"Fear and Loathing in Hong Kong: Media Use and Political (Dis)Trust on the Road to 1997."

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As one of Great Britain's last remaining colonies, Hong Kong citizens have had very little opportunity for direct political involvement until quite recently. In 1997, the colony of Hong Kong will be returned to the People's Republic of China. Under the agreement between Great Britain and the PRC, an agreement in which the people of Hong Kong were not directly consulted, China has agreed to maintain Hong Kong's existing economic and political system for the next fifty years, granting Hong Kong a degree of autonomy under the rubric One Country, Two Systems. With such a drastic change looming ahead, many Hong Kong residents worry about their future in the territory, with a large number making arrangements to emigrate. Many others have adopted a more fatalistic approach to the situation, hoping that the PRC will, in fact, find it in its own best interest to limit its direct involvement in Hong Kong affairs, and life will be not that different from it has been under British control.

Historically, the people of Hong Kong have had very little direct involvement in their own governance. Within the last few years, however, the British government has tried to establish a degree of democracy in the local governance, along with a sense of political involvement, which they hope will continue past 1997. The PRC, on the other hand, has vociferously objected to any expansion of the minimal levels of democracy outlined in the original agreement. They have challenged the attempts of the British to increase the number of directly elected officials, and at various times have announced that they have the right to disapprove of, and remove from office, any elected officials they do not approve of. Their own attempts to involve Hong Kong citizens in their future has been limited to the appointment of some individuals to consulting committees with no real political power.

The struggle between the British, attempting to install "democracy" in Hong Kong, and the Chinese, attempting to exert their control over their future territory, has so far been carried out along diplomatic channels, as well as in the press. Chan (1992: p. 120) observed that "public opinion wars are often waged between China and Britain, with the Hong Kong media serving as the battlefield and participants." The often strongly worded debate has raised the level of uncertainty over the future of the territory and its citizens. Some of these statements, as well as other recent actions of the People's Republic of China, have raised further concerns about the future of the colony. A key issue in this war of words between the British and Chinese-- about Hong Kong-- has been that of trust.

The Political Context

Interestingly enough, none of the three governments concerned, British, Chinese, or local Hong Kong, has much of a foundation for political legitimacy, or trust, among the citizens of Hong Kong. British sovereignty over Hong Kong was established by force, and maintained by force, a series of Chinese governments refusing to recognize the treaties establishing the colony. Further, the British gave very little concern to the colony's residents during their tenure; their efforts at promoting democracy have only occurred in the last few years. As late as 1991, there were no directly, popularly, elected members in the local legislative council.
The local Hong Kong government also has had problems with legitimacy and trust. Historically, many of the local governmental organizations were notoriously corrupt. While considerable ground has been gained in the area of corruption, there remains concern over whether the local government truly serves the interests of the general population.

The government of the People's Republic of China was also established largely by force of arms, and has similarly done little in the intervening years to expand their base of political legitimacy. Many Hong Kong residents remain suspicious of PRC intentions, particularly after the events in Tiannanmen Square in June, 1989, when over a million Hong Kong residents marched in support of the demonstrating students. The lack of trust of the PRC is compounded when it is recalled that most of the residents of Hong Kong were originally refugees from the PRC, they or their parents seeking either greater political or economic opportunities.

With such a weak foundation for political legitimacy, the issue of trust in the political system is crucial. In Hong Kong, the situation is further complicated by the fact that the future of the colony is being decided by two foreign powers, with only limited input from local voices. Second, there has historically been very little political involvement by the people in Hong Kong, with the first movement towards implementing democracy occurring only in the last few years. Finally, most of the political information about current issues comes through local news media (Chan, 1992). There does appear to be a high use of media among Hong Kong residents, who routinely cite television news among their favorite programs (Chan and Lee, 1992). Television is also cited as the most important, and most credible source for news, possibly because a large number of Hong Kong's newspapers are partisan (Chan and Lee, 1991; Lee, 1992). Some scholars (Kraus and Davis, 1976; Lang and Lang, 1986; Robinson, 1976) have argued that the rise of, and reliance on, television news contributes to political cynicism, possibly contributing to the levels of political (dis)trust in Hong Kong.

