

Western media and the Hong Kong handover

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In the summer of 1997 thousands of journalists streamed into Hong Kong to record for posterity the return of Great Britain's last significant colony to the People's Republic of China. As July 1, the day that China would resume sovereignty, approached, reporters were to be found scattered across Hong Kong in search of a certain story that would, they hoped, capture the significance of the moment. Regardless of reporters' national origins or professional affiliations Hong Kong was a story that elicited great excitement and emotion. While for many Chinese language papers around the world Hong Kong's return was celebrated as a final triumph over colonialism, in the Western press it was greeted with, at best, apprehension, and at worst, vituperation. This negative predisposition was not, however, limited just to those reports in the days surrounding July 1 but can be found in much of Western coverage of Hong Kong since the *Sino-British Joint Declaration* was issued in 1984. Since that time discussion of 1997 often assumed an almost funereal quality. Such books as Last Year in Hong Kong by long-time Asia correspondent Robert Elegant, Mark Roberti's The Fall of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong Remembers by Sally Blyth and Ian Wotherspoon bespoke the pessimism and nostalgia with which many in the West approached July 1.

The roots of this media bias regarding Hong Kong can be traced to the very outset of significant Western contact with China at the close of the nineteenth century. Rising British and American power at the time engendered a fervent belief in the preeminence of Western culture and religion. The transformation of this energy into such notions as the *white man's burden* or *Manifest Destiny* resulted in Anglo-American relations with China being ones of patronage and cultural imperialism. Ensuing efforts to convert the Chinese not only to Christianity but to Western ways overall were invariably rejected, much to the dismay of the purveyors.

Over the first half of the twentieth century, as China was racked by domestic upheaval and turmoil, American and, to a lesser extent, British audiences were in firm support of those forces and interests with which they could perceive a commonality of cause. America's unrelenting support of the Kuomintang with its Protestant leader Chiang Kai-shek and his

American educated wife was a clear testament to this disposition. Chiang's ultimate defeat to the Communists was yet another stark repudiation of supposed Western benevolence.

It was solely to Hong Kong that Britons and Americans could point as an example of the triumph of their systems and the righteousness of their ways. Only in Hong Kong did Chinese people receive much of their education and often conduct much of their business in English. Only in Hong Kong did British law continue to rule, and was Smithian capitalism practiced with abandon. Hong Kong was, therefore, seen not so much as a place purely Chinese, which it is not, but as a place irrefutably devoted to the Anglo-American model, which it also is not. The dolorous coverage given to Hong Kong's handover was very much the consequence of Anglo-American reluctance to relinquish to China the last and perhaps only successful result of their century-long *civilizing mission* and commercial adventurism on the China coast.

This paper seeks to examine the Western media's coverage of Hong Kong's return to China in light of the history of Anglo-American relations with and judgments towards China. In order to lay the groundwork it will look first at the history of Western interactions with and perceptions of China as well as Hong Kong's position as a Western influenced yet Chinese entity. Secondly it will examine significant trends and criticisms of media coverage of the handover. Lastly it will analyze in detail how two major Western papers, *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London, reported the transfer and to what extent their coverage in the two weeks surrounding the handover was or was not consistent with many of the overall trends and criticisms of the Western press.

Beginnings

By the close of the nineteenth century the United States and Great Britain found themselves in positions of unparalleled prosperity. The Industrial Revolution created in both nations tremendous rises in national wealth, power, and standards of living. While Britain assumed preeminence in the seas America was able to expand its borders across a vast continent.

Enamored of their own success many in America and Britain concluded that their ways were infinitely superior to all others and that they had a divine obligation to disseminate them throughout the world, to Americanize or Anglicize the world.¹

Perhaps more so than any other nation China stood out in the eyes of many in Britain and America as one in dire need of the West's cultural benevolence and economic system. According to Edward Farmer, "Americans pushed all of their fondest values at the Chinese - Christianity, democracy, individualism, consumerism - in the firm belief that these ways were superior."² Thus the missionary culture which swept America and Britain was not limited solely to propagating Christianity but sought to indoctrinate the world with all aspects of Western life. Prominent and respected individuals regularly testified to the veracity of this *white man's burden*.

President William McKinley lent support to these notions when, speaking of America's acquisition of the Philippines, he said, "There was nothing left for us to do but to take the islands, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellowmen for whom Christ also died."³ According to Charles Hayford, "Westerners once thought they could 'take China by storm', and knives, forks, stockings, and pianos were shipped to China from England under the impression that the empire was about to be 'Europeanized.'"⁴

As the Western presence and power on the China coast expanded so too did missionary activities. According to treaties signed at the conclusion of the Opium and Arrow wars, Western powers became not only the protectors of Western commercial interests but of missionary activities as well. This essentially "had the effect of making the church a partner in Western

¹ Charles Hayford. "Chinese-American Characteristics: A.H. Smith and his China book." Christianity in China. Ed. Suzanne Barnett and John Fairbank. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985. 154.

² Edward Farmer. "Sifting Truth from Facts." Voices of China. Ed. Lee Chin Chuan. New York: Guilford Press, 1990, 250.

³ W.A. Swanberg. Luce and His Empire. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972. 20.

