Hong Kong Identity on the Rise: Understanding the Role of Subnational Identity in the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests

Gemma Sykes

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Hong Kong Identity on the Rise: Understanding the Role of Subnational Identity in the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests

submitted to
Professor Aseema Sinha

by
Gemma Sykes

for
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Abstract

In 2019, Hong Kong erupted in mass protests demonstrating the city’s desire to be recognized as having a distinct peripheral identity with separate political expectations. What began as demonstrations against the proposed Extradition Bill quickly became a mass display of the differences between Hong Kong’s peripheral nationalism and the national Chinese identity. Since 2008, the subnational ‘Hongkonger’ identity has seen a dramatic rise in self-identification polls from only 18 percent in 2008 to 52.9 percent in 2019. Moreover, in 2019, 92.5 percent of 18 to 29 year olds in Hong Kong identified solely with the ‘Hongkonger’ identity. This thesis seeks to understand what has caused the rise of the ‘Hongkonger’ identity and how it has played a role in the emergence of Hong Kong’s 2019-2020 pro-democracy movement. In addition, it reviews existing social movement and identity theory literature to develop a revised version of Doug McAdam’s political process model. This revised political process model includes the consideration of identity within the cognitive liberation aspect of the theory. This thesis argues that including identity within the political process model provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding the emergence of social movements that derive from identity-based clashes. After understanding the factors that have caused the strengthening of the ‘Hongkonger’ identity, it applies the revised political process model to Hong Kong’s 2019-2020 protests to argue that subnational identity is the main factor behind the movement’s emergence.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, Hong Kong has made headlines for the massive protests that have disturbed the city and marked a generational change in identity. Many scholars attribute the social unrest in Hong Kong to the growing division between the ‘Hongkonger’ identity and the national Chinese identity. Through the mass protests, Hong Kong people seek to be recognized as a distinct group with vastly different political desires from the rest of China. In 2019, the rise of the ‘Hongkonger’ identity reached a peak in self-identification polls. The subnational identity reached historic heights at 52.3 percent of all individuals and 92.5 percent of those in the 18-29 age group identifying solely with the local ‘Hongkonger’ identity (Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong 2019). While social unrest has been prevalent throughout Hong Kong’s history, the 2019-2020 protests mark a change in the way Hong Kong citizens express their identity and right to democratic values. This thesis seeks to look at how identity has played a role in the 2019-2020 movement’s emergence. If a strong sense of political activism and discontent has existed for generations in Hong Kong society, why did the 2019-2020 protests emerge when they did? By looking at the history of Hong Kong and evidence to the recent strengthening of the subnational identity, I seek to understand how the Hongkonger identity acted as a mobilizing factor in the 2019-2020 pro-democracy movement.

While it is important to understand how the 2019-2020 protests are rooted in the strengthening of the city’s subnational identity, I also seek to understand how existing social movement theories may be applied to Hong Kong’s events. In
this thesis, I deploy Doug McAdam’s ‘political process model’ to better understand how social movements emerge and how this may be applied to the case of Hong Kong’s protests. However, in reviewing the political process model, I argue that its lack of discussion of identity makes it unable to fully explain the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. As a result, I argue that a revised political process model, one that includes identity within the cognitive liberation aspect of the model can better explain why the Hong Kong protests have persisted and how it has been able to attract such a large mass base. I argue that by including a discussion of identity within the concept of cognitive liberation, one can better understand why individuals feel motivated to protest and how identity has become a mobilizing factor in itself. In the main body of the thesis, I connect the revised political process model to the 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong to show how the revised model can better explain the movement’s developments and show the necessity of including identity within the theory.

This thesis first reviews existing theories on social movement theory and identity theory in chapter 2, to outline how these concepts may be applied to cases such as Hong Kong. I then argue that a revised theory integrating the two literatures provides a more extensive approach to understanding the emergence of protests that are driven by identity-based clashes. After arguing that an integrated theory can provide a more comprehensive approach to understanding the 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong, I, then, look at the historical context (chapter 3) of the development of Hong Kong’s subnational identity; in addition, I provide evidence of its recent growth (chapter 4). By analyzing evidence on how the
Hongkonger identity has strengthened in recent years, I then connect it to the emergence of the pro-democracy social movement in 2019-2020 (chapter 4). Lastly, I apply my revised version of the political process model to explain how the inclusion of identity within the theory makes it applicable to Hong Kong.

