

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Performing as ways of knowing: Projects of legibility and state simplification in postcolonial Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving, adaptive, and self-making characteristics of how the Chinese state accesses and governs postcolonial Hong Kong, focusing on how the state develops ways of hegemonic simplification and projects of legibility through performances and political rituals. While drawing inspirations from Scott's classical concepts, the paper contends that the Chinese state's ways of knowing about Hong Kong are dynamic and performative rather than static and representative. The analysis identifies two primary models of state performativity in postcolonial Hong Kong. The first model, which emerged in the initial years after Hong Kong's reunion to China in 1997, focuses on semiotic mapping between sociolinguistic differentiation and sociopolitical boundary making through improvisational and interactional performance. The second model, which the state began to increasingly develop in the late 2000s, engages in a dialectic of boundary making and boundary breaking through scripted political rituals, aiming to both harmonize and subjugate the local within the state's cosmos. Broadly, this paper emphasizes the importance of viewing the state's performances and rituals as laminated and scalar processes and movements of knowledge making and re-making across sociocultural and sociopolitical timespace.

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Abstraite

Cet article explore les caractéristiques évolutives, adaptatives et autoréalisatrices de la manière dont l'État chinois accède et gouverne Hong Kong postcolonial, en se concentrant sur la manière dont l'État développe des méthodes de simplification hégémonique et des projets de lisibilité à travers les performances et les rituels politiques. Tout en s'inspirant des concepts classiques de Scott, l'article soutient que les manières de connaître Hong Kong de l'État chinois sont dynamiques et performatives plutôt que statiques et représentatives. L'analyse identifie deux modèles principaux de performativité étatique dans le Hong Kong postcolonial. Le premier modèle, qui a émergé dans les premières années après la réunion de Hong Kong à la Chine en 1997, se concentre sur la cartographie sémiotique entre la différenciation sociolinguistique et la création de frontières sociopolitiques à travers une performance improvisationnelle et interactionnelle. Le second modèle, que l'État a commencé à développer de plus en plus à la fin des années 2000, s'engage dans une dialectique de création et de rupture de frontières à travers des rituels politiques scriptés, visant à harmoniser et à soumettre le local dans le cosmos de l'État. De manière générale, cet article souligne l'importance de considérer les performances et les rituels de l'État comme des processus et des mouvements stratifiés et scalaires de création et de recréation de connaissances à travers le temps et l'espace socio-culturel et socio-politique.

INTRODUCTION

The 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration paved the way for the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997, concluding over a century and a half of British colonial rule. According to the treaty, Hong Kong was to retain significant legislative, administrative, and economic autonomy for at least five decades following the transition, a policy the Chinese government christened as “one country, two systems”—**國兩制**.¹ However, the post-handover period in Hong Kong, especially the recent decade, has increasingly witnessed escalating political tensions and social unrest, casting doubts on the Chinese state's capacities and strategies to effectively govern the recently reunited postcolonial region.

This paper delves into the complex issue of how the Chinese state navigates the challenge of taming the locals in Hong Kong. Despite the Chinese government's commitment to preserving most of Hong Kong's British legal, political, and social systems after reunion (excluding defense and foreign affairs), integrating a distinctive local identity with national governance poses a significant dilemma. Cultivating and imposing a sense of common identity and belonging is a typical strategy for nation-states addressing governance challenges; however, the practicality of implementing this strategy in actual cases is not at all clear. In

postcolonial Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Basic Law ensures the continuation of capitalism, the independence of public media from central government control, and full freedom of speech. The maintenance of a postcolonial capitalist democracy, legally protected even after the 2020 introduction of the Hong Kong National Security Law, has substantively limited the Chinese state's ability to apply its political, legal, and social norms prevalent in the mainland to Hong Kong society. Since the reunion in 1997, the state has struggled to penetrate its control into Hong Kong's unique political, social, and cultural landscape in non-violent and non-coercive ways.

The exploration of how modern nation-states construct, disseminate, and fortify state ideologies amid the complex interplay of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and nationalism is a significant area of study in anthropology and other social science disciplines (Greenhouse, 2012; Kaneva, 2011; Olins, 2005). Given China's limited direct legal and administrative influence over Hong Kong's political, economic, and social spheres, the use of semiotic and ideological strategies becomes crucial for pursuing effective governance. In the literature of political communication in the anthropology of the state, one avenue of semiotic analysis focuses on typical or conventional political texts, such as political speeches, official proclamations, and governmental documents (Greenhouse, 2012; Lempert & Silverstein, 2012; Sidnell, 2023). Another analytical perspective prioritizes the examination of the state's performative characteristics in public messaging, particularly in pan-linguistic and semiotic mediums such as spectacles, performances, media, urban design, and nation branding that often resemble commercial tactics (Graan, 2016; Nakassis, 2012; Rodriguez, 2016; Wedeen, 1999, 2019; Yurchak, 2011).

This paper highlights a procedural and performative perspective on contemporary nation-state's strategies of pursuing governance legibility. In the context of Hong Kong, I observe that during the early 2000s, the state engaged in interactional public communication, occasionally but uniquely, through semiotic strategies such as code-switching, code-mixing, and social differentiation via indexical framing (Gal & Irvine, 2019; Silverstein, 2023). Nevertheless, a notable shift occurred starting from the latter part of the decade, during which the state's political messages evolved to encompass both the creation and dissolution of sociopolitical boundaries in scripted and institutionalized performative events. In this period, the state's interventions encompassed a broader yet more ritualized array of carefully scripted semiotic processes for "performing" the state, which were frequently channeled through media and the Internet, and experimented with a variety of semiotic modalities encompassing commercial branding, gala events, official ceremonies, and personal visits by state politicians. These approaches, though intended to optimize the "citationality" and "replicability" (Nakassis, 2012) of the state's political and ideological presence in Hong Kong, represent a nuanced and sophisticated strategy of generating and imposing political epistemology. Crucially, articulating, replicating, and imposing the knowledge about the desired order between the state and region are intricately intertwined and realized through the act and process of performing the state.

PROJECTS OF LEGIBILITY BY THE PERFORMATIVE STATE

The Chinese government faces salient difficulties in accessing Hong Kong's social and cultural realities and generating essential sociopolitical knowledge for governing a territory recently reclaimed under its sovereignty (Hung, 2022). Navigating such a challenge of governmentality, as aptly described by James Scott's work *Seeing like a State* (Scott, 1998), constitutes critical state projects of legibility, which often require the state to implement necessary simplifications, abstractions, and standardizations of the society, highlighting certain local traits while minimizing others. The state's projects of legibility, as Scott emphasizes,

always involve coercive processes of typification, in order to make local societal lives comprehensible to the state, yet paradoxically often further distancing the state from the society's actual reality. Typically, state simplifications in the classical Scottian framework are interested, utilitarian constructs, producing manageable categories for organizing citizens based on written, static, and aggregate data, such as geographical maps, demographic statistics, and income charts.

Often, the state's efforts to grasp and impose coercive abstractions upon local sociopolitical situations meet with resistance and defiance from the local populace, further exacerbating challenges in making the local legible (Blommaert, 2010; Scott, 1998; Vertovec, 2007). These challenges are especially acute in Hong Kong, where even rudimentary abstraction would require careful negotiation and balancing of its multifaceted sociopolitical and socio-economic identity: Hong Kong's unique position as the last major British colony to undergo decolonization, its distinction as the first territory to officially reunite with the PRC since 1949, and its role as a leading economic and financial hub within the context of 21st-century neoliberal globalization. Any legibility and governance tasks in Hong Kong would necessarily require an abstraction of the interplay between these local, national, and global dimensions.

