

“Glory to Hong Kong”: An Emerging Nationalism in Hong Kong



“Hong Kong is not China”. Graffiti scrawled in Kowloon around September 17th, 2019.

As I left the mid-autumn festival in Tin Hau earlier this month, I walked past a group of protestors who were crowding around a screen that had been set up. Soon the TV began playing the protest anthem [“Glory to Hong Kong”](#), which has become popular in recent weeks. The song references Hong Kong’s current strife and promotes the defense of Hong Kong’s unique values, all in the style of a national anthem. At this event, it was played with subtitles so that people who hadn’t yet memorized the lyrics could sing along. I had heard protestors singing the song before, but I hadn’t known what it was until that point. Witnessing this scene made me wonder, are we seeing the birth and growth of a new nationalism in Hong Kong?

Hong Kong has been for months racked by protests, which began because of a [controversial bill](#) that would have allowed some level of extradition to the mainland. In early September, when Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s embattled Chief Executive, announced the complete

withdrawal of the extradition bill, she perhaps hoped the movement would die down. That has not happened. Even a more limited strategy of fracturing the movement between moderates who only wanted the extradition bill to be withdrawn and those who wanted all five of the protestors' demands to be met has not occurred. [The five demands](#) are the withdrawal of the extradition bill, the withdrawal of the use of the word "riot" in relation to the protests, the release of arrested protestors, an independent inquiry into police actions, and universal suffrage. Why has the protest movement been resilient in the face of the meeting of one of the five demands, and in fact the most important and original demand? I think that we should see the movement's stability since the withdrawal as one piece of evidence among many of an emerging Hong Kong nationalism.

Using the word nationalism is a particular choice. Hong Kong nationalism represents more than simply Hong Kong identity. Many nations have non-majority groups that have an identity, with varying degrees of integration to the polity. But a non-majority group with nationalism represents a direct political challenge to the modern nation-state. Boiling it down to its most basic elements, I am defining nationalism here as identity combined with political aspirations for self-government. The nation-state definitionally relies on its own nationalist story to unify and stabilize the country. While it is possible for this nationalism to integrate other identities, it is not possible for it to integrate other nationalisms, because they fundamentally challenge the origins and legitimacy of the central nation-state. To understand why it is appropriate to use the word "nationalism" in this context for Hong Kong identity, I will look at both a quantitative and qualitative example: changes in polling about identity and the anthem "Glory to Hong Kong".

I am not the first to say that there is an emerging nationalism in Hong Kong. In 2016, Alvin So [argued](#) that there was a developing Hong Kong nationalism, focused in large part around “the influx of mainland tourists and migrants and growing social inequality as the underlying structural forces”. I, however, argue that while the nascent Hong Kong nationalism began with these socio-economic concerns, it is now focused on political grievances and ideological divergence. That is, while these socio-economic concerns are still relevant and important, they are not at the center stage of the current evolving changes in identity.

Changes in identification in polling have been noted by many commentators, but it is worth going over them to show the quantitative evidence for this nationalist trend. When the [most recent poll](#) was taken in late June 2019, 53% of people in Hong Kong self-identified as “Hong Kongers” while only 11% identified as “Chinese”. This compares to 37% as “Hong Kongers” and 21% as “Chinese” just 2 years before in June of 2017. This type of poll question required the respondent to only choose one option, but it should be noted that there was also a third option for “a mixed identity of Hong Konger and Chinese”, which went from 40% in 2017 to 35% in the most recent poll. This polling demonstrates why the growing Hong Kong identity has a national character to it. Even when given the option to choose “a mix of Hong Konger and Chinese”, a majority of Hong Kong residents now instead choose just “Hong Konger”. In other words, for this small majority, their identification is not just with Hong Kong but also with specifically being not Chinese. Looking at the timeline of the polls, this change overwhelmingly happened between December 2018 and June 2019, in other words, when the extradition bill controversy and protests were beginning, demonstrating their direct connection to recent political events.

Examining the protest anthem “Glory to Hong Kong” is also instructive for understanding the emerging nationalism. This song has become a popular anthem in recent weeks, in the absence of an official anthem for Hong Kong. The origin and content of the song itself points to the communal story-building that makes up nationalism. The lyrics for the song were [voted on online](#) to create its current form. Even the idea of having a “national anthem”, which “Glory to Hong Kong” seeks to replicate, is a nationalist undertaking. Aesthetically, it is in the style of the 19th century marches and hymns that make up most countries’ national anthems. The [lyrics](#) speak of the political values of freedom and democracy that have motivated the movement, call for communal action, and seek “glory” for Hong Kong. I mentioned earlier that socio-economic issues play a role in Hong Kong nationalism, but it is clear from the case of this anthem that those issues were necessary but not sufficient to its growth. Ultimately, it has been political crises which have accelerated the growth of this national identity to the point where a crowdsourced orchestral song could be such a widely embraced symbol. One journalist, Vivienne Chow, describes how when she first heard the song, she cried alongside a saleswoman and a young man, saying “never had I felt so connected with strangers”. What is that except the [imagined community](#) created by nationalism?

Does labeling the emerging identity in Hong Kong as “nationalism”, rather than just an identity, matter? I believe it does. It is a key differentiation to make for those trying to shape policy on the crisis or just trying to understand Hong Kong’s future. To give one example, understanding the role of nationalism affects how we view the protest movement’s resiliency around the five demands. Under this framework, the five demands are as much about the political symbolism they represent as they are about the actual policies they involve, because

they have a growing national identity underlying them. It is also important for understanding Hong Kong's future. As I have already noted, under the nationalism vs. identity distinction I am making, while it is possible to imagine other identities being folded into the central nation-state, it is hard or impossible to imagine other nationalisms being so easily ameliorated. This is especially important in Hong Kong's case with the looming 2047 deadline for the end of the one country, two systems policy. If this nationalism continues to grow within the context of the approaching deadline, the probable outcome is of greater public strife and feelings of despair and futility, with the room for compromise and reform left more constricted. Nationalism is perhaps the most influential ideology in human history, and Hong Kong's future is likely to be defined by the clash between its own emerging brand of it and that propagated by the central state across the border.