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Cultural co-orientation revisited: The case of the *South China Morning Post*

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Abstract
The freedom of press is one aspect that leaders from the West often criticise about China. As former British colony, Hong Kong has been able to preserve its special status with constitutional rights and liberties that also include the freedom of press. However, in recent years, sentiments of increased influence from Beijing have led to fears that it would curb the freedoms enjoyed by residents of the Special Administrative Region. However, instead of clear unambiguous interferences, Beijing has opted for an indirect approach that is predominantly characterised by the salience of economic considerations in reporting news binding the media outlets closer to the position of Beijing. This article shows that the *South China Morning Post* has undergone an editorial shift that moves it closer to the position of the Chinese government.

Keywords
Agenda setting, communication research methods, content analysis, mass (media) communication, organisational communication, ownership (concentration/competition), policy, policy and law, political communication, public relations

The freedom of press is one aspect that leaders from the West often criticise about China. As former British colony, Hong Kong has been able to preserve its special status with constitutional rights and liberties that also include the freedom of press. However, in recent years, sentiments of increased influence from Beijing have led to fears that it would curb the freedoms enjoyed by residents of the Special Administrative Region (SAR). However, instead of clear unambiguous interferences, Beijing has opted for an indirect approach that is predominantly characterised by the salience of

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economic considerations in reporting news binding the media outlets closer to the position of Beijing. This article will set out to assess whether the most influential English language newspaper in Hong Kong has also undergone an editorial shift. First, it will provide a brief background to the issue of mainland influence in Hong Kong media before proceeding to a content analysis illustrating such a shift.

Beijing's indirect influences on the post-1997 Hong Kong media

Fears that Hong Kong's freedoms of press and speech would be curtailed have a long history and, in fact, were sparked ever since the handover to China had been decreed. Instead of remaining one of the freest societies in Asia, observers were worried that China would apply the same rules and standards known from the mainland to the media in Hong Kong. The state of the media environment has since then also become an issue of heated debates among scholars. Ching (1998) was among the first assessing the situation after the handover and future prospects for Hong Kong media. He depicts a reasonably positive picture concerning the media's independence in Hong Kong. Ching describes that in the first 3 months after the handover, nothing significant has changed. In terms of formal restrictions, the only legal changes that had an effect on journalists' work were the suppression of open advocacy for independence, for both Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, this change did not affect the practical reality of the mass media as these were positions that did not find their way into the public sphere. Ching mainly attributes the absence of significant changes to the fact that China has no intention to replicate its system in Hong Kong. Instead, he claims, Hong Kong will be able to govern itself in most areas. According to Ching, a much greater concern for journalism than direct interference from Beijing is the widely practised self-censorship. Journalists and corporations abstain from reporting some news because they fear that this might lead to disadvantages to them or their employer initiated by Beijing. Nevertheless, Ching finds that this situation has been a pressing one already and has not been affected drastically by the handover. Overall, he holds that 'the prospects for a free press in Hong Kong seem reasonably bright' (Ching, 1998, p. 225), mainly due to his reckoning that the situation will not change considerably in the future.

One year later, Ching had not broken with his optimism. He finds that the legal and institutional situation had not changed significantly in regard to the freedom of press in Hong Kong. Pointing to the great self-interest that China has in maintaining the status quo in Hong Kong, he maintains, 'I believe that Hong Kong newspapers are likely to continue functioning pretty much as they have in the past' (Ching, 1999, p. 10).

Scholars writing more recently confirm this situation. Direct interferences into the working of Hong Media have largely been absent. Instead, the mainland has opted for an approach of more 'indirect and subtle methods to domesticate the Hong Kong media' (Lee, 2007, p. 436). Most importantly, media outlets in Hong Kong are now overwhelmingly owned by corporations that have relations to either the mainland or economic interests there. This development cannot be solely attributed to the return of Hong Kong to China. In fact, scholars point out that this development has begun prior to the handover already (Fung & Lee, 1994). However, this trend only intensified in the post-1997 circumstances. In his study relating to the change of ownership in the media environment in Hong Kong, Fung (2007) holds that 'the Chinese authorities rely largely on alliances and *guanxi*: there are businessmen who have close ties the Chinese authorities or have huge investments in China, the success of which depends very much on the policy and ad hoc regulations' (p. 161). He further finds that the similar ownership situation of most of the print media leads to a convergence of political positions that is increasingly pro-Beijing. Although the owners of the

media are unlikely to be directly involved in the everyday news reporting, they can nevertheless influence the corporate behaviour, for instance, through personnel decisions or resource allocation (Lee, 2007b).

On the surface then, the media environment has changed little in terms of its freedom to report any news. However, with the change of ownership and the increased competition and commercialisation of newspapers, internal shifts have definitely taken place. Ngok (2007) holds that 'the media were still free to report on government misdeeds, and criticisms of government scandals and policies were sometimes vehement. However, insider's views revealed significant self-censorship and editorial shift after 1997' (p. 960). In fact, self-censorship had been circled out as the most pressing concern for the freedom of the press in Hong Kong since 1997. Following Lee's (1998) definition, self-censorship describes

> a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, change of emphasis, to choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organisations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishment from the power structure.

