The Media Representations of Police Image: Research Notes on the Hong Kong’s Occupy Movement

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Abstract
The Hong Kong Police Force has undergone one of its biggest challenges in the Occupy Movement that emerged in the last year. Despite the sheer complexity of the police roles, we know little about its representations in the media coverage, and even less about the extent to which the imagery impacts of police acting as peacekeepers would have been made upon the images of police acting as crime fighters. Against this background, this empirical research aims to investigate the police image and its relation to the police’s specifically categorized duties in Hong Kong. The content analysis of local newspaper accounts is used as the research method. It is found that there would be generally negative media representations of police in the order-maintenance work whereas the police images in the crime-fighting duties could still remain positive. The reasons for these findings and their implications for the conceptions of the police role are discussed.

Keywords
police roles, police duties, police images, content analysis, Hong Kong

Introduction
According to the Basic Law, which is Hong Kong’s mini-constitution negotiated between China and Britain for the governance of Hong Kong after the handover in 1997, universal suffrage for electing Hong Kong’s governor, namely the chief executive, would be introduced in 2017. In 2014, the details of the elective arrangements for 2017 were being formulated. In particular, the power of nominating candidates is to be given to an Election Committee, which mainly comprises a small number of social elites. The opposition therefore demanded to bypass the Election Committee and called for a civil nomination of candidates for the chief executive. Some major oppositional figures announced that if this demand was not met, they would call for an “Occupy Central” struggle, in which the “Central” is generally referring to the core business district, and the “Occupy Central” suggests that the opposition would attempt to bring Hong Kong’s financial and commercial activities to a standstill if a more democratic universal suffrage in terms of the civil nomination could not be introduced. However, the Central Government of China took the elective arrangements for the chief executive to be a sovereignty issue and refused to the civic nomination.

In the autumn of 2014, the Occupy Movement materialized and a 79-day-long protest occurred, sometimes dubbed as the “Umbrella Revolution” by the foreign media. Revolution or not, it indeed very much constituted an insurrection, with violent clashes with the police occurring on many occasions. The police initially attempted to prevent the occupation of the area around government headquarters with teargas but failed. Meanwhile, the occupiers paralyzed several major traffic arteries in the heartlands of Hong Kong. The government then changed tactics and allowed the occupation to continue, letting it to cause as much damage as possible to the daily life of the traveling public. This tactic worked and eventually sentiment among probably the majority of the public turned against the occupiers, and the police was finally able to restore normality.

It is against this politicalized background that the current research is taking place. It should be further noted that the Occupy Movement has polarized Hong Kong society so much that the occupiers and the police supporters incessantly argued with each other. The police were somewhat caught in a dilemmatic position. In view of this, this research aims to investigate the representations of police image in the media coverage during the Occupy Movement. In particular, given
that politicalized context of Hong Kong, this study asks, what are the media representations of police as a peacekeeper? Simultaneously, what are the media images of police as a crime fighter? More important, what are the possible dynamics between the police image in the media coverage and its relation to the police’s specifically categorized duties?

**Literature Review**

The importance of a distinction between crime-fighting (hereafter, law enforcement and crime fighting are used interchangeably) and order-maintenance (hereafter, order maintenance and peacekeeping are also used interchangeably) functions of the police has long been discussed in the police studies. Baton (1964) has nominally distinguished “law enforcers” (detectives) from “peace officers” (patrolmen). Wilson (1968) has proposed the classic policing styles by focusing on such a distinction. In particular, a “legalistic style” of policing would emphasize the enforcement of law dealing with various offences whereas a “watchman style” of police activities would treat order maintenance as the primary police function. More specifically, Wilson (1969) has pointed out the fundamental difference between the law enforcers and peacekeepers in this way:

The difference between order maintenance and law enforcement is not simply the difference between “little stuff” and “real crime” or between misdemeanors and felonies. The distinction is fundamental to the police role, for two functions involve quite dissimilar police actions and judgments . . . Handling a disorderly situation requires the officer to make a judgment about what constitutes an appropriate standard of behavior; law enforcement requires him only to compare a person’s behavior with a clear legal standard. Murder or theft is defined; unambiguously, by statutes; public peace is not. (p. 131, emphasis added)

Although these distinctions are the important typologies that help account for various police practices, they do not resolve the complexity of police roles and the dynamics between crime-fighting and order-maintenance functions of the police in a particular social context.

