



“Killed Out of Love”: A Frame Analysis of Domestic Violence Coverage in Hong Kong

Violence Against Women

1–20

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journals.sagepub.com/home/vaw**Miriam Hernández¹****Abstract**

A frame analysis was conducted on a Hong Kong newspaper to determine whether news coverage of female fatalities at the hands of their intimate partners was reported in conventional domestic violence ways or if there were culture-specific explanations. Overall, most coverage supported known views of domestic violence, justifying the perpetrator and categorizing the issue as isolated crime. However, a few stories highlighted the historical subordination of women under patriarchy in Confucianism as an important cultural factor. Findings have implications for the lack of generalization of the social problem, and the understanding of cultural and political power in Hong Kong society.

Keywords

domestic violence, Hong Kong, China, Confucianism, framing analysis

The present study aims to analyze the cultural understanding of domestic violence in Hong Kong media coverage, by focusing on female fatalities at the hands of their intimate partners in this Asian city, a financial hub in the continent and former British colony, returned to the People's Republic of China in 1997. The issue is more important than ever as the Social Welfare Department (SWD) reported the rate of battered spouses went from 0.56 per 1,000 females aged 16 and above in 2000 to 0.73 in 2010 (Bouhours & Broadhurst, 2015). The rate has remained stable in recent years, 0.70 per 1,000 females in 2016, but females continue to be the main victims (83% on average for the 2005–2016 timeframe; SWD, 2017). Even though both men and women in

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heterosexual and same-sex relationships can be victims of abuse, most domestic violence victims were women in heterosexual relationships (84% of the perpetrators were male partners or former partners). As a result, this article takes a feminist perspective, where domestic violence is explained and analyzed in terms of power inequalities and where women bear the brunt of violence and blame (Tang, Wong, & Cheung, 2002).

Women's rights in Chinese societies have not passed unnoticed. After all, it was in Beijing in 1995, where Hillary Clinton gave preeminence to the phrase "Women's rights are human rights." However, international attention has focused on just certain aspects, such as preferences for boys, sex-selective abortions, or abandonment of girls (Gilmartin, 1990). In these claims, with taints of political interest, domestic violence has been more or less overlooked, perhaps because it would attract awareness to the same problems the countries making these remarks have, or maybe because it is too common and widespread to be unique and newsworthy.

The feminist perspective has explained gender violence as a result of the subordinate position women have in a cultural, psychological, and legal system that privileges men (Barrett, 1988; Smith, 1990; Tang, 1999). Even though most societies in the world function under some level of patriarchal structure, there are nuances and interpretations to the cultures that rule each place. In the analysis of gender issues in Hong Kong, an aspect to consider is the traditional role of women within Chinese culture, which derives from the Confucian philosophy. Chinese culture places women in a submissive position, as a function of the relationship to the men in their lives, as daughters, wives, and mothers. These relationships set the standard for the traditional and enduring family roles that guide their actions. It is in this social ground that media play a crucial part in the perpetuation of perspectives and beliefs that govern the interactions between genders. Media weave coherence into individual experiences and events, promoting them in a neatly packed narrative of how a society understands itself, what its members see as proper or deviant behavior, and the ways to support or deal with them (Hay, 1996).

Parting from these ideas, this study wishes to explore how the news represents femicides, the murder or attempted murder of a woman by her male intimate partner as a result of gendered violence (Gillespie, Richards, Givens, & Smith, 2013; Richards, Gillespie, & Smith, 2011), and domestic violence stories in the most important English newspaper in Hong Kong, the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP). The stories collected during the year 2013 were analyzed for frame functions: problem identification, causes and solutions, and for general explicative frames within the local culture. The "Domestic Violence Definition in Hong Kong" section explores the literature of domestic violence in Hong Kong and China, given the cultural and political connections between them.¹ The social construction of news and past studies exploring the news frames of femicides are described in the "Media Role and Framing Theory" section. By studying domestic violence in Hong Kong, within the Chinese cultural context, this article responds to scholars' concerns that framing research has neglected the relationship between media frames and the broader issues of political-social power and culture (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Van Gorp, 2007).

Domestic Violence Definition in Hong Kong

Domestic violence is defined as physical and/or psychological acts inflicted on a woman by her current or former partner with the intention to dominate and control her (Dutton, 1994; Meyers, 1994; Smith, 1990). Femicides are the end of a continuum of different domestic violence actions, such as verbal, emotional, sexual, and threats to other family members (Tang, Cheung, Chen, & Sun, 2002).

