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Narratives of Hong Kong: post-colonial identity, fears, and social movements

Robyn Lin
Vassar College

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Vassar College

Narratives of Hong Kong:
Post – Colonial Identity, Fears, and Social Movements

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of
Arts in International Studies

By

Robyn Lin

Thesis Advisers:
Professor Katherine Hite
Professor Wayne Soon

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Introduction:

When I was growing up, my parents instilled in me a sense of pride and a careful distinction that I was Chinese – but from Hong Kong. As a part of the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada, I have been a part of my own confliction of identity and culture. Both my parents immigrated to Canada when they were younger, not of their own volition. This forced move lead to more feelings of homesickness and longing for Hong Kong than other immigrants who willingly chose to immigrate themselves. My mother, in particular, threatened to move back to Hong Kong in time for the Handover, unless she and my dad had children. For her, Hong Kong was the city she loved and was forced to leave. I remember her once telling me that on the day of the Handover it began to rain when the British left, as if the city itself was crying. It is these generational experiences and sentiments along with my own visits that have given me a great interest in being able to study and examine the ways that the Hong Kong population has evolved and changed from the Handover.

As a result of my identity, I have had the opportunity to learn about Hong Kong from visiting and conversations with my parents. One of the largest differences impressed upon me is Hong Kong's colonial history and rule of law, especially in comparison to current events on the mainland. In this thesis I aim to explore different narratives of Hong Kong identity, especially as it relates to social movements and in light of the 20-year anniversary of the Handover. I will begin by examining a history of Hong Kong including the Handover agreement, before examining questions of identity, the Umbrella

Movement, the Hong Kong Museum of History, and the film Ten Years. Through my discussion and analysis of these different parts of Hong Kong life, I aim to demonstrate that social movements are a part of Hong Kong identity and an analysis of these movements can help demonstrate the people's fears and worries. Moreover, the emotions underlying these movements help illuminate the distinct identity that has been fostered in Hong Kong and I argue, counters the narrative that Hong Kong is a purely apolitical capitalist city.

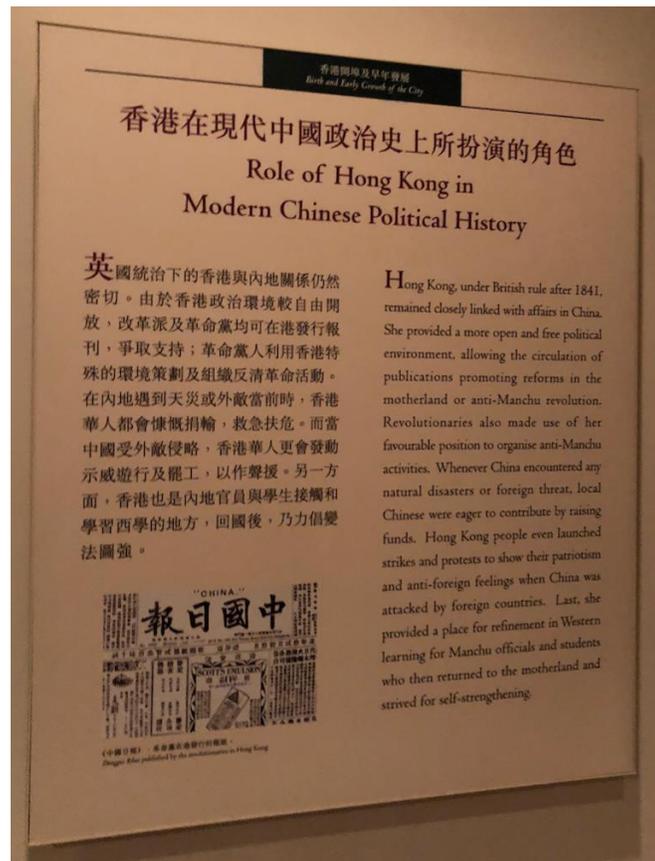
Hong Kong History:

In considering Hong Kong's history, not only is it important to examine the impact of British colonialism, but also the ways that history is presented on the island. I hope to put the history in conversation with the way stories are presented at the Hong Kong Museum of History. The museum was opened in 2002 in honour of the five year anniversary of the Handover. It is open to the public and has one permanent exhibit entitled, *The Hong Kong Story* as well as space for special exhibits. Given that this a museum that is owned by the government, it will espouse an official narrative, which makes it an interesting scholarly insight. While it is difficult to continually change and update museums, this is an exhibit that specifically ends with the Handover of 1997. It's use of two floors to accommodate the whole exhibit, which may have been an issue of space and the building it is housed in, also raises a question of a breaking in between parts of history. It is housed next to the Hong Kong Science Museum, which makes it optimal for school children that may wish to visit both museums at the same time. Located on the Kowloon side in a popular tourist area, *The Hong Kong Story* is free and is mostly visited by school groups and tourists. Visitors can use audio guides to enhance their experience or guides are offered in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin although the frequencies of tour depends on the language. When I went to the museum, my goal was to further examine the type of information presented, the way the space had been used, and the way the information was framed. This was my second time visiting so I was already familiar with the layout and the events chronicled, but this time I was able to more closely examine the exhibit.

The permanent exhibit seeks to showcase and demonstrate over 400 million years of Hong Kong history beginning with depictions of the Hong Kong landscape and early human life. It then delves into various different groups of Chinese folks that migrated to Hong Kong as well as the life of those under different imperial rules. The overall exhibition spans two floors, with free admission, and recreation of different folk cultures that lived in Hong Kong. The bottom floor feels much more reminiscent of China as an ancient civilization, there are model houses and mannequins demonstrating how one would make salt. One can walk through a house and examine bedrooms and living spaces and imagine their lifestyles. They detail the day-to-day lives of an ordinary person as well as living techniques such as farming and salt making.

A number of the exhibits also feature short five – ten minute films that are in line with the theme of the exhibit. For the folk culture part, there is a short film that speaks about important parts of folk lifestyle – such as ancestry, festivals, and foods. Given the short nature of the film, it is of course impossible to cover everything in depth especially when considering the numerous clans and different lifestyles that were present at the time. However, what is interesting is the way that the video is framed. It begins with a narrator introducing the film and comments that Hong Kong has evolved so swiftly that the current generations seems to have lost connection with their roots. It concludes by commenting that Hong Kong's chapters will continue to be written. Throughout the Hong Kong story exhibit, there is a sense of the swiftness of the city's evolution and also an underlying reminder that Hong Kong has always existed in relation and as a part of China. The narration of the folk culture film is just one example; yet it is also a clear

question of Hong Kong's identity and culture. It raises the question of identity and culture especially in relation to groups that were also migrants – the folk cultures mentioned in the film and in the exhibit were not native to the region of Hong Kong, but had migrated and settled there. The exhibit asks the viewer to consider the different forces of identity, especially culture and ancestral roots.



This is a picture of one of the wall plaques that were everywhere in the Museum. It speaks about the Role of Hong Kong in Modern Chinese Political History. It reminds the viewer that Hong Kong's greater political autonomy allowed the residents to hold protests in honour of events happening on the mainland and that Hong Kongers protested any foreign attack of China. It reads "Hong Kong, under British rule after 1841, remained

closely linked with affairs in China. She provided a more open and free political environment, allowing the circulation of publications promoting reforms in the motherland or anti-Manchu revolution. Revolutionaries also made use of her favourable position to organise anti-Manchu activities. Whenever China encountered any natural disasters or foreign threat, local Chinese were eager to contribute by raising funds. Hong Kong people even launched strikes and protests to show their patriotism and anti-foreign feelings when China was attacked by foreign countries. Last, she provided a place for refinement in Western learning for Manchu officials and students who then returned to the motherland and strived for self-strengthening.”¹

This theme of intertwined histories is one that is present throughout the entire exhibit. One of the sections in the first half of exhibit is about Hong Kong during each dynasty. While it is a way of cataloging the chronological time and shifts of history, it is also a reminder that Hong Kong was, and is, still China. In a way, while colonization has undoubtedly played a large role in the shaping of the city, it is also a blink of an eye in comparison to the entire history of China. Yet it is also clear that the second half of the museum is meant to inspire the visitor to consider the speed at which Hong Kong developed and matured throughout the 20th century.

After one has examined the downstairs exhibit, the viewer can take two escalators up to the second half. This half examines the history of Hong Kong beginning with the Opium Wars and the beginning of British colonization. Like other parts of the exhibit, the section

¹ Wall plaque, *The Hong Kong Story*, The Hong Kong Museum, Hong Kong.

about the Opium Wars and British rule has a short film. All of these films are voiced over in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, complete with subtitles in another language –for example the Mandarin voiceover features English subtitles – allowing tourists and Chinese visitors alike to watch and understand the films, regardless of the language of the voiceover.

After the First Opium War, which ended in 1842, part of the agreement that was struck between China and Britain was the leasing of Hong Kong Island. It officially became a British territory with the Treaty of Nanjing and later in 1898, the Convention of Peking would expand British rule to include the Kowloon Peninsula. The Convention of Peking ceded Kowloon to Britain for 99 years, with the lease expiring in 1997. In light of Chinese history, this is seen as an embarrassment and a huge loss. Yet, in the context of Hong Kong history, there is no denying the British Colonialism had a large impact on the city. The British utilized Hong Kong's deep harbour to facilitate trade, which was especially important before the opening of China. For decades, the best way to enter the Chinese market was through Hong Kong and to this day, its financial rule of law and stability remains a great staple of the city. It was also a political haven for refugees fleeing from China, including during the Taiping Rebellion, the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 that toppled the last Chinese dynasty, the invasion of the Japanese, and the Communist revolution.

