

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the research problem

Today, modern communications channels have evolved into big business enterprises where they are financed by private investment and driven into public consumption (McQuail, 1994:154). In countries where printing presses were previously owned¹ and/or controlled² by the state,³

¹ 'Ownership' refers strictly to the largest or major shareholding bloc that determines the overall goals and direction of a newspaper publishing company. Borrowing Poulantzas' (1975:18-19) concept of ownership, Murdock (1982:122-123) classified ownership of media institutions into two categories -- legal ownership and economic ownership. Legal owners are shareholders who do not necessarily confer any influence or control over the company's activities and policies. Economic owners are voting shareholders who determine the composition of the executive board or board of directors. The latter are authorized to formulate policy on behalf of the mass of small investors, thus having voting power in the company's central decision making.

² 'Control' is used in four ways throughout this study depending on the context of usage. First, it refers to 'governmental control' over newspaper publishing company -- legal constraints, attempts and actions of the government to restrain, prohibit and terminate publications. Second, it means 'ownership control' or influence over newspaper publishing company by owner who determines the overall goals of the company and general ways on how to deploy its production. Third, it means the 'managerial control' over editorial policies by management including managers, executives and senior editors who determine, instruct and supervise editorial decisions in the newsroom. Fourth, it means self-control of a journalist (reporter as well as news editor), including self-regulation, self-censorship, self-restraint, self-conscious and self-discipline in news reporting, news treatment and selection of news headlines. With these four types of control, journalists and editors working with newspaper publishing companies are always under the control of the government, owners, managers and senior executives. In other words, journalists are bound by the policies set by the company and therefore have no absolute autonomy for what they do or write.

³ The definition of the 'state' throughout this study is "a relation of domination that articulates in unequal fashion the components of civil society, supporting and organizing the existing system of social domination. What makes this support

private ownership of the press⁴ that falls into the hands of a few entrepreneurs has limited the scope of state intervention. On the one hand, private control of mass communications helps the state to decentralize administration, as well as to develop and transform social structures. On the other hand, the private control of the press also initiates power struggles and creates inherent tension between the state having control over political institutions and the legitimacy, and the private sector having control over the productive and economic resources.

Suggesting media diversity as a principle of media social theory, McQuail and Van Cuilenburg (1983) regarded encroachment by the state into the regulation and control of the press as a severe threat to the press towards diversification. It was found that state intervention of press systems, whether deliberate or not, appeared to threaten the realization or continuation of a free press.

effective are certain objective manifestations of the state -- its institutions and the law." See Guillermo O'Donnell (1979:287). In the Malaysian context, the state refers to the Federal Government particularly the Cabinet given the executives' discretion over major social, economic and cultural policies. Media policies pertaining to the legitimacy, press freedom, licencing and the grant of printing permits will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

⁴ Throughout this study, 'the press' refers to newspaper publishing and printing companies in Malaysia. However, in a more general sense, the press could also encompass other types of mass media segments such as book publishing, radio and television broadcasting, sound and video recording etc., that are bound by rules and regulations of the state.

An Anglo-American libertarian, Ralph Lowenstein regarded 'government intervention' as disadvantageous to freedom of the press in a survey of world press freedom. The Press Independence and Critical Ability (PICA) survey which was completed in 1976 enlisted different levels of state intervention that have a negative impact on press freedom. These interventions include legal control of the press, government control over domestic news agencies, government or 'government party' ownership of media, government subsidies and/or bribes to press and newsmen.⁵ Robert Brown held the same view about state intervention when he denounced European subvention for opening up more opportunity for interference by the state.⁶

At the same time, it is argued that state intervention provides certain advantages to the press system via policy favouring private owners of the press. For instance, Robert Picard (1982) articulated special communication advantages of state intervention in the U.S. press system, particularly in areas of taxation, regulatory relief and subsidies. Picard found that governments in some democratic nations, including the U.S.,

⁵ For major findings of the PICA survey, see Lowenstein's "Press Freedom as a Barometer of Political Democracy" in Fischer and Merrill (eds.). 1976. *International and Intercultural Communication*. New York: Hastings House Publisher.

have successfully promoted financial stability and economic health in the press.

Despite the contradictory viewpoints regarding state intervention of press systems, the degree of state intervention is a useful indicator in the measurement of press freedom in a society. A liberal state with intention to develop its social structures would allow free private ownership and control of its press. An authoritarian state, on the other hand, would not easily relinquish its grip over the press that is often regarded as a praise-singing instrument of its policies. In both cases, the state still plays the role of legislator and policy maker, but the former eventually loses influence as a system of centralized news production and dissemination. Media critic Ben Bagdikian observed that “the more media power possessed by a media corporation, the more a government leader has reason to feel its displeasure” (Bagdikian, 1992:91).

The involvement of the private sector in press ownership is an interaction of power and capital between the state and its press. Private investors venture into press businesses mainly for two reasons: profit and

⁶ *Ibid.*

private interest.⁷ Independent press owners have a tendency to either merge into some other media-related mediums, or combine with others to form a media group. The mergers can be horizontal or vertical, depending on the original business of the media owners. Over the past few decades, successful media owners have built up large companies in the forms of consolidation,⁸ concentration,⁹ cross media chain,¹⁰ media group,¹¹ national and transnational news agency. Entrepreneurs whose businesses are not media-oriented, too, merge into media businesses to form conglomerates,¹² and to establish media corporations via political partnership.¹³ This vast

⁷ In 1986, a Wall Street acquisition expert once persuaded potential media investors to buy newspapers, magazines, broadcast stations or book publishing firms for two favourable reasons: profitability and influence (Bagdikian, 1992:11).

⁸ Consolidation refers to companies having the same level of production which combine to form a larger firm to facilitate operation. (Frederick et al., 1988:221)

⁹ Concentration refers to media companies having different stages of production in the same general line of business which combine to put different productions under the same management. *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cross media chain refers to a single company with holding across media segments, i.e., when a company owns more than one segment and forms a chain within the mass communication industry. (Compaine, 1979:3).