While the classical Scottian framework of state governance is invaluable for understanding the inevitability of the coercive and utilitarian simplification that the state imposes on the society, it typically only focuses on the representative and static characteristics of the state simplification projects. This paper, instead, emphasizes how the state's utilitarian knowledge for governing is semiotically created, perpetuated, crystallized, and actualized through communicative and performative processes (see Table 1). Scholars in anthropology (Graan, 2016; Nakassis, 2012; Rodriguez, 2016), sociology (Alexander, 2004; Brundage, 2023; Collins, 2004; Ozouf, 1988; Reed, 2019; Xu & Gorski, 2018), political science (Ding, 2020; Mampilly, 2015; Weber, 1998; Wedeen, 1999, 2019; Yurchak, 2011), and critical studies (Butler, 1997) have theorized or empirically examined the state's communicative projects as performative ones in diverse contexts. The case of post-reunion Hong Kong, however, stands out as particularly noteworthy. I argue that in Hong Kong, performative

TABLE 1 Comparisons between the static, classical Scottian characteristics of the state's project of legibility (left column; adapted from Scott (1998) by the author) and the dynamic, performative (right column) characteristics of the state's project of legibility that I propose and demonstrate in this paper.

Representative (static) characteristics of the state's project of legibility according to Scott (1998)	Dynamic (communicative and performative) characteristics of the state's project of legibility characterized in this paper
1. The state's project of legibility is achieved via state simplifications, which are predominantly formed by "interested and utilitarian facts."	1*. Interested, utilitarian facts are semiotically produced and reproduced in communication and performance
2. Interested and utilitarian facts are nearly always written, often documentary facts	2*. Written and oral texts and non-linguistic texts all contribute to productions and reproductions of interested and utilitarian facts
3. Interested and utilitarian facts are typically static	3*. Productions and reproductions of interested and utilitarian facts are often dynamically realized via performance or performativity
4. Interested and utilitarian facts are typically aggregated	4*. Productions and reproductions of interested and utilitarian facts reinforce their aggregate characteristics
5. Citizens need to be grouped in order to be collectively assessed via interested and utilitarian facts	5*. Citizens internalize or are anticipated to internalize facts concerning collective grouping that are produced and reproduced via performance or performativity

communication constitutes the state's main epistemological and actional means of generating and imposing hegemonic knowledge of state governance. Notably, the state's performative simplification projects in Hong Kong were both enabled and constrained by modern media from the outset, with television, Internet, and public media as main conduits. Rarely do other instances encompass all these characteristics simultaneously: Public communication, predominantly facilitated by modern media channels, serves as a key strategy for achieving both legitimacy and legibility, and the progression of the state's communicative interventions can be observed from nascent stages to full development within a comparatively short period of time, approximately a decade after 1997.

In practice, largely without the traditional means of achieving legibility as characterized by Scott (1998) for Hong Kong's society,ⁱⁱ the Chinese state is compelled to devise specific semiotic strategies to decipher the intricate sociocultural tapestry of the local societies. These strategies often constitute a crucial step of the state's effort to reformat multicultural characteristics into segregated multilingual groups (Gal, 2016; Gal & Irvine, 2019). As the empirical analysis of this paper will demonstrate, simplifying Hong Kong's multidimensional socio-cultural tapestry, constituted by the local, national, and global, by a one-to-one mapping with three major languages forms one critical and necessary semiotic imagination for the state's project of legibility. According to this imagination, Cantonese is positioned as the singular, emblematic local language representing the primary sociocultural identity, Mandarin is seen as the standard Chinese language, and English is regarded as the lingua franca of international business. Ever since the early post-reunion years in the 2000s, the Chinese government approached the task of regimenting Hong Kong's diverse social and cultural identities through the lens of multilingualism. For the state, the intricate cultural and societal complexity of Hong Kong are perceived as analogous to linguistic complexity, with simplifying multilingualism and rendering it legible to the state being critical toward effectively seeing and regimenting the multicultural local politics and society.

For linguistic anthropologists, the phenomenon of states or other institutional powers reformulating multicultural phenomena as multilingual challenges is nothing new (Blommaert et al., 2005; Bugarski, 2004; Das, 2008, 2016; Greenberg, 2008, 2017). In the exceptional context of Hong Kong, the state lacks most direct administrative tools typically used to acquire knowledge about the local linguistic landscape, nor is it able to directly monitor or regulate it. Traditional Scottian processes of state-led simplification, such as organizing demographic surveys, enforcing language standardization agendas, or explicitly censoring language use in media and public spaces, are not readily available; instead, semiotic intervention arguably has become the primary means of state influence in Hong Kong in the post-reunion era, achieved by means such as manipulating state narratives and public images disseminated through both state-controlled and independent media. Importantly, this paper underscores that in the scenario of Hong Kong, semiotic manipulation is not merely a method of intervening in local society in a traditional sense; it also serves as a project of legibility, making the local linguistic and social challenges comprehensible to the state itself. In my forthcoming semiotic analysis of empirical cases, I will illustrate how performative imaginations and practices by the state fundamentally drive and shape this project of legibility, to comprehend the ways in which the state's hegemonic simplification of local complexities into three distilled linguistic identities (Cantonese, Mandarin, and English) is, as a result, procedurally and performatively developed, reinforced, and challenged.

LEGIBILITY CHALLENGES IN CODES AND CHANNELS

Performative semiotic interventions, serving as one main approach of the state's ideological regimentation, are widespread in mainland China, manifesting in both tangible and digital

public spaces. Patriotic monuments and statues, along with state-related images and slogans, are commonly embedded in both urban and rural environments; additionally, state-controlled media often cover state-organized conferences, diplomatic happenings, and ceremonies for national and local events and festivals. However, these practices cannot be directly replicated in Hong Kong by the central government due to the state's lack of direct administrative control over public spaces and media there; such practices can only be implemented by the local administration in a limited manner. Furthermore, the state faces challenges in identifying clear-cut multilingual codes and channels through which to directly enact similar regimentations in Hong Kong's sociopolitical environment.ⁱⁱⁱ

The utilitarian and simplified mapping between codes and identities and multiple coexisting language standards are certainly not unique to Hong Kong. Examples such as Bahasa Indonesia and Melayu in Indonesia (Errington, 1998) and Serbian and Croatian in Yugoslavia and in current Serbia and Croatia (Bugarski, 2004; Greenberg, 2008, 2017; Tollefson, 1980) are similar to the scenario of multilingualism in Hong Kong in many ways. Recent anthropological research also examines more socioculturally sophisticated cases of multiple language standards such as in the diaspora population like Hindu among the Hindus population in Mauritius (Eisenlohr, 2004) and Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils in Tamil-speaking groups in Quebec of Canada (Das, 2008, 2016), as well as the emergence of the "image of standard" in the local, colloquial register that is nonetheless felt and embodied as an alternative to a standard language, such as the case of Singapore's Colloquial English, known as "Singlish" (Babcock, 2022).

Nevertheless, Hong Kong's sociopolitical history in the late 20th century combined prolonged colonization, successful modernization, and peaceful sovereignty transition, all contributing to a remarkable trajectory and process of formation, distribution, and redistribution of multiple standard languages in the population that is unusually seen even compared to many other extraordinary cases of state multilingual politics. In 1974, the British local government in Hong Kong enacted the Official Languages Ordinance, recognizing both English and Chinese as Hong Kong's official languages (Hong Kong Government, 1974), without specifying *which* form of the Chinese language it referred to—Hong Kong was notably still under British rule at the time. Within the Greater China region, Taiwan continues to use traditional Chinese as its official written script, whereas mainland China has developed and adopted its own standardized version of simplified Chinese since the 1950s. In everyday conversation, most Hong Kong residents primarily spoke Cantonese (which is not readily transcribable to either standard simplified or traditional Chinese in written form). Implicitly, the British language ordinance acknowledged traditional Chinese and Cantonese as the official written and spoken forms of Chinese, respectively, but this ambiguity indeed stemmed from the complexity of designating a single, modality- and identity-neutral standard form of the Chinese language. Concurrently, during the 1970s and early 1980s, English, spoken Cantonese, and written traditional Chinese coexisted in an unofficial but relatively stable sociolinguistic equilibrium: English served as the language for government and business, Cantonese was the lingua franca of daily life, and traditional Chinese was used for reading and writing.^{iv} Several major "language communities" (Silverstein, 2010) had emerged in Hong Kong throughout the 20th century, each propagating its own language norms within the social fabric of Hong Kong. Significantly, these language norms began to be increasingly salient and adopted in local lives since the 1970s (Ng, 2009).

