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**HONG KONG INSTITUTE OF ASIA-PACIFIC STUDIES**

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

SHATIN, NEW TERRITORIES

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# **Strategic Responses to Political Changes**

## **An Analysis of Newspaper Editorials in Hong Kong, 1998-2006**

### **Introduction**

This study analyses editorials published by five Hong Kong newspapers from 1998 to 2006, i.e., within the first decade after the handover of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain to China. For more than 20 years, one of the central themes in local communications research has been the issue of how the Hong Kong news media has responded to the ongoing social and political changes (Lee and Chan, 2009a). After the handover, commentators and scholars continued to pay close attention to issues related to press freedom. In this regard, a number of content-based studies have provided us with insights on the performance of the press during major political events. For example, based on an analysis of the editorials of five newspapers in 1998, Leung (1999) argued that many Hong Kong newspapers exhibited a trend of “introspection”, i.e., paying more attention to local matters and less attention to China. The reason, presumably, was because of the higher degree of political sensitivity connected to issues involving China. In addition, the analyses of Cheung (2003) and Lai (2007) of the Hong Kong media’s coverage of the 2000 Taiwan presidential election show that the media has a tendency to downplay or even omit certain viewpoints supportive of independence for Taiwan.

Certainly, the press system in Hong Kong is also marked by a significant degree of pluralism and political parallelism (Chan and Lee, 1991; Hallin and Mancini, 2004), i.e., whereby newspapers adopting clear political stances can be identified and can be located on a spectrum that is parallel to the spectrum of political stances held by actors in the formal political system. Hence, there have been many studies, including some of the ones cited above, demonstrating how

newspapers adopting different editorial and political stances differ in their coverage of political issues and events (e.g., So, 2003a, 2003b; Chan and Lee, 2006; Lee and Lin, 2006).

The above studies represent an important tradition in journalism studies in Hong Kong — the use of content-based analyses to examine press performance or changes in holistic “journalistic paradigms” (Chan and Lee, 1991; So and Chan, 1999). However, the existing post-handover studies have a couple of limitations. First, they are limited in scope. Most of the studies focused on news coverage of a specific political controversy or a very specific type of political news, whereas Leung’s (1999) analysis of editorials covered only those that appeared in a single year. Second, and related to the first point, when scholars decided to work on case studies, they usually picked the most politically controversial and thus sensitive issues, such as the Taiwan presidential elections, the debate over national security legislation, or the debate over democratic reforms. There are indeed good reasons for scholars to pay close attention to these issues and events, as they can be considered “critical incidents” (Zelizer, 1992) for the Hong Kong media. They were situations in which political pressure on the press could be extraordinarily high, thus media coverage of these events can be highly illustrative of how the Hong Kong media have responded to political pressures. However, paying a disproportionate degree of attention to such events can also lead one to lose sight of the more general picture. There can be important patterns that can be uncovered only through a study of how the media handle a wide range of political, social, and economic issues.

This study, therefore, attempts to contribute to the existing literature in several inter-related ways. First, it offers a rare systematic longitudinal analysis of media content in the post-handover period. The findings are expected to corroborate at least some of the observations and arguments made by other scholars who have used different research approaches. In other words, this analysis should be able to strengthen the generalizability of some of the existing arguments and conclusions about media performance in Hong Kong. At the same time, specific aspects of the analysis, such as the examination

of editorial invocation of social and political values, offer new and interesting ways to examine media content.

Conceptually, this study is grounded in a framework that sees the Hong Kong media responding strategically to the changing political environment after the handover. While it is generally agreed that the transfer of sovereignty was followed by heightened pressure on the media to conform to the new power centre, different newspapers had their own professional and/or commercial concerns. Hence, they could be expected to employ different strategies to handle the political pressures. As a result, the various newspapers differed in their conformity to the power centre not only in terms of degree, but also with regard to the exact kind of conformity or non-conformity that they exhibited. Our analysis of the contents of editorials should allow us to shed light on such variations in the strategic responses of the newspapers to the political environment.

To explicate the conceptual underpinnings and provide further background for the study, the next section will elaborate on the strategic interaction perspective on understanding media politics in post-handover Hong Kong. Some of the major findings and arguments about media performance in the city in the past decade will also be further reviewed. We will then explain the design of our content analysis by identifying which aspects of the editorials we will pay attention to. The results of the content analysis are then presented, and the implications of the findings are discussed at the end.

## **Media Politics in Post-handover Hong Kong**

Looking at media politics in Hong Kong at a macro-structural level, one can indeed expect a decline in press freedom and an increase in political pressure to have occurred after the handover. Most fundamentally, the transfer of sovereignty marked the end of the “dual power structure” that existed during the transition period, when a balance of power existed between the British colonial government and the incoming Chinese authorities. Specifically, the transfer of sovereignty marked the beginning of a period when China became the sole power centre. As political and social power became more

centralized, social and political freedoms could be expected to suffer.

In addition, from a political economy perspective, the links between the political and economic systems became tighter as the Chinese government attempted to co-opt media owners: Political appointments were meted out to various media owners and top level managers in Hong Kong (Ma, 2007). Chinese capitalists also began to enter the Hong Kong media scene in the early 1990s (Fung and Lee, 1994; Fung, 2007). Meanwhile, most Hong Kong media owners have extensive business interests in the mainland. To cite just one example, Robert Kuok and his family, the current owners of the *South China Morning Post*, also own Shangri-la Hotels and Resorts, which is currently operating 27 hotels across the mainland.<sup>1</sup> In short, Hong Kong media outlets are largely concentrated in the hands of business people who share similar political and economic interests in appeasing China.

Although the media owners, as leaders of huge corporations, cannot be expected to often meddle in the daily operations of their media organizations, the allocative decisions they make, especially with respect to the hiring and firing of top level managers in organizations, coupled with the process of socialization in the newsroom, can lead to a certain degree of political conformity among media personnel (Ma, 2007; Lee and Chan, 2009b). The result is a significant degree of media self-censorship, an elusive phenomenon that is nevertheless widely recognized by journalists themselves to be a major problem faced by the media (Lee and Chan, 2008).

Some politicians and observers may regard the above developments as the most important “story” — essentially a story of decline — about the post-handover Hong Kong press. However, without denying the existence of serious problems involving press freedom, other researchers and scholars have also been interested in the possibilities of resistance and in the operation of counteracting forces that have prevented the Hong Kong media from completely turning into mouthpieces of the government. In this regard, many researchers have recognized the significance of professionalism, commercialism, and a concern with local interests (Chan and Lee, 2007b, 2008; Lai,

2007). Professionally, the Hong Kong journalistic corps have long subscribed to the liberal ideal of journalistic independence and the media as the fourth estate (Chan, Lee, and Lee, 1996). Survey research has shown that such journalistic ideals have not changed much in the post-handover era (So and Chan, 2007). Commercially, the newspaper market in Hong Kong is highly competitive, and survival would require the media to avoid straying too far away from the concerns and interests of their readers.

As a result of the multifarious and often competing concerns that they face, some media organizations have responded by developing and adopting a range of specific reportorial practices and strategies. Recognition of this development has led to the emergence of a strategic interaction perspective on understanding media politics in Hong Kong (Lee, 2007). Originally articulated in Chin-chuan Lee's (2000) seminal piece, in this perspective the media and the power holders engage in constant negotiations and struggles within the larger context of social and political change. The playing field, of course, is not even. The power holders possess extraordinary political and economic resources. As the most important sources of information on public affairs, they are also the "primary definers" of news (Hall et al., 1978). But the structural condition is also far from being a determining one. The media can develop and employ certain "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985), such as practices justified by professional norms, to defend themselves and/or to strive to secure a wider space for their preferred form of journalism. Thus, Lee (2000) declared that the Hong Kong media's reactions to political events can be "highly situational, erratic, partial, and even contradictory", and that the media is at once "cyclically bold and tame, public-spirited and self-serving" (p. 323).

