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What Do You Think About Hong Kong?

UBC Research Project Showcases Diverse Range of Opinions on China-Canada Relations

Project Breakdown

The political and economic relationship between China and Canada is bleak, to put it lightly. Global power dynamics are shifting, some say aggressively so, towards the East. Domestically, the People's Republic of China is confronting mass civil unrest in Hong Kong, while facing international scrutiny for the government's "re-education" camps for Muslims in Xinjiang province. Meanwhile, Canadian media, think tanks, and academic institutions have been criticized for propagating Western-centric rhetoric, often unfairly demonizing PRC policy. Concerningly, some news outlets have reported a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in the wake of escalating bi-lateral tensions. Consequently, global, bi-lateral, and domestic conflicts, whether in China, in Canada, or on the international stage, continue to affect people living in Canada, including students at the University of British Columbia. Indeed, divisive politics and polarized ideologies are fueling an atmosphere of reproachful disengagement and stereotyping within the diverse ethnic Chinese communities on campus, and between Chinese and non-Chinese communities.

In an effort to address this growing concern, UBC's *School of Public Policy and Global Affairs*, through the *Institute of Asian Research*, has been exploring dialogue as a tool to engage students across the ideological and political divide. Cassandra Jeffery, a student from the Master of Public Policy and Global Affairs program, conducted a series of interviews with UBC students of ethnic Chinese descent, as well as with UBC area specialists. Sharing key insights and perspectives gathered from qualitative research, this article is the first in a series to be written and published by Cassandra Jeffery. Her primary research has been supplemented by secondary research, including an analysis of relevant media publications, think tank publications, and academic journals.

The primary focus of this project is to illustrate the process of ideological polarization in times of political turmoil and social tension. Cassandra interprets this process through the exploration of identity constructs, as a mechanism fueling nationalism and escalating conflict within and between ethnic groups. Concluding this series, she discusses solution building tactics, with a specific focus on the use of dialogue as a tool to understand the myriad of opinions along the ideological and political spectrum. Said another way, Cassandra is keen to analyze *how* our understanding of our identities may contribute to rising nationalism; how nationalism may give rise to polarization, leading to discriminatory behaviour and in some cases, violence; and lastly, if there are methods we can explore, as a university, to mitigate this process. The process of conflict escalation is not a new phenomenon, and as a university, as a society more broadly, it is time we open our eyes to this staunch reality.

Background and Historical Context

An entire year has passed since the [arrest of Huawei's CFO Meng Wanzhou](#) in Vancouver, and the subsequent [arrests](#) of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig in China. As I am typing this article from the comfort of a downtown coffee shop, violent civil unrest in Hong Kong is teetering dangerously toward desperation. The proposed extradition bill originally inciting mass protests in Hong Kong was [formally scrapped](#) in October of this year, and yet civil unrest in the semi-autonomous region of China has surpassed the nine-month-mark with little indication of slowing down. Indeed, our socially induced twenty-four-hour news cycle may distract overly saturated minds with the latest political angst or nauseating Trump related scandal, but the growing political tensions and widening inequalities feeding civil unrest around the world continues to bubble over well beyond the boiling point, and Hong Kong is no exception to this phenomenon.

Naturally, how we understand and subsequently analyze domestic and international politics is a by-product of our socially constructed environments, tunnelling our vision on highly contentious subject matter. However, regardless of our individual opinions, our political leanings, or our cultural upbringings, the seedy underbelly of corruption—both domestically and internationally, and whether perceived or factual—has been exposed on a scale unrivaled in our brief history with globalization. Brewing beneath the surface for decades, political and economic turbulence has become almost eerily omnipresent, progressively challenging ideological principles across borders. Case and point: the ideological and political divide fueling the Hong Kong protests, which is now virtually synonymous with seemingly fragile democracies of the global West in contrast to Xi Jinping's Leninist state.

Publications out of reputable Canadian think-tanks, such as the Fraser Institute and the Mackenzie Institute, reiterate concerns over an ideological divide, citing China as a growing economic powerhouse and looming threat to the global world order. A 2019 [press release](#) by the Fraser Institute described China as the greatest threat to democratic freedoms, referring to the nation as a “dangerous authoritarian imperialist” with “great military, economic, and seductive power to advance repression.”

Debating the validity and ideological morality of this claim is beyond the scope of this article and research more broadly. Rather, I am concerned with understanding the varied experiences, environments, and social constructs that embed fundamental beliefs and attitudes into communities of people. As an individual born and raised in Canada, I too tend to hold certain opinions and beliefs regarding the importance of democratic freedoms centric to my core principles. In that light, I too question my ability to empathize with diverse opinions that fundamentally question everything I was raised to believe is correct and just. Therefore, it goes without saying that every human being holds certain principles they believe are moral and correct, but is it possible to find common ground in the midst of fundamental disagreement? How should we, the global community, address the very real and devastating effects of socio-economic inequality and human rights abuses? More importantly, how do we confront difficult and contentious topics in an increasingly globalized world? Indeed, a world where ideologies from the global north are rightfully questioned for imposing and perpetuating moral superiority, a complex derived from centuries of economic exploitation, colonization, and cultural imperialism.

