

Chapter 7

The “National Question” and the Stories of Hong Kong

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In an address to the territory’s legislature on January 14, 2015, just less than a month after the final crackdown on the so-called Umbrella Movement, Leung Chun-ying, the Beijing-appointed chief executive of Hong Kong, decided to go out of his way to call out what he considered to be the central fallacy of the student leaders. Mindful that the seventy-nine-day pro-democracy protests were largely driven by those who came of age after the 1997 handover, Leung apparently opted to take the earliest opportunity to give the younger generation a not-so-veiled scolding. In particular, the chief executive pointed to the publication of the February 2014 issue of the *Undergrad*—the official periodical of the Hong Kong University Students’ Union—as a clear symptom of what he took to be a delusion shared by many who had participated in the protests. While “[w]e fully recognize the aspirations of our young students for democracy and their concerns about political reforms,” according to the official translation of Leung’s policy speech, students “should be guided towards a full understanding of the constitutional relationship between our country and Hong Kong so that the discussion on constitutional development would not be fruitless.” For the chief executive, the idea of a “Hong Kong nation determining its own fate” (Cantonese: *Heung Gong man juk, ming wan ji kyut*; Mandarin: *Xianggang min zu, ming yun zi jue* 香港民族, 命運自決)—the cover title of the *Undergrad* issue in question—was clearly misguided. “Hong Kong’s autonomy,” Leung Chun-ying maintained, “is a high degree of

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autonomy, not an absolute autonomy.” And since “[u]niversity students are the future pillars of society and deserve our care,” Leung declared, “there is all the more reason for us to . . . correct their mistakes.”¹

That the chief executive of Hong Kong would find it necessary to single out a student publication for criticisms and to tackle head on in his all-important annual policy speech the notion of a “Hong Kong nation” is in many ways revealing. The political offensive demonstrates, above all, that, despite the apparent failure of the Umbrella Movement, students—and, by extension, institutions of higher learning—have been reckoned by the political leaders in Beijing and their local agents as a major source of troubles; it shows also that, to retain, or regain, control of the territory, Leung Chun-ying and his advisors had decided that they needed to isolate and marginalize those who might be deemed too radical for Hong Kong. But Leung’s extraordinary criticisms also point to another source of concerns. Although relatively few had given serious attention to or even heard of the *Undergrad* issue in question before his policy address, the chief executive, and no doubt his masters in Beijing, has become especially allergic to any undue claim of autonomy. Calling attention to the general political framework and the mini-constitution under which the territory is supposed to function in the post-colonial era, Leung reminded his audience that “under ‘One Country, Two Systems,’ Hong Kong is a special administrative region of our country.” The “high degree of autonomy” the territory is supposed to enjoy, he particularly noted, is one that is “specially provided for in the Basic Law, not one based on any arbitrary interpretation.”²

But if the notion of a “Hong Kong nation” has struck a nerve among those in power, its reception among the territory’s political and opinion leaders, not to mention the general public, has been noticeably cool. That this is so is perhaps not surprising. To begin with, the idea of a “nation” (*man juk/min zu*) is inherently contentious; a *man juk* could refer to a community bound by ethnic ties (but to explain what “ethnicity” entails, of course, is to open another can of worms), and it could denote a population identifiable *primarily* by a common way of life as well as a set of shared values. Neither interpretation is, in the context of Hong Kong, without complications. If one subscribes to the former, how would one be inclusive of the (admittedly relatively small) “non-Chinese” population who has long called the territory home? And if it is the latter, how would one identify Hong Kong’s core values? Then there are the considerations associated with the usage of the term *man juk* in modern Chinese political discourse. If the people of the territory indeed constitute a nation, would the recognition automatically confer upon them an autonomous status, or would they then be rightfully viewed as one of China’s “minority nationalities”? But perhaps the main reason the notion of a “Hong Kong

¹Information Services Department, HKSAR (2015), para. 10; quotations are from paras. 9, 7. It is perhaps too early to write the history of the “Umbrella Movement”; for an early effort, see Ng (2016); for a useful timeline, see Connors (2015); for first-hand accounts, see, for example, Sanxiaderen (2015) and Chan Tze Woon (2016); for a visual record, see Umbrella Movement Visual Archive’s Facebook page; for a discussion of the languages of protests, see Veg (2016).

²Information Services Department, HKSAR (2015), para. 7.

nation” has not been widely embraced is that people in the territory are still at odds—with one another, but also often with themselves—about how to align their identities. Are they, above all, “Hong Kongers,” or are they first and foremost “Chinese”? Or is it after all a false dichotomy? For many, then, to recognize the people of Hong Kong as a *man juk* is to have to reflect anew on how Hong Kong has come to be and where it might be going.³

So while the notion of a “Hong Kong nation” might seem moot to many, the debates surrounding it have clearly exposed deep-seated ambivalence and anxieties about Hong Kong’s identities as well as the roles of the territory as a post-colonial Chinese city. To be sure, such ambivalence and anxieties could in part be explained by the shifting socio-economic and political landscapes that have accompanied the handover of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic in 1997. Since the early 1980s, when discussions about the future of the territory finally came to the open, not only has Hong Kong experienced fundamental transformations in its social, economic, and political structures, it has also witnessed seismic changes both within mainland China and in how the People’s Republic has repositioned itself within the global order. But the ambivalence and anxieties shared by many in Hong Kong have deeper roots. They stem from the yearning to re-examine and reflect on the legacies of colonialism, and they stem from the need to assess and sort out the relationship between the “special administrative region” and its newly emerged “motherland.” But, more to the point, such ambivalence and anxieties are founded on the desire among many to define and articulate an identity for the territory, and they are founded on the urge to give shape to and relate the story that has been Hong Kong.

