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Content Analysis of the Coverage in Hong Kong Newspapers**

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of the image of China by three Hong Kong newspapers—*Ming Pao*, *Sing Tao Daily* and *Apple Daily* in 2005, 2008 and 2010. With a brief review of national image, the social construction theory and contemporary media system in Hong Kong, a quantitative content analysis was conducted in terms of news themes and favorability differences. Findings show that coverage of China has increased over time; the tone of reports varies according to different content categories. The construction of this image is a result of the interplay between political pressures and economic forces coupled with professionalism and commercialism of Hong Kong media.

Keywords

National image, China, Hong Kong newspapers

Introduction

National image is the product of a complex historical process involving political and social realities, diplomatic relations, international politics and economic strength as well as symbolic representations in the mass media and popular culture (Peng, 2004). The image of a nation is primarily constructed and shaped by mass media and is dependent on how media select, describe, and distribute news about national situations.

China, considered by some to be a Third World country (Todaro, 1989), has been superficially and inaccurately illustrated through the standpoint of some journalists in international news media (Sun, 1984). The Chinese government has become quite attentive to China's national image in recent years. As part of its intensified image-building activities, white papers on subjects such as human rights, China's national defense and the environment are designed to explain to the international community China's positions on these sensitive questions. International media expertise and firms were hired to run public relations campaign and polish China's image (Wang, 2003). International events, such as 2008 Olympic game and 2010 World Expo were organized to improve the image of China.

Hong Kong media, for its unique geographic location, historical background, cultural tradition, political and economic status, plays a very important role in observing and reporting China. Since the redistribution of political power and a realignment of social forces, Hong Kong media has been largely driven by the complex interplay between political pressures, economic forces, as well as commercialism and professionalism. To know to what extent the Hong Kong media are able to shape the image of China in the eyes of Hong Kong journalists is important due to the complicated, subtle, but closer and inseparable relationship with mainland China.

The primary goal of this paper is to (1) examine how China was portrayed in Hong Kong media and explore if there are differences in their news coverage by comparing the news themes and favorability across time; (2) understand what factors affect this media representation of China. To attain this goal, the news stories on China during 2005-2010 were examined through a content analysis of three typical Hong Kong newspapers. Then

the image was put back in the social and historical context to investigate the image construction process.

Literature Review

The first task before conducting this research is to describe the national image and point out that media play a vital role in constructing and shaping the image of a country. Second, the theory of framing and the social construction of reality were discussed as the theoretical framework for this paper. Besides, on the standpoint of the contemporary Hong Kong media, a macro level of discussion on what they are confronting in and outside of the local area will be illustrated.

National Image

National image, also called national stereotypes, is conceptualized as a generalized and abstract profile of a nation or its people (Huang and Leung, 2005). Past studies of national images in mass communication research have focused on how an object-nation is presented in a mass medium, and how individuals perceive an object-nation. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann (1945) equates subjective reality to the pictures in people's heads. He states that the pictures in people's minds are created by people about the environment they live in and the pictures determine people's behavior toward the environment. Buchanan and Cantril (1953) borrowed Lippmann's concept of pictures and focused on the image of a nation in the mind of individuals at an aggregate level. Crespi (1961) and Boulding (1966) also stated that image is our subjective knowledge about the world and this image largely governs our behavior.

National image is the product of a complex historical process involving the interplay of many factors, such as the political and social realities of a particular country, diplomatic relations, changes in the international political and economic spheres as well as symbolic representations in the mass media and popular culture (Peng, 2004). Among these factors, news media play a vital role in constructing and shaping the image of a country (Adoni and Mane, 1984; Wolfsfedl et al., 1988). Media make a nation real and

tangible by relaying to audiences a range of images and symbols, events and ceremonies (Scannell and Cardiff, 1995).

