ONE EVENT, THREE STORIES
Media Narratives of the Handover of Hong Kong in Cultural China

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Abstract / This article analyzes how the media from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong constructed their respective narratives about the handover of Hong Kong – based on their institutional configurations, the relevance of the story to their home constituencies, their conventions of news-making and the cultural repertoire on which they drew to make the event intelligible. Domesticating a global media event reflects and reproduces each society as a discursive community; in a defining moment like this, the media bind each society through their shared ways of interpretations and expression.

Keywords / Cultural China / discursive community / domestication / framing / Hong Kong / news narrative

At midnight, 30 June 1997, a 'solemn and meticulously scripted' flag lowering and raising ceremony crowned a series of events that led to Britain's hand-over of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC).[1] The historical and political significance of this ceremony went beyond a simple rite of diplom-acy and symbolized a host of imagined fundamental clashes such as colonialism vs nationalism, capitalism vs Communism and East vs West. The handover loomed larger than life also because of the world's lingering memory of the Tiananmen crackdown, which continued to be a source of uneasiness for Hong Kong. As a global 'media event' (Dayan and Katz, 1992), the handover attracted more than 8000 journalists from around the world, making Hong Kong a site of ideological contestation over which various discursive communities constructed their narratives. This article seeks to analyze how the media from the PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan – three contentious discursive communities in what Tu (1991) calls 'Cultural China' – tried to make sense of what undoubtedly would come down in Chinese history as a watershed event.

Discursive Community and the Handover of Hong Kong

A 'discursive community' is a group of people who share a framework to inter-pret their 'lived and living' everyday experiences and resort to a set of common conventions to talk about them (Fish, 1980; Wuthnow, 1989; Lincoln, 1989).[2] The discursive binding of such a community shines at critical moments or

around special occurrences which function as a reference point and furnish a rich repertoire of cultural symbols. As public stages, mass media rank among the most important institutionally regulated venues for each community to express discursively its shared experiences and to disclose its underlying cultural and ideological premises (Edelman, 1988; Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1994). Events of historic importance mobilize the resources of each community's public arena (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988) and reinforce its core values. In writing about the US media, Gans (1980: 37) said that foreign news was treated as a variation on domestic themes 'relevant to Americans or American interests' and 'with interpretations that apply American values'. This is also true of other media systems. The world media tend to selectively 'domesticate' (Cohen et al., 1996) an event like the handover of Hong Kong in consonance with the 'enduring values' (Gans, 1980), national interests and foreign policy agendas (Lee and Yang, 1995) of their home countries. They draw metaphors from their own cultural repertoire to make the event seem more relevant and meaningful to their home audiences. Of course, the journalist's personal biography, the organizational constraints of the media and the larger media environment all come to influence news production with varying strength.

In each society, the political system is a paramount structural apparatus for building its media narrative. The media always favor an unusual event full of drama, suspense, emotion and vivid images. The prescheduled nature of the handover enabled the media to plan ahead of time the resources needed for knitting their 'news net' and for developing their interpretative canons (Tuchman, 1978). However, the process of regime change turned out to be so surprisingly smooth and peaceful as to rob the story of its essential elements to make a good 'media event' (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Journalists thus had to 'hype' news elements of spectacle, festivity and theatricality in order to attract audience attention. Staged conflict was a frequently used technique to achieve this effect, while producing 'color' stories that purported to capture the 'mood' was another. These commonalities notwithstanding, the media also created narratives that varied with the 'institutional configurations within the media and the social order' (Dahlgren, 1991: 9), thus painting different 'colors' and catching different 'moods' in their coverage. In general, the market-based media systems must adhere to the ritual of journalistic objectivity (Tuchman, 1972) and orient themselves toward the entertainment logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979; McManus, 1994). Consequently, as a self-professed guardian of Hong Kong's liberty after the British exit, the US media harped on pessimistically about Hong Kong's imminent erosion of democracy, press freedom and human rights. The British media showed a strong sense of 'imperial nostalgia', even going out of their way to stress that Britain had brought civilization to the world and left a good legacy in Hong Kong. The Japanese media were primarily interested in Hong Kong's continued stability to protect their own business opportunities, while oblivious to its democratic yearnings. In contrast, the Chinese Communist organs sought to uphold the kind of national glory that Taiwan did not aspire to and Hong Kong felt ambivalent about.

