Research Centre for Sustainable Hong Kong [1]
City University of Hong Kong

Policy Paper 4
Re-examining Hong Kong Political Identities:
Beyond a Zero-sum Relationship[2]

Linda Chelan Li[3], H. Christoph Steinhardt[4]
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Main thesis

The conventional wisdom in society and policy circles is that local and national identities in Hong Kong are in a zero-sum relationship. Our analysis cast doubts on whether this assumption is empirically justified. We therefore argue that the two identities should *not* be measured as two poles of a single attitude, as practiced by many studies. This provides not only a more

conceptually sound and empirically accurate estimate of identity trends, but also shows that local identity is much more consensual and less politicized than often assumed. Such a reinterpretation will be conducive to the development of a more effective approach towards a sustainable society. This policy paper summarizes this analysis and points to a few possible directions for practical application.

Questions

1. Over the first decade after the handover of sovereignty in 1997, the gradual reunion of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and Mainland China seemed to have worked reasonably well. Somewhere during the late 2000s, this trend seems to have taken a U-turn evident in episodes of protest that increasingly carried antagonistic sentiments against China, and culminated in the 2014 Occupy Central Movement. Public opinion polls likewise suggested a gravitation towards local identity and a small pocket of vocal activists began to deliberate the notion of independence from China.

2. These shifts in political identity in post-1997 Hong Kong provoke important questions that have not yet been sufficiently addressed. How should local and national identities be captured in surveys to inform academic and public discussion? How exactly has political identification shifted? Is it a matter of rising localism, a diminishing sense of nationhood, or both? How can we explain the shift? This study provides the following answers.

Measuring identities

3. Local and national identities should not be measured as opposite poles of one attitude measured in a single categorical survey item (such as, "Hong Konger"-"Hong Konger in China"-"Chinese from Hong Kong"-"Chinese"). A preferable measure are two separate identity strength items (such as, strength of identifying as "Hong Konger"/"Chinese" from 0-10).

4. The reasons are as follows: first, the single categorical indicator assumes that local and national identities are two poles of the same attitude (and, hence, in a zero-sum relationship and negatively correlated). A long line of research from Europe has shown that this is not usually the case. Second, the single-item indicator does not allow examining how the two identities are related and if their relationship changes over time. Our findings confirm that the assumption of a unidimensionality of local and national identities in Hong Kong does not hold. We also find indications that respondents conflate their two identities when they answer the categorical survey item, and that therefore those who opt for the *category* "Hong Konger" do not primarily express their strong identification as "Hong Kongers," but their weak identification as "Chinese."

5. Examining the trend between 1997 and 2017 (Figure 1) with the preferable identity strength items provided by the HKU Public Opinion Programme (HKU POP), our analysis shows that: first, the strength of Hong Kong identity (from weakest "0" to strongest "10") has hardly budged. Although it dipped slightly in the late-1990s and early-2000s and had a miniscule uptick after 2011, it has hovered closely around 8 points throughout the period. This has not changed until now. Even during the tumultuous second half of 2014 and the following period of bourgeoning "localism" in 2015 and 2016, Hong Kong citizens did *not* become markedly more strongly attached to Hong Kong.
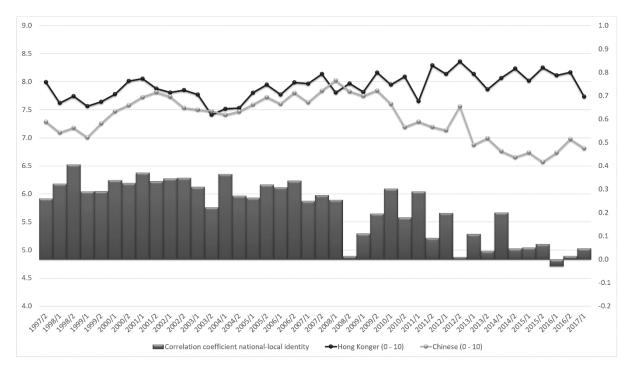

Figure 1: Scaled two-item measure of political identities in Hong Kong, 1997-2017

Notes: HKU POP data. Semi-annual average values have been calculated when more than one survey was available. The left axis displays national and local identity strengths (0 to 10). We do not display the full scale here because we intend to visualize details and regard values between 4 and 9 to be the realistic range of population mean variation. The right axis displays the correlation coefficient between the two items (-1 to 1). Note that this analysis was done without survey weights, leading to miniscule differences with population means published on the HKU POP website.

6. Second, what did change was the strength of identification as "Chinese" (again, from weakest "0" to strongest "10"). Mean national identity strength inched up gradually from a mean of 7 points in the first half of 1999, stabilized at around 7.5 points during 2002–2005 and then continued to rise to just over 8 points in the first half of 2008. A weakening set in from the second half of 2008 onwards. Until mid-2013, national identity strength dropped 17% to 6.9 points. The gradual downward trend has since

continued, albeit at a slower and unsteady pace, to 6.6 points by mid-2015 and 6.8 by mid-2017. While this appears less dramatic than some survey findings with categorical indicators suggest, it should be noted that for the youngest cohort of 19–29 years of age, Chinese identity strength reached low points of 4.6 in mid-2016 and 4.4 in mid-2017.[5]

7. Third, the bars in Figure 1 show that the correlation between national and local identity remained robustly positive at around 0.3 until 2008. Those with strong Chinese identity tended to report strong Hong Konger identity and vice versa. Since 2008, however, the correlation has been on an unsteady but palpable downward trend. Notably, in mid-2016 the association has veered into the negative for the first time since 1997. Still, in contrast to the assumption inherent in the single categorical survey item, national and local identities have most of the time not been in a zero-sum, but in a positive-sum relationship.