Most studies on national images during the 1970s and 1980s were designed to find out how the mass media in the Western countries portrayed Third World nations. The negative media messages of a given foreign country influence the public's perception of that nation and will eventually lead to negative perceptions toward that nation (Wilhoit and Weaver, 1983; Roach, 1987). China, considered by some to be a Third World country (Todaro, 1989), has been superficially and inaccurately illustrated through the standpoint of some journalists in certain Western news media (Sun, 1984). Stories do not give an accurate portrayal of China because reporters and editors do not choose topics reflecting all aspects of China but rather those aspects focusing on violence and disasters. As a result, readers construct a superficial and inaccurate image of China through the eyes of these correspondents (Sun, 1984; Todaro, 1989). Studies during 1990s and 2000s focused on the international events organized by China, such as the state leaders visiting foreign countries, the Olympic Games and so on. These researches found that although the amount of the coverage of China was largely increased, the image of China presented in foreign newspapers and the media tone toward the nation didn't change a lot. Some issues such as human right and freedom of speech and religion were still negative (Peng, 2004; Zhang and Cameron, 2003; Li, 2006; One and Jiao, 2008).

Social Construction of Reality and Framing

From the perspective of social construction of reality, it is understood that the formation of a media image about a nation is a complex process. Boulding (1966) first demonstrated that the construction of an image for an individual was based on his or her past experience of living in the society. Originally proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), this theory was focused on how it is possible that human activities can be adequately understood and appropriately constructed to become objective facticity. Adoni and Mane (1984) defined the social construction of reality as a process which includes interactions among individuals, society and culture. They classified socially constructed reality into three types: objective reality, symbolic reality and subjective reality.

In the context of media studies, frames were defined as the principles of organization which govern events and people's subjective involvement in them (Goffman 1974). News is a socially created product, not a reflection of an objective reality and play a central role in the process of social construction of reality (Tuchman, 1978; Adoni and Mane, 1984). To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. Consequently, mass media not only influence what people think about a matter, but also make a significant contribution to shaping how they think about it (Entman, 1991). The process of framing is influenced not merely by individual journalist's values, but also by collective perceptions and traditional understandings that are socially created (Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad, 1998). In this sense, a frame not only demonstrates media professionals' attitude toward certain news event, but also reflects the intrinsic social perspectives on the related issues.

Contemporary Hong Kong Media

Rooted in a society with commercial system and free market, a tradition of press freedom and a significant degree of civil liberties co-exist, Hong Kong media has a vibrant and well-developed modern media system.

Hong Kong has experienced a rapid redistribution of political power and a realignment of social forces in the transition period and after handover. Its mass media, as a cultural commodity and ideological apparatus of modern capitalism, has undergone a dramatic transformation (Lee, 2000). In the transition period (1984–1997), despite its colonial status Hong Kong's media enjoyed a high degree of press freedom due to the balance of power between the British administration and the Chinese government. Early studies showed that power transfer was accompanied by shifts in “journalistic paradigms” (Chan and Lee, 1991). The force of journalists' self-censorship (Chan, Lee, and Lee, 1996) and change of media ownership (Fung and Lee, 1994) were at work. After being officially returned to mainland China by the British government, dramatic changes in media organizations' political positions did not occur overnight (Fung, 2007). Constrained by the promise of “one country, two systems” and for the purpose of using Hong Kong as an example to lure Taiwan into re-unification, the Chinese government

did not impose the mainland's prepublication censorship system in Hong Kong, but has largely refrained from openly intervening into Hong Kong affairs. However, the media owners with China background intervened in media operation by making the decision on personnel and resource allocation and the processes of newsroom socialization, which generated self-censorship and political conformity. By the tenth anniversary of the Hong Kong handover, most observers agreed that press freedom in Hong Kong had declined and that media self-censorship is a growing problem (Lee and Lin, 2006; Chan and Lee, 2007; Lee and Chan, 2009). The main question for journalists and media managers in Hong Kong is how to find a balancing point among freedom of speech, political pressure, and market expectations in this changeable media market.

Research Questions

Based on the above analysis, this study tries to investigate a general picture of China represented by Hong Kong media during 2005-2010. Three research questions were proposed as follows:

RQ1: How is China portrayed in the selected Hong Kong newspapers?

RQ2: Is there any difference of the image in various newspapers in the three time period?

RQ3: What internal and external factors affect this media representation of China?

Methodology

Research Method

Content analysis is the most important and popular method in media studies with the advantage of being unobtrusive and efficient. Rooted in the positivistic tradition, content analysis is a systematic and objective method of analyzing message content. Wimmer and Dominick (1997) explain three aspects of the definition-systematic means selection, collection, and evaluation of content analyzed following one set of explicit and consistent rules. As this study is mainly designed to give a full-account description of the coverage

of China in three Hong Kong newspapers, content analysis was decided as the appropriate method.