Domestic violence in Hong Kong is as socially and legally condemned as in any other country (The Women's Commission 2006). The Hong Kong Police define the action as, “any incident involving an assault or breach of the peace between parties who could generally be described as married or having intimate partners’ relationship, which also includes lovers having a lasting relationship or former lovers” (SWD, 2017). Nevertheless, given Hong Kong’s history, the perceptions toward what constitutes an assault or breach of peace are a mixture of old and new ways. Past studies observed that the definition is tied to the demographic, economic, and educational background of women and men in Chinese society. For instance, Tang, Wong, Cheung, and Lee (2000) found that younger female professionals had a more comprehensive understanding of violence against women than elder blue-collar male workers. These women included psychological harm or any violation of women’s rights in their definition of gender violence, whereas only repeated and extreme infliction of physical harm would count for an elder man.

These distinct degrees of awareness about what exactly domestic violence entails obstruct the women’s own perceptions of their abuse, the motivations to denounce it, and the responses they face when they experience it. For instance, some Chinese women may not designate monetary control as violence (Tang et al., 2002). In addition, police, prosecutors, or judges may have different mind-sets as well. For example, in Leung’s interviews with Hong Kong social service organizations (2014a) and policemen (2014b), she found that domestic violence was understood as a mere case of miscommunication between partners and that both partners could be equally responsible for an attack. In one interview (Leung, 2014b), a victim recalled a police officer telling her a complaint could not be filed because while she perceived her ex-husband’s comments as threatening, no actual weapon was used.

From where do these variances emerge? The broader or narrower definitions have been explained by the great influence of Confucian philosophy on Chinese societies. Specifically, the established guidelines for females in relation to males, and its tension vis-à-vis the industrialized Hong Kong values account for this variance.

Confucian Culture—Philosophy, Values, and Guidelines

Traditional Chinese values were constructed around several elements, but the family was the main institution, taking precedence over the desires of the individual. The “economic family” was the central unit of organization and security in rural China. Creation and protection of the family were vital, because it was the principal source of shelter. In the family, an authoritarian hierarchy based on gender, age, and generation

subdued women's behavior to the "three obediences and four virtues" (Gallin, 1999; Li, 2000; Xingjuan, 1999). Rules of measure for a model woman were based on her obedience, fidelity, tidiness, propriety in speech, commitment to needlework, and self-sacrifice, in her roles as a good daughter, wife, and mother (Tang, 1997, 1999). A woman's status, protection, and good social image were obtained in subordination to the men in her life. Men then used violence against women as a restoring technique when women failed to comply with these prescribed roles (Coleman & Straus, 1986; Smith, 1990; Tang et al., 2002). Even though these ideals have adapted to economic development and cultural modernization (Bouhours & Broadhurst, 2015), family expectations still maintain the male's position as principal breadwinner, and place women as the primary caretakers or supervisors of housework and children, even if they have full-time careers (Lee, 2002).

Furthermore, the patriarchal family structure is reinforced by the Confucian welfare model established in Hong Kong. Families are considered the first system of support for their members, with the government's services used as the last resort. This model was adopted believing that excessive public welfare would hinder economic growth (Lee, 2002; Leung, 2014a). As family is the principal unit of care, social security services work to secure and strengthen its integrity. In cases of domestic violence, social services undertake a family perspective, where women are encouraged to think about maintaining the family unit for the children's sake. It is also possible that both sexes can equally commit acts of violence, because in Confucianism, women are seen as equal and as strong as the men within the household. Li (2000) quoted how women were compared with the Empress Dowager: "The home is the throne from which she makes appointments for mayors or decides the professions of her grandsons" (p. 189).

As important as they are imagined, Chinese women are discouraged from breaking up honor, solidarity, and harmony in their families, leaving their individual rights in second place (Chan, Brownridge, Tiwari, Fong, & Leung, 2008; Leung, 2014a; Tang, 1997). When the government adopts this perspective, it structurally maintains men's social dominance (Leung, 2014b). The following section addresses the importance of media in framing and understanding the local culture, as well as past media analyses of domestic violence coverage.

Media Role and Framing Theory

Media play a vital role in the construction and reproduction of the ideas a person has about the problems in his or her community, such as poverty, crime, or even his or her personal failures (Bullock, Fraser, & Williams, 2001; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Schneider, 2012). Not only that, the information and evaluation people retrieve from news media serve to attribute responsibility, seek policy changes, or simply help them normalize their experiences, pointing to what is acceptable and what is not (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Hay, 1996; Iyengar, 1991; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). The problem-cause-solution format has been categorized as functions of framing (Entman, 1993), and is affected by source selection, word choice, and the

political and cultural context of a society (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Gillespie et al., 2013; Van Gorp, 2007; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011).

Framing is a process that occurs within the newsroom, where certain aspects of an issue are selected. Through this process, some facts and opinions are ranked above others, so the news can resonate with the perceived beliefs and values of the audience (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). It does not mean that information is faked intentionally, but it means pieces of it (causes, solutions, or moral evaluations) are edited to reduce their complexity and as a result, events are transformed into an interesting narrative of “shared culture . . . on the basis of socially defined roles” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 55). This results in centrally organized storylines that provide “common-sense wisdom” of unfolding events (De Vreese, 2005; Tuchman, 1978). In the present case, the coverage of domestic violence in the Westernized and ethnically Chinese city of Hong Kong could carry frames, which provide a cultural understanding of how they see the social problem at the intersection of their Confucian past and industrialized present.

