

## UNVEILING A NEW IDENTITY UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF CHINESE IN THE POLITICAL CONFLICT

Chan Nok Lam\* 

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### Abstract

*This paper argues that the conflict between China and Hong Kong is not a simple political dispute but is fundamentally tied to the emergence of a new identity within Hong Kong under the umbrella of Chinese identity. The Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the 2019 Extradition Bill movement further highlight the rise of a distinct Hong Kong identity, an identity constructed under the lens of a constructivist and defined by its set of politics, unique culture, and democratic values influenced by British colonialism. In contrast, Chinese identity is understood through a primordialism lens, emphasizing common ancestry and national harmony, interpreted as submission to autocracy. This paper will argue how value incompatibility in both identities is the root cause of this political conflict.*

**Keywords:** constructivism, identity, China, Hong Kong, conflict.

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\* Chan Nok Lam is a bachelor's student in Political Science at the Faculty of Law, Political and Social Sciences, University of Lille. He wrote this article as an Erasmus student at the Faculty of Political, Administrative, and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, for the 2023-2024 academic year. Email: olivernl2002@gmail.com



## Introduction

The conflict between China and Hong Kong has always been interpreted as a complex political conflict. The Umbrella Movement in 2014<sup>1</sup> represented a milestone in the breakdown between Hong Kong's people and the Chinese government. The conflict was further triggered by the "Extradition Bill" in 2019<sup>2</sup>, with the desire for self-determination, intensifying the rise of Hong Konger identity and demand for full democracy in Hong Kong. Yet, it also came with a response from Beijing by implementing the National Security Law (NSL)<sup>3</sup> and Article 23,<sup>4</sup> which tightened its control over Hong Kong.

In this light, the conflict from 2014 to 2020 between Hong Kong and China transcends mere political disagreement, as it delves into the realms of identity-related conflict, because it is, in fact, the different ways in which the two sides' identities are constituted that have led to this political conflict. These two identities culminate in a polarized situation, Hong Kongers resist the authoritarianization imposed by Beijing, while Beijing expands and imposes its authoritarianism in Hong Kong at the same time. The identity of the people of Hong Kong consists of shared democratic values, which can be

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<sup>1</sup> A series of civil actions took place in Hong Kong from 26 September to 15 December 2014 to fight for genuine universal suffrage in the Chief Executive election and Legislative Council election.

<sup>2</sup> Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Bill 2019 campaign began in response to a proposed law allowing extradition to mainland China, Taiwan, and elsewhere. Protesters argued that it would undermine Hong Kong's judicial independence. The campaign initially focused on withdrawing the bill, but soon expanded to demand democratic reforms, police accountability, and universal suffrage.

<sup>3</sup> The Hong Kong National Security Law is a Hong Kong-specific law passed and implemented by the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee on 30 June 2020, aiming to prevent, stop, and punish acts of secession, subversion of state power, terrorist activities and collusion with foreign or extraterritorial forces that endanger national security.

<sup>4</sup> Article 23 of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China provides that the HKSAR shall enact laws on its own to prohibit seven types of acts endangering national security, including treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government or Hong Kong government.

observed in the unique culture (with its emphasis on individualism, different education, and language), the shared history of colonialism, political events, and the political system. On the other hand, Beijing advocates a Chinese identity that emphasizes common ancestry and national harmony, interpreted as submission to autocracy. From Beijing's point of view, Beijing inevitably wants to impose its dictatorship on Hong Kong, and Hong Kong is bound to resist Beijing's power.

To understand how the different identities fundamentally cause a political clash between two identities. This paper will examine how these identities are fundamentally constructed from different perspectives, such as constructivism (in the case of Hong Kong) which is shaped by the unique culture, shared values of the society, a set of politics, and a shared collective aspiration and grounded in historical legacies, political system and cultural factors, and primordialism (in the case of China) which emphasizes common ancestry and blood lineage.

By adopting a constructivist viewpoint, the methodology of this paper will employ mainly qualitative data, drawing from a range of sources including interviews, literature, official documents, and empirical data to analyze systematically. The qualitative data will cover the historical context (political system, legal framework), cultural approach (traditional values, language, educational divergence), and political events chapters.