Sampling

This study is based on the analysis of the news coverage in three Hong Kong newspapers, *Ming Pao*, *Sing Tao Daily* and *Apple Daily*. The elite-oriented newspapers *Ming Pao* is generally considered as the most trusted and respected Chinese language newspapers, and for the same orientation, *Sing Tao Daily* is considered Hong Kong's second largest Chinese language newspapers. The mass-oriented *Apple Daily* is known for the colorful presentations and sensational styles with the highest shares in the Hong Kong newspaper market. The words "China"、"Chinese" or "PRC" were used as the keywords for searching in the full-text of the three newspapers. The three years 2005, 2008 and 2010 were chosen for a snapshot comparison. These three years cover news on important issues, both in political, economic, cultural and even disaster news, such as Sichuan earthquake and the baby milk powder crisis, Beijing Olympic Games, China government's measures in world financial crisis, Shanghai World Expo Asian Games and so on. These issues undoubtedly draw attention to people all over the world for its importance and sensibility. It will certainly help to understand the image of China portrayed by Hong Kong media when considering its possible implications.

Coding Scheme

To investigate the coverage on China, the variables of news themes and favorability were examined.

Theme: The themes are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation of selection, emphasis and exclusion. The five themes are: Politics; Economy; Military and Diplomacy; Society; Cultural, Technology and Sports.

Favorability: Favorability refers to the overall tone manifested in the individual stories. The favorableness of coverage was evaluated as positive, neutral and negative range, rated from 1 (positive), 0(neutral) to -1 (negative). Positive stories were defined as

those reflecting social cohesion, stability and strength, which tend to contribute to a favorable image of China; negative stories were those reflecting conflicts, instability and weakness, which tend to contribute to an unfavorable image of China; neutral stories reflected neither positive nor negative conditions when the report did not contain explicit evaluative references, or reflecting both positive and negative sides.

Results

Number and favorability

Specific distributions of news stories and favorability ratings by the three newspapers in the three time periods are summarized in Table 1. The procedure of data collection yielded a total of 2002 news articles involving China issues. *Ming Pao* had a total of 704 news stories devoted to China which was 35.2% of the whole sampled population, remained steady for three years; *Apple Daily* had a total of 711 news stories devoted to China constituted 35.5% of the whole sampled population, with a significantly increase; *Sing Tao Daily* had a total of 587 news stories devoted to China which was 29.3% of the whole sampled population. The distribution of the number of stories shows a significant increase in the number of stories on China across time.

In terms of favorability demonstrated for all the stories by the coverage across time, 56.6% (n=1133/2002) of the coverage was neutral in tone, 31.5% (n=631/2002) of the coverage was negative, and 11.9% (n=238/2002) was positive. The average favorability is negative, with the mean of -0.196 below the neutral mean index of 0. As Table 1 indicates, the average tone of the news articles in 2008 was less unfavorable toward China (M= -0.131) while more negative in 2010(M= -0.263). The fluctuation may be because of the Organization of Olympic Games in 2008 and increasing social problems in 2010.

Table1 Distribution of News and Related Favorability Means

Newspaper	2005			2008			2010			Total		
	N	%	Mean	N	%	Mean	N	%	Mean	N	%	Mean

<i>Ming Pao</i>	235	33.4	-0.17	235	33.4	-0.119	234	33.2	-0.265	704	100	-0.185
<i>Apple Daily</i>	195	27.4	-0.354	213	30.0	-0.315	303	42.6	-0.406	711	100	-0.364
<i>Sing ao Daily</i>	181	30.8	-0.028	209	35.6	0.043	197	33.6	-0.041	587	100	-0.007
<i>Total</i>	611	30.5	-0.187	657	32.8	-0.131	734	36.7	-0.263	2002	100	-0.196

Theme and favorability

As Table 2 shows, the stories talking about China's Economy account for the largest share of the coverage (28.5%, n=571), steadily increasing each year. The second largest share of stories was those reporting China's Society, constituting 24.5 % (n=491) of all the stories also with steady increase. The stories dealing with China's Politics make up the third largest share (19.6%.n=392), however with a sharp reduced in 2008, and quickly increased in 2009. The following themes were those uncovering China's Culture, Science and Sports (14.0%, n=280), and those discussing Military and Foreign issues (13.4%, n=268).

