

[投稿: 研究論文]

# Why Must the Central Government Control the Media?

## Cultural Hegemony, Social Movements, and the Case of Hong Kong

中央政府によるメディア統制の必然性  
文化的ヘゲモニー、社会運動、そして香港の事例

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**Abstract:** Since the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law, media control has suppressed dissent and shaped state discourse. This paper examines how such control influences policy windows and public identity, applying agenda-setting, framing, and Kingdon's policy window theory, with cases including *Apple Daily*, to explore media's dual role in policy implementation and social governance.

2020年の香港国家安全法施行以降、メディア統制は異論の抑制と国家言説の形成に顕著な影響を及ぼしている。本研究は、アジェンダ設定理論、フレーミング理論、およびキングドンの政策ウィンドウ理論を適用し、Apple Daily等の事例を分析することにより、メディアが公共認識の形成および政策課題の顕在化を通じて、政策決定のタイミングや実行可能性にどのように影響するかを考察する。これにより、香港における情報統制と社会的同意形成の構造的関係を明示的に理解する枠組みを提供する。

**Keywords:** cultural hegemony, policy window, media control, public opinion  
文化的ヘゲモニー、政策ウィンドウ、メディア統制、世論

## 1. Media Regulation, Policy Windows, and Identity Formation in Hong Kong

### 1.1 Hong Kong as a Postcolonial Special Administrative Region

Hong Kong, as a unique territory, was under British colonial rule for 156 years from 1841 to 1997. Today, as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, it exhibits a multicultural character, making its social and cultural development complex and dynamic. Before and after the 1997 handover, the central government closely monitored Hong Kong's political, economic, and cultural development, implementing policies aimed at decolonization and the dissemination of central ideological narratives. As a result, Hong Kong's administrative status is particularly intricate: the legacies of colonial democratization

and governance, combined with post-handover modernization and decolonization efforts, and the fact that sovereignty was returned to China rather than to the Hong Kong people, have heightened sociopolitical instability. From a postcolonial perspective, even after achieving formal political independence, former colonies continue to be influenced by colonial institutions, cultural frameworks, and cognitive patterns (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988). For instance, Hong Kong retains the British common law system, capitalist economic model, and bureaucratic governance, while maintaining a high degree of autonomy under the "one country, two systems" framework. Linguistically, English continues to play a significant role, differentiating Hong Kong from mainland Chinese norms.

Although returned to China in 1997, Hong Kong has not

been fully integrated into the mainland; it retains a form of partial independence that is now subject to new political and economic controls. Neocolonial theory posits that powerful states influence or control developing regions not through direct military occupation, but via economic imperialism, globalization, cultural dominance, and conditional aid (Nkrumah, 1965). Such influence often creates dependence and reduces political autonomy. Similarly, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power illustrates that while the Chinese government's methods differ from British colonial governance, Beijing still shapes Hong Kong through economic leverage, electoral reform, and media oversight (Nye, 2004). Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge further elucidates this dynamic. He argues that "power and knowledge are inextricably linked; power produces knowledge, and knowledge reinforces power" (Foucault, 1977). During colonial rule, the British exercised control over Hong Kong via legal-administrative systems that restricted political participation. Post-colonially, Beijing has employed instruments such as the Basic Law, National People's Congress interpretations, and the National Security Law (NSL) to shape political discourse. Simultaneously, media regulation, national education, and electoral restructuring have been used to disseminate ideology and reshape political and cultural identity.

This chapter examines how the central government has attempted to decolonize Hong Kong culturally and cognitively, weaken British cultural influence, and cultivate alignment with mainland Chinese identity, focusing particularly on media regulation and its role in policy and identity construction.

## 1.2 Media Regulation and Its Role

Since the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020, the central government has significantly tightened its regulation of Hong Kong's media. According to the Basic Law, the NSL provides a clear legal basis for such control by criminalizing acts including "subversion of state power," "collusion with foreign forces," and "secession" (HKSAR Government, 2020). Consequently, journalistic practice, freedom of expression, and publishing activities are strictly constrained. This legal institutionalization transforms media oversight into a political task within the framework of national security, establishing the foundation for a highly centralized communication system. Media in society functions simultaneously as information disseminator, opinion shaper, and ideological tool. The central government's regulation of Hong Kong media reflects its recognition of media's pivotal role in

politics, social stability, and cultural identity. As Karl Marx famously described newspapers as the "eyes, ears, and mouth" of the people, he emphasized their capacity to intervene in political movements and maintain active engagement between citizens and current affairs (Marx and Engels, 1974).

Media possess dual capacities which are communication and opinion control. During policy implementation, media transmit information and provide social support by guiding public discourse. In politically sensitive contexts, governments regulate media to serve as instruments of governance, creating a social environment dominated by a singular discourse. Under strict regulation, media narratives align with central intentions, minimizing dissent. For example, the closure of Apple Daily and the framing of NSL-related coverage channelled public attention toward official narratives, thereby enhancing policy acceptability. Through such control, media function to legitimize policy and facilitate social compliance, while pluralistic viewpoints diminish, and news agendas increasingly converge with governmental positions. Agenda-setting theory further explains this process. Lippmann (1922) argued that media shape the mental images people carry about the world, while Cohen (1963) noted that media may not tell people what to think but are effective at telling them what to think about. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) developed this into the agenda-setting theory, identifying two levels: transfer of issues from media to the public agenda, and cognitive representation of these issues in the public mind. This framework helps explain why the central government regulates Hong Kong's media: to align public priorities and perceptions with state ideology. However, the critical question is whether strict control and a highly centralized communication system can achieve social stability and harmony, and whether cultural convergence can be engineered through dominant media narratives. This article analyses these questions through Hong Kong-based case studies.

## 1.3 Media Control and Identity Formation

In postcolonial contexts, cultural convergence and identity formation remain enduring issues. Media functions not only as a channel of information but also as a tool to shape public cognition and reinforce identity. By regulating media, governments cultivate a singular discourse environment to maintain authority. In Hong Kong, controlled media select information, frame narratives, and promote value orientations to encourage cultural convergence. A key objective of Beijing's media regulation is to shift Hong Kong citizens' identity from

localism toward national belonging. Stuart Hall (1990) conceptualizes cultural identity as constructed and influenced by power, history, and media discourse, distinguishing between essentialist identity and constructed identity. In Hong Kong, essentialist identity emphasizes that Hong Kong residents should be integrated into a singular and indivisible “Chinese national identity,” underscoring the inseparability of national unity and identification. On the other hand, constructivist identity posits that Hong Kong identity is the product of historical, social, and cultural interactions, shaped by colonial legacies, hybrid local culture, and Western liberal values (Chan, 2020; Ma, 2018). Following the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL), the public discursive environment has undergone a marked transformation.