First of all, the paper will dive into the historical approach, to analyze how colonialism gives the possibility of emerging a new identity, the Hong Konger identity under the umbrella of the Chinese that is further fostered by its political system (electoral system), and legal framework. On top of that, the paper will dive into the cultural approach, such as a difference in traditional values, language, and education in order to illustrate the contribution of a new identity. Additionally, it will analyze how the political events (such as the Tiananmen incident, the social movement in 2014 and 2019, and the rise of nationalists and independentists) reflect deeper cultural and value differences that lie in each identity. Lastly, all the factors above will be combined to

explain how the conflict between China and Hong Kong is more deeply rooted in differing conceptions of collective identity than in pure politics.

### **I. Constructivism and Primordialism as Analytical Framework**

There are two approaches to defining the conceptions of identity formation. The primordialism typology of identity types is given, defined through blood connection<sup>5</sup>, and is fixed<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, from a constructivist approach, identity is constructed based on various factors, such as culture, shared values of the society, a set of politics, and a shared collective aspiration for the future rather than blood lineage in terms of primordialism. In other terms, collective identity should not be considered as a substance, a thing, entity, organism, or collective individual<sup>7</sup>, and collective identity should be seen as a value, a practical category, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects, and contingent events<sup>8</sup>. For this reason, regardless of an individual birth or origins, by adopting a set of shared societal values, a set of shared politics, culture, or collective aspirations can also become a member of the collective identity. To conclude the constructivist approach, identity is fundamentally not an inherent or fixed entity in the world, but rather a perspective shaped by individuals' and societies' views and interpretations of their shared experiences and values<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, quoted in Murat Bayar, "Reconsidering Primordialism: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Ethnicity," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, no. 9, vol. 32, 2009, p. 1640.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1981, quoted in Murat Bayar, *op. cit.*, pp. 1640-1642.

<sup>7</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups," in Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex (eds.), *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, p. 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 65.

By adopting constructivist approaches. The following chapters will show how the historical context gives the possibility of emerging a new identity (Hong Konger) under the unique autonomy granted by the Sino-British Joint Declaration. This historical background lays the foundation for the fundamental difference between Hong Kong and China in political-cultural rooted in their distinct political system and legal framework.

Moreover, besides the historical background, cultural divergence plays a crucial role in shaping the Hong Konger identity as well, specifically, the cultural conflict between Confucianism and individualism, and how the disparities in the education system foster the emergence of the Hong Konger identity, lastly, in the subchapter of cultural will explore how language differences and Beijing's attitude toward Cantonese reinforce the Hong Konger identity.

Moreover, the paper will show how political events further demonstrate the friction between this new identity and the Chinese identity. Key events such as the Tiananmen incident, marked the turning point when Hong Kong people started to detach themselves from the values of the Chinese. Besides, the political events of the 2014 and 2019 social movements and the emergence of independentists and nativists further reflect the emergence of a new identity under the Chinese umbrella. Lastly, combining all the above factors, the paper will demonstrate that political division is, in fact, an extension of a deep-seated identity conflict, and the inevitable clash is tied to these fundamentally different perceptions of identity.

## **II. Historical Context: An agreement that fostered the future possibility growth of divided identities**

During the era of decolonization, Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997 but under the principle of "one country, two systems". This agreement was established and agreed upon by both parties, the British and Chinese governments. The agreement mentions that Hong Kong is part of China, but it retains its systems and guarantees Hong Kong a high degree of

autonomy in various aspects<sup>10</sup>, promising that the Chinese socialist system and policies would not be practiced in this special administrative region and that Hong Kong's previous system and way of life would remain unchanged for 50 years<sup>11</sup>. In other words, except for national defense matters and certain areas of political diplomacy, Hong Kong has all the functions of any other sovereign state. From China's perspective, China is trying to meld Hong Kong into the national picture and maintain its characteristics at the same time<sup>12</sup>.

