

# GLOBAL MEDIA SPECTACLE



NEWS WAR OVER HONG KONG

CHIN-CHUAN LEE • JOSEPH MAN CHAN  
ZHONGDANG PAN • CLEMENT Y. K. SO

# Global Media Spectacle

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Cover photograph: Hong Kong citizens watch live broadcast of the handover events on June 30, 1997. Courtesy of the *Ming Pao Daily News*.

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*To our families, with love and gratitude*

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## *Contents*

Figures and Tables	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Chapter 1. Global Event, National Prisms	1
Chapter 2. News Staging	21
Chapter 3. Domestication of Global News	41
Chapter 4. Hying and Repairing News Paradigms	63
Chapter 5. Banging the Democracy Drum: From the Superpower	85
Chapter 6. Essentializing Colonialism: Heroes and Villains	109
Chapter 7. Defining the Nation-State: One Event, Three Stories	127
Chapter 8. Human Rights and National Interest: From the Middle Powers	151
Chapter 9. Media Event as Global Discursive Contestation	169
Epilogue: After the Handover	189
Appendix I. Sampled Media Organizations	199
Appendix II. Interviewees	205
Appendix III. Guideline for Interview	209
Appendix IV. Content Analysis	215
Appendix V. Coding Scheme	221
Notes	223
Bibliography	229
Authors	245
Index	247

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## *Figures and Tables*

Figure 1.1:	Conceptual Scheme of Comparative International Media Discourses	16
Table 1.1:	The Sample of Media Outlets	10
Table 1.2:	National Origins of Journalists Interviewed	12
Table 2.1:	Number of Media Organizations and Journalists Registered with the Handover Ceremony Coordination Office	25
Table 3.1:	References to the Prospect of Changes after the Handover	54
Table 3.2:	Tones on the PRC Government (in %)	56
Table 3.3:	News Sources from Different Countries	56
Table 3.4:	Official Sources from Different Countries	57
Table 3.5:	Top Ten Most Frequently Cited Sources by Country	58
Table 4.1:	Key Visual Devices from the Media Coverage	72
Table 5.1:	Ideological Packages of the U.S. Media Coverage	92
Table 7.1:	Discursive Packages of the PRC Media	129
Table 7.2:	Features of the Historical Scripts of the Three Media Narratives	147
Table 7.3:	Features of Discourse Structures of the Media Narratives	148
Table 9.1:	Domestic News vs. International News	173
Table 10.1:	Headlines of Hong Kong Anniversary Stories in the World Media	191
Table 10.2:	Topical Distribution of U.S. and British Media Coverage of Hong Kong (July 6, 1997–July 5, 1998)	196

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## *Preface*

If journalists are said to write the first draft of history, what kind of a history will they be writing in the age of globalized media? Does this history appear to be littered with contrived images and dramas, hyped media events, and ideologically soaked catchy phrases? All global news is local. How do the media—operating as a “twenty-four-hour ideological repair shop” (van Ginneken, 1998:32)—mold international news in accordance with national interest, domestic politics, and the prevailing cultural values? Sighting this scene of international newsmaking from a hub of the world capitalist system, we are awed at how much the process of constructing mediated narratives cum historical discourses is Western-dominated both organizationally and ideologically.

The ubiquitous mediated communication of secondhand reality has kept alive the powerful images of joy and despair, destruction and triumph, authority, and emotion from the Tiananmen Square, the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War, and the Moscow coup. But as students of international communication we know surprisingly little about how the world media and journalists plan, operate, compete, and produce during these historical episodes. We know of no systematic, broad comparative account of the dynamics of international newsmaking since Wilbur Schramm (1959) published *One Day in the World's Press*, an analysis of press coverage of the Suez Canal. This sustained neglect for four decades has been particularly extraordinary in view of the proliferation of journals and publications in media studies, and of the amazing growth in the number of theoretical treatises on the ideological underpinning of newswork in relation to social power and national interest. The heat of the New World Information and Communication Order debate, once highly visible and charged in the fora of international politics, threw little light on this issue. Even the current vogue in the glamour of media globalization has barely skirted around it.