A number of studies since then have employed Lee's (2000) conceptual framework to analyse media performance. Cheung (2003), for example, argued that one method used by the Hong Kong media to alleviate political pressure when covering the Taiwan presidential election in 2000 was to rely on published materials from the international press. Similarly, focusing on the rise of radio phone-in shows in Hong Kong, Lee, Chan, and So (2003) argued that the



mainstream news media have established an informal alliance with radio phone-in programmes — the former considers the latter to be highly “useful” because the mainstream news media can report on the criticisms aired in the shows. Lee and Lin (2006), in a study with a more narrowly defined focus on discursive strategies, examined the editorials that appeared in *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao Daily News* in early 2004, during the debate over democratic reforms. They showed that *Ming Pao Daily News*’s editorial positioned the paper as an impartial arbitrator in a debate between the Chinese government and the pro-democracy politicians in Hong Kong. The editorial also described the Hong Kong public as “centrist” in that the public did not strongly incline towards either one of the two sides. In addition, the paper adopted the rhetoric of objectivity to reduce the political riskiness of its editorials. These rhetorical strategies, nonetheless, still allowed the newspaper to present itself as a professional media organization serving the interests of the public.

While Lee’s (2000) original intention in developing the strategic interaction perspective was to explain how newspapers with a professional orientation struggled to maintain some degree of independence and integrity, the perspective also has implications for the performance of a full range of newspapers in Hong Kong. As Lee and Lin (2006) have demonstrated, even the *Apple Daily*, known for its strong criticisms of the Hong Kong and Chinese governments, has employed a range of rhetorical strategies, including appropriation of the dominant discourse, articulation of internal contradictions, and “abstractization” of the central government, in order to smooth out the radicalism of their editorials. At the other end of the media spectrum, it is also doubtful whether the traditional leftist newspapers, such as *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*, can completely disregard the local culture and local public opinion when covering political news or commenting on political topics. Finally, there is the *Oriental Daily News*, the newspaper with the widest circulation in the city. It is owned by the family of Ma Ching-kwan, who is currently a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Thus, it might be expected that the paper would be muted in its criticisms of the mainland government. But as a populist newspaper in Hong Kong,

there is also a strong tendency for it to voice the anguish and concern of the masses, some of which relate to the mainland government.

Put generally, each newspaper can have a different set of considerations and the relative importance of the various considerations can differ. Therefore, theoretically, each newspaper can be expected to develop its own more or less unique set of strategies to straddle the sometimes turbulent political waters. If, in the post-handover context, most media organizations in Hong Kong are likely to show a certain degree of political conservatism, such conservatism may be manifested in different ways by different newspapers.

Based on the above considerations, the editorials of *Apple Daily*, *Ming Pao Daily News*, *Oriental Daily News*, *Sing Tao Daily*, and *Wen Wei Po* will be examined below. It should be noted that media researchers often attempt to group Hong Kong newspapers into types. Lee (2000), for example, differentiated among the elite-oriented press, the mass-oriented press, and the leftist press in Hong Kong. Employing this typology leads us to group *Apple Daily* and *Oriental Daily News* together (as mass-oriented papers), and *Ming Pao Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily* together (as elite-oriented papers). Fung (2007), on the other hand, argued that with the exception of the leftist papers and the *Apple Daily*, most Hong Kong newspapers can be regarded as “centrist”, although not in the sense that they stand at the mid-point of any abstract left-right or liberal-conservative continuum. Rather, they are actually much closer to the conservative end of the political spectrum. They are “centrist” only in their self-representation. Adopting Fung’s argument would lead us to group together *Ming Pao Daily News*, *Oriental Daily News*, and *Sing Tao Daily*, while at the same time expecting that the gap between such “centrist” newspapers and *Apple Daily* would be bigger than the gap between the “centrist” papers and leftist papers.

Given the large number of daily newspapers in Hong Kong, classifying newspapers into types can be very useful and important for many research purposes. There are certainly similarities among certain newspapers that can justify grouping them into types. But it is important to remember that there can also be subtle differences among newspapers supposedly of the same type. As Lee (2000) noted,

press performance can at times seem contradictory. Following the arguments explicated in the above pages, this study is more interested in uncovering these subtle differences and seeming contradictions. We can certainly expect the *Apple Daily* to be more critical and the *Wen Wei Po* more conservative than the other papers. But rather than simply treating the other three as “centrist”, we are interested in each newspaper as a unique entity that may exhibit its own distinctive journalistic approach.

### **Research Questions, Analytical Focuses, and Methods**

As stated earlier, the empirical analysis of this study involves examining editorials from the following five newspapers: *Apple Daily*, *Ming Pao Daily News*, *Oriental Daily News*, *Sing Tao Daily*, and *Wen Wei Po*. A more comprehensive sampling could have included more specialized papers, such as the English language newspapers (e.g., the *South China Morning Post*) or the economic newspapers (e.g., the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*). But concerns over scope lead us to restrict the study to general-interest Chinese newspapers. *Apple Daily* and *Wen Wei Po* were selected because they were presumed to anchor the two ends of the political spectrum of mainstream newspapers in Hong Kong. *Ming Pao Daily News* is the most widely circulated middle-class oriented newspaper in the city. *Oriental Daily News* is the most widely circulated populist paper in Hong Kong. *Sing Tao Daily*, meanwhile, also targets the middle class in terms of its market orientation, but is well known within the industry as a paper that has a good relationship with the Hong Kong government. Its owner, Ho Tsu-kwok, is also a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference.

We focus on editorials instead of news for a practical and a substantive reason. Practically, editorials give us a relatively well defined and finite set of materials for analysis. It is especially important for the present study, which covers a nine-year period. In contrast, studying news coverage, even if we focus only on the front page, would require a much larger amount of resources. Substantively, the contents of newspaper editorials, when compared to news coverage,

are less constrained by the facts of real-world happenings and the usual journalistic norms of objectivity and neutrality. The editorial is the place to make arguments. Hence, it is where the ideological orientations of a newspaper can be more readily discerned (Hackett and Zhao, 1994). Moreover, the editorial represents the voice of the newspaper. It is the place where newspapers are likely to actively construct their image as authoritative commentators on public affairs and representatives of the reader-public (Le, 2003, 2004). Editorials thus provide a good entry point for an analysis of the media's responses to the political environment.

Which aspects of editorials should we then pay attention to? First, returning to Leung's (1999) argument of the media's tendency to "introspect", it is important for us to examine the topics and issues that are the focus of the editorials. Indeed, one common observation of the post-handover Hong Kong media is that there seems to be a clear distinction between how the media handle Hong Kong and China affairs. While the perception is that self-censorship is more frequently practised in relation to issues involving China (Lee and Chan, 2008), media criticisms of the Hong Kong government have remained fierce, especially during the time of the Tung Chee-hwa administration (Chan and Lee, 2007a). With the assumption that commenting on China is much more politically risky than commenting on the Hong Kong government, having only a small percentage of its editorials address issues relating to China can be considered one way for a newspaper to reduce its political risks. Certainly, an even more straightforward way for the media to avoid political pressure is to avoid politics altogether, i.e., the strategy of de-politicization. Hence, if only a small percentage of a newspaper's editorials address political issues, this can also be taken as a sign of its political conservatism.

Second, as in most analyses of news content, the tone of the coverage would be an important issue for analysis. Obviously, a lack of critical editorials and a proliferation of editorials that are biased towards the power holders could be regarded as signs that a newspaper is conforming to the power centre and avoiding political risks. Moreover, given our analysis of the topical focus of the editorials, it would also be interesting to examine whether newspapers are willing

to criticize the Hong Kong and Chinese governments when discussing political as opposed to economic or social issues. It is plausible to suppose that some newspapers would be highly critical of the Hong Kong government on social and economic issues while refraining from engaging in political criticism.

Third, we also analyse the invocation of social and political values in the editorials. As Gans (1979) has argued, news often reflects the enduring cultural values of a society. In the case of editorials, social and political values widely held by society may be invoked from time to time when constructing arguments. Examining value invocation in editorials is one way of studying social and political change (Taniguchi, 2006). The present study is more specifically interested in the invocation of social and political values as a reflection of the political stances of the newspapers and of how they have been responding to the changing political environment. Generally speaking, more conservative newspapers can be expected to invoke liberal-democratic values less frequently and conservative social and political values more frequently.

In sum, the political conservatism of a newspaper can be signified by an avoidance of China and/or political issues, the relative sparseness of critical editorials and the proliferation of pro-government editorials, and the less frequent invocation of liberal-democratic values in comparison with conservative values.

However, following our conceptual discussions in the previous section, we do not expect simple associations among these characteristics. As was just observed, a newspaper that is highly positive towards China may nonetheless be critical of the Hong Kong government. A newspaper that does not invoke liberal-democratic values in its editorials does not necessarily invoke many conservative values. In addition, when a newspaper is willing to invoke many conservative values, it may not need to de-politicize its editorial agenda at all. We suspect that different newspapers may exhibit their own specific configurations of characteristics on the above aspects.