After the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, which set the stage for Hong Kong's sovereignty handover, mainland China emerged as a formidable sociopolitical force poised to disrupt Hong Kong's unofficially established sociolinguistic balance. Approximately a decade before the official transfer of sovereignty in 1997, many of Hong Kong's middle and high schools began incorporating Mandarin into their curricula. To this day, although the Hong Kong government has not revised the wording of the 1974 British language ordinance

(Hong Kong government, 1974; Hong Kong government, 2017), their language policies have not been without less ambiguity. In 2011, for instance, the Hong Kong Education Bureau launched the “Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism” policy (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2011). This policy envisages a harmonious coexistence between two written languages (English and traditional Chinese) and three spoken languages (English, Mandarin, and Cantonese). Yet, it lacks any realistic implementation plan for schools and society, further underscoring the complexities of managing the *actual* multilingual landscape in Hong Kong.

In addition to the diversity of linguistic codes itself, the state also faces the challenge of finding appropriate channels for code dissemination. The issue of delivery channels intersects with, yet does not completely overlap with, the diversity of codes. Television programming in Hong Kong primarily comes from two sources: local media broadcasting regionally to Hong Kong viewers, and mainland Chinese media with national (and international) reach. While the central government cannot directly or openly regulate Hong Kong’s local media as it does within mainland China, it restricts most Hong Kong local media from broadcasting in the mainland. Conversely, the media in mainland China are tightly controlled by the government, but their program distribution remains unregulated: Major channels of state-run media, such as China Central Television (CCTV), enjoy certain popularity among Hong Kong viewers (see Table 2).

In the case of Hong Kong, challenges in codes and channels amplify the difficulties for achieving legibility and imposing state simplification for the purpose of governance. Theoretically, two critical dimensions as legible knowledge about sociocultural reality serving for state governance are *boundary creating* and *boundary breaking* (Ball, 2014). In Peircean terms, the two corresponding semiotic means that can potentially enable the generation of legible and transmissible non-local knowledge from local iconic and experiential similarity and indexical worlds are *rhematization* and *dicentization* (Ball, 2014; Gal & Irvine, 2019). Sociolinguistically, rhematization, through “iconizing indexical signs,” can initiate a semiotic process of boundary creating, materializing socioculturally differentiating indexes into perceptible and tangible differentiation among communicatively relatable individuals (Gal, 2016; Gal & Irvine, 2019). On the other hand, dicentization, which “indexicalizing iconic signs,” can enable boundary breaking, relating previously disparate heterogeneous local and individual sensory and perceptual experiences within a shared or unified indexical framework, thus forging a contiguous semiotic framing for interpretants who typically inhabit different social and cultural spheres (Ball, 2014; Silverstein, 2004, 2023).

Empirically, I identify two empirical semiotic models that the state has developed and employed in its project of legibility in postcolonial Hong Kong, utilizing the above two semiotic means to overcome the challenges in codes and channels, among other ones. The first model involves creating a simplified (and simplifying) mapping between *sociolinguistic* differentiation and *sociopolitical* boundary making in on-site, improvisational interactions, primarily through rhematization (Gal, 2016; Gal & Irvine, 2019). The second model, on the other hand, engages in a dialectic of both boundary creating and breaking in scripted, ritualized

TABLE 2 Difficulties in state simplification in Hong Kong in terms of code and channel discrepancy, compared with mainland China.

Codes and channels in mainland China	Codes and channels in Hong Kong
Mandarin (spoken) Simplified Chinese (written)	Cantonese, Mandarin, English (spoken) Traditional Chinese, English (written)
State-run and state-controlled media	Private media; the state does not have direct executive power to control the media in Hong Kong
Most Hong Kong media are prohibited from broadcasting to mainland China	State-run media in mainland China can broadcast to Hong Kong

performative events (Irvine, 1974; Silverstein, 2004, 2023), incorporating both rhematization and dicentization (Ball, 2014). While the first model seeks to establish and reinforce boundaries and hierarchies, generating sociocultural knowledge from sociolinguistic differentiation at specific communicative junctures, it encounters difficulties in stable citationality and replicability. Recognizing these semiotic limitations, the state began to adopt a more sophisticated alternative model in the latter half of the 2000s, aiming to maximize citationality and replicability for signs transversing sociocultural spacetime, ultimately producing and reproducing what Scott terms as “interested, utilitarian facts” for state governance (Scott, 1998). Crucially, these state simplifications are not merely achieved through aggregated and representative means; they involve a complex, dynamic performative interplay between state and society, in the forms of either informal and improvisational, or ritualized and institutionalized types of public performance.

The empirical analysis of this paper will primarily focus on two case studies to illustrate each model respectively. The first case involves a 2000 interview of the then Chinese president by a Hong Kong reporter, discussing the first post-reunion re-election of Hong Kong's chief executive (broadcast exclusively to Hong Kong viewers). The second case is a short animated film from the 2007 official gala celebrating Hong Kong's tenth reunion anniversary with China (broadcast by Central China Television to audiences in both mainland China and Hong Kong). My analysis will demonstrate how these two cases exemplify the two semiotic models respectively and the underlying logic through which the state dynamically and performatively ideologizes and projects these models at the metapragmatic level in communicative practice, aiming to navigate the complexities of code diversity and delivery and generate a *performative political epistemology* of state governance. More broadly, these cases aim to illustrate how comparative studies, involving combinations of codes, channels, locations, and timings, can shed light on the evolving and self-making characteristics of the state's semiotic cosmology.

SOCIOPOLITICAL BOUNDARY MAKING THROUGH INTERACTIONAL PERFORMANCE

In the initial years following Hong Kong's 1997 reunification, the central government adopted a largely unobtrusive stance toward the region's affairs. This reserved approach was evident even in matters of defense and foreign affairs, which are legally within the central government's jurisdiction. Hong Kong maintained its own representation in international forums, as well as in cultural and sporting events, under the designation “China Hong Kong.” Notably, it was reported that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) even adjusted its training schedules in Hong Kong to “avoid interfering with the daily routines” of local residents (Sina.com, 2004).

Direct, public interactions between the state and Hong Kong society were infrequent, mainly occurring during visits by state politicians. On such occasions, Chinese leaders and officials often met with local authorities and elites and sometimes visited residential and popular urban areas. These visits received extensive coverage in Hong Kong media but were more sparingly reported in mainland China. Chinese politicians typically portrayed a more open, sympathetic, and liberal demeanor in Hong Kong than in the mainland, with these appearances being less accessible to mainland audiences. For example, in 2002, 4 years after the 1998 Southeast Asian financial crisis, Premier Zhu Rongji visited Hong Kong and delivered a memorable public speech to Hong Kong's political and financial leaders. Zhu lightheartedly revealed that his knowledge of Hong Kong was primarily sourced from several local newspapers, handpicked and provided to him by his secretaries each day. Arguably, this admission subtly acknowledged a central challenge of understanding and governing Hong Kong from the state's point of view—a nod

to the problem of legibility. He humorously refuted to be a “charlatan” (*jianghu yisheng* 江湖醫生) with all the solutions for Hong Kong, merely based on his brief daily newspaper readings. But confidently citing all economic data from memory, he then underscored the central government's support in aiding Hong Kong's recovery from the 1998 financial crisis. Particularly, poignant was the conclusion of his speech, where he recited lyrics from “Under the Lion Mountain,” a song by a local song writer, culminating in his affectionate proclamation: “I love Hong Kong!” (Ifeng.com, 2002).