In the museum, the Opium War is the beginning of the second floor of the exhibit. This means that the visitor leaves the bottom floor, takes two flights of escalators, and rounds

the corner to the second half of the exhibit. This break in the exhibits gives the visitor time to process the first half, but also left me with a sense that the break represented Hong Kong reaching a more modern time. The first part of the second exhibit features the Opium War, which also lead me to believe that the museum wants to emphasize the importance of this event by placing it after the physical break of the two floors. For this exhibit, there is also a film, which gives a brief overview of the trade imbalances that lead to the import of opium and covers the war and agreement that resulted in Hong Kong becoming a British colony. The Opium Wars section than leads into “Birth and Early Growth of the City” featuring different parts of everyday Hong Kong life from pharmacies, to teashops, the judicial system, and education. The section on education also features Dr. Sun Yat Sen, who was born and educated in Hong Kong and is commonly thought of as the Father of modern China. This is perhaps, another reminder of the intertwined histories of China and Hong Kong – regardless of colonization.

Life under colonial Britain was not pretty. Chinese inhabitants had no political power, were discriminated against, and lived in appalling conditions. Yet the opening of the port of Hong Kong by Britain had large economic impacts for Hong Kong. Given its proximity to the mainland, it attracted rich Chinese from the mainland to trade but also labourers, smugglers, artists, and more, all hoping to make a better living. Carroll suggests, “that these people violated orders from authorities in Canton against working with foreigners suggests both the dismal conditions in China and the opportunities that

British colonial rule offered.”² Colonial Britain offered little protection in the way of the economy so the Chinese learned to organize in order to protect their economic interests. Many Chinese struggled under British rule; yet, Hong Kong remained an attractive place for jobs and a better life.

It is clear that although Hong Kong was ruled by Britain, it was still intertwined with Chinese affairs. As I’ve mentioned before, many Hong Kong was a place of refuge for many Chinese escaping violence. Sun Yat Sen, the leader of the 1911 revolution against the last Chinese dynasty, was raised and educated in Hong Kong. Developments on the mainland would have an economic impact on Hong Kong because of the influx of wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs coming from Guangdong. 1919 saw the establishment of the Bank of East Asia, a bank that would have modern services such as letters of credit and checking accounts, while also an understanding of Chinese culture. Just as the economy and businesses of China affected Hong Kong, so too could political movements. In 1925, Sikh police fired on Chinese demonstrators in the International Settlement of Shanghai, which sparked protests across China. Leaders called on the Chinese in Hong Kong to rise up against British imperialism and leave the island, because of this, 50,000 Chinese left causing chaos in the city. Although the incident occurred in Shanghai, “the strike derived part of its local force from genuine economic concerns and from the popular feeling against the privileged status of foreigners. This was apparent from the demands of the strike commission, which apart from standard issues ... also had a strong local component: that labor unions be allowed to vote for a Chinese member on the

² John M Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2007), page 36.

Legislative Council and that Chinese be treated as the equal of Europeans and be able to live on the Peak.”³ While the strike demonstrated to the British colonial government that they could no longer dismiss Chinese as just workers, it also “strengthened many Hong Kong people’s appreciation for the colony’s political and economic stability – and reaffirmed their sense of belonging and commitment to Hong Kong.”⁴ Hong Kong’s relationship and feelings toward their colonizers would continue to be formed in relation to activities and life on the mainland.

The next major challenge that Hong Kong would face would be during World War II. Thousands of Chinese refugees fled to Hong Kong because of the Japanese invasion. Soon, however, Japan would invade Hong Kong in what is known as The Fall of Hong Kong. Although British troops aided by the Hong Kong Voluntary Army as well as troops from Canada defended the city, the Governor Mark Young surrendered the city to the Japanese on Christmas Day. The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong would last for three years and eight months, marked by deteriorating sanitary conditions and rising inflation. The invasion was part of the Japanese aim for a Great East Asian Co – Prosperity Sphere, but it soon became clear that “the Japanese in Hong Kong ... showed that they could be far more brutal than the British had ever been.”⁵ As Hong Kong dealt with rising inflation, sickness, and the imposition of Japanese culture, British forces and civilians were imprisoned in different parts of the island. The occupation not only highlighted a lot of pre – war social problems such as racism and legalized opium, but the

³ Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 100.

⁴ *Ibid*, 105.

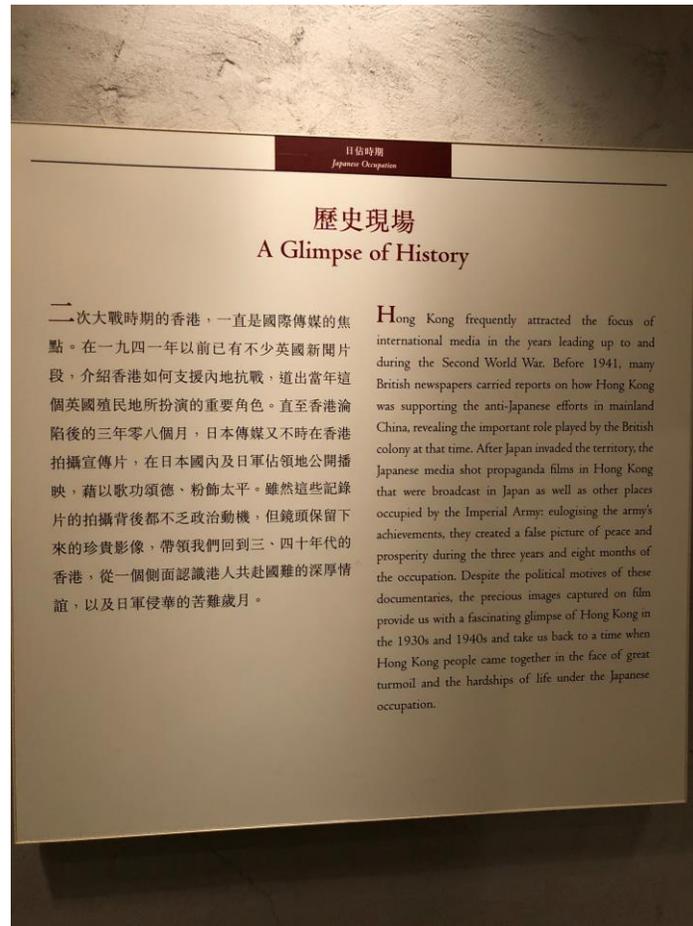
⁵ *Ibid*, 122.

occupation also brought together different groups who had to work together in order to survive. The British Army Aid Group (BAAG) smuggled British and Chinese out of Hong Kong and created a network to gather information and sneak food and supplies into the POW camps. The group was based out of the mainland but was composed of British, Hong Kongers, Chinese Nationalists, and Chinese Communists. Similarly, P. S. Selwyn – Clarke who had headed the medical services prior to the occupation, worked with the Japanese to improve health conditions for all the citizens and those in the POW camps. While the occupation lasted for three years and eight months, “at least ten thousand Hong Kong civilians were executed, while many others were tortured, raped or mutilated.”⁶

One of the key features of the second half of the exhibit in the Museum is the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. While it undoubtedly had a large impact on Hong Kong life, especially on health and food supplies, there is a large focus on the destruction that rained upon the city. This part of the exhibit features five films of propaganda whose aim was to demonstrate what the Japanese Imperial Army was doing in Hong Kong and show it as propaganda to the Japanese population. It includes footage of refugees from the mainland accessing foodstuff in Hong Kong and portrays an overall feeling of Hong Kongers helping those from the mainland. This is a point that is also emphasized on the poster that accompanies the videos – “Despite the political motives of those documentaries, the precious images captured on film provide us with a fascinating glimpse of Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s and take us back to a time when Hong

⁶ *Ibid*, 123.

Kong people came together in the face of great turmoil and the hardships of life under Japanese occupation.”⁷ Below is a picture of the plaque.



The exhibit of life under Japanese occupation continues with a film about the surrender of Hong Kong. It focuses on the death and destruction of the invasion of Hong Kong, the surrender by Governor of Hong Kong Mark Young, the prisoner of war camps, the decline of the economy, and the dramatic drop of the Hong Kong population due to a lack of hygienic conditions, food, and the forced deportation of many back to mainland China. It also discusses the way that there is a stark contrast to the propaganda films, which were

⁷ Wall Plaque, *The Hong Kong Story*, Hong Kong Museum of History, Hong Kong.

a lot more cherry and hopeful. In comparison, it is clear that the main film focuses on truly showing the destruction and death that the invasion brought upon the city. Yet the exhibit also fails to discuss who was present for events such as the invasion of Hong Kong. It briefly touches upon the Prisoners of War that were sent to camps in Stanley, but only discusses the conditions and the number who survived. It does not discuss the higher levels of British administration nor the troops from Canada and India who had fought against the Japanese to protect the city and was captured. In this way, one could walk away from the exhibit forgetting that there was (and continues to be) a large expat community. It is clear that the exhibit, while demonstrating the destruction that rained upon the city, is also a reminder of the way that Chinese folk from both the mainland and the island came together and how the British failed to protect the city.

After the exhibit of the Japanese occupation, the story goes on to look at Hong Kong in the years after the war. At this point I was running out of time because the museum was closing soon but I was able to quickly go through the post war Hong Kong exhibit. It featured different aspects of life, including technological development and a campaign by the city to improve hygiene conditions. The overall vibe was a lot more cheerful and hopeful in contrast to the violence of occupation. It portrays a more developed Hong Kong and a feeling of cosmopolitanism, which is commonly associated with the city. There was less focus on what life was like during these decades and more focus on economic growth, new schools, and a growing civil life.

