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Are You Pro-Hong Kong or Pro-China? Ideological Divisions in an Age of Ultra-Nationalism

Project Recap

This article is third publication of a four-part series featuring the opinions and perspectives surrounding the Hong Kong protests. The goal of the project is twofold. Firstly, to understand and discuss the wide range of opinions within the ethnic Chinese community on campus, as a means of providing adequate support through sound policy development. Secondly, to explore these opinions as a catalyst to interpreting the current political climate, as well as the potential ramifications of an increasingly polarized environment at UBC. With these two goals in mind, Cassandra Jeffery, a researcher from the *Master of Public Policy Program and Global Affair* program, set out to illustrate the process of polarization in times of political turmoil and societal tension. She 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 interprets the process of ideological polarization through the rise of nationalist rhetoric. In other words, how does our turbulent era of rising populism and nationalism, globalization, and unbridled capitalism bleed into the UBC community? How is it that events taking place on the either side of the Pacific fracture relationships here in Vancouver? Does an extremely polarized campus jeopardize the safety and wellbeing of students? Bearing these questions in mind, researcher Cassandra Jeffery sat down with several students and area studies faculty members from UBC to discuss the Hong Kong conflict and ideological polarization more broadly. To protect the anonymity of the students involved, pseudonyms have been used. To read all publications in this series, please click [here](#).

Food Fights: Polarization Around the Dinner Table

Reverberating around the world, communities fraught with soaring political tensions are susceptible to extreme ideological polarization. Leveraged as a divisive mechanism to harden lines in the sand, a bout of rising nationalism appears to be dragging moderate perspectives to their respective radical sides.

You're either with us, or against us, so the saying goes. A damaging sentiment, surely. An age-old saying disregarding the hues of grey littered between shades of black and white. Logically, we understand there are two sides, if not many sides, to every story. We recognize the existence of nuances and complexities when discussing ideology, political or otherwise, and yet most of us fail to look past our biases and accept disagreement without condescension. And so, in a global climate riddled with fear and anxiety, we yell. Equipped with our righteous assumptions, we

passionately express our views, blinded by the guise of, “well, that’s *my* opinion.” These are emotional and turbulent times, to be sure.

Ideological polarization is not a new phenomenon, though. Think back to every holiday spent around the dinner table with your trickle-down advocating conservative uncle or love-will-save-us-all hippie cousin. Conversations, at least in my household, ended in fits of rage and inconsolable tears. I would storm out of the room, rambling on about ignorance, blinded by my unquestionably *correct* doctrine. This routine became a household bit: staunch retaliation to any idea deemed in opposition to my ideological principles, regardless of actual knowledge or insight on the subject matter. In every fit of pantomimed desperation, we pushed ourselves and one another further along the ideological spectrum. Naturally, the realization that I too may be pouring fuel onto the polarization fire was not an easy pill to swallow. My identity was entirely intertwined in my ideological and political beliefs, to the point where any slight against or critique of these principles was a direct affront to my personhood. A family member questioning the fundamental values I believed to be *right* was to challenge my rudimentary understanding of the world.

In 2020, it feels as though the entire world is our dining room table, and we are passionately squabbling over an insurmountable range of opinions on the political and ideological spectrum. However, unlike our annual holiday gatherings with family, the stakes at the proverbial global dinner table are much higher.

Background Knowledge

Before diving into the opinions and perspectives of UBC students, it is important to consider nationalism and populism in a global context. A journal published by the [Italian Institute for International Political Studies](#) broadly defined nationalism as the ideology, or discourse, of the nation.

“It fosters specific collective movements and policies promoting the sovereignty, unity, and autonomy of the people gathered in a single territory, united by a distinctive political culture and sharing a set of collective goals. [...] Nationalist ideology coordinates and mobilises collective action in nation-building through the sentiment of belonging to the nation as a primary identity” (14).

On the other hand, populism has often been defined as a “rhetorical style of political communication, a thin-centred ideology, a form of political behaviour, and a strategy of consensus organisation” (16-17).

These two ideologies converge when there is a need to legitimize vaguely developed rhetoric, which centres around the denial of pluralism, with a more robust ideology such as nationalism (17).

“In other words, conceiving populism as a thin ideology illustrates the dependence of populism on more comprehensive ideologies that provide a more detailed set of answers to key political questions” (17).

Key political questions, within this context, effectively divide based on inclusionary and exclusionary ideologies, fostering a culture of blame towards out-groups for the woes of in-group participants. The *us* versus *them* mentality manifests on both sides of the political divide, often through the villainizing of ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities on the right, and elitist, greedy socialites on the left. In a time of global unrest, it's easy to see how populist and nationalist dogma can polarize opinions, even within in-groups, and lead to increased hostility, division, and discrimination.