⁴ Hayford, 163.

imperialism.”⁵ Young people, often fresh out of the best schools in New England or Britain, eagerly accepted appointments in China feeling that they were embarking on a divine mission. In their book Christianity in China Suzanne Barnett and John Fairbank state, “The early Protestant mission to the Chinese was broadly representative of Protestant Europe and America - the vigor of their nineteenth-century expansion infused the self-confidence of evangelists who felt they had received God’s call, who believed that Christianity was a major component of Western progress in general, and that they must share their faith with the as yet unbelieving heathen.”⁶ Patronizing views on the part of Westerners towards Chinese were very much reinforced by school texts which often reflected racial prejudices and contained numerous inaccuracies in portraying the Chinese.⁷

Despite the intensity of feeling and the self-confidence which many Westerners took to their China missions, success was minimal and often fleeting. Few Chinese were interested in adopting a new religion not to mention an entirely new culture. According to Farmer, “It was always a profound shock when the Chinese flatly rejected the gifts offered.”⁸ It took the Methodists ten years of work in China before they were able to gain even one convert.⁹ Those who did convert often did so in hopes of escaping problems or disputes in which they were caught. Outlaws and the mentally ill often made up a sizable portion of those few Chinese interested in Christianity.¹⁰ Those who received a British or an American education generally did so not out of a reverence for Western ways but out of a practical interest in finding a job. In such treaty port cities as Tianjin and Shanghai the dominance of the Western powers compelled the

⁵ Paul Varg. Missionaries, Chinese, and diplomats: the American Protestant missionary movement in China, 1890-1952. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958. 13.

⁶ Barnett, 5.

⁷ Patricia Neils. China Images in the life and times of Henry Luce. Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990. 17.

⁸ Farmer, 250.

⁹ Varg, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Chinese to adapt if they wished to prosper. In this sense the West became very much a purveyor of cultural imperialism.

Through this entire period of Western involvement with the Chinese China was in varying stages of disorder and upheaval. The middle and late 1800s saw China racked by rebellions such as the Taiping in the southeast and the Nian around Shandong province. Perhaps the most significant uprising for the West was that of the Boxers in 1900 which took as its slogan, "support the Qing and exterminate the foreigners."¹¹ The early 1900s witnessed the fall of the Qing, the creation of a republic and the further decline of China into factionalism and civil war. As China changed, so to did the West's involvement with it. The 1930s and 1940s was a period of protracted war between the Kuomintang and the Communists. America supported the Kuomintang and its leader Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. To an overwhelming extent American support of Chiang was rooted in the belief that he was fighting America's fight. That is, he was supporting in China those ideals that Americans tended to have faith in and hold up as true. Not only was Chiang a devout Protestant married to a beautiful, American educated woman, he was also an opponent of communism. Communism, with anti-capitalism and atheism among its core tenets, was wholly incompatible with American ideology. Furthermore, the information that most Americans received regarding China was what they read in the publications of Henry Luce. As head of *Time* magazine and its sibling publications *Life* and *Fortune*, Luce had an inordinate amount of control over what was written about and reported from China. Born in China to Protestant missionary parents from New England and educated at Yale University, Luce was very much molded by the religious fervor and *Manifest Destiny* of his time. Despite speaking no Chinese Luce felt he had a clear and keen understanding of China as well as its people, problems, and needs.¹² Chiang was, to Luce, the salvation China so desperately needed. Furthermore Luce was certain that a victory for the Communists would be the worst possible

¹¹ "China." Encyclopedia Britannica: Micropedia. 1995 ed.

¹² Swanberg, 186.

scenario for China, America, and the world.¹³ According to W.A. Swanberg in his highly critical 1972 biography of Luce, "he had used his power and would continue to use it for the Christian Chiang, the America - oriented Chiang, the Communist-hating Chiang."¹⁴ Luce's sympathy for the Nationalists and willingness to use his magazines as vehicles for their cause was evidenced by the Generalissimo's portrait having graced *Time's* cover no less than six times, more than any other person. Madame Chiang was featured three times.¹⁵

Luce's predisposition was of such force that even respected *Time* correspondents were invariably unable to get stories perceived as critical of Kuomintang policies or actions published. Those few that did get published were subjected to extreme censorship.¹⁶ Teddy White, Chongqing correspondent and one of the most knowledgeable and level headed of the China hands, was, because of Luce policies, often unable to get his stories published as they were highly critical of the Kuomintang. As Swanberg wrote, "White had come to regard the Generalissimo as a power-mad dictator, a reactionary surrounded by bandits, a burden that China's suffering millions could no longer support. His dispatches to New York had said this, but they had not appeared in *Time* that way. They had been revised in the Time-Life office by the foreign news staff under Whittaker Chambers who had become the most zealous of anti-Communists and who, like Luce, would not permit a bad press for anti-Communist Chiang."

Following Communist victory in 1949 and the Nationalist retreat to Taiwan, Luce as well as the American government maintained their support for Chiang's regime. He regularly chastised foreign leaders such as Charles DeGaulle for recognizing Beijing, invoking his support of democracy, yet saying little about the abysmal state of it in Nationalist ruled Taiwan.¹⁷ In the 1950s such mass market Luce publications as *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune* as well as the independents such as *Reader's Digest* and *US News* supported Chiang and opposed official American

¹³ Ibid., 191.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Peter Rand. *China Hands*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990, 210.

recognition of Beijing.¹⁸ The McCarthyism of the early 1950s further solidified American enmity toward the newly formed People's Republic.

The degree to which American-Chinese hostility was avoidable began to be studied in the late 1960s. Writers such as Thomas Christensen proposed that the standoff could have been significantly less profound were it not for America's intense animosity towards any institution labeled *communist* or *socialist*.¹⁹ Had America, with its ideology firmly rooted in capitalism and Christianity, been less caustic towards the People's Republic, it is certainly possible that three decades of division and hostility could have been substantially less intense.

