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Flexible and Plastic National Identification in Hong Kong: Its Historical Configuration and Changes since 1997

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This article, based upon the experience of Hong Kong society, is an attempt to look at the social constitution of its peculiar brand of national identification. Particularly, emphasis is placed on the effects of the political environment of the Cold War in the early post-WWII decades on how Hong Kong people perceived the nation and the political regime in power. The decoupling of the political regime in power from the nation has its enduring impact on identity formation and people's perception and definition of the national. This gives the people of Hong Kong a rather special perspective in locating themselves in an ideological and political environment characterized by colonialism and Cold War geo-politics in East Asia. As a result, they develop their own brand of national identification that allows for both attachment and critical engagement.

Keywords: *national identification, Cold War, geo-politics, colonialism, decoupling, empathy*

Introduction

It was not really that long ago when observers and commentators were quite optimistic about the impacts of globalization. It was suggested that 'a borderless world' was in the process of its formation (Ohmae 1999). With the growing influence of multinational corporations, the proliferation of cross-border economic regions, representing a new form of economic integration at the regional or sub-national level, and newly found openness in the world economy due to political changes in socialist countries in the 1980s, the operation and management of the national economy have become never quite the same. The role of the nation-state was conjectured to be in decline. Concomitantly, the notion of the national was also expected to undergo significant change (Hannerz 1996, pp. 81-90). It would become more plastic, flexible, and less emotionally charged. Postnationalism was taken as a new cultural orientation in a globalizing world.

However, as it turns out, globalization is probably a 'false dawn' (Gray 1999). Not only has globalization not brought about a wider spread of economic prosperity to developing countries, it in fact is one of the most important impetuses for growing inequalities both within and between societies. At the same time, while the capacity of individual national government in managing its own national economy is weakened in the globalizing world economy, the significance of the notion of the nation-state has not in any way been diminished. Nationalism is once again an important feature in contemporary international politics. Instead of fading out in the background of current rivalry and conflict, local and national identities bounce back and their impacts are widely felt in different parts of the world.

But both local and national identities do not reappear out of nowhere. In fact, the conjecture of their erosion under globalization is simplistic and overly generalized. Instead of assuming that local and national identities are becoming irrelevant and/or insignificant, what we have to look into is the actual configuration of local and national identities under specific historical context. This article, based upon the experience of Hong Kong society, is an attempt to look at the social constitution of its peculiar brand of national identification. Particularly, emphasis is placed on the effects of the political environment of the Cold War in the early post-WWII decades on how Hong Kong people perceived the nation and the political regime in power. The decoupling of the political regime in power from the nation has its enduring impact on identity formation and people's perception and definition of the

national. This gives the people of Hong Kong a rather special perspective in locating themselves in an ideological and political environment characterized by colonialism and Cold War geo-politics in East Asia. As a result, they develop their own brand of national identification that allows for both attachment and critical engagement. This special brand of national identification allows Hong Kong people to show their own kind of social empathy towards the nation. A selection, and not all of them, of social issues (e.g., matters related to history and culture) would sparkle strong emotional reactions to a national calling. The notion of the national would not be taken up uncritically. The individuals are always given a lot of space to work out their own connections, if any, with the nation. The main objective of this paper is to tease out the historical and institutional background for the social constitution of such a kind of national identification.

The Historical Configuration of Local and National Identities

Anderson's notion of the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) implies that national identity is socially constructed. Its construction is a complex process, involving social processes at different levels. For instance, at the psychological level, what constitutes 'us' depends largely on the presence and definition of 'them'. The formation of an identity is always an outcome of an interactive process. And in many cases, ethnicity and/or religion come into the forefront in the shaping of local as well as national identity. Cleavages, tensions, and conflicts are often parts of such identity formation process. Larger processes (including warfare) in long historical duration are often the key developments that bring antagonism and violence into the picture of the building of people's sense of their own nation. The existing literature on these subjects is by no means short of description and analysis of such interactive dynamics at individual, institutional, as well as structural levels in the structuring of local and national identities. What I intend to do here is to offer the case of Hong Kong for an understanding of the historical configuration of national identities. What stands out in the case of Hong Kong is that the concepts of the nation and the national are always disaggregated, creating a lot of space for the imagination of how individuals are connected to China and its culture and history. The colonial situation there in Hong Kong before its return to China in 1997 did not cultivate emotionally charged nationalism to challenge colonialism. Rather, anti-colonialism had never become the major political ideology that could

