

# Introduction

## *The Newest Nationalism*

If there is one point on which everyone involved in the discussion of Hong Kong's political future could agree, it would be that Hong Kong independence is impossible. This once taboo idea has become increasingly part of mainstream political discussions in the city since 2011, yet remains just as implausible as ever. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which rules over the People's Republic of China (PRC), of which Hong Kong has been a part since 1997, would never allow the city to be independent. Furthermore, the fact that Hong Kong has no army of its own and relies on China even for its food and water means that the idea is simply unfeasible.

Hong Kong independence is however more than just unfeasible: the idea, in fact, presents a genuine self-destructive threat to the city's freedoms. China has ruled over Hong Kong since 1997 under the principle of One Country, Two Systems, wherein the Special Administrative Region enjoys a high degree of autonomy and numerous rights and freedoms that are not permitted anywhere else in China: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly. Yet the Chinese Communist Party is particularly sensitive and unforgiving toward transgressions against national unity: the Party bases its legitimacy in a narrative of national reunification following a century of humiliation by foreign powers, which began with Great Britain's colonization of Hong Kong in 1842 and officially ended in triumph with the city's hand-over to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Using Hong Kong's treasured freedoms to promote separation from China, a practical impossibility, achieves nothing

but provoking Beijing and providing the central government with the perfect pretext to further tighten its grip on the city.

What if, however, all these assumptions are actually wrong? What if Hong Kong independence is not just a crazy and impossible idea, but rather a product of genuine reflection on political developments in Hong Kong over the past two decades? What if the group of theorists and activists known as the “Hong Kong independence movement” represent not a singular and inevitably failed ideal, but rather a diverse array of political perspectives contributing to a vibrant and open-ended discussion of the city’s future beyond the failed orthodoxies of the past? And what if, furthermore, these theorists and activists in fact understand the central government far better than the central government understands them?

This book is intended as a provocation, asking readers to take seriously the all-too-often casually dismissed idea of Hong Kong independence. Yet like the idea that it explains and analyzes, this book is also far more than a provocation. I first became interested in Hong Kong independence because the emergence of this idea since 2011 provides a rare opportunity for a theorist of ethnic and national identities to observe the formation of such identity in real time. The initial question driving my research was this: Why has the concept of a Hong Kong nation, largely unarticulated just a little over a decade ago, emerged at this moment in history? Pursuing this question for nearly a decade, including conducting fieldwork with enthusiasts of independence since 2016, I have taken the time to engage seriously with concepts and theories that I had also once dismissed as completely impractical. In doing so, I realized that Hong Kong nationalism is not only a case study that could be used to develop a new academic theory of ethnicity or nationalism, but also in and of itself a collection of radically innovative theories of Hong Kong’s history, identity, relationship with China, and potential future paths.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while analyzing Hong Kong nationalism to better understand the formative processes of nationalist identity, this book also provides an introduction to the main schools of Hong Kong nationalism, giving readers an opportunity to see the world through the eyes of independence activists and recognize their intellectual contributions to the study of Hong Kong and China.

This book is then a provocation that should not really be all that provocative: I propose that we engage seriously with the ideas of a diverse range of intellectuals and activists who have contributed to a nuanced, theoretically engaged, decade-long debate in a politically complex society. It is all too easy

to dismiss Hong Kong independence as an impossibility. It is at once more intellectually challenging and rewarding to seek to understand why ever more people are increasingly enthusiastic about this impossibility: a political reality that demands a complete reassessment of our understanding of Hong Kong's political reality.

