Lessons in Patriotism

Producing national subjects and the de-Sinicisation debate in China’s post-colonial city

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Fifteen years after the former British colony’s “reunification with the motherland” on 1 July 1997, the relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong remains as uneasy and conflict-ridden as ever. An increasingly porous border, evidenced by an influx of mainlanders from day-trippers to real estate speculators, as well as what is seen as the growing political influence of Beijing, have sparked popular fear in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) over the imminent “mainlandisation” (大陆化) of the city. Deepened resentment towards the mainland has also become more openly and unabashedly expressed: In February 2012, a full-page advertisement was printed on the local tabloid Apple Daily condemning mainlanders as “locusts,” in retaliation for Peking University professor Kong Qingdong’s provocative remarks that Hong Kongers are “bastards” and “running dogs of the British government.”(1)

These recent flare-ups bring to the fore deeply rooted issues of belonging and national identity in China’s post-colonial city. According to a survey conducted in June 2012, the society’s self-identification as Chinese dropped to a 13-year low on the eve of the 15th anniversary of reunification. (2) People in the SAR identify themselves most strongly as “Hong Kongers” (香港人), then in descending order as “members of the Chinese nation” ( Zhonghua minzu yifenzi 中华民族一份子 ), Chinese” ( Zhongguoren 中国人 ) and “global citizens” ( shijie gongmin 世界公民 ). Worryingly for Beijing, identification with the title “nationals of the People’s Republic of China” ( Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guomin 中华人民共和国公民 ) is found to be the lowest of all. For youths under the age of 30, it is found that the number of those who view themselves as “Hong Kongers” is 60-72 percent higher than those who identify themselves as “Chinese.”(3)

It is at this perhaps unprompted moment that the programmatic introduction of patriotic lessons under the banner of guomin jiaoyu (国民教育), or national education, was announced by the Hong Kong government. The controversial decision contributed to one of the city’s most successful civil movements since the handover and stimulated productive probes into the enduring question of what it means to be a “patriotic,” “motherland-embracing” national subject in a city where colonial legacies such as the rule of law remain defensively treasured. What emerged from the debates also highlights the tensions embedded in such seemingly unproblematic notions as the city’s “necessary integration” with the mainland.

This article analyses the issues of belonging, national identity, and citizenship through an examination of the national education debate and looks ahead to the future of mainland-Hong Kong relations in the 18th Party Congress era.

Learning to love China

During his visit to Hong Kong in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of reunification in 2007, President Hu Jintao highlighted the need to strengthen national education for youths in order to “pass on Hong Kong compatriots’ glorious tradition of loving the country and loving Hong Kong” (爱国爱港的光荣传统). This manifest instruction from Beijing was swiftly heeded by the administration headed by then Chief Executive Donald Tsang. The budget for national education witnessed a staggering six-fold rise from HK$5 million in 2006 to HK$35.3 million in 2007. (4) This figure further increased to HK$60 million in 2008. (5) In policy addresses, Tsang pledged to give greater weight to elements of national education in primary and secondary curricula. In 2007, the government vowed to encourage more schools to assemble flag guard teams and promote flag-raising ceremonies. A year later, a National Education Funding Scheme for Young People was launched to subsidise large-scale events targeting youngsters. The subsidy quota for secondary students to participate in mainland exchange trips was raised from 5,000 per year to 37,000. To promote national education “in a more strategic and systematic manner,” a platform named Passing on the Torch was created to facilitate coordination between voluntary groups engaged in the organisation of exchange activities. (6)