7.1 Story of the Story

The story—and the story of the story—of Hong Kong has, of course, been told many times. As it could be expected, how the history of the territory is recounted is often linked to the political and cultural conditions of the day. Hence, there are stories written from the perspectives of colonial officials and foreign residents, who, though not necessarily unrepentant racists, were clearly convinced of the righteousness and merits of the colonial enterprise. There are also accounts, composed by émigré scholars who suddenly found themselves settled in the territory as a result of the turmoils in the mainland, whose main objective is to place the story of Hong Kong within the broader context of Chinese history. There is of course also a substantial body of studies, many of which written by social scientists inspired by the questions and concerns of the 1960s and 1970s, that seek to offer insights into the nature and structure of Hong Kong’s fast-changing society. Then there is that

³For the tortuous history of the idea of *man juk/min zu* in twentieth-century China, see, for example, Shin (2007) and Leibold (2007). For the complexity of the case of Hong Kong, see, for example, Ku and Pun (2004) and Mathews, Ma, and Lui (2008).

stream of popular as well as scholarly accounts produced in the 1980s and 1990s, whose primary task is to take stock of (sometimes in the form of obituaries) the colonial period of Hong Kong. Finally, since the 1997 handover, there has been an ever greater flow of output on various aspects of the history of the territory. While the stories told in such recent works are too varied to be generalized, it is clear that, just as Hong Kong the “special administrative region” is learning to come to its own, the people there are also trying to figure out how to tell their own story.⁴

Although as early as the 1850s there had already appeared in the first local Chinese newspaper, *Chinese Serial* (*Ha yi gun jan/Xie er guan zhen* 遐邇貫珍), brief accounts of the origins of Hong Kong, it was colonial officials and other foreign residents who produced the first systematic accounts of the history of the territory. Among this corpus of early colonial writings, the most well-known is no doubt Ernest John Eitel’s (1838–1908) *Europe in China: The History of Hongkong from the Beginning to the Year 1882*, first published in 1895. Born in Württemberg, Germany, Eitel was a missionary-turned-colonial official who arrived in China in the early 1860s but who would spend much of his career (1870–97) in the British colony. A scholar as well as a missionary, Eitel was also author of a Cantonese-language dictionary, a study of the theory and practice of geomancy, and a number of works on Buddhism. For some, *Europe in China* remains, to this day, an important source for—and contribution to—the study of early Hong Kong. But even for scholars who praise the work’s overall “accuracy and impartiality,” there is no denying that the book is, ultimately, “a celebration of British colonialism.” For Eitel, that the territory should come under British rule was a fulfillment of destiny on multiple levels. In terms of geography, “[g]eological upheavals had felicitously formed Hongkong of the toughest material and placed it just where the continent of Asia—large enough for the destinies of China, Russia and Britain—juts out into the Pacific, as if beckoning to the rest of the world to come on.” In terms of history, while for a long time “the march of civilization has been directed from the East to the West,” according to Eitel, “Europe’s destiny is to govern Asia.” And though Eitel did include in his work a chapter dedicated to the “pre-British history of the island of Hongkong,” it was “[t]he genius of British free trade and political liberty” that “constitutes unmistakably the vital element in the historic evolution of Hongkong.” For Eitel, then, “[e]very measure, every event in the history of Hongkong, that is in harmony with this general innate tendency [of cooperating with colonial rule], is in part a fulfilment of Hongkong’s mission in the history of the universe.”⁵

If writings by early colonial officials tended to emphasize the vital role of British rule in the founding of Hong Kong, those by local and expatriate scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century were more likely to draw attention to the

⁴For the historiography of Hong Kong, see, for example: Sinn (1994); Huo Qichang (1995); Wang Hongzhi (2000), esp. 1–69; Li Peide (2001), 11–36; Xiao Guojian (2015a).

⁵For assessments of Eitel’s work, see Luo Xianglin (1961), 29–34; Sweeting (2008); quotations are from pp. 94, 90. For Eitel’s views, see Eitel (1895), 127, iv, 570.