*The Puzzle of the Rise of the Hongkonger Identity*

As Hong Kong’s most recent wave of protests continues to consume the global media’s attention, many people are puzzled as to why the 2019 to 2020 protests have persisted for so long. While the protests began in response to the Communist Party of China’s (CCP) extradition bill in March 2019, they have continued into 2020 even after the bill was formally revoked (Wu 2019).

During this period of unrest, the protests marked monumental events in Hong Kong’s social movement history. On June 16, 2019, Hong Kong experienced the largest march in its history. As many as two million Hong Kong residents out of the city’s seven million population participated in the pro-democracy movement; a dramatic display of the current tensions between the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and the Mainland Chinese government (Wu 2019).

In addition to the immense size and length of the 2019 protests, the recent protests depict a significantly more violent side of Hong Kong’s social movements. Compared to previous protests in Hong Kong, the 2019-2020 protests have seen a shift in the use of violent tactics by both police and protestors. The police have used violent tactics beyond rubber bullets and tear gas, resorting to crowd management vehicles and even firing live rounds at protestors on a regular
basis (Lee 2019). On the other hand, protestors have similarly used more violent
tactics than experienced in previous demonstrations. Protestors’ tactics quickly
evolved from peaceful civil disobedience demonstrations to vandalizing
government buildings, using bricks, and even home-made petrol bombs (Lee
2019). Moreover, universities in Hong Kong have become battlegrounds between
student protesters and police (Chan et. al 2019). At the Chinese University of
Hong Kong, protesters and police clashed in an extreme display of violence--
depicting the grave extent to which the 2019-2020 protests had reached (Chan et.
al 2019). The violent tactics used by both protestors and police depict clashes that
arose from the growing frustrations of facing oppressive policies by the CCP in
Hong Kong.

The 2019-2020 protests and the violence that ensued, depict a boiling
point in which resentment towards the central government reached a peak. In
addition, the historically high levels of self-identification as Hongkonger versus
Chinese in 2019 reveal a strong desire to be recognized as a distinct identity with
different political expectations. Evidentially, the length of the 2019 protests, and
the attendant violence hint that the causes are much deeper than the Extradition
Bill. As a result, it is crucial to understand if and how the subnational Hongkonger
identity has acted as a mobilizing factor in the 2019-2020 protests.

Looking at the history of Hong Kong’s social movements, it is evident that
political activism and the desire for democratic ideals has been a longstanding
sentiment held throughout the city. One of the most significant demonstrations of
pro-democracy ideals was the 2014 Umbrella Movement. While the 2014
Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong lasted for a significantly shorter period than the 2019-2020 protests, it laid many of the seeds for future pro-democracy movements to rise. The movement similarly began as a cry for democracy in the current political system. Protestors used primarily peaceful means to demand for universal suffrage in Hong Kong elections (Shuk-mei Ku 2019). The protests lasted for over two months but ultimately were unsuccessful at causing political reform (Shuk-mei Ku 2019). However, despite the inability to achieve universal suffrage, the movement reflected the city’s strong desire for democratic values and the monumental discontent with Hong Kong-China relations.

While the 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019-2020 protests are two of the largest displays of protests in recent years, seeds of pro-democracy movements have existed since the 1980s (Shuk-mei Ku 2019). Prior to the handover of the British colony of Hong Kong back to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, some intellectuals advocated for democratic ideals to be established in the post 1997 Hong Kong. During this time of uncertainty as to how Hong Kong would be governed once handed back to China, some Hong Kong intellectuals proposed the idea of “democratic reunification” in order to promote the idealistic goal of democracy not only in Hong Kong, but also, within China a whole (Shuk-mei Ku 2019). They believed that promoting reconciliation between Hong Kong and Mainland China through democratic values would allow for a greater sense of unity rather than going back to a highly controlled authoritarian regime (Shuk-mei Ku 2019). In addition, in 1989 Hong Kong experienced mass demonstrations in response to the violent suppression of the student-led movement at Tiananmen
Square in Beijing (Shuk-mei Ku 2019). The protests in Hong Kong reflected not only the condemnation of the massacre by the Chinese government, but the desire for Hong Kong’s democratization leading into the handover (Shuk-mei Ku 2019).