By good fortune, we were at the right place at the right time. In 1997 we were on the spot to witness an important chapter of history—the transfer of

sovereignty of Hong Kong—unfolding and, further, to observe the field of action by thousands of top international journalists at close range. We saw how journalists wrote the first drafts of history from their vantage points. The result, being presented to you after long years of labor, is, we hope, a theoretically informed and empirically grounded analysis of the international newsmaking process. How did our project begin? Our institutional memory has faded: two claim the idea came from a bus ride in Montreal, the other attributes it to a challenge from a Dutch colleague, and the fourth member decides not to contest the archeological truth. What is important, however, is that we did agree to follow the admirable tradition of C. Wright Mills in trying to integrate personal interest with public issues. We were intent on taking advantage of the world media that were to congregate in one place—an alien, exotic, but most likely routine-breaking place—to cover a momentous event of global significance.

We are a team of diverse backgrounds and compatible interests who actively engage one another's minds. Lee, a native of Taiwan, on a three-year leave from the University of Minnesota to be a chair professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, is interested in political and international communication, political economy of the media, and the interface between social theories and media studies. Chan, then chairing the department, was born in China but grew up in Hong Kong, with interest in international and political communication as well as the impact of information technology. Pan, arriving from his previous post at the University of Pennsylvania to join the team, is a native of China and is interested in framing analysis and political communication. So returned from Canada to his native land of Hong Kong to resume his teaching position, just in time to “catch the big show”; his interest includes media sociology and the sociology of knowledge. All educated in the United States, with prior journalistic backgrounds, we met in Hong Kong. The magnitude of this project might be unimaginable for any team less diverse or less committed than ours.

In this volume, we shall try to demonstrate how nation-states fight an international discursive battle via the media to compete for legitimacy and recognition. We shall explore the causes, processes, consequences, and limits of such discursive contestation. To these goals, we strive for a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of contestation and alliance, themes and variations, convergence and divergence between and within various blocks of nations. We take pains to collate a mountain of media texts with the “meaning world” of journalists. These theoretical points could not have been adequately made had it not been for the scope of empirical data that our project encompasses. Comparative studies being easier said than done, we are uniquely blessed to canvas the broad landscape of eight different “national” media systems: the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and Japan. We wish to paint a general picture of broad (yet nonreductive) outlines

with nuanced analysis and a lot of rich details. Having poked into a world of life stories behind these media accounts for three long years, we are feeling bittersweet loss and relief at delivering this intellectual baby.

While incorporating the strength of area studies, we have above all aimed to keep pace—and dialogue—with theoretical and methodological advances in several fields of humanities and social sciences. We began by trying to conceptualize the project theoretically in terms of what Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) call “media events” and methodologically in terms of what William Gamson (1988) calls a constructionist approach to discourse analysis. Interwoven into this theoretical and methodological matrix are a network of theoretical visions culled together from media sociology (including media occupation, profession, and organization), international communication (the geography, ideology, linguistics, and semiology of international news), cultural studies (social construction of meanings, ideological contestation, and Orientalism), and various strains of social theories (nationalism and globalization). This process involves developing layers of arguments through journeying back and forth between social theories, media theories, and the “real world”—all guided by a comparative light.

No sooner had we set out to interview journalists than we sensed pent-up anxiety about the gulf between what they had preconceived and what they were witnessing. Such revelation continually impressed on us to discard, modify, sharpen, and improvise many hypotheses, and we have in the end strayed quite far away from the original trajectory and terrain. We are therefore grateful to the seventy-six international journalists who shared their professional insights with us in a series of grueling interviews while in the thick of fighting their own “news war.” They are in this sense distant coauthors of this book. But as interpreters of their interpretations we are ultimately responsible for the viewpoints expressed. In the course of interviewing these journalists, they were eager to have our take too. This experience gave us a unique position to penetrate their minds and see what really “troubles” them.

We have spent countless hours together mulling over the outlines and details that led to mutual fusing of perspectives, the incremental development of ideas, themes, and arguments, as well as the making sense of embedded empirical meanings. We debated in the little noodle corner, in the mountaintop office overlooking the magnificent Tolo Harbor, in the crowded subway, on the noisy phone, over the delicious Peking duck and Cantonese cuisine (all too infrequently), and via the corridor of global cyberspace. Ideas have germinated and taken shape with our travel in today’s global air transport to Beijing, London, Jerusalem, Acapulco, Minneapolis, and Washington, D.C. While the project is a whole piece, writing involves inevitable division of labor. Lee drafted chapters 1, 5, and 9. Chan drafted chapters 3 and 6. So drafted chapters 2 and 8 as well as prepared the index and photos. Pan drafted chapters 4, 7, the epilogue, and Appendix IV;

he also prepared the methodological note and the quantitative data. Chan was the project coordinator. In the last stage, Lee was entrusted to critique and edit the entire manuscript; in various cases, this involved extensive rewriting. Three years of asking, arguing, laughing, and griping together have accomplished a profound level of borrowed learning, the impact of which will be quite obvious in each of our future work.