Further analysis

8. Trying to explain the strength of national identity, we derive three sets of arguments from academic and public debates: 1) the structural argument stressing socio-structural variables such as class, education and age; 2) the grievance account stressing the impact of popular dissatisfaction with various livelihood issues; and 3) the trust argument emphasizing the role of confidence in the nation's highest political authority in fostering a sense of belonging to the nation.

9. Through regression analysis we find that trust in the central government is indeed a highly significant factor to explain national identity strength. In contrast, class and education do not have a significant impact on national identity. Only the youngest cohort of 18–29 year olds stands out for its significantly weaker national identity in comparison with those 60 and older, the group with the strongest national identity among all age groups. Peoples' livelihood concerns, measured as the extent of dissatisfaction with "present livelihood conditions in Hong Kong", also exerts an impact in the expected direction—more dissatisfaction leading to a weaker national identity—but it becomes insignificant once trust is controlled for.

10. When we then compared the effects of trust and age on Chinese identity, we found that in 2013 the differences between the youngest and oldest groups' identity strength appears large at 2.62 points. However, when other variables, trust in particular, are controlled for, the gap shrinks to 1.06 points (5.97 and 7.03 for the youngest and oldest respectively). Around 39% of the identity gap between young and old is due to age-differences in political trust. In contrast, the discrepancy in national identity strength along values of political trust is much larger and highly stable. Even when controlling

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[5] https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/english/popexpress/ethnic/chicitizen/poll/chicitizen_poll_chart.html

for all other variables, it stands at a whopping 4.19 points (5.15 and 9.34 for the lowest and highest trust levels respectively).

11. Although our cross-sectional data does not permit to directly examine the causes of change over time, comparing the over-time trajectories of trust in the central government and national identity supports the impression that trust is a very important driver of the trend since 1997 (Figure 2): like national identity, political trust (from 1, lowest, to 5, highest) also gradually increased from between 2.81 in 1997 to 3.53 in the first half of 2008. Subsequently, it also went on a decline back to 2.81 in late 2012. We also find that the correlation between trust and national identity has increased over time, reaching an all-time high of 0.51 in 2013/1. This very strong association suggests that by 2013, feeling "Chinese" and trusting "the central government in Beijing" has taken on an almost synonymous connotation for Hong Kong citizens.
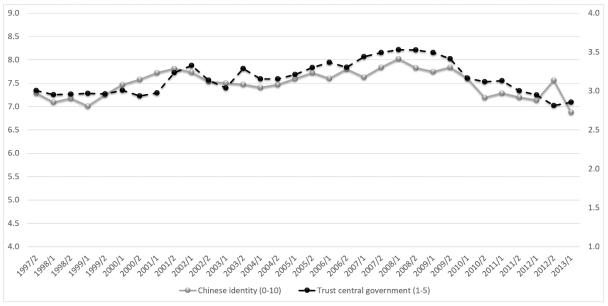

Figure 2: Trust in the central government, 1997-2013

Note: HKU POP data. Semi-annual average values have been calculated when more than one survey was available. The left axis displays national identity strength (0 to 10). The right axis display trust in the central government (1 to 5). We do not display the full range of the scale here because we intend to visualize details.

12. When we applied our explanatory model to local identity we could further confirm that local and national identities are distinct attitudes instead of opposites of a unidimensional concept. If the latter were true, we would find the correlates of local identity to be opposite of those for national identity. While this is the case for age (in contrast to Chinese identity, the youngest cohort has a stronger local identity than the oldest), many variables point in the same direction (for instance, discontent with livelihood conditions also reduces local identity strength, but here the effect is significant). Importantly, trust in the central government plays no role whatsoever for

formation of local identity. Thus, in contrast to widely held assumptions, local identity is *not* politicized over attitudes towards the Chinese government and much more consensual than previously thought.

Summing up

13. To conclude, our work takes a close look into empirical evidence on the identity shift in post-colonial Hong Kong. Identity scholarship and the present analysis suggest that Chinese and Hong Kong identities should be understood and measured as two related, but clearly distinct attitudes. The identity strength of "Hong Konger" has essentially remained stable and unpolitical. It is the sense of belonging to China that has become weaker and increasingly partisan. The characterization of the identity shift since 1997 therefore requires a subtle, but significant, reinterpretation. If a much-discussed "rise of localism" in Hong Kong implies that people have increasingly identified with being a "Hong Konger," the available empirical evidence does not provide much support for such a reading.