The post war and occupation provided an opportunity for renewal in Hong Kong. Although there were calls for China to regain control of the island, the Nationalists – and Chiang Kai Shek – realized that if he did not successfully retake the city, he would be discredited at home. So Hong Kong remained in the hands of the British and quickly rebuilt with help from Chinese entrepreneurs fleeing uncertain conditions in China. “The speed of Hong Kong’s postwar recovery helped restore confidence in British rule, especially compared with the suffering during the Japanese occupation and with the politically and financial instability in postwar China.”⁸ The end of the occupation also brought better racial relations, with the elimination of rules that had banned Chinese from living on the Peak – which overlooked Hong Kong – calls for less workplace discrimination, and more Chinese representation. When Governor Mark Young returned to Hong Kong he proposed “the most radical constitutional reforms in Hong Kong history ... [he] believed that the Chinese of Hong Kong needed more political representation to increase their desire to remain under British rule.”⁹ Although Young’s plan did not succeed, minor constitutional changes began to be made and there were soon greater race relations with less stigma and discrimination. Given the civil war happening in China between Chiang Kai Shek’s Nationalists and the Communists, many corporations moved their headquarters to Hong Kong from China. The war and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 brought a flood of refugees and a question of what would happen to Hong Kong.

⁸ Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 130.

⁹ *Ibid*, 131.

These refugees would stay and have children who were “taught by their elders that Hong Kong was just a refuge, not a home [but] came into their own with the realization that Hong Kong was the only society they knew ... they ... were citizens of the city where they were born or raised and made contributions. They were Chinese to be sure, but they were also different from the Chinese on the mainland or those in Taiwan. With this sense of belonging, they began to demand a more equitable and more open society, and challenged both the British colonial set – up and Chinese traditional patriarchy. The ‘70s was a decade of peaceful popular protests that brought about a civil society.”¹⁰ It is important to recognize that this decade brought greater demands in civil life stemming from a sense of a specific identity. These types of demand in combination with British desire to give more autonomy to the Hong Kong people would lead to greater power being given to the people. The 1970s are also an important decade because of the movement to fight institutionalized corruption. The creation and work of the Independent Commission Against Corruption, Hong Kong would soon become very proud of its strong institutional rule and law. In these few decades leading up to 1997, Hong Kong became a fairer, more accountable society, both from the demands of the public but also because of governmental decisions. Historian Bernard Luk, further argues “without deep roots in an assertive and activist population, the package of last – minute elections introduced by Governor Patten would not have been able to survive the handover”¹¹.

¹⁰ Bernard Luk, “Hong Kong Society Toward The Twenty – First Century,” *Asian American review* 16, no. 2 (1998): 48.

¹¹ Bernard Luk, “Freedom, Democracy, and Human Rights in Hong Kong Since 1997: A Historical Perspective,” *Asian American review* 18, no. 1 (2000): 19.

Yet Hong Kong is not only important because of its role in relation to China, it is also an interesting case study in the realm of British colonial history. Unlike other British colonies, it was never given independence or democracy such as in India or Canada. And unlike other colonies, Hong Kong is considered to have and share cultural roots with a huge superpower right next door – China. Unlike other colonies, the 99-year long lease leads Britain to begin negotiations to return Hong Kong to the mainland. In the years leading up to 1997, talks had already begun and the city knew that there would be negotiations of a return. However, during the entire negotiations, the city was never consulted even though by that time, “Hongkongans had experienced three decades of widespread social activism.”¹²

But how can one return a city, especially one that had been ruled by a different power for over a century? This led to “one country, two systems”, an agreement, which would stipulate that Hong Kong could retain her autonomy for 50 years before joining China. Interestingly enough, the “one country, two systems” was designed to incentivize Taiwan to re – join China, but when discussions around Hong Kong arose, the system was implemented there instead. While the system is called “one country, two systems”, the agreement was the Handover agreement. Given that Hong Kongers were never given an opportunity participate in talks of what would happen to their city, it is quite accurate that they were literally handed from one superpower to another.

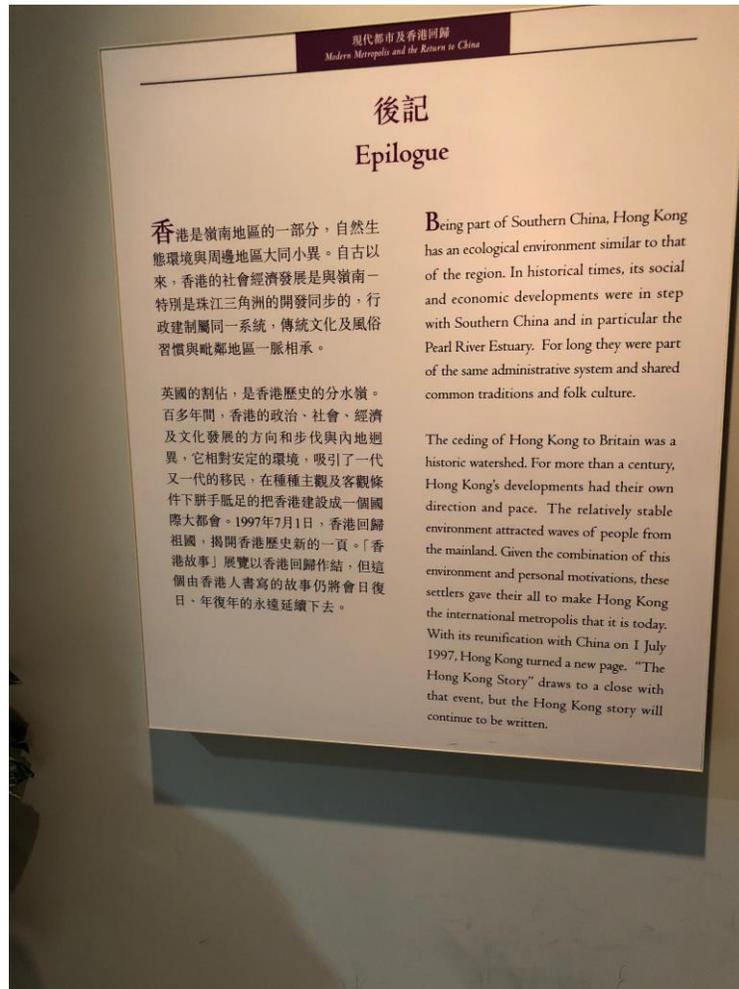
¹² Luk, “Freedom,” 19.

The last part of the “story” is the handover of Hong Kong back to China. At this point, a voice over the system indicated that it was time to leave because the museum was closing, but I was able to take few photos of the exhibit. The introductory sign for this part merely writes that the Sino – British Joint Declaration was discussed beginning in the 1970s because of the ending of the New Territories Leasing. After two years leaders were able to come to an agreement, part of which stipulated “after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region on 1 July 1997, Hong Kong will remain unchanged for 50 year”. Unfortunately, I was unable to watch the film that accompanied that part of exhibit, but for such a large historical event, it struck me that there was not more to the exhibit.

The final sign that signals the end of the exhibit is entitled Epilogue. It attempts to wrap up the entire exhibit and ends with saying “With its reunification with China on 1 July 1997, Hong Kong turned a new page. “The Hong Kong Story” draws to a close with that event, but the Hong Kong story will continue to be written.”¹³ Overall, the exhibit brings up a lot of interesting history especially before the Opium Wars. It is clear, however, that it is also meant to inspire one to consider the intertwined history of Hong Kong, China, and Britain. It is a narrative of survival and change but there is also something poignant about calling the exhibit “The Hong Kong Story”. Stories imply a beginning, middle, and an end, a climax, a thrilling discovery or overcoming of loss, and key players. What I wish to focus on is the ending part. As the exhibit states, the story of Hong Kong will continue to be written, however, calling the exhibit the “Hong Kong Story” implies an

¹³ Wall Plaque, *The Hong Kong Story*, The Hong Kong Museum of History, Hong Kong.

unchanging nature to the plurality of narratives and the events that followed 1 July 1997, such as the SARS outbreak. A picture of the Epilogue plaque is shown below.



In the years following the 1997 Handover, Hong Kong initially continued to experience a high degree of autonomy and continued to invest in infrastructure such as the construction of the new airport. The economy was hit hard during the Asia Financial Crisis and the impact was compounded by the impact of the Bird Flu. Overall, the city continues to attract visitors from the around the world, and lately, further media attention as tensions between the island and the mainland have heightened. After the Handover,

there has been little academic literature and examination of Hong Kong society, until recently in light of the 20-year anniversary and recent social movement. Given that Hong Kong will maintain this system of autonomy for 50 years, it is important to consider the history that occurred post handover. Not only has the city grown and expanded, but also it remains an interesting case study into the complexities of identity, post – colonialism, and governmental policy.

Hong Kong Identity:

How do we conceive of identity? While there is no doubt that facets of identity such as culture and religion can be passed down and learned, there is also an aspect that is more subtly instilled. Feelings of nationalism or pride for one's country, for example, are dependent on time and place. Yet, it is also clear that these feelings are not inherent in a person and are subtly taught and constructed. For many in Hong Kong, there is a sense of pride and an attitude of being distinct from the mainland or Taiwan. The construction of this identity is interesting and worth studying for a variety of reasons. It can first help us understand what factors can heavily influence a person's sense of identity, especially in relation to a culture as old and distinct as the Chinese. It can help frame the actions and social movements that have taken place, such as the Umbrella Movement. Lastly, it also presents as an interesting case study of within anti – colonialism studies. There is no doubt that Britain was responsible for a great deal of racism and denigration, yet it also opened Hong Kong economically and shaped it into a financial powerhouse as well as instilled values such as freedom of thought and assembly. Is that effect alone, enough of an influence to inspire feelings of loyalty to colonizers?