2. The survey is conducted by the Public Opinion Program of the University of Hong Kong. See their press release on 26 June 2012, http://hkupop.hku.hk/english/release/release937.html (consulted on 12 November 2012).
3. Ibid. Another government-commissioned survey conducted in 2010-2011 by the Department of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan, showed that 42.9 percent of youths see themselves as Hong Kongers, 30.7 percent as Chinese Hong Kongers (Zhongguoren de Xianggangren), and 13 percent as Chinese. The study was commissioned by the Commission of Youth and was announced in November 2011. Full report available for download at www.cov.gov.hk/ikc/research/hk_youth_development.html (consulted on 12 November 2012).
It was in Tsang’s 2010-2011 policy address that the introduction of Moral and National Education (deyu ji guomin jiaoyu ke) as an independent, standalone subject was proposed. Beijing’s design was clearly articulated in an editorial that appeared in the People’s Daily overseas edition:

Many surveys have shown that Hong Kong youths’ knowledge of the country’s condition (guoqing) is far from ideal. For instance, fifteen years after the SAR’s return, a significant proportion of young people still have no idea what the May Fourth spirit represents; some do not even know who the President is. The SAR government’s introduction of Moral and National Education serves to fill these gaps in knowledge of guoqing, and helps young people to adapt to the changing times.

What concerns Beijing is not just the lamentable paucity of factual knowledge about China, however. More important is what it perceives to be the worryingly slow progress in the “return of people’s hearts” (renxin huigui) to the motherland. Since 1997, the land has returned to China, but not the hearts and minds of those who inhabit it. National education in the post-colonial city, it is argued, is necessary to raise up a future generation that will “grow to love our motherland and Hong Kong, aspire to win honour and make contributions for our country, and have a strong sense of pride as nationals of the People’s Republic of China.”

Tsang’s curt, one-line proposal on the subject, buried in an otherwise lengthy policy address, largely fell outside the media headline and certainly did not arouse the public uproar it did less than two years down the road. Following the address, an ad hoc committee was set up in 2010 to see to the subject’s implementation. A draft Curriculum Guide (kecheng zhiyin) prepared by the Curriculum Development Council was released in May 2011, accompanied by a four-month period of public consultation. The revised Curriculum Guide was formally announced in the final months of the Tsang administration. On 30 April 2012, the Education Bureau declared that Moral and National Education as a standalone subject is to be introduced in a “progressive manner” through a three-year initiation period before it becomes compulsory in primary schools in 2015 and in secondary schools in 2016.

The series of incidents that precipitated the outpour of public anger, however, did not take place until Tsang had completed his second term in office. On 4 July, days after Leung Chun-ying was inaugurated as the new Chief Executive, the media reported the publication of a highly controversial teaching handbook. Entitled The China Model (Zhongguo moshi), the handbook lauds the Chinese Communist Party as a progressive, selfless, and united ruling organisation (jinbu wusi yu tuanjie de zhizheng jituan) and commends the democratic (minzhu xing) and superior (xiuyue xing) nature of China’s current political system. The ideal model (lixiang xing) is far from ideal. For instance, fifteen years after the SAR’s return, the Tsang administration is currently headed by Victor Sit, a former member of the National People’s Congress. The Institute worked under the appointment of the National Education Services Centre (Guomin jiaoyu fuwu zhongxin), set up by the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers, a pro-Beijing organisation that receives substantial annual subsidies from the government. From 2008 to 2010, the Centre pocketed as much as HK$27.33 million in subsidies from the Education Bureau.

The dubious links between the government, pro-Beijing organisations, and educational institutions unsettled the public. Hundreds joined in an online petition denouncing Baptist University for sacrificing its academic integrity for the fulfilment of dubious political assignments. Similar arrangements for the production of other national education materials were soon revealed. Another programme, criticised for “indoctrinating” credulous primary school students by cultivating unreflective, sentimental notions of patriotism, was compiled by an organisation affiliated with the City University of Hong Kong after receiving HK$8 million in sponsorship from the Quality Education Fund. The Blended Learning Curriculum Design for Hong Kong National Education has been adopted in at least 18 primary schools over the past three years.

