THE DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC OPINION, POLITICAL PARTIES, AND MEDIA IN TRANSITIONAL HONG KONG

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As Hong Kong moved from colonial governance to Communist rule, since the mid-1980s its governmental and electoral structures have undergone significant transformation. Despite the piecemeal pace of political reform, Britain's retreat has created room for political participation and triggered democratization in the Hong Kong government. The emergence of political groups was a by-product of this process, and the elections carried out under British political reforms accelerated the development of political parties. Grassroots pressure groups first appeared in the 1970s and slowly broadened their activities to include political commentary and district board participation in the 1980s.[1] Their consolidation into political parties was galvanized by the colony's first three-tier direct elections to the District, Urban and Regional, and Legislative Councils—which took place in 1991. The mass media played a significant role in legitimizing the image of these parties by mobilizing and raising the awareness of the voting public.[2]

Legitimacy in the modern sense is the value or quality associated with being accepted or justified. In the political context, it is concerned with the perceived rightfulness of the dominant governmental system by the public. The legitimation of a party is a process, the stages of which are defined by the party's changing relations with the media, public opinion, and government agencies. During the initial stage seen in Hong Kong in the 1970s, the

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1. See Louie Kin-shuen, "Political Parties," in *The Other Hong Kong Report 1991*, ed. Y. Sung and M. Lee (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1991).

2. See To Yiu-ming and Nip Yee-man, ed., *Media Strategies and Election* (in Chinese) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Humanities Science Publication, 1995).

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mass media reflected the recent collective memory of social chaos during China's Cultural Revolution and the accompanying riots in Hong Kong in 1967. It supported the government agenda by portraying political groups as detrimental to social stability. Toward the end of the 1980s, however, poll data and electoral behavior showed that the public became increasingly receptive to political groups that had pledged their determination to pressure China to fulfill its promise that Hong Kong people would rule Hong Kong. The June 4 Incident in Tiananmen Square eroded the public's trust of their would-be sovereign. They vented their discontent and frustration with China and again expressed their fear of loss of autonomy and democracy in surveys and at the ballot boxes by turning to the liberal parties. Such democratic aspirations and the resulting popularity of the parties brought a complete about-face in the mass media in the 1990s, and they now endorsed democratic groups as legitimate political entities.[3] In 1991 and 1995, the pro-democratic parties won landslide victories in the direct Legislative Council (Legco) elections and continued to influence policy in Hong Kong until the 1997 handover to China forced them to relinquish power.

This article seeks to anticipate whether the media will continue to lean toward the pro-democratic camp and the public under Chinese rule. It examines media coverage of the last Legco in light of the post-1997 political environment and with specific regard to the interaction between the media and political parties in Hong Kong. Within this framework three additional questions are addressed: (1) how did the media report on the democratic parties after they had beaten the pro-China forces in the elections and entered the establishment (the Legco)?; (2) given that China had openly rejected the democratic camps, what was the ideological stance of the media toward the liberal parties as Hong Kong moved toward the handover? Did the media continue to legitimize the democratic parties or delegitimize them and why?; and (3) when the positions represented by public opinion, the democrats, and/or the Chinese authorities were in conflict, on which side did the media stand? The answers to these questions have implications both for press freedom in Hong Kong after 1997 and in the elections scheduled for 1998. Examining the interactions between the parties and media also helps model the interplay of political entities and the media in states under transition.

To understand the backdrop for these investigations, an analysis of the political forces behind the media and their dilemma in the late transition period (1992–97) is required. This necessitates examination of democratic party politics, local-China tensions, and changing public opinion in Hong Kong as well as an empirical investigation of news coverage. Finally, based

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3. Anthony Y. H. Fung, "Parties, Media and Public Opinion: A Study of Media's Legitimation of Party Politics in Hong Kong," *Asian Journal of Communication* 5:2 (1995), pp. 18–46.

on the contextual information and the news coverage, I offer an explanation of the specific interactions between the media and various political parties in both late- and post-transitional Hong Kong.

Political Coverage, Party Politics, and the Media System

Pro-democratic groups monitored both local and Chinese authorities on behalf of the public during the transition. At the time, the media supported this dissident status by either giving them favorable coverage or exaggerating the "party effect" in subsequent elections.[4] Studies on media portrayals in Hong Kong suggest that after the election victories, party politics had attained a "stage of full legitimation."[5] The media tended to treat parties as legitimate political entities and, during the 1994–95 elections, seldom questioned their legitimacy. Incumbent party candidates were considered legitimate sources for information on governmental and administrative affairs and therefore worthy of coverage. The media, however, had to contend with two opposing pressures. On the one hand, since the pro-democratic camp was part of the establishment (inside the legislature), the "responsible" media were obliged to cover the camp objectively. While the public had shown strong democratic aspirations and apparently was willing to accept more criticism of nondemocratic political groups, news coverage could not be too biased against the nondemocratic groups lest it undermine the media's credibility and professionalism. On the other hand, the media as expected hesitated to denigrate the pro-China camp (the anti-democratic camp) as China had publicly objected to the democratic arrangements fostered by the colonial regime. The press had to consider professionalism in covering and framing the parties, and at the same time had to attend to various vested interests and external pressures.

Although formal British power has ended in Hong Kong, the residual influence of the British political reforms continues in the form of an incubated group of local political leaders. Since the 1980s, the British colonial government had been carrying out democratic reforms in the name of representative governance. This is documented in the former government's *White Paper: The Further Development of Representative Government* in which it promised to quicken its step toward democracy by introducing a number of directly elected members in 1988 and ultimately "building up a significant

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4. Leung Sai-wing, "Attitudes towards Party Politics," in *Indicators of Social Development: Hong Kong 1993*, ed. Lau Siu-kai et al. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1995), p. 279. See also Lau Siu-kai, "Public Attitude toward Political Parties in Hong Kong," Occasional Paper no. 11 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1992).