Nonetheless, starting in 2008, Hong Kong people's sense of identity has gradually risen and drastically moved away from their Chinese identity, while Hong Kong people's sense of Chinese identity has been decreasing year by year<sup>13</sup>. The political events that happened between 2014 and 2019 also intensified the identity of Hong Kongers<sup>14</sup>.

Indeed, the idea of a "high degree of autonomy and remained unchanged for 50 years"<sup>15</sup> planted a seed of split identity between Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese, because of the existence of separate systems, Hong Kong has its legal framework, governance structure, and political system.

Legally, the Basic Law serves as a bedrock that distinguishes the political system from China. Because the Basic Law Article 45 and Article 68 outlined the principle of gradual and orderly progress toward full democracy<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Hong Kong Legal Hub, *One Country, Two Systems and the Basic Law*, 29 August 2024. <<https://www.legalhub.gov.hk/details.php?a=10&v=-one-country-two-systems-and-the-basic-law#>>, 2 September 2024.

<sup>11</sup> The Basic Law of the HKSAR of the People's Republic of China, art. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Anastasia Yip, "Hong Kong and China: One Country, Two Systems, Two Identities" in *Global Societies Journal*, no. 3, 2015, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Hong Kong Free Press, "Hongkongers identifying as Chinese at record low, only 10% of youth proud to be citizens – poll," 28 June 2019 <<https://hongkongfp.com/2019/06/28/hongkongers-identifying-chinese-record-low-10-youth-proud-citizens-poll/>>, 10 September 2024.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> The Basic Law of the HKSAR of the People's Republic of China, art. 5.

<sup>16</sup> The Basic Law of the HKSAR of the People's Republic of China, art. 45 and art. 68.

Besides, the Basic Law allows Hong Kong to practice democratic values, such as maintaining a clearer separation of power, judicial independence, and the rule of law compared to mainland China<sup>17</sup>. Even in practical terms, Hong Kong has its own passport, which grants greater global mobility compared to the Mainland Passport.

Politically, Hong Kong has its electoral system for the Chief Executive and Legislative Council, which is a system that is more “free and fair” and “universal and equal” election compared to mainland China<sup>18</sup>. In other terms, Hong Kongers have a different political culture that values political participation, civil liberties, political rights, and democratic values. It contrasts sharply with that of Chinese citizens, who do not have any rights regarding elections, which also means that they cannot build an identity around democratic values like Hong Kongers.

These structural and institutional differences further reinforce the sense of Hong Konger identity, since the collective identity is easier to occur under common organizational routines, and institutional forms from a constructivist perspective<sup>19</sup>. In doing so, the political system and legal framework shape a collective identity that values civic participation, political freedom, and democratic principles, and this contrasts sharply with Chinese citizens. That is the reason for the increase in the feeling of separation and being at odds with the rest of China.

### **III. Cultural context: The Cultural Divergence, and contrast in culture, education, and language**

In this section on cultural differences, this chapter will explore two key dimensions: the first subchapter will explore how the value opposition between individualism and Confucianism, and the second subchapter will

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibidem*, art. 48, art. 69 to art. 79 and art. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2018: Me too? Political participation, protest and democracy,” 2018, <[https://enperspectiva.uy/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Democracy\\_Index\\_2018.pdf](https://enperspectiva.uy/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Democracy_Index_2018.pdf)>, accessed 15 October, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *op. cit.*, 2006, pp. 36-37.

dive into the education system that reflects the harmony and conformity of Confucianism, and the critical thinking and individuality of individualism. Moreover, the third subchapter will explore the linguistic differences between Cantonese and Mandarin, and how the predominance of Cantonese in Hong Kong serves as a crucial marker of cultural identity that is distinct from Mandarin. Lastly, the final subchapter will examine Beijing's attitude toward Cantonese and the reaction of Hong Kongers regarding it. Collectively, these elements will substantiate the escalating tensions between Hong Kong and China, bolstering my principal thesis regarding the shifting identity of Hong Kong residents.