The destructive ramifications of colonization cannot be contested, and yet, at least in the case of Hong Kong, Britain's imperialist reach paved the way for a particular type of institutional rule-of-law, as well as the spread of democratic ideology. In light of this contextual history, it would be naïve to assume the ideological values driving the Hong Kong protests are fundamentally synonymous to the ideological values driving the actions of the PRC government. As one could imagine, the onset of the Hong Kong protests has been described as a retaliation tactic, a move refuting what many believe has been a gradual restriction of democratic freedoms onto citizens by the PRC. Said another way, the situation has become an accumulation of strict impositions by the government to assimilate Hong Kong into the mainland fold. A sentiment underscored during the [2014 umbrella movement](#), when Hong Kongers protested their right to unabated political elections, free from PRC influence.

On the other hand, to many international governments and to mainlanders and Hong Kongers alike, the [1997 repatriation of Hong Kong](#) to China's sovereign rule was deemed an amendment of gross injustices imposed on China during the infamous [Opium Wars](#). Make no mistake, the "[Century of Humiliation](#)" inflicted onto China by the British Empire and other Western powers in-part devastated the once thriving Eastern power during the 19th century, sequentially stunting socio-economic growth into and beyond the turn of the 20th century. Past injustices aside, the fact remains that Hong Kong was under British rule for 156 years, which undoubtably influenced how the region developed culturally and ideologically.

China, Friend or Foe?

Much debate has enveloped the realm of global politics regarding China's economic growth, and subsequent power on the international stage. A 200 page [report published by the Hoover Institute](#) in 2018 cautions policy measures implemented by China's General Secretary Xi Jinping. Suggesting the PRC aims to infiltrate American civil society, the Institute cites Chinese policies that attempt to corrupt and coerce a range of institutions, groups, and communities, including but not limited to, media, think tanks, academic institutions, and Chinese American communities (1).

"Not only are the values of China's authoritarian system anathema to those held by most Americans, but there is also a growing body of evidence that the Chinese Communist Party views the American ideals of freedom of speech, press, assembly, religion, and association as direct challenges to its defense of its own form of one party rule," (*Hoover Institute 2*).

Regardless of ideological differences, China and America are economically intertwined. According to the Hoover Institute, the value of combined US-China trade has reached \$635.4 billion, with a \$335.4 US deficit (2). North of the border, [Canada's trade deficit](#) with China sits around \$2.2 billion.

Beyond traditional economic interests, China and North America host thousands of international students annually. In 2017, 28 percent (roughly 140,530 people) of international students studying in Canada were Chinese nationals, according to the [Canadian Bureau for International Education](#). International students contributed over \$15 billion to the economy in 2018, filling empty seats in Canadian schools and helping to subsidize domestic learners, read an [article](#)

published on news outlet *True North, Far East*. In 2016, three percent of Canadian students explored studies in China, with 90 percent of survey respondents citing an increased cultural awareness and understanding from having studied abroad ([Canadian Bureau of International Studies](#)).

Perhaps the PRC is attempting to demonstrate reach and control on an international scale; however, on the other hand, cultural and ideological influence across borders is only natural in an increasingly globalized world. In a conventional sense—economically and militarily speaking—the balance of power is certainly shifting. Of that we can be sure. However, the genuine motives of Xi Jinping’s China will continue to be hotly contested, and along with it, actions and ideologies from prevailing Western nations and rising Eastern powers. The Hong Kong crisis is one example, but there are many more we can cite: Tit-for-tat trade sanctions between China and North America, aggressive scrutiny towards Huawei’s telecommunication interests in Canada, Australia, America, and England; crackdowns on intellectual property rights in Canadian and American academic institutions and think tanks, and the controversial media coverage on the frankly horrific [systematic round-up and forced detention](#) of the Uyghur Muslim minority group in Xinjiang province. Presumptively, opinions and retaliation tactics surrounding these, and similar circumstances, do little to repair already weak East-West diplomatic relationships.

Project Rationale and Methodology

The tumultuous state of affairs between China and Canada illustrates the damage, and potentially long-term repercussions, of diplomatic relations in an increasingly vulnerable global political climate. It’s true, Vancouver is a far cry from the streets of Hong Kong, but the Canadian city is also not immune to the dichotic rhetoric beholden between democratic freedom fighters and staunch nationalists. Competing opinions have battled it out on the steps of [Vancouver’s City Hall](#) and local university campuses, including the University of British Columbia. Questions have been raised regarding the institutions role in [hosting controversial speakers](#) on campus, while faculty mull over impending intellectual property protocol. Rumbblings of PRC influence has sparked on-campus debate, and whether fact or fiction, talk of such influence has fostered an atmosphere riddled with anxiety and apprehension. Such a statement is not anecdotal, either.

