

**AT THE INTERNATIONAL CHINESE NEWSPAPERS CONVENTION
SHANGRI-LA HOTEL
KUALA LUMPUR (K.L), 10 DISEMBER 1990**

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and gentlemen.

Firstly I would like to bid you welcome to Malaysia, a genuinely multi-racial country where the languages and the cultures of every race are preserved although or despite there being an official indigenous-based language and culture. Few countries populated by people of different races have been able to preserve their lingual and cultural identities.

2. In most countries citizenship requires total cultural and linguistic identification with the definitive people of the country. A Chinese Australian or a Chinese American or a Chinese Canadian is more Australian or American or Canadian than a Chinese Malaysian or a Malaysian Chinese is Malaysian. Certainly a Chinese in Thailand, Indonesia or the Philippines is more identified with the indigenous native people there than a Malaysian Chinese is with the Malays and other indigenous people of Malaysia.

3. But Malaysia is a tolerant country and the preservation of the root cultures of the people have not caused the kind of schism that is seen in many other multi-racial countries. Except for the one race riot in 1969, the different races in Malaysia have lived in relative harmony. It would be hypocritical to say that race relations in Malaysia is ideal. But by comparison we are more able to live together than in many other multi-racial communities in the East or the South or the West. Certainly we do not have the continuous violent conflicts and rebellions that characterise some countries where the population is multi-racial.

4. What is more noteworthy is that despite its multi- racial composition and the presumed tendency towards violent conflicts, Malaysia has been so politically stable that it has made very good economic progress throughout the 33 years of its independence. Presently the economy is booming.

Ladies and gentlemen,

5. One of the manifestations of racial tolerance in Malaysia is the availability of newspapers in the languages of the different races living here. There are numerous Chinese newspapers and magazines catering for a very large readership, as Malaysians of Chinese origins make up more than 35% of the population of 17.5 million.

6. A large number of newspapers may mean a liberal policy towards the press. But it also results in very violent competition between them. Competition is said to be healthy and is very much in keeping with a nation which subscribes to a market economy. However, keen competition may result in unhealthy practices. We are all aware that in the West keen competition between newspapers have resulted in unsavoury practices such as excessive sensationalism, inaccurate

and slanted reporting, intrusions into the privacy of citizens, buying of stories from criminals, etc. There is very little concern for the well-being of the community or the nation. The most important thing is for the competing publications to increase their circulation and make profits.

7. It has been said that the pen is mightier than the sword. In this information age, when news travel instantly, when events happen right in front of the eyes of the whole world, the pen as represented by the print and electronic media is, if anything, even more mighty than the sword.

8. Now the sword too is the subject of many aphorisms. The one that comes to mind and is relevant here is the saying "Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword". In other words, those who use force for gain will one day lose through force also.

9. It is interesting to speculate, if the pen is mightier than the sword, whether those who live by the pen might not suffer the same fate as those who live by the sword. Even if the government permits press freedom, chaos and violence can adversely affect that freedom.

10. There is no doubt that the pen can influence the thinking of man. It can influence for good or for bad. In the hands of a skillful writer or journalist, it can help to build or to destroy.

11. In an age when one man's writing can reach hundreds of millions of people worldwide, it is frightening to think of what can happen if the intention of the writer is evil. Yet, if the intention is good, how much the world will benefit. It is controlled and restricted. Those agencies which have need for weapons are trained and disciplined in their use and are supervised very closely. The police and the armed forces are skilled in the use of weapons but they work under very strict rules. Indeed, they are usually placed under the authority of civilians who handle no weapons. In the world of today, government by the people with the weapons are frowned upon. We all know why of course.

13. But although the pen is mightier than the sword, it is generally considered improper for anyone to restrict or discipline the use of the pen. The pen must be free. Any restriction would be considered undemocratic. And indeed this should be so, for any government which restricts the pen must become oppressive over time. The press must be free to criticize governments because that is one very important way to stop governments from the misuse of power.

14. But such is the power of the free press that it can bring down governments by influencing the electorate in a democratic country. And now we come up against another dictum, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Since the press can wield power which can make or break governments, is it not possible for it to be corrupted? If there is no criticism of press freedom or the press is permitted unlicensed freedom then would not the press be said to wield absolute power and would not it then be absolutely corrupted?

15. I pose these questions because as one who heads a government I am, of course, vested with power. If I am expected by the press to give it the freedom to criticize and condemn, and maybe even bring down the government I head, should not the press, also vested with tremendous power, accept non-press criticism of itself? If the press does not like the government to have absolute power, than by the same token the press must not wield absolute power in moulding public opinion.

16. The press in Malaysia is free. But then this is what the government says. The government has no means to get the press to agree with what the government says. But the fact that the press can say that the press is not free, means that the press is free. If it is not free, then it will only echo what the government says. Paradoxically therefore a press is free when it says it is not free, and it is not free when it says it is free. I would like to leave these thoughts with you, the Chinese press which in South East Asia, at least, cater to a very influential minority community in the countries concerned.

Ladies and gentlemen,

17. As I said in many countries in South East Asia and East Asia there are substantial Chinese minorities. They play a very important role. In Malaysia they have mounted a military insurrection that lasted 42 years. On the other hand they, the Chinese, also contribute much towards the economic prosperity of Malaysia. Their attitudes are therefore very important. And to a certain extent the Chinese press in Malaysia help form this attitude.

Ladies and gentlemen,

18. Your convention is therefore of great interest to us. We feel you can contribute a great deal to our stability and prosperity. We know you are a responsible group and I am sure that your conference will help the Chinese language press to identify the role that it will play in the different societies of which it is a part of.

Ladies and gentlemen,

19. It is now with much pleasure that I declare open this International Chinese Newspapers Convention.