Thus conceptualized, this article examines how the three Chinese discursive communities authored their media accounts of the handover event. Borrowing

from Gamson, we employ a form of framing analysis to deconstruct the media stories and then reconstruct them into what he calls discursive 'packages' (Gamson et al., 1992; Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, 1989). Each package is a textual conglomerate with a primary frame (Goffman, 1974), a conceptual scheme that threads the observable signification devices into a coherent whole. The signification devices include concrete textual elements (such as images, catchphrases, metaphors, depictions and exemplars) that reflect the underlying structures (thematic scheme and grammar) of the story (Pan and Kosicki, 1993; van Dijk, 1988). This analysis thus makes a semiotic comparison of media narratives along the paradigmatic axis and the syntagmatic axis (Fiske, 1982). Paradigmatically, we examined the choices of textual units as small as words, images, metaphors and catchphrases and as large as sources and historical exemplars. Syntagmatically, we unpacked the rules or conventions that 'structure' such textual units into a coherent narrative.

Our analysis covered the period between 16 June and 5 July 1997, straddling the formal handover on 1 July. We analyzed texts – routine news, special reports, documentaries and live coverage – from 28 media outlets (including eight from the PRC, nine from Taiwan and 11 from Hong Kong), all chosen for their significance and representativeness.[3] We also interviewed many of the journalists from these media outlets: 11 from the PRC, eight from Taiwan and 10 from Hong Kong. The interviews probed the journalists' background, interests and beliefs. More important, we explored the ways their organizations wove the 'news net' or utilized available resources to meet challenge in a competitive environment.

Resource Mobilization: Political vs Market Games

Treating the handover of Hong Kong as a political game, the PRC authorities orchestrated a massive media mobilization effort to stage a 'national ceremony' for an event that had been touted as a major achievement of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In early April, the CCP's Propaganda Department began to organize a workshop, urging more than 80 chief editors from Party newspapers to create a 'more hospitable opinion atmosphere' for Hong Kong's return to the motherland. A month later the Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television held a similar workshop with directors from provincial radio and television stations. In its wake, the Propaganda Department and the Office of Hong Kong and Macao Affairs of the State Council issued a guideline stipulating the principles of media coverage and the political terms of language to be used. The policy was to be implemented down to the very basic unit in the propaganda system.

Of the 16 media outlets chosen to cover the handover, the big three – China Central Television (CCTV), the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency – not only accounted for a lion's share of the 610-member entourage but also established command centers at their Beijing headquarters. These skillful journalists were given lengthy training sessions to review Deng's speech on 'one country and two systems', the Basic Law and the general conditions of Hong Kong. The scale of CCTV's operation was particularly grand: it formed a special team in

1996 headed by the director himself, and then set up a Hong Kong office in March 1997, altogether involving 1600 people (of whom 289 were in Hong Kong, 100 were sent to cover eight different cities in China and 15 cities abroad). Xinhua's handover team consisted of 89 reporters in Beijing and 25 from the Hong Kong bureau; the *People's Daily* dispatched 27 reporters and editorial writers to join the five members in its Hong Kong bureau.