mobilize people to challenge the colonial authority throughout most parts of Hong Kong's colonial history (Carroll 2007, p. 105; Tsai 2001). More interestingly, Chinese people in Hong Kong developed their own brand of national identification that stood apart from the kinds of Chinese nationalism found in Mainland China both before and after the 1949 Revolution.

The Hong Kong experience suggests that there is no one single brand of Chinese nationalism. Being Chinese does not necessarily lead to the same emotional and ideological response to the appeal of the nation across different Chinese societies. More importantly, such variation in response is not a matter of difference in degree. So, in other words, it is not necessarily a question about the extent of nationalist fervour. Nor is it about whether patriotism has its popular appeal or otherwise. Rather, it is about qualitative difference. In the following discussion, what I intend to show is Hong Kong people's separation of their emotional attachment with the nation (as defined according to history and culture) from the political representation of the nation by a particular political regime (which claims to be the legitimate government having the sovereignty over China). By separating the nation from the ruling government, they maintain some distance, a kind of aloofness, from the nationalist sentiments promoted by the latter (and, very often, by its competing political regime too). Such a kind of reaction to the nationalist appeal does not necessarily imply apathy. In fact, Hong Kong people did show their caring of China when national humiliation (e.g., conflict with Japan over sovereignty over Diaoyu Islands or, from the Japanese perspective Senkaku Islands) and natural disaster (e.g., earthquakes and floods in China) are issues of concern. There was no shortage of emotion and fervour. Yet, at the same time, they also show strong resistance to the imposition of nationalism from the ruling political regime. The decoupling of the nation and the political regime bears its mark, and indeed a strong imprint, on Hong Kong people's national identity.

Indeed, the kind of national consciousness found in Hong Kong is always characterized by multiple characters that cannot be easily boiled down to one single characterization. As briefly mentioned above, there is one strand of national consciousness that takes national pride with passion and the fate of fellow Chinese (*tongbao*) with empathy. Issues that touch upon 'historical wounds' (e.g., memories of Japanese invasion during the Second World War) (see, for example, Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008, pp. 51 and 176) and ordinary people's suffering (e.g., in an earthquake) and some kind of humanitarian appeal are likely to receive emotional support and immediate reaction (e.g., organized relief to address the needs arising from a natural

disaster). Yet, such empathy does not spill over to other aspects of the appeal of the nation, particularly support of the political regime in power. For some people, the love of the country is mainly confined to history, culture, and *tongbao* according to their definition. Others, the critical stance towards the political regime in power adopted by them comes from their love of the country. The effects of such decoupling of the nation as a political regime and the nation as a cultural and historical construct are particularly salient in Hong Kong. Such a historical and institutional background shape Hong Kong people's response to matters related to the nation. The main feature is that Hong Kong people will respond the national question with empathy but their reaction and emotion primarily focus on issues related to the livelihood of Chinese people. Their affection is not unconditional. More interestingly, the country as such does not necessarily command more respect. It is always the suffering of the ordinary people or the pride of Chinese culture that can trigger strong social empathy. It is the contention of this paper that this is an outcome of a process of historical and political configuration.

The Colonial Setting: Out of the Country

Hong Kong was occupied by the British in 1841 and its colonialization was later formalized under the Treaty of Nanjing. Being a colony in close geographical proximity to China made Hong Kong a rather special place. First, its population was mainly composed of Chinese, with most of them being sojourners and then later migrants coming from Mainland China. These migrants came to Hong Kong for different purposes and their objectives varied according to the period of their arrival. Many came prior to the Japanese Occupation for the purpose of making a living and they usually returned to their hometown after having a spell in the colony. During the inter-war years, some of these sojourners began to choose to stay. Then, the Civil War in China in 1946-1949 and later the Communist Revolution brought many refugees to Hong Kong. Political campaigns in the People's Republic continued to push many to enter the colony as illegal migrants in the 1950s – 1970s. These migrants were largely a self-selected group who opted to leave China (for different reasons, though) and to live under colonial rule. Such a migration background had its impact on the population of Hong Kong, not only in terms of their attachment to the colony but also that of their mentality.[1]

[1] On the so-called refugee mentality, see Mathews, Ma and Lui (2008, pp. 27-29).