Another aspect found problematic was the Assessment Program for Affective and Social Outcomes (APASO) (qingyi ji shejiao biaoqian pingying) introduced by the Education Bureau. The APASO consists of a number of scales by which students are to evaluate their performance. One of these scales is “National Identity and Global Citizenship,” useful as “an index on the duty to the nation, emotional attachment to the national, global citizenship, and attitudes toward the national” of schoolchildren. In its implementation, schools have devised such measurements as “We should support the country even if the people believe that the country has done wrong” and “We should buy made-

9. Copies of the handbook were published in March and distributed free of cost to primary and secondary schools in mid-June, as reference materials for the launching of national education. For an online scanned copy of the handbook, see www.scribd.com/doc/98483500 (consulted on 12 November 2012).
10. “Youshi zhi shi jiehe jiazhang wei xiayidai bianzhi guomin jiaocai” (Experts and parents should unite to design national education syllabi for our next generation), Ming Pao editorial, 7 July 2012.
12. “Youshi zhi shi jiehe jiazhang wei xiayidai bianzhi guomin jiaocai” (Experts and parents should unite to design national education syllabi for our next generation), Ming Pao editorial, 7 July 2012.
13. The content of the program is available online at http://re.actin-education.hk/Website/re/swl/NE%20touch%20FLASH/Flash_touch_160511_3.5.2_updated2012.swf (consulted on 12 November 2012).
in-China products in order to protect the employment situation in China.”

The adverse turn in public opinion days after the handover of power took the Leung administration by surprise. Deep suspicions of the new Chief Executive’s cozy relationship with Beijing — sentiments that Leung’s contender for the top job, Henry Tang Ying-yen, had effectively exploited during the election, and that Leung’s own actions after his victory have served to aggravate — only intensified public anxiety over national education and consolidated distrust of the new government. Misguided and ill-considered comments made by pro-Beijing supporters of national education helped little in allaying concerns. Just as the outcry against “brainwashing” grew in volume, National Education Services Centre representative Wong Chi-man was quoted as saying that “all education is, to some extent, designed to brainwash”. “I think the word ‘brainwash’ is too negative. It evokes something out of ‘Clockwork Orange.”

**Activism against “red indoctrination”**

What followed was a rare collaboration between different forces against national education in the society and the staging of civic action on a scale comparable to the 1 July 2003 demonstration through which citizens successfully blocked the introduction of an anti-subversion security law in the Basic Law of Hong Kong. The first mass protest took place on 29 July, with organisers reporting a turnout of 90,000. A month later, as the summer holidays drew to a close, an Occupy Tamar movement with protesters clad in black took over the government headquarters at Admiralty. The siege lasted for ten days, during which a marathon hunger strike was staged, until the Leung administration backed down on 8 September by cancelling the three-year initiation period and promising that national education will not be introduced as an independent subject within his term.

What was particularly noteworthy about this demonstration of collective will was the extraordinarily marginal role played by the city’s political parties, including the usually strident People Power. Although the pan-democrats joined in the opposition against national education, they were not the chief organisers of the crucial movement that eventually forced the government to change its mind. Instead, the pressure group behind the victory was made up of students, parents, and teachers without a unified political background. The Civic Alliance Against National Education (minjian fandui guomin jiaoyu quan diaolun) was established in July 2012, led by the student body Scholarism (xuesheng aiguo quanfang), the National Education Parents Concern Group, and the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union. Among these three, the young, post-90s activists of Scholarism drew society-wide applause and brought “a glimmer of hope,” according to political commentator Albert Cheng, to the city’s democracy dream.

Scholarism was founded by three secondary school students in May 2011 after the draft Curriculum Guide was first released for consultation, when its core leader, Joshua Wong Chi-fung, was only 15. Scholarism used the social media network Facebook to draw attention to national education and recruit supporters, attracting more than 200 student members. Funded by members’ own pocket money and donations obtained through street rallies, the group was efficiently organised with labour divided into policy, public relations, music, and action teams. During Occupy Tamar, which required meticulous planning from the setting up of tents to the assembling of sound systems, the young activists demonstrated “extraordinary discipline and organisational skills” and provided protesters with an abundant selection of snacks and drinks that “would put [convenience store chain] 7-Eleven to shame.” They also showed keen political acumen by maintaining a cautious distance from political parties, warning them off to prevent the movement from being hijacked by mainstream politicians and to avoid accusations of being used as puppets. From the beginning, the movement has remained singularly focused on the issue of national education, one of the key reasons, indeed, for its eventual success.