Last, besides treating the nine years between 1998 and 2006 as one whole period for analysis, we are also interested in whether change can be discerned over time. For this purpose, we divide the

period into two sub-periods using 2003 as the dividing line. Certainly, societies can find the processes of social and political change to be exceedingly dynamic and complicated. The use of any dividing line leads to the risk that the picture of political change will be oversimplified. Yet treating “year” as a continuous variable would over-complicate the analysis. Hence, for practical reasons, a relatively simple periodization is needed.

But why the year 2003? The choice was based on the recognition that there are a number of major differences between the political context of 1998-2002 and that of 2004-2006. First, between 1998 and 2002, Hong Kong was experiencing its worst economic decline for decades. Public discontent towards the government was very strong. But between 2004 and 2006, the Hong Kong economy was in the process of recovery, and public discontent had largely dissipated. Second, 2003 was also the year during which Hong Kong experienced both an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the debate over national security legislation took place. The social and political crises led to the historic July 1st protest, in which 500,000 citizens took to the streets, forcing the government to postpone the passing of the highly controversial national security legislation (Chan and Lee, 2005). The event has arguably changed the Chinese government’s approach to handling Hong Kong affairs (Tai, 2008), and has also re-invigorated the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong (Chan and Lee, 2007c).

In a study of media discourses surrounding the protest, Chan and Lee (2006) argued that the event has reshaped the manifestation of political parallelism in media discourses. The historic protest forced even the most politically conservative newspaper to make concessions, and it led to the emergence of an image of a “rational and peaceful citizenry” unanimously adopted and hailed by the media.

For Chan and Lee (2006), the July 1st protest was a critical event that posed a challenge to the Hong Kong media, who had to respond by abandoning old strategies and devising new discursive ones. But can the newspapers’ shifting strategic responses to changing political contexts be also discerned beyond the single case of the July 1st protest

and over a longer period of time? This question will be explored in our analysis.

Methodologically, due to a concern with the scope of analysis, we only analysed editorials from alternate years (i.e., 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006).<sup>2</sup> From each year included for analysis, editorials were selected through a systematic sampling procedure: A day in the first week of the year was randomly selected to be the starting point, and then every sixth day was included in the analysis. This procedure gave us 60 to 61 issues of each newspaper for each year, and the editorials published on the selected days were all included in the sample. However, there are differences among the newspapers as well as differences within a newspaper over time regarding the number of editorials published on each day. Some newspapers, such as *Ming Pao Daily News*, published two editorials per day during part of the period under study. Some others, including *Apple Daily*, might not publish editorials on Sundays and/or public holidays. Therefore, the actual numbers of editorials from the five newspapers differed somewhat, while the total number of editorials included in the content analysis is 1,623.

The coding was conducted by two hired undergraduate student assistants. As in other content analyses, the students underwent a coder training process, which was supervised by an experienced research assistant. At the end of the training period, the inter-coder reliability coefficients, measured with Scott's *pi*, were all .80 or above for all of the items included in the coding scheme. This level of reliability is generally regarded as acceptable for communications research (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken, 2002:593).

### **Topical Focus of the Newspaper Editorials**

We begin our analysis by looking at the topical focus of the newspaper editorials. Table 1 summarizes the findings. The top half of the table shows the results on whether the editorials addressed broadly defined social, economic, or political topics. The item "social topics" covers a wide range of issues such as education, social welfare, transportation, health, environment, and so forth. Hence, it is not surprising that

**Table 1** Topical focus of editorials by newspapers (%)

	Topical focus		
	Social	Economic	Political
<i>Apple Daily</i>	67.6	15.0	17.4
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	74.9	13.5	11.6
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	77.3	11.2	11.5
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	67.4	23.4	9.2
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	65.3	19.5	15.2
$(\chi^2 = 33.55, df = 8, p < .001)$			
	Geographical focus		
	Hong Kong	China	Others
<i>Apple Daily</i>	79.9	7.8	12.3
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	90.5	6.6	2.9
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	97.0	2.6	0.3
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	89.8	3.9	6.3
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	82.8	13.4	3.8
$(\chi^2 = 89.58, df = 8, p < .001)$			

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper addressing each of the three types of issues, defined in terms of topical or geographical focus. Percentages across a row may not add up to exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

all five newspapers devoted the majority of their editorials to social topics. In contrast, substantially smaller proportions of the editorials focused on economic and political topics.

However, there are indeed significant differences in the degree to which the editorials of the five newspapers focused on the three different topics. *Apple Daily* devoted 17.4% of their editorials to political topics. Next was the *Wen Wei Po*, which devoted 15.2% of its editorials to political issues. The other three newspapers devoted only about 9% to 11% of their editorials to political issues.

The bottom half of the table shows that there were also significant differences in the degree to which the editorials of the five newspapers focused almost exclusively on local matters. When compared to



other newspapers, *Apple Daily* devoted the smallest proportion of its editorials to Hong Kong issues (which include issues touching upon the relationship between Hong Kong and China). It devoted 7.8% of its editorials to China issues. *Ming Pao Daily News* devoted 6.6% of its editorials to China issues. These two percentages are higher than the percentages for *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily*. However, the paper that devoted the largest proportion of editorials to China issues was *Wen Wei Po* (13.4%). Interestingly, *Apple Daily* devoted a substantial proportion of its editorials to issues relating neither to Hong Kong nor China.

What do these findings show us? On the one hand, following the argument that avoiding political issues and China issues is one way for the news media to avoid political risks, it is indeed to be expected that *Apple Daily* would devote comparatively more editorials to political and China issues than the other newspapers in Hong Kong. But at the same time, Table 1 shows that the leftist *Wen Wei Po* did not exhibit a general tendency to avoid political and China issues. This is not unexpected, since *Wen Wei Po* serves as the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda outpost in Hong Kong. De-politicization and introspection, as strategies to avoid political risks, are more likely to be adopted by newspapers which, regardless of their political orientation, still attempt to present themselves as "Hong Kong" newspapers. Table 1 shows that the tendencies are most conspicuous in the cases of *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily*.

Have there been any changes in the topical focus of the editorials over the years? Tables 2 and 3 summarize the relevant analysis completed by cross-tabulating the topical focus variables with the dichotomous time period variable for each newspaper separately. Table 2 shows that, in the case of *Apple Daily*, the proportion of editorials devoted to political topics increased from 12.1% in 1998-2002 to 22.4% in 2004-2006. The increase is statistically significant at  $p < .01$ . This increase is most probably attributable to the return of the issue of democratic reform to the policy and public agenda after 2003, a subject that this pro-democracy newspaper is likely to have frequently brought up in its editorials.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, there was no significant increase in the percentage of editorials addressing political

**Table 2** Topical focus of editorials by time periods and newspapers (%)

	Social	Economic	Political
<i>Apple Daily</i>			
1998-2002	76.7	11.3	12.1
2004-2006	59.2	18.4	22.4
	$(\chi^2 = 10.18, df = 2, p < .01)$		
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>			
1998-2002	78.2	11.7	10.1
2004-2006	71.7	15.2	13.1
	$(\chi^2 = 2.11, df = 2, p > .30)$		
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>			
1998-2002	71.2	14.1	14.7
2004-2006	86.7	6.7	6.7
	$(\chi^2 = 9.91, df = 2, p < .02)$		
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>			
1998-2002	66.8	23.4	9.8
2004-2006	68.3	23.3	8.3
	$(\chi^2 = 0.19, df = 2, p > .80)$		
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>			
1998-2002	60.3	20.5	19.2
2004-2006	69.3	18.8	12.0
	$(\chi^2 = 4.10, df = 2, p > .10)$		

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper addressing each of the three types of issues in each of the two time periods. Percentages across a row may not add up to exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

issues in *Ming Pao Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily*. There was even a significant decline in the proportion of *Oriental Daily News* editorials addressing political issues – from 14.7% in 1998-2002 to 6.7% in 2004-2006. *Wen Wei Po*'s editorials exhibited a similar decline, though the decrease from 19.2% to 12.0% is not statistically significant.