According to Fung (2007), the most contentious topics concern Taiwan independence, separatism in China and *Falun Gong*. Lee and Chan (2007) have authored an influential study among journalists tracing the procedures of self-censorship in media outlets. They find that the phenomenon cannot be linked back to individual journalists' decisions but are institutionalised in indirect ways.

This article wants to focus on the second aforementioned trend among media outlets in Hong Kong, namely that of the editorial shift within the newspapers in moves towards more pro-Beijing positions. Previous content analyses (e.g. Leung, 1999) have already discovered that different newspapers are portraying the Beijing government in a more positive light than the Hong Kong government.

Lee (2007) further concludes in one of his articles that the combination of

> changes in media personnel, practices of self-censorship, the turn to objective journalism by some news organisations, rise and fall of critical media outlets, changes in journalists' attitudes, and changes in public opinion at large combine to generate a press that has become less critical towards China over the years. (p. 145)

All these factors have led to a cultural co-orientation according to Lee. In other words, it describes a process by which the media becomes more aware of the Chinese position and adopts a position closer to that due to increased contact with each other following the return of Hong Kong. Lee (2007) also defines this process as 'the acquisition of better information and achievement of increased understanding between two individuals or groups through interactions, which may lead to convergence in attitudes towards external objects and mutual agreement on issues' (p. 14). The inherent result is that the positions portrayed in the media will increasingly resemble that of the official Chinese position. Domestication of the media in Hong Kong has therefore been very successful in the eyes of China. The mainland has successfully managed to influence media in Hong Kong and pull it closer to its position without exercising any direct influence that would have curbed the freedom of press in the SAR.

According to Lee, the conflict potential has switched though. It is not national issues anymore that could lead to disputes between Hong Kong and China. Instead, issues that concern Hong Kong directly bear the greatest challenge for news reporting. National topics such as Taiwan or Tibet

independence do not provide a cleavage anymore since the Hong Kong media has, partly due to non-fixed standards of what constitutes 'reporting news' and 'advocating' these, avoided these altogether. This is probably even more true now than it was at the time of Lee's article. The growing sense of a distinct local identity has caught the media in a conflict between Chinese interests and the local opinion.

It is worth reflecting on these issues again as the concerns regarding Beijing's indirect influence on the media in Hong Kong have become even more pronounced in recent years. As reports suggest, Beijing has become less restrained in its efforts to manipulate local media. Self-censorship has worsened in recent years as a result of the ever growing dependence on the mainland (Anonymous, 2014) – in recent years, the issue of media ownership, physical attacks on journalists and the publication of confessions made by Chinese activists (Koponen, 2017).

This article wants to contribute to the literature concerning the position of Hong Kong's media. In the following, it will analyse the editorial stance of the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) in recent years. The SCMP has perhaps been one of the most controversial cases in Hong Kong. That the paper is nowadays lacking its traditionally widely acclaimed critical stance towards China is not a new phenomenon. The abovementioned development towards co-orientation already became visible with the ousting of the China-critical chief editor Willy Lam in 2000 already (Lee & Chan, 2009). Several other controversies concerning alleged self-censorship have contributed to damaging the reputation of the paper. However, one of the most severe accusations of a growing Chinese influence on the newspaper was linked to the acquisition by Alibaba in 2016. Several authors (e.g. Allen-Ebrahimian & Wertime, 2015; Bandurski, 2015) have voiced their fear that this is likely to further contribute to the co-orientation of Hong Kong and mainland media outlets.

Why independence/greater autonomy?

Following Lee's concept of cultural co-orientation, this article hypothesises that the SCMP has also moved closer to the official position of the Chinese government. In accordance with other scholars' claim that national issues will not be a likely source of conflict between the central government and media in Hong Kong anymore, this analysis will focus on issues in Hong Kong. This article is focused on the issue of Hong Kong independence, autonomy or self-determination, depending on which term proponents prefer. This issue falls in line with Lee and Lin's (2006) study that focuses on the issue of democratisation in the SAR. It was pointed out that this is an important issue to analyse regarding the situation of the freedom of the press in Hong Kong. They held that

> it involved conflicts between national and local interests, which present a dilemma to the Hong Kong media. They risk losing their audience's trust if they betray the local interests of democratisation. Yet protecting local interests would mean pitting oneself against the Chinese government. (Lee and Lin, 2006, p. 337)

In the following, this article will illustrate why the issue of independence or greater autonomy for Hong Kong also corresponds to these criteria.

The Chinese government's stance on Hong Kong independence

In order to follow a possible shift of the SCMP's editorial stance closer towards the positions of the Chinese government, this study will put a focus on the question of increased autonomy for Hong

Kong. This issue appears to be useful for an analysis because the public debate around it highlights divergences of the Chinese government's stance and that of the public opinion in Hong Kong. The following section will set out to illustrate these discrepancies that make the issue valuable to this article's discussion.