Zhu's speech exemplified how the state can leverage humility and personal charisma in face-to-face communication to foster a specific state-region relationship with Hong Kong. Nonetheless, my first detailed case study examines an instance of less successful, yet even more revealing interaction between the state politicians and local elites during the same period. In October 2000, 3 years after Hong Kong's handover, Jiang Zemin, the then President of China, met with Tung Chee-hwa, Hong Kong's first PRC Chief Executive, in Beijing for a review of Tung's first working report since reunification. At a meeting prior to the review, nine Hong Kong television reporters were invited to interview Jiang and other state officials. This meeting, not extended to mainland reporters, was also not broadcast in mainland China (Youtube, 2021).

After the initial casual interactions, a young reporter, who was later identified as Hong Kong journalist Sharon Cheung, questioned president Jiang about the likelihood of Tung being re-elected for a second term. Jiang, faced with local reporters and cameras, vehemently refuted any allegations of the central government's interference in the upcoming election or pre-selection of Tung. Typically, top Chinese politicians seldom exhibit informality or disclose personal views and emotions publicly in the mainland. Notably, Jiang's spontaneous code-mixing and code-switching between Mandarin, English, and Cantonese (the latter two in which he was reasonably fluent) marked several pivotal moments in the interaction.

The exchange began amicably: Cheung the reporter asked in Mandarin, with a noticeable local accent, about the central government's endorsement of Tung's re-election. Jiang responded affirmatively. But Cheung probed further why only Tung was supported so early and hastily. Jiang did not directly answer but criticized her for spreading “unsound” (*wuzhong shengyou* 無中生有) rumors, referring to a contentious EU document penned by Christopher Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, who reportedly implied potential Chinese interference in Hong Kong's legal autonomy. As Cheung persisted, inquiring if a premature support from the central government had suggested a “pre-authorization” (*qindian* 欽點) of Tung's re-election,^v Jiang insisted that the next Chief Executive would still be elected in accordance with Hong Kong's Basic Law and Election Law. At this point, visibly upset, Jiang rose from his seat, approaching Cheung and other reporters, as he continued to elaborate on his disclaimer in Mandarin (Transcript S1):

Then, Jiang agitatedly claimed, again in Mandarin, that he knows about the West far better than the reporters (Transcript S2; also see Figure 1):

Following a brief pause, Jiang unexpectedly changed his self-portrayal from that of a resolute and unflinching leader to, in his own words, an “elder” (長者). He expressed a desire to impart his “personal and life experiences” (人生的經驗) to the reporters.^{vii} Without delving into specifics, Jiang then reverted to his initial assertive demeanor, reiterating that he had not and would not predetermine Tung as the next Chief Executive before the election. Unswayed, Cheung persisted with her original line of questioning. In response, Jiang replied in Mandarin, adopting an even more forceful tone and referencing the formal designations of both Hong Kong and China (Transcript S3):

The confrontation came to an abrupt halt when security personnel signaled that time was up, asking the reporters to leave. By this point, Jiang was visibly agitated, loudly proclaiming, in English again, that the reporter was “naive” and he was angry.



FIGURE 1 Left: In a confronting posture, Jiang was telling the reporters at the scene: “the American reporter Wallace—he’s far, far greater than you guys.” Right: Jiang was saying: “I chatted with him [Mike Wallace] with a smile and ease.”^{vi} Tung, the then-chief executive of Hong Kong, can be seen quietly sitting behind on the left (Youtube, 2021).

I argue that Jiang's performance, while denotatively disjointed, was nevertheless semiotically potent. He struggled to coherently articulate how the next Chief Executive would be elected in accordance with Hong Kong's local laws, while simultaneously affirming the central government's support for Tung's candidacy. Nonetheless, his *performance* rendered a coherent and legible semiotic message that the state sought to exert control over Hong Kong's political affairs and possessed the legitimacy to do so. Jiang's initial demeanor toward Cheung was amicable, but as she began to further cast doubt on the states' role in the election, probing into sensitive issues possibly further stirred by the former colonial governor's remarks, Jiang's tone shifted. Though refraining from directly condemning her queries, Jiang utilized specific semiotic strategies to establish a hierarchical sociolinguistic differentiation between the two interlocutors. Two key moments were when Jiang, switching from Mandarin to English, portrayed himself as respectable and experienced (an “elder” wishing to “share personal and life experiences”), and when the reporter was characterized by Jiang as youthful and inexperienced in English (“too young” and “sometimes naive”). The code-switching here indexes both his superiority by his seeming proficiency in English, the global language, and the reporter's local identity and perceived naivety, as evidenced by her Cantonese-accent Mandarin.

Jiang further accentuated this sociolinguistic differentiation by drawing on his experiences with Western journalists, notably American reporter Mike Wallace. By querying the reporter if she “understood or not?” (識得唔識得嘢?) in Cantonese, Jiang employed a metasemiotic “trope,” momentarily adopting the supposed “local and naive” register to performatively reinforce his intended message of differentiation. As the interactional text unfolded, Jiang's ability to improvisationally switch between English and Cantonese—perceived as higher and lower linguistic registers, respectively—was starkly contrasted with the reporter's constrained use of accented Mandarin, which she likely was limited to for the interview. I argue that this linguistic dexterity not only highlighted a *sociolinguistic* hierarchy but also subtly transformed it into a *sociopolitical* differentiation, according to which Jiang was framed by the interactional performance as a cosmopolitan, capable figure fluent in several languages and seasoned with Western experience, a wise elder willing to impart knowledge, and a figure of authority, effortlessly shifting between languages and moods as needed. On the other hand, the reporter was cast in a more local and limited light, her speech marked by

a Cantonese accent and her questions perceived as naive and simplistic. She appeared less worldly compared to the renowned Western journalist, portrayed as inexperienced and easily influenced, clearly subordinate in both linguistic agility and societal standing to Jiang's commanding presence. This performative interplay of linguistic differentiation served to reinforce the hierarchical divide between the powerful state leader and the local journalist, which can be well captured by the concept of rhematization in Peircean semiotics (Gal, 2016; Gal & Irvine, 2019; See Table 3).

Toward the interview's conclusion, Jiang strategically shifted from singular self-references ("I," "an elder") to plural ones ("we," "our"), assertively using the semiotically constructed interpersonal hierarchy to stress the subordination of "the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region" (香港特別行政區) to "the central government of the People's Republic of China" (中華人民共和國中央人民政府). The performative use of multilingual resources by Jiang and the reporter initially serves as constructing a differentiating, indexical relationship of their individual identities, and within the broader context of Hong Kong's multilingual landscape, the specific occurrences of code-mixing and code-switching in the interview take on iconic associations, projecting certain differentiable qualities onto each speaker through the process of rhematization. Furthermore, toward the end of the interview, the interpersonal iconic-indexical mapping between the reporter and Jiang unfolds into a mapping about the differentiation between Mainland China and Hong Kong, rendering their sociopolitical relationship legible. This, as I interpret, represents a second layer of rhematization, operating at the polity rather than individual level, yet performatively enabled and made tangible (thus legible) by the latter. Spectacularly, Jiang's dual registers and personas, as both an elder and a state leader, were eventually laminated together through the interactional performance. For both the reporters and Jiang himself, the performatively constructed personal image as an assertive and paternal politician *maps* and *measures* the sociopolitical knowledge

TABLE 3 Throughout the interaction between Jiang and the reporter, I argue that an indexical mapping for *differentiating* the two interlocutors' linguistic and personal characteristics is performatively mapped with *differentiable* tangible perceptual features and experiences (qualisigns).