5. For example, Anthony Y. H. Fung, "Parties, Media, and Public Opinion."

number of directly elected members by 1997."[6]   Once a number of council-lors had been directly elected, the government was unable to ignore public opinion as represented in part by grassroots pressure groups and parties.

The Chinese authorities' position on the future constitution and electoral arrangements made it seem likely that people's rights and interests would be eroded under the new regime. Furthermore, China's persistent opposition to direct elections in effect excluded the middle and working classes from par-ticipation in the system of governance. Clearly in this context, the pro-demo-cratic groups gained broad public support in such a short period of time because they fought for greater autonomy on behalf of the public. Not all political groups were committed to the course of democracy and acting in the public interest. Their rhetoric served functionally to garner votes, but when Beijing co-opted them by, for example, appointing some members as advi-sors in Hong Kong, they readily changed tack. Many local party leaders then became semidependent on the approval and recognition of both the Chinese government on the public, a situation which led to clear contradictions.[7]

Regardless of their political positions, Hong Kong's most prominent par-ties have always tied their interests to socioeconomic classes: either the mid-dle classes or the rich. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into two groups: the local bourgeoisie and the middle class reformers. Although these groups are aligned in their support of a free market and capitalism in Hong Kong, their political orientation is diametrically opposed. The bourgeoisie includes real estate developers, bankers, and wealthy businesspersons, some of whom have considerable investments in China. They are conservative and anti-democratic, and naturally became China's co-optation target. Though some may have felt a strong sense of attachment to China, most saw politics as a means to achieve profit. Since Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping opened free enterprise zones on the mainland side of the Hong Kong border in the early 1980s, they have set their eyes on the China market and on cultivating the crucial personal connections with officials required to do business effec-tively there. They were not about to sacrifice the privileges they enjoyed and their lucrative ties with China, and thus they advocated the more conservative approach that China preferred.[8]

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6. Lau Siu-kai, "Political Reform and Political Development in Hong Kong," in *Hong Kong and 1997: Strategies for the Future*, ed. J. Yao et al. (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1985).

7. Lau Siu-kai, *Hong Kong Politics in the Transitional Period* (in Chinese) (Hong Kong: Wide Angle Publishing Co., Ltd.), pp. 283–306.

8. Jane C. Y. Lee, "The 1997 Transition and Hong Kong's Evolving Political Leadership," in *One Culture, Many Systems: Politics in the Reunification of China*, ed. D. H. McMillen and M. E. DeGolyer (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1993), pp. 63–93; and Lo Shiu-hing, "Hong Kong: Post-colonialism and Political Conflict," in *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, Mc-*

Their opponents were the advocates of reform, that is, the indigenous lib-
eral-minded middle class composed of lawyers, medical doctors, and teachers
highly supportive of such Western values as human rights and democracy.
The June 4 Incident spurred the evolution of some of their number to effec-
tive party leadership. In spite of its middle class and professional back-
ground, the democratic leadership also secured strong support from the
working class. For example, the democratic camp mobilized two million
people to demonstrate against China's military crackdown on its student
movement in 1989.

Segments of Hong Kong's press systems have long gravitated to one of
two political camps: the Nationalists and the Communists. Not surprisingly,
in the twilight of colonial rule the press system experienced a shift in favor of
Communist China. The balanced, stable ideological equilibrium also began
to collapse as the pro-KMT papers withdrew from Hong Kong. Substituted
in its wake was a potpourri of newspapers representing different ideological
spaces ranging from the depoliticized press of commercial interests to that of
the economic and soon-to-be political elite such as the pro-China Communist
party organ *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*. The ideological conflicts in this
industry no longer hinged upon the Nationalist-Communist struggle but were
instead bound by both local (Hong Kong) and national (China) contradic-
tions.[9] Whereas the people of Hong Kong sought a greater degree of auton-
omy under the promise of "two systems," China continued to interfere in
local affairs in the name of "one country."

The Hong Kong press epitomizes the struggle between pro-democratic par-
ties and the pro-China camp. During elections, the press has split into two
camps: the ideological-laden or "biased" press and the "centrist" or neutral
press. Whereas the China mouthpieces, the *Wen Wei Po* and the *Ta Kung
Pao*, promoted the pro-China camps, the independent press observed the pro-
fessional codes of journalism and remained neutral.

During the late transition period, some newspapers were acquired by busi-
nessmen who sought to depoliticize the press to win favor with the mass
public and ingratiate themselves with the Chinese authorities. Only a few
independent papers remained critical of China. Capitalist acquisition how-
ever did not necessarily mean that editorial policy changed or coverage fa-
vored certain camps. The press had to conform to a dual "legitimizing
creed," namely, not to undermine the legitimacy of Chinese authorities by
bolstering the democratic forces while not acting to disgrace their own legiti-

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Donald's and Middle-class Revolution, ed. Richard Robinson and David S. G. Goodmas (New
York: Routledge, 1996), p. 165.

9. Lee Chin-Chuan, "Media Structure and Regime Change in Hong Kong," paper presented at
the Chinese Media in the Information Age Conference, Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1996. See also
Michael Yahuda, *Hong Kong: China's Challenge* (London: Routledge, 1996).

macy by neglecting local interests through flattering the pro-China forces too overtly. Accordingly, the media had to proceed extremely carefully when framing the elections and the ensuing struggles between pro-China and pro-democratic camps.[10]

Parties and the 1994–1995 Elections

The 1994–95 three-tier elections served as a gauge not only of the popularity of the parties involved but also of the ideology of the press. It also marked the second time that the pro-China camp clashed directly with that of the democrats. The District Board elections came in September 1994, followed by the Urban and Regional Council elections in March 1995 and the Legco election that September. During the latter—the last election before Hong Kong reverted to China in 1997—an unprecedented 60 Legco members were elected. Legco had three kinds of members, each with its own election: a geographical constituency election (20 seats), a functional constituency election (30 seats, 9 seats more than the 1991 election), and an electoral committee election (10 seats). The number of registered voters had soared from 1.9 million in 1991 to 2.56 million in 1995.

