


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hong Kong Anti-colonial Nationalism during the Chinese Language Campaign

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Abstract

The study of Hong Kong identity has traditionally been positioned in a local–national dichotomy, where Hong Kong identity is viewed primarily as a local identity while the label of national identity is reserved for identification with the Chinese nation. Hong Kong nationalism, on the other hand, is generally considered a new phenomenon, the study of which has focused predominantly on the political activities in the post-handover period. Drawing on Partha Chatterjee’s theory of anti-colonial nationalism, this paper seeks to broaden the understanding of Hong Kong nationalism by examining the nationalistic sentiments manifested during the Chinese language campaign (1964–1971). This paper draws on archival materials to shed light on the presence of anti-colonial nationalism in colonial Hong Kong, an aspect often overlooked or considered a mere extension of Chinese nationalism from mainland China. This paper also discusses the distinctions between anti-colonial nationalism in Hong Kong and Chinese nationalism, highlighting the intricate nature of the concept of Chineseness.

摘要

研究文献传统上把香港身份认同置于一种本土与民族之间的二元对立，香港人身份认同主要被视为一种本土身份认同，而中国人身份认同则被视为民族身份认同。另一方面，香港民族主义常被认为是一种新兴现象，对其研究侧重于主权移交后的政治活动。本文借鉴帕沙·查特吉的反殖民主义式民族主义理论，通过分析争取中文成为法定语文运动（1964–1971）期间表现出的民族主义情绪以拓宽对香港民族主义的理解。有见殖民地时期香港的民族主义情感往往被忽视或仅视为中国民族主义的延伸，本文一方面探讨当时的香港反殖民主义式民族主义，同时亦讨论它与中国民族主义之间的关系，以突显中国性这概念的复杂性。

Keywords: Hong Kong; anti-colonial nationalism; Chinese language campaign; Hong Kong nationalism; Chinese nationalism
关键词: 香港; 反殖民主义式民族主义; 争取中文成为法定语文运动; 香港民族主义; 中国民族主义

Researchers often position the study of identities in Hong Kong within a local–national dichotomy. Hong Kong identity is treated as a form of “local identity” while the label of “national identity” is often reserved for the identification with the Chinese nation.¹ For a long period of time in Hong Kong’s history, Chinese nationalism prevailed among Hong Kong people, and is perhaps most noticeable in the “Protect the Tiao-yu Tai” movement, a series of the protests against the Japanese takeover of the Diaoyu Islands 钓鱼岛 (Senkaku Islands), a group of islands situated north-east of China and south-west of Japan. The main concern of the protests was to assert Chinese sovereignty over the islands. The protests later transformed into a movement for Chinese unification, with nationalistic slogans such as “Oppose two Chinas” and “Unify China.”² This partially led observers such as

1 Fong 2019; see also Ma, Eric, and Fung 2007; Fung 2004.

2 Lam 2004.

Alvin So and Ludmilla Kwitko to conclude that the student movements in the early 1970s “not only [took] the existing communist regime for granted, but also wholeheartedly endorsed the Maoist version of Chinese socialism.”³ The movement described above aligns perfectly with the traditional understanding of nationalism, which is defined as a “political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”⁴ Even though Chinese nationalism had subsided in the late 1970s, Chinese identification remained salient and the new middle class remained highly nationalistic, which arguably prompted them to advocate for the return of Hong Kong sovereignty to China during the Sino-British negotiations over Hong Kong’s future in the 1980s.⁵ As a result, scholars of Hong Kong studies traditionally treat nationalistic sentiments in colonial Hong Kong as an extension of Chinese nationalism from China.

While it is widely agreed that a distinct Hong Kong identity has existed since the 1970s, it was generally not considered to be a form of national identification. The Hong Kong population during colonial times has often been described as politically apathetic, or as Wai-Man Lam puts it, a culture of depoliticization prevailed in Hong Kong.⁶ According to Lam, during the colonial period, there existed a discourse that emphasized stability and prosperity, and politics was generally considered undesirable and potentially dangerous. As a result, political actors and organizations often attempted to appear politically neutral and political activities were even disguised as social activities. Against this context, Hong Kong nationalism, as a political principle, was unthinkable. Instead, Hong Kong identity was primarily seen as a “local identity” that was first inspired by the disparity in the economic development and standards of living in Hong Kong and China,⁷ reinforced by the stereotype of a “backward China”⁸ and Hongkongers’ association with liberal values such as the rule of law, freedom of speech and human rights;⁹ and substantiated in the 1980s by political controversies such as the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre.¹⁰

Hong Kong nationalism, on the other hand, is generally considered a new phenomenon, as the self-identification of the Hong Kong people has only been considered nationalism when the local discourse developed claims on self-determination, autonomy and varying degrees of separation from China. For instance, Alvin So argues that prior to 2015, Hong Kong was marked by the presence of multiple, layered identities, including a distinct Hong Kong identity and a Chinese ethno-cultural identity.¹¹ It only became “nationalism under construction” when the influx of Chinese tourists and immigrants and growing social inequality gave rise to a discourse that emphasized the separation between Hong Kong and China. Similarly, Brian Fong and Rwei-Ren Wu both construe Hongkongers’ identification after 2010s as peripheral nationalism.¹² According to them, the Hong Kong–China relationship after 1997 can be considered to be a situation where “a centralizing state penetrated into the new peripheral territory and threatened the pre-existent identities and interests of the peripheral society” as China adopted an assimilationist nationalism,¹³ “an incorporation strategy aimed at subjecting Hong Kong to greater central control on the political, economic, and ideological fronts.”¹⁴ These initiatives exerted a significant impact on the governance, freedom, resource allocation, economy and culture of Hong Kong and eventually triggered a mobilization against Beijing’s incorporation strategies. Only Yongnian Zheng considers Hongkongers’