¹¹ Media group refers to a company owning two or more types of the same segment. For instance, when a company owns two or more newspapers, it forms a media group. *Ibid.*

¹² Conglomerate refers to a large corporation with a variety of non-media interests, or to a company with media interests branching into other fields. *Ibid.*

¹³ Political partnership refers to companies that are administratively managed by and/or financially supported by a political party.

variety of press ownership shows that it has become a major investment in production resources.

Like many other investment corporations, press institutions serve the interests of those who finance them (Altschull, 1984). State-owned press are employed by the state to educate its people, to decide the ways of seeing and thinking for the people, to mould public opinions and finally to enable the society subscribe to the state's rule and supremacy (Chang et al., 1994). On the contrary, privately owned press is believed to be able to provide the society with more diverse views, to help promote the flow of information and ideas for the betterment of a democratic society, a part from making profits for its owner(s).

Ownership of the press as a field of inquiry has attracted increasing attention in mass communication research. For the past two decades, studies in the U.S.A. have been concerned with the extensive acquisitions, takeovers and mergers by private investors into the press industry (Gomery, 1993; Bagdikian, 1992; Herman, 1985; Compaine, 1979). This aggressive and ambitious venture of private individuals into press ownership is not just a phenomenon in the U.S.A., but is also becoming a

trend in other parts of the world.¹⁴ Thus, concentration of ownership in media industry by the private sector and intervention by the state, have become two major forces that are deliberately encroaching upon press systems in advanced as well as in developing countries.

In Malaysia, private press ownership have inseparable ties with the state via the interest of political parties to invest in the press enterprises (Gomez, 1994). However, it is yet to be proven whether ownership of the press has a profound influence on the characteristics of the media production (Kasoma, 1990). It is also realized that press content cannot be entirely explained by the economy or ownership of resources because the press is a product stimulated by the existence of political, social and economic forces (McQuail, 1983:147), and a consensus originated from the history, belief and culture of the society. When content of the press is viewed as a cultural production of the society, press ownership, which determines the press content to a certain extent, deserves more attention than private ownership of other economic investments. In other words, ownership of the press is not merely a profit-oriented investment but a

¹⁴ For private ownership of the press in the United Kingdom, see Hartley et al. (eds.). (1977). For the implications of legal and political constraints on Nigerian journalists, see Onyedike (1984:91-102). For the African government's apprehension of the development of private press, see Kasoma (1990). For more details on the pervasive role of the Indian government in the field of mass media, see Chakravarty (1994).

combination of economic and cultural entrepreneurships that are usually obliged to carry out social responsibilities for the community they serve.

Aims and scope of research

This study focuses on the state-press relationship in the Malaysian context, with a particular reference to the Chinese dailies in the Peninsula. Even though the state does not legally own any of the vernacular press, different forms of control over the Malaysian press system such as legitimate constraint via media policies, ownership control via indirect political partnership, and other constraints imposed by the local governments from time to time. By drawing close ties between owners of the press and the ruling coalition of the *Barisan Nasional*¹⁵ (BN), this study attempts to show that the Chinese dailies were used by their respective owners to support the state to serve their private interests. This study also examines the impact of state intervention upon news reporting in the Chinese dailies during the 1995 Malaysian General Elections campaign process, which is an acute and critical period for the ruling coalition to rally the people's support via print and electronic media channels.

¹⁵ The *Barisan Nasional* or National Front coalition is a collaboration of the ruling political parties in Malaysia whereby all component parties agree not to contest as rival candidates in a particular constituency during the parliamentary and state elections. The chairman of *Barisan Nasional* is also the Prime Minister who leads the Cabinet.

In Malaysia where public rally is prohibited, electorates depend rather heavily on the print and electronic media for electoral information to help making voting decisions. It is therefore vital for political parties to have access to mainstream media so that they are reported uninhibitedly at all times, particularly during the election campaign period. Individual politicians who have influence over the press, too, make sure that their image is well portrayed to give a favourable impression of themselves and their political parties.

It was reported that two months before the 1995 General Elections, among the vernacular dailies in Malaysia, three Chinese dailies received warnings from the Ministry of Home Affairs either to restrain news articles that could undermine racial harmony in the country or have their printing permits revoked (*The Star*, 20/2/1995). The fear of the state that the Chinese dailies could provoke racial sentiments indicated that the Chinese dailies were more likely to provide favourable coverage of the opposition parties compared to the English, Tamil and Malay dailies.

The relatively impartial stance of the Chinese dailies in news reporting is due to four reasons. First, the Chinese dailies are targeted at the Chinese readers and not all ethnic groups. For this reason, news are sometimes skewed towards ethnic instead of national viewpoint to create a

feeling of sensation to attract the Chinese readers' attention. Second, none of the Chinese dailies falls into the direct ownership control of the prominent political parties. This has enabled the editors to have more freedom in the selection of news. Third, there had been a tendency for Chinese dailies catering to the urban Chinese to support the DAP, the only opposition party accepted or favoured by Chinese voters during the general elections in 1986 and 1990. Finally, as both the *Barisan Nasional* and the opposition parties heavily emphasized on Penang, Kelantan and Sabah where the opposition parties were more likely to offer a threat to the ruling coalition, the Chinese dailies also gave considerable coverage to Federal Territory, Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca particularly where Chinese constituted more than one-third of the total electorate.

The relationship between media and electoral process has been a field of mass communication research since 1944.¹⁶ Researchers have shown extensive interest in the media coverage of presidential elections, a topic widely studied in the area of political communication (Johnston, 1990:30). Despite knowing that it is impossible to draw a direct and clear

¹⁶ The pioneer study on the use of mass media during electoral process was a collective research by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet to study 3,000 respondents in

cut causal relationship between media agenda and the voting patterns, the role played by the media in suggesting and determining agenda for the public is not to be overlooked.