connections between the territory and the mainland. One highlight during this period was the development of the field of archaeology, which, though led initially by amateur scholars, did result in the discovery in the territory of not only a wealth of prehistoric artifacts but also a rather odd tomb dated to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Another noteworthy development during the early decades of the twentieth century was the occasional publication by émigré scholars on topics related to the history of Hong Kong. Take the case of the eminent historian Luo Xianglin (1905–1978). Born in Xinning county in the province of Guangdong, Luo would study at the prestigious Tsinghua and Yenching Universities before returning to the south to take up a succession of academic posts. A scholar with wide interests, Luo was the author of more than forty books, among which are his pioneering works on the history of the Hakka and the Baiyue (C: Baak Yut) 百越 peoples, as well as a series of studies on the historical interactions between China and its neighbors. For Luo Xianglin, the history of Hong Kong—where he, as many others, left China for in 1949—was very much part of the history of China’s interactions with the outside world. But while Luo, especially in his book *The Role of Hong Kong in the Cultural Interchange Between East and West* (1961; issued in English in 1963), would agree with Eitel that the colony had been instrumental in facilitating exchanges between China and Western countries, he would emphasize, as he did in his *Hong Kong and Its External Communications Before 1842: The History of Hong Kong Prior to British Arrival* (1959; also issued in English in 1963), that the waters around the territory had in fact served as an important channel for interactions and communications for China since at least the fifth century.⁶

As Hong Kong entered into a period of rapid growth and change, there appeared also from the 1960s to the 1980s a wide range of studies on the history and society of the territory. While some of the scholarly works produced during this period, such as those by historian George Endacott, continued to adopt a top-down approach and rely primarily on official documents, others were more open to examining local conditions from the ground up. Among those who took a keen interest in the local history of Hong Kong was the noted scholar James Hayes, who, despite—or perhaps because of—his background as a career officer in the colonial government, has produced some of the best-documented and most insightful studies of the New Territories. And while some of the scholarly works from this period were produced by anthropologists from the United Kingdom or the United States (among them Barbara Ward, Hugh Baker, Elizabeth and Graham Johnson, as well as Rubie and James Watson), who, despite their own misgivings, tended to treat what they found in Hong Kong as a proxy for “traditional” Chinese society, others were by local social scientists (such as Henry Lethbridge, who was on the faculty of the University of Hong Kong) who seemed genuinely interested in the political and

⁶For the story of archaeology in Hong Kong, see Meacham (2009), 10–41. For Luo Xianglin’s works on the history of Hong Kong, see Xiao Guojian (2015b). For Luo’s views, see Luo Xianglin (1961), 2–5; Luo Xianglin and others (1959), 1–16.

social changes that had taken place in the territory. Even more noteworthy a development during this period was the emergence of a new generation of locally educated historians (among them Ng Lun Ngai-ha, Bernard Luk, David Faure, and Elizabeth Sinn), who, among their many other attributes, have had the advantage of being able to make use of both Chinese- and English-language materials in conducting their studies.⁷

As the 1997 issue began to loom over the territory, there would appear in the 1980s and 1990s a great variety of studies that aimed to take stock of the impending return of the colony to the “motherland.” The wide range of popular and scholarly works produced during this period could in general be divided into three types. The first were those which appeared almost mournful of the passing of what was understood to be an extraordinary era; an obvious example for this category would be Frank Welsh’s *A Borrowed Place: The History of Hong Kong*, first published in 1993. The second group were those produced mostly by mainland scholars in anticipation of the resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong; the series of studies published by Yu Shengwu and his colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences just before the handover, for example, was essentially a systematic (and exhaustively documented) denunciation of British imperialism. The third category of works were those that sought to transcend this binary approach; they steered clear from the “barren rock-turned-metropolis” narrative, but they also avoided simple-minded anti-imperialist rhetorics. The desire to go beyond the conventional binaries would lead some to reflect on the difficulties of telling the story of Hong Kong (e.g., Leung Ping-kwan, better known by his pen name Yasi [Mandarin: *Yesi*]), on the predicament of the transfer of the territory from one colonizer to another (Rey Chow), and on the phenomenon of Hong Kong as necessarily a “space of disappearance” (Abbas). The need to offer an alternative narrative could also be seen from the publication in 1997 of *Hong Kong History: New Perspectives*, edited by Wang Gungwu, noted historian, former vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, and for a brief time member of the Executive Council of the colonial government of Hong Kong. But even in this admirable work, tensions between different interpretations by different contributors are evident.⁸

Since the 1997 handover, there has been a mini tsunami of both popular and scholarly works on the history of Hong Kong. While the range and quality of this voluminous output cannot be easily generalized, several features are worth noting.

⁷For an assessment of Endacott, see Carroll (2005c). For James Hayes, see, for example, Hayes (1977, 1983). For anthropological studies in Hong Kong, see, for example, Watson and Watson (2004). For the works of local social scientists, see, for example, Lethbridge (1978). For the studies of locally educated historians, see, for example, Ng Lun Ngai-ha (1984); Faure (1986); Sinn (1989).

⁸For the scholarship of mainland Chinese historians, see, for example, Yu Shengwu and Liu Cunkuan (1993); Yu Shengwu and Liu Shuyong (1995). For an assessment, see Wang Hongzhi (2000); also, condensed in English, Wong (2005). For alternative narratives, see, for example, Yesi (2012); Chow (1992); Abbas (1997); Wang Gungwu (1997).