The elections were complicated by the political row between China and Britain. The Chinese government publicly declared its refusal to recognize the 1994–95 three-tier elections carried out under the constitutional reform proposed by Governor Chris Patten in October 1992. The reform effectively secured the pro-democratic camp's place in the legislature and contradicted the Chinese authorities' original plan to ensure a pro-Beijing voice in the legislature. In retaliation, the Chinese government threatened to tear down the Legco, instituted a provisional legislature, and declared that the term of the elected legislators would expire on June 30, 1997. Although hopes of a "through train" arrangement for the political body that would allow elected members to retain their positions after the handover were fading in the wake of Beijing's reaction, many groups still put forward candidates for election.

Between the first three-tier election in 1991 and that of 1994, the configuration of the party system had changed greatly. Anticipating the election, the existing political groups realigned and new parties were inaugurated. There were 44 political organizations which vied for elections between 1982 and 1994, but by 1995, the number had been reduced to only 33. The party system eventually consolidated and five major parties dominated the scene: the

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10. For the changing media landscape in Hong Kong, see Anthony Y. H. Fung and Chin-Chuan Lee, "Hong Kong's Changing Media Ownership: Uncertainty and Dilemma," *Gazette* 53 (1994), pp. 127–33. For an analysis of "legitimizing creed," see Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "Towards a Comparative Framework of Political Communication Research," in *Political Communication: Issues and Strategies for Research*, ed. Steven Chaffee (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1978), p. 177.

Democratic Party (DP), the Democratic Alliance for Betterment of Hong Kong (DABHK), the Liberal Party (LP), the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood (HKADPL), and the pro-China Liberal Democratic Federation (LDF). The democratic camp was represented by the DP, which was established in 1994 when the United Democrats—the winner of the 1991 election—merged with the pressure group Meeting Point. A survey in November 1992 showed that 78% and 36% of the people, respectively, regarded the United Democrats and Meeting Point as representatives of "democracy."[11] The pro-China camp was headed by the DABHK and followed by the LP. The LP represented businessmen who were attempting to secure business interests and privileges. The HKADPL reportedly held an "ambiguous" position: claiming itself to be in the democratic camp while at the same time it warmly received China's co-optation. The new configuration was a better reflection of the ideological boundaries of the candidates as well as those of the voters.

Tug of War: Democrats vs. Pro-China Camp

The 1994–95 elections were portrayed in Hong Kong's media mainly as battles between the democratic and pro-China forces. The pro-democratic DP was successful in positioning itself as critical of both the Chinese authorities and British maladministration, and as fighting for a wider boundary for the freedom of Hong Kong's people. The DABHK-led pro-China camp, for its part, was faced with the strenuous task of winning public trust and negating anti-Communist China sentiment even as it accepted tentative support from the Chinese government and official media.

Beijing accused the British of violating the Joint Declaration, the Basic Law, and other Sino-British arrangements signed by the foreign ministers of both countries to resolve the disputes created by the handover. Though China threatened to invalidate the election results, it hedged its bets. The New China News Agency's Hong Kong bureau (NCNA, or Xinhua), continued to produce favorable coverage of the DABHK during the elections. Significantly, the pro-Beijing media began calling on Hong Kong's voters to elect legislators who could better communicate with China and thus ensure a smooth transition to Chinese rule. Xinhua's support increased DABHK's recognition and, through the China-controlled Federation of Trade Unions, helped mobilize the working class. In February 1994 just before the first

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11. Caritas Community Centre, *A Snapshot of Hong Kong's Political Groups* (in Chinese) (Hong Kong: Caritas Community Centre, 1993).

election, a survey found that public acceptance of the DABHK was second only to that of the DP (99%).[12]

However, the DABHK soon realized that it aimed to represent proletarian interests in a political realm dominated by capitalists, an increasingly difficult and precarious proposition after June 30, 1997. At times, the DABHK had to support decisions and sacrifice mass interest in favor of the wealthy and the capitalists, who somewhat ironically have received preferential consideration from China. Thus, the public viewed the pro-China camp as a pathetic political organization that owed allegiance to the Chinese authorities and appeared to have inadvertently compromised the interests of Hong Kong's people. It was no surprise, then, it received little support in the 1995 elections.

By contrast, the DP did earn popular support despite its relatively limited financial resources. In terms of membership, the DP had been Hong Kong's largest political party, but this situation changed with the founding of the DABHK in 1993. Whereas the DP had around 500 active members at most in 1994, its pro-China rival had already recruited 1,086 members by the end of 1995.[13] The size and composition of this membership meant that the DABHK could count on strong working class support in the elections throughout 1994–95. However, despite the DP's disadvantages the party was held in the greatest favor by the general populace as the results of a variety of opinion surveys show. For example, a *Ming Pao* newspaper poll published in July 25, 1995, showed that the DP ranked first, scoring 63 points out of 100 possible points. The HKADPL came second (57), the DABHK third (56), and the LP fourth (53). Another *Ming Pao* poll published September 11 that asked respondents to rank performance in the area of social policy gave the top slot to the DP (4.1 out of 5), as opposed to the DABHK's third place finish (3.6).