Second, Hong Kong was a destination for different kinds of people who left China. It was the refuge for the revolutionaries, before the revolutions in 1911 and 1949 respectively. This was not due to Britain's and/or the colonial government's openness and accommodation of political activism from China. In fact, the colonial government sometimes took direct and drastic action towards Chinese political figures in order to ensure that their presence would not create diplomatic controversy and to give China an excuse to stretch its influence to local matters in Hong Kong. For most of the time, the colonial government was tactful. As we shall see in subsequent discussion, during the Cold War period, the colonial government had to strike a delicate balance among contending forces involving, China, Taiwan, and the USA. But here I would like to discuss another aspect of Hong Kong's political openness – between 1910s and 1930s, quite a number of notable gentry scholars, with some of them being former officials under Qing Dynasty, left China because of the Republican revolution and came to settle in Hong Kong. These dislocated gentry scholars found new breathing space in the alien colonial environment.

Governor Clementi established the Chinese Department at The University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1927 with advice from Lai Ji-xi, a gentry scholar who briefly served the Qing Government before its downfall. Lai ran away from China when the Qing Dynasty was collapsing and brought his family to Hong Kong. He taught at HKU, played an important role in reforming its Chinese curriculum, and was instrumental to the establishment of Tsung Tsin Association, a Hakka native place organization that was active in the local school sector, in 1922. He was in a sense typical of the dislocated intellectuals; he saw Hong Kong, a British colony and a territory at China's periphery, the place that could offer the space to resurrect the classics (Chiu 2016, p. 119). Being a place that was least affected by the waves of change created by the 1911 Revolution (apart from politically overthrowing the dynastic empire, it also brought about cultural transformations via westernization as well as modernization and challenges to classical education and values), Hong Kong was the cultural haven for preserving *guoxue* (classics of the nation).

Lai was not alone. A number of intellectuals and gentry scholars similarly found Hong Kong their shelter to stay away from the Republican Revolution and the resultant sweeping changes (Chiu 2016). Chen Bo-tao was another notable intellectual figure who was active in promoting *guoxue*. They established their clubs (most notably *Xuehai Shulou*), organized lectures, and came together to cite poems and poetic verses. They made an

effort to preserve *Sung Wong Toi* (Terrace of Sung Dynasty Emperors) in the 1910s, an alleged heritage site that symbolized the once presence of Sung emperors in Kowloon prior to the downfall of the Dynasty. This site was symbolic for re-connecting Hong Kong to China Mainland's mainstream history and culture, despite the former's image of being a coastal outpost at the periphery of the empire's boundary. The narration of Kowloon being the last stop (and, in a sense, the last hope for making a comeback) of the Sung emperors stroke a chord that echoed the existential conditions of the dislocated gentry scholars. Taking refuge at the British colony, which was free from the chaos and suffering in the motherland, did not imply them giving up their responsibilities as intellectuals (say, being loyal to the emperor), nor would that deny them from making their contributions to national revival. Paradoxically, it was in a foreign land like Hong Kong that they could find the space to preserve and promote their cherished traditions, values, and history. This was made possible not so much because of tolerance practised by the colonial government but rather that the promotion of Chinese classics, which was disconnected with and, very often, critical of contemporary Chinese nationalism and political ideology (say, Marxism) was seen as politically harmless. Indeed, an emphasis on Chinese classics allowed the colonial government to show its appreciation of Chinese culture and, at the same time, promoted a cultural discourse that would facilitate the maintenance of certain distance from turbulent cultural and political scene (such as political and ideological debates about nation building through learning from the West) in Mainland China. As long as the practice of *guoxue* was disconnected with the political and ideological contentions in the Mainland, it would be allowed to disseminate.