Media narratives equate ‘national security’ with ‘national interest and legitimate authority,’ marginalizing localist and pro-democracy values, reinforcing public recognition of central authority. This shift reflects a process of identity reproduction under the NSL, whereby public discourse strengthens a singular national narrative and diminishes the historically plural and hybrid identity space of Hong Kong society, highlighting the central role of power relations in identity politics. Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony (1971) posits that ruling classes maintain dominance not only through political and economic means but via ideological and cultural consent. Beijing’s control over Hong Kong media exemplifies post-cultural hegemony, shaping ideology, discourse, and public perception to foster cultural and political alignment. However, Hong Kong’s postcolonial, multicultural landscape limits the effectiveness of media-led identity reshaping, and persistent identity divisions may undermine cultural convergence.

#### 1.4 Media Regulation and Policy Window Activation

Media serves as information disseminator, opinion shaper, and ideological instrument, playing a central role in the activation of policy windows and the implementation of the NSL. Kingdon’s Policy Window Theory posits that policy change occurs when the problem stream, policy stream, and political stream converge, creating an opportunity for decision-makers to enact specific policies (Kingdon, 1995). In Hong Kong, media construct problems by amplifying issues and framing events. During the 2019 anti-extradition protests, pro-Beijing outlets emphasized “violence” and “threats to national security,” reinforcing public perceptions of instability. Policy streams were

shaped by framing the NSL as a legitimate solution, emphasizing feasibility and necessity. Political streams were fostered through repeated dissemination of official narratives and regulation of social media, producing a “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) in which dissenting voices diminished. Through agenda-setting, opinion guidance, and narrative framing, media facilitated the convergence of all three streams, opening the policy window and enabling the enactment of the NSL. Yet a paradox emerges: while media control enables short-term narrative dominance and policy enactment, Hong Kong’s multicultural and postcolonial identity landscape sustains persistent societal divergences, which may, in turn, undermine long-term cultural convergence and social stability. This chapter thus examines how media regulation advances policy implementation while simultaneously shaping identity and public perception.

#### 1.5 Methodology

As discussed above, this study employs Kingdon’s Multiple Streams Approach and Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony to analyse the relationships among media, social mobilization, public opinion, and policy windows. While these theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the dual role of media in social movements and policy formulation and implementation in Hong Kong, theoretical analysis alone cannot fully explain how media shape public cognition and guide societal discourse during social events. Therefore, this study further adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, integrating theory with empirical research to examine the agenda-setting and framing strategies of the media in detail.

Firstly, the study selects key social events as research subjects, namely the July 1, 2003 protest, the 2012 Moral and National Education controversy, the 2014 Umbrella Movement, and the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law protests. Secondly, it collects media coverage of these events, including news reports, opinion pieces, and editorials from politically representative Hong Kong media outlets. These include pro-democracy media with significant influence before 2021, such as *Apple Daily* and the independent online platform *Stand News*, as well as pro-Beijing outlets *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*. Publicly available social media content from platforms such as Facebook and LIHKG is also incorporated to capture multi-dimensional expressions of public opinion. These media were chosen for their long-term influence, clear political orientations, and sustained coverage of major political events. For data collection, keyword searches

were conducted, including “Article 23 legislation” (2003), “Moral and National Education / National Education controversy” (2012), “Occupy Central / Umbrella Movement” (2014), and “Anti-Extradition Movement” (2019). For each event, relevant reports were collected from the week prior to the outbreak, during the peak of the event, and in the post-event period. Once the data were collected, the content was analysed according to McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) agenda-setting theory and Entman’s (1993) framing approach. The analysis focused on how media presented issues, regulated emotional tones, and used symbolic representations, highlighting differences and strategies across outlets. The results are presented narratively rather than in tabular form, enhancing clarity, methodological transparency, and the interpretability of the findings.

## 1.6 Discussion and Critical Perspective

In sum, the Hong Kong case demonstrates the dual role of media, as instruments of policy facilitation and ideological alignment, and as arenas where identity conflicts persist. While media control enabled the NSL’s implementation by constructing problems, shaping policy options, and cultivating political consent, the long-term goal of cultural convergence remains contested. Public exposure to diverse histories, colonial legacies, and hybrid identities mitigates the homogenising effect of state-controlled media. Therefore, the study highlights a paradox inherent in postcolonial governance: media regulation can activate policy windows and consolidate short-term political authority, yet the deeper processes of identity formation and cultural convergence resist unilateral control. Analysing Hong Kong as a postcolonial society with complex historical legacies and plural social identities provides insight into the limits and functions of media regulation in facilitating policy and shaping public consciousness.

## 2. The Transformation of Hong Kong Media: From Colonial Liberalism to State Regulation

### 2.1 Colonial Legacies and the Liberal Facade

To trace the historical trajectory of media freedom in Hong Kong, one must return to 1842, when the territory was ceded to Britain under the Treaty of Nanking. The colonial administration inherited both the opportunity to develop a colony and the challenge of governing a culturally Chinese yet geopolitically strategic outpost. The British government adopted what has often been described as a “liberal facade,” promoting commercial freedom and a relatively open press environment,

while simultaneously imposing restrictions whenever the stability of colonial authority appeared at risk. Under this liberal governance philosophy, a “divide and rule” strategy was executed, allowing a certain degree of media freedom as long as core political affairs remained untouched (Chan, 1993).

After World War II, Britain resumed control over Hong Kong, which had become a key geopolitical hub during the Cold War, serving as a conduit for information between the East and West. The British allowed Hong Kong to evolve into an information-open society with relatively free media, facilitating the circulation and dissemination of international news and public opinion. Between 1900 and 1960, amidst political turmoil in China including the Xinhai Revolution and the May Fourth Movement, Hong Kong’s media served as a channel for revolutionary ideas. Numerous newspapers and magazines were published, circulated, and disseminated, including publications discussing the governance of Mainland China. Two broad camps emerged, on the one hand, left-wing newspapers such as *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po* became vehicles for pro-Communist narratives, actively promoting socialist ideologies and providing legitimacy to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). On the other hand, right-leaning or liberal newspapers, notably *Ming Pao*, founded by Louis Cha (Jin Yong), emphasized editorial independence, professional journalism, and a broad spectrum of coverage on political developments in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Britain. The competition between these outlets operated in an environment of relative freedom (Nye, 2004). The divergence in reporting among these camps illustrates the principle of agenda-setting: the media does not tell people what to think but rather what to think about (Lippmann, 1922; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). By emphasizing or downplaying specific social issues, colonial media guided public consciousness, even in the absence of direct political participation. Nevertheless, the colonial government still imposed regulatory measures when core political discourse was involved. For instance, the Libel Ordinance of 1845 stipulated that publications deemed “seditious” or “defamatory” toward the colonial authorities could be punished with fines or imprisonment (Basic Law, 2020).