Political Reform and Conflict:
Distrust and Confidence

The popularity of the pro-democratic camp was not without reason. The public demand for democracy had long been shaped by the changing political context and the ongoing political struggles, both of which were increasingly an interplay between the impending British withdrawal and the ever-expanding influence of China over Hong Kong's policy. Before Hong Kong was returned to China, the British colonial government under Patten loosened its rein on official power and distributed it to the local elite through electoral

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12. Poll conducted by Wharf Cable and Hong Kong Polling and Business Research Company as reported in *Hong Kong Economic Times*, February 14, 1995.

13. For DP membership data, see *Oriental Daily News*, October 3, 1995; for the DABHK, see *Ming Pao*, December 13, 1995.

reforms and the appointment of locally born Chinese in place of British expatriates to chair important governmental bodies. This was done to maximize democratic freedoms in the colony prior to the handover. However, the political participation granted and democratic reforms carried out vexed the Chinese authorities, who insisted that they inherit the existing political structure relatively unchanged and intact. Despite China's strong resistance, in October 1992 Governor Patten tabled the democratic reform proposal that essentially made all seats in the legislature directly or indirectly elected.

Immediately after the proposal was gazetted in March 1993, a March 20 *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*) poll revealed that 35% of the public said Patten was "correct" versus 32% opposed. However, the ever-intensifying conflict between China and Britain had significantly eroded people's confidence in the British, Chinese, and Hong Kong governments and aroused a sense of anxiety among the public. The relative confidence index as measured by Social Research Hongkong (SRH) and published in *Ming Pao* on February 16, 1995, reached 88 out of 100 points in October 1994. This was the highest late transition figure; scores of 95 or 96, by contrast, were common before the June 4 Incident. In 1994, Hong Kong's relationship with China was of greater concern to the colony's residents (40%) than other issues like the economy (20%) or democracy (15%), according to a January 12, 1996, *Ming Pao* survey. Many respondents called for a change in specific political actors in the government; a poll released by the *SCMP* on May 29, 1995, also found that almost half the respondents (48%) would have liked to see Governor Patten leave Hong Kong two years early and seat a council of local people to administer the colony in his place.

People were also piqued at China's unequivocal and unilateral decision to disband the Hong Kong's elected legislature and reappoint an interim body in 1997—this in spite of the fact that people in general supported the through-train idea. A survey released by the *SCMP* on January 9, 1995, showed that more than 70% of the respondents distrusted the China-appointed Preliminary Working Committee, and less than 20% believed that this body could represent the people of Hong Kong. Irritated at China's interference, 52% of those interviewed for a July 15, 1995, *Ming Pao* poll indicated a preference for an independent Hong Kong or a Hong Kong under British administration rather than becoming a Special Administration Region (SAR) of China. By February 1996, the *SCMP* reported that the percentage of those who wanted independence or British rule had dropped back to 14%.

Democratic Aspirations and Democratization

The public outcry reflected in opinion polls were significant indicators of Hong Kong's fundamental change in political structure and the thinking of its public. In the past, the colony's residents were said to be politically apa-

thetic. Hong Kong had long remained non-democratic because of its politically dependent status as a colony and because the public recognized the attitude of its future sovereign.[14] As mentioned earlier, the colonial government chose to implement reforms to decolonialize governance prior to the British withdrawal, but due to the structural limitations of the future SAR the reforms were piecemeal. The government was also aware that any drastic change would be subsequently dismantled by the Chinese government. The resulting reform configuration provided only limited opportunities for local elite participation in the political process without a significant alteration in the executive structure. But the partial reforms did provide a fertile environment for the growth of a limited understanding of and aspiration for democracy among Hong Kong's people.

Approaching the end of the 1980s, it appeared that the democratizing reforms had changed Hong Kong citizens' traditional values. Foregoing the passive political behaviors of the past, the public became more actively engaged in politics and pushed for a faster pace of democratization. The June 4 Incident intensified this democratic aspiration. The public also expressed its displeasure with the Chinese authorities by voting for parties critical of China. Contrary to the common notion that the public was ignorant, the middle and elite (professional) classes showed they were clearly aware of the dynamics between government and politics during Hong Kong's transition.[15]

Although public demand for democratic reforms has undeniably been on the rise in Hong Kong, the public's conception of democracy is full of ambiguities. Its democratic aspiration has been instrumental and utilitarian rather than ideological.[16] As the public began to understand that the political structure was not effective in safeguarding its future interests, there was awareness that Chinese "democratic reforms" were little more than populist rhetoric and not a prelude for the establishment of a democratically elected government. The colonial government essentially had created instead a system of a nonelected executive government that consulted the people and was checked

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14. Kuan Hsin-chi, "Hong Kong after Basic Law," HKIAPS Reprint Series no. 8 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1991). See Lau Siu-kai, *Society and Politics in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982) on the political indifference of Hong Kong Chinese.

15. Timothy Wong and Lui Tai-lok, "From One Brand of Politics to One Brand of Political Culture," Occasional Paper no. 10 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong). See also Jermain T. M. Lam and Jane C. Y. Lee, "Allegiance, Apathy or Alienation? The Political Culture of Functional Constituency Voters in Hong Kong," in *One Culture, Many Systems: Politics in the Reunification of China*, pp. 95–120.

16. Kuan Hsin-chi and Lau Siu-kai, "The Partial Vision of Democracy in Hong Kong: A Survey of Popular Opinion," *China Journal* 34 (1995), pp. 239–64.

by a few counter-elite.[17] People's appreciation of the positive and observable outcomes produced by the subsequent reforms had the effect of further rein- forcing democratic aspirations.