The high-profile activism of Scholarism attracted criticism and censorship. South China Morning Post columnist Alex Lo alleged that it operates like “a radical cult involving young children.” “Well, we don’t have a cult leader yet,” he wrote in a piece entitled “Just who is brainwashing whom?”, “but the pure enthusiasm, youthful rebellion, rejectionism, intransigence and total contempt for the authorities are all on display.” Asia Television (ATV), a local broadcaster, went further to vilify Scholarism as a pawn (qizi) manipulated by politicians backed by foreign powers in London and Washington.

The 3 September episode of ATV Focus, an evening prime-time news commentary broadcast on weekends, portrayed Hong Kong as polarised between the “constructive camp” (jianjuepai) and the “destructive camp” (pojuanpai). The student activists were labelled as “wilful young ruffians” (renxing shiqi de eshao) who are “extremely poor at playing politics,” adding the barely concealed threat that they were putting their soul, studies, and futures at risk.

The program is understood to be under the charge of Louie King-bun, former senior editor of the pro-Beijing newspaper Ta Kung Pao.

In fact, the day after the controversial show was released, Ta Kung Pao itself ran a front-page report assailing the teachers and activists that joined the anti-national education hunger strike, reviling them as “black hands” (heishou) controlled by political forces. The provocative ATV program precipitated an avalanche of complaints. Tens of thousands wrote to the communications authority saying that the program had breached the authority’s code of practice, which states that free-to-air television licensees should ensure that their programs are accurate and impartial. The chief editor of ATV news resigned. Chang Ping, one of China’s best-known commentators, called the episode Hong Kong’s “4/26 moment.” He drew parallels with the 1989 Tiananmen democracy movement – “the same young faces, the same steel in their eyes, the burning passion, the fearlessness” – and compared the ATV program to the notorious People’s Daily editorial of 26 April 1989, which branded the peaceful demonstration...
Nationalism with Hong Kong characteristics?

The national education debate directed attention to the fundamental issue of what patriotism and nationalism mean for the SAR: Should there, indeed, be a version of "nationalism with Hong Kong characteristics"? "It is as ridiculous as it is sad that, while the world is hungry for knowledge and understanding of a country that is home to one-fifth of the world's population and its second-largest economy, we in Hong Kong are rejecting this need," writes a lecturer at the Chinese University. Young people in Hong Kong should know so little about China that getting to know it is as essential as learning addition and subtraction. It would be a grave mistake, however, to simplistically label opponents of national education as refusing to learn anything about China. Many were against national education as it was designed and conceived by the Education Bureau, and not necessarily against introducing the subject itself.

The strongest critique concerns the kind of nationalism being fostered as defined by the Moral and National Education Curriculum Guide. Tsang Wing-kwong, professor at Chinese University, points out that the proposed national education encourages a kind of primordial, essentialist nationalism that is irrelevant to and incompatible with the situation of the SAR. It is built on dated notions of kinship ties, geographical embeddedness and boundedness, and feelings of consanguinity as found in concepts such as "blood is thicker than water" (xuexiong yushui 淵囬血) — "descendants of Yanhuang" (Yanhuang zisu 黄皇子孙), and "sons and daughters of the land of the Yellow River" (Huanghe dadi de emu 黃河大地兒) — this type of ethnic nationalism based on deep-seated, narrowly-defined notions of "same roots, same hearts" (tonggen tongxin 同根同心) often conflates "family" and "nation" and leads easily into exclusivistic ethnocentrism. The draft Curriculum Guide also explicitly adopts a passion-based (yiqing weiben 激情而非) or inspiration-by-passion (yiqing yinta 激情以發) approach in educating youngsters.