This duality which is the appearance of press freedom constrained by the imperatives of colonial governance, persisted into the late colonial period. During the Sino-British negotiations over Hong Kong’s handover, the British government tightened control over the media to prevent excessive criticism or discussion of the negotiations, avoiding negative social opinion

and unrest (Cheung, 2021). Thus, colonial Hong Kong's media environment represented a semi-liberal space: media could shape public discourse and guide opinion, yet remained structurally constrained by colonial authority. This ambivalence laid the groundwork for post-1997 tensions, as public expectations of pluralistic media conflicted with the logic of political control inherent in authoritarian governance.

## 2.2 Post-Handover Transformations: From Autonomy to Regulation

When Hong Kong was returned to the People's Republic of China in 1997, the Special Administrative Region (SAR) framework came with the "One Country, Two Systems" promise, designed to preserve Hong Kong's capitalist economy and way of life for at least fifty years that ostensibly allowed for the continuation of a free and pluralistic press. However, over the subsequent twenty-five years, media freedom exhibited a gradual but distinct trajectory: from autonomy to control, and ultimately toward near-complete oversight. This transition was neither instantaneous nor merely an extension of colonial-era regulation; rather, it emerged through identity tensions, public opinion divergences, agenda-setting by media outlets, and escalating social conflicts, wherein media played a pivotal role not only in information dissemination but also in shaping political controversy, amplifying dissent, and facilitating collective action.

From the central government's perspective, media's ability to mobilize society presented a political risk, particularly during large-scale protests. Consequently, media gradually became subject to indirect political influence and, later, direct intervention. For example, in 1999, *Ming Pao*, long known for its independent stance, was acquired by Ho Chiu-kiwok, a businessman with close ties to Beijing. Post-acquisition, the newspaper's coverage of Mainland human rights issues, official corruption, and Hong Kong democracy movements diminished, while editorial oversight intensified and content increasingly aligned with pro-Beijing perspectives (Nye, 2004).

### 2.2.1 Article 23 and Legislative Tolerance

A critical juncture occurred in 2003 with the proposed Article 23 of the Basic Law, which sought to criminalize acts of secession, sedition, and subversion and prohibited foreign political organizations from operating in Hong Kong (Basic Law, 2020). Although the law did not explicitly restrict media, any critical reporting of the central government or discussion of political

reform could be construed as subversive. Reports on independence movements in Xinjiang, Tibet, or Taiwan could also be interpreted as promoting national division. Both domestic and foreign media faced heightened scrutiny. Independent media such as *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao* treated Article 23 as front-page news, framing it as a direct threat to civil liberties. Provocative headlines such as "Crisis of Free Speech" and "Democratic Backslide" emphasized potential censorship and limitations on assembly. In contrast, pro-Beijing media, including *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*, framed the legislation as a legitimate exercise of sovereign power and highlighted government assurances of law and order, emphasizing terms such as "national security" and "rule of law" while downplaying dissent (Cheung, 2021). This polarization of media coverage culminated in a 500,000-strong protest on 1 July 2003, ultimately leading to the shelving of the legislation, illustrating the media's capacity for agenda-setting and mobilizing public opinion (Lippmann, 1922; McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

### 2.2.2 National Education and the Battle for Cultural Identity

A second pivotal juncture in the post-handover media trajectory occurred in 2012 with the introduction of the Moral and National Education (MNE) curriculum by the Hong Kong government. This initiative sparked widespread public debate and contention over its perceived political and cultural implications. Independent media outlets, including *Apple Daily*, *Stand News*, and *Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK)*, characterized the policy as "brainwashing education," arguing that it sought to cultivate loyalty to the central government at the expense of local identity and critical thinking. These media prominently featured student voices, providing extensive coverage of sit-ins, hunger strikes, and parental petitions, thereby amplifying dissenting perspectives and mobilizing public engagement. In contrast, pro-establishment media framed the curriculum as a patriotic initiative. Publications such as *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao* praised the educational policy's objectives and depicted opponents as radical or foreign-influenced actors. The ensuing public backlash ultimately compelled the government to withdraw the policy (*Apple Daily*, 2012a; *RTHK*, 2012b; Cheung, 2012a; *BBC News*, 2012a). However, administrative and financial pressures were imposed on independent media: *RTHK* experienced budget cuts and increased oversight, while *Apple Daily* suffered revenue loss as pro-Beijing businesses withdrew advertising support (Nye, 2004). This episode

illustrates both the formidable influence of media in shaping public discourse and the central government's growing perception of media as a potential political risk.

### 2.2.3 The Umbrella Movement and Polarised Narratives

In 2014, the decision by the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) to impose restrictions on the election of Hong Kong's Chief Executive triggered the pro-democracy "Umbrella Movement," a large-scale social protest symbolized by the ubiquitous yellow umbrella. The media became a central battleground for narrative framing and public opinion shaping. Pro-Beijing media, such as *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*, aligned with the official stance, emphasizing the legality of the NPCSC decision and portraying the movement as a "foreign-instigated riot," thereby undermining public support for demonstrators. Independent and pro-democracy media, including *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, extensively covered the protests, highlighting police violence, excessive force, and supporting the demonstrators' demands. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were crucial tools for real-time reporting and protest organization, further amplifying independent narratives. The occupation of key districts, Admiralty, Mong Kok, and Causeway Bay, lasted 79 days, ending on 15 December 2014. The authorities' perception of media as a political risk became increasingly evident, prompting a transition from indirect influence to direct intervention. Subsequently, in 2015, five Hong Kong booksellers associated with politically sensitive publications were detained in Mainland China, signalling heightened scrutiny over dissenting media and cultural production (Cheng, 2020).

