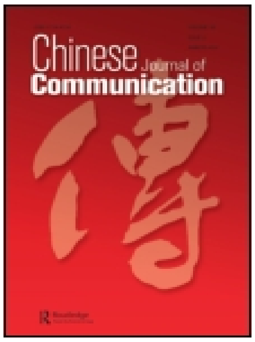

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Local press meets transnational activism: news dynamics in an anti-WTO protest

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Transnational protests often involve a cross-cultural encounter between "foreign" protesters and the local media and public, whose repertoires of contentious practices and discourses may differ. Examining how transnational and local actors interact in these events is one way to understand the significance and impact of transnational activism. At the same time, local media coverage of transnational protests can also be analyzed as such a cross-cultural encounter. Following these premises, this article examines Hong Kong media coverage of the transnational protests during the World Trade Organization's 6th Ministerial Conference, which was held in the city in December 2005. The analysis focuses particularly on how this non-routine news event provided the conditions for a more reflective interactive dynamics between the protesters and journalists, which contributed to emergence of media discourses negotiating and redefining the existing cultural understanding of protest actions. However, the case study also shows the limits regarding how far the redefinition and negotiation can go. Theoretical implications of the analysis are discussed.

Keywords: transnational activism; news production dynamics; protest culture; non-routine news event; law and order

Introduction

Since the "Battle of Seattle" in 1999, meetings of major international economic institutions are often accompanied by activists from around the world staging protests against neo-liberal globalization and a range of related issues. The 6th Ministerial Conference (MC6) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Hong Kong was no exception. From December 13 to 18, 2005, the conference and the protests against it constituted the biggest news story in the city.

Many scholars have argued that the media are agents of social control. They tend to undermine the legitimacy of protests and outsider groups when covering them (e.g., Chan & Lee, 1984; Gitlin, 1980; Shoemaker, 1984a, 1984b; Vandriel & Richardson, 1988). This insight has recently been applied to the study of media coverage of transnational activism (e.g., Boykoff, 2006; McFarlane & Hay, 2003). Indeed, some Hong Kong media did portray anti-WTO protests (and protesters) as irrational mobs. A mass-oriented newspaper in the city went so far as to use the headline "The Korean War Broke Out" in reporting the protests staged on the first day of the conference.

However, when the conference ended, a columnist wrote that "the Korean farmers unexpectedly acquired the sympathy of Hong Kong people and became the big winners of the meeting".[1] Another columnist treated the situation as paradoxical:

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"Hong Kong people have enjoyed the benefits of free trade……and [now they] start talking about protecting farmers because of the Korean farmers' protests".[2]

These comments presented only perceptions, not evidence, of shifting public opinions. But the appearance of these comments suggest that during and after the event, the discourses in at least some Hong Kong media outlets had become more complicated and/or sympathetic towards the protests. Hence a number of questions can be asked: Were there actually shifts in media discourses in Hong Kong surrounding the protests? If yes, what were the changes? What conditions and dynamics have contributed to the changes? Throughout the process, how were images of the protests constructed and conceptions of social order negotiated? What were the limits of the Hong Kong media's sympathy towards the transnational protesters? Moreover, since the protests were staged primarily by foreign activists, how did the differences between local and foreign protest cultures shape the characteristics of news?

This study addresses some of these questions. But it is not simply a case study describing how the Hong Kong media covered a transnational protest. Rather, it aims at contributing to our understanding of the relationship between local media and transnational protests. More specifically, the analysis is based on two general theoretical premises. First, the interaction between transnational protests and local media can be understood as a cross-cultural encounter, in which the two sides may attempt to accommodate to each other to different extents. Second, large-scale transnational protests may constitute a large, the non-routine news event for local media. Second, large-scale transnational protests often constitute large, non-routine news events for local media.

To further explicate these arguments, the article begins by briefly discussing the phenomenon of transnational protests and the senses in which they lead to cross-cultural encounters between the transnational and the local. It then discusses media coverage of protests and the differences between the coverage of routine and non-routine events. The background, methods, and findings of the case study are presented afterwards. The concluding section discusses the implications of the study.

Transnational activism as cross-cultural encounter

Following Della Porta and Tarrow (2005), transnational collective action can be defined as "coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions" (pp. 2–3). Although transnational activism has existed for decades, its prominence has certainly increased since the late 1990s. Research has shown that much transnational activism involves the formation and maintenance of loosely linked transnational networks of activists and organizations (e.g., Bandy & Smith, 2005; Tarrow & Della Porta, 2005). This networking is often facilitated by new information and communication technologies (e.g., Bennett, 2005; van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004), while framing processes and construction of collective identities are also central to the formation of transnational movements (Della Porta, Andretta, Mosca, & Reiter, 2006).

However, some scholars have warned against an overly optimistic estimation of the power and extent of movement transnationalization. For example, Rootes (2005) finds that, despite a trend towards transnationalization of organizational networks and agenda, "even the most internationalist" British environmental movement organizations remained "devoted to particular campaigns within Britain, targeted at British governments and corporations about essentially domestic issues" (p. 41). This is because most opportunities for effective collective action still existed in the national and local arena. Not all national movement organizations are equally active in taking up transnational issues and concerns (Diani, 2005).

Looking from the other side, Tarrow (2005) points to the problems faced by transnational movements when they enter specific national arenas. As different countries have different cultures, political opportunities, and existing social formation, there is a strong need for transnational movements to domesticate their concerns and strategies. But such domestication may "dissolve an international movement into separate strands, take different directions, and catch activists in the toils of domestic conflict structures" (p. 61).

These studies illustrate that the interface between the transnational and the national or local represents a fertile ground for analysis. The present study is also interested in this interface. It focuses specifically on the interaction between transnational activism and the media of the local society where the collective actions are staged.

Raising this topic for analysis is to recognize that, while transnational activism by definition involves actors, targets, and/or actions beyond a single nation, many of the most prominent transnational protests, such as those staged during the meetings of international institutions, occur in specific localities. To hold transnational protests, support from the local movement sector can be very important. Local protesters sometimes constitute the majority of the participants (Fisher, Stanley, Berman, & Neff, 2005). The collective actions, besides targeting the authorities, may also treat the local public as a major addressee.