In *Forget Chineseness: On the Geopolitical of Cultural Identification*, Allen Chun explores this question of Chinese identity as it relates to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. He aims to differentiate how the Chinese identity can evolve due to forces such as colonialism, nationalism, geopolitics, and more. He is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica in Taiwan and published this book through SUNY Press. In his analysis, he considers the role of culture and the state in the

production of identity and factors historical events as well as other structures of power in the creation of Chinese identity. Overall, Chun challenges the reader to reconsider the way that one ethnicity can be changed, reinterpreted, and impacted by other forces such as globalism and nationalism.

One of the angles that Chun examines as it relates to identity is that of language and names. The difficulties and nuances of names and language in relation to belonging and foreignness are highlighted when he writes, “like the PRC, Hong Kong was not a “foreign” country in either official or popular parlance, and its people were just called Hong Kongers, while neither of the dualistic terms used to describe being “inside the country” (*guonei*), that is, domestically, or being “outside the country” (*guowai*), that is, going abroad was applicable to Hong Kong. One could only say that one is going to Hong Kong.”¹⁴ While the legal dimensions of both Hong Kong and Taiwan in relation to China can be difficult to fully untangle, it is clear that this ambiguity spills over from the legal into the cultural and more colloquial vernacular.

Chun highlights the way that colonialism changed its practices and tactics in relation to the way Hong Kong was governed and discussed. One of the largest things he highlights is, how the city came to be called a territory as opposed to a colony. He argues that this was implemented “as if to suggest the inapplicability or irrelevance of colonial domination.”¹⁵ He argues that this time period of the ending of colonialism and impending political change, saw “the need to construct an explicit identity under conditions of political uncertainty ... an expansion of culture throughout the social realm

¹⁴ Allen Chun, *Forget Chineseness* (New York: SUNY Press, 2017), 63.

¹⁵ Chun, *Forget Chineseness*, 75.

... where ephemerality, speed, and abstraction confounded the senses in a way that reflected the ambiguous crisis of late colonial modernity.”¹⁶ He then goes into a brief history of the different lands that were leased to Britain and how the island of Hong Kong came to be under colonial rule.

Following the history, Chun goes on to highlight the position that Hong Kong was in during both the Second World War and the Cold War. He writes, “the colonial government in effect took an active role in promoting economic growth in Hong Kong during the early postwar era, not just for the sake of modernization itself but more importantly as a means of steering Hong Kong away from ongoing nationalist conflicts that had threatened at times to destabilize the colonial regime. From 1967 to 1984, influenced by the turn of events during China’s Cultural Revolution and distracted by material progress at home, nationalist sentiment began to wane to the point of not being anchored to any political homeland (either to PRC, ROC, or UK). This contributed to the rise of a peculiar kind of Hong Kong culture that was essentially syncretic in nature.”¹⁷ Chun argues that this is further complicated by the implementation of capitalism by the colonial government, which lead to more Western values and sentiments such as self – interest. It lead to class conflict and the creation of a cosmopolitan city that, he argues, is reflected in the magazine *City Magazine*. He argues “in sum, Hong Kong’s history is less the product of British – Chinese interactions per se than the consequence of overlapping colonialisms, nationalisms, and modernities.”¹⁸ Overall, Chun clearly sees Hong Kong pride and a sense of identity as rooted in capitalist notions.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 96.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 99.

This is contrasted with the writings of Rey Chow. Chow is a critical theorist from Hong Kong who teaches at Duke University and was trained as a literary scholar. Chow writes largely about post colonialism, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. In 1992 she published an article entitled, *Between Colonizers: Hong Kong Postcolonial Self – Writing in the 1990s* in *Diaspora: A Journey of Transnational Stories*. In the article she attempts to complicate notions of post colonialism by asking questions such as “if a culture is postcolonial in the sense of having gone through colonialism, does that mean colonialism is no longer a part of its life? If we are referring strictly to the completion of territorial colonialism, now presumably a thing of the past, how do we talk about the ideological legacies, the cultural effects of colonialism? Is the *post* in *postcolonial* simply a matter of chronological time, or does it not include a notion of time that is not linear but constant, marked by event that may be technically finished but that can only be fully understood with consideration of the devastation they left behind?”¹⁹

This article by Chow is particularly useful because of her sociological background and intellect, but because she writes at a time of limbo. This article was published in 1992, five years before the official handover of Hong Kong back to China, but well after talks had begun. In this piece, she highlights questions of identity and emotions that can help us understand the sentiments of the Hong Kong population at the time. In comparison to Chow, she highlights that Hong Kong was never to gain independence. Unlike other colonies such as India or Canada, there was never an idea that Hong Kong would become its own sovereign state, “it does not have the privilege of an independence to which it can look forward. Between Britain and China, Hong Kong’s postcoloniality is marked by a

¹⁹ Rey Chow, “Between Colonizers: Hong Kong’s Postcolonial Self – Writing in the 1990s,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 2, no. 2 (1992): 152.

double impossibility – it will be as impossible to submit to Chinese nationalist/nativist repossession as it has been impossible to submit to British colonialism”²⁰ (153). That Hong Kong is to be returned to China is a pressing point for Chow. She highlights “*how do we talk about a postcoloniality that is a forced return to a “mother country,” itself as imperialistic as the previous colonizer? ...Or does it not, in its imminent “restoration” to China, in fact crystallize and highlight the problem of “origins” that has often been suppressed in other postcolonial cultures because of ethnic pride?*”²¹ I believe the large questions about colonialism and identity that Chow is raising, help us better battle with the complexities and nuances of identity.

One of the ways she highlights Hong Kong’s unique identity and relation to China as it pertains to colonization is the way she writes, “the decolonization of Hong Kong is part of *China’s* self – writing. From the perspective of those living in Hong Kong, however, the reverse is not true: what is self – writing for China is definitely not self – writing for Hong Kong; the restoration of China’s territorial propriety in and through Hong Kong does not amount to Hong Kong’s repossession of its own cultural agency.”²² She highlights language as an example of this by demonstrating how the mainland uses standard Chinese – Mandarin – while Hong Kong has historically spoken Cantonese (like many in Southern China) along with broken English and traditional Chinese characters. To write and speak of Hong Kong’s identity in China would not be the same as someone from Hong Kong speaking of their own identity.

²⁰ Chow, “Between Colonizers,” 153.

²¹ *Ibid* 153.

²² *Ibid*, 154.

Given that Chow is from Hong Kong, she is especially able to posit the way that Hong Kongers view themselves and how other views them. She touches on a common view of the mainland holding prejudice against Hong Kong, “if Hong Kong’s postcoloniality means both a kind of freedom (from the restrictions of “national” culture) and a kind of danger (anything is possible), it is also the reason why Hong Kong is usually viewed with disdain by most mainland Chinese as a symbol of decadence, artificiality, and contamination, while “proper” Chinese cities such as Beijing and Nanjing are viewed with a reverent sense of their centrality in Chinese history.”²³ This feeds into her point that, “what is unique to Hong Kong ... is precisely an in – betweenness and an awareness of impure origins, of origins as impure. A postcoloniality that marks at once the untenability of nativism *and* postmodernism distinguishes Hong Kong’s “Chinese” self – consciousness and differentiates it from other Chinese cities.”²⁴

For Chow, it is clear that Hong Kong identity is more than just the values of capitalism as Chun suggests. Chow argues for an awareness of the complexities of culture as it relates to identity and suggests that this is of why those in Hong Kong distinguish themselves from the rest of China. Hong Kong has been influenced by the values and culture of colonialism and by migrants who never lived under colonialism but still fled the communist revolution. Furthermore, Chow argues that the knowledge of “returning” to China influences sentiments as well – because of the disconnection in values and culture.

This is more similar to what Carroll suggests in *A Concise History of Hong Kong*. He argues that a sense of Hong Kong identity had been in the process of being formed since

²³ *Ibid*, 156.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 157.

the 1800s and that “this sense of belonging was shaped by several factors, among them Hong Kong’s rising economic prosperity, its closer ties with China, and the efforts of the colonial government to foster a sense of local identity. Perhaps what most shaped this sense of Hong Kong identity, however, was the realization in the early 1980s that Hong Kong would revert to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.”²⁵ It is clear that Carroll aligns more with Chow in that he believes that Hong Kong identity stems from an acknowledgment and recognition of difference as well as facing the prospect of Hong Kong returning to China.

While Chun writes post 1997, Chow wrote before the Handover. It is clear that in the years after, there have been rising tensions in light of an identity crisis that is felt by many. I chose to examine the film 十年 and the Umbrella Movement because these influence and are a part of the social fabric. In contrast to works by Chow and Chun, films and protests can be accessed by a greater number of the Hong Kong population, whereas academic writings are more likely to appeal and be read by only certain people. It is clear that this question of Hong Kong identity has been one that many have considered. Understanding the ways others around the world perceive Hong Kong and the ways they perceive themselves, help push us to reconsider how we conceptualize identities especially as it relates to race, culture, and systems of power such as capitalism.

²⁵ Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 168.

Occupy Central and the Power of Student Activism

When considering Hong Kong and social movements, there is no doubt that the most recent instance that comes to mind is the Umbrella Movement. But where did the Umbrella Movement really come from? And how does it speak to Hong Kong identity?

While many in the media correctly portray it as a fight for the democracy, the power of the movement began before anyone raised a single umbrella. While the desire for democracy is not new, it is crucial to understand the role that the fight against the national education curriculum played in producing student activist and leaders.

Since 2007 the Hong Kong government has attempted to institute a national education in order to “strengthen “national identity awareness” and nurture patriotism towards China”²⁶. Yet in 2012 under the Chief Executive CY Leung, protests truly built. Under Leung there were plans to roll out a “Moral and National Education” subject in the fall of 2012. A booklet guide was distributed to National Education Services Centres, which included statements such as “China’s ruling party is “progressive, selfless and united”. It also criticized multi – party systems disaster to countries such as the United States. The booklet also made no mention of major events that many view as integral to China’s history, such as the 1989 massacre.”²⁷ Many in Hong Kong interpreted this booklet a

²⁶ “National Education in Hong Kong,” *South China Morning Post*, accessed 31 January, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/topics/national-education-hong-kong>.