### 2.2.4 The Anti-Extradition Protests and the Point of No Return

The 2019 anti-extradition movement represented the culmination of post-handover media dynamics, further intensifying the central government's control over Hong Kong's media. During frontline protests, journalists from independent media faced violent assaults. Independent media extensively reported instances of police brutality, whereas pro-Beijing media downplayed such incidents and labelled protestors as "rioters," emphasizing foreign interference in domestic affairs (Cheung, 2021). This period marked a turning point, culminating in the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020. The law provided a legal framework for extensive

oversight, restricting press freedom, curbing information dissemination, and imposing operational constraints on media outlets (Basic Law, 2020). Independent media faced unprecedented suppression, with *Apple Daily* ceasing publication after asset freezes in 2021, *RTHK* undergoing managerial restructuring and editorial curtailment, and *Stand News* shutting down following police arrests of journalists. By 2022, the central government had effectively consolidated control over Hong Kong's media landscape, leading to the closure or withdrawal of independent and pro-democracy media, and prompting the departure of international media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* (Chan, 2021). The post-handover evolution of Hong Kong's media demonstrates the central government's incremental approach: media's unique capacity to mobilize, expose, and influence public opinion made it both a resource and a potential threat, justifying comprehensive regulation under the NSL. Agenda-setting and framing theories illuminate this process, showing how selective coverage, editorial emphasis, and narrative framing systematically shaped public discourse and facilitated political control (McCombs, 2004).

### 2.3 Post-Handover Media Dynamics: Agenda-Setting and the Path to Regulation

During the colonial period, Hong Kong's media operated within a relatively liberal environment, mirroring the broader openness of colonial society. This condition persisted until the end of British rule, and local residents harboured expectations that such openness would continue after the 1997 handover. In practice, however, although Hong Kong's media landscape remained comparatively more open than that of Mainland China immediately following the handover, it fell short of the full freedom anticipated by the local population. The city's liberal-democratic ideals increasingly conflicted with the ideological framework promoted by the central government, and this tension intensified over the period from 1997 to 2020 (Mathews et al., 2008). The political legacies of colonialism did not disappear with the transfer of sovereignty but continued to influence the postcolonial city's political, economic, and cultural development over the long term. Hong Kong's political and social transformations, therefore, reflected the intersection of colonial inheritances and postcolonial governance practices. While the "One Country, Two Systems" policy was intended to safeguard Hong Kong's political, economic, and cultural development, differences in political structures, ideological orientations, and

governance methods inevitably created social and political friction.

Through this period of adjustment, mass media continued to play an irreplaceable role, serving as both a bridge between the government and the public and a mechanism capable of shaping social change while also enabling governmental control over public opinion. Critical perspectives from the Frankfurt School have conceptualized media control as a dual phenomenon, encompassing both government regulation of media institutions and the capacity of media itself to exercise social control through discourse (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002; Habermas, 1989). The former refers to the government's oversight and regulation of media, whereas the latter concerns the media's role as a tool of state power to influence societal beliefs and behaviors. State control over media can thus be understood as a prerequisite for broader social control, with media control functioning as a mechanism through which the state manages public cognition and conduct. At the same time, mass media, while constrained by government oversight, can influence audiences through the content and language it disseminates, linking the domains of government, media, and the public in a complex dynamic of manipulation and counter-manipulation (Lee, 2018). This dual function of media, as both a controlled and controlling entity, was particularly evident in major political and social events in Hong Kong from 2003 to 2020.

### 2.3.1 The 2003 Article 23 Controversy

In 2003, the Hong Kong government's proposal to enact Article 23 of the Basic Law triggered significant public debate. At that time, the postcolonial media environment still retained a degree of freedom inherited from the late colonial period. Independent and pro-democracy newspapers such as Apple Daily framed the proposed legislation as an infringement on press freedom and civil rights. On 1 July 2003, Apple Daily printed large pre-designed protest banners on its front page with slogans such as "Take to the streets - see you there!" ("走上街头、不见不散" in Chinese) and "No to Tung Chee-hwa" ("不要董建华" in Chinese) urging citizens to participate in the mass demonstration. Following the protest, which drew approximately 500,000 participants, major newspapers covered the event extensively with distinct editorial tones:

- Sing Tao Daily: "Half a Million March in Peace"
- Apple Daily: "Long Live the People of Hong Kong"
- Ming Pao: "500,000 Oppose Article 23"

- Oriental Daily: "Half a Million Take to the Streets"
- Ta Kung Pao: "Premier Wen's Words: Understanding, Trust, Unity, Courage, Action"
- Wen Wei Po: "Premier Wen Encourages Hongkongers with Twelve Words"

Pro-Beijing media such as Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po published editorials prior to the march condemning organisers as "anti-China conspirators" and "agents of chaos," calling on "patriotic citizens" to reject participation. After the protest, these same media largely ignored the demonstration's scale, focusing instead on pro-government rallies.

This divergence in news framing revealed the operation of agenda-setting in three stages: issue selection (emphasising the threat to freedom), repetition (reinforcing public attention), and framing (portraying the legislation as an assault on democratic rights) (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Chan, 2006). The protest's success in halting the legislation demonstrated the extent to which media-driven public opinion could directly shape policy outcomes. From this point onward, the Hong Kong government became increasingly aware of the media's influence over social mobilisation and began adopting more cautious regulatory approaches.

### 2.3.2 The 2012 Moral and National Education Controversy

The 2012 debate over the proposed Moral and National Education curriculum revealed the polarisation of media narratives in the same way. Independent outlets such as Apple Daily, Ming Pao and Stand News described the programme as an attempt at "brainwashing" and criticised the curriculum's pro-mainland bias. These media amplified the voices of parents, teachers and student activists, especially members of the Scholarism movement, providing sympathetic coverage that effectively mobilised public participation. Statistical references, such as a University of Hong Kong poll showing over 50% public opposition to the curriculum, were frequently cited to enhance credibility (The University of Hong Kong Public Opinion Programme, 2012). Conversely, pro-Beijing newspapers including Ta Kung Pao, Wen Wei Po, and Oriental Daily defended the policy as fostering patriotism and national identity, depicting the opposition as "radical," "misguided," or "influenced by foreign powers." Their framing sought to legitimise the government's position and portray the education reform as rational and benevolent. Nevertheless, when mass protests erupted on 29 July 2012, the government was forced to

suspend the policy an outcome that underscored the failure of pro-establishment media to shape favourable public opinion. The contrast between these two media blocs illustrated how competing frames actively shaped public understanding of policy issues, confirming the continued relevance of agenda-setting and framing theory in Hong Kong's media ecology. Social media further enhanced the mobilisation process by enabling real-time communication, thus decentralising information dissemination and weakening traditional press dominance.