What is appropriate for Hong Kong, Tsang proposes, is the cultivation of "civic nationalism." In contrast to ethnic nationalism, which builds solidarity based on irreducible and unchanging elements such as blood ties, civic nationalism emphasises a sentiment of "comradeship" based on the equal participation and mutual cooperation taking place within what German thinker Jürgen Habermas called "a community of citizens," with the collective vision of sharing in the same fate (tongzhou gongji 同舟共) and being in the same boat (tongzhou gongji 同舟共). The city's ethnic minorities, for example, have rallied alongside opponents of national education, saying that the proposed curriculum marginalises them and risks engendering racism. An honorary adviser of the Hong Kong Association of the Heads of Secondary Schools recommends the introduction of a citizenship education that cultivates "cultural and constructive patriotism" through promoting the universal values of multiculturalism, pluralism, and cosmopolitanism. The Hong Kong Alliance for Civic Education has since 2002...
worked towards the development of teaching materials for schools in this direction. [48]

A second point of contention is the suspiciously urgent introduction of national education when the teaching of Chinese history itself has been neglected for more than a decade. In the curriculum reform initiated in 2000, it was determined that Chinese History was no longer required to be taught as an independent, standalone subject. Instead, the teaching of Chinese History can be broken down and parcelled out, for example through combination with World History or incorporation into an Integrated Humanities program. Only 5 percent of total school hours need to be allocated to Chinese history-related topics. As of 2008, only about 70 percent of secondary schools still keep Chinese History on their lists of subjects. [49] Barely more than 8,300 out of some 73,000 student candidates took the Chinese History paper in the 2012 Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination, less than half of the number of students who, for instance, took Chemistry or Economics. The number is expected to fall further. [50]

Many have since called for the resurrection of Chinese History as a compulsory subject in junior secondary forms. In 2008, the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers joined forces with Education Convergence and two history teachers’ groups to form the “united action group on the popularisation of national history education” (guanzhu puji guoshi jiaoyu lianhe xingtongzu 联合历史教育行动组), petitioning the Tsang administration to bring the subject back. Then in June 2011, after the government released the consultation draft for Moral and National Education, the Democratic Party tabled a motion to reinstate Chinese History. Ironically, the demand was blocked by the pro-establishment camp. [51] The apparent lack of concern for Chinese History teaching stood in stark contrast to the displayed enthusiasm for national education, and made the public reasonably wary of the genuine intentions behind the insistent push for the program’s introduction.

**“De-Sinicising” Hong Kong**

The national education controversy also led to an intense debate over the phenomenon of “de-Sinification” or “de-Sinicisation” (qu Zhongguohua 卜 去中國化) in Hong Kong. The term de-Sinicisation has been most strongly associated with the pro-Taiwan independence or the Taiwanisation (Taiwan bentuhua yundong 臺灣化運動) movements, which under the Chen Shui-bian administration from 2000-2008 led to campaigns aimed at eliminating Chinese influence and strengthening the separateness of Taiwanese identity. To Beijing, the de-Sinicisation label basically entails the most serious offense of advocating secession, separatism, and independence with the aim of breaking up China.

As the national education debate raged on, two influential Hong Kong-based commentators of Yazhou Zhoukan (亞洲周刊) – a newsmagazine founded by Time Warner in 1987 and bought out by the Ming Pao Group – wrote that the controversy is putting the city in a “very dangerous” de-Sinicisation crisis (qu Zhongguohua weiji 卜 去中國化危機). Tan King-sin argued that opponents of national education have thrown out the “China baby” (Zhongguo 去中國) when they tried to get rid of the murky “Chinese Communist Party” (Zhonggong 去中國共产党) bathwater. “China” has become a term hijacked by politics and a target of unrelenting demonisation (bei yaomohua 倒惡魔化). [43] Editor-in-chief Yau Lop-poon cautioned that by not drawing a clear distinction between the Party and the state (dangguo bufen 党国本) , “anti-Communist sentiment has unknowingly evolved into anti-China sentiment.” [45] Yau argued that Hong Kong is “losing China” (Xianggang zhengzai shiqu Qu Zhongguo 卜 去中國地) and turning into an “啊歷史性的城市” (qu lishi de chengshi 卜 去城市). “去中國化” (qu Zhongguohua 卜 去中國化) and called upon the populace to rediscover its own narration and knowledge of China (minjian Zhongguo lunshu 卜 去民間論述).

