Boundary Politics in the Public Sphere:
Openness, Secrecy, and Leak*

AGNES S. KU
Hong Kong Polytechnic University

The issue of openness/secrecy has not received adequate attention in current discussion on the public sphere. Drawing on ideas in critical theory, political sociology, and cultural sociology, this article explores the cultural and political dynamics involved in the public sphere in modern society vis-à-vis the practice of open/secret politics by the state. It argues that the media, due to their publicist quality, are situated at the interface between publicity and secrecy, which thereby allows for struggles over the boundary of state openness/secrecy in the public sphere. A theory of boundary politics is introduced that is contextualized in the relationship among state forms, the means of making power visible/invisible (media strategies), and symbolic as well as discursive practices in the public sphere. In explaining the dynamics of boundary politics over openness/secrecy, three ideal-types of boundary creation are conceptualized: open politics, secrecy, and leak. The theory is illustrated with a case study of the Patten controversy in Hong Kong.

Recent discussion in social theory and in various substantive areas of sociology has addressed the notion of the public sphere in relation to the question of democracy, bringing in the concept to analyze the complex relationship between state and civil society (Habermas [1962] 1989; Bobbio 1989; Pateman 1989; Thompon 1990, 1995; Alexander 1991; Calhoun 1992, 1995; Cohen and Arato 1992; Eley 1992; Fraser 1993; Taylor 1995; Weintraub 1997), and between culture and politics (Somers 1993, 1995a,b; Alejandro 1993; Robbins 1993; Diawara 1994; Dahlgren 1996; Jacobs 1996; Jacobs and Smith 1997; Elshtain 1997; Wolfe 1997). Within this growing body of work there nonetheless exists substantive lacunae to be filled and theoretical gaps to be bridged. This article is intended neither as a thorough critique of the existing approaches to the public sphere nor as an exhaustive discussion of the subject matter. Rather, drawing on and reworking some of the ideas proposed by critical theorists, political sociologists, and cultural sociologists, it attempts to address a facet of the question of the constitution of the public-private boundary that has not yet received adequate attention in current discussion of the public sphere, namely the issue of state openness/secrecy.

In academic discourse, the notion of the public has been interpreted in contradistinction to that of the private in at least two different yet related ways (Thompson 1995; Weintraub 1997). One of them, represented by Habermas’s work in critical theory [1962] (1989), is premised on a conceptual distinction between state and civil society; the other has to do with the issue of publicness, openness, and visibility as opposed to privacy, secrecy, and invisibility. The two meanings of the public-private dichotomy do not coincide with each other but can be fruitfully combined in certain ways. Indeed, as we shall see, the second interpretation has made an appearance in the first which, when substantially reformulated,

*I would like to thank Craig Calhoun, editor, and the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Alexander and my colleagues in Hong Kong, Ho and Shae, for their constructive criticisms and suggestions. Direct correspondence to Agnes Ku, Department of Applied Social Studies, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong. Email: sssmku@polyu.edu.hk

Sociological Theory 16:2 July 1998
© American Sociological Association, 1722 N Street NW, Washington, DC 20036
will help put into perspective the issue of state openness versus secrecy from the vantage point of the public sphere. An adequate reformulation would require us to tease out and theorize the political and cultural significance of “openness” as an integral element of the public sphere. In this connection, more specifically, Thompson’s recent work (1995) represents an important attempt in political sociology to draw our attention to the intricate and changing relationship among state forms, (in)visibility of power, and forms of publicness. Cultural sociology, moreover, has opened up the necessary conceptual space for us to theorize the symbolic or discursive structures and processes that accompany and constitute political struggles over openness/secrecy.

The aim of this article is to explore the cultural and political dynamics involved in the public sphere in modern society vis-à-vis the practice of open/secret politics by the state. Two theoretical questions present themselves as pertinent to our concern: (1) How does the moral boundary of publicness that defines the scope of legitimate public concern in the public sphere shape—give meaning to, contest, and negotiate with—the state-enforced boundary that delimits the political scope of openness? and (2) What role does the public play vis-à-vis the state elites in the political process whereby such boundaries are drawn and redrawn? I will introduce a notion of the symbolic “public,” whereby the interplay between culture and politics as well as the role of public citizens in politics is foregrounded. In theoretical construction, the notion of the symbolic “public” would have to be contextualized in the relationships among state forms, means of making power visible/invisible (media strategies), and symbolic or discursive practices in the public sphere. Further, in explaining the dynamics of boundary politics over openness/secrecy, three ideal-types of boundary creation will be conceptualized: open politics, secrecy, and leak. In the final section, the theoretical framework will be illustrated with an analysis of the controversy over Governor Patten’s reform proposals in Hong Kong between 1992 and 1994.

PUBLICITY, OPENNESS, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A public sphere is an arena in which members of a political community can join together to discuss communal issues. In its operation it becomes a structural prerequisite that the public sphere be developed from within a nonstate domain whereby its political autonomy vis-à-vis the state could be safeguarded. Habermas has made this point clear in his conceptual distinction between the state and civil society, although the distinction itself is fraught with ambiguities and paradoxes (Cohen and Arato 1992; Weintraub 1997). Much discussion on the public sphere has followed this line of thinking, but scholars differ in their views about the institutional locus of the public sphere. More specifically, there have been debates on whether the media in modern society may be taken as a public sphere for democratic politics (Habermas [1962] 1989; Calhoun 1992; Garnham 1992; Fraser 1993; Thompson 1990, 1995; Dahlgren 1995). Among critical theorists, questions are raised as to whether the media, due to their commercial character as well as their hegemonic relationship with dominant groups in society, could function as a sphere for critical and rational discourse. This argument contains certain grains of truth, but in being predisposed to a social-structural mode of theorization, such an approach falls short of grasping and spelling out the cultural and political significance of the publicist quality of the media. My contention is that the media embody an element of publicness in two distinctive ways that have to do with the concept of openness in two related senses of the word—openness versus restrictedness, and openness versus secrecy. Turning to critical theory as a point of departure, the following will elaborate these ideas in the context of Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, partly as a critique of and partly as an attempt to reformulate it.
Habermas’s book on the public sphere [1962] (1989) is primarily concerned with the social and cultural bases within civil society for the development of a public sphere capable of solving political disputes through rational-critical discourse. He understands the historical existence of such a sphere in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries as the product of the rise of capitalism that, alongside the development of the modern state, had helped establish in society a private sphere of commodity exchange that took on public relevance and at the same time facilitated the growth of a communicative infrastructure for public life (for example, the press, coffeehouses, and salons). Habermas does not define the public in terms of openness, yet the idea that openness (in both senses of the word) forms an integral part of the public sphere is implicit in various places. First, on the institutional and cultural levels, publicness is embodied in three institutional criteria in public discussion, one of which is the norm of general accessibility or inclusiveness—“openness” in the first sense (the other two are an adherence to the principle of critical-rationality versus status consciousness, and an unprivileged interpretation of the domain of common concern via the commodification of culture products).