14. Trust in the central government emerged as the dominant factor to account for the strength of national identity. An important caveat of these findings is that the direction of causality between political trust and national identity can go both ways. Although we surmise that for Hong Kong people trust in the central government representing the political community of China is logically prior to the identification with that community, this question cannot be empirically resolved with the cross-sectional data at hand.

15. This research did not examine the driving forces behind the up and down of trust in the central government. However, inferences from previous scholarship, experiments with indicators of confidence in "One Country, Two Systems" as a predictor of political trust, and anecdotal observations support the conjecture that policy from Beijing matters, and an approach perceived by the general public as increasingly interventionist is driving the decline of political trust, which translates into a weakening national identity. Why this decline began in 2008 is open to future research. Yet, the period prior to 2008 shows that this process is neither inevitable nor irreversible – a finding which is worth emphasis for its practical policy implications.

16. A robust identification with China among Hong Kongers is a prerequisite for the effective functioning of the "One Country, Two Systems" concept. At the same time, local identity will remain a stable feature of political identities in Hong Kong. Importantly, local and national identities do not, contrary to conventional discourse, necessarily constitute a zero-sum game. Decision-makers should thus ponder two inter-related questions: how can they foster a form of patriotism in Hong Kong that remains compatible with local identity? What constitutes the optimal approach to encourage Hong Kong people to re-embrace their Chinese identity as they did prior to 2008?

Some key elements in a renewed policy approach

17. *Confidence in the compatibility of national and local identities.* Our analysis shows clearly that the two are distinct attitudes which have been compatible with each other. There is no inherent zero-sum relationship between the two. Recent tensions (post-2008) are empirical contingencies rather than a result of an inevitable trend. Public policy in the HKSAR and Beijing needs to start from this premise and adopt an approach which embraces **both** national and local identities.

18. *Enhanced respect for diversity values in governance*. Such a renewed policy approach will benefit from an enhanced respect for diversity values in the governance of HKSAR matters by both the HKSAR government and the central government. This is especially the case as we have shown that the key factor underlining a weakening of national identity is the decline in trust in the central government. There is reason to surmise that the fear over the loss of autonomy and diversity in Hong Kong as a result of central policy has precipitated the decline in trust in the central government in recent years. Diversity values are an integral part of the governance of cosmopolitan cities like Hong Kong and a desirable objective in the strategic vision of developing a modern governance system enshrined at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017. Diversity is also a constituent part of the spirit of "One Country, Two Systems" under the Hong Kong Basic Law, which has been repeatedly reaffirmed by successive national leaderships. A more effective implementation of the diversity principle will bring positive and immediate dividends not only to the local governance of HKSAR goverment, but also to the execution of the national vision of developing a modern governance system in line with its broader national development strategy towards a 'fully developed modern socialist country' by the middle of this century.

19. *Resilience in proactive engagement and communications.* Building trust requires patience and time. Resilience and commitment is key to effective implementation of the renewed approach. The public looks up to the government, in Hong Kong as well as in Beijing, to take a firm lead in this process, notwithstanding frustrations and difficulties. Provocations should be avoided from all sides, and especially from government and officials.

20. *Delivering policy innovations to improve general well-being of the less advantaged groups.* While livelihood concerns do not have a direct impact on identity concerns, as our analysis discovers, they are closely connected to incidences of tensions including those between Hong Kong and mainland communities. They may also contribute to individuals' inclination to be mobilized into street protests. Priorities should be adjusted to address the concern for an adequate supply of essential public goods and resources, including the mitigation of an increasing wealth/income gap, a reversal of the deterioration of housing conditions for an increasing segment of the Hong Kong population, and meeting the challenges to sustainable society, economic growth and

social justice. Improving socio-economic well-being is the 'bread and butter' of governance in all societies, and the bedrock of a well-balanced social psyche and strong socio-political entity. The HKSAR Government has started moves in this direction. The challenge is how to sustain the efforts and improve further.

Conclusion

21. In this Policy Paper we point out that much of the on-going discussion over national and local identities is misplaced. Hongkongers have since the mid of the 20th century developed a strong local identity and this has little to do with political events in recent years. Their national identity has no doubt seen a weakening after 2008, especially amongst the younger cohorts, and this is linked to a declining trust in the central government over the same period. However, there is no inherent zero-sum relationship between the local and national identities; indeed, the two have been compatible and in a positive-sum relationship for an extended period before and after the decline in national identity set in in 2008. Policy-makers should not forget that Hong Kong people's identification as "Chinese" and their confidence in the central government have steadily strengthened between 1999 and 2008. Although this period is different from the current one, it is worth carefully re-examining which dynamics may have contributed to that and how they could be reinvigorated.

22. We believe that the findings of our study have significant implications for our understanding of the identity issue and public policy. The analysis suggests that for practical purposes, we should have confidence in the mutual compatibility of national and local identities in Hong Kong, and focus our policy on mitigating or reversing the decline in national identity after 2008, rather than attacking the surge on "localism." We have suggested a few core elements in a renewed policy approach with a view to more effectively achieve this objective. These are understandably broad conceptual outlines and serve a sensitizing and steering function only. We hope to develop more details of this approach in our later work in the near future. Comments and suggestions, and ideas for collaborations are most welcome.