The Crisis of Hong Kong Identity

Leading up to the fifteenth anniversary of the handover, Hong Kongers are questioning the legitimacy of the Deng Xiaoping-coined ‘One Country, Two Systems’ policy. But, is Hong Kong ignoring its struggle to determine its own cultural identity?

BY TIM YU | APRIL 1st, 2012

HE IS HIS most fervent, yet only supporter.

Donning a red baseball cap, and draped in a flag of red and yellow, he stands alone. Before a crowd of reporters and spectators, he positions himself to take in questions, from both left and right. His message, though, is quite simple: ‘Support Leung Chun-Ying.’

Some people jeered at him, calling him ‘mindless’ and a ‘slave’ to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Others spared back, reiterating that everyone was entitled to their right to political opinion.

One could have easily forgiven him, after all, given that it was April Fools’ Day. But, apparently, this was no laughing matter in Hong Kong.

Over the past few months, tensions have boiled. Following a highly publicized incident in January, involving passengers on a local subway, anti-Mainland sentiment has surged to new levels. Kong Qingdong, a professor at Peking University, responded to the incident by branding Hong Kongers as ‘thieves, bastards, and running dogs of British imperialism.’ Local activists in Hong Kong, in turn, retaliated by staging a protest calling for quotas to be placed on pregnant Mainland mothers in the city’s public hospitals. Hong Kong’s Apple Daily newspaper also sparked controversy, after publishing a full-page advertisement labelling Mainland Chinese as ‘locusts’ infiltrating past the border into the city.

Recent surveys have indicated that public support for ‘One Country, Two Systems’ has declined leading up to its fifteenth-year anniversary. Some reports, including a poll conducted by the University of Hong Kong’s Public Opinion Program, have suggested that Hong Kongers are becoming increasingly divided on the issue of national identity. According to the survey, sixty-three percent of Hong Kongers were found to have emphasized their Hong Kong identity, while only thirty-three percent identified themselves as Chinese nationals. Critics of Beijing have argued that the influx of Mainland Chinese into Hong Kong has resulted in the exhaustion of public services, erosion of Western-style political freedoms, and skyrocketing property prices.
The recent scandal-ridden ‘election’ campaign has raised questions about the current state of Beijing-Hong Kong affairs. During an ‘election’ campaign that witnessed Henry Tang, an early front-runner, lose out to fellow pro-Beijing supporter, Leung Chun-Ying, Hong Kongers have expressed frustration with their new leader. Under Hong Kong’s semi-democratic system, Leung was appointed as the Chief Executive through a closed committee of 1,200 members. It is believed, though, that many are thought to be local business leaders, with direct political allegiances to the Mainland.

The people of Hong Kong, however, are most disheartened by their inability to directly elect their own democratic leader. While Hong Kong’s 3.4 million registered voters can vote for neighbourhood councillors, they have no authority in choosing the Chief Executive. Despite Leung’s promises to allow for future ‘free elections,’ Hong Kong’s pro-democratic forces have shown their contempt for an electoral process that is, ultimately, determined by Beijing.

Thousands of protestors flooded the streets of Hong Kong demanding universal suffrage. Many of Hong Kong’s high-profile dissidents, including Leung ‘Long Hair’ Kwok-Hung, could be seen calling for Leung Chun-Ying to resign. Active student groups from The Chinese University of Hong Kong carried signs mourning for ‘the death of democracy,’ and blindfolded themselves out of defiance. In a move of solidarity, students sported red headscarves as a passing reference to Leung’s popularized nickname as The Wolf in Little Red Riding Hood. Some of these protestors, albeit in the minority, had even called for the return to a British Hong Kong.

In many ways, the protest is reflective of a conflicted society: one still coping with its British colonial past, yet equally daunted by, what some believe, is now its colonial future under Beijing. Most striking, however, were not the offhand, anti-Maoist remarks that could be heard in the protest towards the Mainland Chinese liaison office. Nor, was it the visible disain or detachment they were showing towards Mainland China. But, rather, it was the crisis of identity of a city looking out of place, and uncertain about the fate of its future.

With the rapid flow of Mainland visitors to Hong Kong, the spoken language on the street has slowly shifted towards Putonghua. In 2011, Hong Kong played host to around twenty-eight million tourists from Mainland China: a total nearly four times the city’s overall population. Although the Mainland Chinese have been credited for providing a much-needed economic boost to Hong Kong, their presence has not exactly been embraced by an antagonistic society.

These shifts in cultural attitude have occurred amidst a period of a widening economic gap between locals and the incoming Mainland Chinese. Hong Kongers have argued that Mainland migrants have tapped into the city’s resources, but have provided, and done little, for the greater society. Hong Kong activists have also called for greater restrictions to be placed on the Mainland Chinese, particularly pregnant women, who have come in hopes of attaining Hong Kong citizenship. Mainland Chinese, in turn, have countered these claims, citing multiple instances of ethnic discrimination in Hong Kong.
While Beijing has pledged to honour Basic Law in Hong Kong until 2047, scepticism still remains. Hong Kong has grown increasingly resentful about its potential role under China’s shadow. These fears, coupled with a semi-authoritarian regime, have some worried that Hong Kong could, very well, develop into virtually another Chinese city – and, in the process, lose its sense of self-identity. For over a century, Hong Kong has been discouraged from pursuing, or acting in the interests of the region. It is only now, in the post-colonial era, that the people of Hong Kong have been confronted with the task of determining their own cultural identity.

The question, therefore, has less to do with Beijing, and more to do with Hong Kong’s struggle to define its cultural identity.

That, itself, is arguably no laughing matter.

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