## *Acknowledgments*

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# Chapter 1

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## *Global Event, National Prisms*

What the fireworks of international news illuminate or leave in the dark is the historic panorama beyond them.

—Jaap van Ginneken (1998: 126)

Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

—George Orwell (1954: 177)

A thin massive event: a small pellet of fish food being attacked by 8,000 piranhas.

—Chris Wood, a Canadian journalist,  
on covering the handover of Hong Kong

It is often claimed that media discourse represents “a site of symbolic struggle,” but what are the processes, significance, and limits of that struggle? As a global “media event” (Dayan and Katz, 1992), the transfer of Hong Kong from British to Chinese sovereignty on July 1, 1997 provides such a site and moment for opposing *national* media communities to express, and thus reinforce, their enduring values and dominant ideologies. More than 8,000 journalists and 778 media organizations from around the world reportedly congregated in this bustling city to witness an event of presumed global significance.<sup>1</sup> The political periphery of Hong Kong stands in sharp contrast to its status as a core hub of global capitalism. Yet journalists are far more interested in China than in Hong Kong. They are interested in China not so much as an ideologically benign site of geography, as it is a rising economic power, a security risk, and an ideological foe in the post-Cold War era. They participate in the embedded ideological struggle among various modern *-isms*: East versus West, capitalism versus socialism, democracy versus authoritarianism. As *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman puts it vividly, Hong Kong’s return to China is “not just a

slice of the West being given back to the East,” but also “a slice of the future being given back to the past” (December 15, 1996). What marks for China national triumph over colonialism is, in the eyes of most western journalists, “a menacing, authoritarian Chinese government, its hands still stained by the blood of Tiananmen Square, riding roughshod over freewheeling, Westernized Hong Kong” (Chinoy, 1999: 394). The world media had worried about brutal Communist China turning Hong Kong into Tiananmen II. When that scary scenario did not come to pass, their interest in Hong Kong quickly faded away after the handover.<sup>2</sup> In view of Hong Kong’s relative stability, the world media cast all but a casual glance at the neighboring Macau (a big casino showcasing capitalist vices) when it returned from Portugal to China two years later.

In the shadow of cultural and technological globalization (Braman and Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996; Featherstone, 1995; Featherstone and Lash, 1995; Tomlinson, 1999; Waters, 1995), we wish to show in this volume that international newsmaking remains inherently ethnocentric, nationalistic, and even state-centered. Globalization may have brought the world “closer” in many ways. But global news continues to acquire paradoxically domestic, local, and above all *national* significance. The same event may be given distinct media representations by various nations, through the prisms of their dominant ideologies as defined by power structures, cultural repertoires, and politico-economic interests. Journalists try to illuminate complex and ambiguous political realities in remote foreign places through the process of “domestication” (Cohen et al., 1996). If international news is a state-centered enterprise, Hong Kong’s sovereignty transfer explicitly foregrounds this nation-state problematic.

News is about the unexpected, the extraordinary, and the abnormal, but it can only be understood in terms of the expected, the ordinary, and the normal. As an event must be understood in relation to a whole stream of previous causes, collating selected facts into certain relationships is based on embedded cultural and national perspectives. van Ginneken (1998: 126) puts it so well: “What the fireworks of international news illuminate or leave in the dark is the historic panorama beyond them.” In general, these media frames coincide with, echo, and support elite consensus within the established order. Moreover, the state, as a repository of “national interest,” is a major contestant in international news discourse. As the media foreground the sovereignty reversion of Hong Kong as historical ruptures, lurking in the background are the ideological continuities of their nations toward China. Major western media do not recognize their quasi-consensual ideology but naturalize it as common sense. They emphasize the facts, but disguise the underlying ideology.

