Women Under Authoritarianism: Precarious, Glamorous Women Politicians in Hong Kong Political News and Gossip

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This study combines content analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine how the media representation of politicians is shaped by their gender, political identities, political leanings of the press, and journalism genres, with a sample of 946 news articles during the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Results show that women legislators in Hong Kong are more visible in softer journalism than hard news. Under authoritarianism, women politicians with liberal, prodemocracy agendas are particularly vulnerable to what Gaye Tuchman terms the "symbolic annihilation" by the media. Although celebrity journalism tends to portray more women politicians over men regardless of their political leanings, it often stresses women's gender over their profession. This study brings in an intersectional, cultural studies approach to research on gender and news.

Keywords: feminist media studies, women in politics, media representation of women, celebrity culture, discourse analysis, cultural studies, Hong Kong

Women Politicians Under Political Authoritarianism

On the return of Hong Kong to Chinese control in 1997 after more than 150 years under British colonialism, there has been a reinvention of patriarchal Confucian values in law and society by the mainland Chinese government to reinforce an authoritarian order amid political insecurity in Hong Kong (Jones, 2001).[2] The lack of solid, citywide feminist movement in Hong Kong has urged the local feminist activists to

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[2] In fact, different versions of patriarchy that is infused with women's oppression were instituted across the colonial and posthandover periods in Hong Kong. During the early colonial years, the British colonial government coopted Chinese male business and rural elites to perpetuate patriarchal social institutions in Hong Kong, in the name of preserving the native Chinese social customs and practices, including accepting the mui tsai (girl slave) system until the 1950s and polygamy until the 1970s (Lee, 2007, p. 4). Only in the mid-1980s, to claim public legitimacy, the colonial government introduced a Bill of Rights based on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which registered and reinforced gender equality as universal human rights in the public sphere. With the heightened political consciousness of the public that

translate their feminist agendas into transnational solidarity, which relied heavily on vague international treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the United Nations (Lim, 2015). Gender equality in Hong Kong is predominately registered as part of the universal human rights discourse, enshrined in the Bill of Rights based on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights introduced to Hong Kong by the British colonial government in the 1980s. In posthandover Hong Kong, the swing toward authoritarianism has threatened this universal human rights discourse, including gender equality, and continued to promote conservative, gendered Chinese Confucian values of deference and obedience to both the husband as the patriarch and the state as the superpatriarch.

Notwithstanding the broader political climate, the wider public voted more women into the legislature of Hong Kong, which was the only political institution in Hong Kong that was endorsed by territorywide votes. The representation of women in the Legislative Council (LegCo) of Hong Kong rose sharply from 9.4% in 2009 to 18% in 2016. These women politicians, especially those with liberal, feminist agendas, represented a challenge to both the authority of the husband and that of the authoritarian state. How could these women politicians advocate for the public in such precarious positions?

Popularly elected legislators[3] in Hong Kong relied heavily on the mainstream media to put the unelected government and its political rivals who were not popularly elected under the scrutiny of "public opinion" in the first two decades on the handover. Under the weakened legislature of Hong Kong that accords most policy making power to the executive branch, the political influence of the legislature derived primarily from public opinion support instead of its constitutional power (Ma, 2007, pp. 129–139). Before the People's Republic of China (PRC) government tightened its control over Hong Kong by introducing a sweeping national security law in 2020, Hong Kong enjoyed a relatively high degree of press freedom. The press in Hong Kong represented diverse political ideologies and was once an alternative-representative institution that performed the "surrogate democracy function" to handle social and political conflicts (Chan & So, 2005, pp. 68–69). By 2019, there were 82 registered newspapers in Hong Kong, which had one of the highest newspaper readerships in Asia and became one of the world's largest outlets for Chinese-language publications (The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2020). In the immediate posthandover period between 1997 and 2019, the mass media remained some of the primary sites for circulating public discourses. How did the media represent the popularly elected women legislators, whose public presence could seemingly threaten the authoritarian, patriarchal order?

This study will show that Hong Kong women politicians, especially prodemocracy women, were underrepresented in hard news, but women politicians were overrepresented in soft news quantitatively. A follow-up critical discourse analysis will reveal how and why prodemocracy women were particularly vulnerable to "symbolic annihilation" in hard news and how and why women politicians, regardless of their

advocated "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" in the decade right before the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong to China in 1997, there was also increasing support toward women's rights.

[3] For example, in the 2012-2016 Legislative Council (LegCo), among the 70 seats, there were 35 geographical constituencies and five functional constituencies that represented the territorywide votes, and the remaining 30 constituencies were elected only by selected professional groups, special interest groups, and business corporations and organizations.

political leanings, were more visible as celebrity figures than men in soft news. This study will show that women politicians, including those who achieved the top in the political arena, were still subject to trivialization and sexualization by the media in Hong Kong.

