

REVIEW

SATURDAY

The case for controlling immigration: We must balance concerns for those outside the country with the needs of Canadians, writes Douglas Todd.

Slywatch: A new feature takes you star-gazing, with a handy map to help you identify heavenly bodies. Today, come fascinating facts about Sirius, the dog star.

Take a base of socialism, add a dash of good old-fashioned entrepreneurial spirit and you've got Cuba's growing economy. An expert tells why the U.S. blockade isn't working.

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A focus on immigration and politics

When Chinatown News started production in 1973, Roy Mah said he would never imagine the explosion of Chinese ethnic media in Vancouver. "Even 20 years ago, it would have been hard to believe. Their ownership is still in the hands of a few, multi-national, multi-cultural corporations."

What changed is that Vancouver's population of Chinese, which exploded in the 1980s. And it wasn't just any growth. It was a growth that brought with it a new wave of immigrants, mostly from Hong Kong, who brought with them the "most affluent and recent Hong Kong immigrants who are your prime target audience."

Most ethnic media survive by getting advertising from a small group of businesses within that ethnic community. And local Chinese media do get a healthy share of advertising from Chinese-owned businesses. In fact, Chinese media owners and advertisers are often the same people. This is why Chinese media owners are so successful in their ability to convince mainstream businesses that their products are profitable. After all, as any student of media knows, it's not the information you sell to readers, but the audience you sell to advertisers.



Premier Glen Clark meets the press. More news conferences in Vancouver mean more direct contact with Chinese community.

CHINATOWN NEWS

Format: Monthly magazine published in English. What's happening: Not stopped publishing the magazine in July 1988 in order to reorganize it. Best magazine coming in July will be published in English, with Chinese community news. Not more upscale, with full-color covers and glossy pages.

Est. in Vancouver: 1983 (closed that, copies of the paper printed elsewhere were sold in Vancouver). Target audience: Immigrants from China and Taiwan. The only international Chinese newspaper available world-wide.

Circulation: 31,000 weekdays; 30,000 weekends.

Pages per day: Average 100. Empire: Sing Tao in Hong Kong began in 1933 and has 26 offices around the world.

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FEBRUARY 1, 1997

MEDIA from page C1

A focus on immigration and politics

When *Chinatown News* started production in 1953, Roy Mah said he could never imagine the explosion of Chinese media in Vancouver 40 years later.

"Even 20 years ago, it would have been hard to believe. Now everything's shifted to the big, multi-nationals. There's a lot of Chinese Conrad Blacks out there."

What changed is that Vancouver's population of Chinese, which exploded in the 1980s. And it wasn't just any group of immigrants.

As *Ming Pao* says in the material it sends to advertisers, it is the pipeline to the "unmatched buying power" of the "more affluent and recent Hong Kong immigrants who are your prime targets of many businesses."

Most ethnic media survive by getting advertising from a small group of businesses within that ethnic community. And local Chinese media do get a healthy share of advertising from Chinese restaurants, ESL tutors, Chinese accountants, Chinese physiotherapists, movie theatres, and shopping centres. But what really makes the Chinese-media engine run is their ability to convince mainstream businesses that this is the way to reach a desirable demographic niche. After all, as any student of media knows, it's not the information you sell to readers, but the audience you sell to advertisers.

No one knows this better than Vancouver's Thomas Fung, the soft-spoken but hands-on owner of Fairchild Television and TalentVision.

Fung's late father, Fung King Hey, founded Hong Kong's largest securities company. His family owns Hong Kong's TVB, the largest Chinese-language broadcasting system in the world.

Fung, 44, also built the Aberdeen Centre, Fairchild Square and Parker Place, which caters mainly to the local Chinese community. He built Fairchild TV into the only national Chinese-language pay-TV network in Canada.

"The Chinese media is now profitable because of the size of the population, its spending power and the interest from the mainstream agencies and advertisers," Fung says.

In 1992, Fung's Fairchild Media bought the national Chinavision network, which was in receivership. The network, with stations in Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary and Edmonton, became Fairchild Television.

"One of the reasons I created a national network is to cater to the national agencies demand. They were looking for a one-stop ad placement in the Chinese community."

Fung also has an AM and FM station in Toronto and earlier this year was awarded a licence for a Vancouver FM station. But he has no plans to expand further: "The market is more or less at a saturation point now."

In fact, Fung recently negotiated with Rogers to sell his money-losing TalentVision station. But the deal collapsed because Rogers couldn't get a licence. Fairchild says it will keep operating TalentVision.

Fung sees the market increasing in the long term because Ottawa welcomes wealthy immigrants.

The high-end nature of the Chinese market is also evident in the print media (all of which are branches of Hong Kong- and Taiwan-based media empires). A recent edition of the Hong Kong-based *Ming Pao*, which set up its Vancouver operations in 1993, includes advertisements from the Radisson Hotel, B.C. Tel, Future Shop and numerous car dealers. The real estate ads run in the thousands.

It's much the same story at *Sing Tao*, which has been operating in Vancouver since 1983.

These media sell their audiences a blend of news and entertainment from the old country, news about the local Chinese community and news about their new country, Canada.

Readers of English-language media would find many stories familiar: government announcements, economic news, international events. But there



Premier Glen Clark meets the press: More news conferences in Vancouver mean more direct contact with Chinese community.

are also unmistakable signs of a different cultural take in some areas.

Entertainment gets major coverage — and not just stories about Cantopop stars or the latest Hong Kong movie. When *Sunset Boulevard* opened in Vancouver, it got the entire front page of *Ming Pao's* entertainment section.