Nevertheless, the ceding of the “capitalist jewel” to a Communist regime, against the grand narratives of “the end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992) and “the clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1993), is a rallying cry for national media resources to reinforce their core values and reaffirm the power structure. Interna-

tional journalism is in this sense an ideological war, a discursive contestation, or a symbolic struggle. From the perspective of comparative sociology of news-making, we wish to show how international journalists take part in a post-Cold War ideological discourse through making sense of a “media spectacle” (Edelman, 1988). The handover of Hong Kong is a media event that undergoes a transformation—thus robbed of conflict, suspense, and theatrical appeal. This does not prevent the world media, cum various national cultural arms, from plunging into discursive struggles to promote the legitimacy of their national regimes. The media utilize a set of rhetorical strategies from the entertainment-based media logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979) to articulate their ideological themes. The collusion of national interests and foreign policy goals on the one hand and the media interests in enthralling large audiences on the other brings the world media together to stage a global media spectacle in collaboration with their domestic authorities. It is illuminating to note that these international journalists come all the way to interview a small (probably no more than fifty) and highly overlapping set of people, mostly from the elite but with some token “ordinary folks” to put a “typical” face on the news. But different national narratives enable journalists to insert the present into a highly ideological perspective on the past and the future. In most foreign policy issues, media differences across the ideological divide *within* a nation tend to be dwarfed by media differences *between* nations. Such national perspectives interact with the sociological arrangement of the theater of the handover events as well as the rhetorical strategies of the media logic, making it appropriate to talk about the handover as a global media spectacle fitted with varying national themes.

### **International News and Discursive Struggles**

Discourse is at the heart of a nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983). It reproduces the society as a coherent unit of culture, allowing its members to envision a sense of belonging and identity vis-à-vis other units. A discursive community comprises a group of people who feel bound through shared interpretations and representations of their everyday experiences within a common cultural, political, and economic environment (Fish, 1980; Lincoln, 1989; Wuthnow, 1989). The discursive binding of such a community shines particularly at critical moments when certain events of historic proportions inspire a wealth of symbolic resources to solidify cultural values. These events force members of a society to form their self-conceptions through cultural practices and thus renew their shared identity.

The ceding of Hong Kong to a Communist regime in the post-Cold War era represents one of those “hot moments” to different national communities in varying degrees. In this study, as said above, we start with the premise that

on the global scale, different national communities will construct different media discourses about an issue of such momentous ideological import. It is true that globalization of modern media has made the symbolic bond of a community often more dependent on mediated representations than on territoriality (Appadurai, 1996), but international news about distant events happening in faraway places must be “brought home” via discursive means. Cultural representations of a “discursive community” are closely related to the activities and artifacts of their producers in concrete social and historical settings. Media discourse, in Wuthnow’s words (1989: 16), occurs within “the communities of competing producers, of interpreters and critics, of audiences and consumers, and of patrons and other significant actors who become subjects of discourse itself.” This sociological grounding calls for an examination of how different media discourses invoke their cultural symbols on behalf of their national interests, and how they articulate enduring values of the society often in support of the power authority.

Put otherwise, mass media stand at the forefront of institutional venues through which each national community acts out its shared experiences and the underlying cultural premises (Edelman, 1988; Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1994). Events of historic importance absorb the “attention resources” of the public arena (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), which “tames” a distant event through selective domestication in tandem with core social values. Global news must be filtered through the domestic system of commonsense knowledge (Berger and Luckman, 1967) or “local knowledge” (Geertz, 1993); media texts are constructed in the multilayered organizational, cultural, economic, and political frameworks. We aim to achieve some understanding about the discursive contestation of national media systems in the international terrain over tensions between cultural particulars and transcendent values. These tensions sharpen the continuities and ruptures between national interests in the world order.