The Symbolic Annihilation of Public Women

Literature in feminist media studies shows that women who run for office, despite their powerful and influential positions, have been omitted, trivialized, and condemned—what Gaye Tuchman (2000) found and termed "symbolic annihilation"—by the media. This pattern holds true in territories with various degrees of democratization worldwide. Women are less visible than men in the news of national or international significance in the United States (Zoch & Turk, 1998) and serve as news sources much less frequently in the United Kingdom (Ross, 2011). Within their limited visibility in the press, women politicians are often trivialized. The news coverage of women politicians focuses more on their personal matters than their professional work, which overshadows their accomplishments in politics (Alvares, Krijnen, & Van Bauwel, 2011; Byerly & Ross, 2008; Campus, 2013; Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012). In Belgium, women candidates' appearance and family life are more often highlighted (D'Heer, De Vuyst, & Van Leuven, 2021), and sexism in the media persists even though the representation of women in parliament has sharply increased there (Hooghe, Jacobs, & Claes, 2015). A cross-cultural study finds that in the election campaigns in Australia, Canada, and the United States, for example, women candidates are confined to stereotypically "feminine" social policy topics, such as education, welfare, childcare, and women's rights, and are less referenced to economic and foreign policy issues (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008). A study of the Dutch media reveals that the media evaluate male politicians on traits that belong to stereotypically male leaders, but female politicians have no such advantage (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2020). In the Bulgarian and Zambian press, women members of parliament and politicians are silenced and trivialized likewise (Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Kasoma, 2014). Women politicians are marginalized in political news despite decades of advocacy for gender equality in Nigeria (Ette, 2017). While the gap in media visibility between men and women political leaders is closing worldwide, especially in democratized regions, feminist news researchers Karen Ross and Cynthia Carter (2011) argue that women political actors are seen only at best as novelties in the media.

With the increasing visualization of news and the growing importance of celebrity culture in political communication, women's bodies are more often being sexualized, which turns them into spectacles to be looked at in the media (Holland, 2002; van Zoonen, 2005). The sexualization of women by the media includes women politicians, making them more difficult to view as reliable political figures, and women politicians often fail to present themselves either as reliable politicians or fully fledged women (van Zoonen, 2005, 2006). Contrary to this binary of career and femininity somehow, in one of the rare studies of the media representation of female officials in Hong Kong, Francis L. F. Lee (2004) argues that the media in Hong Kong often portray some high-profile female officials as "perfect women" who excel both at work and in the family. The Hong Kong media grant the ability to women to do both—being rational at work and tender at home—and regard them as "successful." Yet as Lee (2004) points out, this ideology of "perfect women" trivializes the female officials' struggles in doing both professional career and homemaking and reinforces the "double burden" that confines women more than men (p. 220). This discourse of "perfect women" surrounding female officials is crucial because the prominence of female officials is often quoted as

evidence for gender equality in Hong Kong's public discourse. Yet more research has to be done to delineate how much this neoliberalist "perfect women" discourse actually embodies local feminist ideals in Hong Kong.

To the best of my knowledge, few studies have adopted the perspective of intersectionality to investigate what Tuchman (2000) termed the symbolic annihilation of women politicians by the media, except Fiig's (2010) study that employs an intersectional perspective to examine the media representation of Özlem Cekic, a Danish-Kurdish Muslim woman legislator in Denmark. Fiig (2010) argues for a broader intersectional perspective that considers how gender is related to other social categories, including class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality, in researching the media representation of women politicians, as previous studies often assume "women political leaders" as a uniform group. The study here points out that besides social categories, political identities divide the group of "women politicians." In fact, in regions like Hong Kong, where political authoritarianism is threatening its democratization and gender equality, within the group of "women politicians," the ones with liberal, feminist agendas would be particularly precarious. This study complicates the previous research paradigm by considering the gender of the politicians with their political identities while controlling the political ideologies of the press. In addition, I argue that it is crucial to also investigate the representation of politicians in the trivialized "soft" news that previous studies have rarely included.

News as a Masculinist Construct

Studies of the media representation of women politicians have concentrated on political news, focusing solely on the sexism the public women faced in hard news. However, softer news is not irrelevant or frivolous to a politician's formal work. In the arenas of media and politics, the meanings of personal and political are always shifting and overlapping. As van Zoonen (2005) points out, formal politics is part of everyday culture, which intersects with entertainment that is in touch with the experiences of ordinary people. In fact, the newspaper as a commercial product seeks to amuse as much as to inform, appealing to both the emotion and the intellect. The newspaper is made up of a mix of daily news, celebrity journalism, op-eds, and other forms of content. Moreover, the hierarchy of hard news over soft news is derived from the journalistic practices infused with masculinist assumptions of public, truth, and objectivity, which deserve a radical feminist critique.