### *A) Confucian Values versus Individualism*

The legacies of the British colony are heavily present in the present day. Hong Kong people inherited individualism from the British, which contrasts with Chinese Confucianism. Yip argues that it is difficult to form a cordial relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland from the departure of cultural identities within one national framework<sup>20</sup>. This is because Confucianism emphasizes constructing harmony in society and the construction itself requires much exclusion and sacrifice of personal interests<sup>21</sup>. Yet, it is complicated to advocate the Confucianism in Hong Kong context despite China possessing the sovereignty of Hong Kong, since Hong Kong is a city that advocates individuality and allowed criticism of the government before the 2019 protests, in contrast to the conformity expected in mainland China, where citizens are expected to submit to autocratic rule, if not, it will be considered as advocating nonconformity, and ignoring the collective interests.

The reason that Hong Kong inherited individuality is that Hong Kong people are accustomed to British legal concepts<sup>22</sup>. The legal concept is based on Kant's ideals, which emphasize that protecting basic human rights,

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p.20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p.23.



such as individual freedom, equality, and independence, is the responsibility of sovereign states<sup>23</sup>. Kant's ideals relate more to individualism, which focuses on personal interest, than the idea of Confucianism, which focuses on collective interest. In this condition, Hong Kong people inevitably advocate democratic values, such as freedom of speech and the press<sup>24</sup>, it is incompatible with Confucianism since having values such as freedom of speech makes it easier to advocate for one's personal interests. At the same time, freedom of opinion is incompatible with China's dominant philosophy of governance and, more importantly, the harmony agenda introduced in China is designed to legitimize and sustain the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>25</sup>

### ***B) Educational Divergence: Conformity versus Critical Thinking***

The disparities in the education system also contribute to the division of Chinese identity and the emergence of the identity of Hong Kongers. Hong Kong education is built around critical thinking and individuality. On the other hand, China's education advocates conformity, and patriotism, interpreted as obedience to authority (CCP). For this reason, Hong Konger identity developed with a critical and democratic outlook while Chinese identity emphasizes collectivism and a state-aligned identity.

The general objectives drafted by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) on Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools<sup>26</sup>:

#### *General Objectives*

*To cultivate students' love for the Party, the country, and the people, to enhance national awareness and social responsibility, to educate students to*

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<sup>23</sup> Gabriella Slomp, "On Sovereignty", in Darren Zook (ed.), *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies*, San Diego: Cognella Inc., 2006, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Anastasia Yip, *op. cit.*, p. 24-25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p.25.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "Circular on the Issuance of the Guidelines on Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools," 17 August 2017, <[https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2018/content\\_5254319.htm](https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2018/content_5254319.htm)>, accessed 15 October 2024.

*understand, embrace, and support the national political system, to learn about the excellent traditional Chinese culture, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture, to enhance the self-confidence of socialism with Chinese characteristics....*

As indicated by the objectives of moral education in China, the goal is to cultivate students' love for the Party, and the country, and to embrace the unique autocratic political system. Besides, under the rules of President Xi, the school must deeply implement the spirit of the series of important speeches of President Xi Jinping and school has to firmly grasp the leading role in ideological, political, and moral education work in primary and secondary schools, and ensure that primary and secondary schools become strong bases for upholding the Party's leadership.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, to study and educate on Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's series of important speeches, and the Party Central Committee's strategies for the governance of the country.<sup>28</sup> The objective of teaching has shaped an identity that aligns with the Chinese Communist party's goal, in which the Chinese are less likely to question authority but to be submissive, obedient citizens. In addition, this approach reinforces a collective identity that prioritizes collectivism over individual thought.

In contrast, Hong Kong's education system focuses on critical thinking, and individual opinion, similar to Western education. For instance, liberal studies are a core subject in secondary school studies, which cover topics such as culture, economy, politics and technology, knowledge of current affairs, and world situation. Students are specifically encouraged to cite the pros and cons, analyze the fundamental nature, feasibility, limitations, and effectiveness of the government policy, assess global issues, or evaluate societal issues, in order to train students' critical thinking skills through different issues in the society, helping them develop their personal values

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>28</sup>*Ibidem.*

and make judgments. For the reason that individual opinions and critical thinking foster a Hong Kong identity that is likely to criticize and question government and support democratic principles such as freedom of speech.

