The relationship between Hong Kong citizens’ ethnic identity, political culture and their political participation

Introduction

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is enjoying a “high degree of civil development without a corresponding degree of democratic party development”, (Ng, 2009, p. 193). After Hong Kong was returned to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, HKSAR has a high degree of autonomy and is governed separately from the PRC government under the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ policy (Hui, Wong, Li, & Yu, 2011). Also, there are strong and close social and economic ties between HKSAR and Mainland China.

It is noted that identities and political cultures of citizens can influence their political participatory behaviours, and also vice versa (Tsang, Burnett, Hills, & Welford, 2009). Most Hong Kong citizens have low political efficacy and competence (i.e. the conservative political culture) (Lam, 2004). At the same time, because of the huge differences of identities, political environments, cultures, economic systems and values, there are a lot of conflicts between Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong citizens that help to shape an indigenous ‘Hongkonger’ identity amongst them. It is one of the major causes leading to different political events and movements in recent years. However, citizens who have low political efficacy and competence may also be afraid of the negative impacts on the relationship between the HKSAR and the PRC. They may not have the will to participate, or even be opposed to these political events.

This paper will first focus on discussing Hong Kong citizens' ethnic identity and political culture. Then the relationship between Hong Kong citizens' ethnic identity, political culture and their participatory behaviour in political movements will be analysed.

Hong Kong citizens' ethnic identity

According to Kennedy (2010), citizens’ ethnic identities can be defined as “the obligations upon individuals as a consequence of mutually recognised membership of a particular grouping”, (p. 111). However, because of the complex historical, economic and political factors, citizens' national and ethnic identities, and their attitudes towards politics are complicated. In fact, many studies (see Chong, 2010; Kam, 2012; Vickers & Kan, 2003; Tse, 2007) show that most Hong Kong citizens have distinctive and dual ethnic identities.

As shown in Figure I below, more than half of Hong Kong citizens have a mixed identity of ‘Hongkonger’ and ‘Hongkonger in China’ and ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chinese in Hong Kong’. Only around 20% of them identify themselves as ‘Chinese in Hong Kong’ and the percentage keeps decreasing since 2010. In his survey on the
perception of Hong Kong teachers on national and ethnic identity, Chong (2010) notes that most citizens see
themselves as ‘Hong Kong Chinese’ or ‘Hongkongers’ rather than ‘Chinese of Mainland China’. This shows
that there is a strong indigenous ethnic identity but a relatively weak Chinese national ethnic identity amongst
most Hong Kong citizens, despite the government have implemented civil education (Kam, 2012).

Figure I. The ethnic identity of Hong Kong citizens

Many Hong Kong citizens feel that the newcomers from Mainland China are exploiting their welfare and
opportunities, and the identities and relations between both of them has been disordered (Leonard, 2010).
Because many people see ‘Chinese’ as a political identity with a strong relationship to Mainland China, there is
an increasing number of Hong Kong people claiming that they are ‘Chinese in Hong Kong’ or ‘Hongkongers’
to highlight their unique, personal and indigenous identity as distinct from Mainlanders.

It is also noted that the indigenous identity of citizens in the HKSAR is a powerful social and cultural reality
(Vickers & Kan, 2003). Yuen and Byram (2007) pointed out that Hong Kong citizens have a strong local
identity, though the school curriculum is promoting Chinese nationalism and patriotism. However, it is arguable
that forcibly instilling a sense of national identity and promoting national interests by the HKSAR government
is not advisable, as it may create value conflicts between the government and students who have pro-democracy
ideology and cause the students and democratic supporters to dislike their identity of being a ‘Chinese’.
In his study on the ethnic identity among Hong Kong youths, Kam (2012) found that as “[t]he shared values of Hong Kong society were built upon the self-awareness of its people in distinguishing themselves from those living in Mainland China” (p. 659), most Hong Kong people consider themselves as ‘ethnic Chinese’ or ‘Hong Kong Chinese’ rather than claiming themselves as people from Mainland China. Also, they may resist being the ‘Chinese of the Mainland’ though most of the citizens can tolerate and change their lifestyle towards some cultural differences with Mainland Chinese (Paige & Cogan, 2002).