Thus, I bring in the perspective of cultural studies that considers how "other news," such as gossip and tabloid news, are as important as "hard news" (Langer, 2006) to further the investigation of the media representation of women politicians. I also pay attention to how privileging consumption over production in celebrity culture makes it hard for women politicians to establish authority and reliability (van Zoonen, 2006). News as a genre, as stabilized by the liberal model of journalistic professionalism, tends to trivialize and neglect the experience of women because it devalues differences and sensibilities as "irrational" and delegitimizes those claims that are "private," "trivial," and "sensational" (Glynn, 2000; McLaughlin, 1998). The overreliance on the static notion of the "public" can depoliticize the "private." For example, domestic violence is still treated as a "private issue" that does not deserve media attention in many contexts (Fraser, 1990). Since the emergence of the modern press in the 1830s, mainstream newspapers have been persuading the public to believe the "objective truth" they represent, which indeed corresponds with the life experiences of the powerful White men, who are the dominant class in society (Schudson, 1981, p. 91).

Soft news is still widely perceived as less important than politics and sports, and many women journalists are confined to the "pink ghettos" as soft news is yet to be given more credibility, and many women are precluded from reporting hard news (North, 2016).

Some feminists then move beyond the stereotypical media portrayal of women to question the deeply rooted antithesis between public and femininity and what constitutes the public and the private (Sreberny & van Zoonen, 2000). They argue that news is associated with the "public," the province of elites and men, and that women would not appear as the authority figures in the news media anyway (Carter, Branston, & Allan, 1998). Regardless of the number of women as news sources, the news would be constructed as a masculine narrative that fends women off the public sphere who signify nature-sexuality-family (Brown & Gardetto, 2000; Rakow & Kranich, 1991). Therefore, besides investigating how the press, especially political news, treats women and men politicians differently as previous feminist media studies do, it is also important to stay critical of the gendered hierarchy of hard, public, political news over soft, private, personal news.

Research Questions

By fusing the feminist media studies paradigm with the cultural studies approach, this study asks, first, what was the visibility of Hong Kong women politicians in the news media? How would this visibility change if one also considered the political leanings of the women politicians, the political ideologies of the press, and the genre of the news articles? Second, how and why women politicians in Hong Kong were subject to symbolic annihilation differently, depending on their political leanings, the political orientation of the newspaper, and the news genre?

Methods

This study uses mixed methods to examine how the media representations of politicians are shaped by their genders, political identities, political leanings of the press, and journalism genres, with an intersectional feminist lens. The framework considers the politicians' overlapping identities and experiences, with specific attention to the precarious subjects: the popularly elected women who carried democratic, feminist agendas in Hong Kong that were at odds with the patriarchal political order instituted by Chinese authoritarianism. I focus on the period of the Umbrella Movement in 2014,[4] when legislators still played

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[4] On August 31, 2014, the People's Republic of China (PRC) government announced its decision on the constitutional reform of Hong Kong. A nomination committee of 1,200 members should elect two or three chief executive candidates before a territorywide ballot by ordinary voters. Public dissatisfaction with this decision triggered a 79–day-long occupation movement in the city's hubs, widely known as the Umbrella Movement. In the subsequent years, a series of protests echoed the Umbrella Movement, notably those that were triggered by the introductions of the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill by the Hong Kong government in 2019 and a national security law by the PRC government in 2020. Although the popularly elected legislators were facing more overt challenges by the public on their actual influence on the government since the Umbrella Movement, as the only public representatives within the formal political institution, these

prominent roles in mobilizing the mass, especially through the press, and where the representations of different political ideologies were still possible before the PRC government enforced a sweeping national law in Hong Kong and tightened its control of Hong Kong since 2020.

I use descriptive content analysis to gain some background knowledge on the media visibility of politicians since similar research in the context of Hong Kong is nascent. The frequencies found by content analysis can serve as indicators of a phenomenon (Krippendorff, 2018) and hence are valuable for drawing attention to the overt manifestations of gendered representations in news media. Yet the text meanings are not objective, and they are relative to particular discourses. I then employ critical discourse analysis to further these quantitative findings with a feminist lens to examine how discourses of gender, politics, and media are organized and woven into the media texts. The method of critical discourse analysis can reveal how the hegemonic ideology is discursively produced by rendering alternative discourses ungrammatical (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2005).