The Hong Kong educational emphasis on critical thinking and individuality has led to Beijing's view that liberal studies were one of the causes of the recent social movement in 2019 since students are more inclined to advocate for their demands and question authority. In response, liberal studies were reformed in 2021 and renamed the liberal studies to "Citizenship and Social Development". Also, the curriculum of the subject, such as the deletion of topics on separation of powers, civil disobedience, freedom of the press, issues related to localism, and those considered by the government to be anti-Hong Kong or Beijing government topics, has been removed from the curriculum. Shifting to the education on Chinese national identity, and patriotism, such as topics on Hong Kong's integration into the overall situation of national development. In order to reduce the Hong Konger identity and foster closer integration with Chinese values, conformity, and patriotism, interpreted as obedience to authority.

### C) *Cantonese versus Mandarin*

The difference in language plays an important role in shaping both identities and reinforcing the division of identities because collective identities are easier to form with a common language<sup>29</sup>.

Beijing's government advocates that Cantonese is a dialect that cannot be considered a language. However, linguistically, Cantonese shares some features with Mandarin, nevertheless, it can be described as separate, different, and special since the Cantonese language is not simply the standard Chinese characters but with its pronunciations, grammar, and vocabulary<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Barrett, Martyn. "English Children's Acquisition of a European Identity", in Glynis L. Breakwell and Evanthea Lyons (eds.), *Changing European Identities: Social Psychological Analysis of Social Change*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996, pp. 349-369.

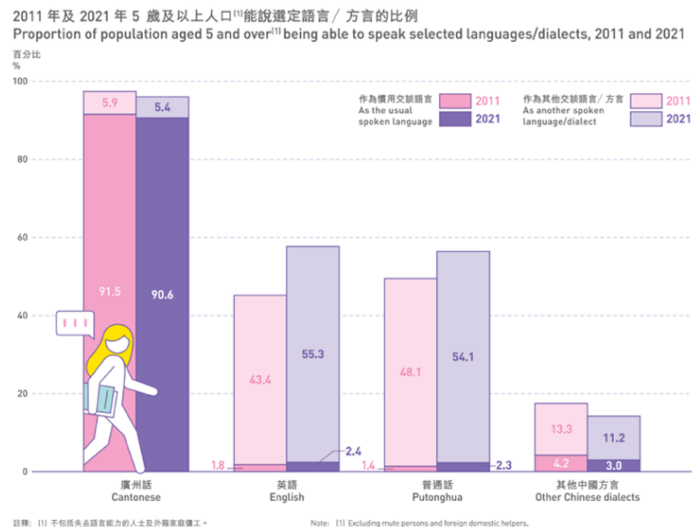
<sup>30</sup> Robert S. Bauer, "Cantonese as Written Language in Hong Kong" in *Global Chinese*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, p. 103.

Besides, Cantonese is believed to have originated in 220 A.D., much earlier than the appearance of Mandarin after the Yuan Dynasty in the 14th century. For this reason, Cantonese plays an important part in forming an identity that distinguishes it from other mainland Chinese Mandarin speakers since it carries a distinct linguistic culture uniqueness.

Moreover, the Beijing government uses the term 'Chinese' as a synonym for Mandarin, which undermines the importance of other languages like Cantonese, in order to diminish the recognition and value of these distinct linguistic identities. In reality, Cantonese and Mandarin are two mutually unintelligible languages, much like the relationship between Spanish and Portuguese, using the expression "Chinese" to refer to both languages is misleading, such a characterization would be analogous to describing all Romance languages as Latin.

The Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department conducted a survey on the proportion of the population aged 5 and over being able to speak selected languages/dialects, and which one is chosen as the usual spoken language in daily life<sup>31</sup>.

*Figure 1. Proportion of population aged 5 and over being able to speak selected languages/dialects, 2011 and 2021*



<sup>31</sup> The Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2021 Population Census: Use of Language by Hong Kong Population 2021, 2021, p. 2.

