



# Contested Identities and Citizenship in the New Normal: The Dilemma of Hong Kong Youth in an Evolving Landscape

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## Abstract

In the new normal that emerged following Hong Kong's political transition in 1997, the territory has experienced a complex interplay between contested notions of citizenship and the evolving perspectives of its youth regarding identity and belonging. This review explores how the evolution of Hong Kong's unique socio-cultural identity about mainland China, alongside the governance challenges of this new era, has influenced the experiences and outlooks of Hong Kong youth. The key argument of this review traces the impacts of socio-economic shifts, educational policies, and generational dynamics on how the city's youth navigate the multifaceted dimensions of citizenship and self-identification. The analysis highlights the crucial role of educational experiences in cultivating civic consciousness among young people amidst the prevailing turbulence. By examining the complexities of reconciling citizenship rights with fluid identities, the conclusion offers valuable insights into the nuances of fostering inclusive societies in the inter-related rapidly changing contexts of the new normal.

**Keywords:** Civic consciousness; One Country, Two Systems Hong Kong

**Abbreviations:** OCTS: One Country, Two Systems; CEPA: Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement; ITS: Individual Traveller's Scheme

## Citizenship and its linkage with identity

The notion of citizenship has long been on a contentious site in which the essence of citizenship values, the multifaceted dimensions of citizenship and self-identification are contested. Regarding the boundaries of citizenship, the behaviours exhibited during the COVID pandemic have prompted substantial discourse and divergence. In certain regions, there exists a pronounced sense of civic responsibility. On the one hand, a significant portion of the population promptly fully engaged with surveillance applications to assist in pandemic mitigation efforts for the Singapore government. On the other hand, there was remarkably public resistance to measures such as social distancing or even the essential act of wearing masks in the United Kingdom. These phenomena represent discussions and debates surrounding what can be termed uniform citizenship, the sequential identity and values. The problematic citizenship practices are observable globally, with Hong Kong as a significant case study across interdisciplinary domains. In contrast, the situation in Hong Kong is considerably more intricate. Hong Kong's unique historical

context and geographical significance have led to the frameworks for civic discourse being frequently shaped by various civil society organizations and scholarly debates from diverse locales.

Generally speaking, the 1997 handover marked a profound turning point in Hong Kong's history, initiating a significant transformation in its cultural changes, socio-economic development and political landscape. While the "One Country, Two Systems (OCTS)" framework aims to ensure a high degree of autonomy, the subsequent decades have witnessed a complex interplay between evolving notions of citizenship and the identities of Hong Kong's youth. While citizenship can be understood through various lenses, including individual identity shaped by specific conditions and collective identity arising from social affiliations (Kennedy, 2010), the framework surrounding identity remains a contentious issue. Notably, when identity is disrupted by broader contextual changes—such as the transitional citizenship identity experienced by citizens of the United Kingdom—the anxieties and struggles of these individuals should not be overlooked.

Considering backgrounds like these, the primary objective of this review is to enhance the understanding of responsive citizenship within a rapidly changing environment. This concept is informed by Hong Kong's distinctive historical context and developmental trajectory over recent decades. The subsequent sections will address widely acknowledged contentious issues, such as the decline of Hong Kong's longstanding status as a leading film hub and the transformation of Hong Kong's identity, using these as illustrative examples.

### Hong Kong people felt great in the past

First, it is necessary to address the disparity between the traditional practices of a colonial context and the contemporary approaches that increasingly advocate cultural relativism and recognise the distinctiveness of each field site. Thus, this section aims to explore and analyse how the struggles for identity among the people of Hong Kong have given rise to activism and localism following 1997. The concept of identity has been interpreted in various ways within literature. Brown and Harris [1] contend that identity is essential for individuals, as its absence can lead to difficulties, hopelessness, and depression. In contrast, Gee [2] views identity as an analytical lens through which to understand education and society.