In contrast to America, Britain was far more tolerant of the Chinese Communist Party. According to Qingwen Dong, London had long been "dissatisfied with the old Chinese government and with the incompetence of the Nationalist government headed by Chiang Kai-shek."²⁰ Britain felt that the Communists not only best represented the Chinese people but were also more likely to promote stability in East Asia and preserve the status quo in Hong Kong. London, unlike Washington, also felt that recognition could prevent Beijing from aligning with the Soviet bloc.²¹ After Britain became the first non-communist nation to recognize China *The Times* issued the following editorial indicative of British sentiment, "A great revolution has been accomplished in China, which has changed the balance of power throughout Asia and the Far East. Like all revolutions it is likely to release hidden energies in the Chinese people..."²² Moreover, British commentators often had sharp criticisms of the coverage their American colleagues gave to China. Felix Greene, a British journalist, said that "The evidence ... has shown, at least as far as reporting about China is concerned, that the unusual freedom granted the

¹⁷ Swanberg, 449.

¹⁸ Neils, 246.

¹⁹ Warren Cohen. "Rethinking the 'Lost Chance' in China." *Diplomatic History* 21 (1997): 71.

²⁰ Dong Qingwen. "A Content Analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London in Coverage of China in 1989." Thesis. University of Missouri-Columbia, 1990. 37.

²¹ William Roger Louis. "Hong Kong: The Critical Phase." *American Historical Abstracts* 102 (1997): 1052.

²² Editorial in *The Times* of London, March 3, 1950.

press has not resulted in better news. The sad but irrefutable fact is that the American people today are less informed and more misinformed about China than the people of any other Western nation As a result of this inquiry into America's information on China I have reached the conclusion that the American people have not received the minimum of necessary information on supremely important developments."²³

Hong Kong as a place Western

Since it became a British colony following the 1842 Treaty of Nanking Hong Kong has been a place very much touched by the West. Throughout Hong Kong's development, though Chinese may have been the language and culture of 95 percent of the population, it was the British colonial system and the English language which governed the colony. Just like in the treaty ports of China proper to which it remained quite similar - in Hong Kong, for those who wanted to succeed, a substantial degree of Westernization was nearly compulsory.²⁴ It is all too often forgotten that the prevalence of English language schools and alumni of American and British universities is a testament not to any refutation of their Chinese heritage but of a practical realization of what Hong Kong required.

Hong Kong's economy was for most of its history that of an entrepot and its largest companies were trading houses such as Jardine Matheson, Hutchinson Whampoa, and Butterfield and Swire's.²⁵ Though the highest officials in these concerns were invariably, even into the 1970s, expatriates, the majority of their staff were local Chinese who comprised much of the elite of the Chinese community. These Chinese were hired on the basis of their familiarity and ease with the English language and British customs and trade procedures. According to Carl Smith in

²³ John Merrill. The Elite Press, great newspapers of the world. New York: Pitman Publishing, 1968, 26.

²⁴ In "Hong Kong: The Critical Phase", William Roger Moore states that, "Hong Kong today possesses as much as ever, the characteristics of the China port system of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to the fall of Shanghai in 1941." 1053.

his book Chinese Christians, "The better his English, the more competent the *compradore* was to perform an important function in his position."²⁶ These *compradores* were often the product of English language church schools where they acquired Western-type knowledge as well. From early on, therefore, Hong Kong's elite was comprised of Western oriented English-speaking Chinese.²⁷

This prevalence of Western culture and the English language was increasingly palpable throughout Hong Kong as educational opportunities expanded and, especially after 1949, the colony became the preeminent financial center of Asia. In his 1983 work Society and Politics in Hong Kong Siu-Kai Liu wrote that, "Cultural and linguistic differences are further reduced through the process of Westernization among the Chinese who increasingly pick up Western lifestyles and the dissemination of Western education."²⁸

Hong Kong, for those who wished to find them, continued to display many of the trappings of a British colonial society. Among the favorite haunts of Hong Kongers, Chinese and expatriates alike, was the racecourse at Happy Valley and for the elite the cricket grounds in Causeway Bay. The Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club held regattas in a harbor named for a queen, British pubs were scattered across the colony, and Radio and Television Hong Kong broadcast the queen's English. For the vast majority of the territory's residents however these were but asides to Hong Kong's overwhelming Chineseness. Certainly, for some, they served as bitter reminders of Hong Kong's continued status as a colonial society at the close of the twentieth century.

Coverage of 1997

²⁵ These business concerns, traditionally known as "hongs", are still among the most prominent and influential in Hong Kong. According to Asiaweek of December 10, 1999 many still rank among the largest firms in Asia.

²⁶ Carl Smith. Chinese Christians: elites, middlemen, and the church in Hong Kong. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1985, 154.

²⁷ Ibid, 139.

The coverage that was given to Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese control was extremely diverse in outlook and tone. News reports varied tremendously both in depth and content of coverage depending on the national origin and political disposition of the host organization. While the Western press tended to stress the negative and romantic aspects of the changeover, the government controlled mainland press focused almost exclusively on the positive and nationalistic sides. The press in other Asian countries, including the Chinese language media in Hong Kong and Taiwan, tended toward neither extreme but emphasized instead such practical concerns as trade relations, diplomatic exchanges, and the end of colonialism in Asia.²⁹

Since the *Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong* was signed in September of 1984 the Western press has taken immeasurable time in agonizing over the territory's fate. Reports from or about Hong Kong invariably took the tone not of asking how Hong Kong will change but of how detrimental the changes would be. It often seemed that Hong Kong's demise was certain and the only uncertainty was the exact nature and timing. In reporting Hong Kong Western journalists and editors took great pains to cover the future of the colony's freedoms and budding democracy. Reports often over glorified the reforms taken by Christopher Patten during his term as governor. Many Hong Kong residents, especially members of the business community, felt that the distinguishing feature of the news coverage about Hong Kong was a melodramatic emphasis on worst case scenarios which ignored the self-confidence felt by most in the territory.³⁰ According to Frank Ching, Senior Editor at the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, reports on Hong Kong regularly ignored the fact that it had been a colony without much democracy for over a century and a half. Ching points out that although Tung Chee-hwa's election as Chief Executive by 400 members of Hong Kong's elite was "widely condemned in the American press as a rigged election" it was, in fact, more democratic than the appointment of

²⁸ Lau Siu-kai. *Society and Politics in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983, 8.

