

## My Brother Francis

My late beloved brother Francis, or Tzi-Kun, was much taller than I. And heftier too. He must have inherited a greater number of our grandfather's genes. He was in all probability also more intelligent than myself because apart from graduating from the Raffles Institution in Singapore, he was virtually self-educated.

While I was studying at Stanford, our father brought Francis to Hong Kong in 1951, at the age of 17, to study at the University of Hong Kong. It was not entirely clear whether he was intended to study medicine or arts. He had enrolled at the same time as Miu-Kwan, our aunt from the Chau side of the family. Although Miu-Kwan was six years older than Francis, he told me years later that he had considered her even then "quite a dish". He had certainly developed an eye for girls very early!

Francis was also intellectually precocious. He had done a lot of reading for his age. He found the lectures at the university dull and unstimulating. So he cut classes and spent his time with young taxi dancers instead. I suspect that some of the fees which he was supposed to hand over to the university also went towards that diversion. Dance halls were quite fashionable in those days and afternoon tea dancing sessions were on offer at reduced rates. When failing marks revealed to our father what had gone awry, my brother was sent packing back to Singapore.

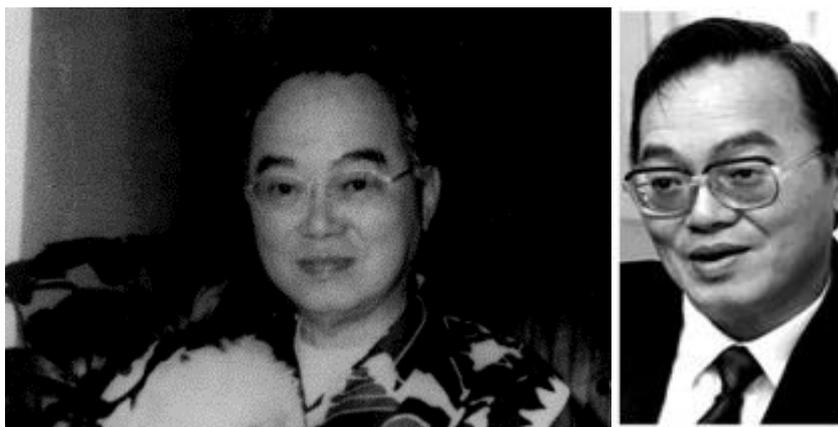
There Francis joined the Straits Times as a reporter and feature writer. But through omnivorous reading he educated himself better than most. I think he might have been influenced too much by the writings of some of the Fabians though, for his thinking soon took on a Socialist turn.

We did not have many opportunities to be together after I left home in 1947. We were more often than not in totally different parts of the world. But we did manage to spend a year of brotherly intercourse in Singapore from the early part of 1958 onwards, when I, too, went to work for the *Straits Times* -- as a sub-editor. We also sometimes played *mah-jong*

together.

After getting married in Singapore in June of 1959, I left again for Hong Kong. Neither of our lives really stabilised till the early 1960s, in my case when I joined the Hong Kong government's Administrative Service and in the case of Francis after he had been "exiled" to Kuala Lumpur in 1962 by the *Straits Times* for offending the Prime Minister of Singapore through an editorial he had written as Editor of the *Sunday Mail*. The article was entitled "A Plague on Both Your Houses".

At the time Francis was exiled, he had just returned after a year as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard and had quickly assumed the presidency of the Singapore Union of Journalists.



Author's brother Francis Wong.

After that, we managed to get together once every two or three years, either by his coming to Hong Kong or my going to Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. Whenever we did meet up, we found much in common in our outlooks on life. We would both lament some of the stupidities of the world and drown our sorrows by breaking open a bottle of good brandy, before sharpening intellectual knives.

One of the basic things we were absolutely firm on was the need for societies aspiring to be democratic to promote and treasure a free,

responsible and independent Press. Since we both had experienced losing tussles with authority on that score, we used to console each other with a laugh by quoting an old ditty we had come across as schoolboys in one of the British magazines for boys. It ran:

“The harder you’re hit, the higher you’d bounce.

“Be proud of a blackened eye.

“Tis not the fact you’re licked that counts.

“But how you fight and why.”

Francis had a wicked sense of humour and he used it to bait intellectual mousetraps for the unwary. I got caught in one of them when I stayed at his home for the first time. I had no idea he had the habit of doing copious reading while sitting on the toilet bowl, although I should have suspected something odd when I noticed an unusual number of doorstopper tomes, like the complete works of Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw, resting permanently on the floor of his bathroom.