The de-Sinicisation debate was triggered by the waving of British flags and the colonial flags of Hong Kong at recent protests, including at anti-national education rallies. The Facebook Group “Raise the Flag on Hong Kong” (Xianggangqiu piaoyang 卜 去香港揚旗), for example, advocates the use of colonial flags to show discontent with the current administration and to “resist China’s colonial rule in Hong Kong” (Fandui Zhongguo dui Xianggang shixing zhimin tongzhi 卜 對中國對香港施行民生統治). The pieces by Tan and Yau further cited growing public concern for the Hong Kong City-State Autonomy Movement (Xianggang chengzhang xizhi yundong 卜 去香港自治運動). The Autonomy Movement was initiated based on the influential writings of Dr. Chin Wan-kan, who teaches Chinese studies at Lingnan University. Chin argues that Hong Kong has a quality of “purity” it should not lose and advocates for it to become a self-governing city-state. [41] Publicity for the Autonomy Movement has grown with exacerbating relations between mainlanders and Hong Kongers aggravated by a series of incidents. In mid-September, the Liberare Sheng Shui Station campaign (guangfu Shangshui zhan 卜 上水站) was organised by netizens, with British flags and placards reading “Chinese people scar back to China!” used to protest the influx of parallel goods traders.

The Yazhou Zhoukan pieces were received with trepidation by some of the city’s public intellectuals. Journalist Ng Chi-sum penned an alarmed reply cautioning against the careless gesture of putting de-Sinicisation hat (koushang qu Zhongguohua de mao 卜 去中國化毛) on the anti-national education movement. The Autonomy Movement remains a minority in the state. Ng points out, and had little if any influence on the anti-national education movement. Rather than de-Sinicisation, what the movement hoped to achieve was eliminating the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (qu Zhonggonghua 卜 去中國化) and preventing Party worship. Applying the de-Sinicisation label is a dangerous move that puts Hong Kong’s civil society on equal footing with those rallying for Taiwan independence. [44]

Ng’s premonition of political escalation proved justified. As anti-national education rallies petered out in October, officials began to strike back through a series of high-profile public remarks targeting “forces” calling for 39. Dennis Chong, “Bring back Chinese history, say lawmakers,” SCMP, 17 June 2012.
Table 1 – Comparison of the 2008 and 2012 Hong Kong Legislative Council elections.

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<th>2008 Legislative Council election</th>
<th>2012 Legislative Council election</th>
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<tr>
<td>Geographical constituencies (GCs)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35 Two seats added to New Territories East, and one each to New Territories West, Kowloon East, and Hong Kong Island.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functional constituencies (FCs)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35 30 Traditional FCs 5 District Council (Second)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Independence (Gangdu shili 独勢). China Daily bluntly characterised the Moral and National Education debate as “a political duel between national identity recognition and ‘Hong Kong independence’ activists.” Former deputy director of Beijing’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office Chen Zuo’er warned that separatist forces are “spreading as quickly as a virus” in the SAR. The Office’s former director, Lu Ping, attacked advocates of separatism as “sheer morons” and remarked with acrimoniousness that they should renounce their Chinese nationality, as China “would not be bothered losing this handful of people.” In certain commentaries, the SAR is portrayed as a base for foreigners scheming to destabilise China. The China Daily piece said that “Hong Kong has become a beachhead for Western powers headed by the US […] and they have trained a bunch of native speakers to act as their functionaries with a much larger number of followers.” Lew Mon-hung, a delegate to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, alleged that Hong Kong is being built into a bridgehead for Americans to bring about a colour revolution in China.

