

Statement of Xinshu Zhao

March 1, 2012

On January 13, 2012, I released a poll of 836 Hong Kong residents about their support for the candidates for Hong Kong Chief Executive. No weights were added to the results. I released exactly what I received from my supporting staff who executed the poll and wrote the press release.

Since this incident, I have been portrayed as a villain. The media, mainstream or otherwise, put the story on the front pages and headlines, devoting entire pages and long episodes, day after day, night after night. Every detail of my past 56 years was scrutinized and selectively used to present a one-sided picture. Innocent colleagues were also publicly attacked, by name. Reporters, often dozens of them, patrolled the corridors of my school trying to get a picture of me and interviewing students and colleagues. Some of them hide outside my apartment, day and night, weekdays and weekends. Several of them, several times when I was not home, tried to force their way into the apartment, claiming to be deliver men or gas meter readers, harassing my family members who happened to be in Hong Kong.

From the very beginning, I assured the media and the public that I have not received any political pressure from anyone. And my actions were not politically motivated. I acknowledged that I seriously underestimated the sensitivity and the potential impact of the past two polls I

directed during this election. I took full responsibility for the misjudgments and I resigned from the Deanship of the School of Communication and Directorship of HongCOMM survey.

But none of that was enough. Some people wanted me fired as a professor, so as to protect academic freedom. Some people demanded to search my personal bank accounts, mails, telephone records and other private information, supposedly to protect my academic freedom.

This session is about academic freedom. I was the only academic staff member and the principal investigator in the January 13 poll release. What my experience says about academic freedom in Hong Kong? How my experience will affect the development of academic freedom in Hong Kong?

One message is: If you release a poll of 836 respondents without adding weights, you could become the villain of Hong Kong. You could do harm to the reputation of your University, School, and Department. You could be investigated, and there could be political pressure on the investigation to find you responsible. You may have to resign, not only from your administrative position, but also from your academic position. Some may demand that you be fired. Your family members could be harassed and attacked. Innocent colleagues of yours may be attacked and investigated. In short, you could receive all treatment deserving of a villain.

As I explained in an earlier statement, the results of the poll were beyond my control. I did not manipulate the data passed to me by my colleagues. No one could have anticipated on January 13 what January 17 results would be. No one had access to the weighted results on January 13.

Oh, yes, other things happened that many people in Hong Kong thought were important. HKBU Council Chair supported one candidate. A staff of that candidate called a public listed phone of my staff. But these were all beyond my control. In fact, I did not even pay attention to the political positions or activities of HKBU Council Chair or the candidates. I say it is academic freedom and political neutrality in its purest – I did not care what politicians said or did while conducting this poll. Unfortunately, as my experience showed, in the Hong Kong context, being that free and that neutral was also being politically insensitive and even naïve.

If historians look back at this episode, I suspect they will find plenty of ironies. A professor and the director of a poll, who also happened to be the dean, released the results based on 836 respondents without adding weights. The media and many others decided it was premature and weights should have been added. They suspected that politicians have interfered with the academic freedom of this professor. The professor denied it and others, including the politicians, denied it. But the professor became the villain. He apologized for not knowing that people would be upset. He apologized for getting the people upset. He resigned from the deanship. He resigned from the directorship. But some people still wanted him fired as a professor. They wanted his bank accounts and other private information searched. These people were hailed as heroic protectors of academic freedom.

I have no doubt that all sides were sincere when they vouched to protect academic freedom following the 2012 HongComm Survey incident. Unfortunately, a firm belief in a pre-conceived story and zealous pursuit of a villain(s) have produced less freedom, at least for the

time being, at least for a few individuals like Xinshu Zhao, whose research might touch upon Hong Kong politics.

Xinshu Zhao will certainly stay as far away from Hong Kong politics as he possible can. It's up to the journalists, politicians, administrators, activists, and other people of Hong Kong to understand that what happened to Xinshu Zhao could and will happen to many more people, including themselves, unless the rules of the game is significantly improved. Hong Kong is in transition, hopefully toward a democracy with more freedom. Transition can be painful and often require sacrifices. Xinshu Zhao was not the first and will not be the last to experience some suffering. What's important is that we the society learn something from such suffering. One thing I hope we will learn is that a true democracy and freedom depends on a responsible and balanced press. If we learn that lesson, maybe we can prevent what happened to Xinshu Zhao from happening again to others, including those who have not been fair to Xinshu Zhao. If that happens, I will consider Xinshu Zhao's suffering worthwhile.