While the close relationship between media and elections suggests a determinant factor for setting the public agenda, it remains disputable to conclude that the access to media necessarily guarantees victory in the elections. Arabi Idid and Mazni (1996) found that despite the public's keen interest in obtaining political information from the media, the media was not a basis for voting decision. This is because majority of the voters had decided on candidates and party long before the election campaign began. The study also showed that the media agenda, i.e. issues brought up by the media during the election were different from issues deemed important by the public.

In Malaysia where public rallies are banned,¹⁷ media-intensive campaign becomes an alternative for candidates to rally support among the

Ohio during campaign period. Lazarsfeld et al. 1944. *The People's Choice* (3rd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁷ Licences must be obtained from the police for speakers and canvassers who wish to hold a processions, indoor *ceramah* or house to house canvassing. However, despite prohibition of political processions and public rallies by the Election Commission, it was widely known and a common practice that none of the *ceramahs* organized so far was illegal since the police had never issued any licences to any political parties. See A. Rahid A. Rahman's *The Conduct of Election in Malaysia*. 1994. Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing, p. 57.

electorate besides display of posters, printed handbills, closed door *ceramah* and canvassing from house to house permitted by the Election Commission.¹⁸ Since the duration for election campaign was only between one to two weeks, print and electronic media channels became an effective tool to reach the public in such a short period.

General elections in the past showed that there was a tendency for politicians to depend on print media, radio and television broadcasts to transmit their propaganda and other election information. Privately owned media had been widely used by the *Barisan Nasional* government as a platform for political propaganda and a strategy to rally support during election campaigns (Ramanathan and Hamdan, 1988; Tan, 1991; Arabi and Safar, 1993; Arabi, 1994). Hence, in order to help the people choose the best government, media institution should ensure that all political parties are given access and should not allow a mere reflection of the political affiliations of its owner(s).

¹⁸ Arabi Idid (1994) found that Malaysians had more confidence in election news rather than political *ceramahs*. The survey showed that 85.6 per cent of the Malays, 89.4 per cent of the Chinese and 85.5 per cent of the Indians believed in the reporting of these vernacular newspapers. However, only 57.5 per cent of the Malays, 51.3 per cent of the Chinese and 52.7 per cent of the Indians believed in the content of political seminar or *ceramahs* (Arabi Idid, 1994:52-5). This finding indicates that even in the midst of the banning of political rallies, people were not showing confidence in political gatherings held by various parties. Malaysians chose to believe what they read rather than what they witnessed, a fact which made the politician's access to mass media even more vital than obtaining permit to hold a political *ceramah*.

Ideally, a responsible press in a democracy should ensure no one with good intentions is deprived of freedom of speech and that the governing parties and their opponents in a democracy are given equal accessibility. In the Malaysian context, however, with the major national radio and television stations directly controlled by the Ministry of Information, the opposition parties are denied of equal opportunity to appear on radio and television broadcasts. These official broadcasts often give maximal coverage to the state. The more critical electorate would have to seek alternative channels that are privately owned, such as the vernacular newspapers in general and the Chinese dailies in particular.

Based on these facts and assumptions, this research sets out to study the news reporting of four prominent Chinese dailies during the 10-day election campaign period from 16 to 25 April 1995. The narrowly focused case study on the Chinese dailies is an attempt to show the role played by an alternative channel, as contrast to the mainstream media during the 1995 General Elections.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the political economy theory as a fundamental to explain the state-press relationship in Malaysia. According to Mosco (1996:24), political economy is the science of wealth as well as the intellectual description for a system of production, distribution and exchange. It is the study of the social relation, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources. This theory also looks at control processes as broadly political in that they involve the social organisation of relationships within a community.

The classical political economy was founded on two of the pillars of the Enlightenment, namely the Cartesian rationality and the Baconian empiricism (Mosco, 1996:39). Classical economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo and their followers emphasized on the individual as the primary unit of analysis and the market as the principal structure. The classical theory also rejected strong state support in merchandising and economic institutions.

Overtime, modern economists progressively transformed political economy theory into the science of economics, eliminating the classical concerns for history, the social whole and totality, social change, moral philosophy and social praxis. On the other hand, the Marxian interpretation of the relationship between economics and politics centres

on the idea of material interests and how they define political agendas within a civil society (Caporaso and Levine, 1992:57). The Marxian theory of political economy examines how interests arise within the structure of production. The moral dimension remains strong in Marxian political economy because it provides a strong defence of democracy, equality and the public sphere in the face of powerful private investors (Mosco, 1996:36).

Political economists of today focus on the critical aspect of this theory based on a Marxian framework. They take into consideration the wider environment of social, political and economic practices, while suggesting the exploitation of material resources as the primary means of overcoming class exploitation. The critical political economy theory criticizes mass cultural production and marketing based on a wide range of humanistic values. For instance, the critical political economy theory argues that the state is not only a regulatory of media institutions, but is also a communicator of enormous power. How this power is exercised remains crucial for the study of critical political economy of culture.

While classical political economists' concern is to minimise public intervention and to give market forces given the widest possible freedom of operation, critical political economists focus on the distortions and inequalities of market systems and argue that these deficiencies can only be rectified by public intervention.

Having discussed the development of theories from classical to critical political economy, this study will now examine the latter within the domain of mass communications. The critical political economy of communications looks into the interplay between the public intervention and economic dimensions of mass communications, focusing on the unequal command over material resources and the consequences of such inequality in the society.

The fundamental framework of this study is the critical political economy media theory by Murdock and Golding (1977, 1991). Based on the Frankfurt School tradition and the work of Raymond Williams, this theory carefully examines the integration of media institutions, mainly business and state policy authorities, within the wider capitalist economy context as compared with the Marxian political economy. The theory is also in defence of public intervention to a certain extent, by means of not opposing, but critically examining the effects of liberalisation, commercialisation and privatisation of media institutions.