More important to the present study, every locality has its own political culture as well as protest culture. Here, political culture refers to the set of deep-rooted cultural codes and political values belonging to a society (Alexander, 2006), while protest culture refers to the set of conventionalized discourses and practices surrounding protests. The latter includes what movement historian Tilly (1978, 1995) calls the repertoire of contention, defined as "the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests" (1995, p. 41). It also includes what Steinberg (1995) calls the repertoire of discourse, that is, a set of discourses people in a society can adopt to talk about protest actions. These cultural codes, discourses, and practices constitute resources with which individuals can make sense of other people's actions, their own actions, and how other people will make sense of their own actions (Swidler, 1986, 1995). Hence they influence the likelihood of various forms of collective actions being undertaken, the meanings associated with the actions, and the ways the larger public will react. As Tarrow (1998) points out, collective actions are "culturally inscribed and socially communicated" (p. 20).

To the extent that the repertoires of discourse and collective actions of the transnational activists differ from the political and protest cultures of the local society, transnational protests can be understood as involving a cross-cultural encounter. Collective actions seen as common and normal by the transnational protesters may be regarded as too radical in the society where the actions are held. The local public may also fail to grapple with the symbolic meanings of specific types of protest actions. Such cultural differences represent a challenge to the relationship between transnational protesters and the local public.

International protesters may or may not be aware of such cultural differences, and depending upon the extent to which they see the local public as their target audience, they may or may not be willing to adjust their actions. Conversely, the local society may also be willing to tolerate or even embrace the foreign protesters and the protesters' contentious actions to different extents. In any case, the dynamics of such cross-cultural encounters shape not only the processes and outcomes of a transnational protest; they can also have implications for broader issues such as the transnational diffusion of collective action models and framing of supranational issues (e.g., McAdam & Rucht, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1999). It is a premise of this article that local media coverage of transnational protests can also be understood in terms of such a cross-cultural encounter.

Media coverage of protests: routine vs. non-routine events

Much research has been conducted on how the media cover social protests. Researchers have pointed towards two main types of biases in media coverage, namely selection and description biases (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001). Studies on selection biases focus primarily on the factors determining whether a protest would be covered. Not all protests are equally newsworthy. Factors such as size, degree of violence, and the presence of counter-demonstration can enhance the chance of a protest being covered (McCarthy, McPhail, & Smith, 1996; Oliver & Maney, 2000; Oliver & Myers, 1999). Studies of description biases, on the other hand, focus on how protests are represented. Key questions include the extent to which protests are framed as disruptions of "law and order", whether the substantive issues are covered, and the ways through which protesters are portrayed as non-credible actors (Boyle, McCluskey, McLeod, & Stein, 2005; McFarlane & Hay, 2003; McLeod & Detenber, 1999; McLeod & Hertog, 1998).

Adding to the problem, selection and description biases are intertwined such that activists are often presented with a dilemma. Protest organizers understand that gimmicks, heightened conflicts, and violence are often needed to attract media attention, but these same strategies tend to distract attention from the issues raised by a protest and lead to portrayals of protesters as irrational mobs or social deviants (Boykoff, 2006; Small, 1995). Therefore, gaining access is not the same as gaining recognition (Bennett, Pickard, Iozzi, Schroeder, Lagos, & Caswell, 2004), and the two goals are often in conflict with one another.

The existence of these biases is often explained in terms of the role of the media as agents of social control (Chan & Lee, 1984; Shoemaker, 1984a, 1984b). The media themselves are large corporations. They are intricately entangled with established political and economic institutions, and they share the deeply embedded cultural codes and ideologies of the established order (e.g., Hall, Crichter, Jefferson, Clarke, & Robert, 1978; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1998). These biases at the structural level are then mediated by organizational routines and news making practices (Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978) to produce a general pro-establishment bias in media content.

Nevertheless, routines and news practices are not inherently conservative (Eliasoph, 1988). As long as they constitute the more immediate determinants of news contents, skillful collaboration with the media on the part of movement organizers may help acquire better coverage (Ryan, 1991). In fact, not all studies of media coverage of transnational protests have stressed negative news contents. DeLuca and Peeples (2002), for example, argue that the dramaturgical performances and symbolic violence by protesters at the 1999 Seattle WTO meeting have expanded the overall amount of media space given to the protests, allowing other images to gain entry to the media, exposing state violence and leading to more substantive discussions of the issues provoking the protests. Meanwhile, a study by Beyeler and Kriesi (2005) finds that protests at meetings of international institutions have received on average positive coverage in some newspapers in some countries. Tone of coverage seems to be dependent on factors such as the journalistic paradigm adopted by the paper and local public opinions toward the international institutions.

Therefore, without dismissing the argument that mainstream media usually have a pro-establishment bias, it is important to analyze under what conditions and with what dynamics the media would generate content more favorable to the protesters. This study suggests one such condition: possibilities for different types of media portrayals can be broadened when protests constitute a large, non-routine news event for the media.

Some journalism scholars have studied how news routines and practices change when media have to handle extraordinary news events. Berkowitz (1992a, 1992b, 2000) illustrates how normal routines are adjusted to help news media cover the "what-a-story", i.e., a breaking news story of such importance that news organizations are willing to "stretch resources in terms of news space (or time), personnel, and equipment to give the story special treatment" (1992a, p. 84). Transnational protests at the meetings of major international institutions may not be the prototypical what-a-story, as they are often anticipated before the event instead of being "breaking news". But similar to what-a-story, they can draw heavy attention from the local media. It is possible that the media would spend an unusually large amount of resources on covering them, and the normal routines of everyday journalism may be replaced by special routines and procedures.

Increased amounts of resources and changed routines provide a condition with important implications for the dynamics of news production as well as the characteristics of news content. First, as media organizations commit more resources to cover a big event, the "news net" (Tuchman, 1978) cast over the event can become wider and more tightly knit. With more news space reserved for the coverage, a wider range of news sources can be used, and elements often found lacking in everyday news, from background information to thematic discussions of the issues behind the story, can have a better chance of appearance.

Second, since big stories are relatively rare and may constitute extraordinary experiences in a journalist's career, journalists may become more reflective about their own work when covering big events. Reflectivity can be further heightened when the events are anticipated such that journalists have a period of time preparing for the coverage. In fact, big news stories are often accompanied by a significant amount of reflective media criticisms (Frank, 2003).