Naturally, when on a short visit, I would want to spend as much time as possible talking to him. So once, when he said he wanted to go to the bathroom first, I had assumed it would be at most a ten-minute affair. But he failed to emerge for almost an hour.

When he finally came out, I remonstrated with him. “For heaven’s sake, what took you so bloody long in the loo?” I cried.

“I was reading,” he replied.

“Reading!” I reacted, staggered. “Wouldn’t it have been more comfortable to read in the sitting room?”

“Eldest Brother, can’t you see that I am trying to establish a fundamental law of nature? Do you realise that no matter how much good stuff you put in at one end, it is only shit that ever comes out from the other?”

My rejoinder remains unprintable even to the present day.

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Some time in 1968, Francis visited Hong Kong and stayed with me for a few days. I was then working as the Assistant Economic Secretary in the Hong Kong government and he was quite excited about starting up an independent English newspaper in Singapore. He was seeking investors. A very large segment of the population, due to the vagaries of colonial history, was only English-educated. The *Straits Times*, he said, had turned into a virtual government bulletin board and Singaporeans were ready and anxious for a more robust and objective newspaper. Because of the annual licensing requirements, inherited from the British, he had to be sure of the government's attitude. He had, after long soundings, been given a clear nod by the government to proceed.

He explained the capital intensive nature of the enterprise and said a decision had been made to call it the *Singapore Herald*. If his calculations and his instincts were correct, he asserted, the paper should break even in a very short time. It could not be expected to be another *Playboy*, which made money from its first issue, but it should be a real money-spinner in the medium to longer term.

On the basis of his analysis, I imagined it could turn into a money tree. My savings from my government salary was quite meagre, in spite of my having cleared my debt to my Eighth Granduncle by then. I had no more than a shade over \$50,000. It was a sum meant for the future university education of my sons. I was conscious of how difficult it had been for me to find money for my own university education. Seeing what appeared to be a sure-fire and profitable investment before me -- and judging that there would be no conflict of interest in investing in an enterprise outside of Hong Kong -- I plunked the entire sum into the *Singapore Herald* project. My Singaporean relatives did likewise.

The next I saw of Francis was in April of the following year. I was in Singapore as the Deputy Leader of the Hong Kong delegation to the Ministerial Conference of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. The delegation was led by Sir C. Y. Kwan, the most senior Unofficial Chinese member of the Hong Kong Executive Council. Francis told me then the preparations for launching the *Herald* were making satisfactory progress.

Incidentally, it was at that conference that the Economic Commission unveiled a geological study which suggested that there might be vast deposits of oil and gas in the seabed in the vicinity of the Diaoyu Islands, a collection of five uninhabited islands and three protruding pieces of rock then under the administration of Japan. That study sparked legal and historical claims by China, Japan and Taiwan which have bubbled on till the present.

Then I got unexpectedly caught up in racial disturbances between the Malay and the Chinese sections of the community in Malaysia, which erupted on May 13. I had been scheduled to fly to Penang to interview an Englishman working there, who had applied to join the Administrative Service in Hong Kong. I did manage to interview him, in spite of an ongoing curfew in Penang. It proved to be a wasted effort, however, because I did not find him suitable and recommended against his appointment.

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The *Singapore Herald* duly made its appearance on July 8 in 1970, working out of rented premises in the People's Park Complex. The first issue was a complimentary one.



Part of the front page of the first issue of the Singapore Herald in 1970.

It set out on its front page its philosophy under the heading “The how and why of the *Herald*” as follows:

“The way a newspaper sees itself is unimportant. It is the way the public comes to see it that matters.

“Nonetheless, it is customary for a new publication to say a few words on how it came into being and what it hopes to do.

“Like so much else, the *Singapore Herald* has grown out of the expulsion of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia.

“It began, a year or so after that climacteric, as an idea in the heads of a group of journalists -- citizens of Singapore, then working in Kuala Lumpur.

“They had watched with fascination the adjustments of the new Republic to the independence that had been thrust upon it.

“Almost overnight, the old associations of the word ‘Singapore’

were shed and new associations were acquired.

“The outside world which, for over a century, had thought of Singapore as one of Britain’s more interesting South-East Asian possessions (during the last war, the subject of a memorable piece of Churchillian breast-beating), and then as an awkward part of the Malaysian pastiche, was obviously impressed by the little island’s efforts to set up house on its own.