Therefore, news content is contingent on the values and social structures where reporters reside, and what they consider important. The framing process reinforces the prevailing dominant structure, because elites define and regulate the social structures that are part of the news making production. All coverage, but predominantly coverage of crime, is first filtered, understood, and explained by the legal, administrative, and enforcement institutions that men have historically controlled. For instance, journalists rely on law enforcement officials to obtain information about crimes, confiding in their initial definitions of what happened at the scene (Welch, Fenwick, & Roberts, 1997). In domestic violence incidents, police officers are the first on the scene and identify the terms of reference from which media discussion will derive (Chermak, 1994). As a result, credibility is conferred on authorities or “official” sources like the police, judges, and politicians (Tuchman, 1978; Van Dijk, 1996), where the middle-class, ethnic majority men’s arguments make up the lion’s share. For example, it is easy to imagine the type of information produced by law enforcement and judicial sources in Hong Kong, where male police officers are 84% of the force (Hong Kong Government, 2016) and where traditional concepts of domestic violence are not uncommon (Leung, 2014b). News about the world then is not always an accurate reflection, but rather a perspective filtered through journalistic standards, localized values, and systems of beliefs that are subconsciously at the service of male elite institutions and their dominant ideology (Gitlin, 1979; Lippmann, 1922; Van Dijk, 1996).

Framing and the Social Construction of Domestic Violence

The study of coverage of femicides due to intimate partner violence as a social and newsworthy construct is ample, although it has usually been done in the United States and Europe. Researchers have remarked on the news’s reluctance to treat the femicide as an event in a prolonged history of physical violence and instead merely as an isolated crime (Ferrand Bullock, 2007; Ferrand Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al.,

2013; Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2009). By labeling them just accidents, the authors concurred, media neglected to elevate them to the category of “domestic violence as a social problem,” part of a system of patriarchal control, which would demand social analysis and human action (Taylor, 2009).

These accidents were central in the so-called factual or “police frame,” where the main quoted actors were official sources, particularly the police, enlisting facts and narrating the topic like any other crime. Solutions were rarely given or they tended to rest on law enforcement institutions (Ferrand Bullock, 2007; Ferrand Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011).

Another important frame was the discussion of the people involved in domestic violence (“victims and abusers are different from us”). In it, the perpetrators and victims were identified as inherently different from the general population. Their distinct behavior or characteristics, such as low social class, ethnic background, or cultural practices predisposed them to this type of violence. In doing so, journalists assured readers that perpetrators were easily identifiable and, although horrible things could happen to all, this was not likely for normal people like them (Ferrand Bullock, 2007; Ferrand Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Meyers, 1994).

The literature also identified frames where responsibility was placed exclusively on individual actors (“Direct and indirect victim blaming”). Media representations explained the homicides as a result of victims engaging in morally inappropriate behavior (e.g., infidelities, constant fighting, women refusing to leave their abusive husbands) or perpetrators being emotionally unstable (e.g., they were unemployed, drunk, mentally ill, sad over a breakup; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2009).

In Chinese society, there is little analysis following media coverage of female violence (Chan, 1997; Gilmartin, 1990; Leung, 2016). This research, however, found similar patterns to those of the American and European studies: victims being blamed for their abuse, hot-tempered men, and stories that disregarded the hierarchy derived from gender. Interestingly, these efforts paid little attention to the cultural expectations of women within the Confucian family. Therefore, we are interested in the framing functions (problem–cause–solution) of domestic violence and the predominant narratives used by journalists, whether they recognize the influence of the Confucian culture or not:

1. **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** Framing functions: Are femicides recognized as a problem of domestic violence? What are the causes of femicides? And what are the solutions proposed?
2. **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** Frame narratives: What are the main narratives of the *SCMP*? And what are the sources used to report them?

Method

Items from the *SCMP*, the most relevant English newspaper and one of the most important in Hong Kong, were collected for the 2013 year.² This news outlet was selected due to its large circulation in the city and importance in the region. The *SCMP*

daily circulation has remained stable during the last 10 years, with approximately 100,000 copies on average (Hong Kong Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2017). Of their readership, 39% is ethnically Chinese and 61% is non-Chinese, with 78% of the readership having a university degree or above (SCMP, 2015). Therefore, it can be said the newspaper caters to the local and international business, academic, and political elite of the city. The *SCMP* was chosen for its influence as a “newspaper of record,” its liberal stance, and its use in previous Hong Kong media analyses (Flowerdew, Li, & Tran, 2002; Krumbein, 2015). Given its audience, the newspaper provides a class perspective of the city and their mainland cousins. As past studies have pointed out how domestic violence events tend to be trivialized, an elite and liberal newspaper would be the one to provide an exploratory, open-minded, and cultural translation of Chinese events to its Westernized and privileged audience. Furthermore, an analysis of a leading English language newspaper would be beneficial, as to this researcher’s knowledge there are not current studies addressing the coverage of domestic violence in Chinese media in English (for a Chinese revision, see Chan, 1997, and Leung, 2016).