Habermas defines accessibility in the sense that in the public sphere as a sphere of the public “everyone had to be able to participate” (p. 37, emphasis in original). But in idealizing the critical-rational nature of discourse conducted in public spaces like salons and coffeehouses, his analysis overlooks the fact that while such places for face-to-face discussion are in theory open to anyone, they are in practice limited in public accommodation and hence in accessibility. According to Thompson (1990), this interpretation of the public sphere is lodged within a conception of publicness that is essentially spatial and dialogical in character—the public as an assembly of individuals meeting in an open or public place where they discuss issues of general concern. In his elaboration, Habermas nonetheless appears to be well aware of the existence of a larger public (which the bourgeois circle was conscious of being part of) that extends beyond the immediate locale of the debating individuals: “The public of the first generations, even when it constituted itself as a specific circle of persons, was conscious of being part of a larger public. Potentially it was always also a publicist body, as its discussions did not need to remain internal to it but could be directed at the outside world” (ibid.).

Here, Habermas apparently acknowledges the relevance of media publicity as a feature of the public sphere. However, like others (Bendix 1978; Mayhew 1984; Wuthnow 1989), he conceives the press at that time as carrying out a publicist function for certain activities, such as coffeehouse discussions, rather than as a social institution having a cultural logic of its own. As I will argue later, due to its publicist nature, media discourse necessarily encompasses the whole citizenry as an “imagined community” participating in the same discursive context. The media hence become a sphere of the public. As a corollary, media discourse necessarily calls forth the imagined “public” as the prime symbolic reference whereby politics in the public sphere is conducted.

In Habermas’s account of the bourgeois public sphere, there is a second context in which the notion of publicity crops up as an important element in the process of political struggle against the state. In the monarchical states of medieval and early modern Europe, state affairs were conducted largely in the closed setting of the court. Habermas contrasts this practice of state secrecy with the principle of publicity through the press. His historical analysis gives an account of how the press played an indispensable role in the successful

---

1In his discussion on television and the public sphere, Dahlgren (1995) suggests moving from the category of private audience to citizen in the sense of a public of interacting social agents. In a similar vein, Skogerbo (1990) emphasizes the image of the citizen in place of the consumer. For a detailed explanation of the concept of “imagined community,” see Anderson (1983). See also Chaney (1993) for his idea of mode of address in public life.
struggle against the privilege of secrecy of Parliament in Britain, eventuating in the historic transformation of the form of the state in Europe. Through media publicity, not only were parliamentary debates opened up for public scrutiny, but political actors might actively appeal to the public for support in times of internal dissension:

[I]t took the new relationship of Parliament to the public sphere that ultimately led to the full publicity of the parliamentary deliberations to bring about a qualitative difference from the previous system. . . . The minority that did not get its way in Parliament could always seek refuge in the public sphere and appeal to the judgment of the public. (Habermas [1962] 1989:63)

Clearly, with the emergence of civil society, media publicity has played a prominent and indispensable part in the process of the democratic reformation of the state. In this light, we may go one step further in presuming that to the extent to which the concept of the public sphere entails an element of openness, the development of the modern media is concomitant with a democratic struggle for openness in state politics.

This is perhaps not the place to go into the details of the complicated historical processes that have shaped the struggles for state openness. Nevertheless, based on Zaret’s (1994, 1996) in-depth historical analyses of the rise of the notion of public, I hazard that the struggles against state secrecy that took place in the early modern period had been deeply connected with a cultural process that marked the change from a discourse of deference to a discourse of democracy. Before the rise of the public sphere, the right to petition was a privilege that allowed people to communicate directly, and hence nonpublicly, with the state authority. This kind of privileged, nonpublic petition was pervaded by deferential rhetoric that “portrays petitioners as ‘humble’ suitors who ‘pray’ and ‘suppli cate’ for relief from grievances” (1996:1514). This contrasted with later petitioning practices that, as a result of the development of printing, “invoke or imply popular will as a source of authority” (ibid.). This observation not only lends force to my presumption that the development of the media has been concomitant with a democratic struggle against state secrecy and political privilege, but also gives support to my argument that politics in the public sphere entails a need to make constant reference to the symbolic “public.”

The political and cultural implications of the notion of openness, which remains undertheorized in Habermas’s framework, are indeed far-reaching. As an open discursive space, the historical significance of the public sphere lies not so much in it being a sphere for critical-rational discourse, as Habermas conceives it to be, as in it being (a) a sphere of the public, and (b) deeply involved in the process of the democratic reformation of the state. In the history of Europe, the early press was initially an organ of the state; with the development of capitalism, the press was later transformed into a weapon of the public vis-à-vis the state. The important thing about the development of the media in the context of civil society is that, insofar as the idea of the public sphere entails an element of openness in the double sense of general accessibility and visibility, the media constitute a crucial site through which the people can join in a collective struggle for an open, democratic form of government in the name of the public. That the public sphere can serve as a site for this purpose is due to two unique features: first, it is structurally located at the interface between the state and civil society; second, it works at the interface between publicity and political secrecy, helping to define the boundary between the two realms through day-to-day struggles. Such struggles are both political and symbolic in nature, seeking to maintain or transform the existing political boundary of openness/secrecy enforced by the state while endowing it with symbolic and moral meanings. Apparently, there exists a juncture between
the political and the symbolic/moral boundaries of publicness (openness). What needs to be theorized, then, are the political and cultural dynamics involved in public struggles over the open-secret boundary of state practices.

For one thing, struggle against state secrecy does not end with the formal institutionalization of the democratic state in modern society, for secret practices by the state exist in different manners under different state forms. This explains the continuing importance of the public sphere as a site of struggle over the boundary between state openness and secrecy. In theoretical terms, it is the question about the interplay between state practices (under different state forms) and political-cultural practices in the public sphere that should be addressed. In this regard, Thompson's discussion of the changing meanings of publicness in relation to the different state forms in different historical epochs will serve as a springboard from which to confront the issue of state secrecy in contemporary settings. Yet, as we shall see, for all the insights it has offered us, his work does not fully address the question of the interplay between culture and politics—as they are practiced in the public sphere. The following will draw on some of his ideas and also a few works from cultural sociology in working out a theory about the public sphere that will allow us to attend to the political and cultural dynamics involved in the struggle over state openness/secrecy.