²⁹ Tiny Macao would last as a Portuguese entity until 1999 but for all practical purposes the era of Western colonial rule in Asia was over.

colonial governors by a lone British Prime Minister had been.³¹ Most of the changes made to Hong Kong law were, according to Ching, simply reversions to British law as it was before Patten arrived in 1992. Thus, speaking of a significant loss of civil liberties in Hong Kong, is to admit that there were disturbingly few before the early 1990s. The Western press was also criticized for over concentrating on the Democratic Party and its leader Martin Lee. An *Apple Daily* column of June 30 stated that, “[Hong Kong] Chinese and foreigners seem to live in different worlds. The forum which the Democrats organized before the handover was attended by several hundred people. Only a few Chinese reporters were present.”³² Interest on the part of the Western media in a curtailing of liberty was shrewdly capitalized on by the Democrats. According to Lau Sai-leung, Senior Executive Officer of the party, “In the local media, interest was not in the Democratic Party. Their interest was in the ceremony. And we were just a story for the local press. But if you were foreign press, maybe the ceremony was one of the stories, the main story may be the Democratic Party. We wanted foreign coverage, foreign coverage on ‘we were forced to leave the LegCo.’”³³ In many reports Lee, who was quoted more times than either Prince Charles or Tung, was elevated to near martyr status.³⁴ Lau said of Lee, “They [foreign media] think we are anti-Communists. Communist means evil empire, and Martin Lee is a martyr.”³⁵

Hong Kong’s changeover as the final end of the British Empire was also an angle which was exploited to the fullest by Western journalists. In the days surrounding July 1 newspapers and television screens in the West repeatedly showed such key symbols of British rule as the Royal Yacht Britannia, bagpipe bands, and British flags. Independent Television News, Britain’s second largest network after the BBC, built their coverage around a sentimentality not without a

³⁰ Nicholas Kristoff. “On Beijing’s Leash, the News in Hong Kong may lose Bite.” *The New York Times* 25 June 1997, sec. A: 8.

³¹ Frank Ching. “Misreading Hong Kong.” *Foreign Affairs*. 76 (1997): 53.

³² *Ibid.*, 61.

³³ Nakano Yoshiko. “Setting the Stage for a Democratic Hero.” *Reporting Hong Kong*. Ed. Alan Knight and Yoshiko Nakano. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999, 43. “LegCo” refers to the Legislative Council which Beijing dissolved on July 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

tinge of sadness. In his study of ITN's coverage of Hong Kong during the transition Barry Lowe came to the conclusion that the network delivered an overly emotional portrait of both Britain's rule and its departure while creating an overly ominous undertone to its reports on the arrival of the Chinese.³⁶ Within the British media this disposition towards sentimentality was not limited to ITN alone. Though there were some exceptions such as the *New Statesman*, which blasted Britain for its colonialism, the vast majority of news outlets played up the benevolence and glory of British rule.³⁷ "The British presence was framed in terms of benign sentimentality underscored by a note of sadness and regret: Britain created Hong Kong and now must abandon its favourite child", said Lowe.³⁸ Hong Kong was, for UK audiences, very much a domestic story with domestic players and represented "loss and retreat, to many, it sounded a note of regret."³⁹ According to Alan Knight, editor of the book Reporting Hong Kong, "The return of Hong Kong represented opportunities lost and ultimately an end to British notions of superiority. Public school boys would no longer get rich in the Orient."⁴⁰

American media, too, played up the melodrama. Though Americans have generally professed a distaste of British imperialism, this was balanced with a reluctance to see an important trade and financial center like Hong Kong be joined with a communist state. Moreover, according to Farmer, press coverage very much reflects the state of Chinese-American relations at any given time. Thus, as the relationship has become increasingly strained, American reporting has become more wary of China. American biases against communism were strongly reinforced by the crackdown in Tiananmen Square in the Spring of 1989. "To a large extent the aura of negativism surrounding the American press reflects continued hostility over China's military crackdown in Tiananmen Square. Images of tanks and armed soldiers repressing pro-

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Barry Lowe. "Pomp and Pathos." in Knight and Nakano, 107.

³⁷ Martin Jacques. "Never apologize." New Statesman July 1997: 22.

³⁸ Lowe, 106.

³⁹ Ibid., 102.

democracy student demonstrators were seared into the American consciousness eight years ago. Those images remain vivid, and the press is unwilling to give China the benefit of the doubt", wrote Ching.⁴¹ American audiences are generally against communism and the news media often pander to their fears and concerns. The American magazine *Newsweek* went so far as to issue different editions for each side of the Pacific. While the Asian edition of *Newsweek* for May 19, 1997 carried the upbeat cover headline, "Hong Kong: The City of Survivors. What does the Future Hold?" the American edition displayed a far more ominous cover asking the question, "Can Hong Kong Survive?", and showing an Asian woman wearing a Chinese flag as a blindfold.⁴² *Newsweek's* Asian edition took as its theme, "Hong Kong - the City of Survivors" and went on to point out the resilience of Hong Kong and its people over the past 150 years. The American edition however stressed worries about China's rule and the demise of Hong Kong's democratic institutions.⁴³

Asian news media took a significantly different slant to the Hong Kong story. More often than not they avoided large scale coverage of the Democrats or expressions of distress regarding possible curtailments in liberty and justice. Japanese media organizations, which had 1,300 journalists in Asia, double that of either Britain or China, rarely mentioned Lee and only had brief reports dealing with the Democratic Party.⁴⁴ An examination of Asian articles further reveals that what was important to Westerners was not to many Asians. From Taiwan most reports dealt with trade relations and how the politically precarious state of Taiwan may be affected by the handover. Hong Kong media, perhaps exhausted after thirteen years waiting for and debating 1997, focused on the pomp of the ceremonies and shied away from policy debates.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5. The sordid attraction Hong Kong has long held for British adventurers and fortune seekers has led to the coinage of the acronym, *FILTH* for, *Failed In London, Try Hongkong*.

