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Identity Politics and Hong Kong **UBC Research Project Explores Myriad of Perspectives on Hong Kong Protests**

Project Recap

Broader global tensions are fueling an atmosphere of reproachful disengagement and divisive politics on UBC's campus. Specifically, the Hong Kong conflict is fostering polarization and galvanizing harmful stereotypes within and between ethnic groups. 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 during the month of November 2019. Sharing key insights and perspectives gathered from qualitative research, this article is the second publication in a four-part series aimed at highlighting the diversity amongst UBC's ethnic Chinese community. To ensure the safety and anonymity of the students involved in this project, pseudonyms have been used.

The overarching aim of this project is to illustrate the process of ideological polarization in times of political turmoil and societal 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. This specific article explores our understanding of identity, and how such understandings shape our perceptions of politics, international relations, and conflict resolution more broadly. To read all publications in this series, please click [here](#).

Questioning Identity

“Am I Chinese? If yes, what makes me Chinese?”

Jessica sits across from me in the foyer of the economics building, a proud Chinese citizen sharing her thoughts, ideas, and perspectives on international policy, China-Canada relations, and identity politics. She was born and raised in mainland China, moving to Canada about seven years ago to complete her undergraduate degree at the University of British Columbia.

“I am Chinese, but I try to think beyond this nationalist identity. I can disagree with China and I can disagree with Canada,” explains Jessica. “I fully understand that loving your country doesn't mean you have to agree with country politics.”

“Am I Chinese if I love the country, but also criticize the policies and politics?”

It's a rhetorical question, of course. She has always considered herself to be Chinese, both culturally and logistically speaking. However, as Jessica meanders through her internal dialogue, describing various characteristics, beliefs, and interests that comprise her identity, she discloses a

burgeoning sense of anxiety. A growing dread of rejection, a feeling of not belonging to any one particular group because of her visible identity, as well as her more liberal and neutral views.

Personifying her anxiety, Jessica remembers the on-campus protests surrounding the [2014 umbrella movement](#). She was an undergraduate student during this period in time, and distinctly recalls the tension between mainland Chinese students and Hong Kong students. Similar to today's political climate, in 2014 questions on identity and what constitutes patriotism were bubbling under the surface on UBC's campus. Jessica vividly describes one particular protest where a group of mainland students were planning on rallying near the student centre to sing the Chinese national anthem. This demonstration was in response to another protest organized by Hong Kong-based student organizations on campus, explains Jessica.

Feeling torn between the nationality on her passport and what she felt was her personal ideology, Jessica says she started to question what it meant to be Chinese.

“Someone basically told me, if you don't come, you're not Chinese,” says Jessica, referring to her participation in the national anthem demonstration during the 2014 umbrella movement.

“I love my country, but I don't agree with being extremely patriotic,” adds Jessica. “They're disagreeing with Hong Kong students, but that doesn't mean they're any more Chinese for it.”

At the same time, Jessica also recognizes how her visible identity shapes outward perceptions of her beliefs, ideologies, and political leanings. She is one individual with her own thoughts and ideas, but because of her accent and her race, she is often confronted with sweeping generalizations and assumptions about her identity. This idea that your personhood is political, explains Jessica, it leads to feelings of shame and confusion.

“Our perspectives are shaped by our experiences,” adds Jessica, referring to the dangerous rhetoric of stereotyping.

Identity Through an Academic Lens

When one's experience is grounded within the confines of structural racism and belonging to one particular cultural in-group, identity politics can become difficult to navigate. Said another way, for any given person, identity is a nuanced composition of experiences, interests, relationships, and ideologies. These experiences, interests, relationships, and ideologies are in many ways, shaped by our social and cultural constructs. Many individuals moving between social and cultural constructs may find it challenging to navigate new experiences, interests, and ideologies that seemingly work against what is believed to be a core component of their perceived identity.

Dr. Benjamin Cheung, *Lecturer and Indigenous Initiatives Coordinator in the Department of Psychology at the University of British Columbia*, breaks this idea down further, explaining the cultural nuances in navigating identity. Central aspects of identity can be defined in terms of social relationships, and sometimes that extends to relationships with government. On the other hand, there are cultures that emphasize individual identity, based more so on individual interests and personality traits than group dynamics.