The articles were retrieved from the ProQuest database. To be included in the study, stories had to be centered on femicides: men killing or clearly trying to kill female partners with whom they were or had been romantically involved through marriage, cohabitation, or dating. These were chosen, as they represented well-defined examples of domestic violence and less escalated abuse may not receive news attention. As a result, articles of sexual violence, women’s violence against men, children killing parents, or domestic helpers’ exploitation were removed. Following Ferrand Bullock (2007), cases in which a woman’s former partner killed her current boyfriend, her children, or her relatives as a preceding step to attack her, to punish her, or when they tried to defend her, were included. In addition, expressions of domestic violence were also considered. A wide string search related to fatalities and domestic violence was used.³ News articles, briefs, editorials, and opinion columns were included. The unit of analysis was the whole article. At the end, the total sample consisted of 124 news stories.

The codebook is based on information available from previous studies of media coverage of domestic violence in the United States and domestic violence in China. The principal investigator and one graduate student coded the news stories after performing a pilot test on 15% of the items. To obtain reliability, an online calculator, ReCal2, was employed (Freelon, 2010). The intercoder percent agreement was 95% on average, with no variable less than 89%. Krippendorff’s alpha values also showed good intercoder reliability, cumulating .86 on average and no variable less than .70.

Items were coded categorically for general aspects of the story: type of news (*article, brief, or editorial/opinion piece*), location (*Hong Kong, Mainland China, or other*), leading sources (first attributed source from an official: *police, judicial reports, SWD*; nonofficial/victim’s voice: *NGOs, advocate, family, friend*; perpetrator: *perpetrator, defense lawyer, family*; or general: *news agency, factual statement*), and type of victim (*female partner, murder-suicide, relatives*). The type of victim was considered, as abusers sometimes attacked relatives as well as their partners, or killed themselves after the murder. In addition, key nonofficial sources (*female advocates, NGOs, victim’s family*) throughout the article were coded as well.⁴

Coding of Frames

For the first research question, several variables focused on the recognition of each frame function: femicides as a problem of domestic violence (*mentions of domestic violence, history of abuse, and connection to a larger social problem*), causes (woman's actions: *infidelity, unacceptable behavior, breaking up with perpetrator*; perpetrator's motives: *anger, sadness over a breakup, jealousy, mental, or health problems*; society: *traditional society in China, government neglect, legal system*), and solutions (*improve legal system, educational awareness, change Chinese values*). These functions were extracted from the literature and revised after the training period. Also, they were not designed to be mutually exclusive to capture a higher level of information.

To respond to the second research question, one predominant narrative per article was selected. Narrative frames were considered existent at the occurrence of certain framing devices, such as metaphors, catchphrases, keywords, arguments, or lexical choices (Van Gorp, 2007).⁵ All frames were categorized according to previously identified frames (Ferrand Bullock, 2007; Ferrand Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2009): the factual/police (*when the story described the attacks as a matter-of-fact and “neutral” approach*), “victims and abusers are different from us” (*when the involved were set apart from the population*), individual responsibility (*victim-blaming and/or excusing the perpetrator*), and “domestic violence as a social problem” (*when the abuse was placed in the larger context of gendered violence*). Moreover, to account for the “Chinese culture,” coders were also instructed to assign the frame to stories that remarked on the role of women in the Chinese family, the “three obediences and four virtues,” or the understanding of domestic violence through the prism of Confucian philosophy. Equally, as sources have been found to be strongly related to the frames (Gillespie et al., 2013), this section included tests of association between the frames and the leading/key sources.

Findings

The sample consisted of 124 news articles, as presented in Table 1. The majority of the stories in the *SCMP* were briefs, at 77% (length by words $M = 70$, $SD = 17$) and the remaining 23% were news stories ($M = 418$, $SD = 147$). Sixty-seven percent of the articles related to attacks that took place in Mainland China and 25% in Hong Kong. Female partners (current, former ones, or mistresses) were 44% of the victims, female partner plus other family members were 23% of the sample, and murder-suicides were 18%. In 14% of the reports, the perpetrator attacked relatives and/or current partners as a preceding action against her, as punishment, or because they tried to defend her. From the stories, it was implied that 58% of women were still in their relationship at the time of the attack and 36% were out or were assaulted as a result of trying to break up the union.