### 2.3.3 The 2014 Umbrella Movement and Beyond

The 2014 Umbrella Movement marked another escalation of media contention. Following the National People's Congress decision on electoral reform on 31 August, which was widely viewed by pro-democracy groups as "fake universal suffrage," media polarisation intensified. Pro-Beijing media highlighted economic losses and disruptions, framing the protests as unlawful and socially harmful, while pro-democracy media focused on police violence and citizens' demands for genuine democracy. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube, enabled real-time broadcasting of protest scenes, countering censorship and selective framing by traditional media. Symbolic imagery, such as yellow umbrellas and students shielding themselves from tear gas, became central to the movement's visual narrative, amplifying moral legitimacy and emotional resonance (Veg, 2017). While the early phase of the movement showed strong momentum, the government later used the media strategically to shift discourse towards "restoring order" and "social stability," eroding public sympathy for the protesters. This shift demonstrated how state-aligned media could reframe social unrest into narratives of legality and governance, thereby closing the policy window opened by the protests (Kingdon, 1995).

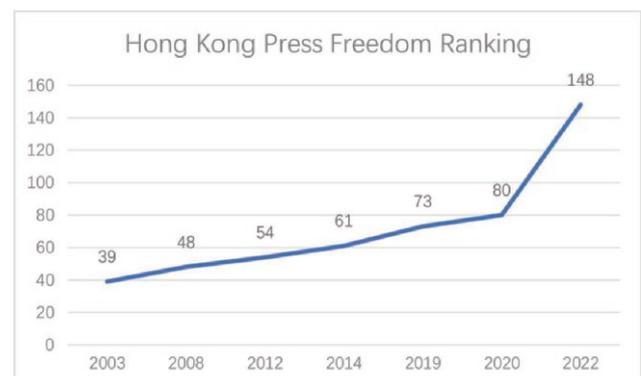
### 2.3.4 From Media Mobilisation to Media Regulation (2019-2020)

The 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement offered the clearest demonstration of the media's growing influence on social mobilisation. Independent journalists were assaulted while reporting from protest sites, whereas pro-establishment outlets framed demonstrators as "rioters" threatening public order. The visibility, immediacy, and polarisation of these competing narratives signalled to the central government that media discourse had become a crucial arena for shaping legitimacy,

public sentiment, and political outcomes. As a result, controlling agenda-setting and opinion formation was no longer optional but strategically indispensable. This shift culminated in the enactment of the National Security Law in 2020, which sharply curtailed press freedom, accelerated newsroom closures, and effectively marked the end of Hong Kong's period of open expression (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

Across these successive social movements, Hong Kong's media assumed an increasingly dual role: initially facilitating pluralistic debate, but gradually acting as a catalyst for large-scale social mobilisation. Through agenda-setting, competing frames, and the construction of public meaning, the media shaped issue salience and influenced the political feasibility of policy interventions. These dynamics help explain why the central government ultimately regarded tighter media regulation as essential for maintaining ideological coherence and political stability. To illustrate the outcomes of Hong Kong's media transformation under central government intervention, this study draws on two datasets, as presented in the following figures:

Figure 1 clearly illustrates the continuous rise in Hong Kong's press freedom ranking. As a higher ranking indicates lower press freedom, this figure reveals the structural contraction of media autonomy and the gradual establishment of state control over information. Figure 2 complements this by showing how public sentiment evolved during the same period, while local identity strengthened throughout the 2010s, a dramatic rise in "Chinese" identification appeared in 2022, coinciding with a marked decline in trust in both the media and the government. These trends reveal not only the sociopolitical tensions underpinning Hong Kong's media transformation, but also the

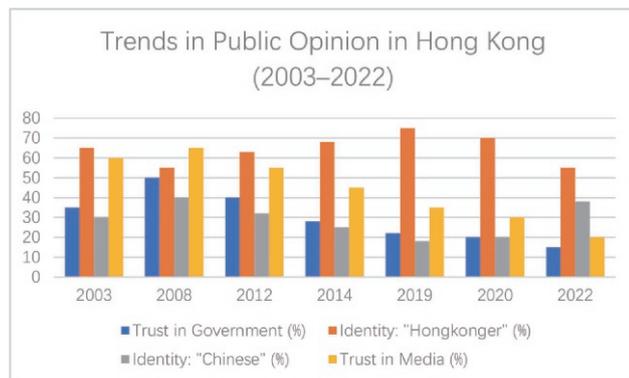


**Fig. 1 Hong Kong Press Freedom Ranking (Selected Years)**

Source: Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (2022) World Press Freedom Index 2022: Hong Kong Profile.

Note 1: Above figures track shifts in press freedom rankings, public trust in government, and identity affiliation in Hong Kong across major political events.

Note 2: Press Freedom Ranking: lower is more free



**Fig. 2 Trends in Public Opinion in Hong Kong**  
 Source: Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) (2020) Hong Kong Identity Survey Report 2020.

shifting public landscape in which policy decisions were made. Taken together, these developments highlight the growing convergence of political pressures, societal attitudes, and information governance. It is precisely this convergence that created the conditions under which major institutional change, particularly in media regulation became possible. The alignment of these structural constraints, public opinion shifts, and political imperatives opened a “policy window,” allowing the central government to introduce sweeping regulatory reforms. The following chapter examines this process through Kingdon’s Multiple Streams Framework, analysing how the problem, policy, and political streams converged to facilitate the tightening of media control in Hong Kong.

### 3. Policy Windows and the Enactment of the National Security Law

The preceding analysis of agenda-setting and framing in Hong Kong’s media has highlighted the dual role of the media in social movements and helped explain why the central government implemented regulatory measures in 2020. Between 1997 and 2020, societal unrest and public protests were continuously amplified and intensified by media coverage. In this context, the central government seized the opportunity to enact legal measures that both addressed social instability and laid a legal foundation for future media regulation. Kingdon’s Multiple Streams Framework (1984) offers a useful perspective for understanding this process. According to this model, policy change becomes feasible when three independent streams, the problem stream, the policy stream, and the politics stream converge. In Hong Kong, media coverage shaped the problem stream by highlighting threats to social order and national authority. Concurrently, domestic unrest and international attention heightened political pressure, increasing the salience of

these issues. Consequently, policy proposals framed within a comprehensive national security context were able to exploit this alignment, creating a policy window that allowed legislative action to be both timely and politically legitimate. To a significant extent, the enactment and implementation of the National Security Law should not be regarded as an isolated policy. Rather, it reflects the complex and interactive relationship among public opinion, media influence, and governmental planning. This chapter will discuss how the media, through agenda-setting and framing, created social and political conditions that facilitated the opening of the policy window and further promoted the enactment of the National Security Law. While the media is not a direct legislative actor, it indirectly shaped the political environment by influencing public perceptions of crisis, legitimacy, and urgency (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993).