For the content analysis, I sampled four newspapers in Hong Kong that best represented the broad political spectrum of Hong Kong in 2014. The sample includes antistate *Apple Daily*, prodemocracy *Ming Pao*, prostate *Oriental Daily*, and state-sponsored *Wen Wei Po*. Despite the contrasting political ideologies of *Apple Daily* and *Oriental Daily*, both were mass-oriented newspapers that adopted tabloid styles in reporting and had the highest circulations in Hong Kong. *Ming Pao* was the only elite-centered broadsheet in the sample with a prodemocracy standing. The state-sponsored *Wen Wei Po* had the lowest circulation among the four newspapers but often represented the official mouthpiece of the PRC government.

I located all the articles in these newspapers that mentioned the names of the popularly elected legislators in the Fifth Legislative Council (2012–2016), including 11 women and 29 men, during the Umbrella Movement in 2014.[5] I set the condition of visibility by limiting the sample to articles that devoted more than 250 Chinese words to the designated legislators. The final sample has 946 articles. For each article, I noted the gender(s) and political affiliation(s) of the legislator(s) and the newspaper source and journalism genre of the article. I then selected four articles for close reading, and the reasons for choosing these articles are illustrated in the analysis.

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politicians still played prominent roles in mobilizing the mass, especially through the press, where the representations of different political ideologies were still possible.

[5] I obtained the articles through the digital news database WiseNews. These are the articles that mentioned the names of the directly elected legislators in the Fifth Legislative Council (2012–2016) and published in the newspapers from September 29, 2014, to December 16, 2014. This preliminary sample contains 5,748 articles and covers the whole period of the Umbrella Movement between September 28, 2014, to December 15, 2014, across four major Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong.

Where Were the Women Politicians?

There were striking variations in women politicians' visibilities across journalism genres. Without distinguishing the genres, the overall media visibility of women politicians was close to their actual representation in the legislature: About 28% of newspaper articles (n = 274) on popularly elected legislators covered women legislators, who made up 29% of the popularly elected seats (n = 11) in the Fifth LegCo (2012–2016) (Legislative Council of The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of The People's Republic of China, 2012). However, women's visibilities varied sharply across journalism genres. In "hard news," the visibility of women to men was 1 to 3.20. In other words, for about every three male politicians who appeared in the press, one female politician became visible. The visibility of women to men rose sharply in genres that were less bound by the journalistic rules of objectivity: 1 to 3.09 in "editorials" and 1 to 1.29 in "political gossip," and only women appeared in "magazine features."[6]

Given the variations across journalism genres, I then want to ask further, first, within the limited coverage of women politicians in "hard news," how could they advocate for the public in the media, especially promoting democratic, feminist agendas? Second, if women were highly visible in genres such as political gossip, what would they be visible for? What kind of political information was filtered through the entertainment materials?

"Hard" News Was Hard for Liberal Public Women

The quantitative findings suggest that women politicians were confined to the softer journalism genres, as they were least visible in "hard" news than in other genres. Worse, within "hard" news, of the 20 news headlines that featured legislators on the cover pages, none of them covered women politicians. The lower visibility of women legislators in "hard" news trivialized the women as politicians because "hard" news, which was usually printed before soft news in newspapers, was directly relevant to their jobs as legislators. For example, the findings reveal that "hard" news was the most common genre where legislators became visible in the press: About 60% of the total articles in this sample were categorized as "hard news" written in a conventional journalistic manner. Moreover, political news contained important materials for legislators to claim public opinion support and legitimacy to scrutinize the nonelected government in Hong Kong (Chan & So, 2005; Ma, 2007). Thus, the findings of women politicians in Hong Kong correspond with many studies elsewhere that argue women are less visible in news that is politically and socially significant (Ross, 2011).

Yet "women politicians" is not a uniform, static group. In their actual political activism, legislators in Hong Kong were organized around their political parties more than their genders. When considering the

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[6] I divided genre into the four most common categories that emerged from the sample. "Hard news" includes daily news and feature-length news that is written with a journalistic objective voice; "editorials" include op-eds and current affairs columns that stress particular points of view and in-depth analysis; "political gossip" refers to a specific genre in Hong Kong newspapers that report rumors about politicians; "magazine features" are articles that adopt magazine style to feature specifically the lifestyles of celebrity politicians.

women leaders' political affiliations and the newspapers' political ideologies,[7] very different media visibilities between the two political camps of women emerged.[8]

There was an extreme underrepresentation of prodemocracy women in the prostate press, which was not found in the proestablishment women. Proestablishment women's visibilities were fairly consistent across newspapers of different political leanings: of the articles that covered proestablishment lawmakers, between 34% and 50% covered women leaders over men.[9] In contrast, while about 25% of the prodemocracy newspaper *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao* articles covered prodemocracy women over men,[10] less than 12% of the articles in the prostate press—*Wen Wei Po* and *Oriental Daily*—covered prodemocracy women over men. In other words, only prodemocracy women but not proestablishment women were underrepresented in the media, and the prodemocracy women were underrepresented only in the prostate newspapers.