⁴¹ Ching, 58.

⁴² Knight and Nakano, 66.

⁴³ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁴ Nakano, "Japanese Radio Voices" in Knight and Nakano, 141.

⁴⁵ Seth Faison. "Politics May Be Serious but It's Crime and Sex That Sell Newspapers." *The New York Times* 30 June 1997, sec. A: 6.

Many Chinese language papers across Asia balanced a note of caution with a strong sense of pride in the end of imperialism. According to *The New York Times*, "As Asian neighbors observed the fireworks in Hong Kong on Monday night, their thoughts were far from the issue that has preoccupied the United States - whether Communist China will crack down on civil liberties in Hong Kong."⁴⁶ Chang Chul Kyoon, deputy director for Asian affairs at South Korea's Foreign Ministry was quoted saying, "As far as Hong Kong is concerned, economics is the No. 1 issue for the Korean Government."⁴⁷ The negativism of the Western media organizations was strongly criticized by many, especially *The Straits Times* of Singapore, which referred to them as, "The British nation's surrogate mourners."⁴⁸

Significant differences in news coverage between the Western and Asian news organizations is greatly the result of differences in national character, culture, and experience. Even the most conscientious journalists cannot help but be influenced and affected by the cultural norms in which they were raised. In their 1964 study of *The New York Times*, Mervyn Lynch and Atkya Effendi state that each country's press system reflects its own country's international outlook and foreign policy. This is attributed to the fact that, "the press system of each nation reflects most importantly the basic social and political structure of that nation."⁴⁹ Therefore as China and the West, especially the United States, are increasingly at odds with each other this is reflected in their newspapers. In his piece "The Dilemma of Centricity" Brantly Womack pointed out that American biases against communism tend to see the world as moving either towards communism or towards Americanism and that any change toward communism is interpreted as a move against America.⁵⁰ Hong Kong's handover was thus often interpreted as a threat to American cultural as well as political values and interests. The British, too, are affected by an

⁴⁶ Andrew Pollack. "Asia's Hope for Hong Kong: More Business as Usual." *The New York Times* 2 July 1997, sec. A: 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Mervyn Lynch and Atkya Effendi. "Editorial Treatment of India in *The New York Times*." *Journalism Quarterly* 141 (1964).

inherent bias - often a sentimental notion of their nation as a world power. This is reflected in their press - according to John Merrill, "William Rees-Moog, the editor, recognizes that his newspaper has been regarded as the voice of the British people in the past and wants to continue this tradition."⁵¹ Even in the free presses of the world reports tend to reinforce national ideals and corroborate governmental policies. In The Press and Foreign Policy Bernard Cohen "found that the American press consistently supported American foreign policy."⁵² In light of these findings it is easy to understand why *Newsweek* made the decision it did and published two contradictory editions: it wished to sell the most magazines by giving readers in Asia and especially in America what they and their leaders probably already believed to be true. The same motivations and influences can also be attributed to the myriad other media organizations which converged on Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's handover in *The Times* and *The New York Times*

The New York Times and *The Times* of London were chosen for study because they are the newspapers of record in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively.⁵³ Both papers are widely read in intellectual, governmental, and financial circles and are considered to possess a global influence.⁵⁴ *The New York Times* is regarded as that American paper which provides the most comprehensive international coverage.⁵⁵ *The Times* of London is widely respected both for the breadth of its coverage and for its analysis of events.⁵⁶ Both papers are considered to be "good representatives of the Western press."⁵⁷ The editions studied were the

⁵⁰ Brantly Womack. "The Dilemma of Centricity." in Lee. 240.

⁵¹ Merrill., 177.

⁵² Dong., 30.

⁵³ "America's Best Newspapers." Columbia Journalism Review Nov. / Dec. 1999: 14.

⁵⁴ Merrill., 268.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 266.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁷ Dong., 44.

metropolitan New York edition of *The New York Times* and the final edition of *The Times* of London because they were available at St. Olaf and Carleton colleges respectively.

The New York Times and *The Times* both gave Hong Kong a large amount of coverage in the days and weeks surrounding July 1. *The New York Times* enlarged its Hong Kong operation by bringing in bureau chiefs from other Asian cities as did *The Times*.⁵⁸ Articles dealing with the handover, accompanied by large photographs, graced the front pages of *The New York Times* from June 29 to July 2 and *The Times* from June 28 to July 1. Each paper featured multiple page spreads addressing the handover.

Editions of *The Times* and *The New York Times* from June 24 through to July 7 were analyzed for content and presentation of material. This method, content analysis, is a popular one for analyzing “underlying attitudes, biases, or repeating themes” within the media.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly the greatest number of articles appeared as the handover was most immediate. Following the first day of Chinese rule, July 1, few articles appeared dealing with Hong Kong.

In order to analyze the content of the two papers in covering the handover of Hong Kong three hypotheses were developed.

I. The first hypothesis stated that the coverage of both *The Times* of London and *The New York Times* will have taken a greater anti-China and pro-British stance than they will have to the contrary. This hypothesis is in line with the general criticisms raised of the Western media such as being overly critical towards China while glossing over negative aspects of British rule. The findings of the content analysis strongly support the hypothesis.