Among so many scholars, an interpretation by Isin and Wood [3] is the most reflective one, which describes the conceptual difficulties of the linkage between citizenship and identity reverberating across different domains. This interpretation is a comparative reflective dimension to explain why the domestic community reverberated with the noise of the distinction between Hong Kong and Chinese identities. Meanwhile, Aneshensel and Pearlin [4] confirm that social status directly impacts identity. In general, identity discourses have swept various people, regions, and all walks of life, influencing different political spectrums and diverse cultural practices. In the minds of some political parties and their believers, there has already been a further embracing of the rise of a local-oriented approach in Hong Kong. However, a growing body of literature counts the rise of domination and integration of mainland Chinese as the key nurturing factors for such a development Arat, Kerelian and Dhar [5].

Overall, the contradictions between Chinese and Chinese identity are caused by the latest non-stop widening distinctions between the two regions. For decades, Hong Kong has long been regarded as the best option for giving a demonstration to the mainland government and its people. This was because, before the political transition from Britain to China, the socio-economic development and political climate in Hong Kong had significantly advanced compared to mainland China. At that moment, a commonly held belief was that the capitalist economy had much greater success than the mainland socialist. Very likely, the majority of the people of Hong Kong had a commonly held mindset- they were much better off than the mainland people. At the same time, due to a remarkable series of comprehensive

reforms in educational area and legal aspects, Hong Kong people also think that their society is much more civilised when compared with the development in mainland China, referring to an all-around arrangement in daily practice to almost all domains of life, for example, the well-planned public housing system and criminal justice system. All of these practices made the people of Hong Kong inevitably consider that they were standing in a higher rank. Some of these thoughts have solid rational reasons behind them, but they are not emotionally fragile. For example, Cantonese is a domestic language in Hong Kong, and it has long been regarded as one of the most challenging languages in the world. Cantonese has up to nine tones, while only four in Mandarin. Compared with the total number of Mandarin speakers, the number of Cantonese speakers is much lower. However, such a problematic language has covered a significant population worldwide. One of the main reasons for this is the great success of Hong Kong films sweeping worldwide in the past few decades.

### The fall of the film market

The golden ages of Hong Kong films and her success from an industrial city to a services-led cosmopolitan further fostered the solid mind of Hong Kong people regarding pride as Hong Kongese because, at least, they can speak Cantonese at will in quite several Southeast regions (Although the Chinese from Guangdong also speak Cantonese). Nevertheless, the influence of Cantonese offers reasons for the Hongkongese to grant them a sense of prestige. However, more people are now interested in learning Mandarin and even migrating to China for opportunities. Even when we return to our Hong Kong film market, which has once swept all over the world for decades, it has now been outshone. At that moment, Hong Kong films are actively producing the meaning of existence for the local population Yau [6]. Abbas [7] considers such a development due to the rise of commercialism, and the potential profits from mainland China are obviously much higher than the local market or even the lump sum of Southeast Asia. We witnessed a significant deterioration of the Cantonese film market, and it has experienced a sharp drop in production, leading to a significant decline in box office receipts in the past two decades Pang [8].

Contrary to the fall of the influence of Cantonese films, we have seen the rise of Mandarin films simultaneously. Due to the openness of the mainland market by CEPA--Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA is a trade agreement between the mainland and Hong Kong to enhance the two regions' long-term economic and trade development), local investors can now do their business in mainland China by specific regulations, i.e., a certain proportion of the artists and front-line workers have to be employed from the mainland. At the same time, the involvement of Hong Kong elements is still one of the critical parts of the branding of Hong Kong films. However, it is believed that such a practice is a trick for producers to widen their potential markets or fulfil the requirements of CEPA. For instance, there is a movie called "Pacific Rim" where, suddenly, a scene takes