²⁷ Alexis Lai, “National education’ raises furor in Hong Kong,” *CNN*, last modified 30 July, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/07/30/world/asia/hong-kong-national-education-controversy/index.html>.

precursor to the curriculum and questioned the ways it would create pro - mainland sentiments. In the months leading up to the implementation of the curriculum, there were many protests. Especially vocal was Joshua Wong, who founded a group called Scholarism. 15 at the time, Joshua is particularly famous for calling the curriculum a form of “brainwashing”²⁸. Annual protests and commemorations such as July 1 (for the Handover) and Tiananmen Square attracted even more protesters in that year.

Yet the turning point was in the days leading up to the start of school. Scholarism organized a siege on the government building. The group had been protesting for days with smaller crowds before the number protesting peaked at 100,000. Determination and patience paid off – CY Leung announced that it would no longer be mandatory for schools to implement national education. It was a remarkable feat and considered a win for protesters.

Why is the fight against national education important? It’s important because it demonstrated to the Hong Kong population that the government would back down if the numbers came out on the street. Social movements and advocacy is not new in Hong Kong but it is largely overshadowed by the capitalist nature of the city. It also catapulted Joshua Wong to local and international prominence. Although he had co – founded Scholarism with another classmate, it is Joshua who spoke and rallied protesters, it was him that confronted CY Leung with questions about the education at a meet and greet he won, and it was Joshua who inspired hundreds of Hong Kong people to protest.

²⁸ Lai, “National Education’.”

Capitalizing on the movement and the interest in civic affairs, Benny Tai, a Professor of Law at Hong Kong University, wrote an editorial entitled “Civil disobedience is the most powerful weapon”²⁹ which called for genuine universal suffrage.

For many in Hong Kong, genuine universal suffrage has long been promised. The Handover Agreement of 1997 included what is called the Basic Laws, which has functioned as Hong Kong’s constitution. Right now, 40 out of the 70 seats of the Legislative Council can be directly elected. Functional constituencies elect the other 35 seats. This means that “the system confers a right to vote on a small percentage of ... the population based on membership in a recognised social, economic, industrial, commercial, political advisory, professional body, or sector”³⁰. These functional constituencies represent about 6% of the Hong Kong population³¹. The LegCo is typically split into pro democrat, who normally holds the seats that are directly elected, and the pro Beijing, who are normally elected by the functional constituencies.

There is also the election committee, which was expanded from 400 to 1200 seats in 2012. The election committee has the power to nominate and vote for the Chief

²⁹ “What is Occupy Central? 10 key facts about Hong Kong’s pro – democracy movement,” *South China Morning Post*, last modified 1 October, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/article/1604649/what-occupy-central-10-things-you-need-know>.

³⁰ “Fact check, was Hong Kong ever promised democracy?,” *ABC News*, last modified 16 December, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-16/was-hong-kong-ever-promised-democracy-fact-check/5809964>.

³¹ “Hong Kong election: Youth protest leaders win LegCo seats,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 5 September, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-37273238>.

Executive, who rules Hong Kong. The election committee is composed of smaller subsets with each subset electing their own representative. The committee has been largely criticized for being skewed towards the professional and business populations of Hong Kong, who have historically been more pro – Beijing given the strong economic ties between the island and the mainland. While the mainland has argued that this system largely reflects Hong Kong population, the Basic Law, Article 45 states that Hong Kongers would have universal suffrage. In part it says “the method for selecting the chief executive shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress. The ultimate aim is the selection of the chief executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures.”³²

To do so, he advocated for a sit in of Central, the busiest area of Hong Kong and home to top commercial firms. In a way, Central represents the heart of what Hong Kong is commonly associated with – capitalism. Benny Tai and other activists including Joshua Wong, spent months canvassing and gauging interest for such an event. They held referendums where 800,000 people voted, providing the activists and leaders an understanding of Hong Kong sentiments. However, it was the Hong Kong government that would light the final spark that would begin the protest. Joshua and Scholarism talked retaking the civic square as they had done the year prior in protest of the National Education curriculum. When they did so, three of the leaders – Joshua Wong, Nathan

³² “Fact check.”

Law, and Derek Lam are arrested and detained. Benny Tai decides that this is the moment to launch Occupy Central to capitalize off the anger that was generated with the arrest of especially Joshua.

It was formally called Occupy Central with Peace and Love, however, it came to be known as the Umbrella Movement when police attacked peaceful protestors with tear gas and umbrellas were used as a defense. Hong Kong is a normally very safe city and the sight of police attacking peaceful protestors struck a chord with many not only in Hong Kong but also across the globe. The use of violence by the police is especially poignant when considering Tiananmen Square. Given Hong Kong's shared heritage and proximity to China, the people have always watched the happenings of the mainland very closely. There has always been an underlying fear that Hong Kong could be invaded with tanks just as Beijing was during Tiananmen Square. The use of tear gas is the closest instance of larger violence that has occurred in Hong Kong since the Japanese occupation.

That the Umbrella Movement chose Central is extremely important. The sit in aimed to disrupt the heart of Hong Kong's economy by blocking the heart of Hong Kong. The demonstration quickly spawned other protests in other major neighbourhoods of the city, speaking to the common sentiments of the people. The length of the protest also highlights the dedication and desires given that the protest lasted for 79 days. After the initial tear gas attacks failed to dissuade protestors and instead enraged people, police waited the protestors out. The sit in affected businesses from larger businesses like luxury

brands to transportation such as the trams. In the end, however, there was no change in the decision to not allow for universal suffrage, much to the disappointment of many.

Post Occupy

Instead of democratic change, student leaders were charged with inciting unlawful assembly, including Joshua Wong. Initially, he was sentenced to community service but that sentence was later reversed and he was sentenced for six to eight months in jail. In the aftermath of Occupy, Wong along with two other student activists, announced plans to create a new political party and run for the LegCo in 2016. Initially, Nathan Law, one of the co – founders of Scholarism won a seat and became the youngest member to ever be elected. During this election a number of fresh politicians won seats – 26 in total – and there was a record high voter turn out. There were also seven “from the local or “self – determination” camp”³³ representing that the issue of democracy and Hong Kong’s future was still very much on voters mind, even two years after the protest.

Unfortunately, during the swearing in ceremony, a four of the newly elected members changed the oath or brought an umbrella, which later lead to their disqualification³⁴. One of these was Nathan Law, another student activist who had helped Joshua Wong lead Scholarism. When these members were disqualified, they lost crucial veto power.

³³ Regina Ip, “Hong Kong people have spoken, and it doesn’t bode well for the government,” *South China Morning Post*, 10 September, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2017925/hong-kong-people-have-spoken-and-it-doesnt-bode-well>.

³⁴ South China Morning Post, “Four more Hong Kong lawmakers disqualified at oath – taking controversy,” filmed July 2017 at Hong Kong Legislative Council, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY5F4mPNTgc>.

What is crucial to note is that it is not just the young activists who altered their oaths. Another prominent activist, Leung Kwok – Hung, held a yellow umbrella during his oath and Hong Kong Professor, Lau Siu – Lai drew out her oath for over 10 minutes. They too were disqualified from the LegCo. The altering of these oaths also prompted Beijing to change the Basic Law to require that politicians to swear allegiance to China. In the end it can be argued that these acts of rebellion have cost Hong Kong, not only did the pro – democracy camp lose the veto power, but Beijing rewrote the Basic Law, which was a very rare move.

Yet these acts of rebellion also speak to the level of allegiance and desperation many feel in Hong Kong. So too does the level of voters and the number of seats the pro – democracy camp won within the directly elected seats. While there is a lot of debate as to the actual direction that Hong Kong should take, such as the right to self – determination, independence, or universal suffrage, there is also no doubt that there is a lot of tension and questioning of Beijing’s influence on the city.

In October of 2015 with the Umbrella Movement very fresh on people’s minds, five booksellers were also arrested either in China or kidnapped and taken to the mainland. The five of them were a part of a bookstore in Central that sold gossip magazines about high level Beijing officials. At first, the Chinese government stated that these arrests were related to charges such as traffic accidents or other lower level charges and that all the men went willingly to China. However, it soon became clear that these men were taken unwittingly, one even while in Thailand. When people in Hong Kong found out “the

revelation sparked fear and anger. [Newspaper] [h]eadlines denounced the “unprecedented” capture and Hong Kong’s “vanishing freedoms”³⁵. It was only one man, Lam Wing-kee, who refused to repeat the story that he was expected to tell when he returned to Hong Kong. Instead of saying that he had voluntarily gone to China and was not in any danger, “he spoke for more than an hour, describing his capture and detention.”³⁶

For a city that was granted a high degree of autonomy, including the freedom of press and assembly, to say the kidnappings rattled Hong Kong would be an understatement. Yet, these events are important in recognizing the changing and growing fears on the island. While it can be argued that what these men were doing was illegal, such as smuggling banned books on to the mainland, that the Chinese government would go to such lengths to kidnap and torture them, terrifies everyday residents. The kidnappings combined with the use of violence by the police during the Umbrella Movement, scared a lot of people. Fear that Beijing would roll tanks into Hong Kong similar to Tiananmen Square, fear that they could be kidnapped if they did not toe the political line, and fear of what Hong Kong will be like after the end of 50 years.

For a city that is commonly thought of as solely capitalistic, profit driven, and apolitical, the turn outs and massive protests both for the Umbrella Movement and against the

³⁵ Alex W Palmer, “The Case of Hong Kong’s Missing Booksellers,” *The New York Times*, 3 April, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/03/magazine/the-case-of-hong-kongs-missing-booksellers.html?mtrref=www.google.com&mtrref=undefined&gwh=C1DDDED65E70AFA1A703D2A1492E8E81&gwt=pay>.