Bias of articles towards or against China and Britain (number of articles)

Pro-China Anti-UK Neutral Anti or wary to China Pro-UK

⁵⁸ Although local bureau chief Edward Gargan wrote the majority of *The New York Times*' stories filed from Hong Kong he was joined by Seth Faison (Shanghai) and Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn (both stationed in Tokyo, formerly in Beijing).

<i>New York Times</i>	4	1	6	10	3
<i>The Times</i>	3	0	7	10	12

The New York Times' reportage very often expressed concern that the economic and political systems Hong Kong had under British rule would be detrimentally altered under China's reign. A theme that *The New York Times* touched on often was that of Hong Kong's stability and insulation from China having been key to its success. The majority of articles therefore were wary of China's disorder and notorious corruption. In an article from June 29 David Sanger stated that the presence of British law, "meant companies were willing to sign contracts, knowing that they could seek enforcement through an independent judiciary where precedent mattered more than who your friends were."⁶⁰ On July 1 *The New York Times* ran a cover story titled "Time of Uncertainty Begins: Will Beijing Honor Vows?" which stressed the final moments of British rule and the fate of democracy. Lee's demonstration and speech from the balcony of the Legislative Council was given three column inches of text.⁶¹ This is in addition to the coverage that Lee and the Democratic Party received on June 29 in a large article titled "With Pomp and Circumstance, Hong Kong Legislature Fades Into the Sunset and accompanied by a photograph. On July 2 *The New York Times* featured a front page article on Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's "Vision for Hong Kong" accompanied by a photograph of Tung with Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen as well as one of pro-democracy demonstrators marching.⁶² Editorials and opinion pieces on Hong Kong took the same wary tone. Of the four pieces published on the paper's *Op-Ed* pages dealing with the

⁵⁹ Rebecca Rubin., et al. Communication Research: Strategies and Sources. 3rd. ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1993. 190.

⁶⁰ David Sanger. "There Is (Was?) No Place Like Hong Kong." *The New York Times*. 29 June 1997. sec: Week in Review: 1.

⁶¹ Edward Gargan. "Time of Uncertainty Begins: Will Beijing Honor Vows?" *The New York Times*. 1 July 1997. sec: A: 1.

⁶² Gargan. "For Now, the Party Scene is Social, Not Socialist." *The New York Times*. 27 June 1997. sec: A: 4.

handover two dealt with how the sordid history of the Opium Wars gave rise to a great city and the other two, both by Thomas Friedman, emphasized that the territory would survive only so long as “the dark side of Maritime China - the alliances between Chinese warlords, military chiefs, triads and business that involve everything from smuggling to shady, sweetheart stock deals” is kept at bay.⁶³

The Times of London, as the numbers make obvious, took a more clearly anti-China and pro-British stance than did *The New York Times*. Articles in *The Times* very often depicted Britain as having granted to Hong Kong all the benefits of its rule and that the arrival of the Chinese would, most likely, harm the colony. Like *The New York Times*, *The Times* of London was concerned with possible losses of freedom, curtailments of democracy, and shady business practices, but *The Times* was especially focused on the fact that Beijing would now be in charge. Lee was given coverage as well as a photograph. Articles dealing with Patten or Tung were universally more favorable to Patten. While Patten was often depicted as somewhat of an old uncle to the Hong Kong people Tung was portrayed as a businessman with no regard for liberty and freedoms. In an article titled “British trained shipping boss takes over helm” Jonathan Mirsky emphasized Tung’s close relationship with Beijing and stated that Chief Secretary Anson Chan would have been a better choice for Chief Executive. Like most Western papers *The Times* took a dim view of China’s willingness to continue Hong Kong’s open and liberal society. In “Protocol row brings a final stumble in Beijing’s orderly pullout” Simon Jenkins stresses how the Chinese government has chosen “destruction” of Hong Kong’s fledgling democracy.⁶⁴ The installation of People’s Liberation Army forces in the territory was given significant coverage by *The Times*. As well as being mentioned in numerous articles, *The Times* devoted two entire

⁶³ Thomas Friedman. “Hang Seng Salvation.” *The New York Times*. 3 July 1997. sec: A: 23. Friedman defines “Maritime - China” as a “huge cyber-community” involving “families, coastal trading houses, business alliances between merchants and officials (including intelligence and army officers), as well as some underworld groups. It stretches from Hong Kong to China to Macao to Taiwan to all of the ethnic Chinese communities of South Asia...it is a source of great economic vibrancy in Asia.”

⁶⁴ Simon Jenkins. “Protocol row brings a final stumble in Beijing’s pullout.” *The Times*. 30 June 1997. 2.

articles to their arrival. One such article, on the front page of June 28 by David Watts titled, "China orders Hong Kong show of force" was very edgy in tone and more than once mentioned the Tiananmen massacre and pointed out that armored personnel carriers like those being placed in Hong Kong were used to bring troops to the square. Editorials and opinion pieces carried by *The Times* were unrestrained in their pro-British sentiment. In an essay titled "Sealed with a golden kiss" Jenkins declared that "the British - and Chris Patten - in particular - can leave Hong Kong with pride in their legacy." He went on to state that, "Hong Kong's political economy stands today as an astonishing monument, not to Chinese labour, nor to European adventurism, nor to the potency of capitalism, but to British imperial rule." Jenkins also lamented the fact that "The city recently voted by an American institute the 'most free city in the world' is passing to the least free country, and certainly the most corrupt."⁶⁵ In an editorial *The Times* declared that "Many Hong Kong Chinese looked back, with gratitude on what Britain had done for them, on the good government, rule of law and impartial civil service that has provided a framework for the prosperity of this once barren island. Britons, too, can reflect with pride on what they and their ancestors have contributed not only to Hong Kong but to those dominions and colonies over which the Union Jack once flew."⁶⁶ *The Times* did also run articles dealing with Hong Kong's future as a business center but these, too, had a gloomy undertone. In "Stakes rise over Hong Kong's future" concern was expressed as to the safety of some 60 billion pounds (96 billion American dollars) of British investment in the territory under Chinese rule.⁶⁷

II. The second hypothesis said that both *The Times* of London and *The New York Times* will have depicted the handover as a British departure rather than a Chinese arrival or as an end opposed to a beginning. This hypothesis was validated by the analysis so far as *The Times* is concerned but regarding *The New York Times* it was found to be inaccurate.