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(Yep 2012; Cheng 2016; Duhalde and Huang 2019; Birsel 2019)

In chapter 3 focusing on Hong Kong’s social movement history, I look more closely at the various demonstrations that have occurred over the years. The series of protests that have occurred in Hong Kong’s history depicts the strength of political activism within the population. Understanding Hong Kong’s history of protests portrays the unique context that led to the emergence of the city’s largest demonstrations to date in 2019.

*The Historical Development of the Hongkonger Identity*

The Hongkonger identity has been developed over a long and tumultuous history of transfers of power. From the city’s British colonization to its reunification with China in 1997, Hong Kong has experienced a political history that is extremely unique. However, since 2008, there has been a dramatic increase
in self-identification with the subnational Hongkonger identity that has become more visible through the 2019-2020 pro-democracy movement. In Hong Kong, younger generations have felt a growing sense of separation from the Mainland Chinese identity and self-identified as Hongkonger. As a result of the implementation of “one country two systems” a distinct Hong Kong identity has emerged due to the city holding much more liberal political and economic freedoms than the rest of China. The differences in terms of economic, political, and cultural factors between Hong Kong and Mainland China have allowed a Hongkonger identity to grow separately from the Mainland and become politicized in recent years. While many of the protests emerged as a result of a varying series of events and policies, the distinction between the Chinese and Hongkonger identities is present in almost all of them. The subnational Hongkonger identity reflects the various powers that have controlled the city for centuries and a sense of separation from Mainland China because of the period of British Colonial rule.

In the nineteenth century, Hong Kong transitioned from being under the rule of China’s Qing Dynasty to British Colonial power (Fong 2017, 525). During British rule, Hong Kong lacked any autonomy and was excluded from negotiations over the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 which would hand over Hong Kong back to Mainland China in 1997. The Joint Declaration stated that Hong Kong would become a Special Administrative Region (SAR) and be under the central-local framework of “one country two systems” (Fong 2017, 526). Under the Joint Declaration, after 1997, Hong Kong was granted a high
degree of autonomy and given executive, legislative, and judicial powers in the SAR (Fong 2017, 526). Moreover, the development of a “Basic Law” was enshrined in the Joint Declaration, which protected freedoms such as the freedom of assembly and speech, and would remain unchanged for fifty years beginning in 1997 (Fong 2017, 526).

While HKSAR was allowed a significant level of political autonomy in the early years after 1997, the CCP later began to adopt a “new Hong Kong” policy in 2003 (Fong 2017, 527). The new policy adopted by the CCP included a stronger control of HKSAR political affairs and the transition from a noninterventionist approach to one of active involvement (Fong 2017, 527). The active involvement of the CCP in HKSAR’s internal affairs and policies is one of the driving factors in Hong Kong’s most recent movement against the proposed Extradition Bill. What began as the SAR’s opposition to the specific Extradition Bill became a movement against the CCP and a city-wide expression of Hong Kong’s distinct local identity. The 2019-2020 protests have depicted a divide between Hong Kong residents’ identification as Chinese versus Hongkonger (McLaughlin 2019). In June 2019, 52.9 percent of the sampled population identified as Hongkonger, whereas only 10.8 percent of sampled individuals identified as Chinese (Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong 2019). In contrast, in the poll conducted in 2008, only 18.1 percent identified as Hongkonger and 38.6 percent identified as Chinese (Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong 2019). This dramatic increase in identification as Hongkonger and decrease in identification as Chinese depicts a notable
strengthening of the subnational Hong Kong identity. Juxtaposing information on changes in ethnic identity and recent social movements, we can better understand how the strengthening of a distinct Hongkonger identity has contributed to protests against assimilation efforts made by Beijing.