The logic of professionalism may also operate differently with heightened reflectivity. Professionalism is often reduced to a set of fixed reporting and writing practices in everyday journalism, and it inadvertently leads to a host of problematic phenomena such as lack of journalistic responsibility and detachment between journalists and the public (e.g., Glasser, 1992; Iggers, 1998). But the professional ideals of independence, fairness, public service, and so on may not be completely meaningless when journalists become more reflective.

This is not to argue that non-routine events would necessarily be covered in a specific way. It is certainly possible that some news organizations may use the additional resources spent on an event only to deepen the pro-establishment bias. In other words, increased resources and changed routines do not directly and invariably cause anything. But they constitute the condition in which the constraints of mundane, daily news production are loosened, and as a result factors such as routines, professionalism, and news competition may generate a news dynamics relatively more open to oppositional views.

Following the above arguments, an analysis of local media coverage of transnational protests should pay attention to: (1) the amount of resources expended by media organizations to cover an event, (2) the dynamics of news production in play throughout the process, and (3) how the dynamics influences the news contents. These principles will guide the following case study of how the Hong Kong media covered the anti-WTO protests staged in the city in late 2005.

The Hong Kong press meet the anti-WTO protests

The WTO MC6 in December 2005 was not the first time Hong Kong hosted meetings of international institutions, but it was the first time transnational protests of substantial scale were held in the city. The meeting presented a significant challenge to the city's government, police, social movement sector, and media. According to veteran labor unionist Tang Yin-or, she received inquiries from movement organizations outside Hong Kong as early as in October 2004.[3] The inquiries urged Tang and other local activists to form the Hong Kong People's Alliance against WTO (HKPA), a loose coalition focusing on the WTO conference.[4] From late 2004 onward, the HKPA was the local contact point for many transnational activists and organizations. It was responsible for negotiating with the police and preparing the logistics of the protest activities. They were also a major "local spokesperson" for the protesters during the WTO conference, though the activists from abroad also talked directly to the local press, as illustrated below.[5]

As explicated later, the relationship between HKPA and transnational activists was not completely congenial because of differences in protest cultures and goals. Indeed, Hong Kong has its own distinctive political and protest culture. Especially since the transfer of sovereignty and the economic decline triggered by the Asian financial turmoil in 1997, struggles for civil rights and protest actions have become a prominent aspect of local politics. Most significantly, on July 1, 2003, 500,000 Hong Kong citizens protested against the government's plan to establish a national security law. The protest kick-started a wave of large-scale pro-democracy protests held between 2003 and 2006 (Chan & Lee, 2007).

As protests were regularly held, the local citizenry have probably become more and more receptive to the notion that citizens have the rights to express their voices through collective actions. In 2004, a veteran social activist even garnered enough support to win a seat in the legislature through direct elections (Lee, 2006).

However, it does not mean Hong Kong society is open to all kinds of protests. Instead, in a series of case studies of local civil rights struggles, Ku (2001, 2004, 2007) argued that an "order imagery" remains dominant in public discourses. The hegemony of law and order means that the society would support protest actions only if they are not regarded as producing violence and chaos. Certainly, violence and chaos are constructed and contested notions. Most, if not all, societies do not accept violence and chaos, but they differ in terms of what is considered violent and chaotic. It is difficult to state precisely where the relevant lines are drawn in Hong Kong. But it is notable that even protests without any physical conflicts can be regarded by some as "radical". Take the aforementioned protest against national security legislation as the example. While the Hong Kong media have converged to praise the "rational and peaceful" character of the protesters (Chan & Lee, 2006), a focus group based study found that the protest participants often regarded themselves as being perceived as radical by people around them (Lee & Chan, forthcoming).

Hence the WTO MC6 was held at a time when the Hong Kong society was witnessing many protest actions and yet maintained a rather conservative protest culture. It is plausible that many kinds of collective actions involved in other transnational protests in the past would have passed Hong Kong people's threshold of tolerance. The interesting questions, then, include whether and how transnational activists adjusted their actions to fit into the local culture, how the local media made sense of the "foreign" protests, and how notions of "violence" and "chaos" were negotiated through media coverage of the protest events.

Given such background and considerations, the empirical study focuses on how *Ming Pao Daily News*, the most widely circulated elite-oriented newspaper in Hong Kong, covered the WTO MC6 and its associated protests. The focus on a single paper allows a closer analysis of news dynamics and media discourses. In other words, this study opts for a detailed analysis rather than looking for breadth of empirical data.

A number of characteristics of *Ming Pao* should be highlighted here. Most notably, the newspaper enjoys high levels of credibility (So & Chan, 2006). It proclaims itself to follow the tenets of professional journalism. The primarily well-educated readership also led it to pay relatively more attention to the WTO meeting and protests. As in other case studies, these characteristics will largely influence the findings of the analysis. Yet it does not mean that the findings of the study will have no generalizability. Although *Ming Pao* certainly cannot be used to represent all other media organizations in Hong Kong, it does represent a conceptually defined type of news organization. We will return to the issues of the generalizability and limitations of the findings in the concluding section.

The following analysis aims at reconstructing the dynamics of *Ming Pao's* coverage of the WTO meeting and protests from its preparatory period to the end of the conference. The reconstruction was based primarily on a close textual analysis of the contents of *Ming Pao*. News reports, editorials, and commentaries related to the WTO or the MC6 were derived using a keyword search in Wise News, an electronic news archive. The period under study is between October 2004 and April 2006. A total of 924 articles were located. The researcher analyzed all of them. The articles were treated as both "historical documents" and "discursive texts": the researcher noted the details of the actions and activities of different groups of actors throughout the period as reported in the articles. The researcher also focused on the rhetorical means used in the texts to construct images of the protests, as well as the major themes being discussed or omitted. Nevertheless, this study is not a rhetorical or discourse analysis focusing on the use of specific linguistic devices. As stated above, the aim of the analysis is to provide a conceptually and contextually informed reconstruction of the events which would highlight their social and cultural import in relation to the research questions raised.

The interpretations of the texts and reconstruction of events were aided by data derived from in-depth interviews with three local activists, who had different degrees of involvement in the anti-WTO protests, and three frontline reporters of *Ming Pao* who have participated in the coverage.[6] The interviews were conducted in late 2006 and early 2007. The interviews provided factual information about the organizational aspects of the protests and the coverage of *Ming Pao*, which was important in the reconstruction of the news production dynamics. At the same time, through analyzing how the interviewees made sense of what they saw and experienced during the event, the interview data are also crucial for our interpretation of the news dynamics as a cross-cultural encounter.