THE INTERFACE BETWEEN PUBLICITY AND SECRECY

State Forms and Visibility/Invisibility of State Power

From the vantage point of democracy, openness is juxtaposed to secrecy; moreover, the form of openness based on a principle of democratic accountability to the citizenry is to be distinguished from that of authoritarian display before the subjects. Democracy in modern society, with the development of the media, has seen the coexistence of both forms of openness and also the emergence of new strategies and techniques of secrecy. Historically, according to Thompson (1995:123), “there is a complex and shifting relation between forms of government and the visibility or invisibility of power.” Ancient democracy in the classical Greek city-states was committed to a visible form of state power by means of a “publicness of copresence.” In contrast, the monarchical states in Europe in medieval and early modern times conducted politics in secrecy while making conspicuous displays of their status and authority in the public space. In modern society, constitutional democracy entails a high degree of visibility by means of a “mediated publicness” through the media. This modern form of state power shares both the quality of accountable visibility characteristic of ancient democracy and the quality of managed visibility found in monarchical states. This paradoxical feature, in Thompson’ words, makes media publicity a “double-edged sword.” Nonetheless, drawing on Goffman’s (1963, 1971) notion of the front stage and injecting into it a democratic quality, he insists that the modern form of visibility of state power, despite its susceptibility to the effect of stage management, embodies an element of public accountability in a way very distinctive to the modern media. As he has demonstrated, there is a limit to political control through managed visibility, which may take the form of a gaffe, outburst, backfire, leak, or scandal.

Nevertheless, as Thompson (1995:124–25) has also noted, what characterizes modern democracy is not simply an increase in visibility; rather, this increase is accompanied by new forms of invisible power or hidden government: “With the development of the modern constitutional state, the invisibility of power was limited in certain ways. . . . Limiting the invisibility of power has not rendered power fully visible: on the contrary, the exercise of power in modern societies remains in many ways shrouded in secrecy and hidden from the public gaze.” The new forms of invisible government range from “the inscrutable...
activities of security services and paramilitary organizations to the wheeling and dealing of politicians behind closed doors” (p. 125). Secrecy, like privacy, involves boundaries between persons to whom access is or is not permitted (Shils 1956; Warren and Laslett 1977). In some instances, however, such boundaries are not well defined and can therefore be changed—a good example is the practice of leaks.

Thompson’s discussion has brought forth the important idea that openness/secrecy takes on different political meanings under different state regimes. Rather than assuming away the relevance of the issue of secrecy in democratic states, he takes as problematic the question of the visibility/invisibility of power in relation to changing state form, which breaks down any easy dichotomous distinction between democratic and nondemocratic forms of government. This is particularly important in understanding the central role the public sphere plays in struggles over political openness/secrecy in modern societies. Precisely, the modern media, in straddling the domain of publicness and the domain of secrecy, allow for struggles over the scope of media publicity itself and thereby define the moral boundary of publicness versus secrecy. This is an idea Thompson has hinted at but not yet fully explored.

The question is, why or under what circumstances would there be struggles over state openness/secrecy? For example, why is it that in some instances media publicity is regarded as a proper exercise of public scrutiny and in others as an improper transgression of secrecy? And, rather paradoxically, why is it that in certain situations media publicity is taken as a sign of secrecy rather than openness? Presumably, the relationships between the moral and the political boundaries of secrecy/openness are complex and multifarious. The juncture between the two kinds of boundaries should therefore open the door for agency, which explains why the issue of secrecy/openness often entails a dynamic process of politicking and struggle in the public sphere. The media, as I shall explain below, have a special role to play in this process.

In principle, the less democratic a system, the bigger will be the area of secrecy; nevertheless, the problem of political secrecy is not confined to undemocratic regimes. In a democratic system, for instance, the hidden sites in state politics may include official or diplomatic secrets, cover-ups of wrong doing, under-the-table dealings that betray the trust of the public, confidential exchanges that seek to ward off the pressure of unfavorable public opinion, and so on. On their part, the state elites have in hand a number of strategies vis-à-vis media publicity. They may conduct secret politics behind the backs of the public or they may resort to different forms of public deliberations, such as open politics, whistle-blowing, or leaks. As a rule, the more interests they share in common, the more likely they will hide themselves in the cocoon of secrecy. It is usually in times of deep conflicts among them that they will turn to the public for leverage.

As far as the role of the media is concerned, in modern society, while the domain of national security is legally protected from publicity, an issue that does not fall neatly within this domain is always potentially liable to legitimate publicity. When sufficiently publicized, for example, instances of the private abuse of power can be turned into events of public concern; words that are intended to be off-the-record in an informal, nonpublic discussion may cause public outrage; traces of political deception will justify open suspicions or even inquiries; and the practice of secret diplomacy can be challenged with a demand for disclosure. At the same time, actors guarding against or having to face the publicity of private or secret dealings may resort to different measures of cover-up, denial, resistance, justification, or self-purification. It is because of the publicist function of the media that much politics is conducted at the very interface between publicness and secrecy.

Thompson alerted us to the issue of secrecy in modern society—an issue that has been largely slighted in critical theory and even in political sociology. In particular, his sugges-
tion that the public sphere entails intricate political work in public performance and bound-
ary maintenance is most useful for us to rework the concept of the public sphere as a
sphere straddling the domains of secrecy and openness. However, Thompson’s book has
not yet fully explained the political dynamics involved in the struggles over openness/
secrecy. Hence it remains a far from wholly satisfactory account of the media as public
sphere with regard to the question of openness/secrecy. Moreover, his framework—as
well as that of Habermas—has left us with no conceptual tools to deal with the discursive
codes and symbolic processes that accompany and constitute political struggles over state
openness and secrecy. More precisely, at issue here is not only a question of the analytical
tools at our disposal but also of the conceptual place of culture in a theory of the public
sphere.

Discursive Codes and Symbolic Processes

Conventional approaches to democracy and politics have taken culture as given, focusing
on the various kinds of social, economic, and political forces and consequences associated
with it without, however, probing the internal structure and processes of culture itself. For
instance, in both Habermas’s and Thompson’s accounts of the public sphere we find excel-

The term *private* usually establishes that the other person does not have a right to some knowledge because of his or her social
distance. A secret, on the other hand, concerns information that the other person may have rights to, but that the
possessor chooses, is told to, or is obliged to withhold.” For similar discussion, see Simmel (1950), Shils (1956),
Rachels (1975), Margulis (1977), and Warren and Laslett (1977).
fane symbols. Further, drawing on Douglas’s (1966) notions of pollution and purification, Alexander and Smith state that sacred symbols are morally purified and purifying whereas profane symbols are polluted and polluting: “Sacred symbols provide images of purity and they charge those who are committed to them with protecting their referents from harm. Profane symbols embody this harm; they provide images of pollution, identifying actions, groups, and processes that must be defended against.” (1993:157)

The sacred-profane distinction not only connotes the moral statuses and cultural meanings attached to certain objects, actions, and characters but also entails the corresponding types of symbolic action involved in maintaining the distinction. One major type of symbolic action involves purification versus pollution, which refers to the act of removing the “polluting” effects of certain objects. Douglas defines pollution as a type of danger that is likely to occur when the lines of symbolic structure are clearly defined. A polluting person is therefore always in the wrong, for he or she “has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone” (1966:114). Depending on the severity of the polluting effects, there could be, in her metaphorical expression, “rites of reversing, untying, burying, washing, erasing, fumigating, and so on,” (ibid.) which may be summarized as rites of purification. From a late-Durkheimian point of view, purification and pollution are expressions of cultural forces that are materially embodied in concrete discourses and practices and are symbolic in nature rather than merely functional in a conventional sense. In other words, they do not necessarily serve the function of maintaining the existing political order; rather, they originate in a relatively autonomous system of cultural meanings that interact with the political system according to its internal logic.