3 So and Kwitko 1992, 34.

4 Gellner 1983, 1.

5 So and Kwitko 1992.

6 Lam 2004.

7 Tsang 2003.

8 Lau 1997.

9 Ma, Eric, and Fung 2007.

10 Bhattacharya 2005; Carroll 2007; Tsang 2003.

11 So 2016.

12 Fong 2017; Wu 2016.

13 Wu 2016, 690.

14 Fong 2017, 528.

identification during the late years of British colonial rule as nationalism.¹⁵ He suggests that the Hong Kong people at that time developed a strong sense of a distinct political identity and thus it was inevitable that the educated elites and middle classes would demand democracy and political participation. The feeling of difference between Hong Kong and China was strengthened by the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre in China and the democratization movement in colonial Hong Kong. Zheng claims that Hong Kong at that time developed “to a great degree ... a unique form of nationalism.”¹⁶

Echoing Ernest Gellner, all the above-mentioned accounts of Hong Kong nationalism treat nationalism as a political principle, and nationalist movement as a political movement. While recent work that draws on the theories of stateless nationalism repudiates Gellner’s proposition that the state and the nation should be congruent,¹⁷ the goals of such nationalism remain solely political, such as seeking international support for democratization¹⁸ and self-determination.¹⁹ One problem of the existing literature is that these understandings of nationalism only offer a limited view of the phenomenon.

To break away from this purely political understanding of nationalism, Partha Chatterjee distinguishes nationalism as a political movement, which poses challenges to the colonizer, and nationalism as a cultural construct, which allows the colonized to assert their difference and autonomy.²⁰ He argues that anti-colonial nationalism seeks to establish its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society. It achieves this by dividing the world into two distinct spheres: a material domain made up of the economy, politics, science and technology, and a cultural domain consisting of religion, traditions, family and language. While Western superiority is acknowledged in the material domain, the cultural domain is seen as the heart of the nation and therefore must be protected.

Chatterjee’s framework is useful for understanding Hong Kong since it acknowledges the non-political aspect of nationalism. This is especially relevant owing to the culture of depoliticization during colonial times. A solely political lens would risk neglecting nationalistic sentiments and activities that are non-political, or as Lam puts it, “disguised as social.”²¹ Despite the limitations of the framework (which I will discuss further in my conclusion), it offers a fruitful starting point to explore the nationalistic sentiments in colonial Hong Kong.

This paper argues that the Chinese language campaign (1964–1971), which was aimed at demanding official language status for the Chinese language in colonial Hong Kong, exhibits key aspects of anti-colonial nationalism despite its lack of political challenges to the state. Additionally, I will explore the intricate relationship between anti-colonial nationalism in Hong Kong and Chinese nationalism in mainland China. While there was an association between them, the distinctions are evident in the former’s aversion to the Chinese state and its emphasis on Cantonese. Consequently, I conclude that the anti-colonial nationalism witnessed during the Chinese language campaign cannot be simplistically viewed as an extension of China’s Chinese nationalism, but rather as a branch of Chinese cultural identification that was localized, transformed and taken on its path of development in Hong Kong in response to the city’s unique geopolitical situation.

Chinese Language Campaign

The Chinese language campaign took place between 1964 and 1971 as a series of protests calling for the British government to grant official status to the Chinese language. English was the only official language in Hong Kong in the 1960s despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Hong Kong’s population was Chinese. Government correspondence, application forms and utility bills

15 Zheng 2008.

16 *Ibid.*, 40.

17 Gellner 1983.

18 Ho 2023.

19 Fong 2019.

20 Chatterjee 1993.

21 Lam 2004, 221.

were predominantly in English. Sending parcels at the post office required filling out forms in English, bookings for public recreational facilities were prioritized if made in English, information leaflets in hospitals were mostly in English, and complaints about the government would only be considered if they were written in English. All of this caused much discontent and difficulty for the Chinese population, many of whom did not speak English.²²