The craving for democratic reform in Hong Kong hinges on the fulfillment of political and social functions, but when the path of reform is met by an intransigent Chinese government, commitment to the cause of democracy wavers. Accordingly, those who aspire for democracy do not necessarily par- ticipate at higher voter registration or voting rates. To some, Hong Kong people are "concerned bystanders" who in general have limited and narrow civic awareness, strong concern for social affairs, and high praise for demo- cratic values, but are weak at political participation. This view is borne out somewhat by a 1994 poll taken by the Social Research Centre of Hong Kong University. It showed that the percentage of people intending to vote (46%) did not increase as compared to the figures in the first three-tier election in 1991, although people were aware of the high political stakes.[18]

Public Opinion, Parties, and Identification

The low percentage of those intending to vote following implementation of the reforms could have been due to skepticism of political parties. In 1990, 44% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that parties would destabilize Hong Kong; studies after the 1991 elections showed that people still had a negative perception of the political parties.[19] However, in the functional constituen- cies in the direct Legco election, party candidates won 16 out of 18 seats and 17 out of 20 in 1991 and 1995, respectively. Other opinion polls revealed that people did vote for issues in 1991 and that party identification was not a major factor affecting the overall results of elections. Nonetheless, subse- quent studies and the voting outcomes themselves give contradictory evi- dence; voters were shown to be making their decisions not based upon policy orientation or party platforms, but a sentimental identification with certain political parties instead. In the 1991 Legco election, studies found that 14% of the voters were "core-identifiers" whose sentiment of identification toward

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17. Fung Ho-lap, "Attitudes towards Protest Action," in *Indicators of Social Development*, pp. 291–320; and Anthony B. L. Cheung, "Democracy and the Democratic Movement in Hong Kong: Origin and Prospects," *Politics, Administration and Change* 18 (January-June 1992), pp. 18–38.

18. Kuan and Lau, "The Partial Vision," p. 262. See also Timothy Ka-ying Wong and Shum Kwok-cheung, "Civic Awareness of Hong Kong Young People in the Late Transitional Period: A Comparison of Hong Kong as a Whole and the Shatin District" (in Chinese), Occasional Paper no. 48 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1996). For poll data, see *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, September 15, 1994.

19. Lau Siu-kai, *Hong Kong Politics*, pp. 283–306, and also "Public Attitude."

the various parties was firm and stable; and another 21% were "peripheral identifiers" whose sentiment of identification was of a nascent nature.[20]

Parallel to the public's democratic aspirations, the identification with political parties was also characterized as pragmatic and instrumental, in part, because the parties were seen as one means to apply pressure on the government. In mid-1995, the DABHK rose to number three among the political groups in Hong Kong. A July 25 *Ming Pao* headline gave "safeguarding the benefit" of the Hong Kong people as the reason for its popularity. In fact, a survey the DABHK had earlier conducted reported by *Ming Pao* on February 21, 1994, showed that the public placed a priority on solving living problems (56.1%) and only secondarily dealt with political issues (less than 10%).

Media Legitimation and Delegitimation

Given that the pro-China party was not as well-received by the public as its pro-democratic counterparts, the question of how the media chose to cover the parties during the 1994–95 elections becomes an interesting one. I use frame analysis to examine the media's (de)legitimation of the parties during the campaign for the September 1995 Legco elections. Framing, which takes place between the news sources and the media, offers a means to study a transaction. A frame serves to define (or define away) opposition both in constructing news and, such as in the case at hand, legitimizing a political movement. News actors and the media are involved in a symbiotic relationship. Both act to interpret events and negotiate meanings over the frames in which the meanings themselves are embedded. However, while news sources can influence events by selectively providing or withholding information, the journalists act as news gatekeepers by deciding what is news and subsequently selecting various frames for the events. They play a central role in the construction of meaning in the story line they choose in their reporting of events, and they also decide which frame sponsors will be selected or emphasized. Media commentators subsequently develop the arguments and images

20. Louie Kin-shuen, "The 'Party Identification' Factor in the 1991 Legislative Council Election: The June 4th Incident and the Anti-Communist China Syndrome," in *Hong Kong Tried Democracy: The 1991 Elections in Hong Kong*, ed. Lau Siu-kai and Louie Kin-shuen (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993), pp. 175–85. A survey taken before the Regional and Urban Council election in 1995 also showed that 55% of the DP's supporters were strong "identifiers" while only 25% of the DABHK supporters were deemed to be so. See Tsoi Chi-keung, "A Preliminary Analysis of Sources of Votes of Five Major Parties," in *Election and Parliamentary Politics: New Political Environment in Hong Kong after the Rise of Political Parties* (in Chinese), ed. Tsoi Chi-keung, Lau Sai-leung and Chan Pak-kuan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Humanities Science Publication, 1993), p. 63.

that support particular frames, and symbolic contests are carried out in the arena of media output.[21]

Two newspapers, the *South China Morning Post* and the *Ming Pao Daily News* were chosen for studies, because they are aimed at readers who represent the Hong Kong elite: highly educated professionals, executives, and government officials. Newspapers from August 1, 1994 (the opening date for District Board election nomination) to September 17, 1995 (the final Legco election date) were analyzed intensively to extract party news frames. Newspaper articles were selected by purposive sampling so as not to miss the important events during this period. To better understand the interaction between the parties and journalists involved, interviews were conducted with spokespersons from the two leading parties, the DP and the DABHK, and the 12 reporters covering either the elections or political beats.[22] Finally, the media's treatment of the two parties regarding identical issues is evaluated.