place in Hong Kong. However, the surrounding plot is unrelated to Hong Kong. It feels like *Godzilla*, another Hollywood movie, but it also suddenly features Hong Kong. After some sequences of action, the plot related to Hong Kong is gone. To a certain extent, such a loss of domestic cultural practices can explain the rise of a local-oriented approach, which refers to the intention to urge local people to reclaim their destiny and integrity and to retain their unique cultural features as different from China. Chu and Chu [9]. Based on the mentioned review, the older generation in Hong Kong probably had a good journey in their early days. Moreover, when we talk about the negative feelings and images towards mainland China, it should come from those older groups instead of the younger ones. When we talk about the noise referring to the unhappiness of Chinese identity, the youth should not be regarded as the priority. Nevertheless, the fall of the film market can explain why some Hong Kong people dislike the return of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong had long been regarded as an Asian film cluster with a well-known, recognised track record. It is sad to say, however, that the Hong Kong film market has deteriorated drastically since the handover in 1997. However, the fall of the local film market should be regarded as a minor element in embracing the rise of local-first consideration. At best, it should only be viewed as one of the core forcing factors for causing discontent. Without a doubt, the negative atmosphere and hostile feelings have formed naturally and gradually, and when significant longstanding achievements have become colourless, famous actors have become widely unknown. Thus, negative feelings and atmosphere inevitably appear. However, the fundamental question is, what are the reasons that make most of those passionate participants so keen on coming out against the mainland China-oriented approach?

### Prosperity and stability under the new challenges

Hong Kong reunited with China in 1997. Since then, attention and discussion about the OCTS model have been prominent in both media and academic discourse. Even two decades after the handover of British sovereignty to Chinese sovereignty, Hong Kong continues to capture international attention Summer [10]. A considerable segment of the Hong Kong population, along with many scholars, initially anticipated that this transformative shift in governance would generate numerous opportunities and foster a strong sense of belonging among residents towards mainland China. Nevertheless, enduring cultural differences have contributed to a persistent legacy of mistrust towards the mainland.

According to So [11], some citizens seek to preserve Hong Kong's distinct identity rather than allow it to be redefined as merely another Chinese city, while others simultaneously maintain a positive perspective towards mainland China. Chan and Lin [12] argue that Hong Kong has been characterised by economic optimism juxtaposed with political pessimism prior to and following 1997. However, due to successive patriotic

campaigns by the government and a relatively close socio-economic relationship with mainland China, the first decade post-handover can be regarded as a honeymoon period, during which the majority of Hong Kong residents held a favourable view of the mainland Mathews, Ma, and Lui [13]. The more socio-economic integration between the two regions, the more significant conflicts will appear. The impact of the Individual Traveller's Scheme (ITS) can be viewed as a core source of the conflict. Theoretically, after a century-long separation, a tight connection between mainland China and Hong Kong was supposed. However, the expected solid relationship with the mainland authorities has yet to materialise, and the concept of citizenship has become increasingly complex for many residents of Hong Kong. The handover did not come along with a solid sense of Chinese identity, after the mentioned honeymoon period. We could see a rise in tensions and conflicts between the two regions, leading to growing animosity towards mainland China and its government. The situation is deteriorating for a while. Apart from the mentioned IVS, many Hong Kong residents recall the contentious debate surrounding the national education proposal, which is often seen as a catalyst for mainland-unfriendly practices in the community and the outbreak of social events. Another longstanding pressing issue is the respect accorded to the national flag. Contrary to the concerned IVS and national education proposal, the notional flag has long been regarded as a symbolic controversy for the authorities to strengthen identity-related policies in Hong Kong.

The notion of identity is crucial when considering the acquisition of citizenship. After the handover, the mentioned cultural differences and socio-political changes have forced Hong Kong people often have to face challenges and impacts. Most importantly, the interactions between mediated national imaginations and social experiences have become more complicated Ma [14]. Thus, the actions and reactions of the youth have become more proactive or even aggressive, which can be understood in this context. However, whether these ideas and behaviours are rational will undoubtedly evolve into another significant area of debate. In short, questions of identity and responsibility remain central issues in Hong Kong. These inquiries arise from residents and an international audience; some actions and responses from the HKSAR government suggest an intention to reshape the relationship between the government and its citizens.