The CCP wanted to harness the national ceremony as a condensed and crystallized expression of patriotic emotions and at the same time, mindful of historical precedents, was determined to contain the mass euphoria. To that end, the authorities organized tightly controlled extravaganzas visually appealing for live television coverage simultaneously in eight strategically selected cities, including Shanghai (the CCP's birthplace), Nanjing (where the treaty of ceding Hong Kong was signed), Guangzhou (the capital of Guangdong province adjacent to Hong Kong), Shenzhen (a special economic zone next to Hong Kong) and Dongguan (a small city along the Hong Kong border where the burning of British opium triggered the war that lost Hong Kong). Moreover, to create the semblance of a unified voice, the party-state accorded special advantages on the big three official organs. The Office of Hong Kong and Macao Affairs in Beijing and the Hong Kong Branch of the Xinhua News Agency liaised between the official organs and the Hong Kong members of the transition team to facilitate the officially scripted coverage.

Contrary to official Chinese media's big-splash coverage, the Hong Kong media had since 1984 chronicled every minute development in the tumultuous process of political transition (Chan and Lee, 1991). What needed to be told had been told. Even though the handover itself was only part of an unfolding story, each media outlet still summoned every bit of resources to meet the challenge. Comparing coverage to a war mission, an editor from the mass-circulation *Oriental Daily* boasted that his boss 'did not care about spending money' and granted every budget request made by reporters. Every paper published a special commemoration issue on 1 July. Local television stations devoted 24–48 hours to live coverage; TVB (Television Broadcasts) alone reserved 400 people for the project. All told, 106 media outlets registered a total of 2816 journalists with the handover organizers to, in the words of a leading political editor, 'document the history'. The broadcast industry (two commercial stations, one cable system and one public channel) formed a voluntary consortium that supplied signals through satellite feed to the world. Instead of being mobilized from the political center, the media followed a mixture of political and market imperatives; standing sentry over the political environment in flux was, after all, a major source of their economic interest. An editor from the English-language *South China Morning Post* admitted that the media were also fighting to shed off their 'timid' and 'self-censorship' images (see Lee, 1998). Echoing this sentiment, an editor from *Ming Pao* claimed that the paper was trying seriously to pursue hard facts and capture 'public mood' rather than simply do 'song and dance stories'.

Across the strait, Taiwan as a non-participant found itself a likely victim of the handover. Since the 'one country, two systems' policy was originally conceived to lure Taiwan into ultimate reunification with China, Taiwan could

become the next target of the PRC's pressure after Hong Kong. Taiwan's 42 media outlets dispatched a contingent of 528 journalists to Hong Kong, ranking fifth in size among all the countries. They mapped out their own 'news net' (Tuchman, 1978) with utmost attention paid to what kind of media strategies their rivals were devising, but political democratization had ruled out the possibility of government meddling. TTV (Taiwan Television Company), the largest network, having formed a ''97 Group' and begun to air a special series titled 'The Uncertain Future', now assigned 39 staff to Hong Kong armed with a fat budget of US$4 million. TVBS (Television Broadcasts Satellite) teamed up with TVB, its Hong Kong parent company. Favoring a status quo relationship with mainland China, the two leading newspaper chains – the *United Daily News* and the *China Times* – each posted a 20-member team led by the chief editor in an effort to outwit the other. The cash-rich *Liberty Times*, which preferred Taiwan's secession from China, did not opt to mount a comparable operation but concentrated on domestic reactions instead. The *Central Daily News*, a ruling party organ, found itself ideologically too awkward and financially too strained to face journalistic competition. The fringe, pro-independence *Minzhong Daily* only had a stringer on the spot to cover the extravaganza. Overall, the Taiwan media suffered from having discriminatory access to newsmakers from Britain, the PRC and Hong Kong, who had granted frequent interviews with major foreign and PRC media but consistently ignored similar requests from Taiwan journalists.

Media Narratives: Celebration, Rejection and Uncertainty

Although media outlets from the same political system might construct different narratives, this internal variation was dwarfed by comparison to the vast media contrast reflecting the constituencies, concerns and signification of the three distinctly different Chinese systems. Following Gamson and Lasch (1983), we constructed the 'signature matrix' to summarize the distinct discursive packages found in the media coverage.[4] In sum, we observe that China's media played up an ideologically and emotionally charged show of national festivity, the Hong Kong media revealed a sense of uncertainty and confusion about the territory becoming a part of China, and the Taiwan media rejected Beijing's effort to extend the Hong Kong formula to the island nation. There was little overlap in these packages.