Peripheral Nationalism and the Development of the Hongkonger Identity

Scholar Brian C. H. Fong uses the theory of “peripheral nationalism” to explain the tensions between national and subnational identity in Hong Kong. Fong defines peripheral nationalism as the “assertion of a distinctive identity by people living within a specific territory of a nation-state” (Fong 2017, 524). As such, peripheral nationalism arises when inhabitants of a distinct periphery resist incorporation by the centralizing state (Fong 2017, 524). Fong argues that after 1997, China began to implement policies which infringed upon the autonomy held by HKSAR in an attempt to better incorporate the city into Mainland Chinese culture and political rule. In addition, by implementing policies that allowed Mainland China to have greater control over Hong Kong, the CCP attempted to limit the sense of peripheral identity and subject them to control under a centralized state (Fong 2017, 528). China’s attempt to incorporate Hong Kong into the centralized state, and thus erode their sense of peripheral nationalism, is one factor that has led to greater tensions between the Hong Kong public and Chinese government. The use of incorporation tactics to limit the distinct Hong Kong identity depicts how a sense of discontent with the Chinese government has grown stronger in recent years and is at the root of the 2019-2020 protests. In my
proposal of a revised political process model, I use Fong’s argument of peripheral nationalism to depict how identity plays a key role in mobilizing protest.

*Economic, Political, and Cultural Explanations*

In addition to the historical context and the resistance to the CCP’s incorporation strategies, the Hongkonger identity has also developed out of economic differences between the city and the rest of China. The economic explanation for the strengthening of Hong Kong’s subnational identity is based both on the economic success of the SAR and the regional economic failures such as Hong Kong’s housing crisis. Hong Kong is of great economic importance within China and in the world. Hong Kong was the 7th largest trading entity in 2018 (Trade and Industry Department 2019). Moreover, in 2018, Hong Kong was Mainland China’s second largest export market, making up 12.2 percent of its total exports (Trade and Industry Department 2019). Hong Kong and China have an extremely intertwined economic relationship where the region is both dependent on the Mainland and contributes to a significant share of the Mainland’s overall economy. At the end of 2018, Hong Kong was the largest source of realized foreign direct investment, making up 54 percent of the national total (Trade and Industry Department 2019). The CCP’s authoritarian regime and centralized policies provides a stark contrast from Hong Kong’s capitalist economy. In fact, Hong Kong was ranked the freest economy in the world for the 25th consecutive year in 2019 by the U.S. Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom (Trade and Industry Department 2019). This fact alone depicts a serious distinction between the significant economic freedoms in Hong
Kong and the lack of economic and political freedoms in Mainland China. Hong Kong’s capitalist nature in contrast with the government’s otherwise centralized and communist policies depicts one factor which has led to the development of a strong subnational identity.

In addition to the economic relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China, regional economic issues also play an important role in understanding the Hongkonger identity. Hong Kong has experienced extremely high levels of wealth inequality and housing shortages which have caused grievances between the local population and the government (Wong and Wan 2018, 38). Issues related to social mobility and economic inequality within Hong Kong have been used in mobilization and political activism since 2003 (Wu 2009, 1035). However, while these economic factors have undoubtedly contributed to social unrest in the city, focusing solely on the economic explanation is too narrow of an approach. Rather, considering economic grievances within the greater Hongkonger identity provides a more comprehensive perspective to why the rise of the Hongkonger identity has led to social protests.

Another factor that has caused tensions between the Hongkonger and Chinese identities is the differences in political views. Moreover, beyond the differences in political expectations in Mainland China and Hong Kong, the complex relationship Hong Kong has with the rest of the country has also led to the strengthening of the subnational identity. In Hong Kong, the Joint Declaration and the establishment of “One Country Two Systems” provides a unique political environment in which Hong Kong’s autonomy is under control by the CCP.
Moreover, recent pro-democracy movements explicate an increase in peripheral nationalism and counter-mobilization against the central government. Hong Kong’s resistance to the CCP’s power depicts one aspect leading to the tensions between subnational and national identities.