Considering the complexity of police roles and functions, Manning (1977, 2005, 2010) goes much further by discussing the “impossible” mandate of the police. It has been argued that the traditional role of police as law enforcer serves to promote a neutral and apolitical conception of policing, concealing the fact that the police are politically defined and function as an instrument of political system (Manning, 1977). Seen in this view, the “crime-fighting” police work is nothing more than managing an apolitical appearance of the politicalized police roles. Thinking along the same line, Bittner (2004) has outlined several ways by which the imagery management of a depoliticized police role as crime fighter or law enforcer was conducted. For instance, the knowledge about criminal law is necessarily incorporated into the police training, and the enforcement of criminal law is highly emphasized in the career development of a police organization.

Derived from the above theory, this study presupposes that the police would be equipped with the “impossible” mandate when performing order-maintenance duties. However, it presupposes that the police would be equipped with a relatively “possible” mandate when acting as crime fighters. As also argued in Robert Reiner’s (2000) *The Politics of the Police*,

If policing is an inherently political activity, it does not follow that it usually appears as such. Policing may be inescapably political, but it need not be politicalized, that is, the centre of overt political controversy over its manner, tactics, or mode of operation and organization. Like riding a bike, policing is the sort of activity that is thought about mainly when the wheel comes off. When things are running smoothly it tends to be a socially invisible, undiscussed routine. (p. 9)

Simply put, from Wilson (1969) to Manning (1977) and then to Reiner (2000), the police’s crime-fighting work could be understood as “possible” because it is equipped with the more clearly legal standard, and more important, the impression management of a depoliticized role like “a bike running smoothly.” In a similar vein, the police’s order-maintenance work would be “impossible” because the public peace could not be easily defined, or more precisely, the policing of it would be doomed to be politically defined, thus being vulnerably subject to the overt political controversy like “a bike with the wheel coming off.”

In this study, what is new is that I will address the complexity and diversity of police roles by focusing a special dimension of the imagery projection of police activities; that is, the media representations of the police image. In particular, a number of hypotheses are postulated in this study:

**Hypothesis 1:** There would tend to be a positive police image represented in the media when the police perform crime-fighting duties.

**Hypothesis 2:** There would tend to be a negative police image represented in the media when the police perform order-maintenance work.

**Hypothesis 3:** In a highly politicalized context, the overall representation of police image would tend to be negative.

In Hypothesis 3, the highly politicalized context is referring to Hong Kong’s Occupy Movement as mentioned in the “Introduction” section. This is because the policing of Occupy Movement is a case in point of what Thacher (2001) called “a high degree of value pluralism” for the police activities.

Finally, a few words about the theoretical and practical significance of this study should be added. Theoretically, the media representations of police image have long been regarded as a major source of popular perceptions of crime.
and policing (Cavender, 2004; Mawby, 2012; Wu, Sun, & Smith, 2011). Specifically, the conservatives claim that the media accounts of crime and policing would tend to subvert the authority of law enforcers (e.g., Surette, 2007). However, the liberals believe that the media representations of crime and control would tend to exaggerate the seriousness of crime and then result in a legitimatization of authoritarian policing, or in Reiner’s (2003) term, a reproduction of “police fetishism.” However, neither the conservative view nor the liberal thought has ignored the dimension of “impossible police mandate”; that is, the media accounts of the order-maintenance police work are by and large left underdeveloped. Therefore, this is a gap that the current study aims to fill in. Taken together, this study is attempting to reconcile the media representations of police image by placing the policing of crime on an equal footing with the policing of order maintenance.

Practically, the Hong Kong Police Force has received compliments of the “Asia’s Finest” and even the “World Finest” not long after the handover in 1997. However, in recent years, Hong Kong’s police image seems to be badly influenced by their handling of public order events. For example, the police force was accused by an official U.S. report of turning to aggressive and abusive tactics on protests (“Police Chief Rejects Claims,” 2013), and was criticized for making a political arrest of the social activists (“Police Chief Defends Activist’s Arrest,” 2013). As such, it is not a wonder that when the police force was being named as runner-up for the Best Public Image Award in the government’s civil service awards held in 2013, some stakeholders had strong opinions about it (“Police Chief Defends Force’s,” 2013). Against this background, the current research is an empirical investigation that can contribute to our latest understanding of the police images in post-handover Hong Kong.