³⁶ Palmer, “Missing Booksellers.”

National Education Curriculum, help counter this narrative. Interestingly enough, Hong Kong is rarely ever thought of as a city that consistently pushes for social change and commemoration. However, it is clear that Hong Kongers have taken advantage of their freedom of press and assembly. Every year in Hong Kong there are commemorations for events such as Tiananmen Square and anti – government protests on the anniversary of the Handover – July 1. What explains this?

While talk about Hong Kong identity and independence is more recent, it is important to remember that the island has always been keenly aware of current events on the mainland, perhaps more so than any other nation. During times of upheaval and turmoil, Chinese refugees have sought sanctuary in Hong Kong. Sun Yat Sen, who lead the revolution against China's last dynasty, was Hong Kong born and raised. The intertwining of Hong Kong and China has always been present on people's minds, which leads to commemorations of events such as Tiananmen and activists pushing for democratic reform on the mainland as well. It was only in the last few decades of British rule, which Britain strategically allowed for greater self-rule. Even so, this had lead to generations who experienced a more gentle British imperialism along with young generations who have developed a very clear identity denotation between themselves and the mainland. Many in Hong Kong still see Britain very favourably, from carrying the colonial flag to imploring London to hold the Beijing government to the Handover agreement.

In the past year, there have been calls for Hong Kong independence and self – determination. While these two terms have been conflated, it is important to understand the distinction between the two and the consequences of each. Hong Kong self – determination argues that Hong Kongers should have the right to decide the direction that Hong Kong should take. This could mean independence, re-joining China, the continuation of one country two systems or other options. This is also distinct from universal suffrage, which would mean Hong Kongers have the right to vote for their representatives and Chief Executive. In contrast to both universal suffrage and self – determination, Hong Kong independence would mean the city would become it’s own country. In recent months, the call for independence has become very strong on college campuses. University of Hong Kong (HKU) is the oldest institution released a statement arguing for independence and other universities have elected pro – independence student leaders. Professor of Law at Hong Kong University, Michael Davis stated, “that “independence” had rarely been discussed during previous Hong Kong protest movements, but was a growing issue since authorities were unresponsive to calls for more autonomy.”³⁷

It is clear that calls for independence have also divided the people of Hong Kong. Chi Wang, a former Chinese University of Hong Kong Librarian and President of the US – China Policy Foundation wrote, “I am not suggesting that the people of Hong Kong blindly accept the decisions from Beijing. Hong Kong has maintained its unique identity

³⁷ Simon Lewis, “Student at Hong Kong’s Oldest University Are Calling for the City’s Independence,” *Time Magazine*, 16, March, 2016, <http://time.com/4260624/hong-kong-university-students-independence-localism-separatists-undergrad/>.

even while the world has changed around them. Calling for independence, however, does not fit this theme. It suggests Hong Kong is not its own self if it remains part of China.”³⁸ Even before students elected pro – independence leaders at universities, Zhengxu Wang a Professor at Fudan University argued “Hong Kong too must embrace and integrate with the mainland.”³⁹ It is clear that there is debate as to how many people truly hold pro – independence sentiments and that these feelings might be more common among younger generations. One article in the South China Morning Post stated, “by the time Hong Kong returned to mainland China, the city’s youth had mostly forgotten the glorious history for China and their national identity.”⁴⁰

While the differing views of the direction and fate of Hong Kong may be tied to generational and political difference, there is no doubt that these activists have been able to rally the Hong Kong people but also have briefly captured the attention of the world. Recently, Netflix produced a documentary about Joshua Wong entitled, “Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower”, which was about his life beginning with his fight against national education, the Umbrella Movement, and ends with his plans to run for LegCo. It shows the story of a boy who was driven to fight for what he believed is right, while

³⁸ Chi Wong, “Calls for independence only weaken Hong Kong’s unique identity,” *South China Morning Post*, 18 September, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2111618/calls-independence-only-weaken-hong-kongs-unique-identity>.

³⁹ Zhengxu Wang “Hong Kong, a city that still exudes movie magic, must get to grips with the political reality,” *South China Morning Post*, 8 July, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2101487/hong-kong-city-still-exudes-movie-magic-must-get-grips>.

⁴⁰ Wendy Wong, Kwai Chung, “Why Hong Kong youth struggle with Chinese identity,” *South China Morning Post*, 19 April, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/2142414/why-hong-kong-youth-struggle-chinese-identity>.

struggling to figure out how to do so. While the documentary is not the most up to date, it is important to recognize that such a global and recognizable company such as Netflix, decided to produce a documentary about him. It won an audience award in the World Cinema Documentary category at the Sundance Festival in January of 2017.⁴¹ It is powerful in its ability to not only clearly outline the timeline of the fight against national education and the Umbrella Movement, but also feels “like a rallying cry for anyone interested in collectively declaring their political stances in public. The causes in *Joshua* are radically different from the ones currently preoccupying American, but the pattern of government action and popular resistance is much the same. The eponymous Joshua is a fiercely optimistic figure, providing an successful example of civil disobedience in pursuit of institutional change.”⁴² Whether or not one feels that the documentary is truly a rallying cry, it is important to recognize the power that a company such as Netflix - that has millions of subscribers – has in its ability to share and shed spotlight on a story.

What do these pro – independence movements really mean? Is it super radical and outlandish? Or maybe it is reflective of a separate identity? Or is it a reactionary movement because these folks feel that their autonomy and identity are slipping away?

What do these student activists and social movements teach us? Given the formation of a distinct identity and the lack of change after the Umbrella Movement, it is understandable

⁴¹ Edmund Lee, “Ten things we learned about Joshua Wong from *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower*,” *South China Morning Post*, 18 August, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/culture/film-tv/article/2095675/ten-things-we-learned-about-joshua-wong-netflix-documentary-joshua>.

⁴² Tasha Robinson, “Netflix’s *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* is a rallying cry for a protest age,” *The Verge*, 25 May, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/1/30/14441022/netflix-documentary-review-sundance-2017-joshua-teenager-vs-superpower>.

that especially young Hong Kongers, would pursue a more radical direction. This generation especially perceives that they have a lot to lose. They are a generation that grew up with a great deal of autonomy and freedom, are educated and socially aware enough to watch the crackdown by the Beijing government. Moreover, they are a generation that have been raised to believe that they are different and have had the luxury to compare themselves to their mainland counterparts. Perhaps what this latest movement shows is the generational priorities and worries of Hong Kong. There is no doubt that this movement does not represent every single young person, yet it does represent a significant portion. In an age where mainland buyers are accused of further driving up Hong Kong's already ridiculously expensive housing market and mandarin is quickly becoming a required language to find a job, Hong Kong appears to be unliveable to those who have grown up there. Combined with the violence by police and kidnappings of booksellers who were not breaking the law, the erosion of basic rights and freedoms seems apparent. Scarily too, is the recent announcement by President Xi Jinping to scrap the Presidential limits. While there is no guarantee that he would be in power forever, it also means that he will not be stepping down in 2023.

Ten Years:

When it comes to identity and society, the arts are often an excellent way to glimpse into the ways that different societies and cultures operate. This chapter aims to explore the recent independent film 十年 or 10 years in English. The premise of the film was that it asked five independent filmmakers what they say Hong Kong society to be like 10 years from now. It premiered in 2015 and takes place in 2025 and features five short stories ranging from government conspiracy to self – immolation and the banning of the word local. While it is well shot and raises a lot of questions from government interference to the power of social movement, it also speaks very deeply to the fears and worries of many in Hong Kong. This chapter will explore each individual story and how it can be used a tool to better understand worries and fears. Below is a picture of the movie poster with each strip representing a story.



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Extras

The first short story is called *Extras* and is shown in black and white. It opens with people setting up for a charity event run by members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo), the only elected members of Hong Kong’s government in honor of International Workers Appreciation day. The story then details two members of a gang, Hairy and Peter, who are hired to assassinate someone at the event. The film cuts between the two of them discussing how to complete the plot as well as a group of officials from both Hong Kong and the mainland who are discussing the best way to spark fear into the citizens. While initially Peter is the only contracted to fire a shot, the

⁴³ Karen Cheung, “Dystopian Hong Kong film Ten Years to be shown at 30 locations on April 1,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 15 March, 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/03/15/dystopian-hong-kong-film-ten-years-to-be-shown-at-30-locations-on-april-1/>

politicians decide that it will be more effective if both of them take part. For Hairy this is great, as an older man he has struggled to make a stable living and tells Peter that the Triad give him a sort of stability. Hairy's story, as small as it is, is also a reflection of the enormous wealth gap that exists in Hong Kong. He speaks about the various jobs he has had from working at a restaurant that later closed to driving a taxi but losing his taxi license because of his inability to speak Mandarin. Peter's story too, also touches on Hong Kong culture. He is a worker from India, which is not uncommon, but also subtly reminds one of the racism and colourism that exists in Hong Kong. The discussion of wealth and jobs is contrasted to the group of politicians who are in a room down the hall. Their focus is on using the assassination to demonstrate the importance of a national security law in light of an upcoming election. After deciding that both members of the gang will have guns, something that is already very uncommon, the politicians join the festivities in the main hall where the assassination will take place. It is clear that both the Hong Kong politicians and the ones from Beijing are united in their goal of inspiring fear. The story ends with the assassination being foiled when the police kill Hairy and Peter. Chaos ensues in the hall with a voice on the radio later calling both of them terrorists.