The Chinese government has made its position on a possible independence of Hong Kong very perspicuous. Most explicitly so by Premier Li Keqiang who addressed the issue in his opening speech at the National People's Congress in 2017 claiming that calls for independence within Hong Kong 'would lead nowhere' (found in Griffiths, 2017). Similar statements have been made earlier by other high-rank officials, for instance, by the head of China's Hong Kong Macau Affairs Office, Wang Guangyan, who held that 'Hong Kong is an inseparable part of the country, and under no circumstance is "Hong Kong independence" allowed. This is a bottom line that cannot be touched in "one country, two systems"' (found in Blanchard, 2016). While these are more recent expressions of the Beijing government, the general aversion towards any kind of independence movement or demands for more autonomy from Hong Kong has previously been illustrated in the handling of the so-called Umbrella movement. The central leadership showed that it was not willing to make any concessions to the protesters about the election format. Furthermore, Beijing showed a firm stance by intervening into the affairs of the Hong Kong Legislative council that banned two pro-democracy lawmakers on demands from the Communist Party of China (CCP) leadership (see, for instance, Chen, 2017). The development in recent years therefore shows that Beijing does not accept any demands for increased autonomy for Hong Kong and appears to be willing to exert influence in local affairs to an ever-greater extent, as, for instance, Albert (2017) points out by asserting that 'Beijing seems to be tightening its posture toward Hong Kong's governance'.

Public opinion in Hong Kong

Although Hong Kong public opinion is by no means unequivocally swayed towards advocating independence for the Special Administrative Zone, one can still find conflict potential when comparing public opinion survey results to Beijing's firm standpoint. In the Tenth Round of the 'Hong Kong Public Opinion & Political Development' Opinion Survey (2017) authored by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the public's attitudes are well illustrated. Only 11.3% of the respondents show support for the idea of an independent Hong Kong after 2047. This is a clear minority also considering that to 60.2% this idea does not appeal, with the rest of the respondents having no clear stance on this question. Also, if asked whether Hong Kongers are open to the idea of direct governance by Beijing, only 14.7% are supportive of that idea. The most attractive option for survey participants appears to be the continuation of the 'one country, two systems' approach beyond 2047 which is supported by 71.2% of the respondents.

In wave 9 of the report (2016), the respondents showed a greater deal of support for the idea of an independent Hong Kong. About 6.2% of respondents in 2016 'strongly agree' that Hong Kong should be an independent entity after 2047, while another 11.2% 'somewhat agree' to this suggestion. The survey did not ask respondents about their attitude towards independence for Hong Kong after 2047 prior to 2016. Therefore, this study is unfortunately unable to illustrate a long-term development of public opinion towards this issue and can only illustrate that support for independence has declined from 2016 to 2017. However, the mere fact that this question was not part of the survey until 2016 could be taken as evidence that the issue just recently entered the public debate.

If understood in this way, it shows that it has become a greater concern for the public in Hong Kong and that its support has received a boost in popularity preceding 2016 and was thus able to enter the public debate.

However, these questions only consider the possible options for Hong Kong's further development after 2047 when the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1997 that necessitates the 'One country, two systems' approach expires. Another aspect that illustrates divergence between the central government's stance and the public opinion in Hong Kong is the issue of more autonomy under the 'one country, two systems'. Unfortunately, it has not been asked in the 2017 survey, so this article utilises the results from 2016. Discernibly there is a high demand for autonomy among Hong Kong residents. On a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 meaning Hong Kong 'should have full autonomy', the mean value lies at 7.45. This is a relatively high score, especially taking under consideration how Hong Kong residents see the current status of their autonomy. On the same scale, on average the respondents see the current level of autonomy at 5.05. Consequently, one can infer that the residents of Hong Kong do not see the level of autonomy they desire for Hong Kong as being realised, or in other words, one might infer that there is a demand for greater autonomy. Interestingly, there is also a clear generational effect on this aspect. The respondents between the age of 15 and 24 are agreeing to a great extent that Hong Kong should have a fair deal of autonomy, represented by the scores 6–10 on the scale which 93.5% of the respondents from that age group have chosen. In contrast to that, only 65.4% of the respondents above the age of 60 opine that Hong Kong should have a great deal of autonomy. The average scores from both age groups are 7.91 and 7.04, respectively. A similar picture becomes apparent when looking at the question of how the respondents think about the current situation of Hong Kong autonomy. Younger respondents consider the current level of autonomy as lower than respondents from older age groups. On average, young respondents believe that the score of 4.64 describes the current level of Hong Kong's autonomy, whereas older respondents set this score at 5.71. However, throughout all different age groups, the factor they give to the current level of autonomy is lower than the level of autonomy they would like to see for Hong Kong. Consequently, a higher demand for autonomy is characteristic of all age groups in Hong Kong and appears to be the mainstream position within Hong Kong's society.

There is unfortunately not much data available that could illustrate the development of the demands for autonomy. Only two surveys in 2015 and one in 2016 asked this question. Both coefficients have gone through similar developments. In 2015, the mean of the perceived level of autonomy declined from 5.07 in March to 4.89 in June. Similarly, the level of autonomy that Hong Kong should have according to the respondents also dropped from 7.11 in March to 6.79 in June. In 2016, however, both figures increase to coefficients of 5.05 and 7.45, respectively. While the divergence between the perceived level of autonomy and the level of autonomy Hong Kong should have remained relatively stable compared to the 2015 surveys, it experiences a relatively sharp rise in 2016 and reaches a difference of 2.4 points between the means. This illustrates that the public's opinion about the actual autonomy of Hong Kong increasingly deviates with the demand of autonomy they have. Therefore, one can infer that Hong Kong residents are increasingly unsatisfied with the issue of autonomy. This ties back to the divergence of Hong Kong public opinion and the stance of the Beijing government.