Finally, the analysis was further aided by general observations and analysis of how other local media covered the same event.

The pre-convention period: coverage from the beat system

The first *Ming Pao* article about WTO MC6 appeared on October 21, 2004. It was a very brief 150-word piece announcing the meeting. In fact, WTO MC6 did not attract much media attention until November 2005. Table 1 summarizes the number

Table 1. Number of articles about WTO MC6

	Ming Pao	*Sing Tao Daily*	*Apple Daily*	*Oriental Daily*
October 2004	11	7	10	7
November 2004	14	9	8	8
December 2004	10	9	8	5
January 2005	9	9	5	5
February 2005	15	7	11	10
March 2005	12	11	11	14
April 2005	17	8	11	15
May 2005	18	19	7	15
June 2005	14	21	17	15
July 2005	30	30	32	29
August 2005	40	30	29	24
September 2005	43	24	27	31
October 2005	59	46	38	42
November 2005	95	97	112	96
December 2005	408	360	340	280
January 2006	64	57	48	50
February 2006	21	23	17	8
March 2006	30	21	27	13
April 2006	14	10	9	6

Note: The number refers to number of articles mentioning the World Trade Organization, WTO Ministerial Conference, or WTO meeting. The exact Chinese keywords used are '*shijie maoyi zuzhi*,' '*shimao buzhangji huiyi*,' '*shimao buzhang huiyi*,' and '*shimao huiyi*.'

of articles published in four newspapers in Hong Kong mentioning the WTO or the MC6. There was scant coverage before June 2005. The amount of coverage began to increase in July and expanded substantially in October. From November to December, the number of articles tripled, thus illustrating how the WTO conference was seen as an extra-ordinary event drawing an extra-ordinarily large amount of coverage from the media.

According to *Ming Pao* reporter Raymond,[7] the paper assigned two journalists to cover the WTO meeting story in May 2005 (the number of people assigned to the story did not further increase until late November). Before that, the WTO MC6 was covered largely in a reactive manner. News articles appeared only when events or pseudo-events were organized by the authorities. Such allocation of human resources partly explains the figures in Table 1. Following the figures, the period between October 2004 and September 2005 can be regarded as a relatively quiet period of preparation. This is the case also for *Sing Tao Daily*, another elite-oriented paper in Hong Kong, as well as *Oriental Daily* and *Apple Daily*, the two most widely circulated mass-oriented newspapers in the city.

The scant human resources spent on covering the event in the early stages means that much of the news coverage during the period came from the usual beat system. Notably, as the interviewed journalists pointed out, most media organizations assigned their security beat reporter to the story during the early periods. As a consequence, news coverage of the WTO MC6 during the period was overwhelmingly dominated by "security concerns", especially the possibilities of violent protests.

A keyword search illustrates this bias. As Table 2 shows, among the 233 relevant articles *Ming Pao* published in the preparation period, 33.0% mentioned "police" or "security", and 28.8% mentioned "protests" or "demonstrations". The actual meaning and content of the WTO MC6 itself constitutes a smaller percentage of the coverage. The WTO MC6 was a continuation of the Doha round of negotiations, and the issue of agricultural product subsidies was one of the most controversial items in the agenda. However, only 12.9% of *Ming Pao*'s articles in the period mentioned either the words "agenda", "Doha", or "agricultural products". Meanwhile, key phrases in the general debates surrounding WTO, such as "free

Table 2. Focus of news coverage of WTO MC6 from October 2004 to September 2005

	Ming Pao	*Sing Tao Daily*	*Apple Daily*	*Oriental Daily*
% mentioning				
Police / security	33.0	38.6	30.7	34.3
Demonstrations / protests	28.8	33.2	34.1	31.5
Doha / agenda / agricultural products	12.9	10.3	9.1	12.4
Free trade / fair trade	9.0	4.9	10.2	5.1
Total no. of articles in the period	233	184	176	178

Note: The exact Chinese keywords used in the search are

- '*jinfong*' and '*baoan*' for police and security;
- '*siwei*' and '*kangyi*' for demonstrations and protests;
- '*doha*,' '*yiching*,' and '*lungchianpin*' for Doha, agenda and agricultural products;
- '*zhiyau maoyi*' and '*gungping maoyi*' for free trade and fair trade.

trade" and "fair trade", also appeared infrequently. Again, the pattern is consistent across a number of Hong Kong newspapers.

A closer look at the articles reveals that security concerns influenced media reports to focus on what the police regarded as the "worst case scenario". For example, news coverage highlighted that the police were purchasing new weapons. Even the possibilities of terrorist attacks and the use of toxic gas by "trouble-makers" were reported.

The coverage had a largely pro-establishment bias. The police's preparation was rarely, if ever, challenged. For example, on November 24, 2004, a news article quoted the police chief as saying that the police "may consider forbidding trouble-makers to enter the territory during the conference period".[8] However, neither the article nor commentaries questioned whether such an act would unnecessarily curtail freedom of expression.

The pro-establishment bias can also be illustrated by the fact that the HKPA and other anti-WTO sources gained very little media access in this period. "Hong Kong People's Alliance" (HKPA) appeared in only 27 of *Ming Pao*'s 233 articles. Moreover, mentioning HKPA does not mean allowing it to speak. The HKPA received its first mention in *Ming Pao* on February 5, 2005, after a meeting between its members and the police was covered. However, the report quoted only official sources.[9]

The above brief description corroborates with past studies emphasizing how the media tend to undermine the voice and credibility of protesters (e.g., Bennett et al., 2004; McFarlane & Hay, 2003). The protests were treated as a potential threat to social order, and activists were deprived of the chance to speak for themselves.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that some alternative voices could already be detected in *Ming Pao*, even in the preparation period. Starting in May 2005, news articles in the paper became more "balanced", with official information often followed by comments from HKPA, other civil society actors, and/or local politicians who might not be supportive of the conference. Second, starting in June 2005, there were occasional commentaries criticizing the WTO, neoliberal globalization, and/or the media's over-emphasis on the possibility of violent protests. Such critical commentaries gained frequency later. For example, an August 24, 2005 article criticized WTO for benefiting only developed countries.[10] A local academic wrote against the concept of copyright promoted by WTO.[11] Yet another academic argued that WTO does not really represent free trade.[12]

The emergence of counter-discourses coincided temporally with *Ming Pao*'s assigning two reporters to follow the story in May 2005. As argued earlier, the smaller the scale of media attention, the bigger the holes in the news net, and the stronger the pro-establishment bias tends to be. But as resources expand, it becomes possible (though by no means necessary or likely) for the journalists to search for alternative views. As *Ming Pao*'s Raymond recalled, once he started to "follow the story", he realized that he and almost all local journalists knew virtually nothing about the issues. Preparing for the coverage thus involved participating in workshops organized by the government and NGOs and talking to many people with different (and differing) opinions. Therefore, although he did not read all the commentaries published in newspapers, he regarded himself as being very aware of the arguments held by different groups and sectors by the time WTO MC6 actually began.

