



CENSORSHIP IN HONG KONG AND BEYOND

by Carol Ann Tan, Dramaturg

Though *Wild Boar* is a play born from the specific socio-historical context of Hong Kong, it possesses broader relevance to modern American audiences for the way it interrogates freedom of expression, censorship, and government-press relations.

Hong Kong was once a British colony, following China's defeat by Britain during the Opium Wars. In 1898, to solidify its control over Hong Kong, Britain leased additional land from China — known as the New Territories — and promised to return the land in 99 years. But returning only the New Territories to China would have caused disruptive uncertainty over property rights and contracts; so, in 1997, Britain transferred sovereignty over Hong Kong to China under the “one country, two systems” principle, where Hong Kong maintains a largely independent political, legal, and economic system from China. This agreement, known as the Sino-British Joint Declaration, is set to expire in 2047, 50 years after it was first implemented. Beyond 2047, Hong Kong's future is deeply uncertain: will it become a full part of China, or will it continue to enjoy a degree of autonomy?

Fearful of losing the right to self-determination, an increasing number of Hong Kongers have begun pushing for greater democracy. For example, every year on the first of July (the anniversary of Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China), Hong Kong activists hold a protest addressing political concerns like universal suffrage and freedom of expression. But in recent years, China has begun censoring pro-democracy perspectives in the media — in violation of the “one country, two systems” principle. These measures raise concerns about Hong Kong's immediate status as an independent region, and perhaps foreshadow China's eventual intentions concerning its relationship with Hong Kong.

To that end, China may be employing physical violence and intimidation tactics. Since the 1990s, a series of unsolved attacks have been carried out against journalists and media owners who take pro-democracy stances. A notable example occurred in February 2014 when Kevin Lau, the editor-in-chief of the Hong Kong daily newspaper *Ming Pao*, was stabbed multiple times. His two assailants admitted to being offered HK\$100,000 each to “teach Lau a lesson,” though they would not name who they were working for.

More covertly, China has also applied economic pressure to discourage print and digital publishers alike from taking pro-democracy stances. For instance, starting in November 2013, companies backed by mainland China began pulling their advertising from the free daily *AM730*. Officially, these companies claimed to be changing their advertising strategy — but the close timing of the withdrawals suggested that political motivations were actually at play. *AM730* had relied on these companies to provide HK\$10 million in advertising fees per year.

As a result, Hong Kong is seeing a growing culture of self-censorship, where reporters downplay perspectives that could upset the government or advertisers in order to protect their personal and organizational interests. According to a 2012 survey by the Hong Kong Journalists' Association, 79% of respondents felt that self-censorship had increased since 2005. And, arguably, self-censorship is the most effective form of censorship out there. After all, outright bans tend to attract widespread

outrage, and sometimes even backfire by drawing more attention to controversial issues than they otherwise would have received. But if journalists and institutions are already producing work that serve the state’s agenda, then the consequences of external censorship don’t apply.

Because censorship violates the right to free expression, debates about the issue typically spark knee jerk outrage. But the situation presented in *Wild Boar* is more complex. *Wild Boar* specifically asks whether the government has the right to withhold information from its citizens — especially when the government believes that the information would prevent people from acting in their best interests. Typically, in Western democracies, government transparency is a coveted ideal; we, the people, ostensibly elect public officials based on what we know of their policies and beliefs. Likewise, we can only exercise our democratic right to kick our leaders out of office if we know about the problematic things our leaders have done.



Hong Kong fans hold signs and banners at a World Cup qualifying match on November 17, 2015. (Bobby Yip, Reuters)

But government secrecy can be equally integral to democracy. We elect public officials so that they may represent us in creating and executing policy — including projects that may only be effective when kept secret, such as those that involve national security.

In short, democratic governance requires both transparency and secrecy. On one hand, governments are held accountable by an informed public — and mechanisms like a free press help protect the people’s right to know. On the other hand, representative democracy can be achieved even if the people do not possess perfect information. So *Wild Boar* isn’t simply preaching that government secrecy is *never* desirable; rather, it’s asking: when does secrecy turn into paternalistic overreach?

In considering that question, *Wild Boar* also reminds us that every institution — including the free press — ultimately serves its own interests. As discussed earlier, the media’s interests can be manipulated to encourage a culture of self-censorship. But even when left alone, the media’s interests still may not align with that of the people. And we can use an example closer to home to illustrate this. During the most recent American presidential election, truth was often compromised for sensationalism, website clicks, and social media affirmation — a tradeoff made even by news outlets we’d typically consider reliable.

Democracies undeniably thrive on the free flow of information. But as *Wild Boar* points out, the news is never objective. Facts are never presented without interpretation. Consequently, it is our personal responsibility to critically and independently assess what we’ve been told.