From the perspective of policy window theory, a policy can be implemented when the problem stream, policy stream, and politics stream converge simultaneously. The problem stream refers to significant societal or political issues that attract concentrated attention from governments, the public, and the media, thereby creating a perceived necessity for policy change. The policy stream consists of pre-existing and prepared policy proposals that can be implemented when conditions permit. The politics stream reflects changes in the political environment, such as government transitions, social movements, or international relations, which make policy implementation feasible. In Hong Kong, the media operated across all three streams. Media coverage amplified social unrest and governance challenges, transforming localized events into nationally significant issues that threatened social stability and public order, thereby creating social conditions conducive to policy implementation in 2020. The problem stream, as constructed by the media, derived not only from the events themselves but also from symbolic or representational framing. Repeated narratives, striking visual images, and dissemination through social media increased public attention and guided public opinion. This generated pressure on the government to address these issues promptly. Simultaneously, domestic and international political pressures interacted with the problem stream. Media polarization created contested spaces where public opinion intensified, further pressuring the government. International attention added diplomatic pressure on both the Hong Kong government and the central government, affecting China’s global image. When the amplified problem and policy streams converged, the

government's prepared policy could exploit this alignment to open the policy window, facilitating timely legislative implementation. Therefore, agenda-setting and media framing not only shaped public cognition and opinion but also indirectly created conditions for policy implementation, rendering the media a decisive yet indirect driver in the legislative process.

In 2003, the Hong Kong SAR government proposed legislation to implement Article 23 of the Basic Law, aimed at preventing acts of treason, secession, and subversion against the central government. The government framed this as the policy stream, while the problem stream was shaped by heightened global attention to national security after the 9/11 attacks. Politically, then-Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's support from Beijing represented the politics stream. However, media coverage reshaped the structure of these three streams. Independent media such as Apple Daily and Ming Pao framed the legislation as a threat to freedom of speech and civil liberties, while online forums amplified public concerns over authoritarian tendencies. A University of Hong Kong public opinion survey (HKUPOP, 2003) indicated that over 50% of citizens opposed the bill. Media framing catalyzed public mobilization, transforming national security concerns into a struggle for freedom. Consequently, social opposition replaced governmental support as the dominant political force. On 1 July 2003, approximately 500,000 citizens protested, ultimately forcing the government to suspend the legislation. In this case, media agenda-setting restructured the three streams, with public mobilization shifting the politics stream from support to opposition, preventing alignment with the problem stream and thereby closing the policy window. Figure 3 illustrates the factors that generated the three streams and more clearly shows the outcomes leading to the eventual closure of the policy window in 2003.

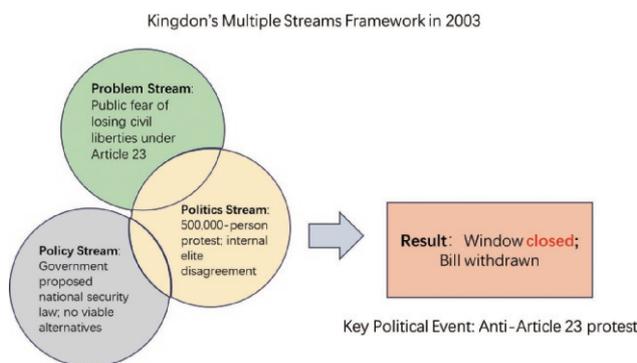


Fig. 3 Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework in 2003

A similar closure of the policy window occurred during the

2014 Umbrella Movement. The problem stream was defined by the outbreak of social unrest, which heightened Beijing's concerns about instability, while the National People's Congress's 31 August decision to restrict the nomination of the Chief Executive was viewed as democratic regression. The policy stream comprised central government measures to increase oversight, such as disqualifying legislators. Media polarization intensified societal divisions. Pro-democracy outlets (Stand News, Hong Kong Free Press) depicted protesters as rational and nonviolent citizens, while pro-establishment outlets (Wen Wei Po, Ta Kung Pao) framed them as unlawful disruptors. Social media platforms (Facebook, LIHKG) generated echo chambers, further heightening emotional polarization. Beijing's concurrent handling of South China Sea disputes, combined with international media coverage of local protests, placed additional pressure on the politics stream. Misalignment among the three streams again prevented policy implementation, delaying the National Security Law. As shown in Figure 4, the factors contributing to the generation of the three streams and the subsequent closure of the policy window are more clearly presented in 2014.

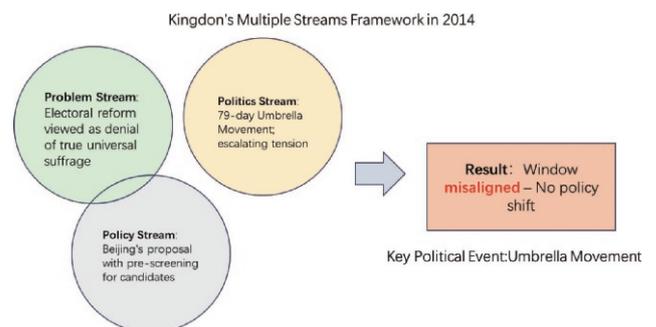


Fig. 4 Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework in 2014

Typically, once a policy window closes, it remains shut until significant changes reopen it. Following the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill protests, the policy window reopened in 2020. Prolonged unrest, amplified by traditional and social media, created the problem stream. The policy stream matured as the central government, recognizing the Legislative Council's limitations, prepared a comprehensive legislative proposal and decided to enact it via the National People's Congress, directly regulating media and protest coordination. The politics stream aligned when international attention decreased due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and deteriorating US-China relations. In this way, the previously closed policy window reopened and the National Security Law was successfully implemented. Media coverage throughout this period played a critical role in shaping

public attention, framing the social crisis, and indirectly influencing political alignment, thus facilitating the policy window's opening. Simultaneously, the media became the primary target of subsequent regulatory measures. As shown in Figures 5 and 6, the state of the three streams in 2019 and 2020 is illustrated, alongside a comparison of the policy window's transition from temporary closure to full opening.