Raymond stated that personally he did not find the anti-WTO arguments particularly convincing. Nevertheless, journalists' awareness of the existence of critical views and their recognition that they were largely ignorant about WTO can be considered as the seeds for the emergence of alternative media discourses when the "big story" began.

The protests begin: scripting the actions and redefining order

As the Hong Kong media were preparing for the WTO meeting coverage, the more media-conscious transnational protesters had also begun to conduct their own "public relations" work. Most notably, although there were thousands of protesters from outside Hong Kong, the Korean farmers would later attract an overwhelming amount of media attention. Besides the fact that the Korean activists were the largest foreign delegation at the protest,[13] the attention they attracted should also be understood as a result of the local media's need for a focus. As Lau Chun-to, deputy chief editor of *Ming Pao*, wrote in a column article, the complexity of the issues involved in the WTO meeting and the lack of prominent individuals as center of attention have presented huge challenges to the media.[14] In this sense, the Korean protesters could partly compensate for the lack of focus.

The Korean protesters were a suitable media focus also because they were identified as likely to engage in "violent protests". They therefore fit into the pre-conference framing of the anti-WTO protests. In fact, media coverage from September 2005 onward has repeatedly highlighted the Korean protesters' record of committing suicide outside the 2003 WTO meeting in Mexico. In mid-November, news about two Korean farmers committing suicide in South Korea during a protest was also reported prominently.[15]

The Korean protesters were well aware of such media biases. According to Tang Yin-or, the Korean protesters had communicated with the HKPA for months to try to understand the protest culture of the city. In May 2005, the HKPA publicly announced that protesters from outside Hong Kong have all agreed that the collective actions to be staged would be "peaceful". A small delegation of Korean activists then arrived in Hong Kong in July to negotiate with the HKPA and the police. During their visit, they wrote a letter to the Hong Kong public. It emphasized how the agricultural tradition was destroyed by WTO-led policies. Therefore, "we will come to Hong Kong with deep and sincere concerns for the Hong Kong people. We wish we can use peaceful means to express our voices and messages".[16]

However, the behind-the-scene negotiations were more difficult because of differences in protest cultures. As a concrete example, Tang Yin-or recalled that the Korean activists were suspicious about the HKPA's insistence on negotiating and cooperating with the police force on the logistics of the protest actions. As a result, a certain degree of distrust emerged between the HKPA and the Korean protesters, and the Korean activists would later refuse to fully inform HKPA about their planned protest actions during the WTO meeting.

Despite such problems, when the WTO meeting began on December 13, the protest coverage in *Ming Pao* was much less negative than what the pre-conference media coverage had implied. Again, this can be partly attributed to the Korean protesters' successful media relations work. For example, the Korean farmers' staged supermarket trip on December 12 was reported by *Ming Pao* under the headline

"Sincere and Simple Korean Farmers Bought Spicy Noodles". The lead paragraph reads:

> In international news, Korean farmers are either fighting with the police using bamboo sticks or committing suicide. However, after the arrival of 1,500 Korean farmers to Hong Kong, what Hong Kong can see is a group of simple and sincere farmers, living at Woo Kai Sha's YMCA camp, buying a lot of spicy noodles in supermarkets.

Coverage like this gave flesh and blood to the protesters and turned them into "common people". Also, the first sentence of the paragraph recited the usual stereotypes, thus positing the news of *Ming Pao* as different from the usually biased "international news". Such "boundary-work rhetoric" (Frank, 2003) can be understood as an attempt to signify the accuracy and professionalism of one's own coverage.

In addition, the paragraph also suggested that the news of *Ming Pao* came not from preconceptions but from what journalists actually saw. In fact, the three *Ming Pao* reporters interviewed all stressed how their understanding of the protests was related to what they actually saw on the spot. Such journalistic "witnessing" (Zelizer, 1998) was first and foremost made possible by the expansion of human resources in covering the event. According to Raymond, during the conference *Ming Pao* stationed three reporters within the convention center, with another two or three stationed in the protest area. Additional reporters from other teams and beats were called upon when needed. The journalists thus observed the happenings from literally different angles.

Although news reporting is never a simple reflection of reality, what frontline reporters saw would still constrain their portrayals. For example, Patricia, stationed in the protest area, acknowledged that she was deeply touched when she saw the Korean protesters began their "three steps one bow",[17] arguably the most powerful dramaturgical performance on the part of the protesters during the whole event. Meanwhile, Raymond was stationed within the convention center, but he and other reporters would regularly go to the balcony and observe the protest from above and afar. "You could see the protesters' movements and strategies", he commented on the protests staged in the first few days of the conference. "It was like watching a video game. You could actually see that it was meant to be a game".

Certainly, such observations could have been made only if the reporters tried to keep an open mind. The incentive to be more open-minded might have come from individuals' convictions. For example, Vanice, who was assigned to follow the Korean peasants' actions during the conference, had training in critical cultural studies from her university years. She acknowledged that she had always liked to do reportage for powerless and marginal groups. Yet more generally, the incentives to be reflective also came from *Ming Pao*'s self-definition as a credible and professional newspaper, as Raymond and Patricia acknowledged. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, even after the first day of the protest, some Hong Kong media continued to sensationalize the coverage. The most controversial cases included *Oriental Daily*'s use of the headline "The Korean War Broke Out", and a TV reporter wearing a helmet to do on-site, live coverage when no physical or dangerous conflict was occurring. Within this context, *Ming Pao* opted to differentiate its coverage from those of other media so as to highlight their professionalism. The reporters themselves, meanwhile, also said they were personally dismayed by the reportage of some other media outlets.