“Internally, too, there was a remarkable change in public self-awareness. People who used to think of Singapore as ‘the place where I live’ began thinking of it as ‘my country.’

“These phenomena, coupled with concurrent changes in Malaysia, hardened the contradictions which had led to Singapore’s expulsion in the first place.

“They placed a question mark over all trans-Causeway institutions forged in historical conditions which were no more. And, indeed, one after another, these institutions -- from the common currency down -- lost first their vigour and then their viability.

“From this, the journalists behind the *Singapore Herald* drew certain conclusions concerning the future of the Press. The validity of these conclusions will be tested by YOUR reaction, over time, to the newspaper you now hold in your hands.

“The policy of the *Singapore Herald* may be simply stated. It is to involve itself totally in the many-sided efforts of Singaporeans to enrich the content of an independence they did not want, but of which they are now proud.

“Yet what a host of challenges that simple statement contains!

“Singapore is a society in transition. Much that was new and necessary as recently as three to five years ago is now obsolescent and an impediment to progress.

“Much that remains essentially relevant must be modified to meet

changes which have already announced themselves.

“These generalisations hold good right across the social board -- the economy, education, foreign affairs and that great intangible: the relationship between the Government and the people.

“The *Singapore Herald* hopes to serve as a gadfly and forum for a broad social dialogue, for that airing of ideas and confrontation of viewpoints which are to a society in transition what lubricant is to a machine.

“The Herald is under no illusion that it deploys under its own roof all the expertise that is necessary to identify society’s problems, let alone to solve them.

“To achieve our purposes we need the assistance and the co-operation of trained and thinking members of the public at large -- establishmentarians as well as anti-establishmentarians.

“To a degree both surprising and gratifying, we have already succeeded in rallying to our aims numbers of people who combine specific knowledge with a social perspective, and who are prepared to stand behind us as a ‘think tank’.

“This is less a tribute to ourselves than an indication of the ripeness of the times.

“Of particular interest to the *Singapore Herald* are the young people who have grown up in the post-colonial era, who are unblemished by the psychological scars which the older generation carries and who feel in their bones that anything can be achieved.

“These young people reject discipline without explanation, hate patronage, despise the cynics who extrapolate from personal failure to paint horrendous pictures of the future -- even when the whine is coated with wit.

“For the *Herald*, the aspirations of young Singapore, its demand to be allowed to experiment and make its own mistakes, will always take precedence over the comfortable prejudices of the conservatives whose theme

song is: ‘Don’t try! It can’t be done!’”

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The newspaper readily gained wide acceptance from the reading public. But it soon ran into official accusations of being engaged in “black ops” financed by foreign money.

I was in Singapore again briefly about two months after the launch, as part of the British team engaging in negotiations with the Singapore government over an air services agreement. That provided Francis with an opportunity to explain some of the *Herald*’s problems. The government was too tight-arsed, he said. Could not even take a joke sometimes.

By “a joke” Francis meant a run-in which the *Herald* had with the government concerning a National Day parade. According to him, a rehearsal was conducted by the government a short while before the actual parade. Not unnaturally, thousands lined the streets to watch the rehearsal and photographers from the *Herald*, along with those from other media, took pictures.

But a directive soon came from the government that no pictures of the rehearsal ought to be published, because -- it alleged -- that would detract from the actual parade. Francis and his editorial staff thought the instruction rather pointless since thousands had already seen the rehearsal and were unlikely not to watch the actual National Day parade on that account.

So thinking, the *Herald* decided to publish a photograph of crowds lining the streets but with the participants in the rehearsal blanked out as empty space. The title of the picture was something like: “What the government does not want you to see”. The government was less than pleased.

After hearing that episode, I warned Francis of the dangers of

upsetting powerful people who took themselves too seriously. “Those who lacked a mellowed sense of humour can hardly be considered very Chinese,” I added, before heading for England to take up a Queen Elizabeth House Fellowship at Oxford. As a consequence, I could not keep up with what was happening with the *Herald*.

When I got back to Hong Kong in 1971, I was soon plunged into dealing with student leaders and heads of youth groups who wanted to participate in the worldwide Chinese protests against the United States and Japan over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Tai.