The PRC Media: A 'Nation-Family Celebration'

The PRC media articulated the thesis of national celebration through four major discursive packages – national achievement, national festival, national family and a brighter future – each distinguished by a central organizing scheme and corresponding signification devices. Together they recreated a highly politicized myth of Chinese as a nation-family (*guojia*). National festivity being a family affair, expression of patriotic feelings was mingled with the rituals of ancestral worship. On the eve of the handover, for example, a CCTV program featured a family memorial of Lin Zexu, an official who ordered the burning of confiscated

British opium and triggered the Opium War in 1840. The caption read, 'The family commemorating the ancestor and welcoming Hong Kong's return.' After a high-ranking official and the most senior member of the family clan read a eulogy in a hometown gathering, 300 descendants recited a pledge of patriotism to their distinguished ancestor. Similarly, CCTV and the *People's Daily* repeatedly quoted jubilant citizens as saying that they felt 'happier than celebrating the Chinese New Year', a traditional holiday for family reunion. They profusely praised all 'children of the Yellow Emperor' who should be united as closely as 'flesh and bones' in the 'big motherland family'.

The 'children of the Yellow Emperor' all over the world were to be embraced by Mother China from Beijing. For days, the *People's Daily* carried special sections featuring various overseas Chinese communities honoring Hong Kong's return. Special care was taken to reflect geographical balance and to create a global appearance. For example, on 2 July, this special section carried stories originating from London, Washington, Tokyo, Melbourne and Johannesburg, each representing a continent. CCTV sent 22 crews to cover different cities within China and around the world; activities in various locations were synchronized on the same screen to construct a mythical concept of 'Chinese' that transcended spatial divide.

Visually revealing of this spatial orientation toward the nation-family in Beijing, CCTV centered its coverage on a 'countdown clock' at the center of Tiananmen Square. 'The countdown clock has forever become a monument in people's heart', a CCTV anchor announced in Beijing on 1 July. It was followed by a camera shot of a sea of people surging toward the clock. Then came a passionate voiceover: 'This is a spectacular festival for the Chinese nation, a ceremony of the century.' The camera shot shifted to a prerecorded live scene of the 30 June midnight celebration on Tiananmen Square which started with a CCTV reporter exclaiming to the camera: 'Friends, let's count down. 10, 9, 8, . . . Hong Kong has come home!' Thousands of people gathered and roared around him. Then a giant television screen placed on Tiananmen Square showed CCTV's live coverage of the handover ceremony in Hong Kong. The screen was now jammed with scenes of national flags, fireworks and dances accompanied by the sound of the national anthem and thunderous acclamations from the Square. Then, the CCTV report cut to one city after another, repeating the same jubilant scene and acclamation.

The head of the nation-family is the CCP. News commentaries emphasized that washing away 150 years of national humiliation by reclaiming Hong Kong was only possible under the CCP's 'correct leadership'. CCTV quoted a uniformed railway worker as saying with excitement, 'Without the CCP, there would be no new China; without the CCP, there would be no reform and openness; without reform and openness, there would not be a strong motherland; without a strong motherland, there would be no return of Hong Kong.' The opening paragraph of the *People's Daily* editorial on 30 June read:

> *Tomorrow, 1 July, is the 76th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, also the happy day of Hong Kong's reunification with the motherland to wash away 100 years of national humiliation. Having two celebrations in one day is a rare moment in our country's political*

life. All Party comrades and people of different ethnic groups, with unparalleled excitement,
warmly celebrate the reunification of Hong Kong and praise our great Party!