As a result, *Ming Pao* reporters were particularly conscious about the need to avoid exaggerating the "violence" involved in any protest actions. Raymond pointed out that he set some simple "policies" for himself and other frontline reporters under his command, such as no use of the words "violent mobs". In fact, when the protests began, *Ming Pao*'s coverage refrained from labeling the protests as "violent". The pushes and shoves between the protesters and the police on the first day of WTO MC6, for example, was described by *Ming Pao*'s editorial on December 14 as acceptable. "Nine people were hurt, and only one protester had to stay in the hospital because of a bone fracture. The 'battle results' of the first day were mild when compared to past WTO meetings. It is a remarkable achievement".[18] This kind of discourse has arguably redefined the notions of "order" and "violence".

After the first three days of protests, *Ming Pao*'s coverage turned even more positive toward the protesters, especially by framing the protests as carefully scripted dramas. An article quoted an unnamed government source as saying that "the protesters and the police have reached some kind of tacit agreement. As long as the protesters followed the three nos – no dangerous weapons, no threat to citizens' safety, and no disruption of the WTO meeting, the police would facilitate the performances by the protesters".[19] Another article on December 16 explained the organization of the Korean protesters in detail:

> The Korean farmers have demonstrated their mobilization and organization power to Hong Kong people. Their division of labor is very precise: there are farmers responsible for charging the police line, there are female farmers responsible for the cultural activities and backup support, and there are members responsible for promoting their cause.[20]

News coverage also began to portray an increasingly friendly relationship between the Korean protesters and the Hong Kong police. Korean protesters were quoted praising the Hong Kong police on December 15. Another article on December 17 described a friendly encounter between a number of protesters and police officers.

Finally, the coverage also portrayed a tolerant and increasingly sympathetic Hong Kong public. *Ming Pao* conducted a poll after the first two days of the conference which found that more than 60% of the respondents regarded the protests as "acceptable". Positive "public opinions" towards the protests also emerged from people-on-the-street interviews. Articles on local participants in the protests further illustrated the existence of local support for the transnational protesters. Scientifically valid or not, these survey and reportorial findings constituted "public opinions" as represented in the paper.

In sum, after the first few days of the WTO conference, *Ming Pao* treated the protests as carefully planned, calculated, rational, and peaceful. This portrayal was aided by information and "evidence" which could be gathered only when the media organization was willing to expend a large amount of resources on the coverage. In the process, the news organization redefined the "order imagery" such that minor scuffles between protesters and the police, as long as they are "under control" and do not result in serious injuries, would not be considered "violent" and "chaotic".

The limit of acceptance and the re-assertion of order

While the previous section illustrates how a picture of protests as calculated games emerged, the relatively positive portrayal should be qualified. First, if *Ming Pao* had become more positive towards the protests, the paper was arguably even more positive towards the police and remained generally supportive of the WTO meeting. Its editorial on December 15, for instance, argued that "one can only improve the WTO by entering [it]".[21]

Second, identifying the Korean protesters as "rational and peaceful people" did not lead *Ming Pao* to dismiss the possibility of violence altogether. Rather, the paper turned to identify the "anarchists" as potential trouble-makers.[22]

Third, the portrayal of protesters as largely peaceful was by no means uncontested within the news organization. As Raymond and Patricia pointed out, while frontline reporters were observing the protests up close, top level editors were watching the protests through live television. Given television's preference for strong visuals, the perception of the top level editors was different. The frontline reporters thus needed to keep constant contact with top level editors and explain to them what was actually happening. Nevertheless, Raymond, who was leading the outfield reporters during the event, opined that he did have a high degree of autonomy in making judgments on the scene.

Finally, if *Ming Pao*'s coverage of the first few days of the event treated the protest actions as calculated, the script also involved an expectation of heightened conflicts on December 17, the eve of the last day of the WTO conference. In fact, *Ming Pao*'s editorial on December 17 urged citizens not to go to the district where the WTO meeting was held because of the possibility of violent riots.[23]

These qualifications point to the fact that the imagination of threat and riots has never ceased. There was always an "irrational other" – the Koreans or the anarchists – in the discourse. In the end, the Korean protesters were expected to elevate their protests to violence. Given the continual imagination and expectation of chaos, the abrupt change of *Ming Pao*'s coverage and editorial discourse on December 18 became more understandable. According to the front page story of *Ming Pao* on that day:

> Yesterday Hong Kong experienced the most serious riot after 1967. The anti-WTO protesters, who have been peaceful in the past few days, suddenly broke loose on the eve of the end of the WTO meeting. Yesterday afternoon, the protesters were divided into a few teams and charged the police line along several routes. They engaged in close-distance fights with the police. The police receded, and Wanchai has once "fallen". …When more than 1,000 protesters came within a few hundred meters of the convention center, the police finally used tear gas to drive the crowd away.[24]

The same report, quoting the police spokesperson, said that there were about 1,000 protesters in the event, and 200 of them were "violent elements" who had charged the police line several times in the first few days of the protests. At the end of the day, 900 protesters were arrested. *Ming Pao*'s editorial on the same day stated "Hong Kong society has already exhibited high levels of tolerance and endurance. If the protesters have to go beyond *the bottom line of social order* and challenge the WTO meeting, the police must respond with *reasonable physical force*. This is what any democratic society can understand and support"[25] (emphasis added).

Raymond and Patricia opined that the change in tone is understandable because the Korean protesters did heighten their use of violence. However, alternative constructions were by no means impossible. Certain basic facts about the protests on December 17 would show that the protests were only somewhat more violent than the protests in the first few days. While the protest involved thousands of people, it resulted in only 70 people being injured. Among them only 10 were police officers, and only three needed to stay in the hospital for monitoring. There was not a single case of serious injury, and no property damage. Judging from these basic facts, the December 17 protests remained much less violent than some other transnational protests in the past.

The abrupt change in *Ming Pao*'s treatment of the protests, then, has to be understood in terms of how a cross-cultural encounter broke down. Hong Kong journalists did not have much experience covering large-scale transnational protests, while the Korean protesters' actions were largely "foreign" to the "rational and peaceful" local protest culture. Under this situation, reporters were learning to "read" the protests, as illustrated in the previous section. After the first few days, some of them – including the reporters interviewed – came to some understanding of the "codes" of the protests. However, again emphasizing what they saw with their own eyes, Raymond and Patricia insisted that the protests were indeed chaotic on December 17. But here, "chaotic" basically means that the reporters could not identify the strategies used *at the time the protest occurred*. Both Raymond and Patricia acknowledged that, one or two days after December 17, with additional information and some reflection, they came to realize that the protests were quite well planned and "under control".