What Table 2 illustrates are two points. First, while there may or may not be a tendency for some Hong Kong newspapers to avoid politics in general, it is likely that different political topics were avoided to different extents. Democratic reform, as a sensitive topic,

was likely to have been avoided by conservative newspapers to a greater extent, whereas newspapers might not have found the need to avoid some political topics in the 1998-2002 period, such as the establishment of the principal officials accountability system and the Chief Executive election in 2002. Second, de-politicization as a strategy to avoid political risks was most conspicuous in specific newspapers in the period after 2003. In fact, another way to look at the findings in Table 2 is to see that, between 1998 and 2002, *Apple Daily* was actually not more likely than *Oriental Daily News* or *Wen Wei Po* to address political topics in its editorials (12.1% vs 14.7% and 19.2% respectively). *Apple Daily* became the most likely to address political topics in its editorials only in the second time period. Therefore, the utility of or the need for the strategy of de-politicization varied according to changes in the political environment. Hong Kong media's responses to political pressure were dynamic, not static.

Table 3 shows the findings on changes over time in the percentages of editorials focusing on Hong Kong, China, or other issues. The findings are relatively difficult to interpret in relation to concrete social and political events. But as far as the numerical patterns are concerned, it can be noted that the findings in Table 3 are very similar to those in Table 2. *Apple Daily* exhibited a significant amount of change over time — but instead of shying away from China issues in the latter period, the percentage of editorials addressing China issues increased from 5.0% in 1998-2002 to 10.5% in 2004-2006. *Ming Pao Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily* did not exhibit obvious changes in the percentage of their editorials focusing on China. A significant decrease in the percentage addressing China issues was found in the case of *Wen Wei Po*: while 22.5% of its editorials in 1998-2002 focused on China, only 6.3% of its editorials in the second time period did so. The percentage of editorials focusing on China also declined from 3.8% in 1998-2002 to merely 0.8% in 2004-2006 for *Oriental Daily News*, though the decline is not statistically significant. On the whole, *Apple Daily*'s particular willingness to address China issues was apparent only in the second time period.

**Table 3** Geographical focus of editorials by time periods and newspapers (%)

	Hong Kong	China	Others
<i>Apple Daily</i>			
1998-2002	87.9	5.0	7.1
2004-2006	72.4	10.5	17.1
	$(\chi^2 = 11.07, df = 2, p < .01)$		
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>			
1998-2002	91.5	5.9	2.7
2004-2006	89.5	7.3	3.1
	$(\chi^2 = 0.43, df = 2, p > .80)$		
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>			
1998-2002	95.7	3.8	0.5
2004-2006	99.2	0.8	0.0
	$(\chi^2 = 3.18, df = 2, p < .20)$		
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>			
1998-2002	91.8	3.8	4.3
2004-2006	86.7	4.2	9.2
	$(\chi^2 = 2.94, df = 2, p > .20)$		
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>			
1998-2002	72.8	22.5	4.6
2004-2006	90.6	6.3	3.1
	$(\chi^2 = 20.41, df = 2, p < .001)$		

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper addressing each of the three types of issues in each of the two time periods. Percentages across a row may not add up to exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

### Overall Tone of the Editorials

We now turn to examine the overall tone exhibited by the editorials. It should be noted that “overall tone” is different from the mere presence or absence of praise or criticism. As various scholars have noted, in the post-handover era the Hong Kong media have exhibited a heightened and intensified objectivity (Lee, Chan and So, 2004).

Even in editorials, criticism of the power holders may sometimes be balanced by praise or acknowledgement of the power holders' goodwill (Lee and Lin, 2006). Therefore, the absence of an overall critical tone in a single editorial cannot be equated with the complete absence of critical views in that editorial. Nevertheless, given that editorials are places for the making of arguments, they are supposed to be less constrained by the norms of objectivity and neutrality. Hence, a general lack of editorials with an overall critical tone can still be a telling sign of the avoidance of political risks.

Table 4 summarizes the findings on whether the editorials in the five newspapers exhibited an overall critical tone towards the Hong Kong government (either the government in general, the Chief Executive, top level officials, or specific government departments), the Chinese government (either the government in general, the national leaders, or specific departments and officials), and politicians and political parties in Hong Kong (including the legislature). The findings show that the proportions of critical editorials differed significantly among the newspapers. However, *Apple Daily* was not the newspaper with the largest number of editorials critical of the Hong Kong government. Rather, that title belonged to *Oriental Daily News*, more than half of its editorials were critical of the Hong Kong government. As mentioned previously, as a widely circulated populist newspaper, the *Oriental Daily News* was not likely to shy away from criticizing the Hong Kong government. In fact, besides frequently criticizing the Hong Kong government, *Oriental Daily News* also had the largest proportion of editorials exhibiting an overall critical tone towards political parties, politicians, or the legislature in Hong Kong (8.6%, as compared to 2.0% to 6.7% for the other newspapers).

Nevertheless, *Oriental Daily News* was unlikely to criticize the Chinese government. In contrast, *Apple Daily* was indeed the newspaper most likely to be critical of China, although the percentage of editorials exhibiting a critical tone towards China was not high even for *Apple Daily* (only 6.8%), since most editorials published by Hong Kong newspapers addressed local issues.

It is also worth noting that *Ming Pao Daily News*, largely due to its emphasis on objectivity and professionalism, did not contain a

**Table 4** Critical editorials by newspapers (%)

	The Hong Kong government	The Chinese government	Hong Kong politicians
<i>Apple Daily</i>	20.1	6.8	4.1
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	10.8	0.5	2.6
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	53.9	2.0	8.6
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	2.6	0.1	2.0
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	2.9	0.0	6.7
$\chi^2$ ( $df=4$ )	392.12***	55.80***	21.83***

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper exhibiting an overall critical tone towards the object listed as column headings. The difference among the newspapers is tested for statistical significance through cross-tabulating each of the dichotomous “critical or not” variables and the newspaper variable.

very large percentage of critical editorials, whether of the Hong Kong government, the Chinese government, or Hong Kong politicians. *Sing Tao Daily* was the newspaper least likely to publish critical editorials. *Wen Wei Po*, on the other hand, almost never published editorials critical of China. But it did publish a significant proportion of editorials critical of politicians and political parties in Hong Kong. Of course, we can presume that the pro-democracy parties and politicians would be their main target of criticism.

Do degrees of political criticism vary according to the topical focus of the editorials and according to time period? Tables 5 and 6 present the relevant findings, focusing only on whether the editorials exhibited an overall critical tone towards the Hong Kong government.<sup>4</sup> Table 5 shows that there were indeed systematic variations in whether a newspaper was more or less likely to be critical on each type of issue. *Apple Daily* was not only more likely than many other newspapers to criticize the Hong Kong government, it was, more specifically, also more likely to be critical when it discussed political issues: 37.3% of its political editorials exhibited an overall critical tone, whereas only

**Table 5** Editorials critical of the Hong Kong government by newspapers and topical focus (%)

	Social	Economic	Political	$\chi^2$
<i>Apple Daily</i>	17.2	13.6	37.3	11.53**
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	10.9	7.8	13.6	0.83
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	54.0	67.6	40.0	5.31^
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	3.9	0.0	0.0	3.97
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	3.6	1.5	1.9	1.00

^  $p < .08$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials addressing each type of issue from each newspaper exhibiting an overall critical tone towards the Hong Kong government. The difference among the percentages in the same row is tested for statistical significance through cross-tabulating the topical focus variable with the dichotomous “critical or not” variable for each newspaper.

about 14% to 17% of its editorials addressing social and economic issues exhibited an overall critical tone.

In contrast, although Table 4 shows that *Oriental Daily News* was the most likely to be critical of the Hong Kong government, Table 5 shows that the paper was most likely to be critical only on social and economic issues. Its degree of criticalness was reduced when addressing political topics. Looking at the percentages along each column, we can see that *Oriental Daily News* had been as likely as *Apple Daily* (40.0% vs 37.3%) to be critical of the Hong Kong government in its political editorials. The difference is that the former was even more likely to be critical when addressing social and economic matters.

Similarly, *Sing Tao Daily* and *Wen Wei Po* also seemed to be less likely to be critical when addressing political topics. But because the number of critical editorials in the two newspapers was very small to begin with, the “topical focus x critical tone” cross-tabulation did not come up with statistically significant results. Lastly, *Ming Pao Daily News* also exhibited no particular tendency to be more or less

**Table 6** Editorials critical of the Hong Kong government by newspapers and time periods (%)

	1998-2002	2004-2006	$\chi^2$
<i>Apple Daily</i>	18.4	21.7	0.49
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	14.7	7.3	4.86*
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	51.6	57.5	1.01
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	3.3	1.7	0.72
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	0.7	4.7	4.84*

\*  $p < .05$ .