Without going into the details, the most important point to note here is that these dislocated gentry scholars offered a perspective that powerfully justified how Hong Kong, probably the least likely candidate for being a place to champion Chinese classics and traditions, could retain what was abandoned and/or destroyed in the midst of political turmoil triggered by major historical events. There was a strong sense of sorrow about being out of the country, witnessing the fall of an old political and social order, and the loss of traditions in the works of these dislocated intellectuals. Their denial of the new political regime (e.g., the refusal to serve under the new government) was grounded on the idea that what was newly established as a result of political change did not embody the essence of classics and traditions. The concept of China developed by them, in fact, often posed some kind of challenge to the new political regime by the claim of being closer to the

historical and cultural origins than those propagated by those currently in power. Such historical and cultural claims undermined the new regime's assertion of being legitimate and being the inheritor of the nation's history. But such efforts were not organized as some kind of political force. They were often mourning of the erosion of tradition and the loss of the old order. They might not be able to convince all the people that China's future was in the revival of classics (after all the Qing Dynasty was seen as being too weak to respond to the military forces of western nations), but they offered a different view of what constituted China and its culture. By asserting that there existed other (probably more genuine and legitimate) representations of Chinese history and culture than the so-called official interpretation put forth by the government in power, the social and cultural environment of Hong Kong allowed for the decoupling of the nation and the political regime. This theme is always an important part of the living experience in Hong Kong. It was developed in the inter-war years. Then, it again came back in the Cold War period.

Chinese Politics on Hong Kong's Soil: Living with Two Chinas

The decoupling theme re-emerged after the Communist victory in China and this time it was organizationally and institutionally enforced by two contending political regimes, namely the People's Republic of China (PRC) that took over political power after the 1949 Revolution and the Republic of China that set up its government in Taiwan and, for a large part of the Cold War period, affirmed its status as an internationally recognized representative of China. Both the Nationalist and the Communists had long been active in Hong Kong before the Revolution and their rivalries continued after 1949. For Beijing, Hong Kong's colonial status was left untouched so that it could serve the national interests for the long term. This included a very crucial role as a window for earning foreign exchanges and getting access to information and resources from outside of the Soviet Bloc. Moreover, Hong Kong was also an important platform for gaining support from the Chinese communities in different parts of the world for the new regime. As a result, Hong Kong was an arena for Beijing's united front strategy. Meanwhile, for Taiwan, Hong Kong was also at the frontier of the Nationalist's anti-communism campaign. How to curb Beijing's political and ideological influence both in the colony and overseas Chinese communities was a major challenge and Hong Kong, as the global cultural hub for Chinese communities in Asia and the rest of the

world, was a strategic site of such political contests. In short, both the Nationalists and Communists believed that establishing their presence in the colony was an important strategic move.

The outbreak of the Korean War was a "game-changing contingency" (Lin 2016, p. 9) for triggering a change in USA's strategy and this facilitated the consolidation of the Chinese Nationalist state in Taiwan. Also, it further reinforced USA's presence in the region. The slogan of "reconquering the Mainland" propagated by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government was in hindsight probably more of a political gesture than a very serious military campaign. But it did mean that Taiwan would work hard on mobilizing political support among Chinese people outside of the People's Republic of China. This was not just a measure for Taiwan to retain its status of being the legitimate representative of China, it also served to counter-balance the spread of the Communist's influence after the victory of the revolution. At a time when the Communist regime was young and the peasant-nationalist (Johnson 1962) revolution was still struggling with the challenges of taking over and controlling the major cities, the threat posed by the Nationalist government simply could not be written off. It was in such a political context that Hong Kong was in the crossfires of the Communists and the Nationalists. Both of these political forces continued their contest in this British colony.