The youngsters wanted to hold a peaceful march in Hong Kong to hand letters of protest to the consulates of both those countries. The bulk of the Hong Kong administration, including a newly installed Governor, was dead set against their doing so, whereas I thought they should be allowed, under certain conditions. I was convinced of the peaceful and patriotic intentions of the students and was desperate to persuade the decision-makers. The problems of the *Herald* thus faded into the background in the face of my other concerns.

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Perhaps it is best for Francis to explain in his own words what subsequently happened. In a piece published on May 19, 1971, on the front page of the *Singapore Herald*, he wrote as follows:

Mr. Lee Kuan Yew’s recent references to the *Singapore Herald* cannot but cause the public to suspect that the paper was founded by foreigners to make trouble in the Republic, and that I myself was, or am, some kind of foreign agent.

To erase this unjust impression, I wish to place on record an

account of the beginnings of the *Herald*, its relations with the Government during the period when I was its editor and the developments which led to my resignation at the end of February this year.

In particular, I wish to clear up the mystery which has been created around Heeda Ltd. and Dato Donald Stephens, and to shed light on the assertion that the *Herald* “took on” the Government.

The *Herald* was originally conceived by three journalists, Singapore citizens. They were myself, the present Editor-in-Chief, Mr. Ambrose Khaw, and the late Norman Siebel (former Straits Times Sports Editor) who, to our great grief, died before the launch.

The idea took firm shape in our minds early in 1968 and among the first things I did was to write to the Prime Minister to inquire if we could count on a licence. This was a necessary precaution in my case, as I had incurred Mr. Lee’s displeasure in the late fifties and early sixties when I had been editor of the *Sunday Mail*.

I stated, in my letter, that we had in mind a paper with a thoroughgoing Singapore orientation, circulating exclusively in Singapore. By way of indicating our editorial stance, I made a number of points which I summarise below:

1. In Singapore on its own, there was no help for it but to pursue efficiency within the laws of capitalist development. The positions of the extreme left had lost all reality.

2. Malaysia’s very difficult racial problems were being made worse by all the communities and trouble very likely was on the way. As this could spill over into Singapore, it was necessary that Singaporeans should be properly informed.

3. Hostile elements in Malaysia needed to be disabused of the notion that Singapore could be pushed around, but, thereafter, Singapore should do its share, and perhaps more than its share, to build co-operation

based on equality and mutual benefit.

I was referred to the Foreign Minister, Mr. S. Rajaratnam. I told the Minister that I had made contact with a Hong Kong publisher (not Miss Aw Sian) who was known to him, but explained that we wished to capitalise the project as far as possible in Singapore. I also tried to get a feel of the editorial scope we could expect. At the end of a wide-ranging conversation, Mr. Rajaratnam said we could proceed.

My associates and I got down to detailed planning. Our task was complicated by a falling out with the Hong Kong publisher. When we finally completed a project presentation in March of 1969, I made contact, through the good offices of friends, with groups of Singapore businessmen. The initial response was extremely encouraging and we had reason to believe, around the end of April, that we would be able to raise in Singapore the bulk of the funds we needed.

Then came the May 13 riots in Malaysia. The resultant business uncertainties spread inexorably to Singapore. Our portfolio of potential investors began to crumble. Within a month, it had become clear that we would not be able to achieve our original capital target locally; indeed, might not be able to find enough money from any source to finance even a scaled-down project.

By this time, our group had been joined by Mr. J. J. ("Jimmy") Hahn, then general manager for *Reuters* in South-East Asia and now managing director of the *Herald*. Jimmy suggested he might be able to engage the interest of his good personal friend Dato Donald Stephens -- at that time, a stranger to me.

He made soundings, obtained a favourable first reaction and brought me into the picture. Together, we presented the project to Dato Stephens on a commercial basis and, on that basis entirely, secured his participation. Naturally enough, Dato Stephens asked many questions about

our editorial policy. I said the journalists in our group felt that the Singapore Government had the right answers on all the big questions and that this belief would be reflected in our paper.

I added that the public utterances of the Prime Minister, my own conversations with other senior Ministers and the fact that Singapore was stable politically and doing well economically persuaded me that there would be scope for the kind of reasoned dialogue and debate that makes for lively journalism. With regard to Malaysia, I said we had a duty to report the facts straight and to interpret events from a Singapore standpoint, but had no interest in political sniping.

Basically, we would stand for good relations. Dato Stephens thought these positions very reasonable and readily agreed that there should be an instrument of the Board of Directors giving me full control of editorial policy.