Another worthwhile aspect is the respondents' satisfaction with the central government's implementation of 'one country, two systems' in Hong Kong. Respondents in Hong Kong are not very convinced about the current situation but at the same time also not entirely critical about it. On a scale between 0 and 10, the mean value lies at a factor of 5.17 and therefore corresponds to the

response of 'So-so'. This is insofar interesting for this study as it conveys the information that there is a sentiment of dissatisfaction with the way the current configuration between Hong Kong and mainland China is being governed. Although the year 2017 marks an improvement of the public opinion of the central government's implementation of the 'one country, two systems' approach, this does not disqualify the point of this section as the level of satisfaction remains on a similar level. One can assess that the satisfaction with the government's implementation of 'one country, two systems' has seen a decline from 2014 when the surveys started up until 2016. From a mean value of 4.99 in December 2014 it decreased to an average of 4.77 in July 2016. Only in 2017 the central government receives a boost in appreciation for its approach on the 'one country, two systems' principle as it reaches a mean of 5.17.

Another aspect that needs to be considered for this study is that of the local Hong Kong identity. Following Lau (1997), the colonial history of Hong Kong, a sense of superiority over the mainland and judgements against the Communist regime form the basis of a local Hong Kong identity. While earlier studies (e.g. Fung, 2007) suggest that the proportions of Hong Kong residents who identify as 'Hong Kong people', 'Chinese' or both remained relatively stable in the aftermath of the handover and in the early 2000s, recent development points towards a more local identity being formed. According to Fernando Cheung, a Hong Kong lawmaker, 'many young Hong Kongers have begun to see themselves as a different ethnicity from mainland China' (found in Schmitz, 2016). Interestingly, there has been a generational shift in terms of identification as a Hong Kong University poll in 2016 'shows that, for the first time, a majority of city residents call themselves "Hong Kongers" instead of "Hong Kongers in China"' (Schmitz, 2016). This points to a development that accelerated in recent years, and especially young people are more likely to term themselves 'Hong Konger'.

Therefore, one can see that while the Chinese government's position on issues of autonomy and independence is clear, Hong Kong residents appear to become more disaffected from Beijing and develop a local identity. This is expressed by the demand for more autonomy, both illustrated by the statistics, as well as for developments in the political reality of Hong Kong, that is, the Umbrella Movement as well as the election of pro-independence candidates. Similarly, the growing level of people identifying themselves as 'Hong Kongers' as well as the constantly low level of satisfaction of the implementation of the 'one country, two systems' approach points to a conflict between central government's stance and the public opinion in Hong Kong.

Methodology

This study will employ content analysis to show whether the editorial stance of the SCMP has shifted recently. Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as 'a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communications' (p. 74). The study has analysed 63 different articles in total, all published by the SCMP (for a complete list, see References). The central assumption of the article is that the acquisition of the SCMP by Alibaba is also a significant element contributing to the cultural co-orientation. Undoubtedly, the change of ownership will lead to enhanced opportunities for exchange and communication between the Hong Kong journalists and the mainland owners. The position of the newspaper is therefore expected to move closer to that of the Beijing government. In order to track a development of the editorial stances, the creation of different phases was of essential importance. Phase 1 deals with articles from January 2015 until 11 December 2015 as this is the date when it was announced that Alibaba

would become owner of the SCMP. The second period includes articles from that date until 5 April 2016 as the acquisition had been finalised on that day. The final phase deals with articles from 5 April 2016 up until today, with the most recent one being from 11 June 2017. All of the articles have been found through a search for the keywords 'independence', 'autonomy', 'self-determination' and 'localism'. While the study seems to have included a great share of the articles dealing with these aspects in the first phase, the study had to be more selective for phases 2 and 3. In 2015, the independence issue did not seem to play a great role in the public agenda, and therefore, it was rather difficult to find a good sample of articles. In phases 2 and 3, however, this study employed a random sampling approach as there was a much higher number of articles available dealing with the abovementioned issues. The sample of articles includes 22 articles from phase 1, 20 articles from phase 2 and 21 articles from phase 3. The content analysis aimed at identifying the amount of mentions of the terms 'independence', 'autonomy', 'self-determination' and 'localism'. Furthermore, it also identified all actors involved in the sampled articles as well as their quotes referred to in the articles.

Findings

First, this study has looked at the frequency of the use of the term 'independence' related to Hong Kong. The findings here show a clear trend (see Figure 1) towards a steady increase in the usage of the term. The concept has only been mentioned 73 times in total, 3.32 times per article and 1.11 times per page in phase 1. The amount of mentions increases in phase 2 to 83 times in total, 3.32 times per article and 1.48 times per page. In phase 3, however, one can find a climax as the word 'independence' has been used 117 times in total, 5.57 times per article and 1.92 times per page.