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each time period from each newspaper exhibiting an overall critical tone towards the Hong Kong government. The difference among the percentages in the same row is tested for statistical significance through cross-tabulating the time period variable with the dichotomous “critical or not” variable for each newspaper.

critical when addressing political matters. On social topics, 10.9% of the paper’s editorials were critical of the Hong Kong government, a percentage which was not far below that of *Apple Daily* (17.2%). Nevertheless, there was a difference of about 24% (13.6% vs 37.3%) between the two newspapers in the case of political editorials, although the difference was due to an increased likelihood on the part of *Apple Daily* to engage in criticism, not a decreased likelihood on the part of *Ming Pao Daily News* to be critical on political topics.

There had been only limited variation over time in the percentages of editorials with an overall critical tone towards the Hong Kong government. Table 6 shows that the percentages of critical editorials in *Apple Daily* and *Oriental Daily News* remained largely the same in the two time periods. Interestingly, the percentage of *Wen Wei Po*’s editorials exhibiting a critical tone towards the Hong Kong government increased significantly from 0.7% to 4.7%. One possible interpretation of this finding is that, in the aftermath of the 2003 July 1st protest and as civil society in Hong Kong continued to develop, even conservative newspapers might have



felt the need to at least occasionally publish criticisms of the power holders. This interpretation would be consistent with Chan and Lee's (2006) argument about the revision of political parallelism in media discourses following the events of 2003.

However, there had also been a significant decline in the percentage of editorials exhibiting an overall critical tone towards the Hong Kong government in the case of *Ming Pao Daily News*: 14.7% of its editorials in 1998-2002 were critical of the Hong Kong government, but only 7.3% of its editorials in 2004-2006 exhibited such an overall critical tone. This finding, nonetheless, is consistent with Lee and Lin's (2006) finding on *Ming Pao Daily News*'s rhetoric of objectivity in its editorials addressing democratic reform in 2004. What Table 6 suggests, then, is that *Ming Pao Daily News*'s approach of objectivity further intensified in the period of 2004-2006 and was often applied to issues beyond the debate over democratic reforms.

While Tables 4 to 6 have focused on whether newspaper editorials had exhibited an overall critical tone towards different political actors, Table 7 illustrates the extent to which different newspapers had published editorials with an overall positive tone towards the political actors. As discussed earlier, avoiding criticism towards the power holders and actually praising the power holders represent two very different forms of political conformity. While Hong Kong newspapers might refrain from criticizing the power holders in order to avoid political risks, they probably felt less pressure to actually take up the role of propagandist and promote the views and deeds of the power holders. At the same time, the absence of criticism, when compared to presence of positive appraisals, is less likely to be identified by readers as problematic. Hence, Hong Kong newspapers should perceive more disincentives to publish editorials positive towards the government.

These considerations and arguments can explain the findings in Table 7, which shows that the percentages of editorials showing an overall positive tone towards the Hong Kong and Chinese governments were actually small for all newspapers. Even *Wen Wei Po* had only about 8% of its editorials exhibiting an overall positive tone towards the two governments. Despite showing evidence of political

**Table 7** Positive editorials by newspapers (%)

	The Hong Kong government	The Chinese government	Hong Kong politicians
<i>Apple Daily</i>	0.3	0.7	1.0
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	1.1	1.8	0.3
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	3.6	2.3	0.0
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	3.0	2.6	0.3
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	8.7	8.2	1.2
$\chi^2$ ( $df = 4$ )	44.91***	36.58***	6.05

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper exhibiting an overall positive tone towards the object listed as column headings. The difference among the newspapers is tested for statistical significance through cross-tabulating each of the dichotomous “critical or not” variables and the newspaper variable.

conservatism in other ways, only about 2% to 3% of the editorials of *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily* were positive towards China. If *Ming Pao Daily News*’s approach of objectivity has limited the percentage of its critical editorials, the percentages of its positive editorials were even smaller. Not surprisingly, however, *Apple Daily* remained the least likely to publish editorials with an overall positive tone towards the Hong Kong and Chinese governments.

The very small number of editorials exhibiting an overall positive tone towards the power holders prevented us from cross-tabulating the presence of a positive tone and variables such as topical focus and time period. The small numbers mean that the percentages of positive editorials were small regardless of topical focus and time period.

### Invocation of Social and Political Values

Finally, we examine the invocation in editorials of social and political values. A preliminary reading of the editorials by the researchers led to the identification of 14 social and political values that were at least

occasionally invoked by the editorials. The content analysis thus recorded the explicit mention of these 14 values. For a more efficient analysis, we grouped the 14 values into the following three categories according to both the literal meanings of the values as well as the ways in which these values were usually invoked in public discourse in Hong Kong:

1. Liberal-democratic values, which include “democracy”, “civil liberties”, “transparency and openness”, “accountability”, “diversity and plurality”, and “listening to the public”. These are ideas and notions central to the operation of a liberal-democratic polity.
2. Conservative values, which include “social stability”, “economic prosperity”, “social harmony”, and “the need to cooperate with China”. These ideas and values are not necessarily anti-democratic when abstracted from the actual political context of Hong Kong. But they have been some of the most widely cited values in the discourses perpetrated by conservative politicians and/or the Chinese government. For example, social stability is undoubtedly a desirable thing. But in the political discourses in Hong Kong, stability is often articulated as something that can be threatened if democratization proceeds at too quick a pace.
3. Procedural values, which include “rationality and rational discussion”, “the rule of law”, “respect for the Basic Law”, and “efficiency”. These values are “procedural” because, when invoked during policy debates, they refer more to the characteristics of the processes of policy making instead of the characteristics of the policy outcome.<sup>5</sup> Besides, the values are neither strongly democratic nor strongly conservative within the context of Hong Kong politics, as they seem to be accepted by politicians on all sides. For instance, while the legitimacy of the Basic Law was once fervently debated in society before the handover, it is nowadays taken for granted by all. Similarly, few would argue against values as general and widely applicable as “rationality” and “efficiency”.

Examining the invocation of procedural values is interesting because they constitute a less politically charged set of values that

the media can fall back on when they feel the pressure to refrain from invoking democratic values. For instance, Lee and Lin's (2006) analysis of *Ming Pao Daily News's* editorials during the debates in 2004 over democratic reforms shows that the newspaper did indeed quite frequently invoke the procedural values of rationality and communications. Lee and Lin (2006) argued that, by emphasizing such procedural values, *Ming Pao Daily News* could continue to write editorials that would seem reasonable in the eyes of the general public as well as acceptable in the eyes of the power holders.

Table 8 shows the basic percentages of editorials invoking the three types of values that appeared in different newspapers. Not surprisingly, *Apple Daily* had the largest percentage of editorials invoking liberal-democratic values (28.7%), but *Ming Pao Daily News* also followed closely behind (24.0%). In contrast, *Oriental Daily News*, *Sing Tao Daily*, and *Wen Wei Po* invoked liberal-democratic values significantly less frequently. Nevertheless, it should be noted that even the relatively conservative newspapers in Hong Kong are likely to pay at least lip service to liberal-democratic values, or may invoke liberal values while redefining them to suit their own purposes. Therefore, the percentages of editorials invoking liberal-democratic values still amounted to about 15% to 19% even in *Oriental Daily News*, *Sing Tao Daily*, and *Wen Wei Po*.

Moreover, while *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily* did not invoke liberal-democratic values frequently, they also did not invoke conservative values frequently. Only about 10% to 12% of their editorials invoked conservative values — not much lower than the corresponding figure for *Ming Pao Daily News* of 13.5%. This finding is similar to the finding in the earlier section that newspapers that refrained from criticizing the government did not necessarily praise it. In any case, the third column shows that only *Wen Wei Po* was especially likely to invoke conservative values, while *Apple Daily* was particularly unlikely to invoke them.

The fourth column of Table 8 shows that there were also significant differences in the extent to which procedural values were invoked by the newspapers. Consistent with Lee and Lin's (2006) findings, *Ming Pao Daily News* was relatively more likely than *Apple*

**Table 8** Invocation of values in editorials by newspapers (%)

	Liberal-democratic values	Conservative values	Procedural values
<i>Apple Daily</i>	28.7	5.5	11.9
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	24.0	13.5	16.1
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	14.8	10.2	8.9
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	15.1	11.5	11.2
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	18.7	31.8	19.2
$\chi^2$ ( $df=4$ )	27.14***	106.26***	19.06**

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper invoking the type of values indicated in the column headings. The difference among the newspapers is tested for statistical significance through cross-tabulating each of the dichotomous value invocation variables and the newspaper variable.

