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**SOCIAL COMPARISON DURING POLITICAL
TRANSITION: INTERACTION OF ENTITY VERSUS
INCREMENTAL BELIEFS AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES**

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ABSTRACT. *The relation between intergroup perceptions and people's implicit theories of the malleability of human attributes or character was examined. We predicted that people who believe that human attributes are fixed (entity theorists) may also view a group as an entity and thus would rely on trait-based dimensions in social comparison to achieve group distinctiveness. By contrast, people who believe that human attributes are malleable (incremental theorists) may focus on the dynamic aspects of social groups (e.g., group goals) and thus would be less likely to rely on trait-based dimensions in social comparison. Moreover, such differential tendency was expected to become more salient as the day of the handover approached. These predictions were tested in a longitudinal study conducted in Hong Kong during the 1997 political transition. Implicit theories, social identities and group categorization strategies of 242 university students were assessed first in March, 1996, and then in September, 1996 and March, 1997. The findings supported our predictions and were discussed in terms of their implications for intergroup relations. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.*

KEY WORDS. *Social identification, social comparison, implicit theories, political transition*

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On July 1, 1997, after 156 years of British colonial rule, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to China. On the same day, some 6.2 million ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong became Chinese nationals. Because the handover of sovereignty has been determined at the signing of the Joint Declaration between the Chinese and British government in 1984, Hong Kong people had been expecting the handover over some years before 1997. This situation has provided social scientists an unique opportunity to study how people respond to a political transition. The present article deals with Hong Kong people's intergroup perception in the period immediately preceding the handover. In particular, how did Hong Kong people view themselves and the Chinese Mainlander group? How did the perceptions change before the handover? With the advent of the handover, contact between the two groups became more frequent and their mutual influence became more pervasive. Would this situation intensify social comparisons between the groups? How are Hong Kong people's reactions to the handover related to their personal beliefs? The present research sought to address these questions. Specifically, we contended that dimensions Hong Kong people used in social comparison are a function of their social identity and their belief about the malleability of people's character.

THE FRAME OF REFERENCE FOR SOCIAL COMPARISON AND SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

As Turner and his associates contended, "self-categorizing is inherently variable, fluid, and context dependent, as self-categories are social comparative and are always relative to a frame of reference" (Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994, p. 454). Accordingly, a change in the social context should effect changes in social comparison by making a particular frame of reference more salient. Consistently, research has shown that Hong Kong people would compare themselves with non-Chinese when a rivalry between Chinese and non-Chinese was made salient, but they were more ready to compare themselves with Chinese Mainlanders when a conflict between Hong Kong and the Beijing government was made salient (Fu, Chiu, Lee & Hong, this issue).

These social comparison frames may also align with people's social identification (Brewer, 1991; Lam, Lau, Chiu, Hong & Peng, this issue). Over 98% of Hong Kong people are ethnic Chinese. However, for over 155 years before the handover of sovereignty, Hong Kong had been under the British colonial rule. Because of the long political separation from Mainland China, some Hong Kong people had acquired a strong regional identity, i.e., Hongkonger. As revealed in the surveys conducted by the

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