Overall, Hong Kong youth may have yet to learn and find difficulties in facing the uncertainty and peculiar changes appearing in Hong Kong, as the initial agreement in Basic Law states that Hong Kong will retain its unique system for 50 years until 2046. However, the way of life and the broader contexts under implementing the OCTS framework have already brought about tremendous changes in different aspects Au & Kennedy [15]. Thus, the concerns of the youth and their reactions are understandable. The fundamental question is how to make the young people in Hong Kong undergo the challenges and difficulties. The road to

building a stable society is not easy as it depends on how well an individual realises the notion of rights and can claim citizenship simultaneously (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). With this background, no one should wonder why the rise of the mainland-unfriendly approach has become a common phenomenon among young people. One of the potential reasons is the notion of uncertainties and the inquiries of identity across the youth.

### Hong Kong youth felt uncertain

According to So [11], despite Hong Kong being established as a British colony and severed from communist China after 1949, many residents initially identified as Chinese. For Faure [16], however, many Hong Kong people viewed themselves as sojourners, lacking any intention to settle permanently, leading to a stronger orientation toward China than Hong Kong. For a long, numerous research parties have focused on public policy in Hong Kong and have engaged with young people to explore their perspectives on the OCTS framework and its practical implications. When these centres' parties solicit opinions on identity, a predominant response among youth is the assertion that "I am a Hongkongese," whereas "I am Chinese" is seldom articulated. This phenomenon is ironic for certain political factions, particularly since Hong Kong has been integrated into mainland China for two decades. The fundamental issue lies not in the perceived shortcomings of identifying as Chinese but in identifying the underlying factors contributing to this unexpected development. From the moment of the handover, there was a prevailing sense of prosperity and stability overshadowed by the influence of mainland China Mathews, Ma & Lui [13].

To a certain extent, such a situation may answer a longstanding question from the majority-- Why has the mainland government actively emphasised nationalism in Hong Kong, and what has led to the sudden rise of an unfriendly atmosphere in public discourse? These inquiries are vital, especially considering that many Hong Kong residents are expected to maintain a sense of national identity. Ma [14] notes that enthusiastic responses from the Hong Kong populace reflected a solid nationalist sentiment when the previous natural disaster struck China. This suggests that, from the outset, domestic opinions often stress that the preference for a mainland unfriendly-oriented atmosphere is not an accurate interpretation of public sentiment. Instead, many residents—particularly the younger generation—call for a comprehensive overhaul of the territory's political system without explicitly advocating for sovereignty or disconnection from China Pepper [17].

This raises the question: What accounts for the sudden emergence of mainland unfriendly-oriented controversies in public discourse? There is a widely held belief across various sectors of Hong Kong society that the local-first slogan has gained traction due to pressure from the mainland government. This phenomenon can be viewed as a response to the socio-economic integration between mainland China and Hong Kong.

### Competition for education resources

At its peak, approximately 40% of the 90,000 annual births in Hong Kong were attributed to mainland parents, which placed significant pressure on the city's healthcare, education, and welfare systems. In response, the HKSAR government enacted measures to restrict mainland pregnant women from giving birth in Hong Kong, successfully reducing the number of births from over 35,000 annually to around 800 since 2013. However, the government needs to take adequate steps to plan to integrate these cross-border children into the local community, thereby exacerbating existing social tensions.

Without a doubt, there is a need for detailed planning regarding the number of these students returning to Hong Kong, and a lack of support for their integration has resulted in overcrowded kindergartens and primary and secondary schools. This situation has caused widespread dissatisfaction, particularly among local youth. The chaos has strained the workforce and resources, and the situation is similarly concerning in the tertiary sector; before 1997, less than one-third of research students were from the mainland, but now, over two-thirds are. Despite initiatives like the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship introduced in 2010 to attract global talent, most fellowship recipients still originate from the mainland. The HKSAR government's policies need to address these challenges sufficiently, as there is an increasing public concern about inequality, especially among young people invested in educational policies. While the government has allocated more resources to tertiary education, including a financial incentive of HKD\$30,000 for approved self-financed degree programs, local youth still need to be more apprehensive about the future. They are apprehensive about the rapid increase in mainland students occupying educational resources and the growing emphasis on Chinese elements in primary and secondary school curricula. This has prompted many young people to question the long-term implications for Hong Kong's identity and educational landscape.