Drawing on the above ideas in cultural sociology, I postulate that openness-secrecy constitutes a set of democratic codes in public discourse that has become central to political conflicts in modern societies, and that in the process of conflicts it helps to develop protean or multifarious symbolic processes of purification/pollution. Basically, openness is associated with honesty, hence moral purity, whereas secrecy is often associated with deception, conspiracy, or scandal which, carrying the danger of pollution, will have to undergo a process of purification, either of individual actors or of the whole institution concerned. In cases of secrecy, the symbolic process of purification carries with it forces of moral effervescence that work toward “purges” of vice by demanding, for example, disclosure of secrets, revelation of truth, proof of innocence, or “house-cleaning” (i.e., removal from office). This is an application of the late-Durkheimian approach in its basic form. I would add that openness and secrecy are not two extreme states of being, but could be intertwined in complex ways. For example, the metaphor of sham bespeaks a suspicion of secrecy behind the veil of openness that can hardly be appeased by openness or the particular form of openness concerned. Likewise, the promise or prospect of future publicity of past and current secrecy, and also the restriction of publicity to the democratically elected legislature, would blur any clear-cut distinction between openness and secrecy.

Moreover, in reality, there are circumstances under which secrecy might be justified or defended. In view of the existence of all sorts of secretive acts performed in the name of national security and public interest, the discourse of civil society that takes secrecy as a counterdemocratic code would appear as a less than absolute cultural force in politics. As Fraser’s case study of the Thomas hearings (1995) has illustrated, in a stratified society like the United States, the category of publicity as well as privacy is often a multivalent and contested one. The same argument may well be applied to the case of publicity versus secrecy in a society that is differentiated by institutions, groups, classes, beliefs, and so on. Bellman (1981:6), in his critique of Simmel (1950) and Warren and Laslett (1977), has given evidence that points to the way that secrecy can be “either negative or positive,
consensual or nonconsensual, legitimate or illegitimate.” In this light, discourses on secrecy may or may not have a consensual or legitimate status. On an analytic level, the discourse of democracy retains relative autonomy vis-à-vis the political system; on the concrete level, however, the discourse of democracy forms only one part, albeit an increasingly important part, of the whole discursive formation in particular societies. The fact is, there exist different thematic discourses in the public sphere in a society. Discourse, to reiterate Alexander and Smith’s definition, is organized as sets of binary codes which members draws on to typify, define and symbolically locate other actors and institutions. Owing to the fact of the multiplicity of thematic discourses, the same event could be interpreted in different ways by actors drawing on divergent codes. In the public sphere, nondemocratic codes, just like democratic codes, will have a way of exerting their symbolic power over politics. In such instances, they may serve to put a halt to, counteract, slow down, or divert the symbolic processes of pollution and purification over questions of secrecy. In the field of discursive practices, the set of codes of openness/secrecy is intertwined with many others—some of which belong to the democratic discourse and others to different thematic discourses—in the struggle over the moral and political boundary of publicness. The following will discuss the cultural and political dynamics involved in three moments of boundary creation in the political process in relation to the notion of the symbolic “public.”

Boundary Politics in the Public Sphere: Openness, Secrecy, and Leak

The public sphere is a sphere of the public that straddles the domains of secrecy and openness. As such, in public struggles over state secrecy/openness, actors must necessarily call forth the “public” as the prime symbolic reference that delineates the boundary between the sacred and the profane in public life. The “public” here comes close to what Warner (1992) has called the “imaginary of a mass public,” which means that publicity must necessarily entail a process of symbolization that has wide cultural significance in society. In my theorization, the symbolic “public” as such is a product partly of the pre-existing collective symbolic system and partly of the making and remaking of agency. Under the force of the symbolic “public,” it is required that the actors be able to conduct public discourses and shape their courses of action in line with the moral boundary of publicness—which may be redefined in the process—so as to keep up their public credibility. This is what I have elsewhere called the “politics of public credibility” (Ku 1995). Moral purity is associated with high public credibility, which is usually achieved by means of a symbolic process of purification or self-purification. In contrast, moral danger and impurity are associated with low public credibility, which bears the mark of pollution for want of purification. (Incompetence is also associated with low public credibility; it is not a moral issue in itself but it may sometimes become dangerous to the sacred values.) The media, by means of publicity, help put into continuous operation the force of the symbolic “public” in the political process. “Public” does not suggest that meanings are uncontested and unchanging; rather, the diverse meanings are interwoven into a web of public discourses that lays out a field of discursive contestation and predominance (Fraser 1995). In day-to-day struggles, the media become the battleground on which the politics of openness/secrecy are staged as part and parcel of the politics of public credibility.

Openness, secrecy, and leak represent three different political and cultural moments of boundary creation in the political process. On the one hand, they are three media strategies

---

3For an elaborate discussion of the distinction between analytic and concrete levels of autonomy of culture, see Alexander (1990) and Kane (1991).
used by the state actors that govern the interaction between the state and the members of civil society over state affairs in the public sphere. On the other hand, openness/secrecy forms a set of symbolic codes in a discourse of democracy that, in their interaction with other thematic discourses, informs, constitutes, and regulates the politics of openness, leak, and secrecy in the public sphere. In a community of multiple discourses, different actors may draw on different codes or interpret the same codes in different ways in defining the meanings of certain public action.

Open politics wins public support and shapes public opinion by attracting attention; at the same time, it is amenable to the test of public credibility. In the play of open politics, while the actors seek to present themselves and their actions as publicly credible, the chance is that their performance may backfire or, rather paradoxically, arouse suspicion of deeper secrecy. On the discursive level, openness (versus secrecy) signifies a symbolic code that, in a discourse of democracy, goes hand in hand with the codes of clean, honest, and publicly accountable politics in opposition to the undemocratic codes of dirty, dishonest, and unaccountable politics. In the public sphere, as my case study will show, once the political actors are associated with the democratic cause, the force of the symbolic “public” that holds them accountable to the practice of clean and open politics will hardly recede. With such a symbolic force at work, a trace of dishonesty or a retreat from their open commitment is easily taken as a mark of pollution that could cost them their public credibility. Yet in other thematic discourses, openness or particular forms of openness may nonetheless be negatively evaluated or be taken as a sham. The different political and discursive responses to the strategy of open politics among different fragments of the public result in relatively unstable and conflicting articulations of the moral and political boundaries of publicness in the public sphere.