The Chinese language campaign involved a wide variety of actors from all walks of life. While there were sporadic calls for the wider use of Chinese in public affairs in as early as 1962, significant debates on the issue first emerged in 1964 when Brook Bernacchi, a liberal urban councillor and the chairman of the Reform Club of Hong Kong, put forward a formal motion advocating granting Chinese official language status.²³ The campaign only formally began in 1965, with elected urban councillors and university students assuming a greater role in promoting the notion of establishing Chinese as an official language. Hung-lick Hu 胡鴻烈, an elected councillor and an early advocate of the campaign, shifted the focus from increasing Chinese usage to putting Chinese on an equal footing with English. While the issue was gaining popularity at this stage, it had still not developed into a fully-fledged campaign owing to a lack of consensus on the idea of bilingualism and joint actions. Participation was still relatively restricted, and a consensus on joint actions was still absent.²⁴ The campaign was further constrained by the riots in 1966 and 1967. The public's interest in the aims of the campaign was revived by the Heung Yee Kuk 鄉議局, a quasi-government organization representing rural inhabitants, when it passed a motion demanding official status for the Chinese language during its September 1967 meeting. University students, magazines and other social organizations then joined the cause and it gradually evolved into a full campaign. By the early 1970s, the campaign had developed into a three-pronged structure, consisting of the All Hong Kong Working Party to Promote Chinese as an Official Language, which represented 298 groups; the Joint Committee to Strive for Chinese to Be an Official Language, which was formed by 13 magazines targeted at young people and student groups; and the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), which was a major student organization comprising the student unions of higher education institutions in Hong Kong. The campaign's enormous popular support was confirmed by a territory-wide petition, organized by the united front, which collected 332,400 signatures, almost one-tenth of the entire population at that time. Over the course of the campaign, at least 330 organizations took part, representing a wide range of backgrounds and social sectors, including chambers of commerce, community and clan associations, professional and academic organizations, schools and school confederations, labour organizations and political organizations. After years of effort, the campaign eventually succeeded in persuading the colonial Hong Kong government to recognize Chinese as an official language in 1974.²⁵

It is important to note that the word "Chinese" (*Zhongwen* 中文) in the Chinese language campaign was an ambiguous term. The term can refer to at least two spoken languages, Cantonese and Mandarin. Although Mandarin and other dialects of the Chinese language family were sometimes mentioned, the campaign centred around the promotion of Cantonese, as demonstrated by the emphasis on Cantonese in the draft ordinance put forward by HKFS and the priority given to Cantonese in *The 70's Biweekly* (*70 niandai shuangzhoukan* 70年代雙周刊, discussed further below). Likewise, while the definition of Chinese was left open when it was accorded official status in 1974, it was interpreted as Cantonese and standard written Chinese (with traditional characters) by the government until the late colonial period.²⁶ Therefore, the Chinese language campaign offers

22 Ibid.

23 The Reform Club of Hong Kong was founded by expatriates who were concerned about the Young Plan proposed by Governor Mark Young in 1949. It was active in the municipal elections and considered the closest thing to an opposition party in colonial Hong Kong.

24 Lam 2004.

25 Ibid.

26 Evans 2013. The situation only changed when the government announced its new language policy of biliteracy and trilingualism in 1995 (Bolton 2011, 56).

a unique opportunity to reflect on the debate around Hong Kong identity since Cantonese is often considered to be an identity marker that sets the Hongkongese apart from the Chinese.²⁷

Another important feature of the campaign is that it took place under a colonial setting, and the nationalist sentiment during the campaign was focused on “othering” the British colonial ruler. This is in sharp contrast to the accounts of Hong Kong nationalism presented in the literature, which depict Hong Kong nationalism as being constructed through “othering” China and as a reaction to Chinese centralism.²⁸ As this paper will discuss, in its essence, the nationalistic sentiments during the Chinese language campaign were a form of Han nationalism, with a heavy focus on protecting the Chinese language and culture; however, the nationalism also differed significantly from the Chinese nationalism widely expressed in China. In this sense, the nationalistic sentiment exhibited by the actors studied in this paper during the campaign was a unique Hong Kong nationalism.

Data and Analysis

This paper draws on archival materials from two sources. First, I draw on declassified government documents in the National Archives (United Kingdom) that concern the use of Chinese as an official language in Hong Kong. The collection includes correspondence between the colonial Hong Kong government and local advocacy groups and between the officials of the British and Hong Kong governments, as well as the Hong Kong government’s internal reports and information bulletins. I particularly focus on material from the HKFS. The second source is *The 70’s Biweekly*, a magazine founded on 1 January 1970 and discontinued in 1972 that was active in social movements. The editorial board comprised a group of young anarchists and Trotskyists. Despite its short lifespan, the magazine was hugely influential among young Hongkongers and the editorial board was an active participant in the Chinese language campaign.²⁹

Both the HKFS and *The 70’s Biweekly* had a significant involvement in the campaign. The HKFS belonged to the conservative wing of the campaign and was responsible for negotiating with the Hong Kong and British governments, while *The 70’s Biweekly* belonged to the radical wing and played an important role in mobilization, including the forming of a coalition of workers and students that eventually numbered 5,000 persons. It is important to note, however, that the campaign was joined and supported by an enormous number of organizations and actors from a wide range of backgrounds and political affiliations. There is not the scope here to provide a comprehensive picture of the extremely diverse views that existed during the campaign. Rather, this paper aims to offer an in-depth analysis of a kind of nationalistic sentiment that has been overlooked in the literature on nationalism in colonial Hong Kong. The materials were selected based on their potential to best demonstrate such nationalistic sentiments. Other secondary sources are also used to provide context and triangulate the result, including HKFS publications and transcripts of interviews conducted by Ma Ngok with the leaders and participants of the campaign.³⁰

The Resistance against the Threat to National Culture

Alongside the practical elements, such as the wider use of Chinese in government affairs, the call for official recognition of Chinese had a symbolic aspect: to put Chinese on an equal footing with English. This cause was especially supported by young supporters of the campaign, as shown in a position paper by HKFS:

27 In the 1970s, Cantonese was likely not as important as a marker of identity, and the boundary between Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese was much fuzzier. The decision to prioritize Cantonese was likely a practical one, as Cantonese was the most spoken Chinese dialect in Hong Kong.