⁶⁵ Jenkins., "Sealed with a golden kiss." *The Times*. 2 July 1997. 20.

⁶⁶ "End of Empire." Editorial in *The Times*, 1 July 1997. 23.

July 1, 1997 as a departure or an arrival (number of articles)

	<u>British departure</u>	<u>Chinese arrival</u>	<u>Farewell to Patten</u>	<u>Welcome to Tung</u>
<i>New York Times</i>	3	5	2	1
<i>The Times</i>	7	2	6	1

While *The New York Times* did feature a large visual describing which features of Hong Kong will remain unchanged and which will not there were, unlike *The Times*, no articles dealing exclusively with such issues as Western expatriates packing up or Hong Kong Chinese clamoring for UK citizenship.

The New York Times was again more interested in stability in Hong Kong under whomever rules than it was in celebrating the British Empire. The article by Sanger examining Hong Kong's vitality as a trade center was given the ominous title, "There Is (Was) No Place Like Hong Kong", but dealt mostly with issues of judicial independence and economic transparency. The front page of July 1 carried a picture of Patten solemnly receiving the British flag as well as one of the Chinese flag being raised under the headline, "CHINA RESUMES CONTROL OF HONG KONG, CONCLUDING 156 YEARS OF BRITISH RULE." The lead article, by local bureau chief Edward Gargan, was mostly a description of the final moments of British rule and the departure of British officials.

In contrast to *The New York Times'* coverage, that provided by *The Times* of London, had a multitude of articles dealing with Britain's exit. Extensive coverage was also given to Patten's departure and future plans. Though numerous articles and headlines were written from the angle of Britain's final exit the most glaring example was *The Times'* headline of July 1 which read, "Final Farewell to Hong Kong". In the days before the actual handover *The Times* ran an article describing the plight of the Gurkha troops who were faced with unemployment when China

⁶⁷ "Stakes rise over Hong Kong's future." *The Times*. 29 June 1997. sec: Business.

arrived.⁶⁸ Similarly there was an article about Hong Kong Chinese police nervous about their fate under Chinese rule and calling for British citizenship.⁶⁹ On June 30 a small article described how Prince Charles used some of his last moments as Hong Kong's sovereign to knight numerous local personages.⁷⁰ The most blatant expressions of imperial departure were published on July 1. In addition to the headline mentioned already, the front page of *The Times* contained an article titled, "Tears mingle with monsoon rain as retreat is beaten" devoted to the final pomp and emotion surrounding Britain's exit. There was much detail given to the songs sung as well as the many weeping Britons on hand.⁷¹ In a multi-page spread inside *The Times* ran the full page headline "Union Jack falls and Britannia sets sail" under which were articles chronicling the final end of British Hong Kong and the departure of British dignitaries from the territory. Watts wrote an article on how British expatriates were annoyed with the loss of British television programming.⁷² Mirsky's piece "Friends see last governor off on sentimental journey" was very much a mawkish account of Patten's time and tenure in, as well as departure from, Hong Kong.⁷³

Neither paper gave much coverage to aspects of the Chinese arrival other than troop deployments. No effort was given to such issues as how many officials would be installed, what their backgrounds were, or where they would live. No mention was made of new Mandarin language programming on television and radio. The only reports dealing with mainland reactions were filed from Beijing and dealt with the crowds in Tiananmen Square. Those in *The New York Times* were rather unbiased accounts of a carefully planned celebration while the sole article on it in *The Times* of London was a highly sarcastic account by Beijing bureau chief James Pringle.

⁶⁸ Michael Evans. "RAF officer to beat retreat in colony's last post." *The Times*. 30 June 1997.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Mirsky. "Colony's police send 'racism' plea to Queen." *The Times*. 26 June 1997. 17.

⁷⁰ "Prince honors the last knights for long service." *The Times*. 30 June 1997.

⁷¹ Jenkins., "Tears mingle with monsoon rains as retreat is beaten." *The Times*. 1 July 1997. 1.

⁷² David Watts. "Misery for expats facing life without 'The Archers.'" *The Times*. 1 July 1997. 1.

⁷³ Mirsky., "Friends see last governor off on sentimental journey." *The Times*. 1 July 1997. 3.

Wrote Pringle, "The Communist Party had its own celebrations in Tiananmen Square, an orgy of self-congratulation at the return of the territory to 'the motherland.'"⁷⁴

III. The third hypothesis stated that *The Times* of London will have displayed greater emotion than *The New York Times*. Perhaps to a greater extreme than the other two hypotheses this was substantiated by the analysis. While *The New York Times* contained only one article which was judged to be tinged or laden with emotion *The Times* contained ten. Many of the most prominent examples of this emotionalism have already been discussed in hypotheses I and II as they also depicted the British departure or the benevolence of UK rule. There were, however, some that have not yet been addressed and therefore they will be below.