I want to highlight several features of the story, the first being the collusion between both governments and the Triad. While organized crime is still very much prevalent within Hong Kong, although not the use of guns, the corruption shown in the film is important to take note of. In 1974 the Hong Kong Independent Commission against Corruption was created and has been very successful in combatting corruption on a governmental and

police level.⁴⁴ One of the strongest characteristics of Hong Kong has been its strong rule of law especially in the financial sector. The collusion of Hong Kong and the Beijing government with the Triad, highlights a fear of a return to corruption, especially that of politicians.

The second part that I would like to highlight and emphasize is the overarching arc of the story is the question of national security laws. There is no doubt that this is a reference to Basic Law Article 23, which states that Hong Kong “shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition [or] subversion against the [central government], or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organisations or bodies from conducting political activities in [Hong Kong], and to prohibit political organisations or bodies of [Hong Kong] from establishing ties with foreign political organisations or bodies”⁴⁵. Yet, there was no timeline for Hong Kong to enact these laws. In 2003, the first post – Handover Chief Executive Tung Chee – Hwa attempted to pass the law. The government tried to quickly push the legislation through quickly with the government brushing off major concerns from the public, academics, and leaders alike. The bill proposed an expansion of state powers, the discrimination of organizations that are considered subversive on the mainland, and the ability to search with out a warrant. Moreover, the vague language used greatly concerned the Hong Kong population, with

⁴⁴ “Brief History,” Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption, last modified, 24 November, 2016, <http://www.icac.org.hk/en/about/history/index.html>.

⁴⁵ Kang – Chung Ng, “Fear and loathing: which way forward for Article 23 national security law in stiff opposition in Hong Kong?,” *South China Morning Post*, 22 November, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2121035/fear-and-loathing-which-way-forward-article-23-national>.

even religious leaders stating that this bill had the potential to infringe upon freedom of religion. In the end, social leaders rallied 500,000 people to protest the bill and it failed. There is no doubt that the question of a national security bill is still looming large over the people of Hong Kong. This film highlights this worry and questions to what extent the Central government will go to ensure that it is passed – and how far the politicians of Hong Kong will go to accommodate them. This past November, after the film had been released, Li Fei the National People’s Congress’s advisor released a statement reiterating that Hong Kong still needs to pass Article 23. As the South China Morning Post reports, “his remarks are an indication that Beijing is growing impatient as it is now 20 years since the city returned to China and this constitutional requirement to protect national sovereignty has still not been fulfilled”⁴⁶. In light of recent calls for independence, it is clear that the mainland government sees the enactment of Article 23 as a means of combatting these calls. The question that 十年 asks is how far are they willing to go? And the scary answer is maybe pretty far.

Season of the End

The second short story of 十年 is titled Season of the End and features two characters, Wong Ching and Lau Ho – Chi who preserve things. It is perhaps the simplest out of the five stories but also speaks to another large fear underlying Hong Kong society – that their way of life is slipping away and will soon disappear. This story follows Wong and Lau as they go around the city preserving different things from household objects to bugs.

⁴⁶ Editorial, “National security laws must do justice in Hong Kong,” *South China Morning Post*, 17 November, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2120283/national-security-laws-must-do-justice-hong-kong>.

They spend their time creating specimens while reminiscing about life before they started. It is unclear who else is still alive because the two of them take walks but never encounter anyone else and they speak of how there have made more specimens than objects in the city. Eventually, Lau asks Wong to make him a specimen. The story ends with Wong fulfilling his wish. Although this is one of the simplest storylines it asks the viewer to consider what we view as worth preserving.

Dialect

The next short story touches on a very real difference between Hong Kong and the mainland – language. Cantonese is a source of pride for many in Hong Kong and is one of the most prominent differences. *Dialect* follows a taxi driver whose business is slipping away because of new laws dictating where drivers can pick up passengers based on their language ability. The story opens with the driver with his wife and son in his cab, where his wife scolds her husband for speaking to their son in mandarin because she is worried that he will not do well in his mandarin speaking school. As his day progresses the radio announces that further restrictions are being imposed on pick up locations with drivers being unable to pick up passengers in Central, Admiralty, the Airport, and the Harbour terminal unless they speak mandarin. The viewer watches as he struggles to use his mandarin GPS, which his passenger has to use for him, as a woman is fired for being unable to speak mandarin well with her boss, and as two passengers switch cabs because they realize he can't speak mandarin. Everywhere around him, mandarin is becoming the standard language. At lunch with a tutor, he is unable to ask for his cheque because the waitress only speaks mandarin and even a white passenger he picks up speaks mandarin

with him. To top his day off, after dropping the white passenger off at the harbour, another passenger attempts to get in his cab even though he is prohibited from picking up fares at the harbour. He tells the passenger to go inside and use one of the cabs there but the passenger complains that they all speak mandarin and he doesn't. As he helps the passenger with his luggage another cab comes by and reports him for illegally picking up a fare, which he can clearly tell because of a sign in the front of his cab showing he doesn't speak mandarin. The police come and he's given a ticket, while his passenger leaves shaking his head. He goes to pick up his son from school who comes up to the asking to go with his friends to look at magazines in mandarin. The driver is clearly flustered as his son asks with other schoolboys behind him pleading to let him go, which he does. It ends with the same radio announcement about the restriction of where Cantonese cab drivers can pick up passengers.

The film overall highlights a shift that has already been noticeable in recent years. With the opening of China and tourists from the mainland, those working in the service industry need to have a working knowledge of mandarin. For those in business and working on the mainland, a strong grasp of mandarin is even more important. This story also highlights the political tensions over the use of Cantonese and mandarin. Although the two are technically dialects, the mainland strictly prohibits the use of Cantonese and only espouses mandarin. Given that Cantonese is seen as a point of identity for Hong Kong, the use of mandarin "has become an unwelcome reminder of the increasing

“mainlandisation” of Hong Kong”⁴⁷. Yet at the same time, it is hard for Hong Kongers to deny the prevalence and importance of mandarin, both in Hong Kong but also the world. It highlights a frustration and a bit of an identity crisis – how to hold on to a prominent aspect of identity such as language, while acquiring the skills to be sought after in the job market? How do we view aspects of culture, such as language, that must continually be taught and remembered at the risk of it fading away completely?

Self – Immolator

The fourth short film is perhaps the most extreme in questioning the position of Hong Kong in relation to China. The story opens with a news story about someone who self immolates in front of the British consulate. The news reports that the identity of this person is unknown and begins to narrate that it is in response to the recent death of a Hong Kong activist, Auyeung that had called for the British government to bring the People’s Republic of China to international court on the basis of breaking the Handover agreement of 1997 and who was seen as reactionary and a terrorist. He spoke too about the loss of Hong Kong’s status as a colony under the United Nations and that this therefore meant Hong Kong could never receive self – determination. The film cuts to real footage of the United Nations when Hong Kong was taken off the list and the People’s Republic of China was admitted as the only legal representation instead of the Republic of China. This activist was the first to be prosecuted under Article 23 laws for inciting overthrow of state power. The story cuts between different interviewees

⁴⁷ Juliana Liu, “Cantonese v Mandarin: When Hong Kong languages get political,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 29 June, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-40406429>.

including members of the Legislative Council, a professor, a radio commentator as well as follows the story of a social activist university student who is looking for his girlfriend, Karen. Using flashbacks it is revealed Karen had agreed with the recent activist and argued that the reason why the movement hadn't fully taken hold yet was because no one had died. Her boyfriend jokingly asks is she is thinking of self – immolating and she asks what if she did, to which he replies that he would kill her. This storyline is perhaps the most explicit out of all the stories, in the interviews it features the member of LegCo saying that independence should not be thought of and the professor speaks about self – immolator is when there is no other way out. It also intercuts footage of Auyeung arguing he has faith that the British who are more moral, will still do the right thing as footage of Margaret Thatcher tripping in the Great Hall of the People of Beijing plays – footage that was widely circulated in Hong Kong after the incident⁴⁸. A news commentator comments that Auyeung was undoubtedly the first to sacrifice for Hong Kong democracy and the self – immolator is the second Auyeung. Another interviewee who is identified as the Academic Freedom Concerns Governor argues that just as a father must teach his son, so should Hong Kong teach China, given its maturity and sophistication. As another commentator warns that the Chinese government's evilness could exceed our imaginations, the film cuts to a scene where the secret police detain the man who sold the self – immolator their fuel. The five police enter his apartment and instruct him that he cannot leave on the basis that the government is considering him an accomplice. While he protests that he doesn't know whom the self – immolator is, one of the policemen

⁴⁸ "In Hong Kong, Mixed Memories of Thatcher," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 April, 2013, <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2013/04/09/in-hong-kong-mixed-memories-of-thatcher/>.

says, we know you don't have anything to do with it. As the story goes on, it is clear that tensions over Hong Kong independence and identity range from those arguing that independence is completely out of the question, to those who side and agree with Auyeung. In light of more protests, the People's Liberation Army is called for assistance and tanks roll into Central. As the story is reaching its conclusion, scenes from the Umbrella movement are shown with tear gas fogging the air and police beating on protestors. Auyeung's voice narrates over where he describes seeing an old grandma at these rallies. He describes how this woman had lived through so much social turmoil and upheaval from Cultural Revolution and the July Fourth and is shown at Umbrella Movement rallies. He described how she would always tell him to hold on to hope and how he hoped to live up to her. As he describes her, the viewer watches as she self-immolates with an umbrella burning next to her.