28 See Triandafyllidou 1998 for a discussion of “othering” and the construction of identities.

29 Cheng and Wong 2014; Lam 2004; Law 2015.

30 Ma, Ngok 2012.

The Hong Kong Federation of Students, believing that the mother tongue of the Chinese population should be given *a respectable status as an official language alongside English*, considers the matter one deserving serious deliberation by the Government.³¹

To the participants, the official language status of Chinese was more than a practical issue of communication: it was considered a matter of recognition. This point was made clear in a joint statement issued by 17 student unions of higher education institutions, editorial boards of youth magazines and student social service groups that was published in *The 70's Biweekly*:

Undeniably, both Chinese and English are used in many government documents and correspondence recently, but this is just a trick to ease the people's discontent. The legal recognition, through legislation, is still absent ... Formatively adding Chinese in correspondences and granting Chinese an official status are two different matters. One must not confuse them.³²

The petition letter sent to Anthony Royle, the parliamentary under-secretary of state of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, by James Wing-cheung Chui, the chairman of the Chinese Language Action Committee of HKFS, also echoed this view as he separated the issue into two aspects:

The administrative aspect concerning the *usage* of the Chinese language in local Councils, communications of government with the public and law; and the political aspect on the status of the language.³³

To him, the most important matter was not equal usage in every instance, but equal status:

We believe that status, which is a matter of respect, *should be absolutely equal*, whereas in the light of practicability and technical difficulties, it may very well be true that Chinese cannot attain the same level of useage [sic] as English.³⁴

Chui emphasized that the campaign was not merely about the language of communication but a matter of respect and Chinese and English should have equal status. More importantly, fighting for the equal status of Chinese was considered a means to rectify English cultural superiority, as was explicitly stated:

The tendency to neglect Chinese has become a serious crisis in Hong Kong. To tackle the crisis, we must do our best to fight for the legal status of the Chinese. Only in this way can we change the unreasonable phenomenon of "look up to English, down to Chinese."³⁵

According to the leaders of the campaign, the lack of official legal status for Chinese had led to the "look up to English, down to Chinese" (*zhongying qingzhong* 重英轻中) phenomenon. Chinese was considered inferior to English and there was a fear that Chinese culture would fall into decline as a result. This fear was succinctly illustrated in a special issue of *The 70's Bi-weekly*, entitled *Hong Kong: The Dark Side*:

31 James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) to Antony Royle, parliamentary under-secretary of state, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 22 July 1971, the National Archives (Kew) FCO 40/341. Emphasis added.

32 *The 70's Biweekly* 1970. Author's translation.

33 James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the HKFS to Antony Royle, 22 July 1971.

34 Ibid. Emphasis added.

35 *The 70's Biweekly* 1970. Author's translation.

Currently, English is the sole official language. It means everyone must learn English if they want to become successful. To the many students who want to join the civil service, English is of vital importance. In fact, English is also a compulsory subject in all schools ... The strong emphasis on English has led to the situation that a university student knows only the history of the Anglo-Saxons or the stories of the House of Tudor but nothing about modern China.³⁶

According to that author, the inferior status of the Chinese language would be detrimental to the survival of Chinese culture, as the younger generation would be ignorant of Chinese history. He put forward a more radical view, describing the situation as “cultural imperialism”:

[The campaign] also aims to end the discrimination of Westerners against the non-English speaking Chinese and to oppose the situation of English being the prerequisite for education and well-paid jobs. In short, the campaign is to end the “cultural imperialism” carried out by a small group of British rulers.³⁷

The author went on to define the campaign as “Chinese people demanding their own culture and to be acknowledged as equals by the rulers.”³⁸ Thus, on top of the practical issues such as difficulties in communication, the real grievance for these young student leaders was the feeling that their own language was considered to be inferior.

It is important to note that the letters from the HKFS were written in fluent English and the second half of *The 70's Biweekly* was traditionally composed of English content. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that many of the young leaders were English speakers and therefore were not the ones who were greatly affected by the difficulties in communication. They were motivated to join the campaign by a desire to raise the status of their language and prevent the demise of their culture. This desire to protect and revive Chinese culture was expressed in *The 70's Biweekly* in an article entitled, “My views on Chinese becoming an official language”:

I long for the success of the Chinese language campaign, so as to revive the thousands of years of magnificent culture of my country through the promotion of Chinese characters.³⁹

Resisting the threat to their culture was also a matter of their national dignity:

The contempt for Chinese in Hong Kong is caused directly and intentionally by the colonial regime. It is an undeniable fact, no matter how the colonial regime tried to argue its way out of this, it can never hide its “fox face.” Every Chinese must play a part in defending our national dignity and developing our excellent national culture.⁴⁰

The Chinese language campaign was thus regarded as a bid to protect and revive the Chinese language and therefore Chinese culture. While the terms “my country” and “every Chinese” refer to China and its people, as I discuss below, the word China here refers to “Cultural China,” a pan-Chinese cultural identification, instead of “Political China” – i.e. the Chinese state with which Chinese nationalism is associated.