Looking at the perspective of the Asian Diaspora and the Canadian child, there is this idea that identity is wrapped up in relationships, and it's really difficult to disentangle that relationship. So much so, that in some sense harming those relationships calls into question individual identity within these communities.

“Culture is essentially a process of socialization, and so when people grow and socialize to have these very different ways of identifying, of creating identities, then you can imagine how difficult it is to reconcile these differences when you have groups very much emphasizing core individual identity, as opposed to people who might be thinking about group identity,” says Dr. Cheung.

Contextualizing social and cultural constructs here in Canada imposes another layer of complexity, adds Dr. Cheung, because it adds this element of “what it means to have a Canadian identity.”

However, it is important to remember that within such constructs exists a myriad of diverse opinions and interpretations.

“Just as there is heterogeneity amongst Canadians in general, there's also a lot of heterogeneity amongst Chinese people from mainland China,” says Dr. Cheung. “However, when one's self-identity is tied in with national identity, then I think that creates the potential for any criticism related to country to become a direct criticism of the self. Any attack on the country, any attack on anything related to the country, is an attack on the self, for better or for worse.”

The Challenges of Identity Constructs

Zhang Wei, a graduate student here at UBC, says his identity as a Chinese citizen renders his pro-democracy ideology problematic within his social circle.

“Talking about Hong Kong is complex for me because I genuinely support the pro-democracy movement. I don't agree with the way the Chinese government has been abusing human rights, especially in the last six years since Xi Jinping took power,” explains Zhang Wei. “I can feel the difference. I studied law in China, so I know exactly how he cracked down on NGOs and human rights organizations.”

Regardless, Zhang Wei tries his best to remain neutral when discussing Hong Kong.

“The desired freedom and autonomy of the Hong Kong people is justified, but I do get worried about the level of violence the protesters are taking on. As a Chinese citizen, I also understand the level of propaganda being used on citizens by the PRC through state media and social media. It's created a huge nationalist sentiment in China, because of that I sometimes feel isolated. I worry there are few Chinese citizens that share similar thoughts as I do,” adds Zhang Wei.

Like most children around the world, Zhang Wei said he never questioned his identity growing up. However, once he reached high school, he distinctly remembers exploring alternative

ideologies and experiences. He started to question China's increasingly conservative and autocratic regime, steadily realizing that his personal beliefs conflicted with government-backed ideology.

"That realization was hard for me and I started to doubt my identity as Chinese because I started to feel isolated and ashamed. I realized I was living in a country where I could not change a thing," shares Zhang Wei. "I was going through an identity crisis. I started to think about myself as a world citizen, caring about humanity more broadly. But then I realized that's impossible because I still deeply care about Chinese society."

Zhang Wei's friend, Peter, is an undergraduate student from Hong Kong. He reiterated Zhang Wei's sentiment, suggesting identity politics, particularly for the Canadian diaspora, are complex.

"I'm ethnically Chinese, but there are of course differences, mostly language and the fact that Hong Kong is a former British colony," says Peter.

"We can have different aspects to our identity, but I don't think we should tie ourselves to government ideology," adds Peter. "Is it Hong Kong rejecting China, or is it Hong Kong rejecting the government and the PRC style of policy and rhetoric?"

Calvin, another undergraduate student here at UBC, says rejecting China and rejecting the government are one of the same, suggesting that the Hong Kong government failed to educate its constituents on the history and cultural values of China.

"There's definitely a lot of tension between mainlanders and Hong Kongers. Most people just take what the western media says about protests, which is mostly negative towards China. China isn't as bad as its portrayed. I've lived most of my life in China, and I don't feel like my free speech has been challenged. We also have protests in China, but western media probably wouldn't report on those protests because it doesn't adhere to their agenda," expresses Calvin.

"It's like a diss to China," adds Calvin, referring to the Hong Kong protestors. "They shouldn't be saying anything bad about China. Every country around the world teaches their people to love their country, so I don't understand why Hong Kong didn't teach their people."