I was, and am, completely convinced of the Dato's bona fides. It occurred to me, however, that his open association with the firm might be exploited to embarrass our claim to a Singapore orientation. It struck me, too, that the Dato might find himself in an awkward position if, through no fault of his, we should incur the displeasure of the Malaysian Government.

And so I suggested that he make his investment through a holding company. The choice of the name Heeda Ltd. and the decision to register in Hong Kong were his; the original suggestion was mine. And there is no more mystery to it all than that. I placed all the facts before Mr. Rajaratnam.

He said he would consult his colleagues. Subsequently, he told me there were no objections. (And a licence to publish was granted). I turn now to the suggestion that the *Herald* "took on" the Government. The phrase implies that we deliberately sought a confrontation. It ascribes to us more courage, or foolhardiness, than we actually possessed.

What is true is that -- more out of consideration of survival than of

heroics -- we did not always do what we were told. Our difficulties began shortly after we went into publication in July, in connection with the expulsion from Singapore of Miss Shirle Gordon, Director of the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute.

The Prime Minister's Press Secretary, Mr. Li Vei Chen, telephoned three times to tell us not to print the story, on the third occasion conveying from Mr. Lee the laconic message: "Don't cross swords." My colleagues and I did not at all wish to "cross swords," being only too conscious that we possessed none. We were equally aware, however, that if we suppressed news of events which large numbers of people already knew about we would forfeit the confidence of the public.

The situation was more vexing in that we had received not a word of explanation as to how the public good required a news blackout. We did have independent knowledge that Miss Gordon was stage-managing things to achieve a heightened sense of drama, but we had no intention of falling for that. Finally, after a long discussion, I decided that we had to publish, but would deal with the story in such a way that no harm could possibly come of it. And no harm did come of it.

But the Prime Minister never forgave us that act of "defiance." The *Herald* was denied press releases and barred from press conferences. All official news sources were switched off. As these facilities were more privileges than rights, we had no real grounds for complaint. So we carried on quietly, hoping that as tempers cooled we would be given a chance to explain.

Eventually, on the eve of the Prime Minister's departure on his world tour, I was granted an interview with Mr. Rajaratnam. There was an air-clearing session and all restrictions were lifted. For the next three months, during the Prime Minister's absence, the *Herald's* relations with officialdom were tranquil, occasionally even warm. As soon as Mr. Lee returned, however, we found ourselves once more enveloped in a rather tense and

spooky atmosphere.

We heard on the grapevine that the Prime Minister had levelled against us in private charges that he has since made public -- that we had stirred up trouble over national service and encouraged “permissiveness.” And yet all that we did on these two questions is on record.

It is true that the *Herald* (along with other papers) opened its columns to complaints from national servicemen and their parents. We did so in the belief that this would help the Government to make adjustments and raise morale. And, indeed, much was done with precisely this effect.

When the ground had been covered, and the letters began to be repetitive, *Herald* closed the subject -- long before laws were introduced to strengthen Queen’s Regulations and without knowledge that this was in the offing.

The Defence Minister, Dr. Goh Keng Swee, has said in Parliament that the press has not been a hindrance to him. As for “permissiveness,” we examined the hippie phenomenon and deplored it in rather stronger terms than the Prime Minister himself has used, though we did point out that people with long hair are not necessarily hippies and did suggest that the Government should hesitate to lay down what people may or may not do with parts of their own bodies.

At all events, we were again under a cloud. The incidents which brought things to a head I shall summarise below: A week or so before the Conference of Commonwealth Heads of State, an American Negro and his Swedish fiancée called at the *Herald* office to complain of what struck them as discriminatory treatment at the hands of airport immigration authorities. They came on a Sunday. Though they told us they had already been to an American news agency, we waited until Monday to get an official comment before printing the story.

There were rumbles from City Hall. A couple of days later, the

entire Negro complement of a ship's crew lodged complaints of discrimination with the U.S. Embassy. The situation was highly perturbing. The Commonwealth conference was around the corner. Negroes were passing through Singapore every day. Unless the confounded regulation that was enraging them was amended there was bound to be a first class row when a dozen African Heads of Government and three hundred foreign journalists were in town.

We made repeated attempts to obtain official clarification and then printed the story, though in very subdued form. We were accused of damaging Singapore's image abroad.