To investigate how the prostate press might have disadvantaged women political leaders, especially those with liberal, feminist agendas, I will take a closer look at the coverage in the antistate *Apple Daily* (Apple Daily, 2014) and that in the state newspaper *Wen Wei Po* (Z. M. Lee, 2014) on veteran feminist legislator Emily Lau and, specifically, her plan to raise international attention to the sexual harassment issue during the Umbrella Movement. Emily Lau was the first woman lawmaker who won a popular election in the history of Hong Kong politics. She served the legislature for more than 15 years and became the first and only woman leader of the male-dominated Democracy Party before she stepped down in 2016. She was also one of the few women political leaders in Hong Kong who would proclaim herself a feminist.

Since the first week of the Umbrella Movement, there were reportedly repeated incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assaults against women protesters. About 30 feminist and gender organizations launched a hotline for reporting sexual violence for the movement. They said the cases and figures would be reported to the United Nations (The Association for the Advancement of Feminism, 2014). Echoing this feminist effort, in the third week of the Umbrella Movement, Emily Lau announced to the media her plan to report the democratic development and the status of human rights in Hong Kong to the United Nations in Geneva, including the sexual harassment incidents. Both *Apple Daily* and *Wen Wei Po* covered Emily Lau's plan as daily news on October 17, 2014.

The state-sponsored newspaper *Wen Wei Po* adopted a hostile tone toward Emily Lau throughout its coverage and framed Emily Lau's report to the United Nations as an "issue" that invited foreign, Western intervention to China. The article's title read, "Pigeon Party Bad-Mouthing Hong Kong in the United Nations, The Political Arena Denounced 'Wicked Heart'" (Z. M. Lee, 2014, p. A08). *Wen Wei Po* belittled the Democratic Party by calling it the "pigeon party" and cited a comment from Emily Lau's political,

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[7] In the context of Hong Kong, legislators were segregated into two political camps during the Umbrella Movement in 2014: prodemocracy and proestablishment. Likewise, the mainstream newspapers were leaning toward either democracy or the authoritarian state.

[8] In 2014, legislators were generally spilt into either proestablishment or prodemocracy.

[9] About 35% of proestablishment lawmakers were women.

[10] About 25% of prodemocracy lawmakers were women.

proestablishment rival in the lead paragraph, who said Emily Lau "was no different from a traitor who invited foreign intervention" (Z. M. Lee, 2014, p. A08). In an even more blunt statement, *Wen Wei Po* wrote that "the opposing party of Hong Kong was trying to build a platform for Britain and America to intervene" (Z. M. Lee, 2014, p. A08), and reported that both British Prime Minister David Cameron and the spokesperson for the United States Department of State had expressed concerns over the Umbrella Movement when Emily Lau was preparing to depart for Geneva. *Wen Wei Po* drew on the discourse of nationalism to assert a clear boundary between us and the other and reaffirmed that China was granted the exclusive authority to handle Hong Kong's affairs on Hong Kong's handover. The state newspaper framed the Umbrella Movement as primarily an "internal" affair of China and delegitimized Emily Lau's plan to Geneva as a move that sought a "foreign" alliance to threaten the state's security. The visual treatment also vividly demonstrated the trivialization of Emily Lau. While this news article was about the plan of the Democracy Party that Emily Lau led, as also indicated by the headline, the original article included only the snapshots of four proestablishment men who criticized Emily Lau.

In excluding the "other," *Wen Wei Po* played down the sexual harassment scandal. At the end of the news article, after presenting all the criticisms of Emily Lau, *Wen Wei Po* reported, in one line, "Democracy Party Chairperson Emily Lau and others will depart for Geneva, who claimed that they would report Hong Kong's situations, including the police turning a blind eye to how some women protesters were sexually harassed in the Occupy Movement" (Z. M. Lee, 2014, p. A08). The repeated sexual harassment incidents were not treated as an issue that merited more attention in *Wen Wei Po*, which appeared as merely one of the example items concerning Hong Kong's democracy that Emily Lau would cover in the United Nations. Moreover, *Wen Wei Po* portrayed democracy as a dangerous Western discourse that should be precluded from Hong Kong's political deliberation, which, by association, delegitimized gender equality. *Wen Wei Po* condemned, trivialized, and omitted even a veteran political leader like Emily Lau and her concern.