In summary, to the best of my knowledge, this research is the first-of-its-kind analysis of police image in Hong Kong. The result of this research would not only throw light on academic discussion about the “impossible” mandate for the police, but also on policy making for advancing police image. In the modern society like Hong Kong, this would be of profound importance because policing is as much a matter of symbolism as substance (Reiner, 2003), and the legitimation of policing involves a careful construction and reconstruction of police image (Mawby, 2002).

**Research Method**

The content analysis of local newspaper accounts had covered a whole period of the “Hong Kong’s Occupy Movement,” dating from September 29 to December 15 in 2014. Specifically, the investigation period covered a total of 79 days. The data were collected from the three major local newspapers: (a) *Oriental Daily*, (b) *Apple Daily*, and (c) *Ming Pao*. The reason for selecting the above newspapers was that they are all the major newspapers with high circulation, having coverage of a wide variety of social strata in Hong Kong. Simply put, the selection was suggesting that the media representations of police image are representative and influential.

The researcher had collected the above-mentioned three newspapers in the duration of Occupy Movement. As such, a total of 237 copies of newspapers were collected (3 newspapers × 79 days). After that, there were two major types of investigation derived from the research questions. The first type was the content analysis of police image and its relation to the order-maintenance duties. The second one was the content analysis of police image and its relation to the crime-fighting duties.

In the first type of investigation, the data collection was focused on collecting news items of relevance to the police’s order-maintenance duties. In the above-mentioned 237 copies of newspapers, the researcher would first use the search engine of *wisenews* to identify the relevant news items by using three pairs of dual keywords, including “police and crime,” “police and steal,” and “police and robbery.” In the second type of investigation, the data collection was focused on collecting news items of relevance to the police’s crime-fighting duties. Also, in the above-mentioned 237 copies of newspapers, the researcher would use *wisenews* to identify the relevant news items by using another three pairs of dual keywords, including “police and order,” “police and demonstration,” and “police and protest.”

In all the collected news items, the researcher had gone further to conduct a systematic analysis by classifying each news item along the parameters of positive, negative, neutral police image, or if necessary, unclassified item. Crosschecking and moderation of the classification would be done to ensure the reliability of data analysis. Specifically, a codebook was compiled to serve two purposes. One was to allow the researcher to judge whether or not a news item is of relevance to the police’s order-maintenance and crime-fighting duties. The second purpose was to allow the researcher to judge whether the relevant news item is fitting into a positive, negative, neutral, or unclassified protocol (see the codebook in the appendix).

Finally, the classified data could be statistically analyzed to investigate whether there was a general tendency of the negative representations of police image in relation to the police’s order-maintenance duties. Also, by a statistical analysis of the data, researcher would attempt to investigate whether there was a general tendency of positive representations of police image in relation to the police’s crime-fighting duties.

**Data Reporting and Analysis**

The researcher intensively collected the relevant news items on every single day in the duration of Occupy Movement. A total of 1,769 news items were collected. Among them, there are a total of 883 relevant news items. More specifically, in
the crime-fighting aspect, the number of relevant news items, which were sorted out by using the dual keywords of “police and crime,” is 166. The number of news items derived from the dual keywords of “police and robbery” is 43. Finally, those being generated by the dual keywords of “police and steal” is 84. As a result, a total of 293 news items of relevance to the police’s crime-fighting work were collected.

However, concerning the police’s order-maintenance work, the number of relevant news items, which were sorted out by using the dual keywords of “police and order,” is 173. The number of news items developed from the dual keywords of “police and demonstration” is 336. Finally, those being searched by the dual keywords of “police and protest” is 81. In summary, a total of 590 news items of relevance to the police’s order-maintenance duties were collected.

After the data collection, all the relevant news items were classified into four categories: (a) showing positive police image, (b) showing negative police image, (c) showing neutral police image, and (d) unclassified items. The results are tabulated in Table 1.

From the above collected data, what this study would call a “police image index” is then created with the purpose of showing the overall representations of police image when the police performed crime-fighting and order-maintenance duties, respectively. Analytically, the police image index for crime-fighting duties was generated by a summation of the relevant news items derived from the three sets of dual keywords, that is, “police and crime,” “police and robbery,” and “police and steal.” Similarly, the police image index for order-maintenance duties was generated by a statistical addition of the relevant news items derived from another three sets of dual keywords, that is, “police and order,” “police and demonstration,” and “police and protest.” After adding up all the news items with positive, negative, neutral, and unclassified police images, the figures are shown in Table 2.