First, while much continues to be written in English, an impressive array of studies has been published in Chinese. Second, scholars with long-standing interest in the history of the territory have continued to put forth their findings, but a new generation of Hong Kong “booster-historians” has also arisen in their midst. Third, while general overviews have continued to appear, efforts have been made to probe further and further into specific aspects of the history of the territory. Thus, there are recent monographs that seek to re-examine the nature and logic of colonial rule of Hong Kong, and there are studies that help us better understand the intricate economic, social, and cultural ties between Hong Kong and the mainland. Even more noteworthy perhaps is the increased interest in local (regional) history as well as the history of individual communities (such as that of the local South Asian population). In addition, much attention has been given to the preservation and occasional reprinting of source materials, including early English and Chinese newspapers, local guidebooks, and various collections of early photographs. On top of this wave of popular and scholarly publications has been the creation of a number of historical associations (such as the Society of Hong Kong History, founded in 2005) as well as the appearance in social media of various groups dedicated to the promotion of the history of Hong Kong. While the reasons for this resurgence of interest in the history of Hong Kong are many, there clearly is a demand for, as one author puts it, a “Hong Kong people’s history of Hong Kong.”⁹

7.2 Hong Kong as a Nation

To claim that the people of Hong Kong constitute a nation, then, is to argue, in no uncertain terms, that theirs is more than a story of colonialism, capitalism, and (Chinese) nationalism. To be sure, even to those who are sympathetic to the idea, the notion of a “local” or “native” identity, not to mention that of a “Hong Kong nation,” is deeply problematic. Especially given the extent and impact of the flow of people, goods, and ideas that the territory has long been a part of, it would seem retrograde to have to invent or imagine for Hong Kong a distinct national identity. But while such reservations are in many ways understandable, it is the predicament that is the post-colonial condition of the territory that forging a collective native identity has become—for many—a particularly urgent task.¹⁰

Recent efforts to articulate a Hong Kong identity have no doubt been triggered by the perception that the local ways of life are fast disappearing. For many, the list of transformations that have taken place since 1997 is almost endless. To be fair,

⁹For recent scholarship, see, for example: Ngo (1999); Carroll (2005b); Law Wing Sang (2009); Chung (1998); Fung Chi Ming (2005); Chen Xueran (2014); Zhang Ruiwei (2013); Chu (2005); Ding Xinbao and Lu Shuying (2014); Bard (2002); Ou Zhijian et al. (2011); Cai Rongfang (2001).

¹⁰For reservations concerning “local” or “native” identities, see, for example, Abbas (1997), 11–12.

some of the changes were not results of the handover; they would probably have taken place with or without the People's Republic assuming sovereignty. Nor is it always self-evident how the "local ways of life" should be understood or what, precisely, have been Hong Kong's "core values." Still, impression is a form of reality. Whether it is in the realm of bureaucratic integrity, administrative efficacy, or the all-important judicial independence, there has been for some time a deeply felt perception that there has been a serious deterioration since the turn of the millennium. Perhaps even more consequential has been the impression that the policies pursued by the post-colonial (or Special Administrative Region [SAR]) government have for the most parts placed the interests of Beijing, as well as that of the tycoons in Hong Kong, ahead of those of "ordinary" citizens in the territory. Among the policies or legislations many could point to are the security law proposed in 2002 that has been widely condemned by civil libertarians of all shades as an unmistakable infringement on the freedom of speech, the refusal of successive SAR administrations to challenge the power of the central government to issue permits that would allow residents from the mainland to settle in Hong Kong, thus depriving the territory's prerogative to select some of its newcomers, the attempt in 2012 to introduce into local primary and secondary schools the "moral and national education" curriculum, which was understood by many to be yet another example of how the SAR government had subordinated the interests of the people of Hong Kong (in this case, the value of independent and critical thinking) to that of Beijing, as well as the concerted efforts on the part of the nexus of political and business powers in the territory to push through various large-scale infrastructure-related undertakings that seem to many to have placed short-sighted political and economic benefits ahead of sustainable developments.¹¹

In many ways, it is the last of such perceived shortcomings of the post-colonial administrations that has contributed the most to what may be referred as the "indigenous turn" in Hong Kong society. To put this development in context, it is useful to remember that the principle of "one country, two systems," formulated by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, was founded on the assumption that it was the desire of the people of Hong Kong to retain much of the territory's legal, political, and economic systems following its return to the "motherland." But while the principle might appear politically astute at the time, it has proved to be flawed. In the context of economic developments, though the conflation of political and business interests had long been a central feature of colonial Hong Kong, its continual operation in the post-colonial period (notwithstanding the inevitable substitution of individual cast members) has unexpectedly led to not a few serious clashes. The reasons for this are many. For our purpose, it suffices to note that, despite the assumption that what had performed sufficiently well in the colonial period would and could continue to function in the post-colonial era, the reality is that circumstances, not to mention expectations, have changed in the meantime.

¹¹For recent history, see, for example, Mathews, Ma, and Lui (2008); Carroll (2010); Morris and Vickers (2015).