The most prominent example of emotion present in *The New York Times* is in the article already discussed titled "There Is (Was?) No Place Like Hong Kong."⁷⁵ *The Times* of London published a number of sentimental, almost weepy, articles that looked back at Hong Kong as an enchanted piece of the British Empire. In the article "Governors' regimes of tiffin and scandal" Watts examines the past lives and duties of Hong Kong's former governors. The article is very much a romanticized portrait of imperial Hong Kong and the apparently charmed lives led by its governors. At one point it even quotes approvingly Sir George Des Voeux's (governor 1884-85) remark that, "a governor might pass the whole of his tenure in office by doing little more than sign his name to the productions of others ... the place would be a paradise to a man inclined to be idle."⁷⁶ In roughly the same vein, *The Times* ran an article on June 30 recalling Hong Kong as "a wartime paradise."⁷⁷ Depictions of Hong Kong as some form of Shangri-La would probably come as a surprise to most of the territory's inhabitants during the periods in question. In his chronicle A Borrowed Place: the history of Hong Kong Frank Welsh depicts the mid-nineteenth

⁷⁴ Pringle, James. "Chosen 100,00 hail 'triumph for Communist leadership.'" *The Times*. 1 July 1997.

⁷⁵ Sanger.

⁷⁶ Watts., "Governors' regimes of tiffin and scandal." *The Times*. 30 June 1997.

⁷⁷ Matt George. "Soldier's letters recall a wartime paradise." *The Times*. 30 June 1997.

century colony as one racially polarized and rife with disease, squalor, and vice.⁷⁸ Conditions in Hong Kong around the time of the Second World War also left much to be desired. At the time the colony's literacy rate hovered at around 10 percent and health care was "sadly inadequate".⁷⁹

The findings of the newspaper analysis for the most part substantiate the complaints and observations raised by various commentators regarding the coverage of Hong Kong's handover in the Western press. Overall the coverage of *The Times* of London and *The New York Times* assumed positions critical of China and favorable to Britain. Both papers greatly emphasized possible curtailments in liberties, freedoms, and democracy in Hong Kong, and the Democratic Party, especially Martin Lee, received copious and favorable coverage. Both papers' reporting embodied certain predispositions ingrained within their respective national cultures. For *The Times* this was seen in coverage praising Britain's imperial legacy and looking back nostalgically at past glories while *The New York Times* often embodied the wariness of communism and defense of democracy and liberalism for which the United States is known. *The Times*, like ITN, looked at the Hong Kong story very much as a domestic one. Emphasis was given to British personages, institutions, and legacies in Hong Kong rather than to Chinese aspects.

In the course of analyzing *The New York Times* and *The Times* two significant observations were made which had not been formerly addressed or considered. The first is that *The New York Times* often reported on apathy among Hong Kong people regarding the changeover while *The Times* mentioned it only briefly if at all. In addition to being mentioned in various articles this apathetic disposition was the subject of two separate articles entirely. In both "Politics May Be Serious but It's Crime and Sex That Sell Newspapers" and "At Lun Fat's, It All Seems Small Noodles" Seth Faison depicts a city exhausted with politics and more interested in the gossip and innuendo of daily life. The second observation was that *The New York Times* was much more international in its coverage than was *The Times*. While *The Times* addressed Hong

⁷⁸ Frank Welsh. *A Borrowed Place: the history of Hong Kong*. New York: Kodansha Limited, 1993, 266.

⁷⁹ Nigel Cameron. *An illustrated history of Hong Kong*. New York: Oxford, 1991, 242-3.

Kong as a domestic story *The New York Times*, being in a more removed position, featured reports not only from Hong Kong, mainland China, and Britain but from Taiwan, Bermuda and New York's Chinatown as well.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Since the *Sino-British Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong* was reached in 1984 and it was announced that the colony would be returned to China in little more than a decade the Western media has expended much effort in chronicling the events leading up to 1997. More often than not the transition to Chinese sovereignty was portrayed as an unfortunate and solemn affair. In books, newspaper, and news broadcasts the message given was generally that Hong Kong was, without the British, a doomed city. The roots of this negativistic perspective can be traced well back in history to the era of the *white man's burden* and *Manifest Destiny* when the United States and Great Britain sought to remake the world in their image socially, economically, and culturally. Over a century of effort, including involvement in a civil war notwithstanding, the Anglo-American efforts to remold China were a dismal failure. Though the *China missions* may have provided sanctimonious diversions for religious minded Americans and Britons they have had little, if any, lasting impact on the face or soul of China. Likewise Henry Luce, despite the immense damage he did to Sino-American relations in the twentieth century, failed in his attempt to instill in the Chinese Protestant-American values. The British colony of Hong Kong however appeared to be a different story. There, on the south China coast, was a colony 95 percent Chinese yet adhering to British law, frequently proficient in the English language, and often following the Christian religion. That Hong Kong was also, by the 1980s, a wildly successful and prominent center of international business only further confirmed the righteousness of the West's influences.

⁸⁰ Larry Rohter. "In Bermuda, It's a Day For Glee And Hope." *The New York Times*. 1 July 1997. sec: A: 1. Article reports that residents of Bermuda are hoping to see a windfall of investment by companies

Criticisms of the Western media often centered around there having been an overwhelming negativism and a pining for the days of empire. While the mainland Chinese press mouthed the government's enthusiasm and nationalism and other Asian media looked at the practical issues of economics and trade the Western media looked for the demise of democracy and an end to civil liberties as well as the final retreat of Britannia from the Far East.

The Times of London and *The New York Times*, perhaps the two most influential newspapers in the world, embodied many of the criticisms that were leveled against the Western press in general regarding coverage of Hong Kong's handover. Both papers produced reports which stressed the changeover as one of great uncertainty and regret. The British legacy, especially in the pages of *The Times*, was praised for its stability and remembered with nostalgia and emotion.

The elusive goal of every journalist is that of objectivity - the ability to report events without favor or bias. In its coverage of Hong Kong's transfer to Chinese rule the Western media's behavior left much to be desired. As Hong Kong is embracing a new post-colonial chapter in its history however it is hoped that the West's journalists and media organizations will as well.

moving their operations out of Hong Kong just as Jardine Matheson did in the late 1980s.

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