#### FROM ONE COUNTRY, TWO SYSTEMS TO TWO SYSTEMS, TWO COUNTRIES

On July 1, 1997, after a century and a half of British rule, the colony of Hong Kong was transferred to the People's Republic of China, marking the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Speaking at the ceremony celebrating the handover on June 30, CCP Chairman Jiang Zemin declared, "On this solemn occasion, I wish to extend my cordial greetings and best wishes to the six million or more Hong Kong compatriots who have now returned to the embrace of the motherland."<sup>2</sup>

Twenty years later, on June 30, 2017, a very different event was held on the campus of Hong Kong Baptist University, where hundreds had gathered to mourn Hong Kong's handover to Chinese rule two decades earlier. Against a backdrop that read "Freedom from Chinese colonizers," Andy Chan of the newly established Hong Kong National Party led the crowd in shouting chants of "we are not Chinese," "we are Hong Kong-ers," and "Hong Kong independence."

Twenty years earlier, no one could have imagined this scene. Hong Kong had been handed over to the People's Republic of China in 1997 under the rubric of One Country, Two Systems first agreed upon by Great Britain and China in the 1980s. Prior to 1997, there were doubts about the notable lack of consultation with the Hong Kong people in reaching this agreement, just as there was rightful anxiety about the city's fate under Chinese rule due to the hard dictatorial turn in PRC politics after 1989.<sup>3</sup> Was Hong Kong being handed over from one colonial master to another? Could Beijing be trusted to abide by the promises it had made regarding Hong Kong's freedoms in the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law?<sup>4</sup> Yet despite these concerns, after 1997 the One Country, Two Systems model appeared relatively successful in protecting Hong Kong's unique political, legal, civil, and press liberties, making the city a simultaneously distinct yet also integral part of China. The apparent initial success of One Country, Two Systems in restraining Beijing and maintaining

a genuine degree of autonomy in Hong Kong made a decade of pessimistic predictions about the “fall of Hong Kong” appear hyperbolic and alarmist.

With the passage of time, however, as tensions rose between Hong Kong’s relatively open political, legal, media, and social systems and the increasingly restrictive political culture of the People’s Republic of China, the most pessimistic of predictions began to seem overly optimistic. In 2002, unprecedented protests brought half a million people onto the streets to voice their opposition to proposed national security legislation that threatened the city’s freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of association, and rule of law.<sup>5</sup> In 2011 and 2012, another round of student-led protests targeted a patriotic education module that promoted an ideologically restrictive vision of Chinese-ness for Hong Kong students.<sup>6</sup> And in 2014, after decades of endless delays to the universal suffrage legally guaranteed in the city’s Basic Law, unprecedented Occupy Central protests brought central sections of the city to a standstill for seventy-nine days.<sup>7</sup>

Within this context of continually escalating political and cultural tensions, in 2011 Lingnan University academic Chin Wan published a highly idiosyncratic book, *On Hong Kong as a City-State*.<sup>8</sup> In Chin’s telling, Hong Kong had heretofore been imagined as either a colony of Great Britain or a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, but these labels failed to fully capture the reality of the city’s historical experience and cultural present. Chin proposed instead that Hong Kong was in fact a city-state, a proposal that may seem quite underwhelming at first glance, and certainly an unlikely candidate for radically changing the face of Hong Kong politics. Yet for Chin, reimagining Hong Kong as a city-state places the city’s heritage in the European city-state tradition, envisioning a unique culture for the Hong Kong people distinct from China. Insofar as this distinctiveness enables redirecting the discussion of Hong Kong’s future away from inevitable integration with China to a focus on Hong Kong itself as a distinct polity, Chin’s intervention realized a genuine paradigm shift in political thinking in the city: imagining a future for Hong Kong beyond the increasingly obviously failed ideal of One Country, Two Systems.

In the ten short yet eventful years since the publication of Chin’s book, the world’s newest nationalism has left an indelible mark on Hong Kong politics and culture, producing a proliferation of perspectives, publications, protest movements, political parties, and punitive purges. In the city’s universities, undergraduate students have compiled special journal issues drawing on the

latest developments in postcolonial theory and scholarship on international law to argue for the existence of a Hong Kong ethnicity with the legal right to self-determination.<sup>9</sup> In local media, a network of news sites and daily online talk shows promoting independence has emerged to fundamentally change how people think and talk about daily realities in the city. In the political field, the Hong Kong National Party has explicitly promoted the goal of establishing an independent Republic of Hong Kong, advocating anti-colonial resistance by any means necessary. A rapidly growing scholarly and popular corpus on Hong Kong independence that traces the city's unique history and envisions its distinct future has expanded across bookstore shelves. There has even been a relatively fringe movement advocating for Hong Kong's return to the United Kingdom on the basis of international law. Across their diverse political visions, Hong Kong nationalists have come together in a common awakening to the failure of One Country, Two Systems and the corresponding need to develop a vision of Two Systems, Two Countries.