Raymond even argued that he believed the protesters could have breached the police's defense line and entered the convention center, but they stopped short of doing so. However, he also pointed out that such an understanding of the protest on December 17 was only possible in hindsight. It was impossible for him to realize the nature of the protest as they were unfolding in front of his eyes.

In addition, throughout the WTO meeting, editors and journalists at *Ming Pao* were also well aware of the prominent anti-protest discourses in the public arena in general. *Ming Pao* had to face the question of how far the "bottom line" can be pushed down. If transnational protests involve a cross-cultural encounter, the question is how much Hong Kong should learn to accept protests of a different kind, and the degree to which the transnational protesters should respect the local culture. The sentiment that foreign protesters should respect Hong Kong culture was well expressed in a column article:

> We understand that Korean people have their own more radical form of protests. We also know that the protesters have saved thousands of dollars to come to Hong Kong, and they must perform some kind of show. But Hong Kong people's protests are peaceful and rational. When you enter a foreign place, you follow the tradition there. Foreign protesters cannot say just because they can fight the police in their home country, so they can fight our police.[26]

On the evening of December 17, editors needed to judge whether Korean protesters' actions had gone beyond Hong Kong people's "level of tolerance". In the end, journalists might make that judgment based on their own "common sense". Journalists are members of the local society too, and they cannot be completely immune from the influence of deeply rooted cultural codes and ideas. In fact, both Raymond and Patricia pointed to specific images on television which led them to see the protesters' actions on December 17 as problematic. Raymond referred to the image of a protester picking up a metal rod to fight, while Patricia referred to the image of a group of protesters trying to topple a police car. These images, however, are problematic only if certain ideas are accepted, e.g., police are the representatives of “law and order” who should never be challenged. It was the common sense of Raymond and Patricia as Hong Kong people that led them to see these images as problematic, instead of seeing them as legitimate symbolic challenges to authorities.

Hence *Ming Pao*’s turning against the Korean protesters on December 18 signified the re-emergence of the hegemonic code of “law and order”. This reassertion of order can be understood as the combined result of a failure in decoding the protests, editors’ and journalists’ judgments of how other media and the Hong Kong citizenry as a whole would react, as well as the journalists’ own structure of feelings towards “violence”, especially violence against the key symbols of order.

Discussion

Interestingly, criticisms towards the Korean protesters did not dominate *Ming Pao*’s discourse after the WTO conference ended on December 18. First, there were signs showing that citizens’ reactions towards the protests on December 17 were not overwhelmingly negative: in a poll conducted by *Ming Pao* on December 17 and 18, the proportion of citizens finding the protests acceptable has dropped only a few percentage points from the beginning of the protests.

At the same time, prominent elite news sources continued to express support for the protesters and criticized the police and media for misrepresenting the protests and protesters. Catholic Bishop Joseph Zen went so far as to call the police “the shame of Hong Kong”.[27] Although Zen was in turn heavily criticized for the controversial statement, other commentators argued that the government should not describe the protests on December 17 as riots.

Moreover, as discussed in the previous section, some frontline journalists reflected on their experiences after the event and came up with revised understandings of the December 17 protests. For example, a *Ming Pao* reporter, in a column article published on December 25, said that the protest on December 17 was actually under the control of the Korean farmers. The atmosphere was peaceful just 100 meters away from the conflict area. The reporter expressed some “regret” for failing to “reflect the actual situation better”.[28]

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, many media discourses in Hong Kong have treated the Korean protesters as the main “winner” in the WTO conference, in the sense that they have successfully attracted media attention and the sympathy of the local public. We do not have concrete evidence that public opinions in Hong Kong towards the WTO and the Korean protesters have indeed changed. But this article is not interested in whether “real” public opinions have changed. Rather, the question is how and why, in the case of *Ming Pao*, media discourses changed.

This question is raised against the background of numerous studies arguing that, as agents of social control, the media have the tendency to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of protesters (Boyle et al., 2005; Chan & Lee, 1984; McFarlane & Hay, 2003; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Yet the present study argues that possibilities for alternative types of coverage can be opened up when the media have to handle major non-routine news events. As the analysis shows, media coverage in Hong Kong followed the official line most closely during the pre-convention period, when coverage of the event was based almost solely on highly routinized work within the beat system. The initial expansion of resources by *Ming Pao* around May 2005 coincided with the initial appearance of alternative views in the paper, and the relatively large-scale coverage during the events provided the conditions for a more reflective kind of coverage. The theoretical contribution of this analysis thus resides in its highlighting of how, under the condition of coverage of major events, factors such as resource allocation, the setup of special routines, the professional identity of the reporters, and the competition among news organizations have generated a dynamics of news production which contributed to not-so-conventional coverage of social protests.

Put in more general terms, past research has explained media's tendency to undermine protests in terms of how journalistic routines influence whom journalists talk to and what journalists consider news (Gitlin, 1980; Ryan, 1991). But in the case of a big story, media are willing to spend more time, space, people, and other resources in the coverage. Routines may change, and the news net cast by news media would be larger and more tightly knitted. This provides the condition for journalists to do many things that are usually not practical in daily, highly routinized reporting. Facing a big story, journalists may also become more reflective about how they are framing an issue, and they may in turn develop specific practices and guidelines to follow. On the whole, non-routine news events can provide journalists with opportunities to provide fairer and better coverage.

Admittedly, not all journalists and media organizations would seize the opportunity. *Ming Pao*'s coverage of the WTO meeting was by no means representative of the contents of other news outlets. The findings about the specific characteristics of the news content of *Ming Pao* are not generalizable to other media. What is arguably generalizable in this study is the finding at the conceptual level: under the condition of expanded resources and news routines, the constraints of daily news production are loosened. Hence, with the proper combination of other conditions available, news can become much more open to alternative voices usually marginalized in daily news.