36 Walker 1971, 8. Author's translation.

37 Ibid., 10.

38 Ibid.

39 Yao 1971, 3. Author's translation.

40 To 1970, 2. Author's translation.

In response to the concern over the demise of Chinese culture and the desire for its rejuvenation, the preservation of Chinese culture was also mentioned as a rationale for granting Chinese official language status in the position paper of the HKFS:

The cultural heritage of the Chinese civilization has a history of over 4,000 years. It is a great asset to the whole community. Preservation and development of Chinese culture would be greatly facilitated and encouraged by giving Chinese an official status.⁴¹

In short, the colonial government's language policy was seen as a threat to the survival of the Chinese language and culture, and the campaign could be viewed as an attempt by the ethnic Chinese to resist this threat. In response to an assumed underlying premise of English cultural superiority, there was a fear that the Chinese language and its associated "national culture" would fall in decline. Participants in the campaign therefore fought for official language status for Chinese in the hope of rectifying the secondary status associated with the Chinese language. According to Chatterjee's framework, such resistance within the cultural domain can already be regarded as (anti-colonial) nationalism.

The Surrender of the Political Domain

Anti-colonial nationalism surrenders its material domain to the West, as it does not seek to overthrow the foreign rule but rather limit its opposition to the cultural domain.⁴² This trait was also exhibited during the Chinese language campaign.

In James Wing-cheung Chui's petition letter, he mentions that:

During our recent meeting with the [Chinese Language] Committee, one of the members, while pledging full support to our proposition, raised the question of uncertainty on the recognition of the Chinese language as an Official Language in Hong Kong, *a British Colony*. Our position is that we view the whole matter a local issue, and that the Legislative Council in Hong Kong is in the right position to deal with the matter *without any changes in the Letters Patent and Royal Instructions*.⁴³

This paragraph is significant in two ways. First, Chui underlines Hong Kong's status as a British colony, an obvious fact at that time. Second, he emphasizes that there would be no change in the Letters Patent and Royal Instructions. The Letters Patent were the principal constitutional documents of British Hong Kong, and the Royal Instructions were formal instructions issued to the colonial governors. In effect, Chui meant that the HKFS would not seek to change the constitutional arrangements of Hong Kong as a British colony; in other words, the HKFS did not see the campaign as a form of outright political opposition that would challenge the colonial rule. Instead, the campaign sought to safeguard Chinese culture without bringing major change to the political domain. This position was further underlined in a letter sent to F.K. Li, acting secretary for home affairs in the Hong Kong government, on 30 August 1971, and again in a return letter sent to Royle on 9 October 1971.⁴⁴

41 HKFS, "Position paper of the Hong Kong Federation of Students on the matter of recognition of Chinese as an official language of Hong Kong presented to the Government Chinese Language Committee on the 16 July 1971," 22 July 1971, the National Archives (Kew) FCO 40/341.

42 Chatterjee 1993.

43 James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the HKFS to Antony Royle, 22 July 1971. Emphases added.

44 James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the HKFS to F.K. Li, acting secretary for home affairs, Secretariat for Home Affairs, Hong Kong, 30 August 1971, the National Archives (Kew) FCO 40/341; James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the HKFS to Antony Royle, parliamentary under-secretary of state, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 9 October 1971, the National Archives (Kew) FCO 40/341.

Instead of a revolution to end colonialism, as some forms of nationalism might advocate, the campaign was described as the involvement of the younger generation in local affairs:

Significantly the Chinese language campaign marks the participation of the younger generation of Chinese in Hong Kong ... in local affairs. Any further delay of the Government will only lead to a loss of confidence in the authorities and will only invite troubles to all parties concerned. I hope you would agree that an enlightened and liberal attitude of the Hong Kong and British Governments is essential in the promotion of the wellbeing of the community at large.⁴⁵

Rather than political opposition, the HKFS merely called on the Hong Kong and British governments to adopt “an enlightened and liberal attitude” so as to avoid the “loss of confidence in the authorities.” The HKFS even went on to acknowledge the liberal attitude of the government in the past:

Though the political set-up of Hong Kong is not a democracy, it has proved in the past not too unwilling to take note of public opinion.⁴⁶

In addition, the campaign was described as a means for the government to promote the stability of Hong Kong:

Language is an object of emotion. When the governed feel that their mother tongue is respected as oneof [sic] the official languages of the place, it would strengthen their sense of belonging to Hong Kong, and thus promote stability of Hong Kong.⁴⁷

And the campaign was also seen as a means to foster cooperation:

A government administered in the language of the majority is closer to the governed than one administered in a foreign language. This would mean greater ease and greater inducement to co-operating [sic] with the Government.⁴⁸

In short, although the HKFS was aware of the lack of democracy in Hong Kong, it only demanded that the government display a liberal attitude. The student leaders did not challenge but rather acknowledged the colonial government. The objective of the campaign was even depicted as a means to strengthen the governance and stability of the colony. The evidence presented above shows that the opposition towards the colonial regime was limited to the cultural domain, while the political institutions, namely the material domain, remained unchallenged.