The handover of Hong Kong forms a concentric circle of relevance and vested interests to various national discursive communities and is thus open to divergent media construction. International newsmaking follows the same logic of domestic newsmaking, but under different political conditions. It is widely accepted that the media produce and reproduce the hegemonic definitions of social order. There are four general claims to this overall thesis. First, “news net” of the media (Tuchman, 1978) corresponds to the hierarchical order of political power and the prevailing belief system that defines this order. Occurrences outside the centralized organizations or standard genres would not be recognized as news. Secondly, even in a democratic society, news production must inevitably epitomize the capitalist mode of production and serve the financial-ideological structure and interests of the dominant class, race, and gender (Mosco, 1996; Thompson, 1990). Thirdly, the ideology of journalistic professionalism, as enshrined by the creed of objectivity, is predicated on an

unarticulated commitment to the established order (Gitlin, 1980; Said, 1978; Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). News media “index” the spectrum of the elite viewpoints as an essential tool for domestic political operation (Bennett, 1990; Cook, 1998). In a similar vein, Donohue, Tichenor and Olien (1995) maintain that the media perform as a sentry not for the community as a whole, but for groups having sufficient power and influence to create and control their own security systems. Fourthly, when elite consensus collapses or is highly divided, or when there is strong mobilizing pressure from social movements, the media may have to reflect such opinion plurality (Chan and Lee, 1991; Hallin, 1986; Page, 1996). Such plurality does not, however, question the fundamental assumptions of power in society.

The international order being more anarchic, the *state*—rather than specific individuals, classes, or sectors within a country—acts as the repository of “national interest” (Garnett, 1994), as the principal maker of foreign policy, and as a contestant in international news discourse (Snyder and Ballentine, 1997: 65). Operating as “little accomplices” of the state (Zaller and Chiu, 1996), the media rely on political authorities to report foreign policy cum national interest. Moreover, the media, the domestic authorities, and the public tend to perceive the international news reality through shared lenses of ideologies, myths, and cultural repertoire. The media resolve around the head of state, foreign ministry, and embassies to make news because these institutions are assumed to have superior if not monopolistic access to knowledge about what national interest is abroad. Foreign news agendas are even more closely attuned to elite conceptions of the world than domestic news agendas. The U.S. media therefore tend to “rally around the flag” in close alliance with official Washington (Brody, 1991; Cook, 1998), especially when the country is in conflict with foreign powers. By this process of “domesticating” foreign news as a variation on a national theme (Cohen et al., 1996), the media serve to sharpen and legitimize national perspectives embedded in the existing order of power and privilege (chapter 3). Gans (1979) maintains that in the U.S. media, foreign news stories are mostly relevant to Americans or American interests, with the same themes and topics as domestic news; when the topics are distinctive, they are given interpretations that apply to American values. Media domestication is an integral part of the international political economy.

News media participate in a broader discursive process in constructing the domestic elite’s images of “the other” and legitimizing the state’s effort in safeguarding geopolitical interests abroad (Said, 1981, 1993). They produce a local narrative of the same global event through employment of unique discursive means of rhetoric, frames, metaphors, and logic. In “tangling” with distant contestants in the game of international newsmaking, they impute different causes and effects to reality to advance national interest and promote national legitimacy. During the Persian Gulf War, CNN became a stage for the U.S. and Iraqi

governments to verbally attack each other, paving the way for and extending the eventual armed conflict (Kellner, 1992). Unlike the institutional struggle in which central authority allocates tangible material resources (Jabri, 1996: 72), the discursive struggle wins or loses symbolically in terms of expression of preferred values and orders. The latter may be mobilized into an institutional struggle, while the former may derive its legitimacy from a discursive struggle (Edelman, 1971; Gamson, 1988; McAdams, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996). During the Cold War, superpowers contested over intangible public opinion, images, and rhetorical discourse in order, ironically, to prevent the hot wars of guns and missiles (Medhurst, 1990).

### The Making of a Media Event

The arrival of the world media turns Hong Kong into a theater of performance. Although the basic script for the event was long written in the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, the actual staging of its performance had been in serious dispute between the two principals (Lee, 1997, 2000a). The handover is thus a long anticipated and carefully scripted event that unfolds with real and potential drama of conflicts. The predictability of its prescheduled nature facilitates “calendar journalism” (Tuchman, 1978). Following the meticulously scripted events may neither require much enterprising journalistic effort (Sigal, 1973) nor satisfy the “entertainment logic” of television age (Altheide and Snow, 1979). Yet, given the logic that bad news is good news and given the rancorous diplomatic skirmishes and war of words between Britain and China until the final moment, the world media had committed considerable resources to covering an event of presumed worst-case scenarios under Communist takeover. But the handover turns out to be smooth and peaceful, not as bad as previously envisaged. Somewhat disappointed, the large presence of international journalists in a crowded island becomes a story—a media spectacle—more important than the event itself. A Canadian journalist compares this “thin massive event” to “a small pellet of fish food being attacked by 8,000 piranhas.” *Newsweek’s* bureau chief, when asked, agrees that thousands of competitive egos probably end up talking to the same set of 20 to 50 people in town, but the *Daily Telegraph* reporter defends this practice as an inherent logic of journalism not different from covering South Africa or Bosnia. The logic of making news is hijacked by the logic of staging a media spectacle.