These developments raise two sets of pressing questions, which this book examines. First, thinking specifically about Hong Kong and its political and cultural dilemma under Chinese rule, I ask: How can we explain the dramatic transformation of Hong Kong identity and politics since 1997, and in particular since 2011? Why has the once taboo idea of Hong Kong nationalism emerged at this moment in history? What does the once absent concept of a Hong Kong nation mean to Hong Kong nationalists, and how have their various proposals for the city's future attained broader popular resonance? How, in turn, has the Chinese central government responded to these developments? And finally, what are the implications of this unfolding discussion for Hong Kong's political future and its relationship with China?

Second, thinking through broader anthropological concerns of the formation of a novel ethnic-national identity, I ask: How is this new mode of identification (the Hong Kong nation) imagined and enacted by activists? What can this process, occurring in real time for direct observation, reveal about the fundamental processes of national identity construction? And what can we learn about the Hong Kong-China relationship from the thinkers directly involved in the process of its reimagining?

This book seeks answers to these questions. It is based in a decade of research, having followed and even at times contributed to the conversation on Hong Kong nationalism from the first articulation of Hong Kong as a city-state in 2011 to the attempted silencing of this conversation in 2020 with the

National Security Law. In the span of this brief yet very eventful decade, a series of completely unexpected developments pitting newly emergent knowledge against old power has forever changed politics, culture, and activism in this city of seven million people.

At the same time, one after another, the lives of everyone involved in the conversation on Hong Kong independence have also been forever changed, including my own.

#### A NOTE ON METHOD AND SURVEILLANCE

I first noticed her as I casually glanced around the subway car. We were above ground now, the sun shining radiantly through the MTR (Mass Transit Railway) car's windows on a warm December morning, on our way to Tung Chung on northern Lantau island. Only one of us realized at the time that we were in fact traveling together.

As I looked around the subway car, our eyes met, and she immediately looked down at her phone. A few minutes later, as I glanced around the car again, our eyes met one more time. This was curious. She clearly seemed to be looking at me and only at me, but I could not figure out why: to this day, in fact, I still do not know if she intended for me to notice or not.

Sporting an "I love Hawaii" T-shirt that fit across my rotund figure a bit too tightly, matched with an aging pair of Crocs, I could be certain that her glances were not spurred by romantic interest. I noticed that she was wearing an Oxford University sweatshirt. I had presented a paper on Hong Kong's National Education Center at an Oxford conference seven years earlier. Maybe we had met there? Maybe she was somehow familiar with my research on Hong Kong and happened to recognize me? Yet this struck me as quite unlikely. Believe me, readers, I am not vain, and these are not the kinds of thoughts that I usually think. But then again, I do not usually have someone very obviously staring at me for no reason. Having nothing better to do for the moment, I mulled over each possibility, none seeming terribly likely. Our eyes meeting must just have been a coincidence.

As I arrived at my destination, Tung Chung, my goal for the day was simple: to obtain a sense of the general mood of the area, which had become a site of tensions between locals and Chinese tour groups since the opening of the nearby Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge a few weeks earlier.<sup>10</sup> I would perhaps strike up a few casual conversations along the way, but I had no meetings

or interviews scheduled. It would most likely be an uneventful day, always an appealing prospect before a busy week.