The worrying escalation of the national education debate against the background of growing mutual emnity demonstrates the fragile and volatile state of relations between mainland China and Hong Kong. As a Ming Pao editorial soundly cautions, the politically charged labels of “de-Sinicisation” and “separatist forces” risk upgrading the city’s politics to the level of ideological struggles (shanggang shangxian 高層逆流) through the manufacturing of false enemies and contradictions (diwò maodun 敵戶矛盾). Should Beijing take to the diagnosis that Hong Kong is under the “viral” threat of forces vying for independence, greater intervention in the SAR’s affairs through appendages such as the Central Liaison Office will only be legitimised as a necessary prescription.

A deadlocked government

Managing the increasingly delicate relationship between the mainland and Hong Kong will thus be one of the top governing challenges of the new SAR administration. It must demonstrate loyalty to Beijing, appease local supporters, and at the same time be responsive to an increasingly vocal civil society. The national education controversy has demonstrated the complicated considerations and potential difficulties associated with such a task, and the Leung administration’s management of the rapidly unfolding crisis was found wanting. The launching of the Occupy Tamar movement left Leung staunchly unmoved. Even into the fifth day of the siege, Leung told protesters that the “precondition” for talks “cannot be withdrawing or not withdrawing” the program. He changed his mind five days later, vowing not to forcibly introduce national education within his term.

Granted, the newly inaugurated administration was inexperienced. An official later admitted that the government was encumbered by a combination of a “brand new” education minister and “baggage-carrying” officials who, having participated in the preparation of national education for years under the Tsang administration, saw its introduction as a matter of “normal course” and following “standard operational procedures.” Nonetheless, the administration’s delayed reaction also showed its straddled position. On the one hand, it misjudged the extent and tenacity of public opposition and must struggle belatedly to maintain its popular legitimacy. On the other hand, it had to take into account the political interests of its own supporters in the government, including many Beijing-friendly groups that have braved public opinion and stood for national education.

The strategic significance of both was magnified with the 2012 Legislative Council election taking place in September, in which the makeup of the city’s new legislature for the next four years was to be decided. The 2012 election was significant in that it was the first election to take place after the passage of the constitutional reform package in 2010. Under the new format, the number of seats has increased from 60 to 70, with an additional five seats for both geographical constituencies (GCs) and functional constituencies (FCs). The FCs category has since its inception been criticised as dominated by anti-democratic special interest groups with links to Beijing, and elected based on extremely narrow mandates. The five newly added seats under FCs, colloquially referred to as “supersedes,” were instead elected by all registered voters who are not eligible to vote in traditional FCs. Based on a much broader public mandate, the superseats opened a new battleground for the pro-establishment and pan-democratic camps.

At first the government, straddled by the pro-establishment camp’s concern that backing down on national education would help the pan-democrats gained political capital, insisted on launching the program. Their underestimation of the resilience of public opposition eventually forced the government to haphazardly abandon its policy just one day before the election in order to avoid an electoral disaster. The pan-democrats’ clear stance against national education, however, seemed to have translated weakly in the election.

45. “Chen Zuo’er: Gangdu shili ru bingdu manyan” (Chen Zuo’er: Hong Kong independence forces spreading like a virus), Ming Pao, 15 October 2012.
47. Keung Kai-hing, art. cit.
48. Lew Mon-hung, “Qu Zhongguohua shi fanduipai peihe Mei chongfan Yatai de zhengzhi biaoyan” (“De-Sinicisation is the opposing camp’s cooperation with America’s return to Asia political show”), Wen Wei Po, 24 September 2012.
49. “Gangdu maizi buneng luankou” (The hat of “Hong Kong independence” cannot be casually put on), Ming Pao editorial, 26 October 2012.