Among the radical wing, on the other hand, anti-colonial rhetoric was sometimes employed and the colonial regime was often criticized. For example, the campaign was described as “the prelude of anti-colonial revolution” and colonialism as “cultural invasion” in an article published in *The 70's Biweekly*.⁴⁹ However, the magazine did not launch any substantial action against colonial rule, despite its active role in other social movements such as the “Protect Tiao-yu Tai” movement. Moreover, in another article printed on the same page of the above-cited critique, Hong Kong people were described as “obedient citizens” (*shunmin* 顺民), and “the law” was merely a tool to rule them.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the author of the article argues that the government would meet the demands

45 James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the HKFS to Antony Royle, 22 July 1971.

46 HKFS, “Position paper of the Hong Kong Federation of Students,” 22 July 1971.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Tsoi 1971.

50 Chan 1973.

of the campaign, as granting legal status to the Chinese language was harmless to the colonial rule and Hong Kong people's legal status would not be raised.

In summary, even though the leaders of the Chinese language campaign were aware of the undemocratic situation of the colonial regime, they did not mobilize any substantial movement to challenge the colonial rule. On the contrary, the campaign was pitched as a measure for the colonial government to improve its governance and the stability of the colony. This led the HKFS to describe the campaign, in a review published ten years later, as a "reformist movement," which focused only on culture but not on Hong Kong's future and statehood.⁵¹ The Chinese language campaign therefore accords with Chatterjee's notion of anti-colonial nationalism, where threats to national culture are strongly resisted but political institutions are surrendered.

Divergences between the Two Chinese Nationalisms

In addition to the defence of national culture and the surrender of the material domain, the Chinese language campaign was also viewed as a nationalist movement by the participants. In the petition letter, James Wing-cheung Chui writes:

The Chinese language campaign and Protect Tiao-yu Tai Movement are in fact manifestations of the sentiments and loyalty of the Chinese towards the fatherland, and *the nationalism* must be given due respect by the Hong Kong government (as the British government did).⁵²

Here, the Chinese language campaign is not only described as nationalism but is also associated with the "Protect Tiao-yu Tai" movement. At first glance, the campaign seems to be merely an extension into Hong Kong of China's Chinese nationalism. However, as I argue in this section, the "China nationalism" exhibited in the campaign differed significantly from that expressed in China, even though the ethnonym of "Chinese" applies to both.

To fully understand the Chinese language campaign, it is important to be aware of the social context in which it took place. Although calls for Chinese to be recognized as an official language appeared as early as 1964, the Chinese language campaign only developed into a fully-fledged social movement after the Hong Kong leftist riots in 1967. Influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China and orchestrated by the local branch of the Chinese Communist Party, the riots were triggered by a dispute over wages and working hours that had escalated. They lasted more than six months during which time pro-Beijing nationalists assaulted the colonial police, burned cars and made bombs in the science laboratories of pro-Beijing schools. By the end of the riots, the official death toll was 51, including ten police officers. At least 800 were injured in the riots and more than 300 others were injured in bomb explosions.⁵³

Ironically, the radical activities of the pro-Beijing nationalists enhanced the colonial government's popularity and legitimacy. The events of 1967 served as proof that life in Hong Kong was better than in China and that any anti-British campaign would only do more harm than good. The riots and associated violence confirmed what the Hong Kong people had learned from the media about the extremism of the Cultural Revolution. When the Hong Kong people were forced to choose between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and colonial Hong Kong, most of them sided with the colonial regime. Meanwhile, they increasingly considered themselves as members of a community that was separate from the Chinese in mainland China.⁵⁴

51 HKFS 1983.

52 James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the HKFS to Antony Royle, 22 July 1971. Emphasis added.

53 Carroll 2007.

54 Ibid.

Against this backdrop, the participants of the Chinese language campaign were careful to distance themselves from the pro-Beijing nationalists. One case in point was their emphasis on peaceful means of protest. As Chui states in the petition letter:

One significant aspect of the movement is that all along, only peaceful means, such as public poll, forums, signature campaigns etc, were employed.⁵⁵

The tendency to dissociate themselves from the Chinese Communists was also displayed in *The 70's Biweekly*. An article entitled, "The declaration before action," emphatically states that the author was no comrade of the communists:

If we are comrades of the communists, "how to act" is not a problem at all. Because "all capitalism, colonialism, fascism regimes are reactionary evil forces," because "all reactionary evil forces are paper tigers," because "we have to unite all the oppressed in the world and eradicate the paper tigers," we can therefore claim that our action is revolution. *But are we comrades of the communists? I at least am not.*⁵⁶

The declaration goes on to disapprove of the violent means employed by the communists:

If we are believers of violence, we can easily decide to assassinate some high-ranking officials, kidnap some prominent figures and terrorize the government into compromise. But nowadays, are violent means the only choice? At least to me, my answer is a clear "No."⁵⁷

The author ends by declaring that:

The door to revolution has been closed, the path to violence has ended, the remaining path is the hardest one: the path of non-violent civil rights.⁵⁸