	Differentiable qualisigns (perceptible and experiential features) that are performatively evoked during the interaction, which enables indexical mapping of sociopolitical differentiation	Differentiating indexical features that are projected from the two interlocutors to the state-region politics, which are rendered tangible and legible through mapping with differentiable qualisigns
The leader	Speaking multiple languages and possessing extensive Western experience	Cosmopolitan and capable
	As an elder figure willing to share his wisdom with the younger generation	Kind and wise
	Switching codes freely and changing temper if necessary	Superior and authoritative
The reporter	Only speaking Cantonese and heavily accented Mandarin	Local and incapable
	Being young and only "running fast" as well as less sophisticated than a legendary Westerner journalist	Simple and innocent ("simple" and "naïve" in English)
	Subject to the leader's linguistic trope and temper	Inferior and compliant

Note: Such mapping is further used to render *legible* the sociopolitical differentiation between the state PRC and Hong Kong. In the Peircean terminology, this process of constructing sociocultural and sociopolitical differentiation via indexical mapping of linguistic features and qualisigns can be characterized by the concept of rhematization (Gal, 2016; Gal & Irvine, 2019).

of state governance: The state, like him, is mapped as if it has an absolute claim to words, politics, and temper all at once, and the local is characterized by a position of dependency and subordination within a simplified, single-dimensional sociolinguistic and sociopolitical state-region hierarchy (see Figure 2).

By the above semiotic analysis, I intend to demonstrate that throughout the interaction, Jiang attempted to impose a sense of coherence on the metasemiotic plane, compensating for inconsistencies in the denotational text that he incautiously articulated. By challenging the reporter on the metapragmatic level, he aimed for a more effective rebuttal than a direct denotational argument. But this process delivered a simplified yet semiotically coherent sociopolitical hierarchy that even he might not have fully realized before the exchange. Eventually, an abstract sociopolitical relationship between Hong Kong and China unfolded during the exchange was performatively rendered legible, presumably not only for the reporters and viewers but also for Jiang himself, via semiotic manipulations of multiple perceptible and tangible personal characteristics of the two interlocutors on site.

Broadcast by Hong Kong media on the same day, Jiang's interview was widely criticized in Hong Kong for him to “not understand how a democratic society works” (TVB News Archive, 2016)—many see Jiang's loss of composure near the end of the interview as a significant political breakdown. In mainland China's media, such displays of “negative” emotions by high officials are virtually unheard of. Perhaps Jiang did not actually understand the democratic society, but he obviously had a specific model about it in mind, and certainly developed knowledge about the society by evoking this model in the performance and interaction. According to the semiotic imagination realized by this interactional performance, an image of an authoritative yet kind leader, both formidable and approachable, would enable successful knowledge production about the state-region relationship (see Figure 2). Jiang's interaction with the Hong Kong media thus demonstrates a critical model of legibility and

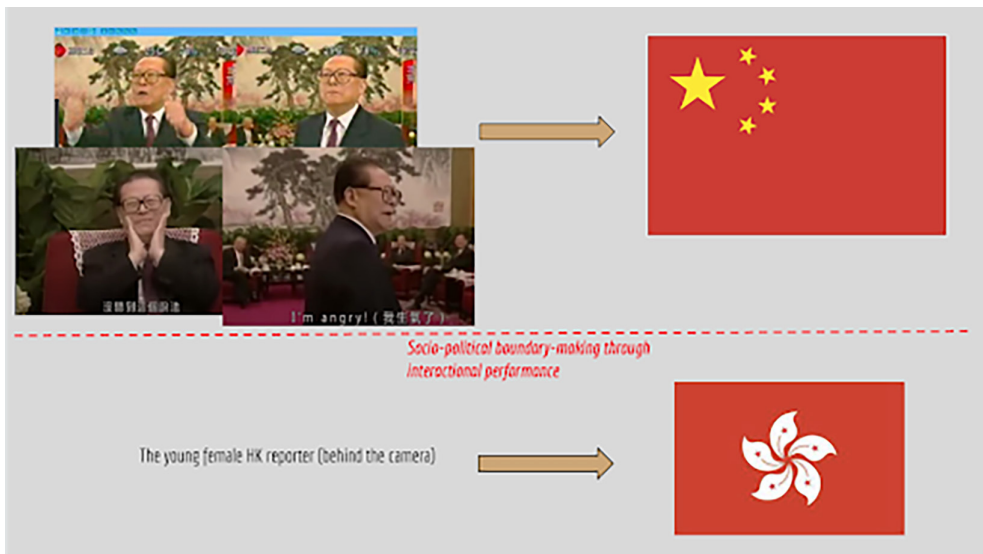


FIGURE 2 My analysis on the interview with Jiang by the Hong Kong reporter suggests a performative knowledge-making model of boundary creating and political differentiation, which the semiotic process of rhematization at two levels mainly involves. An iconic-indexical mapping for differentiating the two interlocutors' linguistic and personal characteristics is performatively constructed at first (top). Such constructed differentiation at the individual level is then transformed (indicated by arrows) beyond the individual communicative scenario, enabling the epistemology of the sociopolitical differentiation between the state PRC and Hong Kong (bottom).

political epistemology, in which the state is perceived to be rendered legible and knowable through politically charged interactional performance.

A DIALECTIC OF DIFFERENTIATION AND INTEGRATION THROUGH RITUALIZED PERFORMATIVE ACTS

Since the inception of new Chinese leadership in 2002, interactions between state leaders and Hong Kong reporters and society have shifted toward being more formal, meticulously prepared, and strategically deliberate. In the eras of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping (2002–2012 and 2012–present), state visits to Hong Kong continued, with occasional speeches mirroring the personal style of Jiang or Zhu in the early 2000s. However, instances like the spontaneous and interactional interview between Jiang and the local reporters became increasingly rare. While such communicative events were exceptions rather than the norm even in the early 2000s, it was the potential for such exceptions that characterized one of the state's major approaches to access Hong Kong's society during that period. The gradual disappearance of such a mode of interactions since the late 2000s hence marked a significant shift. Moments of unscripted public communication still occasionally occur and were made public during Hu's tenure, such as in 2007 when Hu attempted to interact with a local customs official during his visit to a border control area, in which their communication was hampered by the official's limited Mandarin proficiency (TVB2 News, 2007). But by the time of Xi's visit to Hong Kong in 2017, spontaneous occurrences and interactions in public were conspicuously absent. Events were carefully choreographed, exemplified by a Hong Kong police officer delivering a flawless, memorized speech in excellent Mandarin during Xi's visit to a local police center. The speech, expressing enthusiasm for meeting the president, was followed by another official's polished remarks, leading to a planned handshake with a student eagerly waiting to greet Xi, all amidst synchronized applause (Hong Kong Information Service Department, 2017). By this point, the performance of the state in Hong Kong had transitioned to a more calculated, sophisticatedly ritualized execution of statecraft.

Nevertheless, this shift toward more controlled and orchestrated political communication can be traced back to Hu's presidency beginning from 2002, a period already marked by an increasing emphasis on the politics of codes and identities. Unlike Jiang, Hu and Xi are not conversant in English or Cantonese. With Hu's ascendancy as the leader in 2002, the state began cultivating a new model of political communication with Hong Kong society. This approach can be characterized by highly choreographed, carefully staged ritual-like political events (Irvine, 1974; Silverstein, 2023) and the politics of spectacle (Wedeen, 1999).