Over the past four months, I have been working in the “China Choices” project at the *Institute of Asian Research* to better understand the thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes of the Chinese diasporic community on UBC’s campus, specifically regarding the increasingly hostile situation unfolding in Hong Kong. In an attempt to share these perspectives, I have written a series of publications that explore key themes derived from my research. Grounding my research by leveraging the Hong Kong protests, I have attempted to uncover the nuances and complexities of personal opinions, ideologies, and identity constructs in a globalized context. How is it that citizens from similar cultural backgrounds cultivate and champion fundamentally different perspectives? How do we, as individuals, construct our identities? Do such identity constructs play a pivotal role in our understanding of what is deemed right versus wrong? What is the notion of common sense and how is our perception of common sense challenged from within the sphere of competing ideologies? Is it possible to fundamentally disagree, but still empathize with contrastingly different rationale? These are the types of questions that have sparked my interest

throughout this research project, as I am driven by a curiosity to understand *why* and *how* we form our opinions and ideologies. We are all products of our culture, surely, but to what extent are we steadfastly blinded by our ideological environment? Are we capable of truly listening and understanding an alternative opinion?

In my conversations with UBC students, a variety of political and cultural opinions were brought to the table with varying degrees of finality. Indeed, at times, I felt my own opinions and ideologies creeping into the conversation. However, the point of this research project is not to debate participants into ideological submission. Rather, I am acting as an anthropologist, listening and learning from a variety of students with diverse experiences and opinions. In subsequent articles, I will share the thoughts and perspectives of a dozen or so UBC students of ethnic Chinese descent. Some participants are Chinese nationals studying in Vancouver, others are Canadian citizens of ethnic Chinese descent. I spoke with students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, each of whom derived their own opinions on the Hong Kong protests and China-Canada relations more broadly. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their identities, but all participants are graduate and undergraduate students from the University of British Columbia. The opinions and perspectives expressed in this series are solely those of the participants, and do not reflect my personal ideologies, beliefs, and opinions. As mentioned, this series will cover several key themes discussed throughout the interviewing process. Key themes include, but are not limited to, nationalism and populism, identity, ideological polarization, PRC influence on campus, racism and bigotry, and the use of dialogue and effective communication as a de-escalation tactic on campus.

Before signing off, I want to reiterate one key point. The situation in Hong Kong, and the trickle-down scenarios fostered through the protest movement—i.e. disintegrating diplomatic relations, increased polarization, etc—is one example of underlying dissent and unbridled socio-economic inequality erupting into a violent, desperate, and chaotic movement. A movement many view as a final attempt to fight for what they believe is right and just; dozens of social movements and protests have simultaneously spilled into the streets and across international borders. Regardless of your opinion on such plights, it cannot be refuted that *something* is driving millions of people around the world to join massive social causes, demanding what they fundamentally believe are *their* rights. Addressing this reality, really understanding and engaging with this phenomenon, is simultaneously the biggest problem and the most necessary solution of our time. Therefore, the key lessons learned throughout this research project, including mechanisms for addressing conflict and disagreement on UBC's campus, may be applicable across disciplines.

History has shown us that the issue at hand may change at any given time, each situation or conflict encompassing nuanced complexities to consider, address, and in some instances, confront. However, in almost all cases, the creation of equitable solutions to ideological differences can be explored through respectful dialogue, with biased assumptions held in check. Indeed, polarized ideological differences are difficult to address holistically, but is there something to be said for engaging in difficult conversations regardless of the outcome? Are we able to come to the proverbial table with an acute awareness of our own biases, prejudices, and ideological nuances? More importantly, are we able to check any preconceived notions and assumptions at the door? I hope to find out.

To read all publications in this series, please click [here](#).

Research Facilitator and the IAR

Cassandra Jeffery is a graduate student at the *School of Public Policy and Global Affairs*. She is currently working with Dr. Timothy Cheek and Dr. Paul Evans on a series of projects focused on policy development through the *Institute of Asian Research*. Most recently, Dr. Evans and Dr. Cheek hosted an event through the Institute titled, *China Choices: Recalibrating Engagement in a Turbulent Era, Canadian and Australian Views*. The two-day seminar welcomed UBC faculty, Asia specialists from across Canada and the world, and Canadian political representation. The primary premise of the seminar was to encourage dialogue between various vantage points in the face of growing China-Canada tensions. One specific focus was to discuss the impact these political tensions have had on Chinese communities in Canada. This research project spun from this specific focus, as a means of eliciting and showcasing Chinese voices and perspectives on the subject matter. Moving forward, the challenge is to bridge the gaps identified between Chinese Canadian communities and other Canadian communities, especially in the policy process, and to address the gap between area/China studies and ethnic studies. This goal will hopefully encourage universities to usefully contribute to the strengthening of democratic life in our Chinese Canadian communities in the face of PRC government pressures and the Canadian media misperceptions.