Not only have people in the territory (especially members of the younger generation) become increasingly attuned to problems related to social inequities, environmental sustainability, and local communities, they have also become more willing—perhaps prompted by the promise of “Hong Kong people ruling of Hong Kong” stipulated in the Basic Law—to challenge the government. This we can see, on the academic side, from the appearance of periodicals such the *Journal of Local Discourse* (*Bun tou leun seut/Ben tu lun shu* 本土論述; first published in 2008) and *Thinking Hong Kong* (*Si seung Heung Gong/Si xiang Xianggang* 思想香港, <http://www.thinkinghk.org/>; since 2013), and this we can observe, on the ground (so to speak), from the emergence of activist groups such as the Land Justice League (<https://landjusticehk.org/>), which was founded in 2011 to focus on issues related to land use. But emerged from this new context as well have been more radical groups, many of whose members were originally inspired by the ethnologist-turned-activist Chin Wan-kan (better known by his pen name Chin Wan), whose book *On Hong Kong as a City-State* is essentially a polemic against the People’s Republic and a call for Hong Kong to become an autonomous political entity.¹²

It is against this background that we should place the publication—as well as the criticisms that followed—of the particular issue of the *Undergrad* discussed at the start of this essay. As the official publication of the student union of the University of Hong Kong, the *Undergrad*, which can count as its past editors or contributors many a future prominent government official, scholar, journalist, etc., has certainly had an illustrious history. First published in 1952, the paper has in the last sixty years been configured and reconfigured many times over, including serving in the mid-1970s as a battleground for intense debates between university students who were sympathetic to the Communist regime and those who argued that students should first focus on the social problems of colonial Hong Kong. In retrospect, the February 2014 issue of the *Undergrad* was not especially out of line; in the preceding November 2013 issue, there was an article that spoke of “occupying” (i.e., taking over) the “Occupy Central Movement,” a reference to the civil disobedience campaign initiated by the legal scholar Benny Yiu-ting Tai back in 2013, and in the April 2014 issue that followed, there was another article with the title “The Two-Systems is Dead; Homeland Must Self-Strengthen” (*leung jai yi sei, bun tou ji keung/liang zhi yi si, ben tu zi qiang* 兩制已死、本土自強). Perhaps what made the February 2014 issue stand out, at least from the perspective of Leung Chun-ying, was its premise that there is a “Hong Kong nation” and that this “Hong Kong nation” should “determine its own fate.” What made this particular issue a target of official rebukes was also the fact that it was not simply a student publication with limited circulation: in September, 2014, just around the time of the start of the Occupy Central/Umbrella Movement, four of the five original articles, along

¹²For sources of recent activism in Hong Kong, see, for example, Zou Chongming and Han Jiangxue (2015). For the radical turn, see Chen Yun (2012, 2014). For an assessment, see Hung (2014).

with five additional contributions by prominent intellectuals, were published as a book with the title *On Hong Kong as a Nation*.¹³

To date, the most systematic and explicit attempt to imagine a “Hong Kong nation” has been that of *A National History of Hong Kong* by Eric Sing-yan Tsui. A physician by training who came of age after 1997, Tsui has fast become one of the most passionate voices for the study of Hong Kong’s past, having also written a book on the nexus of political and business power both before and after the handover as well as one that examines a selection of influential studies on the history of the territory. In *A National History of Hong Kong*, which came out after the crackdown on the Umbrella Movement but which had had its gestation before that, Tsui extends his earlier analyses and offers a narrative of the history of Hong Kong from the time of the earliest Homo sapiens to the post-colonial present. But as Tsui would be the first to point out, his is a work of synthesis, based not so much on archival research but on a wide reading of existing scholarship. And as Tsui would proudly acknowledge, *A National History of Hong Kong* is not intended to be “fair and balanced”; rather, its goal is to speak up for those “who were unable to speak for themselves in history”—in this case, the “long-oppressed” Hong Kong nation. For Tsui, the history of the Hong Kong *man juk* or *gwok juk/guo zu* 國族 (a label he now prefers) could be traced to the people of Baak Yut, who were presumably active in what is present-day southern China in as early as the Neolithic period. Over time, in Tsui’s telling, despite repeated efforts of the Chinese empire (*Jung Wa dai gwok/Zhonghua di guo* 中華帝國), which was made up predominantly by Hon/Han 漢 people, to incorporate the southern (Leng Naam/Lingnan) region, the descendants of Baak Yut had by and large succeeded in resisting assimilation. It was not until after the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) that, for various reasons, the majority of the population in Leng Naam finally became “Hon.” According to Tsui, many in southern China who did not become (or were late in becoming) “Hon” would take to the seas and become members of what he refers to as a maritime *ethnie* (*hoi yeung juk kwan/hai yang zu qun* 海洋族群). For Tsui, it was the descendants of this maritime *juk kwan* who were the earliest inhabitants of the island of Hong Kong, and it was they, along with generations of refugees from the mainland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who have formed the backbone of the Hong Kong nation.¹⁴

It is worth noting that, just as some in Hong Kong are staking out for the territory’s population a distinct “national” identity, enterprising scholars from the mainland have sought to reclaim for China (and for the world) the long-overlooked concept of *tian xia* 天下 (C: *tin ha*; often translated as “all under heaven”). The reasons for the renewed interest in the idea of *tian xia* are many. It has to do with the recognition that China is a fast-emerging political and economic power, it has to do with the real or imagined inadequacies of the nation-state-based “world order,” and it

¹³For the history of the *Undergrad*, see “Xue yuan liu shi” bian ji wei yuan hui (2015). Past issues of the publication (including the ones for November 2013, February 2014, and April 2014) can be found on the official *Undergrad* web site: <https://undergradhkus.wordpress.com>. See also Er ling yi san nian du Xianggang da xue xue sheng hui Xue yuan (2014).