At the same time, Hong Kong was a strategic site for containing the spread of communism in East Asia. The USA conducted 'China-watching' activities in Hong Kong. More importantly, it financed Chinese publications and cultural activities that tried to win over the younger generation by promoting values and ideologies in confrontation with Marxism and radicalism. And this cultural and propaganda campaign was by no means confined to the colony's territory. As succinctly summed up by Lu (2016, p. 137):

> "Hong Kong became a center of propaganda, which was radiated around East and Southeast Asia. … Chinese-language publications from Hong Kong dominated the consumption of non-Communist materials among overseas Chinese in Asia. Branding these as 'Made in Hong Kong' justified American propaganda as messages from one group of Chinese to another."

What interests us here is not so much about those political and ideological activities organized by the USA. Rather, it was the vibrancy of Hong Kong's cultural scene in the early post-war decades. Whereas political and ideological containment under the Cold War quite often meant very restricted cultural

openness in most of the countries in Asia, in the case of Hong Kong it was open ideological competition among contending political forces. Various cultural products (from publications to movies) coming from the pro-Chinese Communist camp and those belonging to its opponents were in circulation in the colony. Ideologies of both the Left and the Right as well as two different brands of Chinese nationalism (and patriotism) promoted by Beijing and Taiwan co-existed.

Such a peculiar ideological field in Hong Kong was, as suggested above, partly an outcome of Cold War politics. At the same time, it was also a situation shaped by the colonial government's political strategy. It was a strategy of striking a delicate balance among different political interests – Hong Kong colonial administration, London, the USA, Taiwan, and Beijing. It was 'political juggling' (Roberts 2016). It was a conscious political effort of allowing contending political and ideological forces to co-exist so that none of them would become predominant and thus either one of them would assume the status of a major political force that would challenge the colonial administration. By practising 'political juggling', it was believed that Beijing and Taiwan would counter-balance each other in a context where Hong Kong's colonial status would not be challenged:

> "British officials nonetheless believed that the existing status of Hong Kong offered benefits to the PRC that would enable Britain to retain Hong Kong so long as no group within the colony, particularly the Americans or their Nationalist allies, took action that would provoke the Chinese Communists. … During the 1950s, the British performed a balancing act, seeking to discourage the Chinese from taking action against the colony by convincing them that the United States would intervene to defend it, while simultaneously interesting the Americans in Hong Kong's fate but not allowing them to establish a foothold that PRC might perceive as a threat." (Steele 2016, p. 93)

By maintaining such a delicate balance, the colonial government was able to keep both the Communists and the Nationalists, despite being very active in rallying social support in the local scene, largely within tolerable limits.

Indeed, other than two major confrontations, the riots in 1956 and 1967 respectively, these two political camps were rather restrained in terms of their political mobilization. They operated more or less as two self-contained social domains that were relatively secluded from the colonial mainstream. For example, they did disseminate their political ideologies in their local schools but their students largely stayed out of the local public examination

system (and so they would not enter local universities to receive higher education). Those students from pro-Taiwan schools were likely to pursue further studies in Taiwan via the *qiaosheng* scheme (Wong, 2016); those from pro-Beijing schools went to the Mainland to look for their opportunity. But their qualifications obtained outside of the local and Commonwealth systems put them in a disadvantageous position in the labour market. In the pro-Beijing camp, they had their banks, department stores, trading companies, and many other business organizations. So, to some extent, they had their own 'internal' labour market that could offer employment opportunities to their graduates. Meanwhile, in their everyday life (ranging from entertainment and leisure activity like movie-going and sports to social activities such as banquets organized by native place organizations and trade unions), people belonging to the pro-Beijing camp could largely satisfy their needs without reaching out to the larger community. All these together constituted the material basis for sustaining the ideological alternative espoused by the members of this community (Chiu, Lui and Yung 2014). Simply put, they could lead their own lives in their own way. On the one side, because of all these conditions, the pro-Beijing camp had a high level of social solidarity among its members. On the other, especially when China saw the USSR and USA as hegemonic powers in its diplomatic framework of 'Three World' and did not see the UK as a major threat from the 1970s onwards, they also facilitated some kind of social seclusion within Hong Kong society – the pro-Beijing camp was very much left on its own and it stayed out of the colonial mainstream until the end of the Maoist era in the late 1970s.