According to Dayan and Katz (1992), a media event may fall into one of three categories: a contest, a conquest, or a coronation. In spite of consuming efforts made by the dismayed international journalists, the handover story did not seem to rise to various qualifications of a *spectacular* media event. As it began, the event seemed to contain all the exciting elements of a conquest or

those of a contest. As the event went through a process of transformation during its life cycle, elements of a contest and conquest receded, and the media began to focus on it more as a coronation.

First, a contest “pits evenly matched individuals or teams against each other and bids them to compete according to strict rules” (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 33). Media events of this type should generate much excitement over the process of competition and reduce the uncertainty about its outcome. The Sino-British rows over sovereignty negotiations and Governor Patten’s democratic reforms (Dimbleby, 1997) began to fade in significance as Hong Kong inched toward the handover.

Second, a conquest refers to great men and women with charisma who “submit themselves to an ordeal, whose success multiplies their charisma and creates a new following” (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 37). Indeed, all of China’s official and media proclamations hail Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader, as the ingenious author of the “one country, two systems” idea, through which the previously impossible task of reclaiming Hong Kong becomes a reality. Thus, Chinese patriotic heroes roundly beat British imperialist villains. China’s official television constantly shows a picture of Margaret Thatcher falling on her steps in front of the Great Hall of the People, almost as a favorite icon that “provides an occasion for journalists and their sources to refigure cultural scripts” (Bennett and Lawrence, 1995). The Prime Minister had just emerged from her first excruciating encounter with Deng, during which he lectured her that China would not take humiliation from foreign powers any more. That showdown forced both sides to embark on painful negotiations leading finally to the handover. This icon was coined in 1982, and by 1997 Thatcher had retired from public life and Deng was already dead, but the image lives on as a soothing symbol of conquest for China’s injured national psyche. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) media are also fond of flexing military icons to relish the story of national strength in front of the doubting world. To counter this, the world media depict that the small and efficient Hong Kong will play the role of a “Trojan Horse” to subvert the huge and clumsy Communist China from within. This story of conquest is, however, set in the future, and its confirmation requires a time horizon that goes far beyond the drowning ritual ceremonies.

A coronation, a third kind of media event, deals in “the mysteries of rites of passage” which “proceed according to strict rules, dictated by tradition rather than by negotiated agreement” (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 36). Media coverage of a coronation serves to pledge allegiance to the political center and to renew contract with it. Persons of authority are signified and dignified by costumes, symbols, titles, and rituals. Media presentation, which tends to be reverent and priestly, enacts the tradition and authority that are usually hidden from everyday life. A prime icon of Hong Kong’s handover coronation is a picture of the brief moment at the midnight of June 30, seemingly frozen in

history. The Union Jack is being lowered, and the Chinese flag being raised. All principal actors—including Prince Charles, President Jiang, Governor Patten, and Chief Executive Tung—are solemnly arrayed on the stage to commemorate a change in the authority structure and to usher in formal absorption of Hong Kong into the motherland. In spite of its historical significance this still moment produces no lively journalism.

The media event thus transformed, journalists must do something to save the integrity of their paradigmatic structure. They repair part of the assumptions, cull more supporting data, dismiss contrary evidence, or try to fit their stories into generic narrative structures of media events (Bennett, Gressett, and Haltom, 1985; Chan and Lee, 1991). Above all, they must “hype” up the event in hopes that their domestic audiences may find reasons to participate in the media rites and rituals. Through the display of repetitive, familiar, and exaggerated images often out of the context, hyping creates a mythical ritual that is confirming of the dominant ideological framework (Nimmo and Combs, 1990). The media are not passive reflectors of the media event, but active participants in its making. The media not only provide a stage for an event scripted by authoritative agencies outside of media; they also “coauthor” the event with event organizers and their own domestic authority structure. They rescript the event to fit their respective national narrative and annotate the performance of the principal actors with reverence. They add their own “star performers”—the celebrity anchors and famed correspondents—to share the stage with, if not take over the title role from, the actors of the official script. They hype the elements of the event in resonance with the domestic audiences.