The HKSAR government did not estimate the percentage of the total student population in an earlier advance. The government should estimate how many of these children would return to Hong Kong, and there should be sufficient support for them to blend into society. Consequently, many cross-boundary students joined Hong Kong to line up in kindergartens and primary and secondary schools. This created widespread dissatisfaction among the public, especially the youth, as they are the core shareholders in education. Such a practice brought severe chaos in the workforce and even other school resources. Even in the tertiary sector, we have noticed a significant expansion in the number of new undergraduates from the mainland. For the research degree programme, it had an upside-down development. Before 1997, less than one-third of research students came from the mainland. Up to now, we can see that more than two-thirds of the population is from the mainland. Even the HKSAR government started releasing a new scholarship (Hong Kong PhD Fellowship)



to attract talented students worldwide in 2010. However, the fellowship awardees were still mainly from the mainland. It is believed that the HKSAR government needs to pay more attention to these issues. A series of problems have been created, and people have started to question the issue of inequality and many of those are often youngsters, as they are the core stakeholders of education policies. Those poor practices make them start to rethink Hong Kong's future. They may not be concerned about the current practices as the HKSAR government has begun to put more resources into tertiary education (Apart from the mentioned fellowship scheme, the youth also can get an allowance for any approved self-finance degree programme only if the students fulfil the minimum requirement of an undergraduate degree programme). Young people are concerned about the coming generations as they have seen that the HKSAR government seems to disregard the rapid expansion of mainland students taking up more and more educational resources. Young people also have noticed that curricula in primary and secondary schools have more and more Chinese elements. Considering backgrounds like these, the mentioned inquiries of identity should be faced and tackled by the authorities.

### Conclusion

Hong Kong's journey since 1997 underscores the intricate relationship between evolving identities, citizenship, and the aspirations of its youth. The fall of the Hong Kong film market and the competition for public resources are the most representative case studies that disclose the social dynamic of the fluid linkages between Hong Kong and mainland China. The rise of the mainland-unfriendly approach may be due to the collapse of longstanding superiority among Hong Kong people. Thus, it is believed that the HKSAR government takes some proper actions or reactions to solve the conflicts and difficulties of those issues. So, specific issues should be solved with effective and sustainable tactics.

To begin with, it is necessary to bring along a new understanding and readiness regarding the ascription of citizenship and the corresponding understanding of identity in smooth practices. This is a challenging task. To a certain extent, the mentioned chaos and even conflicts have a tight connection with insufficient preparedness and promotion to the new changes of duties and roles for the young people. Suppose the young people have been well-instilled in a mindset regarding the importance and essentiality of their engagement and involvement in the integration. They may have an upside-down perspective to deal with the challenges and difficulties in the past few decades. This is because engagement and involvement do represent and link up with a vision. In the past, many people in Hong Kong talked about the Hong Kong dream or the so-called middle-class dream. The emergence of the "lying flat" phenomenon in recent years can be attributed, in part, to a deficiency in long-term objectives and overarching planning. When young individuals have the knowledge and understanding to engage in societal