Table I. General Characteristics of the Sample (N = 124).

Variable	Options	Percentage
Place of attack	Mainland China	67
	Hong Kong	25
	Other places	8
Type of story	Brief	77
	News story	18
	Editorial/opinion piece	3
	Feature	2
Perpetrator relationship to victim	Male partner	
	Current partner	58
	Former partner	35
Type of victim	General information about Domestic Violence or not provided	7
	Just female partner(s)	41
	Female partner and relatives (children, parents)	23
	Murder-suicide (female partner and perpetrator)	18
	Just female relatives (children or parents)	12
	Mistress	3
	New boyfriend or partner	2

Frame Functions

RQ1 asked about the frame functions in the *SCMP* coverage. The designation of domestic violence as a social problem depended on the categorization of an event as a domestic violence assault, the allusion to the larger problem in society, and/or the reference to a history of violence in the relationship. In the *SCMP*, only 24% of the stories mentioned any of these claims, which meant that more than three quarters (76%) reported the fatalities as unconnected crimes. An example of how past violent history was presented is found in “Man Held Over Stabbing” (2013), where the reporter indicated the father “had been picking his daughter up from work in recent months to protect her from the suspect.” These written insinuations were used as connections between the attack and the history of abuse.

To identify the causes of domestic violence in the *SCMP*, the motives were divided from the individual (victim’s actions and perpetrator’s motives) to the society (cultural and government). In total, 87% of the sample discussed some kind of cause. In 43% of the articles, women’s actions were mentioned as explanations for the assault. The female’s perceived unacceptable behavior was most commonly mentioned (19%), which included behaviors such as infidelities, blackmailing, or fathers suspecting the children were not theirs. The next reason was the victim’s intention to break up or seek a divorce from the perpetrator (14%) and the woman’s failure to comply with her expected family roles (7%). For example, in “Dead Wife Under the Bed” (2013), the man slammed his wife’s head against a wall after she complained that he was out of

work, or in “Rat Poison Murder” (2013), a husband killed his wife because she refused to make meals for his father.

In contrast, 80% of the articles mentioned the perpetrator’s motivation. The main reason for the attacks was most often jealousy, revenge, or depression because of separation-divorce (44%). The next most prevalent motive was a dispute gone awry (19%). The majority of these stories were centered on the perpetrators’ feelings and momentary irrationality (sadness, distress over a breakup, anger, or “hot temperament”). The typical story read, “The woman . . . said she never loved him. He said he became angry and slashed her to death that night” (“Delayed Murder Arrest,” 2013). Or “[the public prosecutor] also said that the trial judge had drawn the jury’s attention to the fact that although Liang was described as bad-tempered, he had never assaulted Yeung [before]” (Chiu, 2013).

Societal causes were mentioned in 7% or just nine of the news articles, and Confucian ideology was a key explanation in five of the nine articles. For example, an argument would express,

Meanwhile, the reality of gender inequality is still stark in Chinese society. Nevertheless, the latest report shows the country that gave birth to Confucianism—regarded by feminists as one of the most repressive ideologies against women—has made great strides in promoting them. (“China’s Women Need Equality,” 2013)

The last accountable actor was the government (police, social services, legal) in 5% ($n = 6$) of the articles. They were accused of being indifferent to the victims’ plight or operating under a vague legal definition of domestic violence. Reporters would discuss police practices, such as, “The Association for the Survivors of Women Abuse said yesterday the police categories of ‘domestic violence’—which warrants urgent follow-up—and ‘domestic incident’—which doesn’t—meant many marginal cases were being ignored” (Tam, 2013).

In contrast to the causes, solutions were a rarity in the *SCMP* domestic violence coverage. In general, only 8% ($n = 10$) of the stories presented some form of suggestion. Solutions were most common in editorials or opinion columns, which accounted only for a small percent of the news (Table 1). These solutions were directed toward the government ($n = 4$) or the society ($n = 6$). The editorialists suggested the government should create better centers to receive battered women, improve police sensitivity, toughen punishment laws, or improve the legal domestic violence definitions. Toward society, news articles appealed to members to take action, increase educational awareness in schools, change gender stereotypes, or encourage women to speak up.

Frame Narratives

RQ2 addressed the key narratives that explained domestic violence to the *SCMP* readers. In the sample, the most predominant and prominent frame was the factual one (87%), transcribing from the police or judiciary report details about the crime. The

tone in these stories was matter-of-fact, even when discussing gruesome details or motivations. There was a statistically significant relationship between the police statements from Mainland news agencies as leading sources (71%) and the frame, $\chi^2(5, N = 124) = 67.82, p < .001$, with a large effect size, Cramer's $V = .74$. In comparison, none of the leading sources was a domestic violence expert or person related to the victim. These sources were significantly underrepresented even when they were cited at some point throughout the text (9%). However, when present, they helped expand the history of what happened; for example, "the victim's family said the suspect became angry after the break-up" ("Man Held Over Stabbing," 2013) or "the woman said her husband often scolded and beat her over trivial family matters" ("Wife Hurt Fleeing Husband," 2013).