Taiwan Media: Our Nation, Not Your Family

Contrasting Beijing's euphoria was the subdued mood of the Taiwan media.
While showing a 'national achievement' package in their coverage, the Taiwan
media credited Hong Kong's return to the Chinese *people*, not the CCP. The
other discursive packages – 'one country, one better system', future of Taiwan,
say 'no' to Chinese expansion, and celebration hysteria – all drew sharp dis-
tinctions between Taiwan and the PRC.

The government held an historical exhibition showing that it was the
Kuomintang (KMT) government, not the Communists, who had led China to
defeat the Japanese invasion and brought the country to international promi-
nence. Also retrieved from KMT archives for display was an original copy of the
Nanjing Treaty which ceded Hong Kong to Britain. Citing this document,
Foreign Minister John Chang claimed that only the Republic of China (ROC)
held historical continuity to the history of the Chinese *nation* (*minzu*), a delib-
erate reference to an identity larger than the PRC. He was quoted by the *China
Times* as saying: 'Had Britain negotiated with us over the return of Hong Kong,
there would have been much less uncertainty because there would be no need
to have "one country, two systems"; all would [be governed by] the ROC's free
democratic system.' President Li Denghui and Vice-President Lian Zhan, in
their interviews with domestic and foreign media, repeatedly refuted Beijing's
'one country, two systems' and promoted what they called 'one country, one
system – a better system', meaning Taiwan's flourishing democracy.

Taiwan's mainstream media echoed the official position that there was one
China (as a *nation*) with a divided sovereignty enjoyed equally by two separate
governments (as sovereign *states*). They reported prominently Vice-President
Lian's proclamation, to NBC's Tom Brokow, that 'Taiwan is part of China, but
not part of the PRC' (*China Times*, 22 June). While expressing satisfaction at
Hong Kong's returning to 'the Chinese *nation*', the head of Taiwan's Mainland
Affairs Committee announced that Taiwan as a sovereign *state* would not accept
a local government status under the PRC's 'one country, two systems' policy
(*China Times*, 16 June). The pro-independence media such as the *Liberty Times*
even treated China and Taiwan as two separate political entities; to them, the
distinction between a nation and a state was irrelevant. The paper (24 June)
warned that if *China's* leaders should refuse to listen to the voice of *Taiwan*
people and should seek to impose 'Chinese nationalism', there would be blood-
shed. On 29 June, its report on a 'Say No to China' rally was headlined, 'Oppos-
ing Chinese Annexation, The Whole of Taiwan Expresses Her Wish'. Taiwan
was portrayed as a homogeneous entity separated from China.

While the PRC media tried aggressively to incorporate various spatially
scattered Chinese communities into the confine of its nation-family, the Taiwan
media focused their attention on Taiwan's future, which meant paradoxically
both bringing Taiwan closer to the PRC and distancing itself from the PRC. The
China Times ran an exclusive interview in three parts with Zhou Nan, then the

PRC's chief representative in Hong Kong. A front-page story printed Zhou's assurance that it would be 'more convenient for Taiwan people to visit Hong Kong after 1 July'. In a wide-ranging 'question and answer' report, Zhou was quoted as telling Taiwan to 'put away its worries'. The third report, written by its chief editor, heaped praises on Zhou. Similarly, the media were preoccupied for weeks with whether a senior Taiwan representative, Gu Zhenfu, would be invited to attend the handover ceremony, whether he would accept the invitation, where he would be seated among all the dignitaries, and whether he would visit with PRC or new Hong Kong officials to resume long-stalled negotiations with the mainland. Despite the difficulties in obtaining interviews with key British, PRC or Hong Kong officials, the Taiwan media seemed alive and wide ranging in reporting about their own government activities, protest rallies, Taiwan's political status and future business opportunities in Hong Kong. In contrast, the PRC media reports of festivity and jubilation were abstractly framed and devoid of concrete real-life experiences.

