Codes of Conduct in Hong Kong: 
Panic, Panacea or Pantomime?

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Prof. Snell is Associate Professor in the Department of Management at the City University of Hong Kong, where he has worked since 1992. He has a PhD from Lancaster University, UK, where he worked before coming to Hong Kong. He has edited two journals, Management Education and Developing and Management Learning. Drawing on his background in management developing, he became interested in the development aspects of business ethics and in 1993 Chapman and Hall published his book Developing Skills for Ethical Management. He has published on business ethics in Human Relations, Personnel Review, British Journal of Management, Human Resource Management Journal and Journal of Business Ethics. Recently, he was awarded a CERG grant to study business ethics on the Chinese mainland.

Prof. Snell writes about his topic:
Corporate codes of conduct (or codes of ethics) are written statements of desired employee behavior, sometimes embracing stricter moral standards than are required by law. Before the 1997 transfer of sovereignty, the Hong Kong government urged companies to adopt such codes, and more than 1600 organisations in Hong Kong have done so. Using a variety of research methods, Robin Snell’s study investigated the manner in which Hong Kong companies introduced codes to the workplace, the content and language of the codes themselves, and their perceived impact. The findings of the study included:
1. Companies consulted the Hong Kong Ethics Development Centre about code construction, but did not involve employees in the process.
2. Codes tended to emphasise anti-corruption (e.g. bribery, conflict of interest, insider trading, misuse of corporate assets), and neglect issues of wider social responsibility (e.g. environmental protection).
3. Companies introduced codes in a low-profile manner.
4. During a seven-month period after code adoption, there was some moderate decline in moral climate, but no change in perceived standards of conduct.
5. The emphasis appeared to be one of stopping things getting worse, rather than developing moral climates.

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