A prime example of the emergence of this new model was the celebration of the tenth anniversary of its reunification with China in 2007. Preparations for this milestone, involving hundreds of formal and informal events, commenced as early as May 2006. The culmination of these festivities was a grand variety show on June 30, 2007, attended in person by Hu himself. Since then, similar shows have been held every 5 years until 2022, as part of a continuing tradition of political ritual (which I will briefly discuss in the next section). Political rituals and spectacle are certainly not novel in China or elsewhere. But since the 1980s, China has gradually developed a specific genre of televised shows for significant political events and national holidays. These shows ingeniously embed state political messages within an array of public entertainment, including dance, song, martial arts, and talk shows, subtly conveying specific ideological orientations.^{viii} The Chinese government, it seems, sought to adapt this entertainment genre for Hong Kong audiences starting from the late 2000s, while attempting to simultaneously appeal to viewers on the mainland among other regions. My analysis zeroes in on the 2007 variety show, the inaugural instance of such a political ritual in Hong Kong. Through this analysis, I aim to illustrate how the state adopted

a scripted, ritualized, and double-voiced model of legibility (Bakhtin, 1981), marking a stark departure from the more spontaneous and interactional communication and legibility projects as shown in the first model.

The 2007 variety show, commemorating “The Tenth Anniversary of Hong Kong’s Reunion to the Motherland,” was a grand ceremonial event held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, the same venue where the 1997 sovereignty handover ceremony took place (Youtube, 2011). The audience comprised President Hu, top government officials, and hundreds of local business moguls and cultural luminaries. The show was globally broadcast by three of China Central Television (CCTV)’s most popular channels. The program commenced with the announcer requesting the audience to stand and welcome Hu, with the announcement made sequentially in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English.

After Hu was seated, the audience was greeted on the large screen by McDull, a beloved Hong Kong cartoon character, set against a musical backdrop. The show featured a short animated film starring McDull and his mother taking a cruise along the Pearl River, passing iconic financial landmarks of Hong Kong. In the film, McDull converses with his mother in Cantonese, asking if they have brought along his *gaau caat* (膠擦), the Cantonese term of eraser which has no phonetic equivalence in Mandarin. The background score subtly shifts to a melody adapted from German composer Robert Schumann’s *Scenes from Childhood*. McDull then asks his mother, still in Cantonese: “Have we brought along my notebook for a signature collection?” followed by “Are we really going to see the president today?” Though his mother answers “yes,” McDull repeats: “Do we have my notebook for getting president Hu’s signature?”

As the cruise progresses, McDull’s mother suggests: “since we have some free time, we’d better practice our Mandarin. We’re going to use it soon today.” Then, she switches to Mandarin, engaging McDull in a conversation about the significance of the reunion anniversary: “my little friend, could you tell me what an important date tomorrow is?” (小朋友, 你告訴我, 明天是甚麼重要的日子?; see Figure 3 top). McDull responds in accented Mandarin: “No class tomorrow.” “Why no class?” McDull’s mother asks, and McDull finally acknowledges in Mandarin: “Ah, tomorrow, July 1st, is the anniversary of Hong Kong’s reunion. Every kid knows that.” His mother is delighted: “It’s the tenth anniversary of Hong Kong’s reunion. Do you remember it now?” “Yes, mum.” McDull happily replies. Shortly afterward, the cruise ship carries them across the Pearl River, arriving at the exterior of the convention and exhibition center at sunset. The boy then switches back to Cantonese, wondering again where his *gaau caat* eraser is, to which his mother ruefully laments its obsolescence in local life: “no one uses it anymore.” The film concludes with their arrival at the convention center; and four star show hosts, one from mainland China and the other three from Hong Kong, appeared on stage being carried by a ship-shaped electronically moving device that resembles the cruise ship in the animation film (see Figure 3 bottom).

This 2-min cartoon movie, as I interpret, densely meshes perceptual and iconic similarity with shared indexical connectivity: popular local cartoon figures, the Pearl River, president Hu, a landscape of financial skyscrapers, famous show hosts, and so on. They are supposedly all known to Hong Kong viewers, but usually appear in separate sensible spheres for the locals. The animation film relates these tangible and experiential features together by the common indexical frame, recontextualizing them toward the “here-and-now” ritual of the tenth-anniversary reunion ceremony. Within this live event, iconic similarities among popular cartoon figures and pop star show hosts are together rendered to index vibrant cultural and social lives in Hong Kong, the landscape of financial skyscrapers marks the global culture of the city, and noticeably in the animation film, the show itself is also recursively mentioned and visually depicted. Perceptual and experiential similarities are hence bundled together into a shared indexical frame, being recontextualized into a coherent story depicting McDull and his mother’s journey to the reunion ceremony. During this semiotic process, local and



FIGURE 3 Top: A beloved Hong Kong cartoon boy McDull and his mother embarked on a cruise ship for the tenth-anniversary ceremony in the Pearl River, while his mother was asking McDull in Mandarin: “What is an important date tomorrow?” (明天是甚麼重要的日子?) and encouraged her son to practice speaking Mandarin. The finance hub along the Pearl River in the central downtown of Hong Kong is visible in the background. Bottom: Immediately following the short animation film, four hosts are carried onto the stage by a ship-like moving equipment. “HONG KONG” in English capital letters can be seen in the front of the bow (Youtube, 2011).

global identities are together redirected to a single indexical frame centering around the national identity, which eventually points toward the nation-state's ultimate indexical icon: the president. In this short movie, meeting president Hu in the ritual orients McDull and his mother's trip, and laminating Hu's indexical-iconic presence in the film with his physical presence as the central figure of the ceremony itself maximally brings out the ritual as the indexical icon centering around the state. Remarkably, the state icon is not rendered legible through denotational or representational means, but through performative acts scripted by a semiotically coherent yet delightfully and casually camouflaged animation story about a local boy.

Importantly, I argue that code-switching is an essential semiotic technique that sequences the live performative ritual. As they embark on their journey, McDull expresses his excitement in Cantonese about the prospect of meeting the Chinese president. His mother, switching to Mandarin (i.e., noticeably more fluent than her son's), begins to quiz him about the significance of Hong Kong's reunification. Upon her son's proper response in Mandarin, she encourages McDull with the prospect of meeting the president, conversing in Mandarin, and possibly getting his autograph. Contrasting this, dialogues in Cantonese are sparingly used, mainly at the beginning and end of the film, and predominantly revolve around the local eraser. Indeed, the animation concludes with McDull's mother remarking in Cantonese that the *gaau caat* eraser is no longer in use. Here, the indexical and denotational messages mutually reinforce each other: *gaau caat* is depicted as an obsolete linguistic term and daily-life entity, and McDull's mother attempts to elevate both her son's linguistic and societal knowledge, aligning them with the broader linguistic and social shifts orchestrated by the state. Like in the first model, a mapping between the sociolinguistic and sociopolitical worlds is performatively constructed, but unlike in the first model in which the intended state-region order is performed in an improvising and interactional manner, here, an identity shift from the local to the national is ritually enacted in anticipation and encouragement, pointing toward a seemingly destined vision of identity transformation.

