

Constructing the Hong Kong Nation: the landscape of emerging nationalism in Hong Kong

Justin Chun-ting Ho, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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Abstract

The handover of sovereignty to China has not made Hongkongese the true master of their city as promised by Beijing. Rather, the recent years have witnessed an increasing influence of the Chinese government in Hong Kong affairs, the shrink of freedom and the violations of values embraced by Hong Kong people. Resultantly, on top of the burgeoning amount of protests, nationalistic thoughts began to sprout. Against this background, this study attempts to dissect the discursive constitution of Hong Kong nationalism. This paper compares two main branches of Hong Kong nationalism, each consists of a distinct narration of Hong Kong's history and culture: The Hong Kong City-state Theory exhibits a tint of cultural nationalism and holds that Hong Kong's cession to Britain and the resulting separation with China rendered the colony a *de facto* city-state, which allowed the "authentic Chinese culture" to be preserved while it was destroyed by the communist state in China. Rather than challenging China's sovereignty, it suggests Hong Kong should protect its autonomy by founding a confederation with China. In contrast, the Hong Kong Nationalism Theory resorts to the rhetoric of civic nationalism and defines Hong Kong as a nation bonded by shared values and the common wishes to "flee totalitarianism and pursue freedom". The advocates also sought to construct an alternative origin of the Hongkongese by resorting to the ethnic groups situated on the edge but beyond the reach of the Chinese empire. They demand for national self-determination and consider independence one of the viable options.

Keywords: Hong Kong nationalism, Hongkongese, civic nationalism, cultural nationalism

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1. Introduction.

After 140 years of colonization, Hong Kong was handed over from the United Kingdom to China in 1997. It was followed immediately by the endeavours by the government to instil a sense of Chinese nationalism among Hong Kong people (See Vickers, 2011; Tse, 2007; and Mathews, Ma & Lui, 2008). However, these initiatives did not bring Hong Kong closer to its new sovereign master. On top of the outbreak of a series of protests with an anti-China tint, the recent years witnessed a rise of Hong Kong identity and the demise of its Chinese counterpart, as the percentage of people who identified themselves as Chinese fell from 38.6 in 2008 to merely 17.8 in 2014 while 42.3 per cent of the respondents identified themselves as Hongkongers in the same year (HKUPOP, 2015).

Against this background, there was a rise of “localism” organizations that champion the idea of “native Hong Kong people come first”. Partially triggered by the further escalation of the Hong Kong-China conflict, public intellectuals started to produce theories of Hong Kong nationalism and uphold a distinguish Hong Kong identity. Although the term Hong Kong nationalism has become more and more popular in the media and public discourse, few have explored its content and identified different branches of the thought. This paper aims to dissect the discursive constitution of Hong Kong nationalism and compare two main accounts, each consists of a distinct narration of Hong Kong’s history and culture.

2. Background

It is believed that the colonization has separated Hong Kong from China, politically and socially, while the “one country, two systems” originally sought to prolong this separation. However, following the official initiatives that aims to foster integration with the new sovereign master, the separation is in the shadow of its demise. Most importantly, it has sparked a range of fears and conflicts. The current literature suggests that the people’s grievances have at least 4 socio-political roots.

i. Scepticism towards mainland immigrants

Each day, 150 mainlanders would get a one-way entry permit to live in Hong Kong, officially for family reunion purposes. Since all of the permits are issued by the Chinese government without prior screening of the Hong Kong government, it is feared that the system would be abused. The fear is not entirely ungrounded, as the Panama Papers revealed that at least seven relatives of top Chinese political figures have obtained Hong Kong resident status (Cheng, 2016), while it is also reported that local pro-Beijing organizations have been making efforts to organize the Chinese immigrants into loyal voting blocs (Hung, 2014). These have also given rise the fear of Tibetization of Hong Kong. As Martin Lee, a long-term opposition leader, expressed the fear that the migration policies would turn the native Hongkongers into a minority in the long run and destroy Hong Kong’s core values and culture (Lee, 2012).

ii. Influx of mainland tourist

The Individual Traveller Scheme was introduced in 2003, allowing mainlanders to visit Hong Kong independently without joining any tour. The Scheme was meant to boost tourism and consumption in Hong Kong so as to help the city to recover from the SARS epidemic. However, as the number of individual tourists rocketed tenfold from 4.3 million in 2004 to 47 million in 2014, the massive influx of tourists eventually sparked new social tension (Ma, 2015). First of all, a large amount of mainlanders came Hong Kong to purchase luxury goods, including jewellery and brand name products, causing the mushrooming of high end boutiques and that in turn drove up rents and eventually knocked small local shops out of business (So, 2016). Apart from luxury goods, basic necessities such as drugs and milk powder were also affected. Believing that Hong Kong had better quality control, mainlanders stormed drug stores and supermarkets and created temporary shortages. The “hot money” from the mainland also pushed property prices to record high, rendering many workers and middle-class professionals unable to afford buying houses (So, 2016).