As I walked through the Citygate Mall, its corridors crowded with hundreds of Chinese shoppers, opening their suitcases to pack them full of new purchases to smuggle across the border, I could see how this sudden surge of new visitors could be annoying for local residents . . . but then as I turned around for a moment to glance behind me, I suddenly noticed that young lady in the Oxford sweatshirt there again. That's really strange, I thought.

About half an hour later, I paid a visit to a bathroom on the basement level of the mall. Exiting the men's room, I noticed that this same young lady was in the foyer area outside of the bathroom. It suddenly became very clear that it was no longer possible to explain these encounters as pure coincidences. Again, all types of explanations raced through my mind, none seeming particularly plausible. Hopping on the escalator to proceed to ground level, I immediately noticed that she followed along. As I disembarked, I stopped, turned around, and held up my iPhone to take a picture. Once she spotted me holding up my phone, however, she turned around 180 degrees, riding the escalator toward me backward. I was so puzzled by this that in the end I completely failed to take a picture. When she reached the top of the escalator, she very conspicuously continued to look away from me as she hurried forward through the mall's crowds.

From that moment, the remaining hour that I spent in Tung Chung was without a doubt the most perplexing of my life. I walked toward the other end of the mall to exit onto the public square outside, only to find that she had followed me there. When I raised my phone to take a picture, she again walked away. I saw two policemen standing outside and thought of speaking with them about the situation, but I honestly had no idea who was following me or how exactly to explain to the police this puzzling experience that I myself was still attempting to process. There was no way to put this situation into coherent words. As I walked out toward the Ngong Ping 360 cable cars to the north of the mall, I noticed that she was again following me. When I walked back toward her to ask what she was doing, she was suddenly led away by an older woman.

I climbed the stairs leading to the Ngong Ping 360 cable cars and could see my two tails standing near a bus stop below awaiting my return. At this point, it was clear that I was not going to get any work done that day; my mind was overrun by the question of who was following me and why they were doing

so. Abandoning my plans, I walked back to the MTR and sat in the station through a few train departures, checking to see if anyone was waiting along with me. Once I was as confident as I could be that I was no longer being followed, I boarded a train to return to my Kowloon hotel.

During a series of meetings, interviews, and casual walks through the city over the following week, I occasionally had a vague sense that someone was following me but was never completely certain. As the days passed, in fact, it gradually began to seem crazy to think that anyone had actually been following me. Friends seemed to agree, most appearing perplexed at my narrative of the weekend encounter. Admittedly, I found the creeping possibility that I had not been followed no less perplexing. Had I just been paranoid that day in Tung Chung?

Arriving back in Sydney ten days later after an overnight flight, I planned to take a nap at home before going to pick up my son in the afternoon. Glancing at my phone, I noticed that I had a message from a friend that read simply: "You're famous." The image attached to the message was a screenshot of the cover of the propaganda rag *Wen Wei Po*, owned and managed by the Liaison Office, the representative office of the government of the People's Republic of China in Hong Kong. A series of clandestinely shot pictures of my time in Hong Kong featured under the headline "Australian scholar spreads Hong Kong independence." The subtitle read, "Kevin Carrico has visited Hong Kong many times, is friends with Andy Chan of the Hong Kong National Party, and Wayne Chan of Students' Independence Union came to his presentation." The article included a detailed discussion of my activities during my visit, including the curious factoid that on Tuesday, December 11, 2018, I went back to my hotel to change clothes in between two afternoon meetings. If anyone is still curious, I made this choice because I was sweaty. Amid all of the challenges facing Hong Kong in 2018, the central government had chosen to prioritize dispatching a team to follow my every move and change of apparel.

One function of such surveillance, of course, is collecting information on the meetings and behavior of its targets. In my case, however, I doubt that any remotely valuable information was obtained. I have made no secret of the focus of my research or of my acquaintance with many Hong Kong independence advocates. Nothing that we discussed in any of these meetings, some of which I now know were in fact surveilled, was top secret. Another far more insidious function of surveillance, however, is to affect the thinking of its targets, leaving one pondering questions that can never be answered. Once the

*Wen Wei Po* cover story confirmed without a doubt that I had been followed, further questions emerged. What was the actual goal of this surveillance? Did the people following me intend to be clandestine and simply fail horribly? Or did they in fact want me to notice that they were following me? If so, why? Why was I obviously followed on some days, but not followed on others? Or was I in fact followed every day, without realizing?