¹⁴Xu Cheng’en (2015); quotation is from p. 24.

has to do with the apparent desire to replace the existing model with one that is based on universal values, a “world order” that is akin, but not wholly identical, to the *tian xia* conception embraced by “Chinese” dynasties of earlier times. The new *tian xia* model, not surprisingly, comes with its own inherent tensions. Its proponents might labor to emphasize that, unlike that of earlier times, the new model or order does not place “China” or “Chinese civilization” above all others (as one scholar puts it, “under the new *tian xia* order, there are no centers but only nations and states that respect each other’s independence and equality”); such champions might also lay stress on the imperative for individual nation-states to subordinate the latter’s self-interests to “universal civilizational principles” (M: *pu shi wen ming yuan ze* 普世文明原則). But what remains unaddressed is the question of how disputes would be resolved if individual nations decide they no longer want to be part of a nation-state. Nor is it clear from the proponents of the new *tian xia* model what criteria would be used to adjudicate whether or not a particular value or principle should be considered “universal.” While the new *tian xia* model is intended to push back on claims made by individual nation-states in the name of “national interests,” it has left unchallenged, in the case of China, the constitution of its “unitary multi-national state,” of which Hong Kong, apparently, remains firmly a part.¹⁵

7.3 Hong Kong as a Subject

The difficulty of articulating a post-colonial identity for the territory is, in many ways, part of the broader challenge of constructing the Hong Kong subject. As many have noted, since at least the late 1960s, there has emerged in the territory, among members of the middle class at first, something akin to a “Hong Kong identity.” Whether this awareness was brought about *primarily* by the social upheavals, economic boom, or colonial policies of the time, it is impossible to say. What is evident is that, by the 1970s, as veteran observer Lui Tai-lok would put it, “not a few people in Hong Kong would come to accept Hong Kong as a place where they could put down roots.” But this sense of identity, as Lui and others would argue, has been for the most part a “shallow” one. Once the issue of the 1997 handover came to the open, for instance, many in the middle class were concerned, first and foremost, about how best to provide “insurance” for themselves by obtaining British or other foreign citizenship. For some, such “shallowness” is part and parcel of the pragmatism or utilitarianism of the people of Hong Kong; for others, the absence, at least until recently, of a vibrant civil society—one where people could foster a rigorous communal identity—must be understood in the broader context of Hong Kong’s colonial past.¹⁶

¹⁵On the new *tian xia* model, see, for example, Zhao Tingyang (2011); Xu Jilin (2013). For cogent criticisms, see Ge Zhaoguang (2015).

¹⁶Lü Dale (2003); quotation is from p. 207. For a cogent critique of the absence of a civil society in Hong Kong, see Luo Yongsheng (2014).

Consider, as part of the context, the formation of the colony of Hong Kong. Although it is customary to think of Hong Kong as a single entity, the territory is in fact constituted by three statutorily distinct regions: Hong Kong Island (which was ceded to Britain in 1842), the Kowloon Peninsula (ceded in 1860), and the New Territories (leased to Britain in 1898). To be sure, the differences between the three, at least as far as general social and economic conditions are concerned, have become minimal. Whereas until the 1960s, the New Territories, which makes up more than eighty-five percent of Hong Kong's area, could still be considered "rural," by the 1970s, with the rapid expansion of the public transit system as well as the construction of "new towns" in former agricultural lands, the rural-urban divide had become less and less clear-cut. Yet, the different paths through which the regions came to be incorporated into the colony have in time become a major source of tensions and troubles. To facilitate control of the New Territories, the colonial government had, almost from the start, followed the time-honored practice of co-opting into its service local village and lineage leaders. While this power-sharing arrangement—which has continued to some degree to this day—has helped the government manage some of the more thorny administrative issues (notably those related to the requisition of land and the subsequent relocation of those affected), it has also allowed the male members of the "indigenous population" to enjoy particular privileges. For example, the "Small House Policy," which was introduced in 1972 by the colonial government to address genuine housing issues faced by indigenous villagers in the New Territories, has been widely perceived to have resulted in a blatant form of land grab. The point here is not to single out certain groups for criticisms or to revisit particular colonial policies; rather, it is to explain how the historical processes of the formation of the colony have continued to shape the ability of the people of Hong Kong to think of themselves as a distinct community.¹⁷

Consider, also, the demographic history of the territory. Over the course of the twentieth century, the population of Hong Kong had increased from less than 300,000 to over 6.5 million. While there were several episodes of notable growth and retrenchment, the most dramatic and consequential of which was no doubt the quadruple increase of population from 600,000 to 2.5 million between 1945 and 1955. Among the arrivals in the post-war period were former residents who had left the territory in the run-up to the Japanese occupation, but just as (if not more) significant a constituent were refugees from the mainland, first as a result of the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists and later because of the Communist takeover of China. The influx of a substantial population, inevitably, brought tremendous changes to Hong Kong, whether in the area of government policies (such as the introduction of identification cards in 1949 and the development of public housing in the 1950s), socio-economic developments (Li Ka-shing, who had arrived in the territory just before the occupation, opened his plastics factory in 1950), or cultural life (Louis Cha, better known by his pen name Jin Yong, had moved to Hong Kong in 1948 and began publishing his martial arts

