The transition to uncertainty?:
The impacts of Hong Kong 1997 on personal relationships

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Abstract
Despite considerable previous research into acculturation processes and family stress, we know little about how different groups of individuals or families respond to planned political changes within a culture and the impact of their expectations on their daily relationships. This study examines the appraisals of 403 Hong Kong married individuals of the forthcoming handover of Hong Kong to China, the impact of these appraisals on relationship disagreements regarding the transition, and perceived changes in their relationships. Results suggest that negative (external) locus of control and pessimistic group norms are predictors of a threatening appraisal of the transition, and that this perceived threat was a significant predictor of perceived change in the couple's relationship. Age and education had direct impacts on perception of relationship change and intradyadic disagreements about the transition. Results are discussed in the light of the complex political and economic climate in the lead-up to the handover of Hong Kong to China, as well as the broader literature on family stress, personal relationships, and social change.

The past two decades have witnessed a huge amount of research into how different groups cope with uncertain or unpleasant events (e.g., Hamilton, Hoffman, Broman, & Rauma, 1993; Hannum, Giese-Davis, Harding, & Hatfield, 1991, on the onset of life-threatening disease). Acculturation studies have examined the acculturative stress associated with movement between societies (e.g., Berry, 1994), with several studies indicating that personal relationships between established couples and family members are often severely compromised by such transitions (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991). Work on family stress has examined the impact of both predicted and unpredicted events on a family and community, such as the Buffalo Creek flood in West Virginia (Erickson, 1976). However, systematically examining the impact on relationships of real-life, large-scale social changes within a culture has proven to be more problematic, with many social and political transitions simply too unpredictable to allow for well-planned research (Kuran, 1991). This problem is symptomatic of a wider reluctance within the personal relationships literature to examine systematically the impact of social change on relationship processes (Goodwin, 1995).

On July 1, 1997, Hong Kong ceased to be a dependent territory and became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. After 150 years of British rule, the potential effects of this change aroused considerable controversy in the territory (McMillen & DeGolyer, 1993). Three recent and independent series of tracking polls, conducted for separate projects and questioning large and representative samples of Hong Kong Chinese, have revealed that most respondents were apprehensive about the handover (De-