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Hong Kong 20 Years after the Handover: The Dynamics of Public, Political, and Media Issue Agendas
香港回歸二十年：公眾、政府與媒體議題議程動態研究

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Abstract

Agenda setting is a commonly shared intellectual framework in political science and communication studies. On the one hand, the agenda-setting framework informs political communication scholars of media influence on public opinion (public agenda-setting) as well as on political actors (political agenda-setting). On the other hand, the framework presents an approach for political scientists to explore the interrelationship between public opinion and government policy (agenda representation). Although grounded in distinct research areas, agenda-setting studies generally focus on issue salience of different agendas and explore how different agendas influence one another.

Drawing upon the agenda-setting framework, this study examines the triangular relationships between public opinion, media attention, and government attention in Hong Kong from 1997 to 2017, the first twenty years after the handover. Two key questions are raised in this study: 1) to what extent does government attention respond to public opinion and 2) what role does the press play in between?

Empirical data came from a number of twenty-year (July 1997 to June 2017) longitudinal datasets: 1) public agenda: “the most important problem” data from the periodical opinion surveys of HKUPOP (Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong); 2) media agenda: a content analysis of media coverage of four local Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong including Ta Kung Pao, Ming Pao, Apple Daily, and am730; 3) political agenda: a content analysis of government press releases; and 4) real-world indicators: a number of real-world indicators. Three important issue domains were examined: political issues, economic issues, and livelihood issues. Data were analyzed by using tools from time series analysis.
Major findings of this study include: the Hong Kong government only responds to public opinion in certain conditions; specifically, its responsiveness to public opinion is prominent in economic and livelihood issue domains and is constrained by the political power from the central government. Similarly, subject to the political and economic influence from the central government, the Hong Kong government responds to media coverage in non-political issue domains, yet leads media coverage in political issue domain. The press plays a responsive role to public opinion, but newspapers exert a very limited influence over public opinion. Although dynamics vary across issue domains and newspapers, the press overall plays a bottom-up role in the overall agenda-setting process, presenting the voices of the public to the government. Narrowly speaking, these findings demonstrate media effects of Hong Kong newspapers and levels of government responsiveness. Broadly speaking, they speak to the nature of relationships between major actors in post-handover Hong Kong politics.

This study makes some contributions to existing scholarship on agenda-setting. First, this study incorporates works on agenda representation from political science and works on public and political agenda-setting from communication studies to build a comprehensive model of the agenda-setting process and empirically tests this model in Hong Kong. Most extant studies of the overall agenda-setting process were conducted in Western societies with democratic political systems. This study thus sheds light on the uniqueness dynamics between public, media, and political agendas in a semi-democratic society.

Second, this study contributes to Hong Kong studies in two aspects. Previous media effect studies on Hong Kong have extensively focused on analyses at the micro-level. By using longitudinal and aggregate datasets, the current study enriches extant literature on media effects by providing insights on the interaction between media, the public and government at the societal
level. In addition, existing macro-level Hong Kong studies rely heavily on qualitative research approach. By employing time series analysis techniques to analyze longitudinal data, this study provides new quantitative empirical evidence which may validate and supplement findings of the qualitative studies.