On the eve of the Commonwealth conference, the *Herald* got wind of the news that a document containing a plan for retaliation against Britain should she sell arms to South Africa -- and originating from the Zambian delegation -- was circulating among the African delegates. Our reporter swore he had sighted the document, whose putative contents, in any case, merely reflected a speech which President Kenneth Kaunda had made in Lusaka the day before. We printed the story. It was denied (expectedly in all the circumstances) by a Zambian spokesman.

I recall no "offences" other than those I have listed. So although it was rumoured that we could expect a caning after the Commonwealth conference was over, I was not disposed to sacrifice the little sleep I had in those days in worrying about it. The rumours were true. A week or so after the conference, the *Herald* came under the most draconian pressure. Government departments cancelled subscriptions and forbade their staff to bring the paper into the office. Government and quasi-Government organisations cancelled advertisements.

All access to official sources was totally denied us. As luck would have it, these pressures were applied at a crucial juncture in our negotiations for additional finance. A local group, and a group headed by Miss Sally Aw

Sian, were just about to sign on the dotted line. The new investors were, understandably, perturbed. To restore their confidence it was necessary to normalise our relations with the Government. For this, there obviously had to be a price.

I told my colleagues that if that price should turn out to be my resignation, then so be it. And so I left. In the Prime Minister's version: "Finally, realising that its (the Herald's) position would become too exposed and untenable, the editor, who was instrumental in organising the paper, stepped down and went back to Kuala Lumpur." The first part of the sentence implies that some kind of unsavoury plot was nipped in the bud. The last clause is plain vicious. Like the Prime Minister, I am a citizen of Singapore, and Singapore is the only country to which I can "go back."

I now work in Kuala Lumpur because it has become impossible for me to practise at the only craft I possess. I might add that before signing up with my present employers I secured their agreement that I should not be expected to write evaluative articles on Singapore which involved pejorative judgements. In any case, I have long ago got over feeling bitter on my personal account. I only hope that a newspaper founded with the best of intentions will be given a chance to get on with the job. -- FRANCIS WONG, Kuala Lumpur

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But the resignation of Francis did not save the paper. Other forces came into play. The bankers of the *Herald*, under pressure from the government, demanded the repayment of a loan of S\$1.03 million within 48 hours because, when the government took action against the paper, many advertisers also pulled their ads for fear of offending the government. Since the new potential investors were not prepared to cough up that much, the fate

of the paper was sealed.

The staff of the *Herald* pledged to work for nothing in order to keep the paper running. The Singapore Union of Journalists started a campaign to save the paper and urged its members to either subscribe to it or to donate a day's wages in support. The prominent architect, Mr. Tay Kheng Soon, led a team of five in forming a co-operative in order to rescue the paper. The University of Singapore Students Union issued a statement saying it was not convinced by the arguments of the government. Donations from the public poured in and tertiary students voluntarily went around selling the paper in the streets.

Local, regional and international organisations asked for a commission of inquiry into the government charges of "black operations" but the government declined to call one. None of those efforts was enough. On May 28, 1971, the licence to print the *Herald* was suspended and later cancelled. More than 200 staff members lost their jobs. I sympathise with them. I felt responsible too for putting the money set aside for my children's university education into that ill-fated venture and losing all of it.

When a winding-up order was sought by the bankers in August of 1972, the amount owed by the paper stood at only S\$623,439.

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After his resignation, Francis went on to edit the *Housing Developers' Journal* in Kuala Lumpur. He then worked for Malaysian property developers, first with Selangor Properties and later with Ipoh Gardens.

I did not see Francis again till the beginning of 1974, when I led a delegation of Hong Kong Administrative Officers and Senior Executive Officers on a study tour of Southeast Asia. He seemed happy and settled into

his new employment in Kuala Lumpur. Many people had urged him to write a fuller account of the *Herald* fiasco but he demurred. He felt he had said all he wanted to say and wanted to move on.

In the early 1980s, after he had kept himself out of Singapore and its political life for more than 10 years, Francis returned to take on Parkway Parade, a mall project at Marine Parade. It opened in 1984 and it remains today a successful premium shopping destination on the East Coast of Singapore.

Francis fell ill in 1999 and passed away due to cancer in May of the following year, a few days shy of his 65th birthday. Mr. Tay Kheng Soon, in a public tribute, described him as “one of the heroes of his time: a man of courage and spirit.”

I can heartily echo that sentiment. More than four decades have passed since the demise of the *Herald*. Singapore can claim to have made enormous advances in many fields of human endeavour. But it still, sadly, after half a century of independence, has no robust and independent English newspaper to serve its own increasingly knowledgeable and sophisticated population. Having said that, I ought in fairness to point out that a plethora of mediocre publications, run for profit, does not in itself necessarily make for elevated discourses on the pressing issues affecting modern societies.