*Daily* to invoke such values. However, *Wen Wei Po* was even more likely to do so. Meanwhile, *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily* were less likely to invoke such values. In fact, one way to summarize the findings in Table 8 is to note that value invocation — regardless of what type of value is involved — is simply not a frequently adopted practice in the editorial writings of *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily*.

Similar to the analysis in the previous sections, we are also interested in whether invocation of different types of values would vary according to topical focus and time period. Table 9 summarizes the findings derived by cross-tabulating topical focus and invocation of values for each newspaper separately. A number of findings can be highlighted. First, the second column of the table shows that, for all five newspapers, liberal-democratic values were most likely to be invoked in editorials addressing political topics. In other words, even a conservative newspaper such as *Wen Wei Po* felt the need to recognize the importance of liberal-democratic values when addressing political issues.

**Table 9** Invocation of values in editorials by topical focus and newspapers (%)

	Liberal-democratic values	Conservative values	Procedural values
<i>Apple Daily</i>			
Social	26.3	5.6	11.1
Economic	6.8	4.5	0.0
Political	56.9	5.9	25.5
$\chi^2$ ( $df=2$ )	30.66***	0.09	15.00**
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>			
Social	23.2	11.3	14.8
Economic	15.7	19.6	7.8
Political	38.6	20.5	34.1
$\chi^2$ ( $df=2$ )	7.19*	4.68	13.48**
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>			
Social	14.0	8.9	9.4
Economic	8.8	8.8	0.0
Political	25.7	20.0	14.3
$\chi^2$ ( $df=2$ )	4.38	4.15	4.64
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>			
Social	17.1	9.8	9.3
Economic	7.0	5.6	8.5
Political	21.4	39.3	32.1
$\chi^2$ ( $df=2$ )	5.08	24.23***	13.67**
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>			
Social	16.5	30.8	16.5
Economic	10.4	11.9	7.5
Political	38.5	61.5	46.5
$\chi^2$ ( $df=2$ )	17.09***	33.50***	31.29***

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper on each topical focus invoking the type of values indicated in the column headings. The difference among topical focus is tested for statistical significance through cross-tabulating each of the dichotomous value invocation variables and topical focus variable for each newspaper.

What marks the relatively conservative newspapers, then, is the likelihood to which they will mention conservative values when addressing political issues. The third column of Table 9 shows that *Apple Daily* was unlikely to invoke conservative values regardless of the topical focus of the editorials. Besides, while Table 8 shows that *Ming Pao Daily News*, *Oriental Daily News*, and *Sing Tao Daily* were more or less equally likely to invoke conservative values, Table 9 shows that values such as stability and harmony were invoked by *Ming Pao Daily News* when addressing all kinds of issues (11.3% to 20.5%). In contrast, while less than 10% of *Sing Tao Daily*'s social and economic editorials involved the invocation of conservative values, as much as 39.3% of its political editorials invoked such values. The association between topical focus and the invocation of conservative values is statistically highly significant. The same pattern can be discerned in the case of *Oriental Daily News*, although the association between the invocation of conservative values and topical focus is not significant. Not surprisingly, *Wen Wei Po* also exhibited a stronger likelihood to invoke conservative values when addressing political issues. The difference between *Wen Wei Po* and *Sing Tao Daily* is that the former was also very likely to invoke conservative values when addressing social issues.

Turning to the fourth column, we can also see that the invocation of procedural values was particularly likely when Hong Kong newspapers addressed political topics. This is partly because "respect for the Basic Law", one of the procedural values included in the study, is strongly political in nature. But values such as rationality and efficiency should be equally, if not more, applicable to social matters. The findings in Table 9 thus support the earlier argument that such procedural values, as relevant but less politically charged values, are what some media outlets in Hong Kong may turn to when discussing sensitive political topics.

Table 10 shows how frequently different types of values were invoked when the editorials focused on Hong Kong and China issues, respectively. The top half of Table 10 largely replicates the pattern already shown in Table 8. When Hong Kong issues were concerned, *Apple Daily* was the most likely to invoke liberal-democratic values,

**Table 10** Invocation of values in editorials by geographical focus and newspapers (%)

	Liberal-democratic values	Conservative values	Procedural values
Hong Kong issues			
<i>Apple Daily</i>	33.3	2.6	13.7
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	24.8	14.0	17.2
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	15.3	10.2	8.8
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	16.1	11.4	11.0
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	19.0	29.2	21.5
$\chi^2$ (df = 4)	34.24***	86.00***	23.63***
China issues			
<i>Apple Daily</i>	8.7	26.1	4.3
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>	8.0	12.0	4.0
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>	0.0	12.5	12.5
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>	8.3	33.3	25.0
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>	17.4	54.3	8.7
$\chi^2$ (df = 4)	3.23	16.12**	5.36

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper on each geographical focus invoking the type of values indicated in the column headings. The difference among the newspapers is tested for statistical significance through cross-tabulating each of the dichotomous value invocation variables and the newspaper variable.

followed by *Ming Pao Daily News*. *Wen Wei Po*, *Oriental Daily News*, and *Sing Tao Daily* were less likely to invoke liberal-democratic values. At the same time, *Apple Daily* was also very unlikely to invoke conservative values, whereas *Wen Wei Po* was most likely to invoke conservative values on local matters.

However, the patterns are rather different when China issues were discussed in the editorials. All five newspapers were unlikely to invoke liberal-democratic values. Meanwhile, when China issues were discussed, *Apple Daily* also invoked some conservative values such as



social stability and harmony to a certain extent. In fact, while 26.1% of *Apple Daily*'s editorials discussing China issues invoked some conservative values, only 12.0% of *Ming Pao Daily News*'s editorials and 12.5% of *Oriental Daily News*'s editorials did the same. That is, *Apple Daily* had an even greater tendency to invoke conservative values than *Ming Pao Daily News* and *Oriental Daily News* when discussing China issues. Nevertheless, *Wen Wei Po* remained the most likely to invoke conservative values when discussing China issues.

The findings suggest that while *Wen Wei Po*'s conservative political stance is consistently applied to Hong Kong and China affairs, *Apple Daily*'s pro-democracy stance is largely restricted to Hong Kong affairs. One possible reason for this is that *Apple Daily* may perceive its readers as interested primarily in the democratization of Hong Kong. Although political analysts may argue that the democratization of Hong Kong cannot be dissociated from the democratization of China, *Apple Daily* may share the view held by certain pro-democracy political groups in Hong Kong that the practical political strategy for Hong Kong society is to focus one's efforts on calling for the democratization of Hong Kong only.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, one may also argue that the conservative newspapers may feel less constrained by local public opinion and freer to invoke conservative values when discussing China affairs. While only 29.2% of *Wen Wei Po*'s editorials addressing Hong Kong affairs invoked some conservative values, 54.3% of its editorials on China issues did so. The same pattern also applied to *Sing Tao Daily*: while only 11.4% of its editorials on Hong Kong affairs invoked conservative values, 33.3% of its editorials on China issues did so. Once again, we see the importance of distinguishing between China and Hong Kong affairs when discussing and examining Hong Kong media's performance in the post-handover era.

Lastly, Table 11 shows whether the invocation of social and political values by the five newspapers varied over the two time periods. The only statistically significant finding in Table 11 concerns *Apple Daily*'s invocation of procedural values: while only 7.8% of its editorials in 1998-2002 invoked some procedural values, 15.8% of its editorials in 2004-2006 did so. However, as Table 11 involves

**Table 11** Invocation of values in editorials by time periods and newspapers (%)

	Liberal-democratic values	Conservative values	Procedural values
<i>Apple Daily</i>			
1998-2002	28.4	5.0	7.8
2004-2006	28.9	5.9	15.8
$\chi^2$ (df= 1)	0.01	0.13	4.44*
<i>Ming Pao Daily News</i>			
1998-2002	22.3	10.1	11.9
2004-2006	25.7	16.8	17.8
$\chi^2$ (df= 1)	0.57	3.60	0.83
<i>Oriental Daily News</i>			
1998-2002	12.5	8.7	11.4
2004-2006	18.3	12.5	5.0
$\chi^2$ (df= 1)	1.96	1.15	3.69^
<i>Sing Tao Daily</i>			
1998-2002	17.4	13.0	10.3
2004-2006	11.7	9.2	12.5
$\chi^2$ (df= 1)	1.85	1.07	0.35
<i>Wen Wei Po</i>			
1998-2002	15.9	36.4	22.5
2004-2006	20.8	28.1	16.7
$\chi^2$ (df= 1)	1.36	2.69	1.86

^  $p < .06$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

Note: Entries are percentages of editorials from each newspaper in each time period invoking the type of values indicated in the column headings. The difference between the time periods is tested for statistical significance through cross-tabulating each of the dichotomous value invocation variables and the time period variable for each newspaper.