The rest of the frames were scarce in comparison. The most representative after the factual frame was the Chinese cultural one (6%, $n = 7$). In this frame, domestic violence advocates or the victims' families were significantly overrepresented as leading sources, $\chi^2(5, N = 124) = 32.19, p < .001$, and as sources throughout the text, $\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 49.07, p < .001$, with large effect sizes in both cases: Cramer's V was .51 and phi was .63, respectively. Through their voices, reporters and columnists acknowledged the influence that Confucian culture still had on women's rights and its everyday influences, from the lack of legislation in a system that undermined such cases, to the traditional family roles and embarrassment of reporting such incidents. For instance, a story read,

Such a cultural attitude makes combating domestic violence particularly hard in China. Another common problem is that domestic violence is often treated as a family dispute. Chen's neighbors were reluctant to step in when arguments broke out, holding the belief that "even the wisest judge can't sort out family disputes clearly." (Zhang, 2013a)

In the case of victims, a domestic violence refuge employee noted that many women kept quiet because they felt ashamed to disgrace their family ("Little Use of Shelter," 2013).

Although such beliefs are perceived as unrelated to modern values and the economic advancement of women, the power disparity between genders was identified as a cultural inheritance: "More than three decades of reforms and opening up have dramatically transformed China. . . . Even so, the culture of male patriarchy is firmly in place" (Zhang, 2013b), or "I blame Confucius for the feudal male chauvinism plaguing society. . . . Chinese communists have undoubtedly improved the lot of women but they haven't wiped out Confucius' influence" (Zhang, 2013a). These rare *SCMP* articles, through women advocates, referred to domestic violence experiences as a deep-rooted cultural pattern, grounded in the unequal relations between men and women in Confucian culture.

A side note to make about this frame is how Mainland China was perceived, particularly when the historical relationship between both places is considered (for an analysis of the discriminatory discursive practices in Hong Kong against Mainland Chinese, see Flowerdew et al., 2002). First, the majority of the news stories were set

in Mainland China (Table 1). In addition, several arguments made efforts to isolate the situation to Mainland China, by relegating it to the rural and poor areas, by setting apart the origin of assailants and victims, or simply by accentuating it there. For example, it was emphasized that women did not report their attackers in the “province” and that many offenders were farmers who had not received a high school education (“Domestic Violence,” 2013). Similarly, the origin of victims and offenders was frequently emphasized as a single identifier: “the 38-year-old *mainlander* who allegedly killed his girlfriend and their two children . . . has been charged with three counts of murder” (“Man Charged With Murdering Family,” 2013, emphasis added), or “Zhang [the victim] moved to the city *from the mainland* in 2011 after marrying an elderly Hong Kong man. He died this year” (Lo, 2013, emphasis added). Finally, the violence across the border was artfully singled out: “A law setting out a clear definition of domestic violence and its punishment is urgently needed on the mainland, as two cases remind us this month” (Tze-wei, 2013). The references to Mainland China could be said to simultaneously meet the previously enlisted frame: “the victims and abusers are different from us.”

The last frame with some significant frequency was “domestic violence as a social problem,” but related to international contexts (5%, $n = 6$). In it, domestic violence experts and bystander witnesses were significantly overrepresented as leading sources, $\chi^2(5, N = 124) = 66.09, p < .001$, Cramer’s V was .73. Equally, there was a meaningful presence of domestic violence advocates throughout the text, $\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 39.13, p < .001$, Phi’s effect size was .60. These *SCMP* stories contextualized domestic violence as a universal structural problem. This was achieved by the inclusion of abuse statistics in other countries, as well as the health and economic effects of violence. For instance,

the World Health Organisation . . . issued a report on violence against women. . . . Former Hong Kong health chief [said] it is a global health problem of epidemic proportions. One of the report’s authors said . . . violence happened to all women, not just poor women or those in certain countries or societies. (“No Excuse for Domestic Violence,” 2013)

These stories spoke of the pervasive presence of gender violence across the globe and cultural resistance to transformation.

Discussion and Limitations

The present study sought to understand the problem of domestic violence in the *SCMP* coverage of femicides and their relatives at hands of their intimate partners in Hong Kong. This was achieved through the identification of frames, derived from Western media studies on domestic violence and from the domestic violence research done in Chinese societies. Frames were expected to follow either coverage commonalities found in other countries or related to Hong Kong society, with the Confucian values of the ideal woman considered in the media narratives.