This theory uses both holistic and historical perspectives to examine the balance between private enterprise and public intervention in the media industries. The method is holistic because it examines the interplay between economic organisation and political, social and cultural life of members in the society. The development of political theory shows a strong commitment to historical analysis, by taking into consideration

the four processes in the development of mass media – the growth of the media, the extension of corporate reach, commodification, and the changing role of state and government intervention (Golding and Murdock, 1991:19).

The domain of this theory lies in its critical analysis concerning the balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention, which determines the people's freedom to know, and the kind of information they have access to. More importantly, Golding and Murdock noted that this theory "goes beyond technical issues of efficiency to engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good" (1991:17-18).

Given the rapid emergence of multimedia conglomerates, the critical political economy media theory is concerned with the ownership pattern of media institutions and the consequences of this pattern for control over micro contexts including the activities and content of these institutions. It also goes beyond such control to show how particular micro contexts are shaped by macro contexts such as general economic dynamics and the wider structures they sustain.

The critical political economy theorists are aware of the pitfalls of two approaches, namely instrumental and structural approach (Golding and Murdock, 1991:18). Instrumentalists view the privately-owned media as instruments of class domination, overlooking the fact that key political personnel, advertisers and even owners are not free to do as they wish at

all times because media are not instruments without constraints of the public intervention and market forces.

On the contrary, structuralists tend to over emphasize the relationship between the outcome and the economic structure of media organisations, overlooking the process of how meaning is constructed through concrete activities of producers and consumers from time to time. This approach simplifies the media production processes, which are often complicated and interdependent between the producers and the consumers.

It is understandable that the critical political economy media theory tries to keep away from the weaknesses of both the instrumentalist and structuralist approaches, to give a broader view and better representation to enhance its theoretical development process. On the other hand, it is also undeniable that analyses using such approaches have come a long way to provide theoretical inspiration and empirical evidence to the development of the theory, whereby strong arguments using the two approaches cannot be ignored. For example, research by instrumentalists showed that the powerful capitalists manipulated propaganda news media of the U.S.A in order to determine the content of news flow and to manage public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns (Herman and Chomski, 1988).

The answer as to how news content or media output comes into being as it is, remains complex under both macro and micro contexts

within which media organisations function. Besides the macro context such as socio-political, cultural and economic factors, there are many other variables in the production process that may have control over the news content or the activities of media organisations. The interplay of such factors are such as ownership patterns, management policies, size and structure of organisation, technical and financial constraints, editorial decisions, political ideologies of journalists, legal restrictions, target readers and their preferences, corporate image, competitive market operations and locality of the media.

Besides, a media organisation is also dependent on other parties such as the government, advertisers, sources of news, pressure groups and readers to shape or influence the outcome of media productions. Nonetheless, the interactions of the many variables may not be realised by the media practitioners.

With this perplexity in mind, this study intends to apply the structuralist approach to examine the macro contexts of the local media organisations in general and Chinese dailies in particular. Hence, this study will take into consideration the wider environment of political, economic, social and cultural practices in Malaysia. By taking a structuralist's viewpoint, this study seeks to relate the outcome of news production to the macro context of media organisations. Given the limitations of content analysis, the analysis of news production in this

study will inevitably overlook the micro contexts of news production processes in the newsroom where crucial editorial decisions are made and where consensus of ideological philosophy of journalists are formed or developed. This study is likely to overlook the power struggle between the managers, editors and journalists throughout the production processes. This is because to examine the power struggle in the newsroom would mean a distraction from the original objectives of this study. Moreover, the micro contexts of newsroom politics can only be examined using other research methodologies such as participant observation and interview survey.

Nevertheless, in order to complement the methodology of content analysis, whenever appropriate and possible, personal interviews with the editors of the Chinese dailies will be carried out. Such interviews are expected to give an insider's view of how editorial decisions are made, whether or not potential abuses of owner power exist either by intervening directly, or by having considerable indirect power over the style and trend of news reporting.

On the other hand, this study also view editors and journalists as working within a range of codes and professional ideologies with their own social and personal aspirations are autonomous within a certain limit. The limit is determined by the degree of owners using their economic power to ensure that the content is consonant with their political and

economic interests. The barriers or limits in the freedom to publish vary from the owners' interests, the state's regulatory constraints, editorial policies, readers' preferences as well as the professional standard of the journalists. To what extent the economic structure of the Chinese dailies prevents some forms of expression during the 1995 General Elections remains the major interest of this study.

Literature Review

There are substantial research on local state-press or government-media relationship and reviews on the Malaysian general elections. Among various fields which have contributed to the further understanding of this study are politics and business (Gomez, 1994, 1993, 1991; Ong, 1991), political power and media control (Rais, 1995; Safar, 1996; Karthigesu, 1987; Yap, 1995), news reporting in the vernacular newspapers (Khor, 1992; Arabi, 1994), the role of media in Malaysian general elections (Arabi and Safar, 1993), the inaccessibility of opposition parties to media (Chang, 1995; Tan, 1991).

As the Malaysian government allows the local political parties to own and control media organizations, the close relationship between political parties and media organizations has initiated interest among researchers pertaining to the structural control by the government via legal

constraints and ownership. In some of the research, Chinese dailies were merely a subject of comparison in relation to newspapers of other languages and not the main subject of study. It is hoped that this study will contribute to an in depth understanding of how Chinese dailies are restrained and controlled in terms of news reporting by the government and their respective owners.

Terence Gomez (1994) has been concerned with the intervention of prominent political parties in controlling productive resources of the country via corporate investment. In his book entitled *Political Business: Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties*, Gomez noted that the involvement of the ruling coalition in the corporate sector had further strengthened its already powerful control over local print and electronic media. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the dominant Malay political party in the ruling *Barisan Nasional* government was seen as an aggressive actor into the media business to seek political influences.

In his research, Gomez pointed out that the major privately owned media organisations are under the direct control of Fleet Holdings, a flagship company. One example of such media organisations was The New Straits Times Press Bhd (NSTP), the largest newspaper chain which published five dailies and three weeklies in three vernacular languages and Utusan Melayu Press, an influential Malay newspaper publishing

company. Owners, directors and executives at the highest level in these press are either strong supporters of UMNO, or have close business ties with UMNO. Besides, UMNO also controls the Malaysia's first privatised television network, Sistem Television (Malaysia) Bhd and a Chinese newspaper publishing company, Nanyang Siang Pau Press Bhd via interlocking stock ownership.