### **Methodology**

This study interweaves (a) indepth interviews with international journalists, (b) a content analysis, and (c) a discourse analysis of elite newspapers and television networks from eight countries or regions. The main body of evidence comes from a discourse analysis of media representations. The result of content analysis provides information about the basic parameter and orientation of media coverage. Interviews with journalists are indispensable to understanding the sociology of news regarding their professional biographies, organizational resources and strategies, news competition and collaboration, and the cultural map on which they draw to cover the handover. These interviews generate important insights for formulating and confirming the “ideological packages” in our constructionist discourse analysis. Published documents, press reports, the proceedings of media fora and symposia, and our field notes fill the background gaps in terms of the motives, actions, and behind-the-scene maneuvers of various key individuals and regimes, thus

piercing through the surface of media content. Needless to say, all of them are to be interpreted in light of the insights we have built up over two decades as critical analysts of the media in Hong Kong and elsewhere (Chan and Lee, 1991; Lee, 1997, 2000; So and Chan, 1999). Without doubt, our comparative framework sharpens our interpretation of media accounts.

### *Countries and Media Outlets*

To investigate the national prisms through which the handover of Hong Kong is inflected, we select for examination eight “national” media systems that form a concentric circle of relevance and vested interest: the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and Japan. Within the immediate circle of relevance are the primary constituencies of “Cultural China” (Tu, 1991)—namely, the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—fraught with conflicting identities and historical memories. (Strictly speaking, Hong Kong is not a “nation” but a British colony returning to the PRC’s possession, while Taiwan has *de facto* but not *de jure* nationhood, constantly struggling against the PRC over issues of national sovereignty. To avoid repeated references to more accurate yet cumbersome “nations or regions,” we shall treat Hong Kong and Taiwan as if they were “nations.”) In broader circles of relevance, the PRC seems ideologically at war with the outside world at large, in what appears to be an extended East-West conflict. Not only has the outgoing Britain marshaled possible moral, political, and media resources to fend off assaults on its legitimacy from the PRC. The United States, particularly, has led a western ideological united front in support of Britain against China in this power game of words and images. Incorporated as junior partners in the western camp are Canada, Australia, and to some extent, Japan, which display different national interest within the common western ideology.

We set out to select a sample of 32 newspapers, four news magazines, 14 television channels, and seven news agencies from the eight countries (Table 1.1). The criteria for selection include:

- Influence in terms of circulation and the perceived status.
- The range of ideological variation with a national media system.
- Level of operation: International, national, regional, and local.
- Modes of financial operation: Official organ or private enterprise.
- Type of medium: Newspapers, magazines, television, and news agencies.
- Type of audience: General interest or specialized interest.

**Table 1.1**  
**The Sample of Media Outlets<sup>1</sup>**

Countries	Print Media	TV	News Agencies
PRC (n = 8)	<i>People's Daily*</i> <i>Economic Daily</i> <i>People's Liberation Army Daily</i> <i>Guangming Daily</i> <i>Guangzhou Daily*</i>	CCTV* Guangzhou TV	Xinhua
USA (n = 11)	<i>New York Times*</i> <i>Washington Post*</i> <i>Wall Street Journal*</i> <i>Chicago Tribune*</i> <i>Los Angeles Times*</i> <i>Des Moines Register*</i> <i>San Jose Mercury News</i> <i>Newsweek</i> (magazine)	CBS* CNN*	AP
Britain (n = 8)	<i>The Times*</i> <i>Guardian*</i> <i>Daily Telegraph*</i> <i>Independent*</i> <i>Financial Times</i>	BBC* ITV*	Reuters
Hong Kong (n = 10)	<i>Ming Pao Daily News*</i> <i>South China Morning Post*</i> <i>Apple Daily*</i> <i>Oriental Daily News</i> <i>Yazhou Zhoukan</i> (magazine) <i>Far Eastern Economic Review</i> (magazine)	TVB* CTV CTN	(GIS) <sup>2</sup>

(continued)

We compile media content of the sampled organizations from two weeks before the handover and one week after it, thus covering the period between June 16 and July 5, 1997. We ask many professional colleagues in various locales to collect the sampled newspaper issues and to tape sampled television programs (including regular evening news, special programs, and live coverage on June 30). It should be noted that we decide not to include the endless stream of wire stories in further analysis, although we do incorporate insights from interview with wire reporters. We are also confident that the “discursive packages” of news agencies do not differ markedly from those of print media and television.