The biggest differences between Chinese- and English-language media are the way they cover their communities and the way they cover politics.

While English-language media have a tendency to focus on the image of wealthy Chinese immigrants taking over the city, Chinese-language media see their readers as a group struggling to overcome language, immigration, financial and employment problems — and sometimes failing.

Immigration gets heavy coverage, with the smallest change in trends generating a story. At Fairview, editor Charles Mak considers immigration, elections and community news his three major areas of coverage.

Drop in at an average day and you'll find Mak's two reporters hot on the trail of immigration-related stories.

It's the middle of the week, and the day's assignments fit neatly into a 10-by-10-cm square on the wall calendar. There's a ferry launch to cover, a no-fault insurance story and something about Premier Glen Clark's office being vandalized.

But Salinia Ng, the senior reporter, wants to research leads on the Lawrence Leung case. The former head of the immigration department of Hong Kong is headline news in both the Chinese and English-language media over reports he may have been a Chinese spy. Leung's daughter, Sylvia, was murdered in 1993 while walking to the BCI parking lot.

The station's other reporter, Kit Koon, gets off the phone to announce she's got an interview with an immigration lawyer. The story: Canadian visa offices in Asia are being closed.

The focus on immigration is echoed at the Taiwan-oriented *World Journal*, which recently ran a series on the difficulties of Taiwanese immigrants.

"Fifty per cent of Taiwanese are independent immigrants. They have technical skills, they are not rich investors," says David Tsou, the *Journal's* assignment editor. "They face big problems, find no jobs."

Chinese reporters and editors emphasize that Chinese media do not help Vancouver Chinese isolate themselves from the rest of the community. On the contrary: They act as a bridge to the new community.

New Chinese readers don't have much local political and social knowledge, so Chinese media add more explanatory material in their stories. *Sing Tao*, for instance, recently ran a series on career-preparation programs in high schools — an aspect of Canadian school life that is puzzling to immigrant parents.

News about local topics works to reduce the often wide gap between Asian and Canadian values, says Gabriel Liu, a commentator at CJVB.

"In Hong Kong money is the priority while relationships and the environment are second. The Chinese media plays a role by developing new Chinese-Canadian values."

There's widespread agreement that the Chinese media have a different approach to politics.

People as different as Wong and Tung Chan, president of Vancouver's Non-Partisan Association, describe Chinese media as more fact- and information-oriented than English-language media.

While English media emphasize drama, narrative and investigative digging in their reports, Chinese media tend to report what happens at press conferences and political meetings in a straightforward way.

Politicians love that kind of coverage, although it appears strange at first.

Vancouver Councillor Sam Sullivan said he was startled when the first article that appeared about him in *Ming Pao* was headlined "Councillor Sullivan has three priorities." It faithfully repeated exactly what he had said.

"I expect lots of interpretation and filtering. But they cover things in a very transparent way, less analysis, more just the straight goods."

NDP MLA Jenny Kwan, a former city councillor, agrees.

"The Chinese media tries to bring facts to the public rather than try to sensationalize like the mainstream media. The Chinese media tries to bring more balance into their stories, they spend more time with me trying to get background and the facts."

Some people see it as more respectful coverage, the kind of coverage that English papers had in the 1940s and '50s, before the Watergate watershed that created heroes of Woodward and Bernstein wannabes.

Another point of view is that it's just bad reporting — an unfortunate combination of chronic understaffing, a lack of experienced and qualified journalists, poor knowledge of local issues, and a deferential attitude to politicians.

"I think we are less critical," says one senior reporter in the Chinese media.

"We don't dig up stories. We are still telling our viewers about what politicians want to tell us. We go to a press conference by the attorney-general and come back and say, 'This is what the attorney general told us today.' We're not as critical as the mainstream reporters would be."

Benjamin Guo, an SFU communications graduate originally from Nanjing, says the Chinese media in Vancouver are more willing to challenge authority than Chinese reporters in Hong Kong, Taiwan or especially China.

But "[they're] not very critical of the provincial or federal government. . . . It's a kind of an attitude towards authority that they have."

There's also the problem of getting trained, stable staff. *Sing Tao* city editor Bob Ip notes that, with only eight full-time and two part-time reporters, his newspaper can't produce the kind of in-depth stories the English media do. It's hard to find trained journalists in the city who can work in English and write good Chinese.

In the major English-language media, the market is so competitive that inexperienced reporters rarely get hired. About half of the city's Chinese-language journalists did not start out intending to have careers in the media.

The *World Journal's* David Tsou was a computer programmer in Taiwan. But he couldn't get a job doing that in Vancouver, so now he's the assignment editor — a job he finds more rewarding.

The mobility factor in Chinese media is high, too. "Many return to Hong Kong to get a better job," Ip says.

Chinese reporters and editors are lower paid than their unionized English counterparts. Chinese newspapers are fat with ads, but while a full-page black-and-white ad in *The Vancouver Sun* costs about \$19,000 (\$22,000 on Saturday), a similar ad in *Sing Tao* costs \$700 (\$770 on the weekend).

Chinese culture also sees journalism as a low-status occupation. "In Hong Kong," Koon says, "people look at reporting as a dirty job. You get underpaid and you have to work very hard."

But Chinese reporters are getting more confident, critical and eclectic.

"For years the Chinese media would only report good things about the local Chinese community," says CJVB's Yui. "If something bad had occurred, nobody would touch it. But now we don't need to consider group feelings so much."

Sandra Wilking, who was the only Chinese-Canadian city councillor for the 1986-88 term, sees a change.

"I think they're getting more challenging to politicians and to issues. I see that in the younger ones." ◊

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