**Hong Kong citizens’ political culture**

On the other hand, political culture can also affect the citizens' political participatory behaviours. Political culture can be defined as citizens’ subjective orientation to politics (Roskin, Cord, Medeiros, & Jones, 2008). There are different kinds of political cultures, but the participatory, conservative and parochial political cultures are the most common types in Hong Kong citizens (see Table I about the differences and features of different political cultures). From a political culture perspective, people who have a participatory political culture are expected to have the political competence and political efficacy and know how to influence various political issues. For those people who have conservative political culture, although they pay attention to politics, they only participate passively. They are uncomfortable to discuss political issues, and their sense of political efficacy and trust in the government is low because they are not satisfied with the political systems. Parochial political culture means that people do not take pride in their political system, expect little of and have low political efficacy. Also, they have no interest in paying attention to and participating in political activities. Lam (2004), and Lau and Kuan (1995) note that the majority of Hong Kong citizens have a conservative political culture and politically apathetic though they think their political participation can influence the government’s decision-making. Only a minority of the citizens are politically participatory or parochial.
### Table I. Different political cultures and their features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Participatory/ Democratic</th>
<th>Conservative/ Elitist/ Subject</th>
<th>Parochial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commonsense of the masses-beneficial. A sense of belonging to Hong Kong. Having political competence and efficacy.</td>
<td>Only an elite is wise and altruistic. Keep the status quo. Pay attention to politics passively. Feeling powerless towards participating and influencing political issues.</td>
<td>Do not care they are citizens of a nation. Take no pride in their political systems. No sense of political efficacy and competence. Just have a little political knowledge.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political environment</td>
<td>Maximum use of opportunities for participation.</td>
<td>Minimum participation in order to support elite and not to disturb their work.</td>
<td>Do not participate in politics. (Apolitical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of politics</td>
<td>Maximized individual freedom and equality.</td>
<td>Preservation of traditional values through process of change.</td>
<td>National integration and differentiation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Morris et al. (2000, p. 245) and Roskin et al. (2008).
There are several reasons that cause most of the Hong Kong citizens to have a conservative political culture (Roskin et al., 2008). First, as the HKSAR has an executive-led government (Morris, Kan, & Morris, 2000), citizens usually cannot change or participate in the policy planning process. Advisory bodies are only the ‘tools’ to get opinions of the citizens and different stakeholders. The general public are only encouraged to provide opinions in the initial consultation period but are not involved in the whole process. They often only have sketchy information or data on the proposed projects and lack the means and channels to request the government to reveal relevant and critical information.

It is also noted that the political power in Hong Kong is mostly in hands of bureaucrats and capitalists, which means the advisory and statutory bodies (ASBs), and the policy-making and implementation processes may be highly influenced and constrained by them (Kam, 2000; Morris, Kan, & Morris, 2000). Moreover, the Chief Executive (CE) and legislators of the functional constituencies are directly ‘elected’ by the individuals and groups of various elites, including businessman, and these political elites have close relationships with the Mainland. It means that the CE and legislators just need to respond to these elites, and citizens’ well-being and opportunities might be exploited. It may lead to the low political efficacy of Hong Kong citizens and they will lose interest and desire in influencing the policy-making processes. Loh (2005) also argues that the citizens’ lack of experience and knowledge of improving the society and engaging in different political events can cause low political efficacy of Hong Kong citizens.

**Relationship between Hong Kong citizens’ ethnic identity, political culture and their political participatory behaviours in political movements**

This paper has so far discussed that the majority of Hong Kong citizens have an indigenous ‘Hongkonger’ identity and conservative political culture. However, the ethnic identity may shape citizens’ political culture and can also influence different political participatory behaviours in the various political movements.

Political participation means activities engaged in by citizens in order to influence the decision-making process of the government (Chan & Cheng, 1999). The sociologist Max Weber thinks that the political participation and movements can improve citizens’ confidence towards their shared ethnic identity and values (Chong, 2010) and express their community interest effectively. Loh (2005) suggests that citizens may join different political activities, which can increase their motivation to join other actions actively. Also, Lam (2004) notes that most of the political activities in Hong Kong are “support, making demands, debates, and other forms of expression communicated … [that target] at the PRC government, and/or the [HKSAR] government” (p. 43).
On the other hand, many people think that the HKSAR has government-business collaborations and do not heed to their demands. This, coupled with the worsening social and socio-economic inequality under its governance, has resulted in the trust of the government falling significantly (see Figure II about the Hong Kong citizens’ trust in the HKSAR government). However, Tsang et al. (2009) also argued that the political movements and events might not be effective in expressing their opinions and engaging different groups of people together genuinely.

Figure II. Hong Kong citizens’ trust in the HKSAR government

![Graph showing trust in the HKSAR government](image)

Source: Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong (2015d).

Fork (2006) states that the majority of citizens claim that they want to have a democratic regime in Hong Kong. At the same time, the HKSAR’s economy is highly reliant on the PRC’s policy and economic system (Cheng, 2011). Since most of the pro-democracy political events in Hong Kong are launched by the democratic camp that fight for civil rights and democracy in Hong Kong, “as against the domestication efforts made by the officials and (the) pro-Beijing camps” (Tse, 2007, p. 174), people may be opposed to these events because it may lead to a negative impact on the relationship between the HKSAR and the PRC.
In his analysis of the political culture in Hong Kong, Lam (2004) argues that the de-politicisation is one of the reasons that causes the conservative political culture in Hong Kong. As many middle-class people, professionals and elites are conservatives (i.e. having conservative political culture) and have certain social advantages, they may want to keep the status quo in order to maintain the stability and prosperity of the society in their privileged groups. Since they may associate that any changes are detrimental to social stability, they may show apathy or even oppose any political activities that may affect the regime or the society. Also, those conservatives often identify the oppositions as “troublemakers” in various public issues.