In addition to understanding the historical and current events related to pro-democracy political movements, the appointment process of Hong Kong’s Chief Executive provides another point of contention. Rather than a truly democratic election, the Chief Executive is appointed by the CCP. Since 2003, the CCP has worked to bring Hong Kong under more centralized power and limit its autonomy (Fong 2017, 528). These attempts to strengthen the grip on Hong Kong are portrayed in both the election processes of officials and the interpretation of Hong Kong’s laws. Despite the promise of autonomy in the Joint Declaration, Beijing officials have developed policies which depict the supreme powers of the central government under Hong Kong Basic Law (Fong 2017, 528). As such, while Hong Kong was promised autonomy, and even the idealist goal of universal suffrage in the Basic Law, the Mainland government has stressed that all HKSAR powers must derive from approval from the Mainland (Fong 2017, 528).

Through political integration, the Mainland government has attempted to establish a homogenous Chinese identity (Fong 2017, 537). However, I argue that rather than integration policies successfully eroding Hong Kong’s peripheral nationalism and identity, it has strengthened the Hongkonger identity even further. The discontent with Mainland-Hong Kong relations depicted in the 2019-2020 protests provides evidence of how these policies caused Hongkongers to feel
a greater sense of subnational identity out of anger with policies infringing on their autonomy.

Lastly, cultural factors play a significant role in the development and strengthening of the Hongkonger identity. The role of language, flags, and cultural practices are essential to understanding how Hong Kong’s subnational identity has not only emerged but strengthened over time. In Hong Kong, Cantonese is the most commonly spoken language at almost 90 percent of the population in 2016 (GovHK, 2019). The second most commonly spoken language in Hong Kong is English at 4.3 percent in 2016 (GovHK, 2019). Meanwhile, only 1.9 percent of the population speaks Mandarin Chinese, also known as Putonghua, the official dialect in China (GovHK, 2019). Despite the large majority of Hong Kong citizens primarily speaking Cantonese, it is still not specifically recognized as one of the official languages. Rather, the two official languages are English and Chinese as stated in Hong Kong’s Basic Law (Civil Service Bureau). While Cantonese is a dialect of Chinese, many Hong Kong citizens view the government's failure to acknowledge Cantonese as an official language as overlooking their unique regional identity (Tam 2014). Moreover, many Hong Kong citizens believe that the recognition of Chinese as an official language, and not specifically the Cantonese dialect, insinuates that Putonghua holds more legitimacy than Cantonese because of its official use in Beijing (Tam 2014). The tension between Mainland China and Hong Kong, driven by differences in languages, presents evidence of a unique subnational identity present in the SAR.
In addition to language, flags and other cultural symbols have played an increasingly important role in Hong Kong’s social movements. Protestors have used flags to symbolize the pro-democracy movement. Many Hong Kong protesters have been seen waving U.S. and British Colonial flags as a symbol of anti-Beijing sentiment. The recent emergence of the U.S. flag as a symbol of the movement is a result of the passing of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act (Lok-Kei 2019). The prevalence of Western flags in Hong Kong’s recent protests presents a controversial aspect of the use of symbols—especially because of Hong Kong’s colonial history. In chapter 4, I dive deeper into how the use of flags and other symbols have helped strengthen the subnational identity in Hong Kong.

**Social Movement Theory**

In addition to analyzing Hong Kong’s social movement history and the rise of its subnational identity, I look at theoretical models of political and social change to analyze what factors contributed to the emergence of protests in Hong Kong. In chapter 2 on social movement theory, I look at Doug McAdam’s political process model in his book, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970*. McAdam defines social movements as “rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through noninstitutionalized means” (McAdam 1999, 37). He states that in his political process model, the disparity of power between elite and excluded groups is recognized but not inevitable (McAdam 1999, 37). Moreover, excluded groups share an inception of powerlessness which allows mass groups to
mobilize and gain greater political leverage (McAdam 1999, 38). In attempts to change the power dynamics between elite and excluded groups, McAdam argues that three factors are crucial to mobilize movements. The first factor is the organization within an excluded population; the second is the sense of an “insurgent consciousness”; and the third is the political opportunities available to insurgent groups (McAdam 1999, 40).