15 separate statistical tests, we should not put too much emphasis on a single result that is significant at  $p < .05$  (as a matter of probability, one such significant finding will emerge simply by chance in about 20 tests). Therefore, we should simply conclude that the invocation of the three types of values by each of the five newspapers did not exhibit any consistent and important variations over time.

### **Brief Summary of the Findings**

To recapitulate, our study is premised on a strategic interaction perspective on the development of media politics in post-handover Hong Kong. The media are considered as entities that are facing contradictory and numerous pressures, some pushing them towards the power centre, and some pulling them away from it. Each media organization has its own market position, its own political stance, and thus its own set of concerns. Therefore, we expect that both similarities and differences will exist among the newspapers in terms of their responses to the political environment. On the one hand, it is conceptually possible to group together different newspapers into types, and newspapers belonging to a type should share similar characteristics and utilize similar strategies to respond to political change. But on the other hand, there should also be subtle differences among newspapers belonging to the same type. When the subtle differences are taken into account, we can expect each newspaper to exhibit its own more or less distinctive approach to handling news, or, within the context of this study, distinctive approach to writing editorials.

We would argue that this overall expectation is largely substantiated by the analysis in the previous pages. We identified a number of strategies the Hong Kong media might have adopted to avoid political risks and reduce political pressure, including depoliticization, introspection, avoiding criticisms of the power holders, applauding the power holders, refraining from promoting liberal-democratic values, and echoing the power holders' promotion of conservative values. However, no newspaper would adopt all of these strategies, and no newspaper would exhibit the opposite tendencies

on all of these aspects. *Wen Wei Po*, for example, did show signs of being a propagandist newspaper for the Chinese government. It made relatively few political criticisms and invocations of democratic values, provided relatively more positive editorials, and invoked conservative values more frequently. However, just because it was willing to take the propagandist approach, there was no strong reason for it to shy away from addressing China issues and/or political issues.

In comparison, introspection and de-politicization are the hallmarks of newspapers such as *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily*. These are commercial newspapers that present themselves as representatives of the Hong Kong public. Their political conservatism can be discerned from the lack of criticisms of China in their editorials, as well as from the relative lack of invocation of liberal-democratic values. But they also understand that, to survive in the Hong Kong market, they cannot be seen as mere propaganda machines for the government. For them, introspection and de-politicization thus became useful strategies to alleviate the tensions created by the conflicting political and economic concerns. Also as a result of the conflicting concerns, the two newspapers did not help to “promote” the Chinese or Hong Kong governments. The invocation of conservative values was as infrequent as the invocation of liberal-democratic ones.

While such similarities can justify grouping newspapers such as *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily* together into a type, there are also subtle differences between the two. Most notably, as a populist newspaper, *Oriental Daily News* provided a huge amount of criticism of the Hong Kong government. But it was shown to have criticized the Hong Kong government on social and economic matters more frequently than on political matters.

*Ming Pao Daily News*, meanwhile, has probably been a prototypical professional newspaper. Its “scores” on many of the variables in the content analysis stood between the critical *Apple Daily* and the other more conservative newspapers in Hong Kong. But because of its approach of objectivity and neutrality, the paper’s “scores” on a number of variables—such as the percentage of editorials criticizing China, the percentage of editorials invoking conservative

values, and the percentage of editorials invoking procedural values — were actually similar to the “scores” obtained by newspapers such as *Oriental Daily News* and *Sing Tao Daily*. As some critical journalism scholars have long argued, an inadvertent consequence of journalistic objectivity can be a bias towards the establishment in many cases (Tuchman, 1978; Glasser, 1992; Iggers, 1998; for a discussion focusing on the case of Hong Kong, see Lee et al., 2004). The findings also support Fung’s (2007) pronouncement that most newspapers in Hong Kong, with the exception of *Apple Daily* and the leftist papers, can be regarded as forming a “centrist” press in the city, at least where political matters are concerned. Yet these newspapers are “centrist” only in terms of their self-representation. In terms of their political stances, they actually stand relatively closer to the power centre.

Last, but not least, the *Apple Daily* did score on the less conservative side on most variables. But even this observation needs to be qualified. First, the paper was not really more critical towards the Hong Kong government than *Oriental Daily News*, especially where social and economic issues were concerned. Second, *Apple Daily*’s pro-democracy stance is largely restricted to Hong Kong. The pro-democracy stance was not obvious in the paper’s editorials addressing China issues. Rather, the invocation of values such as social stability and harmony was more frequent.

## Concluding Discussions

By providing systematic documentation of the major politically relevant characteristics of the editorials of five Hong Kong newspapers, this study should have provided important empirical evidence and grounds for an understanding and evaluation of media performance in post-handover Hong Kong. We do not claim to have found anything startlingly new with regard to political communication in the city. Rather, the findings have mainly substantiated existing arguments and observations about media performance, or helped to generalize some findings based on case studies to the “larger picture” of newspaper editorial contents in general.

A few of these observations and arguments are worth reiterating. First, our findings show that Leung's (1999) observation that the media has a tendency to be introspective was indeed one way for us to examine how some media organizations attempted to reduce political risks. But it is also important to recognize that introspection is a useful strategy for some Hong Kong media organizations exactly because they still dare not turn themselves into propaganda machines. Second, Lee and Lin's (2006) finding regarding the use of procedural values in political debates by editorials is replicated in this study. It thus shows that the turn to the less politically charged procedural values is a strategy applicable not only to the single case of democratic reform, but also to editorial writings on a wide range of issues.

Moreover, the results also illustrate the importance of distinguishing between the media's performance in covering local political matters and their performance in covering China issues. After the handover, most critical accounts of the loss of press freedom and media self-censorship have focused on the media's handling of a number of sensitive and mostly "national topics", such as Taiwan independence (Cheung, 2003). But where local issues are concerned, the media's criticisms of the Hong Kong government can remain fierce. This has even led some government officials to lament that the media has too much influence on public affairs (Chan and Lee, 2007c). Our findings provide systematic evidence showing that, indeed, the Hong Kong media's tendency to criticize or remain silent could differ depending on whether Hong Kong or China issues are concerned.

Last, but not least, the findings also provide some evidence of how the media's responses to political pressure have also changed over time. For instance, the tendency for *Oriental Daily News* to shy away from political topics or for *Apple Daily* to emphasize them were both more apparent in the period between 2004 and 2006. *Ming Pao Daily News*'s tendency to remain objective in their editorials, and thus their lack of editorials critical of the Hong Kong government, was also more pronounced in the second period. Admittedly, the ability of our study to uncover change over time was limited by the relatively simplistic analytical procedure that we used, i.e., differentiating the nine-year period into only two sub-periods. A more comprehensive

and powerful analysis might have been able to uncover more and greater changes over time, although such an analysis would require substantially more resources.

Nevertheless, the continuities over time, as well as some of the findings, which illustrate a relative degree of similarity among the five newspapers, may also illustrate the existence of certain ground rules or commonly accepted ideas that remain important considerations for editorial writers in spite of short-term changes in the political environment and the occurrence of political events. For example, it is noteworthy that the differences between the newspapers on the invocation of conservative social values (which range from 2.6% to 29.2%) are larger than the differences between them on the invocation of liberal-democratic values (which range from 15.3% to 33.3%). This can be a sign of the dominance of the democratic discourse in the public arena in Hong Kong — even conservative media and political actors have to acknowledge the importance of liberal-democratic values to a certain extent, although they are likely to appropriate the democratic discourse in specific ways so as to minimize the challenges that liberal-democratic ideas may bring to the establishment.