Certainly, there is very little doubt as to the role of media in political socialization, and the formation of political attitudes (Kraus and Davis, 1976; Neuman, Just and Cigler, 1992; Nimmo and Combs, 1990). There has also been considerable research into the question of the development of political alienation and distrust in the context of exposure to mass-mediated news (Kraus and Davis, 1976; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1988; Chaffee, Nass and Yang, 1991). These suggest that media, particularly television, can have impacts on a range of political attitudes. In addition, media have also been found to have an influence on individual's perceptions of foreign nations (Salwen and Matera, 1992; Semetko et al., 1992). Since the powers debating the future of Hong Kong are foreign powers, and that debate has occurred largely outside of Hong Kong, this suggests an even stronger role for media in the formation of political attitudes and trust.

Thus, it would seem to be a strong call to examine the levels of political trust and distrust in Hong Kong, and the impact that media use may have on the development of political trust.

**Methods**

The central research question guiding this study is: Is political trust associated with exposure to mass-mediated news? In order to explore the relationship between news exposure and political trust, a representative telephone survey was conducted in April of
1993. Surveys containing a variety of political attitudes, media use and demographic variables were constructed in English, along with a Cantonese translation, which was translated back into English by a second translator to approach reliability across instruments. The surveys were pretested in both language versions, resulting in minor revisions, in addition to a decision not to perform randomization procedures within households, which respondents appeared to find confusing. Interviewers were bilingual, and conducted surveys in the language selected by the respondent (98 % in Cantonese and 2 % in English).

Approximately 3,000 telephone numbers were randomly generated from a list of known telephone prefixes, about 2,000 of which were neither eligible (businesses, facsimile machines, no longer in service, etc.) nor reached by interviewers after at least three attempts over a week-long period. Of the 1,024 households that were reached, approximately half (n=504) refused to participate in the survey. A total of 512 interviews were completed. Response and completion rates were comparable with other studies concerning media use and political issues in Hong Kong (such as Chan and Lee, 1992), as were responses to several basic demographic and media use questions, lending credence to our treatment of the sample as approaching representativeness of persons living in Hong Kong.

In this study, political trust refers to attitudes concerning the governments in Hong Kong, Great Britain, and China, as well as perceptions of Hong Kong's future. To assess political attitudes, a series of statements were read to respondents, who noted their level of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point scale (1=strongly agree and 5=strongly disagree). These statements included: I trust the Hong Kong Government; I trust the British Government; I trust the Peoples' Republic of China's (PRC) Government; The June fourth incident has affected my confidence toward the PRC government; the PRC government will keep their promise to maintain the capitalist system in Hong Kong for fifty years; and Hong Kong will not be prosperous after 1997.

Blumler and Gurevitch (1988) point to one criticism of research in the area of political distrust as not attending to level of political interest among audience members. In order to acknowledge this concern, a scale of interest in political issues was developed, including four areas, which respondents noted as being interested, neutral or not interested in. Additional measures of political interest were voter registration, and having voted in local district elections. Additionally, respondents were asked about their plans for staying in Hong Kong after the transition in 1997.

Results

Responses from the surveys were coded, cleaned, and entered into a database for analysis, utilizing the SPSS-PC statistical package. A variety of analytic procedures were used to assess the results from this survey. Table 1 provides some summary information on the sample's media use habits and political attitudes.

There is a very high degree of media access, and media use, in Hong Kong. There are an average of 1.48 TVs per household. In addition to the two Chinese language and two English language broadcast channels, 85% of the households have VCRs, 40 % have laser disc players, and 22% had access to satellite TV (principly Star-TV, offering 4 English language channels (including the BBC World Service) and one Chinese language channel). The average household spends almost two and a half hours a
day watching television, in addition to two-thirds of an hour reading newspapers and over an hour and twenty minutes listening to the radio. More than 60% of the households reported watching TV news "yesterday", slightly less than reported listening to radio news, but more than reported reading newspapers (52%).