iii. Competition of scarce resources

The fear for the competition of scarce resources also fuelled the hostility against mainlanders. For many years, ten of thousands of mainland mothers came to Hong Kong to give birth so as to take the advantage of the better medical facilities and to make their children eligible for all the welfare benefits accorded to permanent residents in Hong Kong. The large amount of children born of non-Hong Kong parents has led to outcry about the invasion of mainlander and the fear that they would drain public resources in the future.

iv. Violations of rights and freedoms

Scepticism against the Chinese government was also strengthened by its increasing influence of in Hong Kong affairs, repeated denial of genuine democracy, and the shrink of freedom and liberty in Hong Kong. On 1 July 2003, more than 500,000 people has taken the street and it eventually caused the government to shelve its pending National Security Ordinance. However, after that, Beijing has ended its laissez faire approach and decided to intervene directly in Hong Kong affairs (Cheng, 2009; Ortmann, 2014). China’s dominant role was further reaffirmed in Beijing’s recent white paper, *The Practice of the "One Country, Two Systems" Policy in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*, as the paper claims that the Beijing government has "comprehensive jurisdiction" over Hong Kong and required officials, including local judges, to “love the country”, which was widely conceived as an interference on judicial independence (Ortmann, 2014).

Furthermore, despite the large amounts of pro-democracy protests since the handover, the demand for democracy has repeatedly been denied. One of the major frustrations in the recent years is the Umbrella Movement in 2014, a 79-day citywide occupation and blockage demanding genuine universal suffrage. However, till the end of the movement, no comprise had been made by the government and no progress toward genuine democracy was achieved. In addition, press freedom also declined as many pro-democracy figures have been forced out of Hong Kong’s traditional media as the

media has generally become more pro-Beijing while prominent firms have refused to advertise in pro-democracy newspapers (Ortmann, 2014). Also, journalists, news outlets and booksellers were harassed or even brutally assaulted. Kelvin Chun-to Lau, a well-respected journalist, were attacked with beef knife, leaving him six deep wounds on his back and legs and he was kept in hospital for almost five months (Chu, 2015). In 2015, Lam Wing-kee, a bookseller, were kidnapped at the border and put through eight months of mental torture in China. He also revealed that Lee Bo, his colleague, was abducted from Hong Kong to China (Ng, Fung and Siu, 2016).

3. The two branches of nationalism in Hong Kong.

Although the rise of localism organization dated as early as 2010, it was not until 2014 did the term “Hong Kong nation” has first been used. However, Hong Kong nationalism was an extremely fringe movement at that time. Nationalists could only organize rallies of few hundred peoples, they had no representative in the legislature, there was no political figure who shows favour or sympathy to Hong Kong nationalism. The term Hong Kong nationalism was virtually unknown beyond academic circles, it was moved into the mainstream only after Leung Chun-ying, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, condemned it in a high-profile manner in his 2015 Policy Address (So, 2016). Currently, the theories of Hong Kong nationalism can roughly be separated into two branches:

i. The City-state branch

The Hong Kong City-state Theory was proposed Wan Chin, he holds that Hong Kong’s cession to Britain and the resulting separation with China rendered the colony a *de facto* city-state. Since the establishment of Hong Kong as a British Colony, the colonial government had enjoyed enormous autonomy from London. Hong Kong has its own currency, taxation, treasury. According to Chin (2015), the financial independence and the power to sign treaties with other countries without the sovereign master’s consent have made Hong Kong a city-state with *de facto sovereignty*, like the Athens in ancient Greek (pp. 8-10).

During the 150 years of separation, mainland China has experienced a short republican rule and, most importantly, a communist rule. On the top of destructive events such as the Cultural Revolution, it has abandoned orthodox religious customs, traditional written Chinese and the classical pronunciation of local Chinese languages like Cantonese. However, these have been preserved in Hong Kong due to the separation (Chin, 2011). Moreover, during that period, Hong Kong has been a safe haven for the “explorers” and “freedom seekers”, namely refugees from the civil war and the chaos in China (Chin, 2011, p. 88; Chin, 2015, p.38). Hence, Hongkongers are portrayed as the adherents of orthodox Chinese culture, which distinguishes them from the mainland Chinese, whose culture was not the authentic Chinese culture, but, in Chin’s words, “deformed” or even “corrupted” (Chin, 2011, 43-50; Chin, 2013, p. 136; Chin, 2014, p.34-35). In this sense, the Hong Kong City-state Theory can be seen as a form of cultural nationalism as the Hong Kong nation is defined by a shared culture.

ii. The Hong Kong Nationalism branch

The premise of the Hong Kong Nationalism branch is “Hongkongese is nation that differs from Chinese”. The idea of Hong Kong as a nation was first proposed by the 2013 Editorial Board of *Undergrad*, a campus magazine of the University of Hong Kong. They maintain that the Hong Kong identity was sprouted among the Chinese elite class in the late 19th century and consolidated through a series of negative interactions with China. They resort to the rhetoric of civil nationalism and define Hong Kong as a nation bonded by shared values, namely human rights, freedom, and rule of law as well as the common wishes to “flee totalitarianism and pursue freedom” (HKUSU, 2014, p.17). They warn that the core values will be corrupted by the intervention of China and the influx of mainlanders (HKUSU, 2014, p.44-45), and arousing “local consciousness” is the only viable option for Hongkongers to safeguard their nation (HKUSU, 2014, p. 48-49).

