

Leung Lai Kuen, **An Apple Fell Down: A Study of the Apple-fication Phenomenon in Hong Kong Newspapers Industry**, (in Chinese, **Pingguo diaoxialai: Xianggang baoye pingguohua xianxiang yanjiu**), Hong Kong: Subculture Publishing, 2006, 243 pages, HK\$80, (paperback).

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In the run up to the millennium, Hong Kong local media study was infused with a heavy sense of nostalgia. Works included *A Comment on the Press of Hong Kong*<sup>1</sup>, giving an overview of Hong Kong press history in the past 100 years; *Jin Yong (Louis Cha) and the Press*,<sup>2</sup> documenting Jin Yong's legacy to Ming Pao and Hong Kong's press industry; and *The Memoirs of Hong Kong Press*<sup>3</sup> providing an insider's view of Hong Kong press in the 1970s and 1980s. These works are largely laments of Hong Kong's good old days of the press. In contrast, Leung's *An Apple Fell Down* is focused firmly on the present. Her work is a study and analysis of *Apple Daily* and the trend she describes as the "apple-fication" of Hong Kong. Leung's timely work, rich in data and piercing insights, was shortlisted for Hong Kong's Cattle Book Prize of 2006.

*Apple Daily* is a newspaper started by Hong Kong tycoon, Jimmy Lai, in 1995 as a concerted attempt to catch the train of political transition in 1997 when the PRC government would resume its sovereignty over Hong Kong. For most publications, we will either love it or hate it. Yet with *Apple Daily*, so many in Hong Kong have fallen into the spell of loving it and hating it at the same time, reading it yet condemning it all the time. *Apple Daily* is the second most popular newspaper in Hong Kong, but it is notoriously controversial.

To capture the above dilemma, Leung's book devotes eight chapters to account for the rise of *Apple Daily*, its uniqueness, its influence --- not only on Hong Kong's local press and media industry, but on Hong Kong society as a whole. It is an account of a schizophrenic desire to be the most popular newspaper in Hong Kong at any cost, and to be one of the last noble fortresses of political freedom. *Apple Daily* is a strange hybrid of frivolity and seriousness. It is famous for its tabloid, colourful style of reporting with food reviews, shopping tips and travel guides. It has its own team of paparazzi. Mostly, it maintains a daily pornography column and prostitution guide. Yet, the paper also has biting political commentaries and serious social discussions. Oddly enough, it has persuaded famous and highly respected writers to have their columns stationed at *Apple Daily*. Of these, David Tang maintains a weekly column on the proper use of English; Dong Qiao writes about Chinese culture and art; Zun Zi, the defiant caricaturist publishes his satirical cartoons there; and Wang Dang, the famous student leader of the 1989 June 4 student movement in Beijing and other political dissidents, are regular contributors.

It is said that in October 2001, *Apple Daily* tried to purge its disreputable image due to public pressure by removing its pornography column, but the editor claimed sales dropped from 100,000 to a few ten thousands per day. Due to consumers' demand, the column was reinstated in January 2002 (p.

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<sup>1</sup> Li Gu Cheng, *A Comment on the Press of Hong Kong* (Ming Pao Press Ltd. 1996, in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> Zhang Gui Yang, *Jin Yong (Louis Cha) and the Press* (Ming Pao Press Ltd. 2000, in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> Ma Song Bai, *The Memoirs of Hong Kong Press* (Commercial Press 2001, in Chinese).

59). If true, shame on *Apple Daily*, and shame on its readers. And if true, it was a contradictory account of Hong Kong's schizophrenic society to embrace vulgarity and the practice of infotainment news reporting, yet condemn populism and paparazzi at the same time.

Pointed out succinctly by Leung, the trend started by *Apple Daily* includes (1) turning news into a mere commercial commodity. Good news is no longer determined by important or influential events but rather by sensationalistic stories, like the suicide or death of pop idols; (2) turning rumours and pseudo events into news. The cost that *Apple Daily* has to bear includes numerous defamation lawsuits and being convicted of corruption charges for buying news from police officers; (3) adopting tabloid style of reporting to the mainstream media. For instance, on average, 500 colour photos are used per day (p. 39). Short, catchy even vulgar captions are used. The heavy price is often criminal prosecutions. Between 1995 and 2006, *Apple Daily* had been convicted under the Obscene and Indecent Article Ordinance for 56 times (p. 77). The last major influence is turning reporters into paparazzi, digging up trivial stories of public figures. Readers are often recruited as informers with a special citizen hotline being set up (p. 52). In sum, the success formula of *Apple Daily* is a combination of exploitation, distortion, exaggeration and tabloid style of reporting (p. 63). Sadly, according to Leung, *Apple Daily's* style of reporting was mimicked by others in the press industry, by pop magazines, by radio phone-in programs, by TV programs and by Hong Kong's popular culture. This has caused a dramatic drop of intellectual capacity of the locals, a drastic shrinking of elite culture and has triggered a credibility crisis to the media in Hong Kong.

If the above are the major 'crimes' of *Apple Daily*, one of its major contributions is its aggressive style that has brought a new breadth of accountability on authority, indirectly causing the resignations and dismissals of certain officials. Furthermore, it is the sole newspaper in Hong Kong which can afford to offend the rich and powerful, withstanding business censorship after criticizing practice of supermarket cartels and the powerful Hong Kong Bank group (p. 168). It provides a platform for political dissidents. Its direct and clear stance in opposing the proposed article 23 bill back in 2003, was believed to have a direct impact in persuading half a million people to march on the streets (p. 149). The difficult issue is whether *Apple Daily's* virtues could balance its vices. Leung did not provide a clear answer but lets the readers ponder deeply into this perplexing problem.

Leung's work is well-documented and researched. Arguments are clear and strong, supported by concrete facts. If one has to be critical, perhaps the direct voice of Jimmy Lai would add a special flavor to this important work. While Leung has criticized the decline of language standard attributed to *Apple Daily's* use of vocabulary, her occasional use of vulgarity is a bit unsettling for readers like me.

Regardless whether *Apple Daily* is a vice or virtue in Hong Kong culture, it has provided the daily staple for gossip in town and has kept Hong Kong's culture beating. For so many ages, the metaphor of an apple has the enormous power to conjure up endless images in our minds. When *Apple Daily* was launched in 1995, the television advertisements posed Jimmy Lai as the son of William Tell, facing fearlessly endless arrow shots darting at him, signifying his determination and undaunted spirits despite attacks on all sides. More than a decade has passed, *Apple Daily* has probably only reminded us the story of Adam and Eve, tasted once, forever fallen.