Secrecy is a strategy used for purposes that may be legitimate or illegitimate. It may take the form of official secrets, which forbids publicity in the name of national security or public interest. It may take the form of secret dealings behind closed doors or cover-up of wrongdoing (i.e., lying), which, when discovered through the media, will likely cause public outrage. It may take the form of confidential exchange with the public’s awareness of it but without them being given any direct access to the content of the exchange. On the part of the public, however, the veil of confidentiality and the actors’ effort at obfuscation may not stop them from speculating about what is discussed behind closed doors. Secrecy in the form of private deal or lie may or may not be detected or disclosed, but without adequate openness in the system, public actors are always susceptible to the suspicion of secretive acts. Similarly, secrecy in the form confidential exchanges or official secrets, despite the public’s knowledge of their existence, could generate doubts of veracity. In many instances, the more secretive politics are, the more public speculation will likely be aroused. As speculation easily gives rise to suspicion, secrecy becomes a mark of pollution that will demand purification through the public sphere. Moreover, insofar as its boundary is not strictly defined and policed, secrecy is always liable to the possibility of leak and full publicity, which will then turn secret politics into open politics. Secrecy is also a discursive code that performs an evaluative and regulative function in the public sphere. In a democratic discourse, secrecy as opposed to openness takes on a negative meaning in itself. In other thematic discourses, however, it may take on a different meaning that counteracts the democratic discourse. That is, secrecy could be opposed by people drawing on a discourse of democracy and it could be justified by others drawing on other discourses, such as diplomatic necessity. Nonetheless, when secrecy breeds suspicions of treachery, the justification for it will stand on weak ground.

Finally, a leak is an intentional disclosure of information by an insider who makes public something that has been kept secret and, if made known to the public, may give rise
to controversies or scandals. \(^4\) A leak will likely be produced when the elites cannot resolve their internal conflicts and opt instead for an open discrediting of their opponents. \(^5\) In such cases, it is intended as a disclosure of scandal that will subject one’s enemies to the pollution effect. The leak itself may or may not be legitimate, but once it is made, the suspicion of scandal will become an overriding concern in the public sphere, which demands the “polluted” actors be engaged in a process of purification. In the public sphere, a leak may give rise to greater disclosure and unexpected revelation, yet it may also result in more acts of cover-up. In the course of struggle, the leak may or may not develop in accordance with its initial intent, but it will certainly become a dramatic political moment in which the conflicting elites together with the public join in a battle of disclosure versus cover-up, and of purification versus pollution. With illustrations from a case study, the following will explain the three moments of boundary creation within the conceptual framework of the media as public sphere, after a brief review of the political and cultural context in which the event unfolded.

**CASE STUDY: HONG KONG TOWARD 1997**

**Political Context: State Form and Visibility/Invisibility of Power**

In the early eighties, as the end of British rule over Hong Kong approached, \(^6\) state politics straddled the fence between democracy and paternalism. Before the 1980s, the authoritarian political structure effected a practice of cooptation and consensus politics, which kept decision-making processes as well as disputes out of the public eye. In the past two decades or so, however, incessant struggles for democracy from outside the political center gradually brought about a new conception of the “public” that stressed “representativeness,” “public accountability,” and “transparency.” In particular, since 1991, when direct election was first introduced to the Legislative Council, the politics of public accountability reshaped the play of Council politics in a way that became more and more adversarial \(^7\) and that leaned more and more towards media publicity. \(^8\) Although these changes strengthened the role of the public in politics, the half-hearted attempt at reform by the local government left intact many of the paternalistic features of colonial rule. \(^9\) As an extension of colonial paternalism, Sino-British talks on the future of Hong Kong had been conducted under the veil of confidentiality without the participation of the people of Hong Kong.

In the second half of 1992, in an unusual step, Governor Patten departed from the conventional practice of secret diplomacy with China and instead stressed openness with the public. In particular, he emphasized a process of legislative decision over his reform

---


\(^5\) Lang and Lang’s 1972 study of the Watergate crisis in the United States is a good illustration of these ideas.

\(^6\) The year 1997 marked the historic moment when China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong, ending British colonial rule.

\(^7\) Using a fourfold typology, Lam and Lee (1993) explained how, with the introduction of direct elections, the legislature changed from a consensual one to an adversarial one.

\(^8\) Although breaking all records in the duration of its meetings, the number of panel meetings, the number of motion debates, and its members’ enthusiasm for expressing their views, the present Legislative Council also instituted a practice of open in-house meetings that welcomes media coverage. As the Council’s operation has become far more adversarial and transparent, concomitantly, public opinion surveys and public criticisms in the form of newspaper commentaries, television programs, and radio phone-ins have increased substantially in quantity.

\(^9\) The colonial government did not introduce direct elections in the legislature until 1991. Despite increasing demands for the introduction of direct elections in the public sphere, the government put greater weight on other, more indirect forms of election, such as that by functional constituency, which kept the directly elected legislators in a peripheral position within the legislature. Most important of all, the Governor, who was granted paramount constitutional power, was not subject to the test of any form of election at all.
proposals that made use of a grey area in the Basic Law\textsuperscript{10} to broaden the basis of elections in the political system. From the vantage point of “democratic autonomy,” it was an attempt to strengthen the role of the people of Hong Kong as well as the local legislature on matters that in the past were largely swallowed up in the secrecy of sovereign politics. For a time, the political boundary of openness was extended further into new areas under the rhetorics of “transparency” and “autonomy.” The leak of a “secret deal” between China and Britain, which triggered a process of retrospective disclosure of diplomatic exchanges, was a case in point. This process nonetheless stopped short when Britain and China reverted to the old practice of secret negotiation in early 1993. This event unfolded in a course wherein the state elites adopted different media strategies—open politics, leak, and secrecy—at different times. In this light, the event presents itself as a rich case for studying the political and cultural dynamics involved in the politics of openness/secrecy in Hong Kong.

\textit{Discursive Context: Multiple Thematic Discourses}

The struggles for political reform from outside the power center in recent years has laid the basis for a \textit{discourse of democracy} that requires the state to be both open with and accountable to the public. As discursive codes, openness and public accountability stand opposed to secrecy and elitist privilege. Going hand in hand with this is a \textit{discourse of autonomy} that asserts the people’s right to self-decision against both colonialism and undue interference from the future sovereign state. To a significant extent, the twin-values of democracy and autonomy have been gradually established as the new generic codes informing discursive and political practices in the society. While the two thematic discourses lend support to each other, there nonetheless exists a potential tension between them, which erupted in the event of the colonial governor taking up the cause of democracy in Hong Kong. As we shall see, in the course of the Patten controversy, colonialism was to a certain extent associated with the undemocratic code of secrecy.

On the other hand, political practices among the state elites, complemented by a cultural legacy of pragmatic submissiveness among the conservative forces, remained rather paternalistic and hence resistant to the path of democratic openness. In the public sphere, drawing on a \textit{discourse of stability}, they expressed their concerns with order, harmony, and smooth transition as opposed to disorder, conflict, and unstable change. It is in such discursive terms that they opposed democratic reforms that might jeopardize their established interests and/or fall outside the orbit of China’s intent. The conservatives, as part of the ever-expanding pro-China camp in Hong Kong, stuck primarily to this thematic discourse to oppose the form of open politics that Governor Patten resorted to while occasionally drawing on the discourse of democracy to demand publicity of secrecy when it suited their purposes.