As can be seen, Cantonese was still the most commonly used language by the Hong Kong population. Yet the proportion of the population aged 5 and over who chose Cantonese as the usual spoken language was 90.6% in 2021.

In addition to daily language use, Hong Kong and the Mainland speak different languages at the administrative levels. Beijing uses Mandarin, while Hong Kong uses Cantonese.<sup>32</sup>For example, members of the Legislative Council (Parliament) conduct their proceedings in Cantonese rather than Mandarin. This language barrier has further separated the emotional ties between Hong Kong and China.

#### ***D) Mainlandization: Beijing's attitudes toward Cantonese***

On the other hand, the attitude of the Beijing authorities towards Cantonese is to completely replace Cantonese with Mandarin because Cantonese sets Hong Kong different from rest of China.

"Robert Bauer, a Cantonese expert who teaches at several universities in Hong Kong, said the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) and the Education Bureau (EDB) are essentially "buying" schools to switch from Cantonese to Mandarin for Chinese language classes. "They're doing Beijing's bidding," he said," Cantonese makes Hong Kong different from the mainland. The Chinese government hates it, and so does the Hong Kong government." ...incident at the Education Bureau in 2014.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sue Wright and Helen Kelly-Holmes, "One Country, Two Systems, Three Languages: A Survey of Changing Language Use in Hong Kong" in *Current Issues in Language and Society*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1997, pp. 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> Juliana Liu, "BBC Cantonese vs. Mandarin: When Language Meets Politics in Hong Kong," *BBC News*, 29 June 2017, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-40439847>>, 9 October 2024.

In 2008, SCOLAR attempted to introduce the idea of “teaching the Chinese Language in Mandarin at school” for many years, but it failed<sup>34</sup>, since the implementation of the period has caused great repercussions in society, since Mandarin become a disturbing reminder of Hong Kong's “Mainlandization”<sup>35</sup>, meaning moving closer toward China socially, culturally, economically, and politically. For the majority, the imposition of Mandarin teaching represents the symbol of the erosion of Cantonese and the dilution of Hong Konger linguistic and cultural identity. The strong societal reaction to the educational reforms reflects how language acts as a key pillar of Hong Konger identity, and the resistance to the change underlined the deep cultural and linguistic chasm between Hong Kong and Mainland China. The pushback has further enthroned the sense of separateness and fostered identity distinctions.

#### **IV. Identity crisis: Value differentiation and Hong Kong's identity consolidation by China**

The turning point when Hong Kong people began to detach themselves from the Chinese identity can be traced back to the Tiananmen incident. Tiananmen incident produced three impacts on Hong Kong<sup>36</sup>, first, it sparked a series of mass protests in Hong Kong against the Communist Party's crackdown on student protests in Beijing, and more than 300,000 people gathered in Hong Kong's Happy Valley to pay tribute to the victims of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the aftermath of the violent

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<sup>34</sup> The Legislative Council passed in 2016 to abolish the “to teach Chinese Language in Mandarin at school”, The final report of the study was released, pointing out that classroom discussion in Cantonese secondary schools was more heated than that in Mandarin in secondary schools, and some teachers had confused language and language teaching.

<sup>35</sup> Bettinson, Gary. “Yesterday Once More: Hong Kong-China Coproductions and the Myth of Mainlandization”, in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2020, pp. 16-31.

<sup>36</sup> Alvin So, “The Tiananmen Incident, Patten's Electoral Reforms, and the Origins of Contested Democracy in Hong Kong,” in M. Chan (ed.), *Hong Kong's Reintegration with China: Transformation and Challenge*, Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1997, pp. 17-19.

crackdown on June 4th. Secondly, the Tiananmen Square incident triggered a massive wave of emigration, with queues at embassies for visas to leave Hong Kong, and in the early 1990s, an average of 50,000 people emigrated from Hong Kong each year<sup>37</sup>, the United States, Canada, and Australia being the most popular destinations. Finally, for those who could not or would not emigrate, a resistance movement emerged in Hong Kong. As a result, there was a resurgence of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong after the Tiananmen Incident<sup>38</sup>.