Gomez in two other articles entitled "UMNO's Attempts to Corner Financial Sector" (1991) and "Anwar's Men Gain Media Control" (1993) analyzed how the Malay political elite in UMNO managed to gain both print and electronic media control through corporate investment of the political party in media businesses. He studied UMNO's direct and indirect control over local media organizations via its influential holding company, Renong Bhd. In the first article, Gomez was concerned with the emergence of major political parties into the corporate sector, which had helped the parties to siege power in politics and in business. In the second article, Gomez also found that the vast control of UMNO over the mainstream print and electronic media which took place in the late 1980s by Razaleigh Hamzah and Daim Zainuddin, has been further enhanced by Anwar Ibrahim in the early 1990s to maintain his power as the vice president in the dominant Malay party.

Ong Lay Choo (1991) in her B.A. academic exercise entitled "Politics and Business: Three Case Studies in the Chinese Corporate Community" drew significant ties between the dominant executive power and capital accumulation among the Chinese capitalists. With reference to the three Chinese corporations, Ong found that the government's participation in the nation's economy has enhanced more capital accumulation among the Bumiputeras (the indigenous people particularly the Malays) and foreign investors, compared to the local Chinese capitalists due to the political pressure from the Malay bureaucrats. As a result, Chinese capitalists have to turn to these bureaucrats for economic protection and security. Large companies seek protection by appointing Malay bureaucrats as company directors, while small companies by selecting Malays as business partners who are non-genuine or merely based on self-interest. This strategy is commonly known as the 'Ali-Baba' partnership. Ong concluded that the New Economic Policy (NEP) has caused a number of opportunistic Chinese capitalists to manifest political power to support their effort of capital accumulation. This study provides the rationale why many Chinese entrepreneurs, including media owners, are keen on maintaining business ties and personal relationship with the Malay political elite.

From a legislative point of view, Rais Yatim (1995) in his book entitled *Freedom Under Executive Power in Malaysia* mentioned that the executive in power can take a substantial portion of power to rule, "but it cannot take away all rights to voice an opinion that may not go well with those in power" (Rais, 1995:399). He attributed the governmental control over judiciary as well as press freedom to arbitrary executive power exercised by the ruling political parties. For instance, giving the Home Minister the power to act chiefly under the Printing Presses and Publications Act and Internal Security Act instills in the people the fear of executive reprisal. In the long run, this would obstruct the people to act freely in the importance of civil liberties. Rais, too, regarded media ownership as a major form of control over local media organizations.

Mohd Safar (1996) in *Akbar dan Kuasa: Perkembangan Sistem Akbar di Malaysia sejak 1806* (*The Press and Power: Development of the Malaysian Press System since 1806*) noted that most of the mainstream vernacular newspapers are closely related to political parties in power. For instance, UMNO owns *Utusan Malaysia*, *The News Straits Times* and *Berita Harian*; MCA owns *The Star*, and MIC owns *Tamil Nesan*. As the *Barisan Nasional* government has not changed since Independence, the ruling coalition and its successor still maintains this political partnership. However, it is noticed that Chinese dailies and other alternative (non-

mainstream) newspapers are owned by businessmen or groups that do not necessarily support the ruling party (Mohd Safar, 1996:241). This shows that the Chinese dailies have a relatively more 'independent' stance compared with other Malay and English language dailies. However, this statement was not explicitly made in Safar's book that focused on the developmental role played by the Malaysian newspapers since 1806.

Karthigesu R. (1987) in "Commercial Competition to Government Monopoly in Television: Implications of the Malaysian Experience" attempted to show that the Malaysian government allowed the establishment of a private broadcasting company, i.e. TV3, not on the principle of liberalisation of the broadcasting media at home, but with the intention of making TV3 a successfully commercialised and profitable electronic entertainment medium. This view has critically shown that by allowing private media ownership to compete in a free market, not only can the government claim credit of its liberalization but it is also capable of keeping a privately owned media organization under its legislative, economic and political control.

In an article entitled "Mass Media and Politics", Yap Swee Seng (1995) referred to the liberal-pluralist's viewpoint of the mass media as the powerful "fourth estate" and argued that it failed to explain the role of media in the Malaysian context. As the governmental control over

newspapers is not explicit but via political partnership and privately owned companies, it gives the impression that the state intervention is indirect and thus less controversial. Most Malaysians are ignorant about media ownership by the government for two reasons. First, media ownership is often seen as a business practice and not a form of political control. Second, the rather complicated structures of media ownership manage to keep the owners unseen.

In Khor Yoke Lim's (1991) study of vernacular newspapers, she provided a comparative study of news content published in the Malay and Chinese dailies. In her dissertation entitled "Ethnic Relations and the Press: A Comparative Analysis of News Treatment in the Malay and Chinese Newspapers", Khor provided much evidence to substantiate her argument that local current issues were often skewed towards the interest of a specific ethnic group by the vernacular newspapers in line with their effort to perpetuate ethnic identities. Through a comprehensive analysis of the Malay and Chinese newspapers on various ethnic-oriented issues, Khor noted that vernacular newspapers were fully aware of the dominant view of the state, i.e. the Malay elite in UMNO. This study also showed significant preference of news coverage in the Malay and Chinese newspapers. It was found that the content of these newspapers was

basically communal in nature as they cater to the needs of targeted readers who were homogenous in the context of ethnicity .

Writings on Malaysian general elections are numerous in number, but only few are concerned with the role of media in the previous general elections. Arabi Idid (1994) applied the agenda-setting approach to examine the functional role of vernacular newspapers during the 1990 general elections. Agenda setting was used to show how people possess a set of issues deemed important to them personally and important to the community or the state within a given duration.