Together, I interpret the short animated film as depicting a story encouraging identity reformation and transformation of a Hong Kong boy through performatively constructing a sophisticated yet shared indexical frame: McDull, the little Hong Kong boy who was born locally and speaks Cantonese, is encouraged to grasp Mandarin as he grows up; speaking Mandarin, participating in the reunion ceremony, and taking a privileged journey to meet the Chinese president on the date of the reunion anniversary—all constitute a ritual transformation (Irvine, 1974; Silverstein, 2023; Stasch, 2011; Tambiah, 1984) encouraging and anticipating the shift of the priority identity from the local to the national. In this framing, the local identity (being a Hong Konger who speaks Cantonese) is not simply suspended or superseded, but it needs to be elevated and overseen through self-identifying with the national identity (being a Chinese who speaks Mandarin). Marvelously, the performance is not only through “talking by” the two languages, but also amplified by the fact that Mandarin is also “talked about” at the denotational level, but Cantonese is double-voicedly projected, being spoken but without being salient at the denotational level. Together, multiple semiotic manipulations make the “Mandarin-state equivalence” as the primary indexical center at the denotational and metapragmatic levels all at once. The sociopolitical knowledge being rendered legible and tangible is clear: Speaking Cantonese is fine and welcome (McDull's nostalgia to his eraser and its Cantonese descriptor is depicted as delightful and amusing in the film), but it is sociopolitically conditional upon the vision that Mandarin ought to orient Cantonese and the national ought to navigate the local. In other words, the national language gives license when and where the local language can be, should be, or is good to be used, and eventually, indexical alignments harmonize registers and salient perceptual and iconic similarities, projecting them toward the state's intended synthesis of identities. But at the same time, the national language frames the local one and makes it subordinate: In a

series of scripted performative acts, the ritual also establishes and reinforces a hierarchical state-region relationship, which is as well denotatively signaled by the cartoon.

The state's performative knowledge making is further developed throughout the rest of the show. On the one hand, indexical contiguities are performed in a crescendo manner for smoothening the divide between the local and the state. The show was divided into five chunks: "the proud Pearl River," "the shining city," "running for [Beijing] Olympics," "celebration of the reunion," and "love of China," in which national and local performers and sports heroes appeared interchangeably, at times intermingled on stage. On the other hand, differentiating between the national and the local also became increasingly clear through the performance. In the latter part of the show, performers from both Hong Kong and mainland China took to the stage, presenting iconic songs like "Yellow River" and showcasing Chinese martial arts, and collectively built anticipation for the upcoming 2008 Beijing Olympics. As the show neared its conclusion, the atmosphere swelled with patriotism, reaching its climax when President Hu made his appearance on stage. Center stage, with all performers and hosts encircling him, Hu became the focal point of the *unified* and *unifying* moment. Together, they sang in unison "Singing for the Motherland," a renowned and highly ritualized patriotic song composed in 1951, 2 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China (see [Figure 4](#)).

As Ball (2014) points out, the process of breaking identity boundaries through transforming perceptual and iconic similarity to a common indexical icon can render experiences of different social-cultural realms contiguous to the interpretant. Remarkably in our example, such a semiotic process of "uplifting iconic similarity" (among the eraser, Cantonese, the Cartoon boy, Pearl River, the performance hall, and others) toward a unified indexical icon (the live ritualized event of the anniversary show centering around the state's leader), which Ball (2014) terms *dicentization*, crucially contributes to the creation of a shared indexical frame. This process of *dicentization* ritually synchronizes and sequences multiple spheres of iconic similarity of the local life in a live ritual event, thereby smoothening differences and blending boundaries (see [Table 4](#), right column). On the other hand, this attempt of identity synthesis aims to enable a reorientation of the local toward the state, in particular marked by both the indexical and physical presence of Hu in the performance. According to this anticipated reorientation, the sociopolitical differentiation between the state and the local is performatively affirmed and reinforced (see [Table 4](#), left column).

Hence, the dual performance of *boundary creating* and *boundary breaking* is realized through the dialectic process involving both *rhematization* and *dicentization*. In such a double-voiced, dialectic model of legibility, as I interpret, Hong Kong viewers are conceived to welcome the message of boundary breaking and consequently, tolerate the messaging of sociopolitical differentiation, whereas viewers in mainland China are imaged to perceive the message of sociocultural synthesis as extra benevolent to Hong Kong, while taking comfort from the projected nation-region hierarchy. The sociopolitical landscape of Hong Kong is thus harmonized to the extent that both China and Hong Kong viewers are assumed to be comfortably unified in a cosmopolitan yet differentiating narrative. In this utopian projected epistemology of the political universe, the local could be acknowledged and welcomed only upon the condition that it can be rendered to stay as a regional sub-center, a Ptolemaic "epicenter" subsidiary to the state. But on the other hand, the state is projected to be the ultimate center of the political cosmos and possesses the ultimate political agency to determine whether to show forbearance and grant accommodation toward the local (see [Figure 5](#)). Encouraged compliance and good-willing superiority together are projected to be capable of securing stability and harmony in the state's cosmos, and such a utopian and simplified state-region order is believed to eventually become knowledge and reality.



FIGURE 4 Top: At the end of the tenth reunion anniversary variety show, president Hu, the Hong Kong chief executive, and other high officials stepped on the stage to shake hands with the performers. Bottom: At the end of the show, Hu, the chief executive, other officials, and all performers sing in unison the patriotic song “Singing for the Motherland,” one of the most well-known classical patriotic pieces since the founding of the PRC in 1949.

THE END OF PERFORMING THE STATE?

Subsequent reunion anniversary shows were held on June 30, 2012, and June 30, 2017, at the same venue with a similar format and audience composition. However, following the

TABLE 4 The dual semiotic process of boundary creating and boundary breaking identified from the short animation film of the 10th Hong Kong reunion anniversary.

Sociopolitical knowledge being performatively generated	Boundary creating	Boundary breaking
Semiotic means	Rhemetization Socially <i>differentiating</i> indexes → <i>differentiable</i> tangible perceptual and iconic features	Dicentization Tangible perceptual and experiential similarities → contiguous <i>unified</i> indexical frame <i>unifying</i> perceptual and iconic similarities
Specific semiotic manipulations	Local (subordinate) → [Cantonese; Accented Mandarin; Local eraser; Local cartoon figures] National (authoritative) → [Mandarin; Trip to the reunion show; Notebook for obtaining Hu's signature; President Hu's presence in words and in person] International (relatively the least relevant) → [The scene of financial buildings in the background; "HONG KONG" in English capital letters; Robert Schumann's music in background]	{{ {Popular local cartoon figures; Eraser; Mandarin and Cantonese; Pearl River; Landscape of the finance hub; Performance hall; Robert Schumann's music } → President Hu's presence on screen and in person }} → The ritual event of the reunion anniversary show centering around the state

Note: “[]” in the left column indicates *differentiating* indexical elements that are rendered into *differentiable* tangible perceptual features through rhematization. “{ }” in the right column indicates tangible perceptual and iconic similarities that are *unified* into a *unifying* indexical frame through dicentization. The arrow “→” indicates either a downshifting (in the left column) or upshifting (in the right column) process. “{{” and “}}” represent the layered process of creating the indexical frame in the cartoon movie.

Umbrella Movement in 2014, there was a noticeable shift toward the “One Country” component of the “One Country, Two Systems” policy in the central government’s communicative and performative practices. This shift was evident in the 2017 variety show, which concluded with the hosts explicitly urging the audience to “rally around” the center of Xi, a direct reference to the state leader not seen in earlier anniversary shows.

Since June 2019, Hong Kong has experienced significant social unrest and political crises. This culminated in the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law on June 30, 2020, effectively curbing most civil and street democratic movements. The twentieth-anniversary show in 2022 marked unprecedented changes of the genre: For the first time, the event was moved from June 30 at the Hong Kong Convention Center to July 1 at a nearby stadium. Also unprecedentedly, China Central Television did not participate in the planning, and the show lacked overt leader-related content. But at the same time, the 2022 reunion show was even more tightly scripted and controlled; it was pre-recorded and broadcast later without any live audience, both firsts for such an event. These changes were officially attributed to a typhoon approaching Hong Kong on the same day (Chinanews.com, 2022). But the significant political and social upheaval since 2019 might have eventually raised concerns about the efficacy of the legibility project under the second model. The implementation of the National Security Law in 2020 represents the first major direct legal and political intervention by the state in Hong Kong’s society since its reunification in 1997. The extent to which these significant sociopolitical and legal changes signify a categorical decline in the state’s existing performative approaches to legibility requires careful observation in the coming years.