Hong Kong journalists are conscious of the professional expectation of standards for balanced and fair reporting. While they are aware of the direct impact of media coverage, they are less aware of how subtleties in the treatment of issues in their reports can also have an effect. The media in general legitimized the DABHK and delegitimized the DP during the 1995 election, although the latter ultimately triumphed in the polls. The media praised the DABHK for its unity and the support it got from Beijing. The papers highlighted China's open support of the DABHK, identifying it as the "largest pro-Beijing party" and a "friend of China." Conversely, they emphasized China's denial of the DP's legitimacy. The SCMP reported that the DP's first contact with the Chinese authorities had "met obstacles" due to the party's critical stand on the June 4 Incident. The DP was described in *Ming Pao* to be a "loser" when the Chinese authorities refused to discuss Hong Kong social issues (in this instance, a sewage problem) with the party because the conditions for talks were not yet ripe. In contrast, the chairman of the DABHK was presented unquestionably as a legitimate spokesperson for Hong Kong interests who channeled public opinion on various issues and did so sometimes on behalf of the Chinese authorities as well. Framed as a strong opponent of the DP, DABHK Chairman Tsang Yuk-Shing was offered

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21. See William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani, "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power," *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1989), pp. 1–37; Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Gaye Tuchman, *News Making: A Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978); Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 2; and Charlotte Ryan, *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1991).

22. The author is indebted to Linda Lee and Carrie Wong, who conducted most of the interviews. The interview data are used as background information. Two party spokesmen were interviewed in Hong Kong on December 1 and 21, 1996, respectively.

the chance to present his personal evaluation of the 1994 election results in that year's September 20 *SCMP*. He was often interviewed to confirm official Chinese statements and elaborate on the party platform, a document prepared by the chief editor of the CCP press in Hong Kong.[23]

The DP did not receive such favorable coverage from the Hong Kong media. Rather, the party was subjected to four broad varieties of criticism. First, it was charged with failing to adhere to the democratic principle. In general, the DP—framed as the advance guard of democracy—was alleged to be switching sides to the pro-China camp once it won election. It was accused of softening its stance toward China when words about the condemnation of the June 4 Incident were removed from its manifesto. The *SCMP* suggested that the DP "hoped to capitalize on [the Meeting Point's] closer relationship with China" regardless of its democratic goal. In an article critical of the revision, the *SCMP* compared the original manifesto draft with the revised one and pointedly noted that a sharp attack on the Chinese government's massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators had been struck from the latter. This negative report forced the party's leader, Martin Lee, to clarify publicly the DP's determination to follow "the footsteps of the former liberal flagship."[24]

Secondly, the media commonly disparaged the party's leadership and highlighted internal rifts within the party. When a leading DP figure decided to quit politics, the alacrity with which the papers sought reactions from other members of the party created the impression that the party's leadership lacked unity. The reports gave equal play to the accusations of some members of the DP that the legislator in question was "[b]iased and narrowminded," and to the anger of the legislator who felt he had been "unreasonably renounced" by the party.[25]

By contrast, the papers seemed sympathetic to and forgiving of the DABHK when it was faced with a similar problem in its leadership. When *Ming Pao* reports discovered that party Chairman Tsang had sought a foreign passport (thus demonstrating a lack of confidence in the soon-to-be sovereign China), the paper carried extensive reports explaining the situation and Tsang's decision to withdraw the application. On September 13, 1994, the *SCMP* published an article penned by Tsang explaining his position. The papers did not frame the event as evidence of fragmentation in the party: rather, they chose to emphasize how his decision to abandon the attempt

23. See *Ming Pao,* August 22 and November 24, 1994, and *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*), September 20, October 19, November 16, 1994, January 8, and February 13, 1995.

24. See news reports in *SCMP* on August 21, 23, and December 5, 1994, and September 10, 1995. "Former liberal flagship" refers to the United Democrats, which had won 17 seats in the 1991 Legco election.

25. See both *Ming Pao* and *SCMP*, April 19, 1995.

"bolster[ed] morale" and was the "glory" of the party. There were few nega-
tive stories about Tsang and reports on the reaction of core DABHK mem-
bers focused on the declarations of support for him.[26]

Third, the media presented the DP as a collection of incohesive and incon-
sistent democrats. On the whole, reporters kept a close eye on the DP and
tended to expose conflicts among its membership. The *SCMP* reported ex-
tensively on the row between two pro-democratic camps on the issue of co-
operation between the DP and the HKADPL in the election. Journalists were
also sensitive to policy inconsistencies and "double standards" in the DP.
The papers noted that a rank and file member of the DP who released an
internal document to the public was reprimanded, while a high-ranking mem-
ber escaped punishment even though he disclosed the party electoral strategy.
The papers were also critical of the "mistake" made by Chairman Lee and
other leaders who threatened to discipline a DP member resigning from his
councillor's position without party approval. By contrast, *Ming Pao* played
down any inconsistencies in the DABHK's handling of internal conflicts and
party affairs.

The media's ability to reveal DP incohesiveness and inconsistency was
probably due to the party's relative openness. Reports of members who al-
legedly voted against DP candidates in the 1995 election were not uncom-
mon. Such incohesiveness was described as rebellious and played up in *Ming
Pao* articles. Reports questioned party unity and claimed that "the solidarity
of the liberal camp is set to take a beating" when some DP members an-
nounced their decision to leave the party.[27]

Fourth and finally, alleged scandals in the DP were highlighted in the
press, particularly when they pointed toward party fragmentation in the face
of strong challengers. *Ming Pao* reported the betrayal of DP members who
denied that they once belonged to the party. Another member was reported
to have voted against his own party candidate, thereby causing the DP to lose
a district board chairman position. The paper further documented the party's
criticism of a former member who spread rumors about the party and dis-
closed secret party documents to the media in one of the district campaigns.
Other reports centered on "angry withdrawals" from the party by founding
members and important councillors despite the efforts of top-ranked leaders
to retain them.[28]

Externally, the DP was reported as about to "disintegrate" in the face of a
strong challenge and "threat." In the education functional constituency elec-

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26. See Ming Pao, September 6, 1994, and *SCMP*, September 7 and 13, 1994.