The theory of agenda setting attempts to prove the functional role of mass media in highlighting issues that are often discussed by the public as public agenda. It also shows that the mass media is capable of setting the public agenda despite the audience's defensiveness and awareness of media penetration. In his study, Arabi Idid provided evidence that although the media had attempted to publish issues deemed interesting to the public, the media that favoured the ruling coalition had not succeeded on setting the public agenda. The media had failed in directing discussion among all Malaysians during the election campaign. In short, the Malaysian media are capable of determining the media agenda but not the public agenda.

This manipulation of media by the Malaysian government particularly during election campaigns was also a cause of alarm for the opposition parties. The inaccessibility of the media for opposition parties has been closely linked to the defeat of the opposition parties in the 1995 General Elections. In an article written in Mandarin entitled "The Re-interpretation of the Powerful Journalists", Chang Teck Peng (1995) is concerned about the problem of democratization of mass media in Malaysia because all media were owned by either the government, entrepreneurs or large corporations. The democratization of mass media, according to Chang, should be examined by looking at two aspects: the people's freedom to obtain media ownership and the people's access to the media to express their thoughts and opinion. He drew the linkage between media owners and UMNO controlled companies, which clearly showed that there was a lack of freedom of ownership among the people. Except for those who have close ties with prominent politicians in UMNO, it appeared unlikely for someone with mere economic interests to be the major shareholders of the major print and electronic media channels.

During the 1995 General Elections, Chang observed that none of the opposition parties had access to the mass media during the election campaign. This scenario was mistakenly interpreted by most people as 'the opposition parties were lacking issues' in the entire electoral process. On

the other hand, the people were bombarded with manifesto and propaganda of the *Barisan Nasional* and its candidates. Chang concluded that journalists who worked for these large corporations had no power in determining public opinion, as the freedom to own and access to use the media were both in the hands of a few corporations controlled by the ruling political parties.

Tan Chee Beng (1991) in an article "Resorting to Ethnic Games (Again)" gave a review of how the media were manipulated by the government to instill fear in voters of different religions and ethnicity throughout the 1990 General Election. Issues often regarded as sensitive among the Malay and Chinese, for instance the experience of the May 13 riot in 1969, were brought up openly in public by UMNO prominent political leaders including the Prime Minister. Advertisements portraying violence related to the racial riot were published in vernacular newspapers in different versions, attempted to threaten the people and remind them of 'instability and another May 13' if they were to support the opposition parties.

Tan also observed that to ensure success of the ruling political parties, the immoral use of ethnical and religious issues in the mass media was most effective and convenient through the distortion of reality. The victimization of Tengku Razaleigh, the President of Semangat 46, who

was shown wearing a Kadazan headgear with cultural symbol resembling a 'Christian cross', had proven to be successful in creating insecurity and diversity among the Malays. He claimed that irresponsible politicians had caused the emergence of ethnic tensions in Malaysia, and that mass media controlled by the ruling political parties had provided a means to stir up communal feelings among different ethnic groups.

In an article entitled "Contempt for the Mind", Kua Kia Soong (1990a) described the excessive media control by the dominant political party as "crude and transparent". He argued that even a public broadcasting network as Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) had been manipulated to serve the private interests of political parties in power. On the other hand, the opposition parties were denied access to the media "owned by the *Barisan Nasional*". As a result, the treatment of news and features in the English- and Malay-language newspapers was distorted by means of news leads and language used in headlines. The opposition's proclaimed denial to access to the media was protested by the opposition parties in the 1995 General Elections. The Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Islam Se-Malaya (PAS) and Parti Melayu Semangat 46 (S46) leaders showed their dissatisfaction by burning an English newspaper and boycotting journalists sent by a privately owned but UMNO-controlled television station, TV3.

In another article entitled “The Media Communalises”, Kua (1990b) has further supported his argument by analyzing headlines of several local newspapers which appealed to (Malay) chauvinism. In that analysis, he concluded that those papers had failed to carry out their social responsibility, by openly practising ethical double standards by “upholding the dignity and integrity of one ethnic group”, whereas in a multi-ethnic society, newspapers should promote harmonious relations among ethnic groups. Kua's analysis only focused on English and Malay language newspapers, which failed to provide an overall notion about headlines in Chinese and Tamil newspapers. Furthermore, his analysis of headlines was not quantitative but appeared to be selective, which led to a rather biased conclusion.

John Lent (1978) who has written numerous articles about media control in Asian countries noted that legal acts of Malaysia had pressurized publishers in at least two ways: firstly to secure a licence to use a printing press, and secondly to obtain a permit to publish newspapers. Under strict regulations, local newspapers were compelled to publish large portions of developmental information, to the extent that they became “unofficial spokesmen” for the government. This phenomenon had not changed even after the government implemented localization policies in the 1960s and 1970s.

In "Malaysia's Guide Media", Lent (1974) commented the control of Malaysian government over the printing press was so significant that the Ministry of Information "has the power to direct, to insert a denial or correction written on the minister's terms, if he feels a statement is false". Since the government needed no reason for revocation of permits under the Printing Presses Act, the withdrawal of a printing permit by the Ministry of Home Affairs became the greatest threat to publishers. Investigative journalists were restricted by stiff regulations for fear of causing trouble to themselves as well as the publishers.

Chu Chee Chuan (1994) was concerned with the role of Chinese dailies since 1940 and the challenges ahead in the Chinese newspaper industry. The compilation of Chu's column articles in *Nanyang Siang Pau* was entitled *Chinese Newspapers in Fifty Years: The Development of Malaysian Chinese Newspapers*. In his book, Chu noted that although Chinese dailies began to corporatize in the 1960s, there had not been much advancement in terms of employees' benefits. This was due to the exploitative attitude of some owners who ran the newspaper business in a conventional way. Chu observed that journalists with the same qualifications who worked for Chinese dailies were underpaid compared to those employed by English or Malay dailies. Owners of Chinese dailies seldom offered training programmes to the staff for professional

improvement. As a result, employment opportunities in Chinese dailies became comparatively less attractive and this had in turn led to lowering the average academic qualifications of their journalists.