The “Frame Functions” section of the frame analysis observed that the majority of the *SCMP* stories (76%) failed to relate the attempts and the fatalities to the larger social problem of domestic violence. They were related gruesomely and described as domestic crimes or family tragedies, but they were not properly identified as domestic violence or abuse. The articles attributed the incidents to perpetrators’ emotions (80%), such as jealousy, depression after a separation, disputes gone badly, and so on. At the same time, 43% of the stories blamed the victim and justified men’s emotions as triggered by the victims’ actions: inappropriate behaviors (infidelities, economic ambition, and lack of trust, among others), desire to end the relationship, or inability to comply with their traditional family duties (questioning the husband’s decisions, not responding to their needs, challenging his “authority”). A minority of articles placed the reasons for violence within the Confucian society’s values ($n = 5$) and the government’s lack of responses ($n = 6$). Finally, only 8% of the sample enlisted some solutions, mainly calling for law reforms, new updated definitions for domestic violence, or the modernization of societal values.

The “Frame Narratives” section identified three general frames within the sample: the factual, the Chinese cultural, and the international. The first two frames were expected according to the literature. The third one, “domestic violence as a social problem,” went beyond the Hong Kong context to a universal one (Ferrand Bullock, 2007; Ferrand Bullock & Cubert, 2002). The factual frame dominated the coverage, occupying 87% of the sample, with the Chinese cultural frame occupying 6% and the international frame 5%. Each frame was significantly associated with a particular leading source in their storylines. For instance, the factual frame meaningfully relied on Chinese wire-police documents, while the Chinese culture and the international frame were more inclusive of domestic violence advocates and victims’ relatives as sources. The frames’ styles ascended from a “neutral/objective” narrative into one where facts were viewed from a societal and historical perspective.

In terms of the research done on domestic violence coverage, the present effort was consistent with the previous literature (Chan, 1997; Ferrand Bullock, 2007; Ferrand Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Leung, 2016; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2009): Official authorities remained the main sources of information and domestic violence continued to be seen as an isolated crime, disconnected from the control and power issues in the relationship. In addition, the Hong Kong newspaper explained the events from the dominant ideology, as breaches of societal female roles, such as “fidelity,” “loyalty,” “obedience,” or “respect,” which served as precipitators for the attacks. These stories reinforced the traditional narrative on how to avoid being the victim of a domestic violence incident: for if a women is killed for cheating, is not the lesson not to cheat? The stories conveyed the men’s role to regulate and keep the family system in place. For him, his masculinity and position as head of the household/relationship have been challenged, and there will be dishonor if he cannot restore them, but understanding or compassion if he does. The few mentioned solutions were similar also to previous results, relying on law and order institutions. There was acknowledgement that legal definitions of domestic violence were deficient and narrow, but no

recognition that enforcement and prosecution still rest on male-dominated institutions and that society is usually the first cultural enforcer of these definitions.

Nonetheless, this study adds to our understanding of how different locations and cultures give significance to their own context (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; De Vreese, 2005; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). There are many similarities in the coverage of domestic violence, in that women are portrayed as disrupting their gender expectations, while their partners are enforcing those expectations. But there is also a unique rationalization of how a society understands these events. For example, American media have criticized women in abusive homes for not leaving (Richards et al., 2011), but this point was never mentioned in the *SCMP*. On the contrary, the wives' perceived duties were not referred to in the U.S. studies, while they were present in the *SCMP* (respecting the husband's decisions, serving the in-laws or husband's friends, attending to the children) as inadvertent justifications.

These justifications were processed through the long-lasting Confucian beliefs in Chinese culture. The reasons behind the violence worked as a reminder to Chinese women that their duties and family responsibilities in deferring to male professed rights were not negotiable. In fact, it inherently reminded them of the risk of challenging their traditional social status (Gilmartin, 1990; Tang et al., 2002). On the bright side, from time to time, the *SCMP* did not place the whole burden on women. Reporters, through the use of experts and victims' advocates, recognized and sympathized with the cultural implications of shame and obedience that bound women to their family and marriage roles. In these comprehensive news stories, the *SCMP* diverted from the conventional crime narrative and attributed domestic violence to the position women hold in Chinese society and worldwide. The columnists, advocates, and journalists made calls to modernize the last bastions of Confucianism, particularly in rural and uneducated Mainland China areas and to mainlanders' attitudes in Hong Kong.

The current results have implications within two arenas (considering particular limitations to be explained later): domestic violence itself and framing of domestic violence. First, there are practical implications for readers. For women, they may fail to understand the degree of their vulnerability. By editing out aspects of a history of violence or categorizing that as unimportant, the *SCMP* crime reporting prevents women from recognizing their experiences as escalating acts of control, which hopefully would motivate them to seek help. This type of coverage may actually serve as a deterrent to help seeking, because the urbanized and educated audience of the *SCMP* would not identify with the poor uneducated women of Mainland China, as they are portrayed in the articles. Or, they may in fact recognize the great danger they could face if they try to quit the relationship. For men, their actions toward their partners may just seem like exceptions to typical behavior, as anger management problems, or even as justifiable acts of what constitutes societal and cultural betrayals. In reality, they may fail to distinguish their violent behavior as retaliation for the authority they feel entitled to have but was contested.