This surveillance obviously changed how I experienced Hong Kong. It has also changed how I have written the final version of this book about Hong Kong. Readers who proceed through the book will be reassured immediately that I am not engaging in self-censorship. This is, after all, a book about the most sensitive topic in Hong Kong politics today: independence. My concern is not for myself. I have long ago abandoned any hope of returning to China and have reached largely the same conclusion about returning to Hong Kong since the implementation of the National Security Law. My concern is instead for the people with whom I worked during my research. As an anthropologist, I have based my research on lengthy conversations with advocates of Hong Kong nationalism over years of engagement. Yet as a result of the surveillance applied to my research since at least July 2017 (if not earlier), combined with the impact of the National Security Law forced on Hong Kong at the end of June 2020, I have had no choice but to adjust how I tell this story.

In the current political and legal climate, there exists a real risk that even anonymous recounting of private conversations in book form could be used by the authorities to persecute people whose lives are already difficult enough, with the National Security Law allowing the authorities to jail critics for life for speech crimes. Considering the intentionally arbitrary nature of this law and its enforcement, there is no way of knowing which of my meetings were being surveilled and which comments, when put on the public record by an “anti-China force” like myself, could be matched up with a particular meeting and thereby used as evidence in political persecution. To eliminate the risk that this book could be used to persecute others while at the same time never shying away from the critical insights derived from these conversations, I have revised this text such that my original recounting of ostensibly private but potentially surveilled conversations has been replaced by the analysis of publicly available written texts or statements that make similar points. To cite one example, my discussion of the potential use of force in fighting for independence, a topic of numerous conversations over the years, has been replaced by analysis of a publicly available article on this topic from the Hong Kong

National Party journal *Comitium* that communicates many of the same ideas that I took away from these conversations.

For the same reason, this book includes no photographs from my time in Hong Kong. I have had a truly fulfilling fieldwork experience over the past few years in this city about which I care deeply, and it is precisely as a result of this deep care that I must also be careful about how I share my experiences publicly.

The National Security Law forced on Hong Kong in June 2020 makes the stakes of independence advocacy higher than they have ever been. At the same time, however, this law also makes sharing the story of Hong Kong's ongoing struggle even more urgent than it already was. I have thus chosen to tell the story of Hong Kong's independence discussion in a way that is at once brutally honest and ethically responsible. My friends in Hong Kong can be reassured that this text cannot be mined by the authorities for evidence to engage in politicized persecution: all data recounted here are in the public record in other publications. At the same time, these friends in Hong Kong and beyond can also be reassured that I am avoiding self-censorship, speaking honestly without concern for the increasingly voracious anaconda in the chandelier, and drawing fully upon insights from our conversations over the years.

Finally, the fact that I have had to think about these matters at all and have been left with no choice but to take these fairly drastic steps in the final stages of manuscript preparation is a testament to the foresight of the people and ideas discussed in this book. As Hong Kong independence activists have told me for many years, and as I myself have gradually come to realize, there was never any chance of maintaining Hong Kong's freedoms under One Country, Two Systems. Everything that they predicted has come true.

#### LAYOUT OF THE BOOK

The three chapters of this book are organized thematically, examining (1) the origins of Hong Kong nationalist thought, (2) the main factions in the Hong Kong nationalist conversation, and (3) the central government's response to these developments.

In the first chapter, "Hong Kong Ethnogenesis," I begin my analyses from the question of why, since the transfer of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, ever fewer residents of the city identify as Chinese, with ever more embracing visions of a Hong Kong nation. My analysis proceeds through four distinct theoretical exercises, trying on each one to see how it fits these