A closer reading of how the prostate newspapers represented the proestablishment women would support that the prostate press tended to delegitimate the prodemocracy women like Emily Lau more than the proestablishment women and the liberal, feminist agenda that challenged the authoritarian regime. On November 27, 2014, the prostate *Oriental Daily* devoted a whole article on how proestablishment women legislators Yue-han Chan and Alice Mak advocated for an extension of the statutory maternity leave from 10 weeks to 14 weeks (*Oriental Daily*, 2014). The coverage shows that the proestablishment women did sometimes advocate for women but often only in areas that would not challenge the authoritarian regime, such as the welfare policy like the statutory maternity leave. In fact, all women legislators from the proestablishment camp remained silent on the sexual harassment issue faced by the female protesters during the Umbrella Movement, which protested the authoritarian regime. Since the issues the proestablishment women raised, including the women-related affairs, were often politically "safe," it would be easier for them than their prodemocracy counterparts to become visible in the prostate press that tended to delegitimize the feminist agenda that would challenge the authoritarian regime.

The different treatments of proestablishment and prodemocracy women politicians by the prostate press suggested that the prostate press, like *Wen Wei Po*, tended to delegitimize the liberal, feminist agenda that was tied to the broader democratization of Hong Kong. This explained the extreme underrepresentation of prodemocracy women politicians in the prostate media indicated by the quantitative findings. In

posthandover Hong Kong, the state had been culturally and structurally imposing more control over Hong Kong through reinforcing obedience to patriarchy in law and society (Jones, 2001). The case here showed that the public personas of democratic political leaders like Emily Lau as a nonconforming woman threatened the patriarchal authoritarian order. With the support of the prostate media that promoted and perpetuated hypermasculinism of the authoritarian regime, the state could effectively trivialize the voices of women who advocated for democracy in the public sphere.

Contrary to *Wen Wei Po,* the prodemocracy *Apple Daily* adopted a more positive tone and included more details in portraying Emily Lau's plan. Still, in the article's lead paragraph, *Apple Daily* portrayed only how the Democratic Party would urge the United Nations to review the chief executive's election method but did not mention the repeated sexual harassment incidents. *Apple Daily,* only in the last two paragraphs of the article, quoted Emily Lau as saying that "the Hong Kong police did not fully guarantee their freedom of expression and basic human rights; it was an example of regression of feminism. I hope the United Nations can strongly denounce this" (Apple Daily, 2014, p. A08). In the end, *Apple Daily* also cited Josephine Chan, another feminist activist in the Democratic Party, "They would urge the United Nations to monitor the HKSAR government to protect the women protesters from indecent assault, sexual harassment, and threats in the protests" (Apple Daily, 2014, p. A08).

In this way, *Apple Daily* reassured the reader that Hong Kong would need to resort to the United Nations to guarantee Hong Kong citizens' freedom of expression and basic human rights, including gender equality. However, there was no separate follow-up report on repeated sexual harassment in the newspaper, and gender equality did not appear as a primary concern in the news coverage.

Without a widespread feminist consciousness in the civil society of Hong Kong, prodemocracy mainstream newspapers like *Apple Daily* would make feminism visible only whenever it fit the agenda of the dominant right-based, liberal feminism paradigm that was aligned with the version of transnational feminism endorsed by the United Nations and the discourse of universal human rights (Lim, 2015), which became even harder to sustain under the Chinese authoritarian regime in posthandover Hong Kong. In mobilizing the mass through the mainstream media, Emily's appeal to the United Nations for women's rights that concerned the safety of women protesters, therefore, remained secondary to the issue of the "general" political development in Hong Kong like democratizing the election for the chief executive.

Overall, the media visibility of Hong Kong women lawmakers in the mainstream press echoed the feminist studies elsewhere that women politicians were confined to softer journalism genres over political news, which trivialized them as politicians. But what previous studies rarely recognize is that under an authoritarian order, which often privileged security at the state level over universal human rights, women leaders with the liberal, prodemocracy agenda were particularly vulnerable to what Tuchman (2000) called the symbolic annihilation by the media, especially by the prostate press that supported the patriarchal authoritarian regime.

Moreover, from a feminist viewpoint, even when the prodemocracy press covered a veteran feminist political leader's feminist activism, women's rights were framed as secondary, supplementary to the "general" democratization of Hong Kong, where civil society was lacking in a widespread feminist

consciousness in civil society. The findings here suggest that it would be arduous for women political leaders, even powerful like Emily Lau, to put forward any liberal, feminist agenda within their already limited visibility in the news in the context of Hong Kong.

Gossipmongers Loved Public Women

As the quantitative findings suggested, unlike in "hard" news, women politicians were highly visible in political gossip. More than 44% of political gossip articles covered the women legislators over men, which far exceeded women's actual representation in the LegCo—29% of the popularly elected seats. Political gossip was a distinctive genre of celebrity journalism, which covered lawmakers and government officials in local newspapers. Political gossip articles accounted for more than 15% of the articles covering lawmakers in the newspapers during the Umbrella Movement. In many ways, this genre was further away from the ideal of objectivity in journalism that the "hard" news genre embodied. It was written in the form of a column with a zany, catchy column name, using the first-person voice, under a specific pen name in each newspaper. Although the "author" would address himself or herself as a person with a specific gender in the column, it was indeed a collective effort by several journalists and columnists behind the scene.[11] The column, printed intermittently between A11 and A20 (A1 as the newspaper's front page), would profile political leaders and government officials as celebrities. Unlike the usual news and op-eds, journalists wrote this tabloid-style genre in colloquial Cantonese, not written Chinese. Moreover, it showed a sharp, unambiguous political orientation that resonated with the newspaper's political ideology.