In short, research on local media organisations shows that the state intervenes in the local press system by means of legal constraint and ownership control. Nonetheless, the fact that media owners exert control to safeguard their self-interest in business and to use the newspaper as a tool to show support for the ruling political parties has been neglected. It is therefore the objectives of this research to draw the linkage between the state, the political parties and the owners of the press to show how this relationship has affected news judgement and content of the selected Chinese dailies.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is the content analysis of newspapers. The conventional quantitative analysis is applied to compare, among others, the headlines, size of coverage, and the significance of news treatment among different dailies. Frequency of news items and the amount of square centimeters are carefully measured and classified.

Besides quantitative analysis, this study uses the qualitative method to illustrate major themes highlighted in the Chinese dailies as media agenda during the election campaign period. Interviews with journalists, including editors and reporters, are used to complement and to confirm or reject the initial findings of the content analysis. As different issues and problems arose in the news reporting of each daily, open-ended questions were asked during the interviews, whereby probing was essential in order to obtain an insider's view pertaining to the textual analysis.

The underlying assumption in this study is that the Chinese dailies play a functional role in deciding the media agenda. This is skillfully done by 'emphasizing certain issues and de-emphasizing others, by pursuing some subjects relentlessly and quickly abandoning others' (Bagdikian, 1985). Events that are de-emphasized or deemed unimportant by editors will remain unpublished in the newsroom, and hence, unknown to the readers. Editors as gatekeepers decide for their readers what is newsworthy

and what is not. They are solely responsible for editorial decision, since none of the foreign news agencies is involved in the provision of national news on the Malaysian general elections.

During the 1995 General Elections, there were six Chinese dailies published in the Peninsula: *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *China Press*, *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, *Shin Min Daily News* and *Guang Ming Daily News*. The owners of these dailies are listed in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 - Chinese Dailies Published during the 1995 General Elections

Newspaper	Operating Company	Holding Company ¹⁹
<i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i>	Pemandangan Sinar Sdn Bhd	Rimbunan Hijau Sdn Bhd
<i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i>	Nanyang Press (M) Sdn Bhd	Nanyang Press (M) Bhd
<i>China Press</i>	China Press Bhd	Nanyang Press (M) Bhd
<i>Shin Min Daily News</i>	Shin Min Publishing (M) Sdn Bhd	The New Strait Times Press
<i>Kwong Wah Yit Poh</i>	Kwong Wah Yit Poh Press Bhd	--
<i>Guang Ming Daily News</i>	Guang-Ming Ribao Sdn Bhd	Rimbunan Hijau Sdn Bhd

Source: "Media Update", Petaling Jaya: Audit Bureau of Circulation, 24 September 1994.

¹⁹ Except for *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, which is a regional newspaper in the northern states of the Peninsula, the other five newspapers are subsidiaries of companies that have ventured into the business of publishing Chinese dailies from other businesses.

The criteria for selection of Chinese dailies in this study are as follows. First, newspapers selected must be owned by different interest groups to show a comparison. Second, a daily with a bigger circulation is preferred for its relatively larger group of targeted readers. Hence, when a group or a company owns more than one daily, the criterion for selection is the daily which has the bigger circulation as it reaches out to more readers and therefore more influential than one which has a small circulation. Third, with regard to the election period, a mainstream daily with an established reputation for accurate news reporting is preferred to a tabloid newspaper. This is based on the fact that between the two, the mainstream daily is usually more reliable, accurate and responsible in news reporting. It is often taken more seriously by the readers and thus more likely to have an impact on their voting behaviour. However, the relationship between the reportage and voting behaviour remains unexamined throughout this research in order not to divert the focus of studying the state-press relationship.

Table 1.2 - Audited Circulation Figures of Chinese Dailies in the Peninsula

Newspaper	1992	1993	1994	1995
<i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i>	154,596	148,372	208,291	215,036
<i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i>	184,267	182,926	191,002	189,280
<i>China Press</i>	97,857	111,242	129,672	143,543
<i>Kwong Wah Yit Poh & Pen Sin Poe</i>	65,964	69,089	68,130	67,331
<i>Shin Min Daily News</i>	35,733	35,090	n.a	n.a.
<i>Guang Ming Daily News</i>	n.a	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source:

1. *Media Guide 1997*. WhiteKnight Communications. 1997:54.
 2. "Audited Circulation Figures". Audit Bureau of Circulation. 1994:5.
- n.a: not available.

Based on the above mentioned criteria, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Nanyang Siang Pau* are selected for their first and second ranking in circulation. *Guang Ming Daily News* and *China Press* are excluded in the analysis because they share the same owners as *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*. Two other dailies, *Shin Min Daily News* and *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* are included in this study because the owners of these dailies are independent variables which are expected to cause difference in news content.

The content analysis in this chapter attempts to show how the four Chinese dailies owned by different groups portrayed the image of the opposition during the election campaign period from 16 to 25 April 1995 General Election. This section also analyses the trend of reporting of each daily according to frequency, size and theme published in four Chinese dailies: *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (SCJP), *Nanyang Siang Pau* (NYSP), *Shin Min Daily News* (SMDN) and *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* (KWYP).

Since the Chinese dailies catered exclusively to Chinese readers, issues highlighted in these dailies would be quite different from those in newspapers of other languages. Editors of the dailies preferred news of interest of the Chinese community to the general interest of other Malaysians. Therefore in the later discussion, it should be reminded that 'issues' strictly refer to news highlighted by the Chinese dailies which might not be the same as issues highlighted in other language newspapers.

In the content analysis of Chinese dailies, election news, editorials, special reports, news releases, statistical data, election information, analysis and speculation were converted to tab, recorded and classified. Only news and reports pertaining to the 1995 General Election were selected and categorized. In the case of special reports, analyses and editorials, the stance taken by the writer or reporter determined which category an article should fall into.