What is most relevant to our discussion here is that in the eyes of most people living in Hong Kong then there were two major political forces claiming for the status of being the legitimate representative of China. There were two national days in October each year, one being the anniversary of the People's Republic of China and the other that of the Republic of China. Either side spoke very negatively about its counterpart; each side also tried to write its own history and the narratives for building its legitimacy. More interestingly, each of them developed its own machinery for rallying support and building its allies. On the ideological front, they published newspapers and magazines. They formed literary clubs, managed bookstores, and were active in film production. They had their local schools that linked to opportunities for receiving higher education in China and Taiwan respectively. In their interface with the wider community, they ran sports clubs, department stores, trade unions and native place associations. Their networks covered a wide spectrum of activities and reached out to the daily life of ordinary people. The political

rivalry between the two camps was rather obvious and it was difficult for people to be not aware of the political difference. People either chose to join their preferred political camp or stayed out of such political rivalry. Grantham, the colonial governor in 1947-1957, assessed the situation and came to an observation that "… most Chinese in Hong Kong were 'anti-Communist but … not pro-Nationalist,' with many 'undecided' in sympathy" (quotations from Roberts 2016, p. 38).

The kind of political activism practised by the Nationalists and the Communists in Hong Kong, or differently put 'Chinese politics on Hong Kong soil' (Lee 1998, p. 158), was largely a continuation of political contention between these two major political camps in the colonial context. All the challenges and rivalries posed by one of these political agents to the other were articulated in a framework of Chinese nationalism. They appealed to the people in Hong Kong as the government that could promise a better future for China. Whereas the Communists promised to build a stronger nation via a revolutionary course of development with a strong state to lead industrial development and social transformation, the Nationalist government represented China in major international organizations and, despite its authoritarian inclination, was seen as an alternative to the sufferings witnessed by many during the political campaigns launched by the socialist state in the Mainland. In short, there were two different representations of China. China, as the mother country, did not anchor on one fixed political reality. There were always conflicting and contending views. Some people found one camp more approaching and closer to their expectations of what China should be. Many were convinced by neither one of them. The important point to note is that the concept of China is always opened to individuals' own interpretation and imagination. Equally important is that individuals are allowed to develop their own way to approach the nation and its history and culture. They can be very critical of Beijing and Taiwan, and yet they upheld strong identification with China. They can pursue their own course of action of being nationalist.

The Changing Climate

There were few, if any, survey materials on people's attitude towards Hong Kong and China prior to the 1980s when public opinion was given heavier weight and academic institutions began to be more active in conducting opinion survey. However, the colonial government did make efforts to gather local people's opinions on various matters in order to ensure that it could

launch its policy initiatives smoothly. The City District Officers organized their channels for gathering public opinion from the local communities by developing the 'Town Talk' in 1968 (Mak forthcoming). This was later developed into the Movement of Opinion Direction (MOOD) in 1975. Its objective was "to draw attention to subjects which are currently or potentially of public concern, and to assess public reactions, attitudes and feeling in appropriate instances." (Mak forthcoming, 5) Through the MOOD, senior government officials would receive reports from the Home Affairs Department with information relevant to decision making and policy implementation.

It was observed in 1975 that

> "Previously, the C.P.G. [Chinese People's Government] attracted scathing criticism on the 'Great Leap Forward', the 'Hundred Flowers Movement', the grossly exaggerated claims of industrial development (e.g., its steel industry) and the Red Guard havoc; its prestige and credibility suffered. In the seventies, it began to recover lost ground. … Whilst their [right-wing and neutral newspapers'] anti-communist sentiments and political outlook still remain unchanged, the emergence of China as a strong, progressive state and world power began to be tacitly or even explicitly recognized." (HKRS 394/26-12, 1975)

China's entry into the United Nations and US President Nixon's visit, indicators of its changing status in the world order, were major factors that helped improve the image. As a result, Hong Kong's senior officials, including the governor, began to show friendly gestures by more frequently participating in major social functions organized by pro-Beijing bodies. Meanwhile, in the case of people's attitude towards Taiwan, "Gradually less community leaders of Mainland origin paid their annual homage to Taiwan on double tenth or Chiang Kai-Shek's birthday, and today Hong Kong people do not want to get themselves involved politically with the local Taiwan faction, although a considerable amount of trade activities and tourism still continue between Hong Kong and Taiwan." (HKRS 471/3/1/1, 1975) The changing context of international politics had its impacts on Beijing's and Taiwan's presence in the colony. Whereas Beijing was growing in its strength and influence, Taiwan was withdrawing from its earler active role and increasingly finding itself less and less interested in maintaining a high profile in Hong Kong's social and political settings.