What would women political leaders be visible for in popular journalism? How did that inform the meanings of the personal, the political, and the popular? Given the genre's prominence in the commercial press,[12] I will examine the coverage of the lawmakers' fashion during the Umbrella Movement by the mass-oriented press, as represented by the prodemocracy *Apple Daily* (B. F. Lee, 2014) and the proestablishment *Oriental Daily* (Coek Nei, 2014).

What was amusing about women political leaders was that they could be sexy yet political, as the political gossip in *Apple Daily* portrayed. Lee Baat Fong, the persona of a male political gossip reporter *Apple Daily* created, wrote a commentary about how charming Emily Lau was. Lee Baat Fong first called Emily Lau "Hing Sister" (Hing Ze), which derived from her Cantonese first name, Wai Hing, and was widely known by

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[11] In *Ming Pao* and *Oriental Daily,* the gossip tellers called themselves Emily and Coek Nei respectively. Both acquired the gender of women and had no surnames. The other two newspapers, *Apple Daily* and *Wen Wei Po*, used masculine personas instead, and their gossipmongers were men with full Cantonese names: Lee Baat Fong and Zeng Zi Zou respectively. "Lee Baat Fong" is an adaptation of the Chinese idiom "sei fong baat min," which means everywhere and all aspects. "Zeng Zi Zou" in *Wen Wei Po* is a pun with "political beat" in Cantonese.

[12] Political gossip on lawmakers was less common in the state-sponsored *Wen Wei Po* (n = 6), when compared with the mass-oriented, prodemocracy *Apple Daily* (n = 62), the mass-oriented, prostate *Oriental Daily* (n = 36), and the elite-based, prodemocracy *Ming Pao* (n = 38).

the Hong Kong public. "Hing Sister" has a positive connotation of her seniority in politics.[13] As an open ally of the Democratic Party, Lee Baat Fong reinforced his support of Emily Lau by calling her Hing Sister and describing how her "glamour overwhelmed the LegCo" (B. F. Lee, 2014, p. A18). "He" praised Emily Lau for "wearing the right political color" (B. F. Lee, 2014, p. A18) because she was wearing a bright yellow jacket, which was the promovement color, on top of an all-black skirt that "mourns the death of universal suffrage in Hong Kong" (B. F. Lee, 2014, p. A18). In contrast with Emily Lau's well-balanced femininity and political power, Lee Baat Fong ridiculed the proestablishment Ann Chiang by calling her Jyun Cau, the name of an actress who was famous for her bossy landlady persona in Hong Kong cinema, popularized by the action-comedy *Kung Fu Hustle.*

        In "his" article, Lee Baat Fong complimented how more well-dressed Emily Lau was than her proestablishment women political rivals. To make it more comical, "he" unabashedly nicknamed Emily Lau "Black Silk/See Hing" (B. F. Lee, 2014, p. A18) and portrayed Emily Lau's charm in explicitly sexual terms:

> While "Black Silk Kong" (actress Elena Kong) became many nerds' dream girl on television, the political arena also had "Black Silk Hing" (Emily Lau). . .Once "Black Silk Hing" showed up and revealed some parts of her body, she outshone both "Jyun Chau" (proestablishment Ann Chiang) and "Ip Lau" (proestablishment Regina Ip). (B. F. Lee, 2014, p. A18)

        Lee Baat Fong depicted that Emily Lau was more attractive than Ann Chiang and Regina Ip because she was sexier than her political rivals, especially when revealing her body in her black silk stockings. The visualization further amplified how the newspaper sexualized these women. All these three women were wearing skirts and photographed in low-angle, full-body shots. They all posed and smiled like fashion models more than politicians in the portraits. The captions of these portraits were overtly pornographic: "Black Silk Temptation," "Blue Ribbon in Flesh," "Mature Lady Showing Off Fleshy Legs" (B. F. Lee, 2014, p. A18).