\textit{The Strategy of Open Politics}

In the public sphere, the practice of open politics is not only a state-led strategy to mobilize public opinion, it is also a means, from the perspective of the citizens, of subjecting the actors’ performances and claims to scrutiny. In the second half of 1992, the new Governor in Hong Kong, Chris Patten, stressed openness with the public in his novel way of governing. Under the rubric of openness, he kept a high public profile through the media; further, in his efforts to push forward political reform in the upcoming 1994–95 elections,

\textsuperscript{10}The Basic Law is the miniconstitution of Hong Kong society under Chinese sovereignty.
he resorted to publicist and parliamentary strategies (Sum 1995) over and above the time-honored practice of secret diplomacy with China. Such provocative changes, in tandem with the transformed Legislative Council, turned the media into a new sphere for open politics. In turning to open politics, the Governor was both laying his hand on the shape of the symbolic “public” and subjecting himself to the force of it. While the Governor was generally successful in presenting himself as open, fair, accessible, and accountable to the public, his performance also backfired among the conservatives and pro-China forces, and aroused suspicions of deeper secrecy among the cynical prodemocracy critics.

In broad terms, under the force of the discourse of democracy, the Governor’s publicist strategy as well as his appeal to openness was remarkably well received in the media. Amongst all his innovative practices, the attempt to redraw the boundary of open politics versus secret diplomacy was the most striking:

In his first ten days, he earned more and more public credits—the most outstanding performance being his unprecedented openness. (Chai, *Economic Journal*, 20 July 1992)

It represents tremendous progress in Hong Kong’s political culture that the Governor is willing to subject himself to the legislature’s public scrutiny. (*Ming Daily*, 14 October 1992)

In this connection, his reform proposals were taken positively to be a creative package that enhanced democracy under the constraints of the Basic Law. On the whole, it had been quite successfully established in public discourse that Governor Patten’s way of governorship as well as his reform proposals signified a welcome change for greater, albeit inadequate, democracy and a bold assertion of autonomy against China. The symbolic “public” thus configured in turn affected the way the event developed. First, with such overwhelming support, Governor Patten was empowered in his confrontation with China. This paved way for his next move of setting in operation the legislative process vis-à-vis his reform proposals. Second, in affirming the newly extended political boundary of openness, the “public” became more prepared to demand transparency in the area of sovereign diplomacy. (This was evident in the “secret deal” controversy, to be discussed below.) Third, and most important, on the discursive level, once the Governor was publicly associated with the democratic cause, the force of the symbolic “public” that held him accountable to the practice of clean, open, and democratic politics never quite receded. As it developed, he was required throughout the event to appear politically consistent and able to stand firm for the cause he had openly professed.

There was, however, an underside to the picture of overwhelming support, which was shown in the fact that the Governor’s public performance backfired in certain circles. In the first place, there was a sense of distrust of British colonialism among the prodemocratic critics. Thus, despite his posture of openness, it was speculated that the Governor might have behind his reform proposals another target, such as China’s concessions on the financial arrangement over a grandiose airport project in Hong Kong—a project that would

---

11In this regard, he made history in a number of ways. For instance, he met with the public in town hall meetings, explaining his proposals and answering questions from the audience; he introduced a monthly question-time session within the Legislative Council to enhance the Governor’s accountability to the legislature: he took part in a live television forum debate on his maiden speech, which was followed by an explosion of opinion polling on the public’s reaction.

12Even the democrats, who had learned not to take the British government on trust and who found the proposals far from ideal, saw a practical reason for taking it as part of their endeavor for greater democracy. See M. Ng, in *South China Morning Post*, 24 November 1992.
symbolize to Britain the proud achievement of a prosperous economy under its colonial rule. In a paradoxical way, this idea of the reform proposals as a bargaining chip or smokescreen suggested an element of secrecy under the veil of openness. Suspicions about a hidden agenda served to keep alive a tension between proclaimed openness and suspected secrecy. In the second place, the conservatives and pro-China groups, used to closed-door diplomacy, saw in the Governor’s openness an element of impudence and showmanship:

It is a big invention that the Governor makes a showy fuss about his policy speech. . . . Yet judging his performance since his arrival, we find that while Patten the politician manages to keep up a high political profile about himself, he has not yet achieved much in solving concrete problems of various kinds. (Success Daily, 5 October 1992)

Furthermore, within a discourse of stability, many of them worried that the Governor’s way indicated an attitude of arrogance towards Beijing, which would put Hong Kong on a collision course with the latter, which then raised the question as to whether a smooth transition could be secured. Their inclination for the old model of secret diplomacy became all the more conspicuous toward the final stages of the event.

Leak, Disclosure, and Revelation

In the few months after the release of the reform proposals, due to an intensification of Sino-British conflicts, a large part of the politics between Governor Patten and the Chinese government were conducted through the media. The first of such open conflicts was the “secret deal” controversy, which started as a deliberate leak by China. A senior Chinese official publicly alleged that secret papers would prove the existence of a Sino-British deal concerning the composition of the 1995 Election Committee, which was now overturned by Governor Patten’s plans. Did China’s public allegation represent an infringement on confidentiality, or did it expose a breach of agreement or an act of unwarranted secrecy? China, obviously, had sought to undermine the public credibility of the Governor by exposing what it believed to be a breach of agreement. As a further step to prove Governor Patten tainted by the tricks of dishonest politics, China even dared the British side to make the diplomatic exchanges known to the public.

In the first instance, the leak had its intended effect. In the public sphere, the issue quickly became one of public concern about whether there was any joint agreement and hence, a breach. For the first time, the good faith of the Governor was seriously in question among his supporters. In the society, many legislators, democrats and conservatives alike, and quite a number of newspapers urged the release of the letters in order that the Hong Kong people could judge for themselves. In the politics of public credibility, this demand for openness was driven by the people’s strong urge to know if the admirable Patten could come out clean and thereby earn their continued trust: “He is not entitled to continued trust and support if he cannot give a satisfactory explanation and dispel and suspicion engendered by Lu Ping” (M.Ng, South China Morning Post, 27 October 1992).

The conservatives as well as the pro-China groups also favored making the documents public, but for a different reason—they believed that it would taint the Governor irremediably. The British government, in order to clear itself of suspicion, promptly answered the demand for the release of the diplomatic documents; a few days later, they were publicized

14 See M. Ng, South China Morning Post, 27 October 1992.
in full in the major newspapers. The act of disclosure presented an unusual instance in which the two sovereign states, unable and unwilling to resolve their conflicts through private channels, responded favorably to the public’s demand by enlarging the scope of publicness into the realm of interstate diplomacy and letting the public adjudicate the dispute in the full glare of publicity. Undeniably, the public would not have known about the existence of the diplomatic exchanges but for the leak. To this extent, they were at the mercy of the state elites. Nonetheless, the possibility remained that without their strong and united urge for openness, the government might not have seen a need for disclosure.

