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A special territory: visions of Hong Kong and its people

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Summary

This thesis starts with two broad questions: What is Hong Kong, and who are its people? These two questions came from my experiences living in Hong Kong for several years and being confused about the status of the Hong Kong polity under the framework of One Country Two Systems. Despite its status as part of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong presents itself with distinct attributes akin to a nation-state, evident in its autonomous governance, unique currency, educational system, and visa regulations.

Hong Kong was a colony of the British Empire that was handed over to the PRC in 1997. The PRC heralded this as a return to the motherland, but many in Hong Kong looked at this course of events with trepidation. Growing unrest after the handover grew into large-scale social movements stemming from frustration with the pace of democratic reforms that many considered were promised to the Hong Kong people, as well as a growing concern for integration and possibly assimilation with the PRC. Concurrently, a burgeoning awareness of Hong Kong's culture and identity, as distinct from that of mainland China, began to grow under the banner of localism. This is the context in which this research is situated.

The research has two main components. First, I analysed four works about Hong Kong. These works are *China's Hong Kong* by Jiang Shigong, *On Hong Kong as a Nation*, written collectively by the University of Hong Kong Student Union, *Hong Kong as a City State* by Chin Wan, and *Hong Kong Independence* by Yu Jie. I interpret the first as representing the viewpoint of the PRC government, while the other three represent the spectrum of Hong Kong localism. Localism is a general appreciation and awareness of Hong Kong culture and identity that can manifest in political claims aimed at preserving and safeguarding "Hong Kongness" in the face of potential and perceived threats of assimilation. Second, I interviewed a variety of Hong Kongers to understand how people thought and felt about categories such as the Hong Kong identity, society, culture, and its relation to China, Chineseness, and the PRC.

Through the discussion of the four works and the interviews, I discuss varying interpretations of Hong Kong's identity, culture, past, present, and future. I adopt nationalism as my theoretical framework to understand Hong Kong society and state within the national framework and its position within the PRC under the One Country, Two Systems framework.

The works and interviews show a disagreement on most major categories in Hong Kong society. The discourse reveals a spectrum of identities oscillating between Britishness, Chineseness, and the emerging category of Hong Kongness. Should the people, for example, be considered Chinese, British, or a category of their own: Hong Konger. Should the language of Hong Kong society be

English, Cantonese or Mandarin? Chineseness can further be differentiated between a more cosmopolitan idea of Chineseness and a PRC-mandated one in which being Chinese means having certain duties to the motherland of the PRC, of which the Communist Party is the vanguard party leading the state into a glorious future. These tensions illustrate the struggle to reconcile local autonomy with national integration.

Discussing the works and interviews I argue that Hong Kong society and state shows the poverty of certain theories of nationalism. I contend that the prevailing ideology of nationalism inadequately captures the complexity of Hong Kong's post-handover under One Country Two Systems. Both pro-PRC factions and Hong Kong localists are ensnared in a nationalist paradigm, limiting avenues for autonomy amidst local governmental constraints and the PRC's ideological orthodoxies. Particularly the 19th century notion of people-making and its relation to nationalist theory. Here, I explore the belief that a populace, considering themselves to be a distinct culture (defined as a way of life with specific customs and traditions), can fully assert itself only within the confines of a sovereign nation, ensuring its autonomy. This nationalist ideology, I contend, forms the bedrock of much of the political and societal tension witnessed in Hong Kong society, as evidenced by the interviews and the analysis of the four works.

Both pro-PRC and Hong Kong localists trying to safeguard their own culture and identity are caught in a nationalist trap that offers few alternatives other than pursuing autonomy for the people. Yet, autonomy is something that the government, pursuing the one-China doctrine, cannot grant. This thesis is written in a time when many inside and outside of Hong Kong are trying to figure out who they are and where they are going. While matters appear to have settled after the enactment of several laws meant to safeguard national security in Hong Kong, aiming to stymie unrest, the story of Hong Kong is still ongoing. Perhaps the true significance or insignificance of the four works discussed in this thesis will only be known decades hence, reflecting the ongoing quest within Hong Kong society to define their own character and future amidst those in power who wish otherwise. I argue that the case of Hong Kong shows the underlying power of social theory to shape actions. It is therefore imperative that academics not only deconstruct existing political structures but also aim to construct alternatives.