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from four to six, in the GCs they secured only 18 out of 35 seats, a disappointing result compared with the 19 out of 30 seats won four years ago.\(^{52}\)

It remained unclear whether the last-minute concession offered by Leung appeased some voters and thereby assisted the pro-establishment camp in the election. Many of the victories won by pro-establishment candidates could be attributed to a formidable system of centralised planning and meticulous coordination (peipiao) that proved particularly useful under a system of party-list proportional representation based on the Hare quota. Some from the pro-establishment camp, in fact, found Leung’s climb-down strikingly ill-timed. Lau Nai-keung, a member of the Basic Law Committee of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, called Leung’s inopportune announcement a “clumsy political move” that pleased no one. “To those who braved unspeakable pressure to come forward to show their support for national education,” he argued, “this amounts to an unprincipled opportune announcement.”\(^{53}\) Attending to increasingly vocal public opinion amidst a general anti-mainland atmosphere while not alienating loyal supporters within the government will be a growing challenge for the SAR administration.

The 18th Party Congress Reshuffle

The once-in-a-decade leadership transition in China will have an impact on mainland-Hong Kong relations. As analysts point out, the new Politburo Standing Committee included “an unprecedented number of party officials with strong Hong Kong connections.”\(^{14}\) Xi Jinping, the new President, has been heading the Central Leading Group on Hong Kong and Macau Affairs since 2007. Zhang Dejiang, who was Guangdong party secretary from 2002 to 2007, and Zhang Gaoli, who was Shenzhen party secretary from 1997 to 2001, both met with SAR officials on a regular basis during their time in the southern province. Looking ahead, as Xi takes up his new position as the top leader of China, he will continue to chair the Leading Group but will become altogether less hands-on with regard to the affairs of the SAR. At the same time, though he failed to join the Standing Committee, Li Yuanchao is tipped to be promoted to vice-president, who, according to tradition, is responsible for supervising Hong Kong affairs. Li is a close protégé of Hu Jintao known for his relative open-mindedness, and his appointment “could mean a relatively open atmosphere for Hong Kong.”\(^{55}\)

Despite this hopeful sign, political commentator Johnny Lau Yui-siu believes that the central government is gradually “losing patience” with the intractable city. Members of the powerful Politburo have developed an “antagonistic mentality” and are ready to put the city “in a tighter Beijing grip.”\(^{54}\) A changing tone can already be detected in Hu Jintao’s report at the 18th Party Congress. In his section on Hong Kong and Macau affairs, two new Politburo members have been named: Zhang Dejiang, who was Guangdong party secretary from 2002 to 2007, and Zhang Gaoli, who was Shenzhen party secretary from 1997 to 2001, both met with SAR officials on a regular basis during their time in the southern province. Looking ahead, as Xi takes up his new position as the top leader of China, he will continue to chair the Leading Group but will become altogether less hands-on with regard to the affairs of the SAR. At the same time, though he failed to join the Standing Committee, Li Yuanchao is tipped to be promoted to vice-president, who, according to tradition, is responsible for supervising Hong Kong affairs. Li is a close protégé of Hu Jintao known for his relative open-mindedness, and his appointment “could mean a relatively open atmosphere for Hong Kong.”\(^{55}\)

What mainland officials perceive to be the growing power of de-Sinicisation and separatist forces in the SAR may indeed harden their resolve and strengthen their belief that Hong Kong youths need a healthy dose of national education. With the controversial Moral and National Education Curriculum Guide shelved on October 8, the Civic Alliance Against National Education has called it a temporary victory. Others believe that the government’s climb-down is only a delaying tactic, as the introduction of national education has only been shelved, not completely abolished.\(^{56}\) Given the freedom to decide whether to introduce national education and how to introduce it, individual schools have now become the new battlefields for vigilante activists, and for more optimistic educators the new laboratories for developing more objective syllabi to teach the next generation about China. While Hong Kongers will not see the government push for national education in the next five years, the issue will remain a highly sensitive one as citizens of the former British colony continue to negotiate their identity and grapple with the profound implications of their city’s return to Chinese rule.