More important, even though the public demand for openness fell within the projective grasp of the state elites, the latter could not completely control the way the symbolic “public” would evolve. In fact, as the episode developed from a leak to full-blown publicity, as public debate on the “breach” question spread to its wider and deeper implications, the disclosure of the secret documents acquired new significance. It became an exposure not so much of a breach of agreement as of an act of unwarranted secrecy. With the publication of the documents, although Governor Patten was not proved ‘polluted’ (i.e., guilty of dishonest politics), the retrospective disclosure of diplomatic exchanges between the two sovereign states did reveal something secretive about both parties, which then heightened the public’s sense of distrust of the process. Political groups from the pro-democracy camp expressed their disappointment that the Hong Kong people had been deprived of their right to decide on their own future and that their will had not been respected by the British and the Chinese governments during their negotiation. Among the press, *Express Daily* pinpointed the “secrecy” problem instead of the “deal” issue. In view of this, drawing on the discourses of democracy and autonomy, the paper urged the people neither to be led by the nose by China nor to be used by Britain as a bargaining chip.

In terms of public credibility, although the Governor was not polluted by the controversy, in the context of increasing distrust of the British, neither could he emerge entirely innocent. With this incident, the public was alerted to the possibility of more secret deals to be struck at their expense. This had a substantial bearing on the course of struggle toward the final stages of the event.

**Back to Secret Diplomacy**

In the opening months of 1993, when Governor Patten was preparing to put together the legislation for his reform package, the two sovereign states sought to revert secret diplomacy while being prepared to use occasional leaks when they would serve their respective agendas. The democrats opposed the idea of secret diplomacy on the basis of democratic autonomy, the conservatives drew on the discourse of stability to support the resumption of diplomatic talks. In April 1993, confidential Sino-British negotiations were resumed at the expense of a smooth legislative process. Under the discursive force of democracy, the government kept proclaiming its honesty with the community and its respect for the Legislative Council’s decisions. This amounted to a public pledge of respect for democratic autonomy by the Governor. However, without sufficient publicity of the talks, the people’s suspicions could in no way be quelled. The query that was yet to be answered was, would the Governor be able to stand the test of trustworthiness? In this stage, the secrecy around the Sino-British talks and the publicness of the legislative process became so closely intertwined that the Governor would find himself ‘polluted’ in the face of suspicions of secret concessions.

Where should the dividing line be between the domain of diplomatic secrecy and the domain of public interest (or legislative autonomy, in this case)? This issue had become a focus of political struggles in the process. Earlier on, the British Foreign Secretary explained
that there would be no secret deals in the Sino-British talks but insisted that the talks had to be conducted in secret.\textsuperscript{15} Opinion surveys found that most people welcomed the resumption of talks but opposed their secrecy.\textsuperscript{16} From the perspective of the democrats, a deal done in secret would in all likelihood amount to a deceitful deal. Further, China’s insistence that the Governor’s reform proposals be dropped altogether and that any Sino-British agreement reached not be overturned by the Legislative Council aroused their opposition against undue political intrusion into the legislative process, especially in light of suspicions that a Sino-British negotiation might mean a possible sell-out by Britain. To them, the issues at stake were openness versus secrecy and democratic autonomy versus subservience to sovereign politics.

In the process of confidential negotiations, journalists,\textsuperscript{17} legislators and other sectors of the public fought to make the process more transparent. Remarkably, after two rounds of talks, the legislators—democrats and conservatives alike—voted in support of a motion urging the government to reveal the agenda and progress of the Sino-British talks.\textsuperscript{18} Despite such efforts, the fact remained that the Legislative Council’s decision would have no binding power on sovereign politics. During the motion debate, the Secretary for Constitutional Affairs already made clear the government’s position that it would refrain from disclosure until the talks bore fruit. Ultimately, the legislators’ efforts to secure greater openness were to little avail.

Did the the boundary set by the state elites sit well with the media actors? On the one hand, out of a sense of pragmatism, the media appeared to come to terms with it; on the other hand, they were more than prepared to cross over into the domain of secret diplomacy on the ground of public interest. As a newspaper put it,

\begin{quote}
China’s attempt to prevent the local and overseas media from covering next week’s Sino-British talks on Hong Kong’s political reforms could backfire. . . . Although few would argue with the right of both parties to hold sensitive diplomatic negotiations in confidence, it is wishful thinking to believe that Hong Kong will sit obediently on the sidelines awaiting an outcome. (\textit{South China Morning Post}, 16 April 1993)
\end{quote}

In the process of the confidential Sino-British talks, the symbolic “public” was being forged in such a way that it reshaped the course of development in local politics. First, the “purification” requirement in the public sphere dictated that the Governor pay heed to his pledge of honest politics. Second, the veil of confidentiality had not stopped the public from speculating on what was being discussed behind closed doors. As a matter of fact, the more secretive politics became, the more public speculation grew. In this connection, finally, a few leaks together with highly publicized whistle-blowing—partly due to the reporters’ informal connections with the actors and partly due to the actors’ strategic considerations—became commonplace and a wave of public speculation detrimental to the Governor was generated.

During the last few rounds of the talks, the press reported that the talks were dragging on with little progress. Speculation began to grow that Britain might be playing into Beijing’s

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{South China Morning Post}, 28 February 1993.

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{South China Morning Post}, 20 March 1993.

\textsuperscript{17}In the first instance, when New China’s News Agency rejected the applications of the local journalists for covering the Sino-British talks in Beijing, the act was immediately condemned as a seemingly pointless and mean-spirited attempt at secrecy. After much protest by the journalists, the ban on the local media was partially lifted, but not the veil of secrecy.

hands. Among the prodemocracy critics there came a realization that Governor Patten was conceding, either because he was weak vis-à-vis China, or because he had been insincere about the reform right from the beginning. Those critics who had always distrusted British colonialism drove home the idea that the Governor’s reform package was a “sham” or a “smokescreen.” This view gained wider currency in October when Beijing leaked to the public Britain’s proposal of a much watered-down version of reform during the talks.19

The idea of “smokescreen” underlined their belief in some hidden agenda behind the Governor’s open posture for democracy. While such suspicions had been lurking since the beginning of the event, they were never so close to being confirmed. On the one hand, the public credibility of the Patten administration was on the brink of collapse as it held up the legislative process amidst increasing suspicions of secret concessions. The public pressure on the government to clear itself of such suspicions mounted. On the other hand, the pragmatic discourse in favor of the diplomatic talks began to lose steam. Toward the end of the year, in the midst of discursive changes, the government took back the initiative to resume the suspended legislative process.