        How Lee Baat Fong supported Emily Lau and belittled her political rivals, as well as how he performed humor, depended so much on a man's gaze at the bodies of women political leaders. "His" gossip reinforced and amplified that the sexiness of women political leaders and the ways they competed for being the sexiest were entertaining. On the one hand, this example echoed the general trend of popular journalism, where the line between the mass media and pornography was thin, which reasserted the female body, including the powerful politician, as a spectacle for consumption (Holland, 2002), regardless of the politicians' political leanings or the press' political ideologies. The articles even promoted that fashion was part of the legitimate competing field for women politicians. On the other hand, *Apple Daily* reassured that its political ally Emily Lau was sexually attractive and politically competent. Unlike many studies elsewhere that found femininity and politics were depicted as antithesis in the media (Sreberny & van Zoonen, 2000), this case in *Apple Daily* affirmed that women leaders could succeed in both the private and public spheres but trivialized their work to do both (Lee, 2004). The press confused the woman's political ideology with her sexual attractiveness, gender, and femininity.

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[13] It is a courtesy to call the senior or experienced as sisters or brothers in the everyday context of Hong Kong.

If fashion was part of the game in politics, then it would be a harder game for women political leaders than men. In another article of political gossip, *Oriental Daily* made up this woman celebrity journalist Ceok Lei to feature how the two political camps fought for visibility. Coek Lei complimented Ann Chiang's light-blue blouse and the blue ribbon on her chest as "eye-catching." The color blue signified propolice, which was antagonistic to the promovement color yellow and aligned with the political ideology of *Oriental Daily*. Unlike the depiction of Ann Chiang, *Oriental Daily* only briefly described how one of her male colleagues dressed in a matter-of-fact tone: "Mok Lai Kong (Charles) wore a full black suit to the meeting" (Coek Nei, 2014, p. A20). In the upper-body portraits of Charles Mok and Gary Chan, both men were photographed as delivering their speeches at LegCo, with eyes looking at their audience. In Ann Chiang's portrait, however, she was looking into the camera, smiling. Moreover, Coek Lei friendly addressed Ann Chiang as "Ann" while calling five men legislators by their full Chinese names.

The case of Ann Chiang and other women political leaders would agree that the media scrutinized women's appearance much more than men's (D'Heer et al., 2021; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012), and women politicians were depicted as more "casual" and "friendly" than their male counterparts. The representation of Ann Chiang resonated with the situations of women politicians elsewhere: When women were being photographed, their gender was always privileged over their profession (Ross & Sreberny, 2000). In Coek Lei's depiction, Ann Chiang was more visually appealing, yet she got more coverage than her men colleagues in the gossip article. One can deduce that although women politicians were more visible in popular journalism, this heightened visibility also often made them harder to establish themselves as authoritative and reliable figures as politicians (van Zoonen, 2006).

Hong Kong women political leaders and their lives were popular material for celebrity journalism. They were highly visible in political gossip in the commercial press, which made up 15% of the total articles that covered legislators during the Umbrella Movement in the sample, a fairly large share of articles. The media representation of women in political gossip affirmed that femininity, compared with masculinity, was more casual, glamorous, and entertaining. Yet this kind of publicity could become intrusive to these public women, as popular journalism could highly sexualize their bodies and valorize catfights to make them popular (Holland, 2002; van Zoonen, 2006). Moreover, popular journalism legitimized that consumption, in this case wearing the "right" color of fashion, was a legitimate competing field for women politicians, but not for men. It is then legitimate to argue that the women politicians had to play a harder game when celebrity culture became part of politics, as supported by politicians' high visibility in the "softer" news in general.

Conclusion

This study examines how the media representation of politicians is shaped by their genders, political identities, political leanings of the press, and journalism genres, with an intersectional feminist lens. The intersectional lens interrogates "women politicians" as a uniform group by considering how the political leanings of the politicians intersected with their social identity of gender.

This study found that women politicians were less visible in "hard" news than their male counterparts. Moreover, the liberal, prodemocracy women, who were "disobedient" to the state as the

superpatriarch and the husband as the patriarch, were particularly vulnerable to the symbolic annihilation by the mass media, especially by the prostate press, which reinforced the patriarchal, authoritarian order. Even in the prodemocracy press, the lack of widespread feminist consciousness in Hong Kong could marginalize these liberal women's feminist concerns. Regardless of the political orientations of the politicians or of the press, women politicians were more visible in celebrity news. In the discourse of celebrity politics, sexual attractiveness was linked to a woman politician's political ideology but not to a man's. The gossip about women politicians portrayed that women had to compete with their female political rivals in the arena of consumption, like fashion. Therefore, the media portrayals of women and men perpetuated sexism and made it harder for women politicians to establish themselves as reliable, authoritative political figures. Thus, while news—"harder" news—was indeed a masculinist construct in the Hong Kong press, "softer," popular news was also not a way out for women politicians as the genre trivialized their work and was still very much defined by the male gaze.

The study here calls for a more complex research paradigm in studying the media representations of politicians by considering how different social and political identities intersect and factor into the media representation and how different journalism genres, besides hard news, also widely cover politicians as both politicians and celebrity figures.

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