrality" is a dirty word in Chinatown. "It is impossible to be neutral; to be neutral is to be amoral," says Sam H.L. Chang, a former reporter. "We can only have independence, forget about neutrality," says Arthur S. Liu of The Sino Daily Express. Meanwhile, Professor James C. Hsung says, "There are no neutrals, only a matter of fairness."

Yet, Kuo-chi Yu of The Peimei News says, "Even to be fair is difficult, because we have to compromise. As a chief editor, I have to compromise with the boss, with reporters, with the interest of the paper. Not even a contract can guarantee it. I have to compromise as I go along."

"Chinese journalism," Professor Te-kong Tong says, "is not yet modernized. Journalists get excited easily. There are still too many personal attacks, and not enough spirit of 'legal government' and democracy. I depend on English-language papers for my news. They report quicker even on China news; the other day, a Chinese writers' association, meeting in Beijing, was reported by The New York Times first. I read Chinese papers for gossips."

Professor James C.Hsiung has the same opinion, "English-language papers are more reliable: I check with them after reading the news from Chinese newspapers."

The future of Chinatown journalism is however bright. Editors are thinking of expanding the readership. For instance, Kuo-chi Yu, the new chief editor of The Peimei News, expresses the wish to have a closer contact with American society. He intends to employ an English-speaking secretary and to have a page in English both for second-generation immigrants and Americans readers.

Arthur S. Liu of The Sino Daily Express is planning to have a weekly summary of his paper in English, "to let American politicians know the minds of their Chinese constituency."

The China Daily News has already made a feasibility study on an English edition. Andrew M.L. Kwan, the chief editor, says, "The study showed that a daily would be better than a weekly. Yet, we might first put up a weekly, then a daily after one or two years."

In the meantime, Chinatown journalists are optimistic. In a talk at Columbia University last December, Kuo-chi Yu, chief editor of The Peimei News, noted that for the last 30 years, Hong Kong had been the center of free speech for Chinese, but after the 1997 issue, by which China was to regain the sovereignty, Hong Kong newspapers would be limited in their free discussion. He said, "Gradually, Chinatown dailies are the only Chinese-language papers able to discuss Chinese politics freely."

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