Table 2 The frequency of theme across time

Themes	2005			2008			2010			Total	
	N	%	Mean	N	%	Mean	N	%	Mean	N	Mean
Politics	154	39.3	-0.312	105	26.8	-0.238	133	33.9	-0.654	392	-0.408
Economy	164	28.7	0.049	166	29.1	-0.048	241	42.2	-0.062	571	-0.026
Military & Foreign issues	83	31.0	0.076	97	36.2	0.082	88	32.8	-0.045	268	0.034
Society	146	29.7	-0.699	162	33.0	-0.434	183	37.3	-0.577	491	-0.560
Culture/Science /Sports	64	22.9	0.359	107	38.2	0.168	109	38.9	0.064	280	0.171

Regarding the tone of issue coverage, Table 2 indicates that the most negative theme was Society ($M=-0.560$), especially when the reports deal with China's social problems, crises and poisonous food. The second negative theme was Politics ($M= -0.408$), especially when the reports deal with the violation of China's human rights and restriction of freedom of speech, democratic movement and religion. The tone of China's Economy coverage is slightly negative, almost neutral ($M= -0.026$). Positive reports with average mean of 0.034 and 0.171 emerged in the coverage of Military and foreign issues and Culture, Science and Sports, especially when they deal with China's science and technology development, traditional culture, delicious food and the military power.

Discussion

The overall image of china in Hong Kong newspapers

This study examined the China coverage in three major Hong Kong newspapers by chiefly comparing the total number of stories, the dominant media themes used and favorability differences across time. The results of this content analysis show several important findings.

Generally speaking, this study found that there was a significant increase in the number of stories on China, especially for *Apple Daily* demonstrated more than 50% increases over time. The development of China industry, changing of invest and trade policies, fluctuation of RMB exchange rate, organization of international events, social problems and conflicts, domestic politics were found to be the most covered issues in these newspapers. This might be due to several factors. One is the relatively strengthening ties and increasing cooperation both in economical, political and cultural issues between Hong Kong and China. Another factor is that Chinese government has become quite attentive to China's national image and conducted some image-building activities during these five years. It undoubtedly draws attention to people all over the world, including Hong Kong people as well.

The news report portrayed a busy, prosperous and promising China with a high economic growth. These stories covered every aspect of China's economy and business,

especially on the topic of domestic economic achievement, the investment of Chinese industry, the buying of Chinese enterprises' stock share. The increasing economical integration with China benefit Hong Kong a lot in recent years, especially the implementation of CEPA (Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) signed in 2003 and China's measures in global financial crisis. Hong Kong is a free market economy which mainly depends on international trade lead to a sharp recession in this crisis. However, Hong Kong's close ties with the mainland China enable it to quickly respond to the changing circumstances. In 2009, about 17 million Chinese visited Hong Kong and it proved to be a boon to Hong Kong's struggling economy. Related to this is China's growing influence on Hong Kong market and consequently increased media exposure.

The stories on China's culture, science, movies and sports won quite high favorability rating in Hong Kong newspapers. These stories focused on the splendid history and traditional culture of China, the athletes like Liu Xiang, Ding Junhui, Li Na who won champions and broke world records; the young films directed as Jia Zhangke, Gu Changwei, Wang Xiaoshuai who directed world-famous movies; excellent actors like Zhang Ziyi, Tang Wei and Fan Bingbing who won awards and showed unbelievable oriental beauty in the international movie festivals. The topic of modern architectures, popular bars in Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen, fashion and motor show, anime Expo were also frequently reported. It portrayed a passionate, active, young, colorful and diversified social of China.

However, the reports of various social problems, crisis, and diseases portrayed unrest, unjust image of China, such as corruptions from government officials to ordinary people, the widening gap between rich and poor, the increasing pressure of life both in rural and urban areas, threat of food and medical safety like poison vaccine and baby milky, forced demolition in urbanization, the protest of unemployed workers, natural disasters like earthquake and flood. These stories argue that serious social problems and crises are caused by social transformation in every aspect of life in China. Stories about human rights abuses, the suppression of freedom of speech and press and citizens' right to pro-democracy activities also portrayed a negative image of China. These reports demonstrated that although changes are happening, the political system in China still needs improvement.