Election news and articles are classified into five categories:

1. News *favourable* to the *Barisan Nasional* coalition (thereafter referred to as BN-F) constitute news and reports regarding the BN's manifesto and liberal policies, Vision 2020, development programmes, political stability, economic achievements, social harmony, cooperation among BN component parties, profiles of candidates, promises and allocation for BN constituencies, optimistic predictions on BN's victory, public endorsement for BN leadership, statements that urge for the people's support, press conferences, special announcements and news using the BN leaders' statements as headlines.
2. News *unfavourable* to the *Barisan Nasional* Coalition (thereafter referred to as BN-U) consist of news such as the BN members being expelled, UMNO members being warned not to help the opposition in campaigns, factionalism within UMNO, bribes offered by BN to opposition members, misuse of executive power and alleged accusations towards the Prime Minister for threatening opposition leaders.
3. News *favourable* to the Opposition Parties (thereafter referred to as OP-F) consist of the opposition parties' manifesto and political seminars, their political struggles, future prospects, development plans,

efforts to push for changes, clarifications on distorted reports and candidates' profiles and party's action in protest to news distortion.

4. News *unfavourable* to the Opposition Parties (thereafter referred to as OP-U) consist of accusations and statements that reflect or cast the opposition in a negative way. For example, news about opposition parties involving in raising racial sentiments, challenging the police, being extreme and violent, casing factionalism within and among opposition parties, badly organized campaign strategies, suppressing press freedom, assaults on journalists, pessimistic predictions about the opposition's performance, poor economic advancement in Kelantan, the image of Semangat 46 as fighting for the rights of the Malays (a communal approach which was perceived as unfavorable among the Chinese electorate).
5. News categorized as *neutral* (thereafter referred to as N) consist of reports potential to imply judgements or opinions, but appeared non partisan or neutral. These reports are usually in the forms of editorials, special reports, reviews, statistical analyses, commentaries and letters to editor. News and articles deemed neutral often carry both sides of a story, or written in a non-partisan or a non-persuasive manner.

Besides the above categories, there are news deemed *not applicable* in the worksheets that do not imply judgement or opinion.

These are reports regarding official data, statistical figures, police's responsibilities, announcement of the Election Commission, procedures and rules regarding the election, public information and activities of the public during the election campaign. As this category is not significant in defining the political affiliation or apolitical stance of a daily via content analysis, it is therefore excluded in the later discussion. Only five other categories, namely BN-F, BN-U, OP-F, OP-U and N make up 100 per cent for the total news and articles.

The strength of content analysis lies in three qualities -- systematic, objective and quantitative.²⁰ First, uniformity is vital in the coding and analysis procedure where only one set of guidelines is used throughout the research. In this particular study, uniformity is assured when there is only one coder, i.e. the researcher involved in the entire coding procedure. Second, personal biases and partisanship of the researcher must be consciously checked and ratified at all time. Based on the systematic and objective approach, a quantitative analysis is carried out where election news are counted and classified into date, content and issues. A qualitative study is conducted to supplement the quantitative findings by analyzing

²⁰ Roger Wimmer and Joseph Dominick. 1991. *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*. (3rd ed.) California: Wadsworth Publishing Company. p. 157-8.

five important issues highlighted by the Chinese dailies during the 1995 General Elections.

The significance of this study lies in the different ownership of the dailies. Chinese dailies that are owned by different owners will be analyzed using the method of content analysis to show the significance of ownership and control in news reporting. -- *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *Shin Min Daily News* and *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*. Given the same social circumstances, the variance in news reporting, if any, in four Chinese dailies, should be attributed to the difference in owners and their intervention in editorial policies.

The drawbacks of using content analysis in the study of state-press relationship are as follows. First, newspapers have a long-term cumulative effect on their readers, an effect that is often difficult to prove without studying it at length. It is therefore inadequate to newspaper content for a short duration, i.e. the ten-day election campaign period. Second, principal impacts of ownership control over content of dailies are not easily studied and measured. Editors at the executive level are usually pro-establishment and they often denied that owners did exert direct control over editorial policies. Hence, content analysis is but one of the many ways to explain the complex linkage between the state-press and ownership-content relationships.

Third, findings based on content analysis during election campaign are not applicable to non-electoral periods. Fourth, this analysis only examines what was published in the newspapers and ignores what the readers deemed more important. In other words, this study gives priority to the media agenda and not the public agenda, even though the latter would have had greater impact on the formation of public opinions. Fifth, the impact of election news on the formation of public opinions and voting patterns of the electorate is predicted but not empirically proven in this study.

This study is divided into six chapters that focus on the subject matter, i.e., the Chinese dailies in the context of Malaysian politics. The following chapters also relate the Malaysian press system to state intervention, ownership and control, and their effects on news reporting during the 1995 General Elections.

Chapter Two examines the press system of Malaysia since Independence in a political scenario which is Malay-dominated, or UMNO-dominated. The Malaysian printing presses have little autonomy to publish freely due to the political partnership of the *Barisan Nasional*. It is argued that even privately owned media are political and partisan in nature because of their close ties with the state and the *Barisan Nasional* government.

Chapter Three pays attention to the history of early Chinese dailies in Malaya since 1881. The history of Chinese dailies shows that politically motivated owners exerted their influence upon editorial decisions by selecting personnel whom they trusted to be editors. This chapter also provides evidence for partisan stance taken by owners who were keen on using the Chinese dailies to disseminate their political beliefs.

Chapter Four reviews the state intervention of the Malaysian government on the printing presses. This chapter attempts to show the many laws that restrict investigative reporting and its implications on press freedom in Malaysia.

Chapter Five illustrates the use of the press during elections, major issues highlighted by the Chinese dailies and the political affiliation of each daily judging from the ten-day election news content. Classification of headline and its translation in English is in Appendices A, B, C, D and E to give a detailed account on the political affiliation of Chinese dailies in the 1995 General Elections.

Chapter Six discusses findings in the previous chapters and draws conclusion on the state-press relationship in Malaysia.

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