development and life planning actively, their sense of agency and motivation is significantly enhanced. Undoubtedly, Hong Kong's trajectory in the new normal has been marked by profound shifts in how its youth perceive their citizenship and sense of belonging. In the near future, the authorities from both sides (Hong Kong and mainland China) need to embrace the young people with the mentioned responsive citizenship. The proposed responsive citizenship is about improving citizenship education to strengthen timely citizenship values and civic identities among the young people in Hong Kong. Such a direction has a solid foundation to support. The observations underscore how cultural differences, socio-economic transformations, educational experiences, and generational dynamics have reshaped the outlooks of Hong Kong youth in this new era. While reconciling these aspirations with the complexities of Hong Kong's new cultural and socio-political status remains a formidable challenge, necessitating a delicate balance between preserving unique socio-cultural elements and nurturing a sense of national belonging should not be a complicated task. Thus, the authorities have to take action and react to the challenges of navigating multifaceted citizenship within a rapidly changing environment by highlighting the urgent need for a more nuanced and adaptive approach to civic education. Such a direction, however, needs a curriculum fostering a strong sense of local identity and a meaningful connection to national identity, avoiding simplistic narratives and self-centred mindsets. Nevertheless, resources and support for the school management and frontline teachers should not be underestimated as their views and experiences do help the youth in making sense to the challenges and difficulties in this rapid changing globalised world Shi, Chong and Li [18]. Most importantly, teaching and learning national materials are better to be well-linked with the social dynamical worldviews. If not, the youth may not be able to voice their views with reasons.

It is posited that Chinese identity and national security will become central to the youth of Hong Kong. However, there is no universally accepted standard regarding civic identity and national security. Supporting young people in Hong Kong to develop a global perspective should not be viewed merely as a means to challenge their identity or authority. Thus, it is essential to recognize that some opinions suggest a fundamental incompatibility between local and national identification. Theoretical, Eastern and Western cultures have often occupied contradictory positions; nonetheless, the connections and collaborations between the two have persisted. The motto "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer" underscores the importance of understanding local practices and recognizing differences with other regions. A lack of clarity in these areas may expose young people to unforeseen challenges and uncertainties. Therefore, it is imperative that Hong Kong youth are adequately prepared to deal with these complexities, and that the government provides enhanced support for educators [19].

Actually, the Hong Kong government has already taken specific steps to do so. These days, authorities in Hong Kong are increasingly emphasising the need for youth to align their aspirations with domestic development initiatives, particularly those linked to national strategic plans like the Greater Bay Area and the Belt and Road Initiative. The latest educational policy changes reflect this shift, including improved pathways for Hong Kong students to study in mainland China, which aims to reduce competitive pressures. Engaging with the mainland is expected to help young individuals better understand the changes and significance of their unique identities. Most importantly, the mentioned IVS and its chaos have become less contentious. After the pandemic's significant impact on its socio-economic landscape, there is a growing trend of Hong Kong residents returning to the mainland, paralleling past experiences when the region welcomed a large influx of visitors, which led to some community challenges. After the COVID, in 2023, the increase in Hong Kong residents travelling to the mainland underscores the success of the OCTS framework, which provides a platform showing that it is possible to mitigate uncertainties regarding identity for Hong Kong citizens, especially youth. In 2024, new measures and policies, such as enhanced pension benefits for elderly residents returning to the mainland, could lead to significant positive changes. Adjusting policies to respond to these transitions may yield valuable insights into Hong Kong's long-term social development. As mentioned earlier, some of the controversies may link up to young people who need a clear vision of their future. The new tactics and measures will definitely strengthen the confidence of the young people and the long-term sustainability of the OCST framework.

All in all, it is believed that this review can shed light on the intricate interplay between contested identities, evolving youth perspectives, and the multidimensional nature of citizenship amid a rapidly changing cultural and socio-political landscape. future research is necessary to assess the long-term impacts of these evolving dynamics and to inform effective civic education strategies. In short, specific topics and methods for improving communication between the two sides (Hong Kong and mainland China) should be committed with resources and promotion. By proactively addressing certain areas, such as fostering open dialogue and investing in comprehensive teacher training, Hong Kong can better prepare its youth for a dynamic global landscape while fostering a shared sense of belonging and civic responsibility as these aspects are essential for enhancing intercultural understanding and cultivating a cohesive society. Both of these aspects will definitely embrace a stable and sustainable foundation for Hong Kong to move on.

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