The author not only explicitly denies any association with the communists but also voices disapproval of the means adopted by the pro-Beijing rioters. Moreover, he expresses an antipathy towards the two Chinese states in China and Taiwan:

Taiwan is not ideal; mainland China is worse. We are forced to stay on this barren island. Today, no one would doubt the evilness of colonialism. But on this barren island, even if we admit to it, we cannot destroy it. Just because we want a more comfortable life. Therefore, among Taiwan, mainland China, and Hong Kong, I chose Hong Kong. We can say, *I am willing to be colonized.*⁵⁹

Clearly, despite the frequent referencing of the rhetoric of Chinese nationalism, the author expresses no desire to unify with China. If nationalism is considered to be the desire to form a state with co-nationals so that the "political and the national unit should be congruent,"⁶⁰ or, in Benedict Anderson's words, to form a community as "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship,"⁶¹ then the nationalistic sentiment described above differs from the nationalism

55 James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the HKFS to Antony Royle, 22 July 1971.

56 Hanmin 1970. Author's translation. Emphasis added.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid. Emphasis added.

60 Gellner 1983, 1.

61 Anderson 1991, 7.

expressed in China, even though the ethnonym of “Chinese” applies to both. The author’s nationalism does not extend to forming a single state with mainland Chinese. Furthermore, it explicitly denies any comradeship with the Chinese Communist Party.

It is worth noting that although politically there was widespread antipathy towards the Chinese governments, culturally the Chinese language campaign was associated with a pan-Chinese cultural identification, which was shared by not only mainland Chinese but also Taiwan Chinese and the Chinese diaspora.⁶² This pan-identification developed into the “democratic reunification” (*minzhu huigui* 民主回归) agenda of the 1980s, which advocated Hong Kong’s reunification as a means to democratize China.⁶³ Such optimism was quashed by the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. It is argued that the Hong Kong people would find little difficulty in embracing the “Cultural China”; however, their unwillingness to fully take on Chinese identity emanates from their reluctance to embrace the “Political China,” which they view as an illiberal regime.⁶⁴ In this sense, Hong Kong’s anti-colonial nationalism was likely a product of political contingency, rather than a result of ethno-cultural difference.

The Chinese language campaign had a different focus in terms of the language it promoted. The word Chinese (*Zhongwen*) in the campaign could have referred to at least two spoken languages, Cantonese and Mandarin. While they share the same written form, their spoken forms are vastly different. In contrast with the PRC’s policy on promoting Mandarin, the emphasis of the Chinese language campaign was on Cantonese. A definition for “Official Language” was provided in a draft ordinance proposed by the HKFS and sent to the British government as an appendix to the petition letter. It states:

“Official Language” or “法定語文” (*Fat Ting U Man*) means a language authorised for communication between Government and the public that can be demanded as of right in areas specified in this Ordinance. “Chinese,” in its oral form, means the Cantonese dialect and Mandarin.⁶⁵

A close reading of the material reveals that, first, contrary to the PRC’s instructions on promoting Mandarin, the Romanization of the term “法定語文” (*fading yuwen*) is in Cantonese (*fat ting u man*). Also, “Cantonese dialect” comes before “Mandarin” in order. Moreover, although Mandarin was mentioned in the definition, only the use of Cantonese would be guaranteed in court proceedings:

The Chief Justice shall have power to make all arrangements necessary to ensure that presiding officials of tribunals mentioned in S. 7 wishing to conduct proceedings in *Cantonese* are fully competent to do so.⁶⁶

The preference for Cantonese was stated even more plainly in the more radical *The 70’s Biweekly*:

The government asked, if Chinese were to be adopted, which dialect should be used? Before we made a decision, how can Chinese become an official language? But we all know, when they need to speak in Chinese, they will undoubtedly speak in Cantonese, even the Governor learnt Cantonese. Meanwhile, no matter which dialect you speak, the written form is the same. Therefore, it is simply an exaggeration.⁶⁷

62 Lam 2004; Veg 2017.

63 Veg 2017.

64 Mathews 1997.

65 James Wing-cheung Chui, Letter from the HKFS to Antony Royle, 9 October 1971.

66 Ibid. Emphasis added.

67 Walker 1971. Author’s translation.

Calls were made for Cantonese to be made an official language, over Mandarin. While this decision may have been owing to practical reasons – Cantonese was the most spoken language in the Chinese language family in Hong Kong – and not the result of political considerations, it points to the differences in the language preference of the two “Chinese” nationalisms.

The antipathy displayed towards the PRC government and pro-Beijing nationalists, as well as the preference for Cantonese, demonstrates that the “Chinese” nationalism exhibited during the Chinese language campaign cannot be simply reduced or identified as an extension of Chinese nationalism from China.

Conclusion

Although the literature agrees that a distinct Hong Kong identity existed as early as the 1970s, this self-identity is not regarded as a form of nationalism owing to the absence of a political aspiration. At that time, there was little call for independence or self-determination, and the democratization movement only appeared from the 1980s onward. Drawing on Chatterjee’s theory of anti-colonial nationalism, I argue that the Chinese language campaign demonstrated two crucial aspects of anti-colonial nationalism and can be regarded as a distinct form of Hong Kong (anti-colonial) nationalism that existed in the late 1960s and 1970s.