27. See *Ming Pao*, December 25, 1994, May 2 and June 7, 1995, and *SCMP*, December 10,
1994, April 23 and July 17, 1995.

28. See *Ming Pao*, October 6 and 12, 1994, May 2 and July 13, 1995; and *SCMP*, November
22, 1994.

tion, for example, the incumbent DP vice-chairman was said to have faced a strong challenger from the pro-China Professional Teachers' Union. Articles emphasized the defeat of DP members in the Regional Council elections. However, articles on the DABHK reported only that it added fuel to the electoral battle; the party was not reported in the *SCMP* as facing any strong opposition. A *Ming Pao* headline after the 1994 District Board election claimed that the DABHK had "overpowered the other two major parties" (i.e., the LP and the DP) and was subtitled "revenged success."[29]

Election Results and Party Legitimacy

Despite China's looming presence, the pro-democratic groups were successful in the 1994 District Board election, their public acceptance reflected by their winning 173 of the 346 seats up for election. In the 1995 Urban and Regional Council elections, the five major parties wound up with 75% of the seats (44 out of 59). The DP emerged as the largest single block in both elections, filling 75 seats in the District Board (out of 296 open) and 23 in the Urban and Regional Councils (out of 59).

However, after the Urban and Regional Council elections, Beijing officials asserted that the election was "bound to be unfair." The pro-China *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao* in Hong Kong contended that the elections were "dominated by chaos" and were an "unfair arrangement." In contrast, the independent *Hong Kong Economic Journal* described the election as a victory for the democratic camp. In the campaign, though Beijing acted inconsistently, saying that Governor Patten's political reforms were void while simultaneously mobilizing pro-China figures to participate in the subsequent elections. As mentioned earlier, Beijing supported the DABHK even though this was shown to produce effects opposite from those intended. It seems that by toeing the Beijing line too closely the DABHK lost votes.

This negative lesson was repeated in the 1995 Legco election in which the China-sponsored DABHK was the big loser. The results indicate that the pro-democratic forces had not rested on their laurels, and also that Xinhua's campaigning effort had been in vain. The message of the 920,567 voters who cast their ballots (a 36% turnout rate in the geographical constituency election) was that most hoped their representatives would be able to stand up to Beijing in articulating their wishes. The five major parties occupied 40 out of 60 seats (67%) in the election. Among these, the DP won 19 seats with a success rate of 76%. The democrats (the DP members and other liberal allies) had a combined force of 28 seats in the 1995 Legislature. In spite of the defeat of party heavyweights, the DABHK enhanced its presence moving

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29. See *Ming Pao*, September 19, October 25, 1994, and May 29, 1995, and *SCMP*, September 21, 1994, March 9 and June 20, 1995.

from one to winning seven seats. The DP and its allies emerged as the domi-
nant force in Hong Kong's last representative Legco.

However, no single bloc achieved a majority. Thus, the legislators were
forced to seek consensus on many issues in the last legislature under colonial
governance. But on critical issues pertaining to China's legitimacy to rule
and the defense of freedoms in Hong Kong, they had well defined positions
and fell into more distinct groupings. The pro-China DABHK and the busi-
ness-oriented LP frequently joined forces to combat the DP. Success in the
legislature depended very much on effective lobbying of the 20 (33%) coun-
cillors who were independent or from one of the nonaligned parties. The
democrats were often quite successful in passing bills in favor of the working
class, women, and the middle class, and in tabling others that questioned the
legitimacy of the unregistered yet extant Communist Party in Hong Kong.
Such bills reinforced Beijing's desire to install a provisional legislature—
which had not been included in the Hong Kong Basic Law—immediately
following China's dissolution of the elected body on July 1, 1997. Ironically,
none of the DP Legco members were appointed to the provisional body but
some of the defeated candidates from the DABHK and other pro-China par-
ties were. This new legislature soon froze some of the pro-democracy laws
promulgated before July 1 and reversed the liberalization of others enacted
under British rule. This caused a public outcry and demonstrations, but it
also became a trump card the DP can play during the forthcoming 1998 elec-
tions.

Conclusion and Discussion

The analysis of the political context, combined with the empirical poll data,
creates a picture of the media environment in pre- and post-transition Hong
Kong. With support from a majority of the voting public, the pro-democracy
camp earned a lopsided victory in the three-tier elections of 1994–95; how-
ever, faced with taking either a position that reflected civic voices as ex-
pressed in public opinion polls or one that defended Beijing's interests,
journalists ultimately gave favor to the pro-China DABHK. Interpreting the
election results and media behavior using a structuralist frame analysis, it can
be argued that the framing in the media's reporting served to legitimize those
parties seen as representing the interests of Hong Kong's soon-to-be sover-
eigns from China; conversely, the framing also marginalized and delegi-
timized the pro-democracy forces opposed to imminent Chinese rule.

While framing analysis does help explain what happened, it unfortunately
is neither conducive to theoretical development nor does it offer a practical
explanation as to why journalists ignored public opinion. An additional per-
spective is needed to gain further insights and generate a more complete pic-

ture. Such is provided by a micro-process explanation of the dynamics be-
tween the media and political parties.