After outlining each factor of the political process model, I argue that McAdam fails to consider the impact of identity within the model—making it insufficient in explaining the emergence of Hong Kong’s 2019-2020 protests. As a result, I assert that identity should be included within the insurgent consciousness (also referred to as cognitive liberation) factor of his model. The incorporation of identity within cognitive liberation provides a more comprehensive explanation of why individuals mobilize in protest and is the basis of my proposed revised political process model. I then apply the revised political process model to the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests to depict that identity is at the root of the movement.

Research Design

In this thesis, I use a large variety of sources including academic research on the history, economy, politics, and culture of Hong Kong. Moreover, since the 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong continue to evolve, I refer to many news outlets to better understand how the events and demands of the movement have developed. Research on the complex history of Hong Kong provides additional insight into what factors have led to discontent between the Hong Kong people
and the Mainland government. In addition, public opinion polls on identity
provides evidence to the strengthening of the subnational Hongkonger identity.
Lastly, using a revised version of McAdam’s political process model, I apply the
new theory to Hong Kong to see how identity plays a role in mobilizing
challengers. By applying the revised political process model, I argue that identity
is the main factor behind the emergence of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests.

This thesis is a contribution to the existing literature in political science
because of its application of social movement theory to the recent events in Hong
Kong. As the city continues to be in the media’s spotlight for its prolonged
protests, I seek to connect the rise of peripheral nationalism with the emergence of
the 2019-2020 pro-democracy movement. Looking solely at the proposal of the
Extradition Bill in 2019 to explain the emergence of the protests is an insufficient
analysis of the issue. Rather, considering the role of identity in Hong Kong
provides a deeper understanding of why Hong Kong’s protests have emerged and
how they have sustained for so long. Moreover, this thesis contributes a new
model to social movement theory with the synthesis of identity theory and the
political process model. While the revised political process model is applied
specifically to Hong Kong, it provides a framework that may be applied to other
movements that derive from identity clashes. As a result, the creation of a new
political process model and its application to the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests
provides a novel contribution to the literature on Hong Kong’s social movements.

In conclusion, Hong Kong provides a complex case study of how social
movement theory plays out in reality. The unique relationship between Hong
Kong and Mainland China acts as an interesting backdrop to analyze how differences between national and subnational identity caused the 2019-2020 protests to emerge. While Hong Kong’s subnational identity has existed for generations, increasingly centralized policies by the CCP have led the subnational identity to grow stronger and become more evident in demonstrations. Applying the revised political process model to the 2019-2020 protests illuminates how the rising Hongkonger identity has resulted in mobilization. The role of the Hongkonger identity in the process of cognitive liberation depicts how local identity contributes to presence of a large mass base and ultimately, the extensive demonstrations seen in 2019 and 2020. Understanding these events through the framework of the revised political process model, which includes identity, provides answers as to why the protests emerged and how identity must be considered a crucial aspect in social movement theories.
Chapter 2: Integrating Identity into Social Movement Theory

In this chapter, I analyze two separate bodies of theory and literature to create a synthesized model of the emergence of Hong Kong’s social movements. Using social movement theories such as the political process model outlined by Doug McAdam and literature on identity, specifically the concepts of subnational identity and peripheral nationalism, I seek to create an integrated model that better suits analyzing Hong Kong’s complex situation. While McAdam provides a strong theory of how many protests emerge, without the consideration of identity within his theory, the political process model cannot fully explain the emergence of the Hong Kong protests. I argue that including a greater discussion of identity within McAdam’s political process model, and specifically within the factor of ‘cognitive liberation’, provides a more comprehensive explanation of protest emergence in Hong Kong. Moreover, a more flexible political process model which considers how identity can be a mobilizing factor in itself provides insight not only into the emergence of protests in Hong Kong but other regions facing central-local disputes based in identity.