“Nationalism is a tool that gets used in this process of escalation, which is really just a process of power building,” explains Dr. Aftab Erfan, *Director for Dialogue and Conflict Engagement with the Equity and Inclusion Office* at UBC. “It starts with the jokes, the gossip and leads to communication breakdowns. Then coalition building and the othering begins by drawing on the stereotypes and furthering the dehumanizing process. Nationalism is the easiest way to build a coalition and escalate underlying conflicts that could lead to violence. Naming and identifying your ‘enemy’ to further legitimize your in-group.”

Nationalism and coalition building apply to Canada and to UBC, as well. When we think about this process from within the vantage point of a liberal, Canadian academic institution, we may conjure up associations with the radical, Trump-supporting right. However, such an assumption would fail to acknowledge the radical left, which includes a wide variety of opinions within and across ethnic divisions.

“I worry that people hold liberal ideology to be such an intricate part of Canadian identity, that for some members of the Canadian population, especially the Asian Canadian population, they may refuse to see mainland Chinese people, that may have been born here, or that may have Canadian citizenship, as being fully Canadian. Even though, at the heart of it, Canadian identity, or *Canadianness* is about having plurality of ideas and plurality of people,” says Dr. Benjamin Cheung, *Lecturer and Indigenous Initiatives Coordinator in the Department of Psychology* at UBC.

“I worry that people are going to be so entrenched into their views of what is and what isn't Canadian identity, that they end up ostracizing people who have every right of identifying as Canadian,” adds Dr. Cheung.

“Trivial Things Don't Matter Any More:” Student Perspectives

“We are not hopeful about the outcome,” says Jamie, an undergraduate UBC student and Hong Kong native. “We need to find motivation and hope, but it's difficult. I was taught to forgive, and I know I should forgive, but I am very angry, and at this point, I don't know if I can.”

Perched up at a picnic table near the student centre, I sit listening attentively to two undergraduate students from Hong Kong. As they voice their frustration with the Chinese government, and share their personal hardships, it is clear these two young students have a lot more on their minds than final exams.

“Trivial things don’t matter anymore, now it’s more about, have my friends been arrested? Is my family okay? Will my friends be able to escape from Poly U?” expresses Danielle, also a UBC undergraduate student and Hong Kong native. “A lot of us are willing to sacrifice our lives for this, and it’s not because we are stupid.”

Danielle describes how the situation in Hong Kong has grown into a matter of desperation, with many of her family and friends succumbing to feelings of hopelessness.

“But the problem is that I don’t see politics anymore, I see power,” says Danielle, referring to her resentment towards the Chinese People’s Party (CCP). “It’s so frustrating, I am standing up for a basic fundamental right, but people think I am somehow destroying the society. Yes, I am radical in a way. I stand up for what I believe in, for my rights in society, but that doesn’t mean I hate mainlanders. I recognize where their thoughts and values come from. It’s really hard because it’s not about the facts and the communication, it’s the value system and the structural system that has defined our identities from a very young age.”

“In Hong Kong, we put individuals before the system, and we cannot trust the government too much,” adds Jamie, as she explains her frustration towards the CCP and towards the Hong Kong elite, who have helped exacerbate the conflict. “They left it to the next generation to deal with this problem.”

For Jamie and Danielle, the effects of the Hong Kong conflict are bleeding into their Vancouver lives in several ways. The stress and anxiety harboured for friends and family in Hong Kong has become routine, but they have also grown to fear PRC influence here on campus, too.

“I think the government is watching me here in Canada,” says Danielle.

Danielle explains that her dad used to work in mainland China, and also participated in peaceful protests at the onset of this conflict. After crossing back into Hong Kong from the mainland, one day he was detained for eight hours without reason. Danielle says that the police collected information on her family during her dad’s detention and believes they may now be keeping tabs on her.

“I’ve also held a few big rallies on campus, which is another reason why I think they’re watching me,” adds Danielle.

She also mentioned that her photo was taken without her permission and posted all over an information board on WeChat.

“At the rally, they took close up photos of protestors, then posted them up on social media and wrote up blogs about how we’re separatists, but that’s not true,” says Danielle. “I feel so paranoid, I always feel like someone is watching me.”

It is important to point out that during my research for this project, I did not find any conclusive proof that deliberate, government sanctioned PRC influence operations have taken place on UBC’s campus. Regardless, based on anecdotal evidence alone, it is clear that the conflict more

broadly has facilitated and heightened an atmosphere riddled with anxiety and fear on campus. This toxic climate of paranoia and apprehension weighs on students from Hong Kong, as well as mainland China. Students from mainland China and Chinese-Canadian faculty members being the recipients of growing skepticism from Canadian authorities *and* PRC patriots. In one instance, a university faculty member, originally from mainland China, disclosed a scenario in which she was unfairly questioned because of her place of origin. In other conversations with mainland Chinese citizens, they have described their trepidation around holding views that are in opposition to the CCP, should their opinions be discovered.