Hong Kong Media: Uncertain of Being Part of the Nation-Family

Serving a former colony inhabited by political and economic refugees from the Chinese Communist revolution, Hong Kong's media had always reflected deep-seated suspicion and fear of the PRC as a source of disturbance. The handover was a *fait accompli* arranged by Britain and China, over which the Hong Kong people did not have any say (Chan and Lee, 1991). The main concern now was whether China would indeed honor its promise to prevent 'one country' from interfering with the 'two systems'. The media coverage displayed four discursive packages: the 'one country, two systems' model, the quest for democracy, the British legacy and mixed feelings.

Capturing the essence of these discursive packages was the 1 July special issue of the *South China Morning Post*, which ran the full text in both English and Chinese of President Jiang Zemin's speech at the handover ceremony. The headline read, 'Pledge on Rights and Non-Interference'. At the center of the page, Jiang's huge close-up shot was juxtaposed with photos of other world leaders and their brief greetings, as if to convey that 'the whole world is watching'. The mass-circulation *Apple Daily* also designed a striking front-page taken up by a whole picture of Chinese and Hong Kong SAR flags being hoisted; it ran a caption in huge bold-face that expressed a mixture of hope and fear: 'Hong Kong *should* have tomorrow.' Even *Ming Pao*, which had been accused of accommodating Beijing for years, placed on its 1 July front-page a story quoting from the inaugural speech by the newly installed chief executive to say that Hong Kong would enjoy an 'unparalleled amount of autonomy'.

This mixed feeling of hope and fear has ideological and cultural roots. Ideologically, Hong Kong was slowly establishing a nascent democracy in the 1990s to respond to the growing needs of economic prosperity and to forestall Communist interference, but it was a move China abhorred. Typical of the 'quest for democracy' package, a *South China Morning Post* editorial (1 July) urged China to leave what was sometimes called 'the Hong Kong virus' alone and accept the fact that Hong Kong was different. It said that allowing Hong Kong

to continue its own way of life was in keeping with the Sino-British Joint Dec-
laration and a key to its economic success. The paper also devoted the entire
second page of the 1 July issue to reporting various protests organized by the
ousted democrat legislators and other dissidents. By publishing various polls,
the media reflected widespread public fear that China's People's Liberation
Army (PLA), which had suppressed Tiananmen protesters in 1989, might upset
stability in Hong Kong. The PLA's low pay was a topic of media scorn because
failure to resist material seduction might lead it to abuse power. On the other
hand, *Ming Pao* carried a long article by Louis Cha (1 July), its former owner
and a renowned political commentator, warning Hong Kong people against
challenging Beijing's authorities as a way of preserving their own existing free-
doms.

  Hong Kong people identified with Chinese culture but rejected the Com-
munist system, as an *Apple Daily* editorial (1 July) asserted. A columnist asked
rhetorically (24 June), 'Why do so many people feel unsettled and alienated as
Hong Kong bids farewell to colonial rule?' Public polls were often reported to
show sharply divided feelings about becoming Chinese nationals. In a feature
story tracing the history of opinion poll measures of public confidence (1 July),
Ming Pao singled out the Tiananmen crackdown as the worst nightmare for
Hong Kong people. The *Apple Daily* also reported on the eve of the handover
that people were not optimistic about the future of democracy, freedom, human
rights and the economy in Hong Kong. Conversely, many local media praised
British legacies, as dramatized by a columnist's ironical admonition:

> Liu Binyan [a Chinese journalist in exile] once told me that we have to thank the Opium War.
> Without this war . . . it would have been impossible for Hong Kong's public opinion to monitor
> China's power all these years. It may not be appropriate to 'thank the Opium War', but to
> say 'thank you' to what the colonial rule has brought to Hong Kong is consistent with facts.
> (Apple Daily, 28 June)

British farewell was covered with sentimental and nostalgic fanfare. Television
cameras zeroed in on huge crowds lining up to catch a glimpse of the depart-
ing Governor Chris Patten. On 30 June, the *Apple Daily* captioned a photo of
a man holding Chris Patten's photo and seeking his autograph, 'Long Live Chris
Patten!' The *South China Morning Post* also reported the 'hugs, kisses, and
tears all around' the farewell to Patten.