In considering identity within the political process model, I focus on two main subsets of identity theory—subnational identity and peripheral nationalism. Identity theory rooted in psychology views the self as reflective in its ability to categorize and classify itself in relation to many social distinctions and groups (Stets and Burke 2000, 224). This then allows an individual to self-categorize oneself and form his or her own identity (Stets and Burke 2000, 224). The ability to classify oneself as being a part of certain groups is what forms identity. This
process of developing one’s identity is further explained in social identity theory which considers how individuals form identities as result of their membership in social groups. A social identity is an individual’s awareness that she belongs to certain groups which possess cohesive identities and characteristics (Stets and Burke 2000, 224). As a result, in this paper, I define identity as one’s self-categorization with a social group holding distinct attributes, such as language, ethnicity, and citizenship.

Since subnational identity is based on one’s identification with the shared characteristics within a subnational region or group, this concept falls under the broader explanation of social identity theory. Subnational identity integrates the ideas of identity with nationalism. The broader concept of nationalism is a form of identity in itself—in the sense that constituents of a certain nation associate themselves with the characteristics of being from or living in a certain nation. The self-categorization with an identity shared on the national level is what develops a sense of nationalism within a state and creates a sense of comradery of being a part of this large social group. The theory of subnationalism is more narrow than both identity theory and nationalism. Subnationalism develops from self-identifying as a part of a social group that is a subset of the greater nation. Rather than identifying with the broader nationalist identity, subnationalist identities exist within the scope of the geographic nation but are defined by distinct characteristics that may vary from the nationalist identity. As a result, I define subnational identity as one’s self-identification as a member of a group characterized by the shared experiences, culture, and history of a certain
subnational region. A subnational identity is distinct and separate from the national identity as a result of factors which affect a distinct subnational group, and not necessarily the entire nation’s population. This suggests that a nation may have many subnational identities within it as a result of the different characteristics of each local region and territory. In the case of Hong Kong, one’s self-identification with the local ‘Hongkonger’ identity is evidence to the existence of a subnational identity separate from the rest of China.

Closely related to subnational identity, peripheral nationalism also focuses on the establishment, and strengthening, of a local identity separate from a national identity. Subnational identity may be viewed as a broader term which includes peripheral nationalism. The theory of subnational identity encompasses all social groups within a nation in which individuals identify with—including those defined by distinctions such as ethnicity, territory, language, and history. Meanwhile, peripheral nationalism focuses solely on the distinctive identity of people living within a specific region of a nation-state (Fong 2017, 524). In my discussion of peripheral nationalism, I use findings from Brian C.H. Fong who analyzes how peripheral nationalism plays a role in the emergence of social movements. Peripheral nationalism is a key concept to include in my revised theory of the political process model because of its consideration of how regional identities are strengthened and can act as a mobilizing factor in protest. Fong defines peripheral nationalism as “the assertion of a distinctive identity by people living within a specific territory of a nation-state” (Fong 2017, 524). The concept of peripheral nationalism is not necessarily concerned with a peripheral region’s
attempt to secede but rather, the development of a peripheral identity based on the resistance against the incorporation of a centralizing state (Fong 2017, 524).

Peripheral nationalism has a particular importance in Hong Kong because of the distinct Hongkonger identity which is attributed to the specific characteristics of the territory. The difference between the peripheral Hongkonger identity and the Mainland Chinese identity points to the roots of the recent conflicts. As a result, including a discussion of identity within the political process model allows us to also analyze how peripheral nationalism plays a role in mobilizing protest.