Respondents in Hong Kong followed previous studies in Hong Kong (Chan and Lee, 1992) and elsewhere indicating that television is most often cited as the most credible source of information. As indicated in Table 1, slightly over half the respondents indicated that television was the most credible source of information, compared to about 23% for newspapers, and just under ten percent who cited the radio as the most credible source. However, respondents also tended to use multiple sources for political information. Again, television was most often mentioned as a source for political information (85%), with 73% mentioning newspapers, and 33% mentioning radio.

A number of demographic variables were included in the survey to incorporate relevant background factors into an assessment of the relationship between exposure to news and political trust. First, a reliable and valid scale of socio-economic status (SES) was created using reported educational level, income bracket, and ability to speak and read in English (alpha=.66; Eigenvalue of Factor 1 = 1.9, predicting 63 % of variance). About 35 % of the respondents fell in the lowest category of SES, 31 % in the next level, 22 % in the next and 12 % in the highest level of SES. The gender of the respondents is about evenly split (48 % female), and the average age of the respondents is approximately 34 years old (standard deviation = 14 years). Younger males appear more likely to have higher SES than those who are older (r=-.21, p<.05) or are female (r=-.13, p<.05).

As expected, respondents appeared more interested in local issues than in foreign issues (63 % were interested in the issue of the construction of the new airport in Hong Kong, 59% in the fate of students imprisoned in China, 54 % in Clinton's foreign policy toward the PRC, and 30 % in the situation in the former Soviet Union). A scale reflecting the number of issues respondents were interested in was constructed as an indicator of general level of interest in politics. This five-point scale appears reliable and valid (alpha=.68; Factor 1 Eigenvalue=2.03, predicting 51 % of variance). This scale of interest is distributed in the following curve: 16 % have 0 points; 18 % have 1 point; 27.5 % 2 points; 26 % 3 points; and 12.5 % 4 points. As shown in Table 2, political interest is moderately associated with a propensity to watch television news (r=.13, p<.05), with higher SES (r=.25, p<.05); and with males (r=-.08, p<.05).

The multiple sources for political information given by the respondents follows other findings (Comstock, 1992) indicating that there are relationships among media use, and with various demographic factors. Table 2 examines some of these interrelationships. Use of TV for political information was correlated (statistically significant at p < .05) with citation of TV as most credible, use of newspapers, and age. Use of newspapers were correlated (again slightly, although with statistical significance) with citation of newspapers as most credible medium, SES, level of political interest, and gender. The identification of newspapers as being most credible was also negatively associated with age, and positively correlated with SES. There was also a fair degree of correlation among the demographic variables.
Credibility of source and use of that source for political information appear to be correlated for both television \((r=.21, p<.05)\) and newspaper \((r=.12, p<.05)\) preference. These items were combined into indicators of preference for a particular medium: forty-seven percent of the respondents thought that television was the most credible source of information and a good source of information about political matters, while only 20% believed that newspapers were the most credible source as well as a source for political news. Preference for television does not appear to be significantly associated with any of the background factors examined, although preference for newspapers as a source of political information appears to be shared by those who are younger in age \((r=-.10, p<.05)\) and hold a higher level of SES \((r=.14, p<.05)\).

Political trust is assessed along three dimensions: trust in the current regime, which is comprised of Hong Kong and British government institutions; trust in the future regime, including faith in the PRC government and confidence given the June fourth events; and trust in the future of Hong Kong, regarding expectations of PRC rule in the long-run and future financial prosperity after 1997. The basic responses to these trust statements are given in Table 3.

Respondents were more likely to trust the Hong Kong government (35%) than either the British (21%) or the Chinese governments (12.5%). Distrust and suspicion fall most heavily on the PRC government: more than half (55.5%) of those interviewed neither trust the PRC administration, nor have confidence given the June fourth 1989 events in Tiananmen Square (68%). Less than one-third of the respondents (29%) believe that the PRC will keep its promise to maintain a capitalist economic system in Hong Kong for fifty years following the 1997 takeover. Yet, the general outlook of the respondents is hopeful: more than half (53.5%) believe that Hong Kong will remain prosperous after 1997. Overall, respondents appear relatively loyal to Hong Kong politicians and to the belief that Hong Kong's material wealth will persevere. What is striking is the high lack of faith the populace appears to have in the British government, and even moreso in the PRC.