The Tiananmen Square incident brought to the surface the factors that constitute Hong Kong people's identity. The 1989 event cemented Beijing's hostility toward a fully democratized Hong Kong and gave rise to long-term distrust between Beijing and the pro-democracy camp.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, it cemented Hong Kong's aspiration toward a fully democratized society and highlighted the importance that Hong Kong people attach to democratic values.

The Tiananmen Incident illustrates that Hong Kong people have begun to place more emphasis on democratic values than on ancestral heritage in shaping their identity. This shift means that Hong Kong people are moving towards a constructivist approach, where values define who they are rather than relying on historical lineage and ancestor connections. In other words, the Hong Kong people's identity identification is based on whether a person shares the same set of societal values, and collective aspirations for the future with the group and whether they are willing to live with the community. To conclude, the Hong Kong people's identity identification is based on values, by respecting democratic principles, rather than blood.

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<sup>37</sup> Ronald Skeldon, *Reluctant Exiles? Migration from Hong Kong and the New Overseas Chinese*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994, p. 27-28.

<sup>38</sup> Alvin So, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-23.

<sup>39</sup> Stephan Ortmann, "The Lack of Sovereignty, the Umbrella Movement, and Democratisation in Hong Kong", in *Asia Pacific Law Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2016, pp. 108-109.

## **V. Independentists and nativists**

Democratic values have been passed down in Hong Kong society, and social movements such as the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-Extradition Bills Movement contributed to the emergence of independentists and nativists, which further demonstrates there is an emergence of a new identity. Independence advocates for greater autonomy from mainland China or full independence, as Hong Kong's independence advocates for the culture, democratic values, and social systems of the Hong Kong people are threatened by Beijing's growing influence. For example, the Hong Kong National Party, figures like Andy Chan, emphasize the right of Hong Kong people to self-determination and seek to establish a political entity independent of China.

On the other hand, nativists promote and preserve Hong Kong's local culture and identity. Nativists advocate for a strong sense of belonging among Hong Kong residents and prioritize local interests over mainland China interests, for instance, the Yellow Economic Circle movement, which encourages consumers to support pro-democracy restaurants or businesses while boycotting restaurants or businesses with pro-Beijing behaviors, as well as businesses and organizations funded by Mainland China capital.

As mentioned, the advocacies and emergence of the independentists and nativists, further illustrate that the way in which Hong Kong people's identity is constructed is not dominated by primordialism identity but rather by culture, shared values of the society, set of politics, and a shared collective aspiration, regardless of their origin or birth. In other words, individuals of Chinese origin who embrace Hong Kong's values are accepted as part of the Hong Konger collective identity. Therefore, the movements' resistance toward Beijing's autocracy reflects the core values that constitute Hong Kong's identity, the democratic values, and its unique culture.

Moreover, China's stance also helps to consolidate Hong Kong as the concept of "other" (Hong Konger), in other terms, to quote YIP, "While the purpose of "One country, two systems" aims to incorporate Hong Kong into



the national cultural framework, how the Chinese government perceives this city as inherently different from the rest of China contradicts its original intention"<sup>40</sup>. Since Hu Jintao's<sup>41</sup> policies, Hu emphasized the harmony in relations between political parties, nationalities, religions, and compatriots at home and abroad<sup>42</sup>; which is implied in Taiwan and Hong Kong, since mainland China has no other political parties, nationalities, and no "compatriots" that live abroad. To put it another way, Hu self-defeated the purpose of "one country, two systems" unintentionally, transitioning gradually to fully integrate into China.

## VI. The Inevitable Clash of Identities

The conflict between China and Hong Kong is more deeply rooted in differing conceptions of collective identity than it is in pure politics. Since Hong Kong people have developed a constructivist approach to identity formed by culture, shared values of the society, a set of politics, and shared collective aspirations. This constructivist identity has been strengthened under the "one country, two systems" framework, and instead of integration into the national picture of China, the framework has allowed Hong Kong to preserve its unique political and social systems and has contributed to a sense of alienation from the mainland.