Factors affect the media representation

According to literature review and content analysis above, it could be assumed that the image of China presented by Hong Kong newspaper is a socially constructed product. In this sense, in order to understand the external and internal factors affect this representation, it is necessary to deconstruct the power relationship in Hong Kong media, which was performed concentrated obviously in the coverage related to China issued.

Situated within a society that has a free market and a significant degree of civil liberties, and yet no fully developed democratic system, journalism in Hong Kong has been largely driven by the complex interplay between political pressures and economic forces. In the second decade of official return to mainland China, the interactions between the news organization, the government, the media market and individual worked sometimes with and sometimes against each other, result in tension-filled situation. Instead of intervening directly, the Chinese government influenced Hong Kong media through indirect methods, such as co-opted the Hong Kong media owners by distributing political appointments and presumably economic rewards to them(Lai, 2007; Fung,2007). These interests and constraints drove them to conform at least to some degree with Beijing's policies or at least to take a “centrist” position that wouldn't offend the Chinese government (Fung, 2007). In this study, the news distribution indicated that there was more than 50% neutral coverage in three time period (56.1% / 2005, 58.6%/ 2008.55.2%/ 2010). In the case of *Sin Tao Daily*, for its chairman Charles Ho Tsu Kwok, who is a member of the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, hold a pro-government stance. The tone of its report on China was the most positive compared with the other two newspapers ($M = -0.007$). The negative issues were Social news focused on social problems and crisis. The tone of Politics news was slightly negative, even neutral. Other topics were positive with an extremely high favorability rating on Military and Foreign issues and Culture, Science and Sports news.

However, the commercial nature of the media system kept the news organizations take care of both political and market pressure. As business organizations in the highly competitive local market, Hong Kong media have to concern with their credibility in the eyes of the consumers (Fung, 2007). Media was regarded as the “fourth estate” in Hong

Kong. Meeting the public expectations of providing important information and independent forum for public debate helped media organizations to prosper (Chan and So, 2004). As a result, a range of “strategic rituals” was devised by media organizations to handle political pressure, market expectations, and journalistic integrity at the same time (Lee, 2000). In this study, when conducting the sensational topic, such as democracy, human rights and freedom issue, these three newspapers adopted more factual narrative forms; cited opinions in various stances and juxtaposed them all, so that critical views were balanced by pro-government views; provide space for columnists expressing critical opinion, so that shifted some political risks from the news organizations to the individual writers, such as Li ping for the column “Talking about China”, Tao jie and Li Bafang for editorial in *Apple Daily*; Zhong Mingjiu for the column “New situation in China” in *Ming Pao*. However, different sets of strategies were found in these three newspapers. The elite-oriented *Ming Pao* adopted the strategies of balanced criticisms, emphasizing on objective narrative and rational discussion on political debate, as well as *Sing Tao Daily*. The mass-oriented *Apple Daily* took side in the debate and provided direct and harsher political criticisms.

In addition, the practice of Hong Kong journalists also affected this construction process. To be independent from political and economic power and monitoring the government was the core values of Hong Kong journalists. The action of civil society in Hong Kong required Hong Kong media not only aim to uncover inappropriate behavior by individual politicians, but also keep an eye on overall social equality and justice in the territory. The journalist professionalism worked together with this action of civil society contributed to the independency and social responsibility in news production.

In this sense, the interaction of different factors and integrated working on the news production could help explain why various frames of image of China exist. The construction of this image is a result of the state control, the political pressures and economic forces, also the professionalism and commercialism of the Hong Kong media.

Limitation and Future Studies

This study only sampled stories at three time points. This might limit the study from identifying possible fluctuations of media representation within this time period and offering a more comprehensive picture. Also, in doing content analysis, there is often the risk of missing the substance while counting the numbers. Therefore, it is advisable for future studies to use both qualitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis to examine the trends and characteristics of representation issues in media. In addition, the method of interviewing and questionnaire could also be adopted in the future study to test the complicated construction process of national media.

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