Therefore, one can assess a clear tendency in the longitudinal data illuminating an increase in the usage of the concept of 'independence'. One might infer that as the SCMP gives more space towards the debate of the concept, the hypothesis of this study might be falsified. However, this does not accurately reflect the situation assessed here. One needs to note that the concept of independence has only been used by 'extremists' within the political spectrum of Hong Kong prior to 2014. The idea was thus almost non-existent in the public debate. If articles from the SCMP predating the pieces analysed here would be taken under scrutiny, one would likely find an even smaller amount of references to 'independence'. During this analysis, however, this study found that it was significantly easier to find articles dealing with the issue of independence in phases 2 and 3. In other words, an increased use of the concept of 'independence' does not necessarily indicate the editorial stance towards it, merely that the concept has become more prominent in the public arena (Table 1).

As can be taken from Table 1, the use of the concept of 'autonomy' has generally been very limited. However, it appears to be the expression favoured by mainland officials emphasising the current degree of 'autonomy' that Hong Kong has and that makes it stand out from other parts of China.

The case of the usage of the concept of 'self-determination' looks more revealing (Table 2). One can infer a pronounced trend from this development as the references to self-determination have frequented throughout the different phases. From only 5 indications in total in phase 1, the amount increased to 8 in total in phase 2 and, finally, to 21 in total and 1 per article in phase 3. Again, the increased usage of the concept does not necessarily tell much about the editorial stance of the SCMP and does not contradict the hypothesis posed in this article. Rather, it shows that the concept has found its way into the public debate and has received an enhancement in popularity. Similar to the concept of 'independence', 'self-determination' used to be only advocated by a tiny fraction of

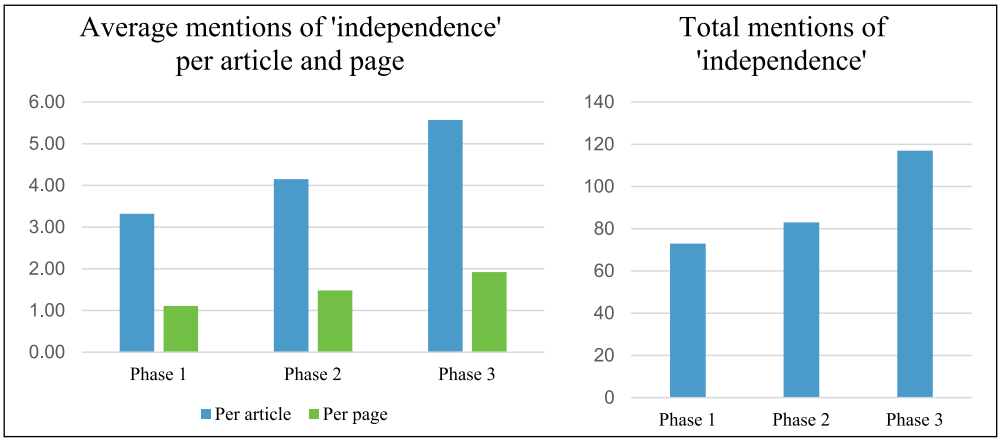


Figure 1. Uses of 'independence'.

Table 1. Uses of 'autonomy'.

Use of 'autonomy'	Total	Per article
Phase 1	9	0.41
Phase 2	4	0.2
Phase 3	4	0.19

Table 2. Use of 'self-determination'.

Use of 'self-determination'	Total	Per article
Phase 1	5	0.23
Phase 2	8	0.4
Phase 3	21	1

'radicals' in Hong Kong that had almost no public influence. The data here therefore illustrate the development of public debate in Hong Kong, with concepts of 'independence' and 'self-determination' becoming more prevalent. Beijing's preferred concept of 'autonomy' can be said to have seen a decline in usage in contrast, although it should not be overstated due to the small amount of mentions in total. The first analysed article provides a very interesting example of the new concept entering the public debate. In the article *Ex-university student leaders argue over Hong Kong independence*, it is stated that

> two generations of student leaders at the University of Hong Kong crossed swords on Sunday over the issue of Hong Kong independence, after Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying accused the current students' union of advocating self-determination for the city. (SCMP, 18 January 2015)

The two concepts are thereby used interchangeably, probably due to the absence of a public debate about the concepts prior to this article. The article also illustrates the political landscape in

Table 3. Use of 'localism'.

Use of 'localism'	Total	Per article
Phase 1	32	1.45
Phase 2	55	2.75
Phase 3	42	2

Hong Kong at the time of writing, January 2015, as it elevates students to the main proponents of independence for Hong Kong. It is stated that 'Hong Kong independence has become the latest hot topic in town since Leung, in his policy address on Wednesday, accused HKU students' union magazine Undergrad of championing self-determination …' (SCMP, 18 January 2015). This shows that the newspaper included the students' union as the main advocate of independence for Hong Kong because the idea was lacking another political platform that was only established later.

