
Global Media Spectacle is a book about the media coverage of the transfer of Hong Kong from Britain to China in the summer of 1997. The authors compare and contrast media coverage from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Their main argument is that “international news making remains inherently ethnocentric, nationalistic, and even state-centered” (p. 2). The transfer of Hong Kong as a global event was still interpreted through national prisms, they conclude. That is, the interests of an individual nation-state were played out in constructing discursive contestations over Hong Kong’s past colonial experiences and its future economic prosperity, political freedom, and human rights, along with the rising status of China as a political and economic superpower.

The book is divided into two themes of discussion: the first is about the making of Hong Kong’s handover into a global media event. The second is about discursive struggles in international news. The authors sketch an outline of their main arguments in chapter 1. From chapter 2 to 4, they examine newsmaking processes, the implementation of various strategies ranging from staging, domestication, and hyping to repairing news paradigms. News staging is used in order “to provide a background for a subject, to create an atmospheric effect, and to enhance a subject either by stressing its importance or by distracting our attention” (p. 22). How a specific piece of news is staged as an important event largely depends on the available resources to journalists. These resources can be the organizers of the event, the organizational structure of the news agency, technology in use, economic situation, political ideology, cultural specificity, and so on. In turn, the media themselves are stages where star journalists and political actors perform.

The authors argue against the existence of a neutral or global perspective on the handover of Hong Kong. Their comparative research reveals that international news is interpreted through the lens of local values, interests, and understanding. The local here refers to the national. Without the processes of domestication, international news remains foreign and meaningless to the audiences in different locales. Lee and his colleagues, nonetheless, criticize the Western media’s tendency to add colonial meaning to the postcolonial event of Hong Kong’s handover, although some Western media claimed to be global, objective, and non-biased. Domestication in international news work further demonstrates Mike Featherstone’s notion of “glocalization,” in which the global production of the local is paradoxically transformed in the processes of the local production of the global (p. 61). In addition to news staging and domestication, this book looks into techniques of hyping and paradigm repairing in relation to the biggest international event of 1997. Because the handover was the only heavyweight international news at the time, the authors argue that hyping its importance was necessary. They say the tedious and boring ceremonial nature of Hong Kong’s handover lacked the attractive or sensational elements required by media organizations in their pursuit of business profits. The distance between hyped and actual realities consequently called forth the partial repairing of a specific reporting angle in order to retain an overall ideological, political, or national perspective in the background (or foreground) of news work.

The second half of this book, from chapter 5 to 8, reveals various discursive struggles over the significance of Hong Kong’s handover. Ideological contestations over democracy, colonialism, Chinese nation-state(s), and human rights are evident in the results of the authors’ comparative research of national media from eight countries. In the analysis of American media reports, Lee and his colleagues find that American journalists tended to “bang the democracy drum” by themselves playing a self-perceived role of new guardian at
the front line of freedom and democracy against the emerging China, the strongest authoritarian regime after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist block. Even though British media showed concern for maintaining capitalism and freedom in Hong Kong, they were also engaged in the discourses of the colonial experiences by projecting a positive image onto Hong Kong as a free, modern, and well-ordered society. In contrast, the Chinese media focused on the negative impacts of colonialism and stressed the symbolic significance of Hong Kong’s handover in the rhetoric of Chinese nationalism. However, while China celebrated the notion of the family-nation, the idea of “One China” was contested in Hong Kong and Taiwan media. The former was infused with a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity concerning its future with China, and the latter carried out the discursive debates in the logics of its political and ideological struggles against China. Finally, human rights were the central concern for the peripheral countries of the Western alliance, including Canada, Australia, and Japan, although they expressed it differently according to their specific national interests. Nevertheless, the news reports from these three countries shared an overarching idea that “universal ideals [of human rights] are desirable, but economic interests are irresistible” (p. 167).

The strength of this book first lies in its methodology. Seventy-six qualitative interviews with print and television journalists yield insightful quotes about journalists’ Takes on the same news event. The content analysis of 3,883 stories from 26 news outlets shows the general pattern of media coverage in each country and sets the parameter of the comparative scheme. Discourse analysis gives depth and complexity to the interpretation of research materials. This use of multiple methods further leads to solid cross-national, empirical research filled with rich, detailed discussion under the theoretical frameworks of cultural studies and the sociology of media. Furthermore, the authors contribute to the discourses on globalization and nation-states by asserting that geopolitical contestation between national units still matters and that nation-states are far from dead! In addition, Global Media Spectacle itself contributes to a dialectic between various national viewpoints and simultaneously challenges hegemonic interpretations embedded in media reports.

This book, however, is ironically challenged by its emphasis on the national prism in relation to the suppression of “local dissent, differences, or struggles” (p. 180). For instance, the authors do indicate nuances between right- and left-wing media in Taiwan in response to Hong Kong’s handover; yet they fail to point out that these differences did not necessarily construct a national prism as a unified view from Taiwan. In addition, the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity embedded in local, Hong Kong news reports rested precisely in the inability to form one single “national” view at the core of the news event. In other words, it is still possible to have many colours passing through the national prism of international news, depending on where one stands in the concentric circle of relevance to nationhood or livelihood.

This book treats news work as a secondary order of an event primarily determined elsewhere. News work is mainly structurally constrained and determined by a broader, ideological or national framework. And each framework helps to make sense of or legitimize the angles of interpretation and the formation of specific viewpoints. International journalism is especially a factory of manufacturing or reproducing national ideology. In other words, dominant media discourses appear to echo, reflect, or reinforce hegemonic stereotypes or ideology. However, it is still debatable to what extent the structural forces as such determine the aspects of agency in maintaining or transforming structural constraints in news work. Finally, for this cultural studies-based model of research, it remains a daunting task to go beyond the common analysis of the structural limitation of domination
and power by imaging the unimaginable or by proposing a normative possibility of analytical and conscientious news work.

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