¹⁷For an overview of the New Territories, see Hayes (2006).

novels in serialized form in local newspapers in 1957). Many of such post-war transformations would in time become part of the fabric of Hong Kong society, but the diversity of life experiences of the people of Hong Kong has added to the complexity of creating an imagined community. On a similar note, while one need not embrace the classification scheme put forth by Lui Tai-lok or his analysis of how the four generations of Hong Kongers (that is, the wartime generation, the baby boomers, those born between 1966 and 1975, and the baby boomlets) have responded differently to the opportunities and challenges that have faced the territory, it is useful to remember that, despite their many shared experiences (watching Shaw Brothers/Golden Harvest movies and TVB dramas, listening to Cantopop, etc.), different generations of Hong Kongers have had reasons to identify themselves in divergent ways.¹⁸

In addition to the historical and demographic factors, the challenge of constructing the Hong Kong subject could be attributed to what might be called the nexus of colonial interests. Although the colonial government had from time to time found it beneficial—as in the case of its sponsorship of the “Hong Kong Week” in 1967 and of the “Festival of Hong Kong” in 1969, 1971, and 1973—to foster a sense of community among the local population, for much of the colonial period, there was a pervasive disinclination on its part to promote the teaching and learning of the history of the territory. This we can detect from its general neglect, until the closing days of the colonial era, of the Hong Kong Museum of History, and this we can observe from the absence of serious efforts, again until the last decade of colonial rule, to incorporate into the school curriculum the subject of local history. The reasons for such willful neglect were many: the imperative to de-emphasize the teaching of the twentieth century within the Chinese history curriculum so as to maintain the political neutrality and stability of Hong Kong; the general trend, especially after 1945, of retreating from the teaching and glorification of British imperial history and, along with it, from drawing special attention to the colonial dimension of Hong Kong’s history; and the long-held and widely-shared assumption that the history of the territory should be properly seen as part of either Chinese history or the history of the British empire. Although the colonial government was not alone in denying Hong Kong its rightful place, the accumulated weight of its policies has, to this day, served to undermine the ability and willingness of the people there to think of themselves as a distinct collective.¹⁹

Further complicating any effort to construct the Hong Kong subject have been the real and imagined ties between the territory and the vast entity called “China.” John Carroll might be right in suggesting that, even before 1949, there had already developed among the bourgeoisie in the territory—people such as Ho Kai (1859–1914) and Chow Shouson (1861–1959)—a sense of a Hong Kong identity. But as

¹⁸For studies of Hong Kong from a generational perspective, see, for example, Yesi (2013); Lü Dale (2007, 2012).

¹⁹For the “Hong Kong Week,” see Tong (2016). For the Hong Kong Museum of History, see Carroll (2005a); Wang Hongzhi (2007), 134–75. For a history of education in Hong Kong, see Lu Hongji (2003). For the history curricula, see Vickers (2003); Kan (2007).

Carroll would argue as well, Ho Kai's identity as a Hong Kong person was not incompatible with the latter's sense of being "Chinese." That people who settled or grew up in the territory after 1949 would continue to relate themselves to "China" or "Chinese" can be seen in a wide range of contexts. This can be observed, for example, in the creation of the storied New Asia College, which was founded by the eminent historian Qian Mu (1895–1990) and his fellow émigré scholars to promote the study of Chinese culture. This can be seen also in the proliferation of publications such as the *Chinese Student Weekly* (M: *Zhongguo xue sheng zhou bao*; 1952–1974), in which contributors were encouraged "to assume the responsibility of the age" and to help "search for a correct way out for the China of the future." The political turmoils in the mainland in the 1960s and early 1970s did remind many in Hong Kong why they (or their parents) had fled there in the first place, but for the locally born who were just coming of age, the promise by the Communist Party of a revolutionary, egalitarian society, the allure of national belonging (amplified, in part, by the disputes between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands), and the perception, as well as reality, of the illegitimacy of the colonial government did lead many to seek to strengthen their "Chinese" roots. By the time discussions concerning the fate of the territory came to the open in the early 1980s, whether for pragmatic reasons or otherwise, it was not long before the idea of Hong Kong "returning to the motherland" (*wui gwai jou gwok/hui gui zu guo* 回歸祖國) became an integral part of the official and popular discourses. Finally, even though the massacre at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, had led many in the territory to seek refuge elsewhere, the pro-democracy movement in mainland China has, on the whole, contributed much to Hong Kong people's own sense of "Chineseness."²⁰

Finally, the challenge of constructing the Hong Kong subject is not unrelated to general neglect of the territory as a subject of study. That Hong Kong, *as itself*, has for a long time not been taken seriously as a subject of study can be attributed to the follies of academia in general and to the academic culture of the territory in particular. As in the case of a great number of universities worldwide, those in Hong Kong have been under the pressure to be "world-class." As a result, researchers there have been strongly encouraged to publish their findings in "internationally-recognized" academic journals. To be sure, Hong Kong is not a world unto itself, and much of what is fascinating and significant about the territory can be fruitfully explored in comparative as well as global contexts. But the pressure to publish in international journals has had two unintended effects: first, since most of such journals are published in English (or, less often, French or German), much of the research findings thus becomes immediately inaccessible to the majority of the Chinese-speaking population in Hong Kong; second, because many of the so-called first-tier journals in the fields of humanities and social sciences are designed to cater to a broad academic audience, scholars who are