FIGURE 5 The case of the reunion gala show in 2007 indicates a model involving a dialectic of boundary breaking and boundary creating, which are realized through combining rhematization and dicentization. Diagrammatically, this model can be well characterized by a Ptolemaic universe of political epistemology. In this universe, the local is acknowledged and welcome only upon the condition that it can be rendered to stay as a regional, Ptolemaic “epicenter”; the state, nevertheless, stays as the ultimate center of the political cosmos to which the political epicenter is subsidiary.^{ix}

CONCLUSION

The endeavors of the Chinese state to engage in political communication in Hong Kong present a distinct and invaluable opportunity to explore how contemporary nation-state political actors and institutions strive to navigate the complex sociocultural and sociopolitical timespace of a postcolonial territory that only recently reclaimed its sovereignty. In this paper, I have proposed to observe the state’s projects of legibility toward Hong Kong through a semiotic and performative prism, not as relatively isolated performances and rituals, but rather as laminated and scalar processes of knowledge creation and transformation across the sociocultural and sociopolitical continuum.

The case of Hong Kong is particularly salient and challenging, indeed because of the striking incongruities between the state’s anxiety of knowing, its need of governing, and Hong Kong’s complex sociopolitical autonomy. In my analysis, I have emphasized how the state’s creation and recreation of political epistemology for local governance is performatively dynamic and socio-historically significant, contrasting with the static and representational approach of Scottian theory of the state’s seeing. This perspective aims to comprehend the Chinese state’s efforts to address governance challenges through performatively enacted strategies and projects aimed at generating and adjusting legibility for Hong Kong’s local society. Particularly during the late 2000s, the Chinese state’s legibility projects toward Hong Kong transitioned from an improvisational model of knowledge making, realized through interpersonal communication and interactive events that rehatize sociopolitical differentiations through sociolinguistic ones, to a more ritualized, codified, and replicable model. This latter semiotic model relied on scripted performative acts to generate and emanate an ideal dialectical order between the state and the region, and promote specific processes of identity absorption and transformation toward it. Following Gal (2011), this paper notably demonstrates that one should not simply presuppose a single generic model in studying how the state of the past and present meets the challenges of

multilingualism and multi-identities. In particular, models of state simplification, as cases in this paper have demonstrated, are far from being only formed through apparatus like demography surveys or statistics tables, as the classical Scottian approach predominantly focuses on. Both models studied in this paper are not only about producing written texts or utilitarian facts, but about how utilitarian knowledge for governance is bodily, indexically, reflectively generated and maintained, and laminated and transformed via performances and rituals that are projected to produce simplification, stability, and order.

Ultimately, the state's projects of legibility and the resulting sociopolitical epistemology frequently clash with the complexities of real-world situations. In *Seeing like a State* (1998), Scott powerfully points out that state projects of legibility, the goal of which are always to render the local accessible, ironically distance the state from the actual reality of the local. Certainly, utilitarian abstractions and simplifications generated through performance or ritual, as investigated in this paper, are no exceptions. Jiang's outburst was widely mocked by Hong Kongers and later became a popular, anti-authoritarian underground Internet meme among mainland netizens (Fang, 2020; Li, 2011), far from the original intended goal of the performance itself. The series of reunion anniversary gala shows starting from 2007 increasingly turned to a self-fulfilling prophecy, which was only shattered by the social and political turmoil in Hong Kong in recent years. Both highlight the huge discrepancy between the goal of legibility projects and the actual reality of the local, which the project of legibility itself indeed only helps further exacerbate.

But rather than proposing strategies or programs of rebellion and resistance, my analysis first and foremost underscores the self-driving and self-denying characteristics of the state's legibility projects. The purpose of the National Security Law implemented in 2020, as the state-run media reported, is to mitigate the social chaos stirred by "mobs that disturbed Hong Kong society" 亂港分子 (Xinhuanet, 2021). But utilitarian projects of legibility and state simplification appear to undeniably move toward a self-denying dilemma, which, on occasions such as those of Hong Kong in 2019, generate sweepingly disturbing and blowing effects on both the state and society. This, of course, does not mean that citizens do not play roles in state politics—I only indicate that while many models of state simplification and projects of legibility are driven and self-driven to evolve and progress, they are inevitably destined to collapse or implode in unforeseen moments and manners. These contingencies can lead to the emergence of highly intricate sociopolitical situations and unforeseen outcomes, rather than the streamlined simplified order the state aims to establish. Navigating and managing such multidimensional, evolving sociopolitical complexity and uncertainty—the unintended yet unavoidable repercussions of legibility projects and state simplification efforts—presents substantial and genuine, and often not easily legible or scalable sociopolitical challenges. These challenges are not only relevant for the Chinese state and Hong Kong society, but also resonate with others experiencing similarly complex and evolving state-society dynamics.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱIn the official documents, the “two systems” refer to the socialist system in mainland China and the capitalist system in Hong Kong and Macau. It is widely believed that the “one country, two systems”—國兩制 policy was proposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1981 for future unification of mainland China and Taiwan (Xinhuanet, 2019). Nonetheless, Hung (2022) observed that the origins of the “one country, two systems” policy can be traced back to Beijing’s efforts to integrate Tibet into China during the 1950s, a connection that Deng acknowledged himself in 1981 (Hung, 2022, 115–117).
- ⁱⁱWhile it is infrequent due to the apparent difficulties I have discussed, Beijing has sometimes sought to engage with more conventional Scottish knowledge-seeking regarding Hong Kong’s society. For instance, between 2004 and 2007, Jiang Shigong, a prominent Chinese legal scholar, was stationed in the Research Department of Hong Kong’s Liaison Office to explore the “Hong Kong question.” His work on the significance of the “One Country” aspect of the “One Country, Two Systems” policy and the necessary transformation of identity from local to Chinese patriots is believed to have influenced the Central Government’s policy-making toward Hong Kong (Hung, 2022, 136–147).
- ⁱⁱⁱIn today’s mainland China, the state-run media have mandatory protocols to report leaders’ political activities on a daily basis. Leaders’ head portraits, pieces of calligraphy, phrases and catchwords from their writings and talks that appear in public spaces are typical non-media-based ways of domestic political messaging to citizens. The central government largely cannot pursue either option in Hong Kong.
- ^{iv}According to the 1971 population census, 25.5% of the Hong Kong population identified themselves to be able to speak English. This number grew to 31.6% in the census in 1991, yet only 2.2% of the Hong Kong population identified English as their native language, according to the 1991 census (Bacon-Shone & Bolton, 1998, 54).
- ^vThe Chinese word that the reporter used for “authorization” (欽點) specifically refers to the emperor appointing palace officials in imperial China.
- ^{vi}The CBS reporter Mike Wallace conducted an interview with Jiang in Beijing for his program “60 min” in August 2000, 2 months before this exchange.
- ^{vii}During the 2019 political crisis of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam, the then-chief executive, called herself “a mum who doesn’t allow kids to be naughty” in an interview, which echoes Jiang’s self-reference as an “elder” in the 2000 interview (UDN Global, 2019).
- ^{viii}For instance, in 2016, the director of the annual Spring Festival’s Gala Show on Chinese Central Television (CCTV) publicly admitted that the show is “a significant political event commissioned by the party and the state” (Cctv.com, 2015). The CCTV spring festival gala show is arguably the single most-viewed regular television program in modern history. In 2013, there were around 750 million viewers for the show globally (Korean Times, 2014).
- ^{ix}The background diagram of the Ptolemaic universe was made by James Ferguson (1710–1776), based on similar diagrams by Giovanni Cassini (1625–1712) and Roger Long (1680–1770; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1771, 1971).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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