Eric Tsui (2016) follows the civic nationalism discourse and supplies a nation myth. In a shape contrast with the official discourse that suggests Hong Kong has long been a part of China and all of the Hong Kong people are refugees from China or their descendants, he claims that Hongkongese originates from the ethnic groups situated beyond the reach of the Chinese empire, including the Cantonese, Hakka people, “Oceanic Clans” like Tankas and Hoklo people. In the writings of Tsui, these ethnic groups share certain common features of being aborigines at the edge of the Chinese dynasties, and they can be considered the antetype of Hongkongese. Tsui thus effectively provides a Non-Chinese multi-ethnic origin of the Hong Kong nation (Wu, 2016)

4. Comparing the branches of Hong Kong nationalism

i. Mobilization Frame

To borrow the concept of mobilization frame from the studies of secessionist movements, both the City-state and the Hong Kong nationalism branch employ the ethnic security frame, in which distinct history, cultural and language are emphasized and the China’s intervention and immigrants are considered threats to the preservation of national culture (See also Huszka, 2014). Hence, the demand for autonomy is presented as a means to preserve national identity and culture. Even though advocates of the both branches support democracy, they see it merely as one of the ways to safeguard Hong Kong’s interest, rather than demanding democracy for its own sake.

However, they differ in their demands. Rather than challenging China’s sovereignty, Chin believes that Hong Kong should protect its autonomy by founding a confederation with China while he plainly opposes Hong Kong independence. On the other hand, the advocates of the Hong Kong Nationalism Theory demand for national self-determination and they conceive independence as one of the viable options.

ii. Ethnicity and Culture

As mentioned earlier, the City-state branch resort to a Chinese origin of Hongkongese as the advocates claim that Hong Kong people are the decedents of Chinese refugee, and thus they portray Hongkongese as majority Han while most of the people can trace their origin to Guangdong (Chin, 2015). They therefore put heavy emphasis on

Chinese cultural elements, especially those related to the Lingnan region, including Cantonese, Tradition Chinese characters, Confucianism and local folk culture.

Instead of resorting to Chinese cultural resources,

On the other hand, the Hong Kong Nationalism branch holds a more pluralistic view and portray Hongkongese as a mix of various ethnicity, including Chinese, South-east Asian, and Caucasians. Likewise, they put more focus on the influence of the Western culture and universal values like freedom, rule of law, and human rights.

iii. Nationalism

The City-state branch exhibits the features of cultural nationalism as it defines Hong Kong as a nation characterized by its shared “authentic” Chinese culture, the rationale to isolate Hong Kong from the People’s Republic of China is thus the “distinction between Hua (civilized China) and Yi (Barbarians)” (Chin, 2014, pp.92-93), where Hongkongese are portrayed as the adherents of authentic Chinese culture and China the barbarians.

Although the advocates of the Hong Kong Nationalism branch resorts to the rhetoric of civil nationalism and defines Hong Kong as a nation bounded by shared values, they go well beyond the scope of civil nationalism and put heavy focus on Cantonese and local culture to establish the distinctiveness of Hong Kong. It is reasonable to conclude that the features of cultural nationalism also exist in the discourse of the Hong Kong Nationalism branch. Hence, rather than a pure form of civil nationalism, it is more a mixed version of both civil and cultural nationalism.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the recent years, Hong Kong nationalism as well as the political landscape in Hong Kong have undergone rapid changes and developments. The idea of Hong Kong nationalism has moved from the fringe to the mainstream, and it is gaining popularity especially among younger generations. Despite the fact that Hong Kong nationalist is still absent from the legislature, political parties in favour of the idea has mushroomed since 2014. Hong Kong Indigenous, for instance, ran for the by-election for Legislative Councilor in 2016. Although their candidate, Edward Leung, was eventually defeated, he received 66,525 votes (accountable to 15.38% of all votes), which is more than enough to secure a seat in the proportional representation election system in Hong Kong. With the 2016 Hong Kong Legislative Council election to come, it is reasonable to expect that there will be major power shifts in the Hong Kong politics.

Furthermore, there are also competition and negotiation between the two branches of nationalism. Theoretically speaking, the City-state branch tends to be more exclusive, as the it defines Hong Kong by Chinese culture and thus the non-Chinese population can easily be excluded, while the Hong Kong Nationalism branch seems to be more inclusive due to their idea that “whoever agrees with the core value of Hong Kong people can be a Hongkongese”. As Hong Kong nationalism is still under construction, which version would eventually prevail might depend on the occurrence of critical events and also the government’s response in the future.

Without doubt, nationalism is on the rise in Hong Kong, yet the velocity and direction of the development remain an unanswered question.

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Contact email: justin.chunting.ho@gmail.com