Historical Scripts of the Media Narratives

Each media narrative connected the handover story to a much larger historical
framework to achieve coherence. Such a framework functioned as a 'script' for
the media to structure various seemingly isolated episodes into compelling
stories endowed with a distinct causal sequence. It was a template for the media
to contextualize a series of activities in terms of their overall historical or politi-
cal significance. In so doing, the media linked two different 'modes of interpre-
tation' (Zelizer, 1993) and placed a micro local report about the handover
in the macro context of Chinese history. The media were at once covering
the handover and writing the history – in light of their technological needs

TABLE 1

Features of the Historical Scripts of the Media Narratives

Features	The PRC	Hong Kong	Taiwan
Starting point	The Opium War in 1840	Historical accidents that occurred 150 years ago	The Opium War in 1840
Hero	The CCP, Mao and Deng Xiaoping	British legacy, Patten, Hong Kong people and the democrats	Chiang Kai-shek, Taiwan people
Villain	Western imperialists, typified by Patten	Chinese Communists, the PLA	Western imperialists, Chinese Communists
Historical flow	Linear and continuous	Linear and punctuated	Linear, interrupted and restarted on a separate cause
Historical present	National pride and celebration; 'One country, two systems' works	Hong Kong's future uncertain; Chinese identity in flux	Hong Kong's future uncertain; Taiwan's status unclear
Historical future	Greater national achievement, brighter future	Uncertain	Uncertain

(especially for television cameras) and the 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow, 1979) of their own countries. For the media, a historical script represents an unfolding story of conflict with a starting point and a directional flow toward a future. As summarized in Table 1, the three media systems have followed these scripts to define how the Hong Kong conflict unfolds and where the current status is, replete with a roster of heroes and villains.

These media systems did not dispute the authenticity of happenings – which had a clear chronology of various regime changes in Hong Kong – but their historical significance. While the PRC and Taiwan media marked the Opium War as the beginning of national humiliation and imperialist exploitation of China's weakness, the Hong Kong media seldom broached this issue at all. To construct Hong Kong as a *different* part of China, the *Oriental Daily* staff were explicitly instructed to 'look forward' instead of settling scores on historical controversies surrounding the colonial past. On this issue, the media seems to largely endorse a historical script proposed by Governor Patten in his farewell address:

> [The chapter of the British responsibility in Hong Kong] began with the events that from today's vantage point, at the end of the following century, none of us here would wish or seek to condone. But we might note that most of those who live in Hong Kong now do so because of the events in our own century which today would have few defenders.

Settling a definite starting point for an event has profound implications for assigning roles to the actors in story-telling. The PRC media told of a history

that both involved western imperialists as villains, albeit with an obligatory acknowledgment of Chinese corruption in the Qing Dynasty, and particularly accentuated the CCP's heroic role as the savior of China, both as a *nation* and as a *state*. In this script, the history ran linearly from weak China losing its territorial integrity to strong China washing away past humiliation. In comparison, the Taiwan media constructed two separate and more complex story lines. One of them, while vilifying western imperialists, portrayed a history in which Communist insurgence had prevented Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government from recovering Hong Kong and was continuing to jeopardize Taiwan's democratic existence. The other story line depicted Taiwan either as a democratic sovereign *state* sharing divided sovereignty with the PRC, or as an independent *nation* in or of itself sharing no necessary political lineage with the PRC. Media construction of this second story line had a murky starting point, given the difficulty in linking the KMT's past authoritarianism to today's democratization.