In a similar manner, also the use of the concept of 'localism' experienced an increase in mentions (Table 3). Mentioned 32 times in total in phase 1, the use augments to 55 allusions in phase 2 and 2.75 per article. This figure declines in phase 3 though to 42 mentions in total and 2 per article. An outstanding example of this is the article named *The bright side of localism: Hong Kong's finance minister sees a constructive sense of pride* from December 2015. It was one the first examples of offering the opportunity to explain the concept of localism. Interestingly, in the mentioned article, John Tsang's positive account of localism is complemented by two supporters of his view and contrasted with views from two opponents of localist movements. Only 1 day later, in the article *Mainland academic rings the alarm on the rise of 'neo-localism' in Hong Kong* (SCMP, 28 December 2015), critical voices towards 'neo-localism' voiced by mainland scholars are not contrasted by any supporters at all. From phase 2 to phase 3, however, the focus seems to shift away from 'localism' towards 'self-determination' and 'independence' in particular as these concepts receive another boost in popularity in SCMP articles. This development can be explained due to the unclear political nature of many of the localist groups in their initial stages. While in phase 2 their voices become louder in the public debate, they were nevertheless in their initial stages of political involvement and most of them lacked a pronounced political agenda. However, especially in the lead-up to the Legco elections, the editors seem to have shifted from calling activists 'localists' to terming them 'pro-independence activists' or similarly. A possible explanation for these findings could be that the localist pro-independence camp in Hong Kong appears to have become more radical and more pronounced in seeking independence. This inference goes in line with political developments in Hong Kong, as, for instance, the Mong Kok protests, the founding of openly pro-independence political parties such as the Hong Kong National Party or the oath controversy illustrates. However, this shift towards more extremist approaches and advocacies has nevertheless found support in the public, for instance, in the Legco elections. The first section of this study's analysis therefore illuminates the development of Hong Kong public debates rather than the editorial preferences of the SCMP. This issue will be the focus of the next sections.

In the next step, this analysis looks at the various actors that the SCMP decided to include in its articles and that are mentioned in them.

Table 4 illustrates the actors that were mentioned in SCMP articles and unfortunately does not provide a clear trend. The mainland officials' share remains on a relatively constant level that deviates between 14.04% of all actors mentioned in articles in phase 1 and 20% in phase 2 before decreasing again to a level of 15.05% in the final phase. Hong Kong officials are the actors that are

Table 4. Actors involved in SCMP articles.

Actor	Phase 1 (%)	Phase 2 (%)	Phase 3 (%)
Mainland officials	14.04	20	15.05
Hong Kong officials	24.56	30	22.58
Independence activists	15.79	25	22.58
Pro-Beijing party members	7.89	3.75	4.3
Pan-Democrats	13.16	5	9.68
Hong Kong scholars	4.39	2.5	4.3
Mainland scholars	0.88	3.75	0
Students/Student unions	5.26	2.5	2.15
Other actors	13.16[a]	7.5[b]	19.35[c]

[a]Include, for instance, Civil Human Rights Front, Occupy Central members whose stance on independence is not clearly expressed, the *People's Daily* and Joshua Wong Chi-fung.
[b]Include, for instance, Joshua Wong Chi-fung and a US scholar.
[c]Include, for instance and especially, Joshua Wong Chi-fung and Demosistō, which is advocating self-determination but not necessarily Hong Kong independence.

most present in all three phases. Their share varies between 22.58% and 30%. While reaching the maximum in phase 2, they also experience a sharp decline in phase 3 putting them on an equal share of actors with representatives from the pro-independence camp. The independence activists have gained the second highest increase of all actors from phase 1 to phase 2 when their share sparked from 15.79% to 25%. Again, this highlights the increased importance of pro-independence campaigners in the public debate in Hong Kong. However, their share also declined in phase 3 when they only made up 22.58% of all actors in the analysed SCMP articles. Pro-Beijing party members in Hong Kong who do not hold official positions in the government have become marginalised to some extent in SCMP articles, with their share declining from 7.89% in phase 1 to 4.3% in phase 3. The share of scholars from Hong Kong remains relatively stable, around 4% of all actors. The group of actors involved receiving the largest gain of mentions is that of 'other actors'. While dropping from 13.16% in phase 1 to 7.5% in phase 2, references to them escalate to 19.35%. The main members of this group are Joshua Wong Chi-fung and the Demosistō party that is advocating self-determination for Hong Kong's future.

This development suggests that in phase 1 the public discourse was not overly concerned with discussing potential independence for Hong Kong, and therefore, the share of actors advocating independence was quite low with only 15.79%. In phase 2, however, terms such as 'independence', 'self-determination' and 'localism' have successfully entered the public debate and thus also allowed independence activists to gain more presence in SCMP articles. The development also shows a concentration of allusions to mainland officials, Hong Kong officials and independence activists in phase 2. Together they make up 75% of all actors mentioned in that phase, and consequently, reporting shows a clear focus on these groups. Pan-Democrats as well as pro-Beijing party members showed themselves unprepared and unable to manage this development efficiently and therefore lost their voices in the public debate about Hong Kong's autonomy status and future. Only when adopting localism to a certain extent, the Pan-Democrats advance back onto the public stage in phase 3.

The increase in the shares of mentions of Joshua Wong and Demosistō in phase 3 also reflects what has been pointed out above regarding public opinion in Hong Kong. From 2016 to 2017,

Table 5. Actors' representation in articles and proportion of actors' quotes in articles compared.