From the collected data, we can basically confirm the two fundamental hypotheses in this study: First, the media representation of police image tended to be positive when the police were handling the crime-fighting duties, as shown in Table 2, with a majority of 62.1% of the news items indicating positive police image. Second, the media representation of police image tended to be negative when the police were performing the order-maintenance duties, as also shown in Table 2 with a majority of 59.7% of the news items showing negative police image. Finally, it is worth noting that in the duration of Hong Kong’s Occupy Movement, the overall representation of police image in the newspaper accounts tended to be negative in a relative term of 43.9% news items. However, simultaneously, there were 33.7% news items showing positive police image during that time. This suggests that the police image was not necessarily turning into the negative one by a landslide during a politicalized period. The reasons for these findings will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Discussion

The above findings are to be mainly discussed in threefold. First, it is about the implications for the police image derived from the police’s crime-fighting duties. Second, it concerns the police image related to the police’s order-maintenance work. Finally, the overall representation of police image and its theoretical implications are discussed.
As regards to how the police image tends to be positive when performing crime-fighting duties, there are a number of important reasons outlined as below:

1. The positive representations of police image are largely due to the news reporting that described the police dealing with the crime efficiently and effectively.
2. A large number of news items were the reporting of court cases. In these kinds of new items, the police were more than often portrayed as an able law enforcement agency, which could successfully bring the criminals to justice.
3. The news reporting always mentioned that the citizens showed their support of the police dealing with the criminals.

Concerning the negative representations of police image, it is worth pointing out that the political inclination of local media has played a significant role in explaining the formulation of negative police image. In this research, the three selected newspapers were (a) Oriental Daily, (b) Apple Daily, and (c) Ming Pao. Simply put, in terms of political inclination, the Oriental Daily could be delineated as pro-establishment media, whereas the Apple Daily could be perceived as pro-democracy newspaper. In between the two, the Ming Pao somewhat remained to be politically neutral with the objective editorial for news reporting. As such, according to various political standings of the newspaper account, there are three particular sets of reasons for understanding the negative representations of police image during the Occupy Movement:

1. In the Oriental Daily, the editorial explicitly criticized the Occupy Movement. In particular, the demonstrators were very often portrayed as those who were uncontrollable. At best, the demonstrators were reported to be unwilling to cooperate with the police; at worst, the demonstrators were reported to be challenging the police authority. According to the coding guideline in this research, all these news items suggested the police’s incapability in their order-maintenance duties, thus being classified as showing the negative police images.
2. In the Apple Daily, the editorial explicitly showed support to the Occupy Movement. In particular, the police were always portrayed as those whose action were violating human rights, constituting unfair treatment to the demonstrators, and even breaching the rule of law. It is also noteworthy that the police were frequently accused of being the political tool of government, no matter the Hong Kong Government or the Central Government of China, during the Occupy Movement. All these news items were therefore classified as representing the negative police image.
3. In the Ming Pao, the editorial tended to stay neutral. In its news reporting, the Occupy Movement was being neither criticized nor supported. However, the police images were being largely represented as negative. This was partly due to the fact that even the neutral reporting of the serious clash between the police and demonstrators were in itself showing the negative police image, in the sense that the police were unable to perform their order-maintenance work. In addition, seven police officers who were alleged to beat up one of the demonstrators in the Occupy Movement were widely and intensively reported. Regardless of whether the allegation is true, the news reporting of this instance had conjured up many negative representations of police images.

Last but not the least, as shown in the Table 2, the overall representations of positive police image counted up to 33.7% whereas the summation of negative images was 43.9%. In view of the figures, the police image during the Occupy Movement could be confirmed as neither positive nor negative by a landslide. This has several important implications. Most important, the overall media representations of police image would somewhat fail to reflect an inclination of the real police image, given that the police image is not closely associated with the major distinction of police role between peacekeeper and law enforcer. Methodically, the measurement of an overall media representation of police images could be even misleading, in case that it was conducted during a special period that there were no any major kind of either public order event or criminal activities. Therefore, it is worth noting that the representations of police image and their associations with the police roles and functions are sort of a monolithic bloc. In such as much politicalized context as in the Hong Kong’s Occupy Movement, it is not surprising to observe that the negative images, corresponding to the police’s order-maintenance works, added up to the high level of 59.7% (as indicated in Table 2). However, it should be remarkable to find that the positive images, corresponding to the police’s crime-fighting duties, also stayed at the high level of 62.1% (as also indicated in Table 2). In other words, this suggests that however negative the police image of handling controversial public order event is, it has very little bearing on the police image of fighting crime.