²⁰For Ho Kai, see Carroll (2005b), 108–130. For the history of New Asia College, see, for example, Chou (2012). An almost-complete run of the *Chinese Student Weekly* is available at the Hong Kong Literature Database (<http://hklitpub.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/journals/zgxszb>); quotations are from the editorial of its inaugural issue dated 25 July 1952 (Anon 1952).

interested in Hong Kong and who intend to publish in them must learn to relate their findings in terms that can be readily understood by non-specialists. None of these is necessarily evil—hence, the appearance of this essay in English—but the overall effect is that scholars who would otherwise publish in Chinese or carry out research on important but narrow topics about Hong Kong would more often than not opt for the proven path. The recent establishment of the Academy of Hong Kong Studies at the newly-renamed Education University of Hong Kong is certainly a positive sign, but much more would need to be changed before the study of Hong Kong could take its rightful place.

7.4 Hong Kong as Narratives

The debates over the “national question” of Hong Kong are, ultimately, struggles over how the story of the territory should be told. Those who maintain that the people of Hong Kong have manifested characteristics (or at least have all the necessary ingredients) of a nation are claiming that the story of Hong Kong is fundamentally one of self-realization, that, since the mid-nineteenth century (if not earlier), people who have come to call the territory home have slowly but surely developed a distinct way of life and a particular set of shared values. For supporters of this view, colonialism should be condemned, but the British rule of Hong Kong did foster among the territory’s residents a distinct outlook and a separate identity. As one would expect, those who find fault with the idea of a “Hong Kong nation” tend to tell the story differently. Some are uncompromisingly nationalistic and view the history of the territory during the colonial period as nothing more than a story of exploitation and humiliation. Others, however, offer a more nuanced interpretation; they accept that there have emerged in Hong Kong a way of life and a set of values that are clearly different from that found in the mainland, but they do not believe such differences have supplanted the ties that have long bound the people of Hong Kong with their compatriots on the other side of the border.

Struggles over the story of Hong Kong are, of course, far from academic. They are, first and foremost, struggles over the legacy of colonialism; they are about how one should assess the overall impact of British rule in Hong Kong, and they are about how, and to what extent, the territory should rid itself of its colonial legacies. Such struggles are also about Hong Kong’s “Chineseness”; they are about how one should understand the relationship between the territory and the mainland, and they are about how, and to what degree, Hong Kong in its post-colonial condition should be incorporated into the “motherland.” Such struggles are, moreover, about the nature of Hong Kong society; they are about how one should explain the territory’s erstwhile “economic miracle,” and they are about how best to realign Hong Kong’s economic and social interests. But, above all, struggles over the story of the territory are struggles over identity; they are about how to characterize the “essence” of the place and its people, and they are about how to give meanings to the experience that has been Hong Kong.

But much as it seems important to locate the essence of Hong Kong, the story of the territory is necessarily multi-layered. It is, to be sure, at its core a story of colonialism; it is about how commercial interests as well as geo-political concerns had shaped the ways Hong Kong had been managed and governed, and it is about how colonial agents and local collaborators had over time devised schemes to facilitate order and control of the territory. It is, as many have argued, also a story of capitalism; it is about how Hong Kong has morphed from a neglected outpost of the Qing empire to a spectacular international trading and financial center, and it is about how local and emigrant entrepreneurs, notwithstanding indifferent—or even hostile—colonial policies at times, took advantage of the post-war boom and transformed the territory into an highly efficient industrial engine. And it is, as observers of Hong Kong’s cultural scenes would attest to, a story of transplantation and transfiguration; it is about how the territory has become home to a large number of émigrés from the mainland and elsewhere, and it is about how people who have settled or grown up in Hong Kong have drawn from both local and outside resources to create their own brands of culture. Finally, it is no doubt also a story of nationalism; it is about how the territory, despite its colonial past, has maintained close ties with the mainland, and it is about how, because of that, the people of Hong Kong have over time developed a complex set of sentiments towards the “motherland.”

To say that the story of Hong Kong is made up of multiple narratives is not to suggest that it is simply a cacophony of triumphs, tribulations, and serendipities. Different narratives are informed by distinct logic and worldviews, and the stories constructed are at times not only out of sync but also markedly at odds with one another. That this is so is, perhaps, inevitable—after all, how the story of Hong Kong is told is often connected to broader arguments about how the territory should be imagined and governed. It should be obvious as well that not all narratives are created equal; those propagated by the metropolises (whether it is London or Beijing) and their agents have long set out what are supposed to be the essential accounts of the territory. To tell the story of Hong Kong, then, is to recognize the multiplicity of oft-competing narratives, to understand that the accounts promoted by London or Beijing not so much lie but are designed to keep out of sight facets that are deemed unsympathetic or irrelevant to the colonial or nationalist project, and to realize that the history of the territory is ultimately a story of how the *idea* of Hong Kong and the notion of a “people” have evolved. Whether or not those who call Hong Kong home should be considered a nation is not by itself a particularly interesting question; why in the post-colonial context it has become a subject of debates, however, is an highly illuminating one.

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