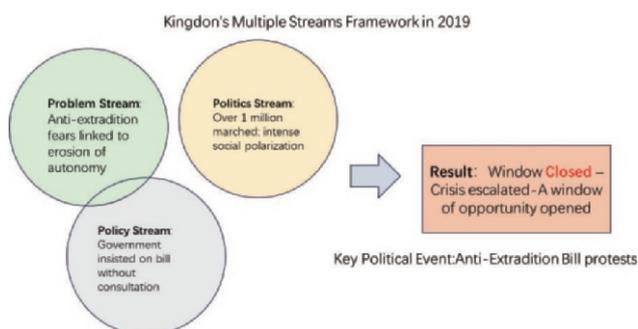


Fig. 5 Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework in 2019

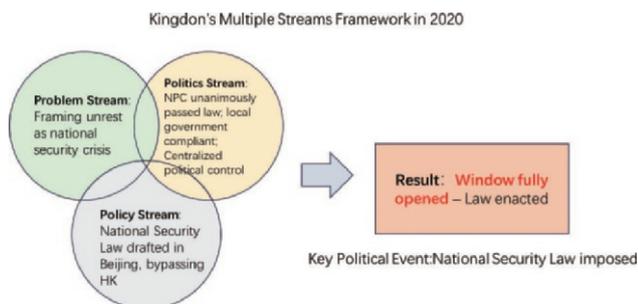


Fig. 6 Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework in 2020

These three cases demonstrate that media influence on Hong Kong's policy outcomes is not linear causality but operates through agenda-setting, framing, and shaping public cognition, which exerts pressure on government decision-making to make policy feasible. The enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law thus represents the long-term interaction of media discourse, public mobilization, and central government planning. Media amplified the perception of societal crises, enabling the convergence of the three policy streams and opening a brief but crucial policy window. From Article 23 in 2003, the Umbrella Movement in 2014, to the National Security Law in 2020, the media played a dual role: amplifying public concern, shaping political perception, and mobilizing social action, while also becoming the target of regulatory oversight. Agenda-setting, framing, and crisis amplification significantly influenced the alignment of problem, policy, and politics streams, ultimately determining the opening and closing of policy windows. These cases demonstrate that policy windows are shaped not solely by government strategy or political will, but through complex

interactions among social actors, media narratives, and political structures.

However, these events also indicate that media influence alone cannot fully explain political outcomes. The framing of issues, mobilization of public behavior, and eventual legislative success must be contextualized within broader ideological struggles. Media serves not only as an agenda-setting tool but also as a contested space where legitimacy, authority, and social values are negotiated. In Hong Kong, this tension is visible in the contrasting portrayals of protests, educational policies, and governance issues. Different actors compete through the media to shape normative interpretations of civic responsibility, national identity, and social order. Thus, understanding policy windows requires attention not only to the procedural alignment of problem, policy, and politics streams but also to the deeper ideological and cultural dynamics shaping public cognition and elite decision-making.

#### 4. Cultural Hegemony and the Ideological Struggle in Hong Kong

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that the media in Hong Kong played a dual role: it not only shaped public discourse through agenda-setting and framing but also actively influenced political outcomes by amplifying social tensions and public opinion. By highlighting perceived threats to social order and national authority, media coverage transformed localized incidents into issues of broader political significance. This process created the social and political conditions that allowed the problem stream in Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework to align with emergent policy proposals and shifting political forces, eventually opening a critical policy window that enabled the 2020 National Security Law to be enacted. Yet, while Kingdon's framework explains the timing and mechanics of policy adoption, it does not fully account for the deeper ideological dimension of media influence. The manipulation and control of public discourse in Hong Kong also reveal a struggle over cultural meaning, values, and identity. This highlights the relevance of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which situates media as a key arena where consent is cultivated, contested, or reconfigured. Gramsci (1971) argued that domination is maintained not solely through coercive mechanisms, such as law enforcement or state violence, but through the shaping of common sense: a set of widely accepted beliefs and norms that align societal consent with the interests of the ruling bloc. This ideological consent is reproduced through

cultural institutions, including education, religion, family structures, and particularly the media (Forgacs, 1988). Understanding the interplay between media agenda-setting, public mobilisation, and the strategic use of policy windows thus provides a necessary bridge to examining the broader project of ideological consolidation and cultural governance in Hong Kong.

In the Hong Kong context, the media has historically served as a conduit for both liberal and pro-establishment ideological frameworks. Under British colonial rule, press freedom was institutionalised, enabling the circulation of liberal ideas and professional journalistic norms. After the 1997 handover, the “One Country, Two Systems” principle preserved a high degree of autonomy, including freedom of speech and press protected under Article 27 of the Basic Law (HKSAR Government, 1997). These legal and institutional protections allowed media outlets to exercise agenda-setting power (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and to frame social issues, such as the 2003 Article 23 controversy, the 2012 National Education protests, the 2014 Umbrella Movement, and the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law protests, in ways that challenged government policies or highlighted alternative narratives. Independent media outlets, such as *Apple Daily*, *Stand News*, and *Ming Pao*, emerged as critical sites of counter-hegemonic discourse. During the 2012 National Education controversy, these outlets described the proposed curriculum as “brainwashing,” amplifying public opposition and generating grassroots mobilisation (Chinaworker, 2012). Similarly, in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, citizen journalism and social media platforms—Facebook, LIHKG, YouTube-enabled real-time reporting, circumventing editorial gatekeeping and broadcasting visual symbols such as yellow umbrellas and student demonstrations to international audiences. By framing protesters as rational, non-violent citizens and highlighting police violence, these media narratives produced a counter-hegemonic discourse that questioned the legitimacy of the state’s ideological framework. Gramsci (1971) conceptualised hegemony as an ongoing process that requires constant reinforcement. When dominant ideological narratives lose their monopolistic hold, a crisis of consent emerges. Hong Kong’s post-2019 protests exemplified such a crisis. Social unrest amplified by both traditional and social media created a pervasive perception of instability, challenging the moral authority of the central government. This ideological rupture provided the justification for the introduction of the National Security Law, which represented a “passive revolution” aimed at

re-establishing hegemonic consent by legally controlling media narratives, restricting dissent, and reasserting state authority across cultural and educational institutions (Gramsci, 1971; Forgacs, 1988). The implementation of the National Security Law in 2020 fundamentally transformed the media landscape. Mainstream outlets shifted towards pro-Beijing narratives, independent media were shut down or forced into exile, and educational reforms integrated national security education across curricula, extending ideological oversight to students, teachers, and academic institutions. These measures curtailed pluralistic discourse and consolidated ideological control, validating Gramsci’s argument that political domination must be supported by cultural and ideological leadership (Gramsci, 1971). In this sense, the media in Hong Kong shifted from a site of liberal hegemonic reproduction to a focal point of state-led ideological realignment.

The case of Hong Kong illustrates that media influence is not limited to information dissemination or social mobilisation. Through agenda-setting, framing, and visual-symbolic strategies, media outlets shape public understanding of social and political crises, exerting pressure on both local and central authorities. Yet, this power also made the media the primary target of regulatory control once the state sought to reassert ideological dominance. The dialectic between media as a counter-hegemonic force and the state’s efforts to reassert hegemony demonstrates that ideological struggles in Hong Kong are inseparable from media practices and public discourse.