Hong Kong appears to be the government comparatively most trusted by the respondents, and the PRC the least. Bivariate correlations of political attitudes with news media use and preference, along with interest in political issues and background variables are presented in Table 4. As shown in this table, news exposure does not appear to be associated with trust in the Hong Kong government. Neither, in this case, is preference for a particular channel associated with political trust. The only factor moderately related to political trust of the Hong Kong government is age: over half of those surveyed (54%) over fifty trust this government, compared to about one-third (32%) of those under fifty years of age. It is those in the middle age group who appear to have the highest level of distrust: twenty-six percent of those 30 to 49 years of age disagreed with the statement that they trust the Hong Kong administration, compared to 19% of those under 30 and 15% of those over 49 years of age \((r=-.09, p<.05)\). This association is confirmed in regression analyses, while no other factor contributes to a prediction of variance (see Table 5).

When observing bivariate relations (see Table 4), trust in the British government appears to bear some association with newspaper use, as well as with gender and interest
in political issues. Those who read the newspaper appear to be much more distrustful (48\%) than those who do not read the newspaper (34\%; r=.08, p<.05). Also, those who profess to be interested in a higher number of political issues tend to be less trusting of the British than those who are less interested (r=.10, p<.05). Finally, men appear to be more likely to distrust the British (45\%) than women (36\%; r=-.12 p<.05). As has been stated earlier, newspaper use appears to be associated with age and gender. When controlling for these and other background factors in regression analyses, the relationship between exposure to newspapers and distrust of the British government becomes noticeably weaker (still significant at .10 level, but not at .05). Thus, it is not that reading the newspaper alone leads to distrust of the current regime, but instead this media use is interwoven with demographic patterns, which themselves explain this case of political malaise.

While trust in the British appears to less likely among newspaper readers than those who do not read newspapers, trust in the Chinese holds a different pattern with television news exposure. In essence, those who watch television news tend to be more trusting of the Chinese than those who do not: almost two-thirds (63\%) of those who do not watch television distrust the Chinese, compared to about half (51\%) of those who do watch television news (r=-.12, p<.05). This relationship holds its strength even when controlling for other background factors, which also bear some significant correlations with distrust of the PRC (see Table 5).

Each of the demographic variables included in this study, SES, age and gender, predict distrust of the PRC. Those with higher levels of SES are more likely not to trust the PRC than those with lower levels: seventy-two percent of those in the highest category do not trust the PRC, compared to about 58\% in the middle categories and 49\% in the lowest level (r=.13 p<.05). In addition, age holds a striking relationship with mistrust of the PRC: two-thirds (67\%) of those interviewed under thirty years of age do not trust the PRC, compared to half (51\%) of those between thirty and forty-nine, and less than half (38\%) of those 50 years and above (r=-.14, p<.05). It is speculated that younger persons in Hong Kong identify with the students who demonstrated in 1989. In addition, women are more distrustful (62\%) of the PRC than are men (50\%; r=.08, p<.05).

Next, each bivariate relationship was examined closely for significance and strength (refer to Table 4 for summary). Then, media factors (exposure to television news, exposure to newspapers, preference for television as political source, and preference for newspapers as political source) and background factors (political interest, SES, age and gender) were included in a regression equation attempting to predict variance along the attitudinal items articulated below. A step-wise method was used, entering political interest, SES, age and gender first, and then a block of the four media variables. Standardized regression coefficients are displayed on Table 5.