In the same way, these results have implications for policy design, as authorities may believe that a broader or more liberal definition of domestic violence would eradicate the situation. It certainly would improve it, but by remarking on certain places

and cultural environments (e.g., Confucian ideology, uneducated mainlanders, rural Mainland China, or Mainland China), this coverage tended to idealize the opposite. For instance, the current condition of women and the persistent existence of domestic violence in “educated” industrialized countries continue to be an issue for them, even when they have clearer legal definitions and the majority of them do not ascribe to Confucian family roles. However, whether readers and policy makers take on this perspective from the media should be tested in future studies. In the end, in societies where this type of abuse is private and narrowly defined, alternative solutions may only be available through progressive perspectives in mass media.

In terms of framing, the *SCMP* frames followed the same crime storylines as presented in other Western newspapers, but with cultural and political adaptations to the Hong Kong environment. In the reporting, the *SCMP* framing did not recognize domestic violence as a social problem. Solutions were the sole responsibility of government or the vague willpower of society. There was no other type of suggestion, not even to walk out of the abusive relationship, as in the American media (Richards et al., 2011). This omission may be a consideration, recognizing the difficulty of leaving a violent home, or it may be a reflection of Hong Kong welfare policies and culture (Leung, 2014a). Nevertheless, none of the stories quoted information about existing shelters, hotlines, or choices women had to help their situation. Neither friends nor neighbors were instructed on how to act if they suspected abuse of their loved ones. And if there was no information for women, there was even less for men. This may be more the center of a campaign and not that of news stories, but it also meant that individual recommendations were not part of the domestic violence narrative in the *SCMP*. Future studies may attempt to establish contact with reporters and editors about their journalistic routines covering domestic violence news, and whether they are conscious of the issue or are constrained by their own practices. In addition, training and guidelines for sensible treatment of crime victims may be a possibility, such as acknowledging the victim’s experience, seeking their family’s take on the issue, and avoiding “why” questions as they may imply blame (Bucqueroux & Seymour, 2015). Evidence indicates that journalists trained by a unified voice of experts and background checks of offenders are successful in better identification and more mindful coverage of domestic violence cases (Gillespie et al., 2013; Ryan, Anastasio, & DaCunha, 2006).

In conclusion, although the research was exploratory and the *SCMP* is one of the most widely read and respected press outlets in the city, the findings signaled to the concerns and perspectives aimed at their middle-class readership. To generalize the results to all Chinese media, subsequent studies should involve Chinese newspapers, television, or Internet news sources. Second, Hong Kong is a highly urbanized city, with a particular political climate as a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China. The city is at the center of an interesting symbiosis of Western and Chinese cultural practices that serve as interpreter for the problem of domestic violence. Nevertheless, caution should be taken not to oversimplify it to other Chinese locations. In spite of these limitations, by incorporating the Confucian and Chinese literature, this study addressed concerns that framing research needs “to be examined within the contexts of the distribution of political and social power” (Carragee &

Roefs, 2004, p. 214). The present study attempts to lay groundwork for succeeding studies concerning the coverage of violence against women in Asia. It aims to recognize the significance of media framing in the creation and reproduction of localized values and its potential contribution to creating awareness and helping the population from the harmful consequences of violence against women.

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Notes

1. Hong Kong was a British colony until June 30, 1997, when China resumed sovereignty of the city. Ethnically, Hong Kong is predominantly Chinese (94%, with Cantonese as their mother tongue). The majority of these came from Mainland China, seeking refuge from political instability. From this history, Chinese Hongkongers have developed their own cultural identity, based in economic liberties and freedom of speech vis-à-vis a cultural differentiation from Mainland China (Flowerdew, Li, & Tran, 2002).
2. News stories until March 6, 2014, were included to account for the pretest sample.
3. The terms (suffixes included) were as follows: kill, death, murder, assassinate, abuse, attack, wound, injure, assault, slash, or chop, along with wife, lover, girlfriend, house-wife, or mistress. The contemplated domestic violence expressions were as follows (Ryan, Anastasio, & DaCunha, 2006): domestic violence, family violence, domestic abuse or family dispute.
4. The codebook is available from the author upon request.
5. There is ample debate whether the sole measurement of arguments is truly representative of frames, and that studies should consider their cognitive effects, societal and cultural narrative besides phrasing (Cacciato, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2016; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Van Gorp, 2007; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). To tackle this, the present study includes two types of frame measurement: functions and framing devices, which previous studies have done before (Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Häggli, 2012).

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