On the other hand, the Chinese government has a primordialist perspective on collective identity. As a result, the Chinese emphasize common ancestry and solidarity under a centralized state. As a result, Beijing imposes further control of Hong Kong through the Hong Kong National Security Laws in the hope of achieving unity and solidarity under a centralized state. Yet, it is precisely for this reason that Beijing has taken further control of Hong Kong. This political action by Beijing has further exacerbated the

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> Former President of the People's Republic of China.

<sup>42</sup> Michael D. Barr, "Confucianism, from Above and Below", in Jeffrey Haynes, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, Routledge, 2008, p. 146.

sense of 'otherness' felt by many Hong Kong people, as these behaviors are seen as a threat to their unique identity that lies in democratic values, and may even trigger resistance, such as the Umbrella Movement and the 2019 protests.

When we understand how historical legacy (political system, legal framework), cultural factors (individualism versus collectivism, submissive education versus critical thinking education, Cantonese versus Mandarin), and political events determine (the Tiananmen incident, social movement in 2014 and 2019) and shape these identities, it is not difficult to understand that political division is an extension of a deep-seated identity conflict. From the constructivist perspective, Hong Kong people's identity is constructed around democratic values, in contrast to the primordialism identity which is rigid and more inclined to emphasize social harmony (i.e., not opposed to an autocratic regime). If these fundamentally different perceptions of identity continue to clash, the conflict between Hong Kong and China will be difficult to be resolved in peace.

## **VII. Conclusion**

To conclude, the conflict between Hong Kong and Mainland China is always portrayed and regarded as a political conflict, however, this paper argues that the conflict is essentially tied to the emergence of a new collective identity under the umbrella of Chinese identity. In other terms, the political division is in fact an extension of a deep-seated identity conflict. These tensions of identity not only determine the inevitable occurrence of political conflict but also strengthen the unique identity of Hong Kong in the process.

The fundamentally different perspectives from which these identities are created are the root of the political conflict. Hong Kong's identity is shaped through a constructivist lens that is built based on a unique culture: individualism, an analytical mindset, and the Cantonese language, shared values of the society: democratic values, set of politics: social movements, political culture, and a shared collective aspiration: social movements, nativists,

and independentists. It is grounded in historical legacies (legal framework, political system), cultural factors (education system and language), and political events. In contrast, the Chinese identity is shaped by Beijing, which is based on primordialism principles that emphasize blood lineage, national unity, and harmony; often interpreted as submission to dictatorship.

The political events from 2014 to 2020 show that while Hong Kong people embrace individualism, democracy, and freedom, the mainland under the leadership of Beijing insists on the Confucian ideals of collective harmony and authoritarian governance, and these primordialism values have deepened the conflicts between the two places, causing constant tension in the relationship between Hong Kong and the Mainland. If these fundamentally different perceptions of identity continue to clash, the conflict between Hong Kong and China will be difficult to resolve peacefully.

To summarize, it may seem to be a purely political conflict, but in fact, it is a deeper identity conflict tied to the emergence of new identity under the umbrella of Chinese identity, which builds up the intrinsic incompatibility between the nature of Hong Kong's identity (democratic values under constructivism), and, in other words, the incompatibility with the nature of the Chinese identity framed by Beijing (under primordialism view, emphasizing blood lineage and harmony, which refers to submission to autocracy), which leads to the inevitable occurrence of a political conflict.

There is further research to be conducted on how the 2047 deadline which marks the end of Hong Kong's "One country, two systems" may impact Hong Kong's identity, and whether the Hong Konger identity will continue to be consolidated or reshaped by Beijing's integrative policies. If the Hong Konger identity continues to exist, what form will it take? My prediction is that Beijing will impose integrative policies after the expiry of autonomy, and eventually, Hong Kong's identity will resemble an identity that is characterized by a pragmatic approach to governance and a focus on economic development, but at the expense of distinct cultural and political expressions.

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