It was also mentioned in the same MOOD report that:

> "The younger generation having been brought up in Hong Kong have less sentimental attachment to China as their native land since they did not associate their childhood or adolescence experiences with China. … At the same time, they have had no experience of the practical applications of communism or of living under a totalitarian regime and thus do not fear or abhor a communist government as much as their parents do." ((HKRS 394/26-12, 1975)

It was immature to suggest that the fear of Chinese communism would subside when a new generation of Hongkong-born young people finished school, adopted their role as adults, and stepped into the community. Indeed, as we have known in retrospect, when Hong Kong's uncertain future was brought to people's attention after Mrs. Margaret Thatcher's visit to Beijing in September 1982, many of them, especially the young middle class, chose emigration (Lui 1999). A significant portion of these emigrants did quickly return to Hong Kong after processing their application for foreign passport. But, like their parents, they continued to have little trust of the Chinese communist regime. That was why they adopted emigration as a coping strategy – with foreign passport in their hands, no matter what happened to Hong Kong after its return to socialist China, they would be able to choose to stay or otherwise. In other words, they could distance themselves from macro changes triggered by the 1997 question. As long as Hong Kong was still a place for career development and making money, they could capitalize on those opportunities. When things turned sour, they could exit via emigration. Hong Kong people's national identity was once described as market-based (Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008): it is a matter of personal choice. It is flexible (cf. Ong 1999). Also, it is plastic – the discourse of market justifies "emigration to flee Chinese control, placing their own personal and familial choice over any sense of local or national duty. A few years later, however, they used that discourse to justify closer relations with China, in all its economic benefits …." (Mathews, Ma, and Lui 2008, p. 18).

The market-based approach to national identification has close affinity with the decoupling of the nation and the political regime. One's identification with the nation can be taken lightly. Nothing about the nation is unquestionable. More importantly, individuals are given the space to do their own interpretation, to manipulate, and to work out their own course of action. Being Chinese does not necessarily imply any prescribed national duty. Rather, it is up to the individuals to decide what Chinese means to them.

Concluding Remarks

In the years following Hong Kong's return to China, people in the newly established Special Administrative Region continued to espouse the aforementioned approach to national identification. In the first post-1997 decade, Hong Kong people still maintained a distinction between a 'political China' and a 'cultural China' (see Chan, 2014; also see Ma and Fung, 2007). This "enabled Hong Kong people to adhere to the identity of Chinese while decoupling themselves from an authoritarian and corrupt Communist regime." (Chan 2014, p. 27) Meanwhile, they saw growing business opportunities across the border and rapid economic growth in major Chinese cities. This allowed them to develop a sense of optimism that would compensate for their uneasiness after witnessing many social problems (e.g., growing social polarization) when they travelled in the Mainland (Ma and Fung 2007). In the first decade after Hong Kong's return to China, it seemed that the Chinese identity based upon history and culture was largely kept intact. People continued to be critical of the state's control of personal freedom and its failure to address issues at the grassroots (e.g., the vulnerability of the low-income communities in the rural sector). But the Chinese identity was seldom questioned.