Theoretically, the significances of this study are twofold. Concerning the media representations of police image and their relation to crime, despite the conservative view that the media accounts would tend to subvert the police authority, this study is showing an opposite tendency that in the newspaper accounts, the police are much more likely to gain the public support, secure the legitimacy, and display both the efficiency and effectiveness of police action when performing crime-fighting duties. In this aspect, Reiner’s (2003) “police fetishism” is still under the auspices of the media representation. What is innovative in this study is that this sort of “police fetishism” could be established when the police were caught in exceptionally politicalized circumstances, like the Occupy Movement in Hong Kong. Thinking
along this line, another significance of this study is concerned about the “possible” and “impossible” police mandates (Manning, 1977, 2005, 2010). As informed by the literature, the so-called “possible” police mandate, no matter in the name of crime fighter or in terms of “police fetishism,” is to serve the purpose of concealing the fact that policing is an inherently political activity. However, this study shows that a successful portrayal of the police as crime fighters would not necessarily function to legitimize the “impossible” police mandate, thus de-politicizing the police role as a governmental tool for “peacekeeping” for various political reasons. The opposite is also true; that is, a highly politicized depiction of the police as “peacekeepers” would not be destined to deal a blow to the “possible” mandate for crime fighting. Taken together, the conception of police role is much more dynamic than we are informed by the previous literature in police studies, at least we can now understand that the “possible” and “impossible” police mandates are not mutually exclusive in the media representation.

Conclusive Remarks

The current study on the conception of police role should not be conclusive, especially when we observe the dynamic coexistence of “possible” and “impossible” police mandate. In view of this, the present research could be further developed along several dimensions in the near future. In particular, the qualitative methodology could be adopted to conduct some specific types of content analysis. Based on the quantitative results, this research confirmed that the positive police images were frequently represented in the news reports on crime fighting. However, we know little about the perceptions of police role in some specific types of crime, for example, the offences with sexual elements or serious violence. Similarly, we know even less about the ideological reflections of police action in managing mass demonstrations staged by various political groups, for example, the pan-democrats versus pro-establishment camp in Hong Kong.

By and large, the media representations of police image have profound symbolic significance, in the sense that they are an integral part of “the presentation of society as governed by the rule of law” (Reiner, 2000, p. 138). From Hong Kong’s perspective, a longitudinally comparative study on the media representations of Hong Kong’s police image between the colonial and post-handover era would deserve our scholarly effort. From an international point of view, a comparative study on the media representations of Hong Kong’s police image with the ones in other Asian cities would also be worth an intellectual consideration. In summary, the present study has been designated to investigate the media images of police role in one singular period of Hong Kong’s Occupy Movement. The future directions could be moving toward different times and places.

Appendix

Methods for Coding Relevant News Items.

| (A) Positive | (B) Negative | (C) Neutral | (U) Unclassified |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| A1           | B1           | C1          | U1              |
| *There is any kind of praise or compliment given by the reporter or editor to the police* | *There is any kind of blame or criticism by the reporter or editor given to the police* | *There is no any kind of complement or criticism given to the police* | *The news item that does not meet any criterion of “positive,” “negative,” and “neutral” coding* |
| A2           | B2           | C2          | U2              |
| *There is any kind of praise or compliment given by the citizen to the police* | *There is any kind of blame or criticism given by the citizen to the police* | *There is no any kind of complement or criticism given to the police* | *(e.g., A1 + B2)* |
| A3           | B3           | C3          | U3              |
| *The police successfully perform their duties* | *The police unsuccessfully perform their duties* | *There is no mention of whether or not the police successfully perform their duties* | *The news item that simultaneously meets the criterion of “positive” and “negative” coding* |
| A4           | B4           | C4          | U4              |
| *The police are being supported when they performed their duties* | *The police are not being supported when they performed their duties* | *There is no mention of whether or not the police are being supported when they performed their duties* | |
| A5           | B5           | C5          | U5              |
| *The police are not being accused of a crime or offence during performing duties* | *The police are being accused of a crime or offence during performing duties* | *There is no mention of whether or not the police are being accused of a crime or offence during performing duties* | |
| A6           | B6           | C6          | U6              |
| *There is no controversy or conflict over the police action* | *There is controversy or conflict over the police action* | *There is no mention of police action* | |

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