I also demonstrate the complex relationship between the two nationalisms during the Chinese language campaign. On the one hand, the ethnonym of “Chinese” was widely used and the campaign was associated with a pan-Chinese identification. On the other hand, divergences between Hong Kong anti-colonial nationalism and Chinese nationalism were clearly evident from the former’s antipathy towards the Chinese state and preference for Cantonese. Therefore, I argue that Hong Kong anti-colonial nationalism cannot be simplistically viewed as an extension of the mainland’s Chinese nationalism; it is best described as a manifestation of Chinese cultural identification that localized and transformed in Hong Kong in response to the city’s distinct geo-political situation. The willingness of the student leaders to embrace Chinese nationalism in the 1980s, despite enduring linguistic and cultural differences, also suggests that nationalism in Hong Kong was likely a product of political contingency, rather than the result of ethno-cultural differences with China.

While this paper investigates the nationalistic sentiment during colonial times, it is also worth discussing the similarities between the anti-colonial nationalism during the Chinese language campaign and contemporary nationalism in Hong Kong. Intriguingly, the dissociation between the political and cultural dimensions of Chineseness is also a recurrent theme in one of the major discourses on contemporary Hong Kong nationalism. In his *Discourse on the Hong Kong Adherents*, Chin Wan portrays Hongkongers as “the adherents of orthodox Chinese culture.”⁶⁸ He claims that the Chinese culture in mainland China is not authentic but “deformed” and “corrupted.” In addition to the destructive events of the Cultural Revolution, Communist China has abandoned orthodox religious customs, traditional written Chinese and the classical pronunciation of local Chinese languages, especially Cantonese. In contrast, these cultural elements have been preserved in Hong Kong owing to its colonization and the resulting isolation from the Chinese state. Such an account of Hong Kong nationalism is not necessarily a total rejection of Chinese culture and pan-Chinese identification. The analysis in this paper shows that such a complex relationship with Chineseness is not unique to contemporary Hong Kong nationalism but rather has been a feature of Hong Kong identity since colonial times.

Although Chatterjee’s framework offers a useful starting point to explore the nationalistic sentiments in colonial Hong Kong, the case of the Chinese language campaign raises the question of whether it is possible to separate the cultural from the political, or in Chatterjee’s words, the spiritual from the material? While the campaign was non-political in aim, many of the actions were political;

68 Chin 2013.

it was a political movement that involved protest and petition in order to put forward new legislation. James Chui, a student leader of the campaign, even claimed that the status of the language was a political matter. Owing to the intertwined nature of the cultural and the political and the fact that many of the cultural issues in modern societies are to a large extent matters of policy, it is questionable whether one can truly protect a national culture without resorting to any political means. The separation between the material and the spiritual might not be as rigid as Chatterjee seems to suggest.

Furthermore, the definition of politics itself can be fuzzy and problematic. According to some definitions, collective action is inherently political regardless of the goal and so an apolitical nationalist movement is by definition impossible. Instead of rigidly following the distinction between the material and spiritual, a more fruitful way to use Chatterjee's theory is to focus on its emphasis on the lack of intention to challenge the current regime, which is often the goal of classical nationalism. It is relevant to the study of Hong Kong nationalism as this trait resembles certain versions of contemporary Hong Kong nationalism. For instance, Brian Fong Chi-hang proposes a form of self-governance that seeks to maximize autonomy without changing Hong Kong's current constitutional arrangements.⁶⁹ It also resembles Hong Kong stateless nationalism in terms of its political goal, with the exception that anti-colonial nationalism occurs in a colonial setting while the context of stateless nationalism is the globalizing world.⁷⁰

In addition, it is worth drawing a comparison with the version of nationalism upheld by Ho Kai 何啟 in the late Qing period. Ho was a vocal supporter of the Chinese Revolution, but he also believed that a Western presence was beneficial for China. Having witnessed the prosperity and political stability in Hong Kong, he proposed that commerce and a constitutional monarchy similar to that of England would be the cure for China.⁷¹ Ho's total adoption of Western statecraft and commerce resembles anti-colonial nationalism's surrender of the material domain, despite that his concern was China, which was not a colony but an empire. This raises questions about the uniqueness of "anti-colonial" in anti-colonial nationalism.

In a sense, Chatterjee's anti-colonial nationalism is better understood as a "nationalism of the weak": it is a compromise made by the weak when head-to-head confrontation with the powerful has no chance of success. This logic applies not only to the resistance against colonialism but also to situations such as when late-Qing China faced the economic and military might of Western countries and the Hong Kong people face the Chinese superpower today.

One limitation of this paper is that it focuses on only two organizations in the Chinese language campaign. The campaign was joined by a wide variety of actors and the political inclinations of the different groups could influence their expression of nationalism. For example, pro-PRC magazines like *Panku* 盤古 could display nationalistic sentiments that are closer to Chinese nationalism. The current paper is unable to provide a comprehensive view of the whole campaign and I invite future work to explore the nationalistic sentiments of other actors in the campaign.

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69 Fong 2015.

70 Ho 2023; Fong 2019.

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