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In the earlier chapters of these memoirs, I have described the dismal state of journalism in colonial Hong Kong and the near-starvation wages local journalists had to endure. The risk of losing employment was often there, if the views being advanced were out of favour with the economic or political elites. That has remained regrettably real to this day.

There has also been the inevitable concentration of media power

under corporations. Three of the main English language newspapers -- the *South China Morning Post*, the afternoon *China Mail* and the *Sunday Post-Herald* -- were all owned by the same corporation. For a journalist wishing to write in English, to fall out with one of the three virtually meant having to look for a new calling.

Notwithstanding those impediments, a wide range of publications, mainly in Chinese, came into existence in Hong Kong during the post-war era. They included left-wing newspapers like the *Ta Kung Poa*. The *People's Daily*, the organ of the Chinese Communist Party, was also readily available at many street corner kiosks. The Kuomintang had its own newspapers too. Their presence did not reflect any inherent British commitment to a diversity of free speech or ready access to information. They illustrated more often than not merely the unwillingness or inability of the elites to take notice of anything published in a language not their own.

In the middle of the 19th century, one of the early governors of Hong Kong made an observation that was -- and had remained for a long period afterwards -- partially true. He indicated that the British ruled in ignorance while the Chinese obeyed in blindness.

A century later, the first part of his statement continued to be valid. The British elites, cocooned comfortably in their exclusive private clubs and their narrow social circles, complacently relied upon the contents of the three or four English publications for what little feedback they might have on the moods and happenings within the politically, financially or sectionally diverse Chinese communities.

Because of that head-in-the-sand attitude, the ruling elites failed completely to appreciate the irredentist sentiments that were gathering steam among a population increasingly younger in profile in the early 1960s. It was only around then that the government, possibly in a fit of curiosity over what Chinese newspapers might be saying, authorised the Information Services

Department to put out a daily summary of the Chinese press for the information of the top brass.

If the British colonial administrators had been more mindful of the Chinese concepts of good governance, they might not have been so dismissive of what was being said about their policies in the editorials and letters to the editors appearing in the Chinese language press or in a growing number of student magazines.

Since ancient times, the Chinese concept of government has been based upon the consent of the governed. Rulers were supposed to bestow good order and prosperity as well as standards of individual and social morality. The primary concern of scholars and philosophers serving as advisors to rulers was to bring about that desired end. If an emperor ruled badly or surrounded himself with corrupt officials, then the people would have the right to rebel and overthrow him, thus bringing an end to that dynastic cycle. In philosophical terms, the emperor would be deemed to have lost the Mandate of Heaven.

It followed that in the ages before there was general literary, mass media and specialised polling organisations, ways had to be found to gauge the popular feelings of the common people. As far back as 90 B.C., during the Han Dynasty, a Music Bureau had been established, partly for that purpose. That musically-oriented organisation was charged with collecting the folk songs sung by the people. Though people might be illiterate, they could sing and their songs often expressed their anxieties, their aspirations or their hardships. The Confucian officials serving the emperor could, through the lyrics of the folk songs collected, give indications of the sentiments of the people.

It was a pity that, 2,000 years after the establishment of the Music Bureau, British colonial administrators should have forgotten the need to keep up with what the people they were governing were thinking. Thus when the

19th century Hong Kong Governor spoke of the British ruling in ignorance, it has to be remembered that the ignorance had been a wilful one. The contents of the multiplicity of Chinese language outlets in Hong Kong had been deliberately ignored for too long.

Sadly, that went hand-in-hand with a general decline in the quality of reportage, the lack of in-depth analysis of events and the absence of editorial courage to hold the powerful to account. Part of that has been due to the new technologies impacting upon the economics of the traditional print media. They relied on circulation numbers for income, which in turn affected advertising rates and economic survival. One major Hong Kong newspaper even resorted in 2004 to dumping printed copies to fake its circulation figures.

Hence a general dash to the lowest common denominator in order to attract readers or viewers, emphasising the trivial, the lurid, the titillating and the sensational. Some of the “reality television” programmes in the West strike me as insults to both intelligence and good taste. My hope is that programmes of that kind would never get aired in the rest of the world but, depressingly, they are already being copied, simply because there is money to be made from them.