“I am pro-democracy, and I stand with the Hong Kong protestors, even though they use violence that is pretty hard to justify. But it is really dangerous for me to have these views,” says Li Jun, an undergraduate student from mainland China, currently studying at UBC. “I went to one of the protests here in Vancouver, and it was so divided. I am Chinese in a Hong Kong crowd, but I am scared to show my face and be visible in this capacity because it could be dangerous for my family back in China.”

From another vantage point, some students feel as though the Hong Kong conflict has been poorly covered by Western media, suggesting patronizing rhetoric is fueling divisiveness between Hong Kong and China, and within ethnic Chinese communities here in Vancouver.

Li Qiang, a graduate student at UBC, says that he was highly critical of the Chinese government before moving to Canada several years ago to pursue his undergraduate degree.

“It was very jarring when the censorship veil was lifted, I was suddenly exposed to all these ugly truths; it’s hard to live with it and be quiet about it,” describes Li Qiang.

However, after spending some time in Canada, Li Qiang says he took a more moderate approach towards the Chinese government, citing Western-centric criticism as an unfair representation of China’s political tactics.

“I started to realize that the Chinese government does have its difficulties, but there’s always another side to the story, there is always a number of political and cultural issues that the government is dealing with at any given time. I’m not agreeing with everything the Chinese government is doing, or even defending the government, but they are reacting to what they perceive as a problem in a way they believe is appropriate,” says Li Qiang. “I am against criticizing the government without being constructive. Pointing a finger and shaming is not adequate. Very often that could make things actually worse.”

Despite his rather moderate views, Li Qiang says it has become increasingly difficult to respectfully engage with students on the Hong Kong conflict, and on China-Canada relations more broadly. More distressingly, he expresses his angst regarding the rise of racist and discriminatory rhetoric in the wake of growing tension between China and Canada.

“People I’ve spoken to, most of whom have been in Canada for about 15 years, have been experiencing more and more bigot sentiments following the arrest [of Huawei’s Meng Wanzhou] and China’s retaliation,” says Li Qiang.

Li Qiang says that he has not personally been at the receiving end of discriminatory behaviour in recent months; however, he did mention that he has started to sensor himself more than usual.

“I’m more careful not to do anything that may provoke people because I am aware that actions by the Chinese, or Asian communities in general, may have altered perceptions of Canadians,” adds Li Qiang. “I want to first show people that I am very similar to them. I do not want to get into a conversation signaling to people that we are very different and there is no way we’re going to agree.”

Zhang Wei, another graduate student here at UBC, also expressed his concern regarding discriminatory behaviour in recent months. In our conversation, we discussed the rejection of student visas based on Chinese citizenship, and his fear that racism will become part of the dominant conversation on campuses in Canada, too.

“I don’t want that to become a normal part of UBC culture,” reflects Zhang Wei.

Where Do We Go from Here? Navigating Ambiguity and Listening to Difference

Avoiding ideological difference is impossible, nor should it be strived for as an idyllic aspiration. Plurality of opinions and perspectives, nurtured and reinforced through a culture of tolerance, provides society with an opportunity for continuous growth and development. Learning without reservation accommodates a space for critical reflection of societal structures and prevailing dogmas, encouraging the fluid adaptation and enhancement of existing presumptions. However, indoctrinated by dominant culture, human beings tend to asseverate assumptions without unpretentiously understanding alternative points of view, sequentially failing to adequately critique their own convictions.

Indeed, genuine ideological heterogeneity should be cultivated; society must learn how to engage with difference in a constructive and respectful manner. We must relinquish our arrogant assumptions, and unequivocally accept difference of opinion, even when it fundamentally contradicts everything we *know* to be true. We must provide a space for a myriad of voices along the political and ideological spectrum, practicing our active listening skills in the process. I am not advocating that we provide a space for voices on either far end of the ideological spectrum. However, I am suggesting that we learn how to be more comfortable in the grey areas. As a society, navigating the ambiguity will not only dissuade movement towards the righteous realms of the ideological spectrum, but it will also foster a more inclusive and effectual sphere of problem solving.

“Conflict escalates when people feel they don’t have a voice,” says Dr. Eftab, *Director for Dialogue and Conflict Engagement with the Equity and Inclusion Office* at UBC. “So, if you can hear people early, really hear them and capture the essence of what they’re saying, then hopefully they won’t have to say it louder and louder.”

The first article published in this series provides background information regarding the scope of the project and the China-Hong Kong conflict more broadly. The second piece published

explores how our understanding of identity can be tightly entangled with cultural values, nationalist rhetoric, or dominant societal discourse that may inhibit our ability to view alternative opinions as valid. Simultaneously, our identities are contested when our fundamental values are challenged. This piece examines how periods of societal tension and political turmoil can leverage entangled identities, working as a tool to exacerbate dangerous and divisive nationalist rhetoric. The fourth and final piece in this series discusses potential solution building tactics.

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.