Actor	Phase 1		Phase 2 (%)		Phase 3 (%)	
	Proportion of articles mentioned (%)	Proportion of quotes in all articles (%)				
Mainland officials	14.04	10.91	20	20.89	15.05	22.53
Hong Kong officials	24.56	22.27	30	26.67	22.58	28.85
Independence activists	15.79	11.82	25	21.33	22.58	16.6
Pro-Beijing party members	7.89	14.55	3.75	3.11	4.3	4.74
Pan-Democrats	13.16	8.18	5	2.67	9.68	10.28
Hong Kong scholars	4.39	10.45	2.5	1.33	4.3	3.56
Mainland scholar	0.88	5.22	3.75	8.89	0	0
Students	5.26	0.45	2.5	1.78	2.15	0.79
Other actors	13.16	15.91	7.5	13.33	19.35	12.65

support for the idea of Hong Kong becoming an independent political entity after 2047 declined. This can be related to the decline of actors mentioned in SCMP articles. While fewer independence activists were mentioned in the final phase, especially the frequency of allusions to more 'moderate' forces such as Joshua Wong and Demosistō, also that of the Pan-Democrats, for instance, increased. This might reflect that while independence might not be seen as a feasible option for many sectors of society in Hong Kong, demands for more self-determination and more autonomy are nevertheless existent and remain strong. In other words, the choice of including certain actors in the SCMP articles appears to be more related to the public opinion rather than to a certain affiliation of the newspaper. However, this situation will be subject to further discussion in the next section.

Finally, this study wants to go beyond scrutinising which actors have been mentioned in SCMP report and also investigate the space the newspaper grants each of these actors. Therefore, this study looks at the quotes of all actors one can find in the articles. This will illustrate how the SCMP values each actor.

In Table 5, one can see the share of quotes of different actors that this study found in the analysed articles from the SCMP. Interestingly, these are quite different from the mentions of different actors illustrated in Table 4. For instance, one can take from these statistics that the share of quotes from mainland officials has been on the rise from phase 1. From 10.91% in phase 1 it saw a sharp increase to 20.89% in phase 2 and, finally, to 22.53% in phase 3. Similarly, also the share of quotes from Hong Kong officials experiences gradual gains, from 22.27% in phase 1 to 26.67% in phase to 28.85% in the final phase. Hong Kong officials are therefore the group of actors that gets the most quotes published in all three different phases. However, the picture looks different for independence activists. Although their share of quotes grew from 11.82% in phase 1 by almost 10 percentage points to 21.33% in phase 2, it also decreased again after that to 16.6%. No overall trend can be seen for the Pan-Democrats, pro-Beijing party members, scholars from both the mainland and Hong Kong, and students. Intriguingly, however, the share of quotes from other actors included in SCMP articles has experienced a constant decline from phase 1 onwards. Starting from 15.91% in the initial phase, it decreased to 13.33% in phase 2 and suffered a further drop to 12.65% in the final stage of analysis.

These findings become especially interesting when one compares them to discoveries from Table 4.

It becomes apparent that some groups have a higher share of quotes than their share of actors would suggest. In other words, some actors are given more space in SCMP articles to express their opinions than others, meaning that one can assess a potential bias against some actors and towards others.

While mainland officials have experienced a bias against them in phase 1, this changed from phase 2. In the second phase, the difference between their share of actors mentioned and their share of quotes is only marginal, 0.89 percentage points. However, in the final phase, there is a large difference of more than 7 percentage points that illustrates a clear bias towards mainland officials. The SCMP has quoted mainland officials to a much greater extent in the final phase than it has most of the other actors which illustrates a strong bias towards them. They only represent 15.05% of the actors mentioned in phase 3, but 22.53% of all quotes in that phase were issued by mainland officials.

While Hong Kong officials have also been subject to discriminatory treatment in the first two phases, they experience a preferential treatment in the final phase. In phase 3, there is a difference of more than 6 percentage points between their share of actors and their share of quotes. The mainland officials who make up 22.58% of all actors in the final phase account for 28.85% of all quotes, and therefore, it also shows a clear bias towards Hong Kong officials. The instance of independence activists is a contrasting case. Throughout all three phases they have experienced a bias against them, culminating in a difference between share of actors and share of quotes of about 6 percentage points in the final phase. One article that illustrates this situation very well is named *Accept Hong Kong is part of China or you can't run in Legco elections* (SCMP, 14 July 2016). This article offers considerable space for the Hong Kong government officials to explain newly introduced rules to stand for elections in Hong Kong, while both Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor and the independence advocate Edward Leung Tin-kei are only offered one sentence each to comment on the new legislation.

Similar to other findings, it is difficult to make pronounced conclusions about the development of the biases for and against the Pan-Democrats, the pro-Beijing party members, and scholars from Hong Kong and the mainland. Students, however, have been prone to discrimination in all three phases. Interestingly, other actors have experienced preferential treatment in the first two phases but saw the tides turning and a bias against them in the final phase.

Discussions and implications

As pointed out above, the public opinion of Hong Kong residents can to a great extent be followed through the analysed articles. Concepts such as 'independence', 'self-determination' and 'localism' that have largely been unexplored prior to 2014 are increasingly used throughout the different phases of this study. This suggests that these concepts have entered the public debate and have therefore also been picked up by the SCMP that increased its reporting on these issues as a consequence. Supporting to this impression is also the fact that supporters of independence for Hong Kong have increased their presence in articles. Thus, it is not only the concepts that are being discussed but also the independence advocates that are given a bigger platform provided by the SCMP. This does not necessarily go against the hypothesis of this article because the importance of the issue of independence for Hong Kong skyrocketed in recent years. Thus, anything but an increase in the usage of concepts like 'independence' and a louder voice for independence supporters would

have been a failure of the SCMP to report news realistically. In other words, any idea that becomes popular within any society needs to be reported notwithstanding the editorial stance towards it. In phase 3, it is interesting that other actors such as Joshua Wong and Demosistō are mentioned more often but do not necessarily gain a greater voice in SCMP articles. This can be linked back to Hong Kong's public opinion. As support for independence declined between July 2016 and June 2017, the SCMP cut back on its references to pro-independence forces in Hong Kong and instead gave more 'moderate' activists that would advocate Hong Kong's self-determination but not necessarily independence more opportunities to express their voices.