Different political movements and events are designed to draw others’ concern of HKSAR’s political environment and maintain the checks-and-balance mechanisms to counteract the PRC’s political influence. Also, there is a significant and growing number of young adults and adolescents participating in different political movements and events, which show their dissatisfaction and resentment towards the PRC-biased HKSAR regime. Examples include the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the annual protest rally on 1st July (see Figure III about the total number of participants of the July 1 rally from 2003 to 2014) (Lo, in press). The analysis of Cheng (2011) and Figure IV show that citizens are disappointed and dissatisfied with the performance of the HKSAR government. Moreover, because of the dissatisfaction with the government’s performance, there were a lot of students joining the mass rally on 1st July in 2003 and 2004 and the candle night event on 4th June.

As Hong Kong was a depoliticised society, students could not learn any democratic knowledge and their own political rights from their teachers, but only emotional concepts that do not need critical analysis that leads to fewer citizens acquiring participatory political behaviours and participating in various political movements. (Fairbrother, 2011; Ng, 2009; Yuen & Byram, 2007). It is noted that some students have participated in political events and discussions actively, even though they are educated and instigated to have ‘harmony’ and social cohesion as priorities (Morris et al., 2000).
Figure III. Total number of participants of the July 1 rally from 2003 to 2014

Source: Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong (2015b).

Figure IV. Hong Kong citizens' satisfaction with the HKSAR government

Source: Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong (2015c).
It can be found in some studies that the HKSAR government has low legitimacy, which can lead to mistrust in the government from citizens (see Cheng, 2011; Tsang et al., 2009). Because the government cannot uphold social justice, coupled with the unjustified exploitation of resources, citizens are skeptical about government officials and political parties. The growing mistrust may also raise the citizens’ awareness to take actions, such as participation in different political movements in order to influence policies and decisions that affect their livelihood and well-being.

At the same time, the citizens’ participation in political movements may strengthen their 'Hongkonger' identity and improve their sense of political efficacy and competence. During the demolition project of Star Ferry Pier and Queen's Pier in 2006, a large number of the Hong Kong citizens organised campaigns to occupy the construction sites (Wang & Liang, 2009). Although it is hard to get legitimacy from the citizens and is easy to be marginalised and dismissed by the government, such movements can often encourage different stakeholders to express their views and opinions in social networking sites (SNSs). SNSs can shape one’s political orientation (or culture) and affect their attitude towards political participation through allowing various like-minded people to discuss their concerned political issues and even participate in different actions. Moreover, because the SNSs have high accessibility and relatively low cost in operation, Internet news providers can deliver their updated information and news quickly. It can also increase citizens’ efficacy and motivation to participate in different political events (Chan and Guo, 2013).

Also, Hui et al. (2011) argue that Hong Kong people try to maintain and protect their 'Hongkongers’ identity by excluding and separating from those newcomers to Hong Kong and Mainlanders with different political movements. As there are 150 eligible Mainlanders immigrating to Hong Kong every day, coupled with a large number of cross-border trip individual visitors and parallel goods traders entering Hong Kong, causing different social and cultural conflicts, inequalities and impacts to the Hong Kong society. They are seen to exploit the citizens’ opportunities and welfare and make a huge stress on the society’s job market, creating heavy demands on nursing care and housing resources. These conflicts may make the citizens have antipathy and adverse feelings towards the Mainlanders, which also lead to various political movements that aim to draw attention from the government to show concern and improve this complex problem (Law & Lee, 2006).
Conclusion

There is a close relationship between Hong Kong citizens’ ethnic identity, political culture and their participatory behaviours in political movements. Because of political, economical and historical factors, the majority of Hong Kong citizens consider their ethnic identity as ‘Hong Kong Chinese’ or ‘Hongkongers’. At the same time, many people are unwilling to be labelled as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Chinese of Mainland China’ as they have antipathy and adverse feeling towards the Mainlanders and the PRC regime. Conservative political culture is common among most of the citizens, with passive political participatory behaviours and low sense of political efficacy and competence. Also, they are afraid of the negative impacts on the relation between HKSAR and PRC and they may not have the will to participate, or even oppose relevant political events. Citizens’ participation in political movements may strengthen their ‘Hongkonger’ identity and improve their sense of political efficacy and competence. It means that the identity and political culture of citizens can influence their political participation, and also vice versa.
References


Grade: A

Comments: This is a high-standard essay in which the issue about the relationship between Hong Kong citizens’ ethnic identity, political culture and their political participation is discussed. All the key terms/concepts are clearly defined, and in every aspect, your excellent understanding of the chosen topic can be demonstrated. Overall, the essay is well-organised and fluent, which makes it easy for readers to read. Your great effort can be shown as a wide range of relevant literature is consulted and quoted properly in the essay. The styles of citation and referencing are always correct. Excellent! Good job!