Furthermore, members of the public have developed much shorter attention spans. They yearn for entertainment and external stimulation, like the Roman mobs who used to bay for excitement at the Colosseum. Even readers of printed material now prefer snappy headlines and capsuled opinions. The gullible find them easier to swallow than the more thoughtful articles requiring reflection before forming judgements. The popularity of Twitter and other social media is a sign of the times. Few seem to appreciate that pondering distant events might sometimes throw light upon one’s own human situation.

Journalism has never been a lucrative profession in Hong Kong, except for foreign correspondents being paid according to foreign pay scales.

And some of the latter were little more than CIA agents in poor disguise. Local salaries have generally remained too depressed to maintain a decent living, let alone to attract the brightest and the best. Only the quixotically idealistic or mediocrities with nowhere else to scratch a living would contemplate entering the Fourth Estate.

Political partisanship since the former colony's re-unification with China has also led to fairly juvenile attacks on political opponents, more for making mischief or indulging in ego trips than for any sober contest of ideas. The ability to make a quick jibe or a clever sneer lent scope for third-raters in both local politics and journalism.

The funding behind newspapers and other media has now become so over-concentrated in the hands of a few faceless international corporations that it is posing an unprecedented danger to free societies around the world. In some countries, those corporations wield so much influence that they can virtually make or break any democratically elected government. Politicians have been so cowed by them that they sometimes become more subservient to them than to their electorates, thus giving rise to all kinds of abuses.

Long before the present unhealthy concentration of media power, the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst had already demonstrated how such power could be used to corrupt both readers and politicians alike. It could even be used to drive countries into unwarranted wars and conflicts.

With a few gallant exceptions, most media in large parts of the world have turned themselves into handmaidens of governments, adhering to official lines and uncritically propagating policies put forward by vested interests. If they did not, they and their staff could become targets for official vengeance, including imprisonment on trumped up charges or even death at the hands of fanatical numskulls. And this is not even counting the number of journalists being killed in the line of duty covering wars, rebellions and other types of conflict.

Too many editors of the present generation seemed to have lost their critical faculties and abandoned their duty to hold up truth to power. Instead, they have been increasingly complicit in burking the truth and in voicing opinions undeterred by ignorance. Worse still, some established anchors on television news have gone so far as to fabricate stories to put themselves in a more distinguished or heroic light. With such loss of any moral compass, is it any surprise that the media in so many sophisticated countries have merely looked upon abominations like “extraordinary renditions” as if they were performances on a par with a Beethoven symphony or Bach fugue?

In today’s dangerous and morally equivocal world, journalists at all levels and in all countries need more than ever to hold on to their courage and their moral purpose. The recent closure of *News of the World*, owned by the Murdoch media empire, is an example of the criminal depths to which a news organisation could sink when circulation figures and profits trumped moral considerations. And the *News of the World* is by no means the only news organisation indulging in criminal activities.

It also seems fashionable -- and indeed acceptable -- nowadays for those in charge of vast international undertakings to claim total ignorance of criminal activities taking place within their organisations. Such denials of responsibility by people at the very top have become commonplace. Virtually every top executive in major international banks has fallen back on the excuse of ignorance of misdeeds and allowed the bank to pay massive penalties to avoid law suits. The head of the giant oil company involved in the massive tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico has also claimed lack of knowledge. Pretty soon, it would become the standard defence for every head of every international corporation found to be rotten to the core. It would be as commonplace as the leaders of the mafia and criminal gangs in America “taking the Fifth”.

It seems to me that the benefits of privatisation and economies of scale should, in themselves, no longer be sufficient justification for corporate mergers or take-overs of public institutions. Environmental, social and other cultural costs ought to be taken into account. The primary function of a private corporation has to be the making of a profit for its shareholders and not for promoting the more intangible public good. When that is realised, being small and local might well become beautiful again. There might then be fewer cities and countries going bankrupt and their ordinary citizens being rendered jobless.

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The media models followed in Singapore and in Hong Kong had developed in entirely different ways. Arguments for and against both can be made. But they also represent unique situations. They are both small enough and closely-knit. Even without modern electronic gadgetry, word of failings and misdeeds by those in power can readily get around. There is not much that either government can really hide from their citizens for very long. But then, on the other hand, baseless rumours get a good run for their money too.

Ultimately it is for each citizen to give or to withhold support for the media or the government they have. To paraphrase an old saw, people always end up getting the kind of media or government they deserve.