Unlike the PRC or Taiwan media, Hong Kong's media depicted a history of the territory as developing linearly from a barren fishing village to an open and rich international metropolis. This linear progression was only punctuated by the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the brutal Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. However, the handover marked the end of this progression and activated the horror images of the CCP, the PLA and the Tiananmen crackdown as major villains – all against the heroic backdrop of the 'Hong Kong people', who wrote a success story with diligence and intelligence, the democrats who had courage to stand up to Beijing's intimidation and the British colonialists, who left a good legacy.

Conclusion

With a high degree of belief congruence in the intra-system media narratives, the three media systems brought very different historical scripts, organizational resources and ideological lenses to bear on the handover of Hong Kong and, at this key interpretative moment, revealed very different constructions of China and Chinese. There were hence three broadly divergent versions of the Hong Kong handover story. To recapitulate, first, the PRC media's nation-family notion was based on mythical blood and ancestral ties; the Taiwan media rejected this expansive framework, while the Hong Kong media were rife with identity uncertainty. Second, the PRC media attempted to integrate all people of Chinese descent across spatial reach in a national celebration. The Taiwan media were intent on drawing different boundaries from the PRC, and the Hong Kong media had to acquiesce to China's presence on the one hand and distance itself ideologically and psychologically by emphasizing Hong Kong's 'uniqueness' on the other. Third, taking different starting points for their 'historical scripts', the three media systems defined the Hong Kong handover with very different significance, wrote different story lines and recognized different heroes and villains. Fourth, the media inscribed their narratives with the prevailing ideology and interest of their respective constituencies. In sum, journalists marshaled their own meaning systems, narrative skills and visual grammar, and firmly anchored their accounts in their home-based interests. These factors contribute to the coherence of media

narratives and reinforce the discourse of their own cultural selves. Domestica-
tion in foreign news-making is thus a process of articulating discursive binding
in a society.

It is often said that journalists write the first draft of history, but they are
producers and reproducers of national ideology in the international context.
Three necessary ingredients constitute a discursive community: its shared
means of interpretations, its shared conventions of signifying practices, and its
shared social and political conditions of discourse. With this concept, we can
bring either societies or time periods or both together into a common analyti-
cal framework (Wuthnow, 1989). The concept also has broad theoretical impli-
cations today, when media conglomerates, given their reach, have enormous
potential to transform regional and local occurrences into global media events
(Katz, 1992; Dayan and Katz, 1992). But stories about these presumably global
events are still being – and will continue to be – told through domestic lenses,
bearing an imprint of their political system and prevailing ideology. With the
concept of discursive community, we can see how through such story-telling,
each society or culture reassesses itself and copes with potential tensions to
achieve internal coherence in the face of globalization (Cohen et al., 1996). This
is the essential tension between globalization and localization.

Notes

1. In this project we examined media accounts of 68 media organizations from eight different
   countries. For space limitation, we refrain from making explicit reference to media sources of
   the quotes in this article.
2. For an exposition of ideas related to 'discursive community', see Zelizer (1993), Radway (1984),
   Jensen (1990), Snow and Benford (1992), Snow et al. (1986), Dahlgren (1991), Morley (1980),
   Schroder (1994) and Darnton (1975).
3. In the PRC's 'commandist system' (Lee, 1990), we selected media outlets by their official status,
   including those at the center (e.g. the *People's Daily* and CCTV) and those with a more com-
   plementary role to play. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, we chose media outlets with market shares
   (the *Apple Daily* and the *Oriental Daily* in Hong Kong, the *China Times* and the *United Daily
   News* in Taiwan) and those with prestige among the elite and journalists (e.g. the *South China
   Morning Post* and *Ming Pao* in Hong Kong). In these two societies, we also included those with
   distinctly different ideological positions (e.g. the *Liberty Times* and the *Minzhong Daily News*
   in Taiwan, and the pro-Communist *Wen Wei Po* in Hong Kong). Finally we included dominant
   television networks: CCTV in the PRC, TVB and ATV (Asian Television) in Hong Kong and
   TTV in Taiwan.
4. A detailed description of the 'signature matrix' will be provided upon request.

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