However, this article set out to explore whether the SCMP's attitude has moved closer to the position of the central government over time. As pointed out, phase 1 does not give much useful insight towards this question as the issues of independence, autonomy and self-determination only commenced to appear in the public debate during that time. Yet, some developments especially in phase 3 point towards the validity of the hypothesis.

First, the preferential treatment to mainland officials and Hong Kong officials in terms of their opportunities to express their opinions has become apparent. Mainland officials have been able to gain a bigger share of the quotes than their share of actors would allocate them in both phases 2 and 3. Despite their share of actors declining quite considerably in phase 3, they were able to gain an even bigger proportion of quotes. This development hints towards a good relationship between editorial staff and mainland officials. Similarly, also Hong Kong officials gain a boost in their proportion in phase 3 despite having less actors in the articles, relatively speaking. Both instances indicate that the SCMP puts a focus on presenting Beijing's positions as well as Hong Kong officials' stances on the issues related to independence, autonomy and localism.

Moreover, the same also applies in the opposite direction. Interestingly, throughout all three phases independence advocates have experienced a bias against them. Despite being mentioned fairly often especially in phase 3 where independence advocates gain the biggest share of actors together with Hong Kong officials, they are lacking opportunities to voice their opinions. Yet, the relative frequency of being mentioned or not mentioned is not the decisive point; rather, the development of the priorities set by the editors is. One priority of the editors appears to be not to publish too many quotes from independence activists, while both mainland and Hong Kong officials were able to increase their share of quotes constantly notwithstanding their development of share of actors mentioned. Furthermore, also the share of other actors has consistently decreased. This means that the losses for independence activists in their share of quotes did not transform into gains, for instance, for Joshua Wong and Demosistō who form the largest part of the category 'other actors' and also advocate more self-determination. Therefore, a bias in the final phase is found in favour of pro-Beijing forces, namely, mainland officials, Hong Kong officials and pro-Beijing party members as well as the Pan-Democrats who have been anything but unified in their stance towards localism and also reject independence. These findings suggest that a shift in editorial priorities has taken place from the first phase to the third phase.

While it seems that the tendency of a bias has become stronger throughout the different phases, one needs to be careful with taking this as a foregone conclusion. As independence has only entered the public debate fairly recently, it is difficult to assess the editorial's stance towards it. Observers (e.g. Custer, 2015) have pointed out that, although once praised as one of the few media outlets that covered topics that were untouched in mainland China, the editorial stance has already shifted closer towards Zhongnanhai in the last decades. While the findings seem to suggest that the editors are willing to reflect more official positions than in the past and, thus, that their editorial stance has

shifted towards a more positive look on Beijing's policies and positions, the case of independence as a newly emerging public debate in Hong Kong makes it difficult to validate this claim in a long-term perspective. Although this analysis ultimately cannot attest a causal link between the acquisition by Alibaba and the move towards the official position of Beijing, this assumption is not far-fetched as Lee's concept of cultural co-orientation has suggested.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore a potential shift of the SCMP's editorial stance towards the position of Beijing with the assumption that the acquisition by Alibaba has contributed to this. A controversial debate in recent years in Hong Kong that has illustrated conflicts between the position of the mainland government and Hong Kong's public opinion is that of more autonomy and potential independence for the SAR. The study has therefore explored several articles from three different periods of time: before the acquisition was announced, after the acquisition was announced but before it was finalised and after the acquisition had been finalised. First, it found that the use of the term 'independence' has increased sharply in this time. Similarly, although not with the same intensity, also 'self-determination' and 'localism' were used more often in SCMP articles. This situation reflects the general development of public debate in Hong Kong, as these terms were largely absent from the public stage but became increasingly popular in recent years. In the following, the article investigated the actors that are mentioned in the articles used for analysis. In phase 2, one can see a larger proportion of pro-independence activists; however, this is more likely to be due to the general novelty of the idea and the rapid increase in popularity of the concept rather than the SCMP's support for the idea. Phase 3, however, shows a decrease in independence advocates mentioned in the articles. Most importantly, this study was looking at the relationship between the actors mentioned and their quotes expressed in the articles. It is found that there has been a consistent bias against independence activists throughout all phases, while especially mainland officials and Hong Kong officials were granted more quotes to publish. This is especially important in the final phase as it shows a development towards a more pro-Beijing/pro-establishment position. It also seems that this tendency gained strength throughout the subsequent periods. Therefore, this research points towards a likely link between the acquisition of the SCMP by Alibaba and the shift of the paper's editorial stance closer to the position of the central government. However, future research should attempt to find a clear causal relationship between the two.

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