The first question is, why did Hong Kong's journalists not side with the
public? Journalists have an educational and ideological background similar
to the DP members, leaders, and supporters. Economically, they are part of
the middle class: 78% have received some level of college education and
39% had a monthly income over HK $10,000 (by comparison, HK $11,000 is
the average for a mid-level government bureaucrat). Most political beat re-
porters are university graduates who belonged to radical student organiza-
tions while at school. Some reporters revealed in interviews that they were
members of such liberal groups as the Hong Kong Journalist Association and
that they favored a faster pace of democratization.[30] Reporters and core DP
members also shared backgrounds similar to the party's supporters, 28% of
whom were categorized as professional or semi-professional. Nearly 25%
had a university or college education. In contrast, the bulk of the DABHK's
support, as reported, came from the working class and the local community
(*kaifong*) committees. *Kaifong* support of the DABHK was reported to be
34% while that of the DP was only 22%. The largest block of support (27%)
for the DABHK came from people with clerical or blue collar workers;
slightly less than 20% had only university or college level education.[31]

It seems natural to conclude therefore that journalists would be likely to
agree with the ideologies, platform, and policies of the DP. However, this
was not the case. Hong Kong's journalists in general are imbued with a criti-
cal orientation toward the democratic camp that may be partly due to utopian
and romantic expectations about democracy. There was thus a real discrep-
ancy and discordance between what the journalists held as ideals and what
politicians saw as politically expedient—in other words, differences between
an abstract notion of democracy and the real politics of democracy in action.
Holding up such ideals only widened the gap between the journalists and the
pro-democratic camp and eventually produced an antagonistic attitude toward
the DP and its members. In fulfilling the demands of their vocation, there-
fore, journalists exposed the deficiencies and failings of the party structure
and revealed what they described as party "scandals." The critical attitude
provoked negative feelings among the DP organizers, who strongly felt that
the journalists' reports were deliberately biased against them during the cam-
paigns.

On the pragmatic side, journalists needed "unexpected and interesting
events" with news value to break their news routine. Acting in a democratic

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30. Joseph Man Chan, Paul S. N. Lee, and Chin-Chuan Lee, *Hong Kong Journalists in Tran-
sition* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1995), pp. 29, 35.

31. Tsoi Chi-keung, "A Preliminary Analysis," p. 60.

way in a pro-democratic party is not worth reporting; behavior perceived as undemocratic is. It follows that whenever the DP acted in ways inconsistent with and contradictory to democratic principles—for example, changing ideologically or conflicting within or with other democratic groups—journalists were more likely to recount the story in detail. Whereas good deeds in a democratic party are no news at all, any similar activity in a party seen as supporting an authoritarian power becomes intriguing. Accordingly, journalists were eager to report acts by the DABHK normally expected from the DP. Anticipating that the DP would disintegrate and the DABHK would flourish as the sovereignty transfer approached, journalists looked for adverse news about the DP and positive news on the DABHK.

The negative framing of DP candidates was also due to the availability of information with news value for journalists. The DP's system of information dissemination was more open than that of the DABHK. The centrality of the DABHK spokesperson system rarely allowed for disclosure of dissident opinions and dissension. By comparisons, the division of labor in the DP was much more finite and the hierarchy more complicated. The central committee and local district branches always competed to present their opinions, and this competition occasionally resulted in inconsistencies. The result was that stories of internal scandals and dissent could easily pass into journalistic circles. Owing to DP's relative lack of resources, it seldom turned down interview requests, in part to avoid the release of unfavorable news. Numerous media studies in fact have suggested that it is relatively difficult for "resource-poor," less established, or anti-governmental organizations to gain coverage in the mass media, and the coverage that is gained tends to be unfavorable.[32]

It is unclear why journalists appeared to favor the DABHK; the explanation may have important implications for post-transition party politics. One possibility is that they were motivated by the party's potential to both punish and reward. The DABHK's position as a pro-China party that also served as an outlet for information from Beijing, combined with the reticence if not refusal of most other pro-China organs in Hong Kong to provide comment, meant that journalists sought out its leaders as representatives of the pro-China camp. If the carrot was access, then the stick was the implicit threat of punishment after July 1997. This threat may have been effective in preventing would-be muckrakers from doing exposés. Additionally, while the DABHK may not have criticized those journalists it termed dissidents, it did identify them by name. As a result, journalists became reluctant to dig out unfavorable news about the party. Dodging a fusillade of criticisms and

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32. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, and Edie Goldenberg, *Making the Papers* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1975).

warnings, they actively created news spaces for the DABHK as a way to curry favor. They needed to maintain friendly relations with party members appointed to the provisional legislature that replaced the Legco so as to maintain their access in a government expunged of democrats. Finally, the media engaged in self-censorship to minimize hostility from the Chinese authorities and the pro-China camp.

To explain the reasons why the Hong Kong media was supportive of the former colony's pro-China forces during transition and so positioning itself contrary to public opinion requires a deeper understanding of the interactions between the journalists and political parties, news sources and reporters, and representatives of news organizations and spokespersons of party bureaucracies. Hong Kong's media and political parties are dependent on one another in a competitive symbiotic relationship. It is a dependence that is not always equal and balanced, for the political parties must rely on their abilities to bargain in terms of value and need. The expulsion of the Democratic Party from the Hong Kong legislature has put it at a disadvantage; the lowered media profile that comes from no longer being in government limits the coverage it can expect to what can be generated by its relatively small media budget. The party needs this coverage for mobilization, validation, scope enlargement, and legitimization. It is not getting it, however, for reporters have come to rely more and more on pro-Beijing sources, particularly the DABHK, for background information on stories regarding political developments in Hong Kong and have thus chosen to maintain closer relationships with them. The post-handover political environment has also given the pro-China parties more leverage over journalists since they dominate the Provisional Legislature instituted by China. Such developments suggest that any examinations of the freedom of the press in post-transition Hong Kong must therefore rely not only on a structural frames-oriented approach but also an analysis of the micro-dynamics of the interactions between the media, that is, journalists, and the representatives and supporters of the local political parties.