In this final stage, although the state elites had successfully restricted the scope of media publicity, the public played their role in engaging the Patten administration in the continuous test of public credibility, not only on what was said in public but also on what was not said about what had been or might be done. With speculation about secret concessions rampant during the talks, the only way for the Governor to emerge with his reputation relatively intact was to stand firm on his reform proposals. In the end, he might have planned for this, he might have struck secret deals with Beijing anyway, or he might have allowed the talks to drag on. The possibility remains that, without the force of the “public” at work, the prospects of legislative autonomy would have melted into air.

CONCLUSION

This article has aimed to theorize the cultural and political dynamics involved in the public sphere in modern society via-à-vis the practice of open/secret politics by the state. It set out to address the question of state openness/secrecy from the vantage point of the public sphere. Although the notion of public sphere has gained increasing prominence in recent academic discourse in terms of the conceptual distinction between public and private, little attention has yet been given to the issue of openness/secrecy as a facet of the constitution of the public-private boundary. It is in light of such a theoretical and substantive gap that this article seeks to rework some of the ideas in the current interpretations of the public-private distinction. In particular, parts of Habermas’s critical theory and Thompson’s political sociology have been reinterpreted, reformulated, expanded, and integrated into an alternative notion of the public sphere as a sphere of the public straddling the domains of secrecy and publicness. In reviewing Habermas’s work on the public sphere, I have argued that within the context of civil society, the media embodies two related elements of publicness that are distinctive, namely, openness versus restrictedness and openness versus secrecy. This then leads me to postulate that the development of the media has been concomitant with a democratic struggle against state secrecy and that politics through the media would need to make constant references to the symbolic “public.”

Struggles against state secrecy do not end with the formal institutionalization of the democratic state in modern society, for secret practices by the state exist in different ways

19The British agreed that (a) the nine new functional constituencies should be delimited “by group” and not “by occupation” as proposed in the Patten package; (b) the “election committee” to select ten legislators should comprise people of the four classes the Chinese suggested; and (c) it was for the Chinese to lay down the objective criteria for the “through train.” (Ming Daily, 3 October 1993).
under different state forms. Thompson’s discussion of the changing meanings and forms of
publicness vis-à-vis state secrecy in different historical epochs has made this point clear,
thereby making problematic the constitution of the open/secret boundary that has often
been taken for granted in political sociology. Building on this framework, I further assert
that boundary politics of secrecy/openness in the public sphere are both political and
symbolic in nature, seeking to maintain or transform the state-enforced boundary of polit-
ical openness/secrecy by giving cultural and moral meanings to it. In this regard, both
Habermas’s and Thompson’s approaches to the public sphere have been found wanting.
With respect to the question of the interplay between culture and politics, they have attended
neither to the protean character of the kind of boundary politics involved at the interface
between secrecy and openness, nor to the symbolic structure and processes that accom-
pany and constitute such boundary struggles. Drawing on the late-Durkheimian approach
in cultural sociology, I propose that in public struggles over state secrecy/openness, actors
must make reference to a symbolic force of the “public” that delineates the boundary
between the sacred and the profane in public life. In particular, openness/secrecy consti-
tutes one set of democratic codes in public discourse that has become central to political
conflicts in modern society. In the context of conflicts these codes, in conjunction with
nondemocratic codes, help create multifarious symbolic processes of purification/
pollution. I have elaborated these ideas in a theory of boundary politics which focuses on
three different moments of boundary creation—openness, secrecy, and leak—and illus-
trated that theory with a study of the Patten controversy in Hong Kong.

In the event studied, despite the fact that the domain of state diplomacy was as much
prohibited from media publicity as it was liable to it, the power to define the boundary of
political secrecy remained in the hands of the state elites. With the scope of publicity being
expanded at one time and diminished at another in the course of Sino-British diplomacy,
citizens were given a prominent political status and then pushed back into the dismal
periphery. Still, citizens had their role to play as the moral guardians of politics in certain
specific ways. In the process of the event, the moral meanings of the different forms of
openness and secrecy had been very much contested in the public sphere. In the first stage,
with the people affirming the newly extended boundaries of publicness by the Governor,
the symbolic “public” developed thereupon required the actors to be more and more open
with the public. The demand for disclosure in the “secret deal” controversy was a telling
example. Moreover, in giving the Governor their support, the public held him accountable
to the moral principles he had openly declared to uphold, such as “openness,” “fairness,”
and “legislative autonomy.” In this way, the public played an important role in the process
by putting him on notice that secret concessions or other kinds of dishonest politics would
not be submitted to quietly. In particular, the cynical democrats who had a deep distrust of
British colonialism had from the outset struck a note of suspicion about the Governor’s
sincerity for reforms. With their persistent doubts, the theme of “secrecy-behind-
openness” lingered in the background and finally burst out into angry public speculation in
the face of the secrecy of Sino-British talks and legislative delay. The symbolic “public”
configured as such was probably one of the forces that enabled the Governor to come out
at the end of the Sino-British talks both clean on the charge of secret deals and firm on his
reformist cause.20

20 A cynical version, which had made only one or two appearances in the newspapers, took a less affirma-
tive position than the one concluded here: “Britain’s democratic turn was forced into being by history—by
China’s refusing to accept the watered-down proposal by Britain. . . . If Britain had really wanted democracy
for Hong Kong, there would have been no Sino-British talks at all. For once there were talks, the reform
proposals would become only a bargaining chip. Indeed Britain did concede in the eighth round. . . .” (Bug,
There was, of course, another side to it. Under the sway of pragmatic submissiveness, the more conservative forces in society had continually yielded to the pressure of Beijing’s paternalistic rule. For them, the change in the Governor’s strategy with Beijing as well as his open politicking was an unwelcome sign of arrogance which, by arousing China’s wrath, put the society at risk of an unstable transition. In the final stage, with their desire for Sino-British reconciliation, they supported China’s move to revert to closed-door diplomacy. In the midst of resurgent pragmatism among the people, the conservatives probably had their sympathetic supporters among the citizenry. In this regard, they had reshaped the symbolic “public” such that the Governor needed to show his sincerity for Sino-British talks. Hence the delay in the legislative process. Nevertheless, to the extent that the cultural force of democracy was simultaneously at work, their tendency to yield to state paternalism was somewhat counteracted, especially when the pragmatic discourse for the diplomatic talks lost steam. This explained their efforts in the Legislative Council to join in the democrats’ call for greater openness about the talks and their failure to further delay the legislative process when the talks dragged on fruitlessly.

One final remark. This article has been intended to be a modest, rather one-sided attempt to highlight the often overlooked dimension—the power of the symbolic “public”—in the political process with regard to the issue of openness/secrecy. The symbolic force of the “public” constituted in public discourse does not necessarily guarantee political power of the citizenry. In Hong Kong, in particular, without a democratic system to safeguard the principle of public accountability, actors with little public credibility will be able to remain in office without having their power weakened. Still, as long as there exists a relatively autonomous public sphere, both the state and the citizenry must be involved in a politics of public credibility in which the conduct of politics and the political boundary of publicness will be affirmed or contested in moral terms. It is with such a public sphere in place that the public citizens may find a niche for themselves in the political process.

REFERENCES