It does not mean that transnational protesters can easily gain the support of the local media and public. One premise of this study is that transnational protests involve an encounter in which foreign protest actions and a local protest culture would have to respond to each other. In other words, this study treats *Ming Pao*'s coverage both as the product of news production dynamics and as the product of a cross-cultural encounter, with the logic of news production and the logic of cross-cultural encounter being intertwined with and influencing each other. As illustrated in the analysis, part of the Korean protesters' preparation work was to understand the protest culture of Hong Kong. Knowing that Hong Kong has a relatively conservative protest culture, the Korean protesters have indeed scaled down their use of physical force. On the other side, knowing that transnational activists have engaged in even more radical and violent actions in the past, the Hong Kong media recognized that the protesters were already behaving themselves. For *Ming Pao*, reporters even began to learn to appreciate and decipher the protest actions of the Korean protesters, and the resulting coverage loosened the definition of "order".

Nevertheless, there is a limit to such cross-cultural learning. If *Ming Pao* reporters thought that they had begun to "understand" the code of the protests, their newly acquired understanding also became the yardstick they used to judge the protesters' actions when the latter raised their protests to another level. The "law and order" hegemony cannot be breached in the end, and there are limits in terms of how far "violence", "order", and "chaos" can be redefined. *Ming Pao* reporters could see the police's use of pepper spray on the first day of protests as part of a strategic game, but their own common senses and structure of feelings did not allow them to see the use of tear gas on December 17 by the police as part of a controlled interaction between the protesters and the security forces.

This study thus points to an aspect of transnational protests which has yet to receive much discussion in the literature. Despite the involvement of protesters from more than one country and having international institutions as the usual target, many of the most prominent transnational protests were conducted in specific localities. How and whether transnational protests would influence local protest cultures and local public opinions deserve more attention from social movement scholars. This study suggests that redefinition and negotiation of local conceptions of "protest actions" and "social order" may be an impact of transnational protests. It can have significant implications on the local society's "repertoire of discourse" (Steinberg, 1995) surrounding social protests. Of course, more broadly speaking, how transnational protests influence local people's understanding of international affairs and local movement activists' repertoires of contention also deserves analysis. In fact, one social movement activist interviewed for the study acknowledged that he learnt quite a lot from the transnational protesters during the anti-WTO conference.

It is not to say that one transnational protest event, no matter how powerful and successful, would necessarily have strong and lasting influence on contentious politics in the local scene. The reporters and activists interviewed in this study converged in their judgment that Hong Kong people's sociopolitical horizon did not suddenly become much more "international" just because of WTO MC6 in 2005. But on the other hand, each prominent case of protests and social struggles can become an occasion for the renegotiation of local protest culture. Transnational protests can be particularly noteworthy because they are likely to introduce new practices and discourses to a locality. Although we cannot expect a single event to effect fundamental changes, the potential accumulated impact of recurrent protest events should not be underestimated.

Notes

1. Chan, Kwok-kei, "Hong Kong people became the biggest loser in the WTO meeting", *Ming Pao*, December 25, 2005, p. D10. The Chinese text was translated by the author. The same applies to other quotations from Chinese newspapers below.
2. Kiu, Ching-wah, "Protectionism", *Ming Pao*, December 20, 2005, p. D7.
3. Personal interview conducted in December 2006.
4. Tang served as the chairperson of HKPA during the event. According to another veteran activist Choi Yiu-cheung, the formation of issue-based coalitions has long been the primary mode adopted by movement organizations in Hong Kong to tackle specific social and political issues. Personal interview with Choi was conducted in November 2006.
5. A full discussion of the organizational aspects of the transnational protests being examined here is out of the scope of this article. For a discussion of the protests from a Korean activist's perspective, see Jeon (2006).
6. Two of the movement activists interviewed were in their 40s or 50s and have been active in the local social movement sector for about two decades. The third movement activist was

in his 20s. The three reporters interviewed were all in their late 20s or early 30s, and had at least five years of journalistic experience by the time of the study.

7. Psuedo-nyms are used for the *Ming Pao* reporters interviewed.
8. "WTO meeting is considering forbidding trouble-makers to enter the territory", *Ming Pao*, November 24, 2004, p. A6. All excerpts were translated into English by the author himself.
9. "The police waits for the coming of the December WTO meeting with a serious set up", Ming Pao, February 5, 2005, p. A16.
10. Fei, Lok-goh, "WTO mechanism is tilted; poor countries can hardly voice out", *Ming Pao*, August 24, 2005, p. B12.
11. Ip, Yam-chong, "Promoting the culture of freedom is better than promotion WTO", *Ming Pao*, October 10, 2005, p. A29.
12. Hui, Po-keung, "Schizophrenic pro-and-con general education on WTO", *Ming Pao*, November 7, 2005, p. A30; Hui, Po-keung, "Give me the reason to support WTO", *Ming Pao*, November 27, 2005, p. D3.
13. According to various media reports, there were about 2,000 protesters from Korea, of which about 1,500 were peasants.
14. Lau, Chun-to, "WTO meeting", *Ming Pao*, December 13, 2005, p. D4.
15. "Two cases of Korean farmers committing suicide by poisoning in a week", Ming Pao, November 18, 2005, p. A8.
16. "Korean peasants to Hong Kong citizens", *Ming Pao*, August 10, 2005, p. D6.
17. It refers to the action in which the protesters would kneel down and bow to the ground every third step. The performance is highly physically demanding.
18. "Protests were mild and restrained; police's responses were appropriate", *Ming Pao*, December 14, 2005, p. A4.
19. "Protesters follow the three nos, police allow the performance", *Ming Pao*, December 15, 2005, p. A6.
20. "Korean farmers took buses to promote their views to Hong Kong people", *Ming Pao*, December 16, 2005, p. A4.
21. "One can't capture the tiger without entering the cave", *Ming Pao*, December 15, 2005, p. A4.
22. "Korean farmer: Worry that Sunday will have fatal conflicts", *Ming Pao*, December 15, 2005, p. A3.
23. "The WTO meeting nears its end; security awareness has to be heightened", *Ming Pao*, December 17, 2003, p. A3.
24. "Wanchai fallen, anti-riot police arrested 900", *Ming Pao*, December 18, 2005, p. A1.
25. "The bottom line of social order can't be breached; decisive use of force is the only option", *Ming Pao*, December 18, 2005, p. A5.
26. Ah-foon, "Necessary violence", *Ming Pao*, December 19, 2005, p. D07.
27. "Bishop criticized police as the shame of Hong Kong", *Ming Pao*, December 19, 2005, p. A8.
28. Tsang Kam-man, "A few days of WTO meeting", *Ming Pao*, December 25, 2005, p. D6.

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