In conclusion, the ideological struggle in Hong Kong cannot be fully understood without considering the media’s dual role as a platform for both liberal pluralism and state-aligned narratives. While the preceding chapter examined how media contributed to the opening of policy windows leading to the National Security Law, this chapter highlights how these dynamics reflect a deeper contestation over cultural hegemony, social consent, and ideological legitimacy. The interplay between media, public mobilisation, and state policy underscores the centrality of Gramsci’s framework in analysing contemporary Hong Kong, demonstrating that political outcomes are as much the product of ideological negotiation as they are of formal legislative processes.

## 5. Conclusion

As demonstrated in the analysis above, two key questions can be addressed: first, why the central government deemed it necessary to legislate control and regulation over Hong Kong’s media; and

second, why a policy that had faced repeated delays due to widespread protests was ultimately successfully implemented in 2020. Following the resolution of these questions, this paper considers the potential crises and challenges that Hong Kong society might face in the wake of the policy's implementation. From the cases discussed above, it is evident that since the end of colonial rule, the central government's approach to media governance in Hong Kong evolved from indirect influence in the early post-handover years to direct legal regulation by 2020. The waves of social movements during this period underscore the irreplaceable role of the media. Media have the capacity to set agendas, guide public opinion, and shape patterns of thought and action. From the central government's perspective, Hong Kong's highly liberal media environment amplified protester demands, shaped social discourse, and, together with foreign media coverage, generated domestic and international pressure, thereby contributing to prolonged instability. Moreover, during and after the colonial period, Hong Kong's media enjoyed considerable freedom, allowing for diverse political perspectives. In addition to pro-Beijing outlets, independent media emerged with a critical stance toward the central government, providing opposition groups with platforms to voice dissent and propagate alternative narratives. Consequently, the central government faced difficulties in promoting its governance agenda within the region. Following the handover, Beijing sought to reconstruct cultural and national identity in the former colony, including the promotion of patriotic education. However, some independent media labelled these initiatives as "brainwashing," negatively shaping public perceptions of China and hindering the cultivation of a unified national identity. The central government thus recognized the influential role of media during social unrest, and when the policy window reopened in 2020, it enacted legal measures to implement strict control over the media landscape.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020 provoked significant controversy within Hong Kong society. Whether this policy can resolve the region's longstanding social tensions or perpetuate instability requires careful observation and analysis from both domestic and international perspectives. Domestically, press freedom has been substantially curtailed. Independent journalism has increasingly faced restrictions, whereas pro-Beijing media receive enhanced political and financial support. The Hong Kong Journalists Association has encountered greater pressure and tighter censorship, leading to a more cautious media environment and reduced information pluralism. Additionally, the decline in press

freedom has prompted international media organizations to relocate and led foreign investors to reassess Hong Kong's regulatory environment, potentially reducing financial investment. Social media platforms, particularly important for younger generations, have also come under stricter regulation. Simultaneously, strengthened media control has arguably contributed to short-term social stability, reducing the risk of mass movements and facilitating the expansion of Chinese state-owned enterprises in Hong Kong (Reporters Without Borders, 2023; Freedom House, 2021). However, internationally, these measures have negatively affected Hong Kong's image, transforming it from a "liberal society" into a "controlled zone," reducing its attractiveness to international talent and investors, and undermining its competitiveness and future development prospects.

From the perspective of ideological legitimacy, the media assumed an even more critical role during the questioning of mainstream ideology, acting not merely as transmitters of information but as active participants in ideological contests. Hong Kong's media landscape, historically rooted in liberal values and a distinct local identity, has posed a persistent challenge to the central government's ideological hegemony. This dynamic was particularly pronounced during the 2019 protest movement, where a clear counter-hegemonic discourse emerged. Independent and social media constructed counter-hegemonic narratives that questioned the legitimacy of central government discourse and shaped collective identity. In response, the state adopted legal, educational, and media governance strategies to consolidate ideological control and reshape public discourse. From Gramsci's (1971) perspective, this constitutes a strategy of reconstructing hegemonic consensus through cultural and discursive institutions rather than mere coercion. Media, in this context, ceased to be neutral observers and became meaning-makers and catalysts of collective identity, generating a profound sense of crisis regarding "ideological sovereignty."

The central government did not respond solely through repression; instead, it initiated a comprehensive governance regime centred on the NSL, including structural integration across legal, media, educational, and digital domains. These policy measures functioned as mechanisms for reorganizing cultural and discursive order, aiming to reassert the state's primacy in shaping discourse and achieving what Gramsci termed a "new moral and intellectual leadership" (Gramsci, 1971). This form of governance cannot be simplistically

categorised as conventional authoritarianism but is better understood as a deep ideological reconstruction intended to generate a “new common sense” and establish revised frameworks for legitimate expression. Therefore, the evolution of Hong Kong’s media policies should not be interpreted solely as an adjustment of political power structures; it represents a broader contest over cultural hegemony. The process of repoliticization, catalysed by successive social movements, responded to by the central government, and mediated through cultural construction, illustrates the complex intersection of media, power, and collective imagination in contemporary Hong Kong.

At the same time, questions remain regarding the durability of this hegemonic reconfiguration. While the central government appears to have achieved short-term compliance and ideological orthodoxy, legal and policy deterrence does not necessarily translate into genuine societal identification or internalized alignment with dominant ideologies. Alternative voices, often subtly coded, continue to circulate online, and a fundamental gap persists between the national identity promoted by the central government and the identity maintained by many Hong Kong residents. Hegemonic reconstruction has largely operated at an institutional level, while deeper realms of consciousness remain less affected.

In the short term, media regulation has contributed to stability but simultaneously increased social pressure, restricted freedom of expression, and undermined Hong Kong’s international image. In the long term, it remains uncertain whether these policies can sustainably resolve social unrest. Hong Kong society is, to some extent, being guided toward acceptance of state-promoted ideology to reshape identity and cultural recognition. Through media, education, and cultural channels, patriotic education fosters identification with China while diminishing residual colonial-era “Hongkonger” identity. Economically, integration with the Greater Bay Area and increased investment from mainland enterprises have deepened Hong Kong’s dependence on the mainland economy. Analysis across political, economic, and cultural dimensions reveals that the central government seeks to consolidate ideological unity, strengthen national identity, and reduce the autonomy of local culture—manifesting a form of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Nevertheless, the effects of such cultural regulation are neither purely positive nor negative; they constitute a double-edged sword, the long-term consequences of which will continue to unfold over time. Overall, this process not only reflects the

central government’s institutional and cultural governance of Hong Kong but also highlights the critical role of media, education, and policy in shaping ideological and cultural identity, providing a theoretical basis for understanding the future trajectory of Hong Kong society.

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[受付日 2025. 5. 30]  
[採録日 2025. 11. 28]