How then, does exposure to television news operate in relation to these demographic factors? Table % provides the percentages of those respondents who do not trust the PRC government (combining disagree and strongly disagree to "I trust the PRC government") across two groups, those who watch television news (51\%) and those who do not (63\%), broken down by significant background factors. Gender appears to operate as a specification variable, in that the relationship between television news exposure and
distrust of the PRC strengthens for males, but disappears among women. Although the pattern between television news exposure and this distrust holds for respondents under fifty years of age, it loses significance among those over forty-nine years. Along the four defined levels of SES, the relationship appears to grow stronger among those with higher SES than those with lower SES.

Thus, it appears that women are likely to distrust the PRC regardless of exposure to television news, whereas people fifty years and older tend to trust the PRC, whether or not they watch television news. Specifying this pattern between news media exposure and political distrust, television news exposure appears to have the greatest influence on distrust of the PRC among men and those with higher SES.

To further assess attitudes toward the PRC, respondents were asked whether the events of June fourth, 1989 had affected their confidence in the PRC. Unlike the item concerning trust in the PRC, this statement appears to bear a weak yet significant association with newspaper use ($r=.09, p<.05$) but not television news exposure. Looking at the bivariate patterns, those who do read the newspaper are less likely to agree with the statement that confidence was affected by the incidents at Tiananmen Square (66%) than those who do not read the newspaper (70.5%); however, this relationship disappears when controlling for other background and media factors (see Table 5). Similarly, although SES appears to bear some correlation with confidence in the PRC, this relationship also loses strength when assessed in relation to other dimensions in regression analyses.

Similar to patterns noted with overall trust in the PRC, younger people are much more likely to be shaken by the events in 1989 (77% of those under 30) than those in the middle age group (66%) or those in the older age group (49%; $r=.13, p<.05$). And again reflecting patterns revealed in the previous question, women are more likely to have been affected (76%) than men (62%; $r=-.14, p<.05$). Finally, those who are interested in political issues are much more likely to have lost confidence in the PRC (69-75%) than those who are less interested (47%; $r=-.15, p<.05$). Political interest, gender and age maintain their strength in predicting confidence in the PRC in the regression model employed.

Trust in the Future of Hong Kong

The last two statements examined in these analyses refer to perceptions of Hong Kong's future: respondents were asked whether they believed that the PRC would keep its promise to maintain the current economic system for fifty years, and whether Hong Kong would be prosperous after 1997.

The former statement, it was expected, would bear some connection with trust in the PRC as well. Patterns observed in connection with agreement that the PRC will keep their promise are quite similar to that of whether June fourth affected confidence in the PRC. Those who read the newspaper tend to be less suspicious of the PRC (34% did not agree that the PRC would keep its promise) than those who do not read the newspaper (42%; $r=-.09, p<.05$). Conversely, those who prefer television as a source of credible political information are more likely to doubt PRC's promise (41%) than are those who do not cite television (35%; $r=-.10, p<.05$). Although these patterns are clear when examining bivariate correlations, these relationships disappear when controlling for background factors (see Table 5).
Similar to a lack of confidence in the PRC currently, suspicion in the PRC's future intentions appears to be moderately associated with SES (those with higher levels of SES were more suspicious than those with lower levels; \( r = .10, \ p < .05 \)), with age (younger people are more suspicious than older people \( r = -.10, \ p < .05 \)) and gender (women being more suspicious than men; \( r = .15, \ p < .05 \)). According to the results from the regression analyses, SES and gender are the strongest significant predictors of this attitude.

Although fear that Hong Kong will not be prosperous after 1997 is not associated with news media exposure in either television or newspapers, there is a moderate relationship between this belief and valuing newspapers as the preferred medium for credible political information, when examining bivariate correlations (see Table 4). Those who prefer newspapers are more likely to disagree with this statement (61 %) than those who do not prefer newspapers (51 %; \( r = .09, \ p < .05 \)). However this relationship appears to be a product of other factors, such as age and interest in political issues, in that it loses strength when controlling for these dimensions in regression analyses (see Table 5). Younger people, for example, appear to have higher hopes for the financial future of Hong Kong than those who are older (57 % of those under 30, compared to 53 % between 30 and 49 and 45 % of those 50 and older; \( r = -.11, \ p < .05 \)).
References