Certainly, our quantitative content analysis cannot show exactly how the social and political values are being used in the editorials. Qualitative analyses of the editorials are needed to discern the nuances and complexities in the invocation of values or the provision of criticisms of the government. Therefore, we do not claim that this study is more valuable than the case studies of news contents that have been conducted by other researchers in the past. The latter are more capable of uncovering and pinpointing the nuanced ways in which the media respond to the political environment in specific issue contexts. This study, on the other hand, provides the general pattern of editorial contents.

In addition, this study focuses only on editorials. As was explained earlier, the focus on the editorial is based on practical concerns as well as on the argument that it is in this form of writing that the ideological and political biases of media organizations are more readily discernable (Hackett and Zhao, 1994). But this does not mean that editorials are the only items worth studying. In fact, the

separation between editorial and news coverage is itself a “strategic ritual” (Tuchman, 1978) that the news media employ to handle their dual role of simultaneously being a reporter of facts and a participant in public discourse. Meanwhile, many newspapers also fulfil the normative role of providing a marketplace of ideas by providing opinion columns and forums. As some local scholars observed, some newspapers may reduce their political risks by leaving the task of expressing political criticisms to the opinion columnists (Lee, 2000). These considerations mean that only a similar content analysis of news coverage and another analysis of opinion columns can give us a more comprehensive picture of the editorial strategies adopted by different newspapers. The differences between newspapers that we see in this study may be stronger or weaker in news and/or opinion columns, or the latter items may exhibit differences between newspapers that have not been uncovered in this study.

Lastly, it should be noted that this study is based completely on an analysis of contents. When we employ the term “strategies”, we do not mean that the approaches that are followed are all consciously articulated and intentionally adopted. In the daily practice of journalism, editorial writers may or may not be fully aware of the general patterns that they are following and contributing to. In fact, given the time constraints in the daily production of news, it is unlikely that editorial writers would spend too much time thinking about how to write an editorial piece. Therefore, the term “strategies” in this study refers only to strategies that we can, given our understanding of the larger social and political contexts and the formation of the media system, attribute to the news organizations. But what considerations the editorial writers actually have in mind when they work, whether they are conscious of certain rules and norms that they follow, and if they are, how they learn about the rules and norms in the organizational context are questions that require further research going beyond that of content analysis.

Needless to say, the most fundamental need for further research on the topic of the media’s response to the political environment arises from the continual changes that are expected of media politics in the city. A central premise of the strategic interaction perspective adopted



by this study is that there will be constant negotiations between the media and the power holders, such that media performance and political development will interact with each other dynamically. Admittedly, it remains to be seen whether the strategic responses from the media organizations will be enough to maintain a relatively wide space for free speech in the city, or whether such strategic responses merely postpone the inevitable decline of press freedom. At the very least, this study strengthens the argument that any prediction of a *linear* decline in press freedom resulting from the power structure is likely to miss a lot of the intricacies and complexities involved in the process.

These complexities and intricacies, regardless of their influence on the final outcome, are highly important for our theoretical understanding of the relationship between the media and political power. To argue that media organizations would strategically respond to the environment is to argue that they always try to maintain a certain degree of autonomy from the power holders. The degree of autonomy that media organizations aim to achieve varies, and the ways in which they try to do this also vary. But the fact that they would strive to attain a certain degree of relative autonomy means that the media cannot simplistically be conceptualized as an ideological apparatus of the state.

## Notes

1. The number is expected to increase to 33 by 2011, according to the company's website: <http://www.shangri-la.com> (last accessed by the authors in March 2009).
2. This means that 2003, the year used to demarcate the two time periods, was not analysed. This should not raise substantial problems for the analysis, however. In fact, with the occurrence of the SARS outbreak and the July 1st demonstration, 2003 is likely to have been an "extraordinary" and unique year, whereas we are more interested in change over time in this study. Not including year 2003 in the analysis, in this case, may actually make any patterns clearer and easier to interpret.

3. Indeed, Lee and Lin's (2006:342) analysis of the debate in early 2004 over democratic reforms found that *Apple Daily* published 68 editorials in the half-year period addressing the issue, whereas *Ming Pao Daily News* only published 51 relevant editorials on the issue.
4. No further analysis is made of editorials with a critical tone towards the Chinese government and towards Hong Kong politicians and political parties because of the small number of editorials involved. The variables, therefore, do not have sufficient variance for further statistical analysis.
5. Admittedly, the liberal-democratic values such as openness and transparency also refer primarily to the characteristics of policy-making processes. Theoretically, the line between "liberal-democratic" values and "procedural" values cannot be sharply drawn. The grouping in this study is based on the authors' judgement of how strong the liberal-democratic connotation of a value is.
6. The Civic Party, for example, has argued that democratization of Hong Kong should be dissociated from issues such as the rehabilitation of the Tiananmen incident in China.

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## **Strategic Responses to Political Changes**

### **An Analysis of Newspaper Editorials in Hong Kong, 1998-2006**

#### **Abstract**

This study analyses the contents of editorials published by five Hong Kong newspapers in the period of 1998 to 2006 — roughly speaking, the first decade after the handover. Based on a conceptual framework that understands media politics in post-handover Hong Kong as involving a continual process of strategic interaction and negotiation between the media and the political power holders, this study examines whether and the extent to which the five newspapers under study have adopted various strategies in their editorials to avoid or reduce political risks. It is argued that, depending on its overall political position and marketing position, each newspaper faces a more or less distinctive set of political and market concerns. Therefore, each newspaper is likely to adopt a corresponding set of strategies in its editorials.

More specifically, this content analysis addresses the question of whether there are signs of introspection, de-politicization, avoidance of criticism of the power holders, promotion of the power holders, invocation of conservative social values, invocation of procedural values, and avoidance of liberal-democratic values in the editorials of the five newspapers. The results revealed both similarities and subtle differences among the newspapers. It was also found that no newspaper would adopt all of the strategies in their editorials at the same time. For example, *Wen Wei Po*, being a propagandist newspaper affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party, has been very positive towards the political power centre. Yet taking up the role of propagandist also means that there has been little need for *Wen Wei Po* to avoid China issues and political matters. Introspection and de-politicization were more apparent in the case of other newspapers, which still attempted to present themselves as representatives of the local public. While these newspapers tended to avoid criticizing China, they also refrained from actively promoting the ideologies of the power holders. Some of them would even heavily criticize the Hong Kong government.

Overall, the analysis illustrates the complexities in media responses to political change. It also replicates and strengthens the generalizability and validity of certain existing findings and arguments based on issue-specific case studies of post-handover press performance in Hong Kong.

## 從香港報章社論看新聞媒介 對政治環境及轉變的回應

### 1998至2006年的報章社論內容分析

李立峰 陳韜文

(中文摘要)

本研究分析五份香港報章從1998至2006年發表的社論文章，探討在回歸後，香港傳媒如何回應政治環境的轉變。從理論而言，本研究視回歸後香港傳媒與政治權力之間關係的發展為「策略互動」的結果。面對一定程度的政治壓力，香港傳媒發展出一些應變策略：一方面避免或減輕政治風險，同時亦盡量維持自己的專業形象、公信力，以及報章的風格。不過，對傳媒機構而言，基於政治立場、市場定位，以及專業取向的不同，它們要面對和考慮的問題並不完全一樣，因而採納的應變策略亦有所不同；亦由此故，每份報章的社論文章都可能顯示其獨有的特徵。

在經驗分析的層次上，本研究著眼於報章社論的選題、對權力擁有者的態度，以及對社會和政治價值觀的運用。分析的目的在于探索各報章有沒有或多大程度顯示以下特徵：迴避中國及政治問題、避免批評政府、為政府作正面宣傳、宣揚保守的價值觀、使用「程序性」價值觀以減低政治風險，以及避談自由民主等價值理念。研究發現，每份報章的確因應其定位及需要而各自有獨特的策略。如《文匯報》很大程度上擔當著宣傳機器的角色——宣傳政府的表現及一些保守的價值觀，但正正由於它扮演宣傳機器的角色，《文匯報》並沒有迴避政治或中國議題。另一些將自己定位為香港主流報章的報紙則較為傾向迴避敏感議題，然而在避免批評中國政府的同時，它們也沒有刻意對北京政權作正面評價。

本研究亦探討了在2003年前後報章社論的特徵有否轉變。整體來說，本研究展示了香港傳媒在面對政治變遷時回應的多樣化和複雜性；亦有助於引證不少現存的香港新聞研究中的發現，加強了這些研究結果的普遍性及可信度。



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