The second post-1997 decade witnessed drastic changes in Hong Kong people's attitude towards China. Such changes were particularly significant among the younger generation. According to the analysis of repeated survey data on Hong Kong people's identification (conducted by the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong) by Wan and Zheng (2016, pp. 132-133), it was observed that the respondents' identification with China (i.e., seeing themselves as Chinese) was growing steadily (rising from 30.8% in 1998 to 37.7% in 2009) and that with Hong Kong (i.e., seeing themselves as Hongkongers) dropped from a percentage of 60.2 in 1999 to 50.1 in 2009. The gap between the two was narrowed from a margin of 28.7% in 1998 to that of 12.4%. The suggestion that Hong Kong people had a weak sense of identity with China because of their colonial experience is not supported by the above data. It is observed that the percentage of Hong Kong people seeing themselves as Chinese had been growing after the colony's return to China. But Wan and Zheng also pointed out that the identification with Hong Kong had bounced back from 2010 onwards. The percentages rose from 51.0% in 2010 to 57.5% in 2014. Meanwhile, the identification with China dropped from 35.5% to 28.6% in

2014. The gap between them was widened. By 2014, the margin was a percentage of 28.9, 0.2% higher than that in 1998.

The above statistics shows the overall responses to questions concerning the respondents' identification with China and Hong Kong. When the analysis was broken down according to age, it was observed by Wan and Zheng (2016, pp. 134-136) that there was a drastic increase in young people's (aged 18-30) identification with Hong Kong from 2010 onwards. The percentage rose from 58.1% in 2010 to 75.8% in 2014. But changes in their identification with China were even more drastic – the percentage dropped from 32.4% in 2010 to 14.5% in 2012, went up to 23.3% in 2013 and then dropped again to 16.3% in 2014. This marked significant difference from the answers given by the middle-aged and older population. For the middle-aged and older people, their identification with China fell within the range of 31.6% (in 2014) and 38.5% (in 2009). Wan and Zheng suggested that the year 2010-2011 was the turning point.[2]

Without engaging the debate about which year was the turning point in current development in Hong Kong people's perception and identification with China, what is crucial to our discussion is that around 2008-2011 there was a major change in the popular mood and sentiment. The enthusiasm generated by Beijing Olympics (37.9-38.5% of young people saw themselves as Chinese in 2008-2009, see Wan and Zheng 2016, p. 135) seemed to have been undermined by doubts arising from people's realization of various problems revealed during Sichuan earthquake. The claim of China becoming a strong nation could not help people to make sense of why the country's remote villages were so vulnerable to natural disaster. More importantly, around the same period of time, social movements arising from controversies like building the speed rail and the launching of national education in local schools triggered strong resistance from the wider community, especially those among the younger generation. Meanwhile, the impacts of regional integration (in terms of the increase in babies born in Hong Kong by non-local parents, shortage of milk powder because of food safety scare in the Mainland, and the arrival of inbound Mainland tourists) further reinforced the rise of negative sentiments in local communities. The label of 'locust' was used to stigmatize Mainlanders and some groups organized collective actions to protest against the arrival of Mainland tourists and the business of carrying daily necessity products across the border for profit. The promotion of

[2] Chiu (2016) suggested the year 2008 was the critical point for such drastic changes in young people's identification with China.

regional integration backfired. Observers remarked that "The rising hostility is accompanied by growing resistance to socioeconomic integration between China and Hong Kong which the government has been actively promoting. This growing resistance to integration is remarkable given that the government had once successfully stirred up public concern through stressing Hong Kong's risk of being marginalized by China's rising economy, which would undermine the city's competitiveness." (Kwong and Yu 2013, p. 135)

It seems that the closer the People's Republic gets to Hong Kong and the stronger the claim for representing China made by the political regime, the more difficult it is to sustain the decoupling practice that has been long adopted by Hong Kong people. The historical, cultural, and political sides of the concept of the nation are increasingly becoming one integrated whole and difficult to keep them separate. Theoretically speaking, such a trend of development should strengthen the national identity. But in the context of post-1997 Hong Kong, it seems to be the other way round. When the concept of the nation is becoming less flexible and plastic, people, especially the younger generation, found it imposing from the above. Reactions to such imposition connect various sources of grievances and are articulated to political demands, as one observes in the changing agenda of Hong Kong politics. Instead of welcoming such changes, they resisted. Identity politics comes to the forefront and regional and national integration is becoming a source of growing political tension. A new conception of the nation seems to be in its course of formation. But instead of sparkling pride and joy among the people by this new conception of the nation, 'negative empathy' is on the rise.

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