

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study is to examine the impact of ownership and other forms of control on the news content of the Chinese dailies in the 1995 General Elections. It is hypothesized that owners of these Chinese dailies exert control over editorial policies to endorse the *Barisan Nasional*, the ruling coalition that controls most of the economic resources in the country. Content analysis of Chinese dailies based on news headline, frequency, size and partisanship, as shown and discussed in the previous chapter, provides statistical evidence for the hypothesis. Findings of the analysis are summarized as follows:

1. Newspaper ownership is a determinative factor for news content. It is found that owners of the Chinese dailies do not necessarily have an executive function in the actual management or day-to-day operations. Nonetheless, owners do retain their control over the major policies and the overall goals as they are determined by their respective board of directors. On the other hand, when a daily's owner is directly involved in the day-to-day operation of the press, he inevitably exerts more deliberate control over editorial policies.
2. Due to the expanding concentration and conglomeration of their holding companies, printing presses have become increasingly interlaced with the political parties in power. At present, many owners

of the Malaysian printing presses, as shown in this study, have established close business ties to UMNO, the dominant party in the government.

3. The Malaysian state-press relationship is a conformity where the state is in a higher position to exercise control via political pressure and legal constraints. In times of elections, the Chinese dailies and other Malaysian press often conform to the state. This is due to media regulations which gives the Minister of Home Affairs the absolute discretion to decide whether a publication should be continued, by granting or rejecting their application for printing permits on a yearly basis. These legal and governmental constraints imposed by the state, particularly the state's unchallenged decision on publishing licences and printing permits, substantiate the belief that the Malaysian press does not have equal power but is instead subservient to the state.
4. Journalists of Chinese dailies practise self-restraint and self-censorship due to stringent press laws, intervention of the Ministry of Home Affairs, ownership control, managerial intervention in the newsroom, stiff competition among Chinese dailies and the preferences of their target readers.

At first, the hypothesis of this study may seem a little disputable because the findings from the content analysis during the ten-day election campaign show that all four Chinese dailies supported the *Barisan*

Nasional, despite their variation in ownership. In view of this, looking from a structuralist's point of view, the findings of this study show that it is the overall structure and system of the communications industry, rather than the individual journalist or owner, that has the discretionary power to decide the stance of the Chinese dailies. Given stringent rules and regulations implied on the Malaysian press, it is only natural that Chinese dailies struggled to strike the balance between "the right to know" of the people, and "the right to exert control" of the state. As such, the significance of both ownership and control, as in the hypothesis, is defended and justified in three ways:

1. It is found that among four Chinese dailies, the NSTP-owned and UMNO-affiliated *Shin Min Daily News* provided the highest percentage of news favourable to the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (53 per cent) and the highest percentage of news unfavourable to the Opposition Parties (19 per cent).
2. A daily not associated with any political party and that proclaims to be a cultural institution, *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, provided a near similar percentage of news favourable to the *Barisan Nasional* (52 per cent) and news unfavourable to the Opposition Parties (16 per cent). One of the underlying reasons for this overwhelming support could be the owner's direct participation in the selection of news, as the managing director of this daily is also the editor-in-chief. This shows that direct

encroachment of owner (director) over editorial policies has an impact on the news content, even when the printing press is not associated with any political parties in business.

3. The considerable percentage of news supporting the *Barisan Nasional* in *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (34 per cent) and *Nanyang Siang Pau* (33 per cent) shows that these dailies are more independent and enjoy more autonomy from owners of their holding companies who have interests in non media-related businesses. It is also observed that these dailies tend to be informative but not investigative for fear of raising issues problematic to their employing organizations.

The state control over the local Malaysian press gives rise to concerns as to what and how information is transmitted, by whom and in whose interests. These concerns are integrally connected with questions of freedom of speech, value of democracy and professional ethics in journalism. This study attempts to show that the control of the state over the Chinese dailies is not limited to legal constraints and governmental policies, but is increasingly and dangerously ingrained in the mentality of their owners, editors and journalists. In other words, it has become an ideological illusion for those attached to the printing presses that they should either show political affiliation towards the state, or give precedence to the executive power of the state to safeguard the personal interests of their employers. As such, press freedom is suppressed by the

state via self-regulation of the journalists, instead of direct and deliberate state intervention.

In Malaysia, the state intervention on the local printing presses via political partnership has been significant since 1972, when UMNO succeeded in localizing *Utusan Melayu* and *The Straits Times* from foreign shareholders. When the localized *New Straits Times Press* (NSTP) and other printing presses opted to be publicly listed in order to accumulate capital to attain corporatisation, the nature of these publicly owned press institutions provided greater opportunity ever for the political parties' to participate in the acquisitions and mergers of press groups and companies in the media industry. UMNO became the largest shareholder after a reverse takeover of NSTP by Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB). By placing an affiliate in the press, UMNO can ensure favourable news to be published and unfavourable ones to be censored in the newsroom.

In the meantime, prominent politicians who seek influence via control of the printing presses are certainly aware of the impact of the disseminated information. The former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim admittedly placed his affiliates and supporters in the top management of NSTP, the largest media group in Malaysia. This also explains why after the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim was sacked by the Prime Minister, his affiliates including the editor-in-chief of

Bertia Harian – the most popular Malay language newspaper – were fired by the top management of NSTP. The Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad who controls the mainstream local media organisations is unlikely to loose his grip on them as long as he is in power. Hence, it is not surprising that newspapers published by the UMNO-controlled media group notably support the *Barisan Nasional* due to such direct and indirect political partnerships.

On the whole, this study shows that the Chinese dailies generally endorsed the ruling coalition despite the fact that they were owned by individual Chinese entrepreneurs or Chinese social groups. News content in this study shows little incidence of direct government intervention and direct ownership control, but the privately-owned Chinese dailies are not free from indirect interference such as legitimacy control, ideological constraint and self-restraint. In other words, the structure of the Malaysian media that restrict free flow of information, has greatly affected the relative degree of press freedom in the country.

It is believed that future takeovers, acquisitions and mergers by corporations that are not media-related into the printing presses will have an even more apparent impact on the performance of the press. Although this will be advantageous to the press in terms of improvement in hardware equipment, better achievement in advertising revenue and more efficient management. On the contrary, there will be disadvantages such as

discontinuance of leadership, servility to corporate control and editors having less autonomy in making editorial policies. Printing presses controlled by non-media related corporations have become subsidiaries that serve the economic interests of their owners instead of their respective readers. For this reason, it is predicted that whenever there is conflict of interests between the owner's interest and the people's right to know, these printing presses are likely to give priority to the former and overlook the latter.

Today, the Malaysian media institutions are increasingly dependent on official news and commercial advertisement to serve the interests of the state and the owners. The Malaysian press is very much confined within the boundaries drawn by the state, press owners and journalists. For instance, the Chinese dailies are over-cautious about publishing news articles unfavourable to their respective owners who control the economic resources of the press organizations, and the state which controls the dissemination of information via legal constraints, political partnership and pressurizing techniques.

In the near future, unless the state exerts only necessary control over the local press and journalists to protect the people's right to know, the Malaysian press system will only reflect the voices of the mainstream and the majority, while the alternative voices of the 'silent' minority group can only be heard via the Internet and informal publications.