Out of all the short stories, it is clear that this is the one that is most critical of the Chinese government. The self-immolator is a clear allusion to the self-immolation that has occurred in Tibet in relation to their bid for independence. Auyeung is representative of a young population in Hong Kong that grew up knowing the One Country Two Systems and is fighting for democracy. Interviewees in the story speak of morality, the lack of it and the appeal to it. While the premise of the film is what Hong Kong will look like in 2025, this short story is very relevant and present. It featured footage of Thatcher, the United Nations, and the Umbrella Movement, all moments in history that are very present on Hong Kong identity. The call for British intervention is especially poignant and relevant. In 2017, former governor of Hong Kong Chris Patten argued that Britain

failed Hong Kong and prioritized trade deals with China over the rights and freedoms of Hong Kongers.⁴⁹ 十年 asks what will happen in 10 years, whereas this short film asks what if a spark were lit right now.

Local Eggs:

The last film asks what happens if China begins to control the minds of Hong Kong's youngest population? The story begins with a store owner – Sam – receiving a call that the last local egg farm in Hong Kong is shutting down. His son leaves for school and he asks how long the Youth Guard will be, to which the son does not know. The man is then seen at the farm where the farmer explains that he has tried to accommodate China's growing request to change and alter the practices of his farm. However, he received an invitation to farm in Taiwan, while he invites the shop owner to come with him and set up a new store. However, he declines, citing his son as the reason. The next scene is Sam back at his shop where members of the Youth Guard dressed in uniform who are seen examining his shop. One of the kids, sees the eggs with the sign "Local Eggs" and takes a photo of it. Sam quickly asks him what he is doing to which the kid responds that he has to take photos of any words he sees that are prohibited. Sam asks him what the definition of local is, in an attempt to illustrate that the word local does not mean anything malicious. The kid responds that local means Hong Kong and when Sam asks if Hong Kong eggs is prohibited, the kid slowly scans his list and responds that it isn't. However it is clear that Sam's message does not take root when the kid shrugs and walks away

⁴⁹ Kevin Rawlinson, "Former Hong Kong Governor accuses UK of 'selling its honour' over protests," *The Guardian*, 25 January, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-38745204>.

with the rest of his unit. Sam's son is then seen at a bookstore where he holds the same list of prohibited words. Him and his unit scan the books with the young bookkeeper watching them. Sam's son looks around and takes down a book but when he puts it back, the books are now out of sequence. Back at the shop, Sam asks his son about the list and become angry when his son says he lost it. He reminds his son that he needs to think for himself and bashfully his son agrees. In the next scene, Sam receives a phone call, which leads him to the bookstore that is now closed. His son's unit is in front of the bookstore throwing eggs at the closed gate. Sam's son stands there in line with the others watching them, as the camera focuses on the aim and concentration on the various children's faces. Sam comes running in, yelling at the children while they drop their eggs and run. Sam's son stands there holding his full carton of eggs, while looking up to his father explaining he didn't know what to do. Sighing, Sam grabs the carton and tells him that they should start cleaning up. As they approach the gate, the bookkeeper pulls it up as egg spills into the shop. In the next scene, night has descended. The bookkeeper is leading Sam and his son down a hallway and explains that his son had been providing the list to him in secret the entire time. He opens the door to an apartment and explains he and a few others pooled their money to rent the space and hide all the objects deemed prohibited. Sam looks around in wonder as his son starts reading. Remarking, "how can they ban these things from existence?" his son agrees and says "they even banned Doraemon, idiots". The movie closes on this slightly more cheerful note than the rest of the films – seeing Sam's son resist the orders he was given, even in the smallest of ways.

This film highlights the fear of localism, which is often associated with being pro – independence. The Youth Guard is a clear reference to the Red Guard under Chairman Mao and the recent attempt to institutionalize a national education that would favor China. It was thanks to a young 14 year old Joshua Wong who would lead a large protest and sit in that would cause the Hong Kong government to change the law just days before implementation. Joshua had called the national education curriculum “brainwashing” and it is clear that the Youth Guard portrayed in the film also questions the training of young minds.

Overall 十年 raises the question of art in an age of shifting identities and culture.

Strikingly, the film was banned in the mainland but opened to sold out theatres in Hong Kong, eventually winning Best Film at the Hong Kong Film Awards. The “Communist mouthpiece Global Times swatted off the film’s pessimism as a “virus of the mind”.⁵⁰ During the awards ceremony, “major mainland TV stations – including state – run channel CCTV – had refused to broadcast the Hong Kong Film Awards, presumably in response to the film’s nomination. Previously, CCTV had shown the awards every year since 1991.”⁵¹ It “made 12 times its budget at the box office” and will get remakes in

⁵⁰ Phil Hoad, “Ten Years –review – a smoke grenade lobbed down Hong Kong’s corridors of power,” *The Guardian*, 23 March, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/mar/23/ten-years-review-smoke-grenade-hong-kong>.

⁵¹ Tufayel Ahmed, “Hong Kong’s Controversial ‘Ten Years’ Wins Top Film Prize Despite Backlash From China,” *Newsweek*, 4 April, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/hong-kongs-controversial-ten-years-wins-top-film-prize-despite-backlash-china-443681>.

Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan.⁵² The premise of the film speaks to the fear of many in Hong Kong – how quickly could life change in a decade? And what will it look like? Art forms such as these should be taken seriously to understand the fears and worries of the Hong Kong people. Maggie Lee writes about the film in *Variety*, stating, “ironically, the project resonated with local audiences precisely because it articulates HongKongers’ deep – seated fears. Greater than their fear of oppression is that of assimilation (with mainland value systems and modus operandi).”⁵³ The reaction of this film also speak to the political tensions that continue to exist between the island and the mainland, how to consider the feelings and sentiments that arise out of a difference in identity, while pushing for unification of these groups. It is also clear that these filmmakers took risks in deciding to make the film, as there were allegations that several had been “blacklisted.”⁵⁴ One well-known filmmaker, Au, “reports that projects on which he had already been in negotiations prior to *Ten Years*’ release abruptly dried up, with potential financiers and collaborators no longer returning calls.”⁵⁵ Not only does the film itself speak to the political nature of Hong Kong, it’s release, reactions, and the effect it has had on filmmakers also speak to the political nature of Hong Kong narratives and identity in relation to China.

⁵² Karen Chu, “Controversial Hong Kong Film ‘Ten Years’ Set for Regional Remakes,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 August, 2017, <http://time.com/4260624/hong-kong-university-students-independence-localism-separatists-undergrad/>.

⁵³ Maggie Lee, “Film Review: ‘Ten Years,’” *Variety*, 19 April, 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/ten-years-film-review-1201748166/>.

⁵⁴ “Ten Years: What happened to the filmmakers behind the dystopian Hong Kong indy film?,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 10 July, 2017, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/07/10/ten-years-happened-filmmakers-behind-dystopian-hong-kong-indy-film/>.

⁵⁵ “Ten Years.”

Conclusion:

This thesis has attempted to reflect on the intricacies of Hong Kong identity as it relates to British colonialism and the system of one country two systems. Utilizing the film 十年, my own experience at the Hong Kong Museum of History, as well as the Umbrella Movement and student activism, I have attempted to argue that activism is a part of the Hong Kong identity that can help further complicate the picture of capitalism that Hong Kong is normally painted as. Moreover, I hope to have raised further questions on how to analyze and read the ways a citizenry feels in relation to the political and legal structures they are under. The use of 十年 in particular, I hope, helps highlight the legal ways that Hong Kongers attempt to express their fears and worries. The story lines and the intense demand to see the movie, underscore the ways that these stories resonate and speak to Hong Kongers. Similarly, I hope that my examination of the Umbrella Movement and the desires of young activists help reinforce the fears and worries felt by many in Hong Kong. Simultaneously, I argue that the movement should not be viewed as a singular event, but also a part of a long line of activism that has occurred on the island. This activism is often obscured by Hong Kong's capitalist nature, yet has played a large role in not only influencing Hong Kong politics but instilling and reinforcing a sense of law and order within the Hong Kong identity that is distinct from events on the mainland.

While it can be argued that these pro – independence movement students are merely a fraction of the voices of Hong Kong, they are an important one. They provide a glimpse into the experiences and sentiments of those who have grown up under the initial freedom

given to Hong Kong. Moreover, they are not alone. Other generations of Hong Kongers, older and younger, have also advocated for independence. I hope that the examination of this activism helps further my argument that we must understand Hong Kong as more than just a cosmopolitan capitalist city. For a city that holds the rule of law close to its heart, calls for independence speak to the level of fear that many have about their city. While national security laws have not yet been enacted, when they are, call for independence such as this can be considered sedition and punished accordingly. These sentiments should be considered seriously especially in an age of post colonial identity formation. Moreover, they push one to consider the nature of culture and authenticity and reckon with notions of ways in which one belongs.

Overall, I believe that the use of these three insights into Hong Kong identity, the museum, 十年, and the Umbrella Movement also provide a temporal analysis and basis for which to understand the transformation of Hong Kong identity. At a time where Hong Kong is coming of age and the Handover agreement has been in effect for over twenty years, it is important to consider the current situations and feelings of the population and the ways that these have changed. The Museum was opened in 2002 in honour of the five year anniversary of the Handover and at a time where Hong Kong was a lot more open to China. Over the years as frustration and tensions have grown, activism and protests have become larger and more pressing. The Umbrella Movement has drawn the attention of the world and was recently nominated for a Nobel Peace prize. Yet it is clear from 十年 that these fears have not been quelled and there is still a large concern for the future of

Hong Kong. These three examples reflect the ever changing and shifting nature of identity over the twenty years since the Handover.

These three focuses of my thesis also speak to the intellectual and the global aspects of Hong Kong. They raise questions relating to the Hong Kong identity, values and rights relating to democracy and freedom, as well as the role that the city plays on the global stage. Moreover, the multidisciplinary nature of these examples speak to the wide spread nature of identity and the different ways that these feelings and thoughts manifest. I hope to have further questioned and illuminated the various ways that social activism and the rule of law have played in the formation of a Hong Kong identity as well as the fears and worries that overshadow Hong Kong's future.

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