**Table 1.1** (*continued*)  
**The Sample of Media Outlets<sup>1</sup>**

Countries	Print Media	TV	News Agencies
Taiwan (n = 7)	<i>China Times</i> * <i>United Daily News</i> <i>Central Daily News</i> <i>Liberty Times</i> <i>Mingzhong Daily</i>	TTV*	Central
Japan (n = 7)	<i>Asahi Shimbun</i> <i>Yomiuri Shimbun</i> <i>Sankei Shimbun</i> <i>Nihon Keizai Shimbun</i>	NHK Asahi	Kyodo
Australia (n = 2)	<i>The Australian</i> *	ATV*	
Canada (n = 5)	<i>Globe and Mail</i> * <i>MacLean's</i> (magazine)	CBC*	Canadian Press Southam News

Notes:

1. All print media and television outlets listed in this table are qualitatively examined in the discourse analysis. Only those with \* are also content-coded. We do not examine the news agencies in either study. For further information, see Appendix I–IV.
2. The Government Information Services serves the international journalists by providing press releases, briefings, field trips, and other assistance.

### *Interviews*

Based on this media sample, we interview a total of 76 journalists (Table 1.2), including 37 from the print media, 29 from the broadcasting media, and 10 from news agencies. The country distribution is, except for Australia, fairly balanced. (See Appendix II for a complete list of interviewees.) Most interviews are based on a detailed, semistructured protocol (Appendix III), each lasting 30 to 180 minutes, fully taped and transcribed. A small number of interviews take the form of more casual conversation to validate our inferences from more formal interviews. Many of the interviewees are Hong Kong-based, others on special assignment for the occasion.

We aim to discern patterns of professional journalists at work within various organizational and cultural milieus. We probe journalists on (a) their professional biography; (b) their working conditions in relation to the sources, editors, competitors, and audience; and particularly (c) their discursive activities—namely, invocation of themes, frames, images, and metaphors to narrate the story. This thick description of their professional world later comes to life, enriching our interpretations of the stories they produce. We ask them to name a story they think would

**Table 1.2**  
**National Origins of Journalists Interviewed**

	Print Media	Broadcasting	News Agencies	Total
PRC	2	4	1	7
USA	7	2	1	10
Britain	5	4	0	9
Hong Kong	7	4	0	11
Taiwan	6	9	2	17
Japan	4	3	4	11
Australia	1	1	0	2
Canada	5	2	2	9
Total	37	29	10	76

capture the essence of Hong Kong. This would lead to a better understanding about how they draw on certain political ideology and cultural repertoire in the process of “translating” foreign reality for their home audiences. We also ask them about their game plan for covering a series of competing events situated in the web of time and geography on the day of the handover. It is important to know how they construct the news net, divide the labor, and cope with intense competitive pressure under the punishing deadline.

At first glance, the interviews seem to suggest the emergence of a “global” culture of professional journalism. Rooted in western origins of market economy and liberal polity, this professional culture seems to have been widely accepted as general if not universal norms of journalistic conduct and judgment (Schudson, 1978; Weaver, 1998). All journalists profess their commitment to the pursuit of fact and “truth,” in their capacities as avowed observers, transmitters, and interpreters of reality, and they take offense at being viewed as partisan activists with an ideological ax to grind. Even Communist journalists from the PRC seem no longer to hold their Leninist teachings with deep conviction (He, 2000; Pan, 2000; Zhao, 1998). This general impression is superficial and shallow at best, for what constitutes the fact or truth is culturally relative and ideologically indeterminate. Despite being professional cynics, journalists usually do not defy the assumptions of the power structure in their work (Gans, 1979; Manoff and Schudson, 1986; Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). Media discourses in the international terrain, in particular, tend to possess strong national personalities that sharpen the us-against-them boundaries in reductive and limiting categories (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Lee and Yang, 1995; Said, 1981). Notwithstanding claims to the contrary, this reliance on national ideology is also true of such global-scale media outlets as the BBC or CNN that speak in perfect English to the elite in the rest of the world.