Navigating Identity in the Real World

What is identity, then? How does our identity influence our perceptions of a scenario at any given moment in time? Identity is a construct, sure, but does that render interpretations of controversial issues any less real for any one particular individual? Probably not. They are simply different ways of viewing the world, heavily influenced by social and cultural understandings of right and wrong.

Again, as the author of this series on the Hong Kong protests, it is not my place to argue what is right and what is wrong. Rather, I am highlighting the myriad of opinions and perceptions this

subject matter elicits, exploring how society and culture simultaneously constructs and contests the identities of those voices involved.

An academic article published in *Asian Ethnicity*, written by Miu Chung Yan, Karen Lok Yi Wong, and Daniel Lai, explores the inherent diversity within ethnic groups. Essentially, the researchers analyze how difference—nationality, language, region of origin, class, politics, religion, etc—within the Chinese-Canadian diasporic community creates sub-ethnic division. Simultaneously, they explore the socially constructed nature of ethnic identities more broadly, pointing out that public discourse tends to conflate country of origin, nationality, and ethnicity.

“The members of an ethnic group can be sub-ethnically diverse and divided by different boundaries which can cause intra-group tensions. These tensions may affect the self-identification of members of the ethnic group and the making and unmaking of the inter-group ethnic boundaries between them, as a collective, and others” (452).

The paper, titled “Subethnic Interpersonal Dynamic in Diasporic Community: A Study on Chinese Immigrants in Vancouver” fills a much-needed research gap around the diverse identity constructs comprising diasporic communities. It brilliantly illustrates what I have found from my own research: Within the Canadian context, individuals across subethnic divides share Chinese identity, willingly and unwillingly, as a minority group, but what it means to be Chinese means different things to different people (463).

We tend to understand this concept theoretically. Naturally, different experiences, cultures, religions, ideologies, family dynamics, educational backgrounds, and the like, will feed into our personal identity politics, uniquely structuring how we understand and make sense of the world. However, I’m not sure we understand this idea in a practical sense.

Whether we like it or not, every single individual will bring their own biases and pre-conceived judgements to the table. We logically understand that the person sitting across from us may have an alternative opinion that fundamentally challenges our own, and yet we simultaneously believe everything we stand for to be correct. We’re all righteous, rather it’s the degree of finality in our conviction that tends to wane.

Point being, tensions about Hong Kong are exacerbating underlying differences within these communities because we have socially reframed the conflict as either pro-China or pro-Hong Kong. This dichotic framing feeds into skewed perceptions of identity because individuals are categorized, either fairly or unfairly, based on certain factors: Where you originally come from, when you immigrated to Canada, generational status, and so on.

Indeed, the tension and the violence surrounding the Hong Kong protests is nothing new in the realm of social movements. Sadly, we too have read about the consequences of intense polarization and the rise of discrimination in our history books, and yet, we continue to doubt the warning signs flashing before our eyes. So, I suppose the next question should be, how do we stop the exhaustive cycle of history repeating itself?

Concluding Remarks

Through exploring the wide range of opinions on the Hong Kong protests, I have attempted to demonstrate how one's sense of identity, specifically within the diasporic context, can be constructed and simultaneously challenged by dominant social and cultural constructs. Challenging or questioning the core components of one's identity can be disruptive. What are we without our most fundamental beliefs? However, gazing beyond narrow boundaries might unveil alternative understandings of what it means to be an individual.

"I'm either too Chinese or not Chinese enough. I'm floating," explains Jessica towards the end of our interview. "But this is not necessarily a bad thing, because I have a wider understanding of the complexities that make up our society."

The next publication in this series will explore the idea of ideological polarization. As expressed in this piece, cultural, political, social, and ideological difference exists across ethnic and sub-ethnic boundaries, often leading to extreme polarization in times of heightened political tension. Generally speaking, prolonged and unbridled polarization fuels discriminatory behaviour. Skewed understandings of nationalism and unwavering populism work to harden divisive lines between in-groups and out-groups, progressively compromising solution building efforts. Why and how do we collectively move towards extreme polarization and what are the ramifications? How does the Hong Kong conflict fit into the larger global trend towards populism? What are the social and cultural repercussions of unabated nationalism? I will attempt to address these questions, and many more, in the following article.

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

About the Researcher 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.

