

THE 30TH INTERNATIONAL CHINESE NEWSPAPER CONVENTION
BAYVIEW BEACH RESORT, BATU FERINGGI, PENANG, 17 NOVEMBER
1997

I would like to thank the organisers, Kwong Wah Yit Poh Bhd and the Chinese-Language Press Institute for inviting me to officiate the opening of the 30th International Chinese Newspaper Convention here today. Malaysia is indeed honoured to host this conference and wish to bid a warm welcome to all the participants, foreign and local.

2. I have been made to understand that among the objectives of this conference are to promote the efficiency and usage of Chinese language worldwide, to strengthen the relationship between the Chinese media in the world and to exchange views and promote the standard of press freedom.

3. The subject of Chinese journalism must necessarily take into account the role of citizens of Chinese origin of many countries and how they relate with China. There is of course a historical and cultural base to this relationship that must influence their journalism. But there is also the very real loyalties to their adopted land they have developed and pledged which they must obviously take into consideration in the attitudes and conduct of their relations. This is not to say that they have to choose but they certainly have to be judicious in the degree of affinity and identity.

4. The Chinese language is peculiar in that although the dialects may be totally different, the written text can be understood by all, irrespective of whether they are Mandarin speakers or not. This gives a distinct advantage to the print media which the spoken words do not have. Indeed the understanding of the written text can extend even to the Japanese.

5. The power of the Chinese print media is thus very great considering that there are some 1.2 billion Chinese in China proper and 40 million more in other countries. Chinese journalism must be able to count on the widest readership and audience. Considering that the media has become such a powerful force in the affairs of man, the role it can play is almost unlimited. And like all who are endowed with power, it can be corrupted.

6. Malaysia is unique because despite having Malay or Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, other non- indigenous languages such as Chinese and Tamil are allowed to be used freely. Thus we find today in Malaysia a proliferation of newspapers and magazines published in the Chinese language. Such is the freedom of publication in Malaysia that there are more Chinese newspapers and magazines in this country than those published in the national language. Considering that Malaysians of Chinese origin number less than Malays this is really worth noting. When Malaysia was under British rule not only were there few Chinese language newspapers but most of the educated Chinese read English newspapers.

7. We do not mind this proliferation of Chineses papers as long as they are not

being used to cause instability in the country by deliberately inciting racial and religious animosities between the various races. So far Malaysian newspapers of whatever language have been very responsible and have not allowed racial and purely commercial considerations to influence their editorial policies.

8. Press freedom, itself a subject of your discussion at this conference, has many facets. What really is meant by press freedom? Is it just the freedom of the press to report and write on anything and everything without caring for the concerns of society? Has the press the right to merely report what is factual or can it fabricate stories in order to create interest, to be sensational and to attract readers and possibly fame to the writer? Even if the report is factual, shouldn't it take into consideration the pain and the shame that it may cause individuals or groups? Perhaps if the exposure would help correct a wrong, would focus on something that needs to be exposed, there may be justification. But what if it merely causes misery? What of the hounding of certain personalities until they have no privacy, no peace? What if it drives them to suicide or to fatal accidents?

9. There is a fiction about the need to know. Of course we have to know certain things that will affect us. But most things which happen affect us not at all. But an interest in a scandal, a possible scandal titillates us. Do we have to cater to this? Yes, if we think we can make money from it. Here the journalist will have to decide whether he should depend on scandals in order to make a living.

10. Then there is pornography. We know that people are titillated by pornographic material. Again it takes a certain kind of journalist who would rely upon such base feelings in order to make a living. Some Governments, in the name of freedom, permit pornography to be freely published and circulated. But we know that such societies are very prone to certain kinds of crimes and behaviour. Some will say that such behaviour is harmless. Others disagree. The role of the journalists is a matter for them to decide in a society that is ultra-liberal.

11. We need freedom of the press because we think it is good for us. Suppressing the truth must surely be bad for human society. But the freedom of one group in society should not deprive other members of society from their freedom. Unfortunately freedom of the press often deny the rights of non-journalists, particularly the subject of journalistic reports from the freedom to state his case, to defend himself. By any measure this is an injustice for society believes that everyone should be given a hearing, everyone should have his side of the story heard.

12. In Malaysia licences are required in order to publish a newspaper or magazine. To the liberals this is a denial of press freedom. We will not apologise for this minimal form of ensuring that the press is responsible and does not abuse the freedom by inciting racial intolerance and violence. Malaysia is a multi-racial society and we have had race riots before resulting in people being killed. While we cherish press freedom, we cherish our peace and stability and the lives of our people more. This and pornography apart, our press is free. Certainly

many of the publications in Malaysia criticise and attack the Government continuously. Perhaps there is justification but quite often there are no basis for these criticisms. But the Government has not withdrawn any licence for so long as race sensitive issues are not played up or pornography exploited.

13. Certain Western papers automatically append "where the press is controlled" when mentioning Malaysia. The fact that a number of these papers are actually printed in Malaysia and have never been censored by the Government does not seem to be of any significance to these papers. It is sad that these papers seem incapable of being truthful.

14. There is no such thing as absolute freedom. All freedoms are limited. This is because the exercise of unlimited freedom on the part of one will deprive or negate the freedom of another or indeed of the whole community. Elected Governments have a duty to protect everyone from everyone else. If there seems to be a restriction on anyone's freedom in this country, it is because we are ensuring the freedom of other people. If the exercise of anyone's freedom does not deprive someone else or the community of their freedom then there will be no restriction to the exercise of that freedom. Countries which claim they have unrestricted freedom are either irresponsible or are just not telling the whole truth.

15. They cannot be telling the whole truth because we know that what they report about us is far from being the truth. Frequently they don't report at all things that they don't like the world to know and things that they disagree with. They will not hesitate to play up any negative issue that they find about our country, our people or personalities in this country but if there is anything good that happens they would ignore it entirely. Thus they would report about alleged excessive logging in the Malaysian forest, but the fact that Malaysia has maintained 50 percent of its land surface covered by the original forest and 20 percent more by tree plantations has never been reported even when we point this out. Yet we know that in their countries they do clear felling of forests and there are hardly any of the original forests left, having been cleared for farm and human habitation.

16. We have to assume that if their report about us is wrong, inaccurate and biased then their reports about other countries are also wrong, inaccurate and biased. In the case of developing countries it is biased against and in the case of their own developed countries it is biased in favour. In any case their reports cannot be trusted to form a basis for our opinion of things.

17. The world needs news reports which are accurate and factual. The media is in a very privileged position to do this. In so doing they would be contributing to the good relations between peoples and countries and to the progress of the world. It is a pity that sensationalism and the bottom line have lead to distortions and inaccuracies and so deprive the world of a very important instrument for the general good of the world.

18. The Chinese language Press like other media instruments are in a good

position to serve the world by accurate and unbiased reporting. For many people of Chinese origin who are citizens of other countries, good reporting will help give them a balanced view of the world and of their own situation. It will help their welfare too.

19. It is my sincere hope that this 30th Convention will not just strengthen the relationship between the Chinese media in the world, but would also and more importantly enhance the role of the Chinese media throughout the world in contributing towards the benefit of mankind, regardless of race, creed and colour, language or ideology. Freedom, including press freedom is a precious thing, and we must use it well and for the good of all.

20. On this note it is with great pleasure that I declare open this 30th International Chinese Newspaper Convention.