Now that I have defined identity, subnational identity, and peripheral nationalism, I can better portray how identity should be included in the existing political process model. I argue that identity—which includes subnational identity and peripheral nationalism—should be included within the “cognitive liberation” factor of the political process model. McAdam also refers to cognitive liberation as an “insurgent consciousness.” In the political process model’s explanation of the cognitive liberation factor, McAdam primarily focuses on the cognitive shift from feeling an individual sense of discontent with the political environment to mobilizing as a result of recognizing the vulnerabilities in political opportunity (McAdam 1997, 47). McAdam argues that the shift in cognitions that bring individuals to mobilize are based on “integrative ties within the movement’s mass base” (McAdam 1997, 47). This asserts that a general shift in cognition is dependent on other factors such as the organization and ideological similarities within the mass base. However, even despite McAdam’s focus on the cognitive aspects of movement emergence, his discussion of cognitive liberation lacks
sufficient discussion of identity. McAdam’s definition of cognitive liberation focuses too heavily on the cognitive shift from personal discontent to participating in mass mobilization. I argue that the success of cognitive liberation is dependent on a shared identity within the mass base and that the distinction between the identity of insurgents and members is an important aspect of emerging movements.

While the cognitive shift towards taking action is necessary for the establishment of movements, the consideration of protestor identity is crucial to understand the network that is necessary for cognitive liberation to occur in the first place. In the case of Hong Kong, cognitive liberation of the city’s protestors has occurred. Evident in the series of events of the 2019 protests, demonstrators have shifted their cognitions from a personal sense of discontent to a mindset of mobilizing their actions. However, while Hongkongers have experienced cognitive liberation, mobilizing them to demonstrate, applying the current understanding of cognitive liberation fails to address the importance of the SAR’s subnational identity. The distinct subnational identity in Hong Kong has developed as a means of peripheral nationalism—causing a unified shift from cognitive discontent to active mobilization. Including identity and peripheral nationalism into the cognitive liberation factor in the political process model is necessary to understand how Hong Kong’s mass base has utilized the Hongkonger identity in mobilizing in protest.

While McAdam’s political process model provides an extensive framework to analyze why social movements emerge, the model is unable to
explain how identity plays a large role in a group’s mobilization efforts. In the case of Hong Kong, identity is at the heart of the social movements. In order to understand why the 2019 Hong Kong protests emerged and why they have sustained for so long, it is crucial to consider how identity has acted as a mobilizing factor. As a result, including identity and Fong’s concept of peripheral nationalism into McAdam’s cognitive liberation factor provides a more comprehensive and applicable model to understand Hong Kong’s situation.

In the first part of this chapter, I summarize the prevailing literature on social movement theory. I explain the theories that preceded McAdam’s political process model and provide context to his alternative theory. I depict that existing social movement theories, including McAdam’s model, fail to place significant emphasis on identity as the driving factor of protest emergence. In prevailing social movement theory, the factors considered in movement emergence focus primarily on resources, leadership, and a political opening. However, many theories currently lack consideration of identity as a mobilizing factor in itself. I refer to this review of social movement theory later in the chapter in considering how social movement theories may be integrated with identity. While social movement theory and identity theory—including peripheral nationalism—look at similar issues, there are few theories that integrate the two. Incorporating identity and peripheral nationalism into existing social movement theory bridges the gap between the two literatures and provides a more comprehensive explanation of how identity can drive social movements. Currently, the two theories exist parallel to one another in distinctly explaining social movement emergence and
peripheral nationalism. However, by integrating identity into McAdam’s theory, I argue that a synthesized model can better explain the current situation in Hong Kong.

In the second section, I outline the social movement theories stated in McAdam’s book, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970*. Prior to laying out McAdam’s original theory, the political process model, McAdam explains the classical model and resource mobilization model. While the alternative models are critiqued by McAdam for their inability to address all aspects of an evolving social movement, they act as the foundation for McAdam’s proposed political process model. After outlining the classical model and resource mobilization model, I will summarize McAdam’s political process model and explain how each factor is evident in Hong Kong’s recent protests.

In the third section of this chapter, I review literature on identity theory and specifically, peripheral nationalism. I restate Brian C.H. Fong’s theory of peripheral nationalism and his application of the theory to Hong Kong. He states that peripheral nationalism is defined by the assumption of a distinct identity of individuals “living within a specific territory of a nation-state” (Fong 2017, 524). Fong argues that when peripheral nationalism becomes stronger in a specific territory, central governments may attempt to erode the existence of subnational identities through consolidating policies. In the later part of his paper, Fong applies the concept of peripheral nationalism to Hong Kong’s growing subnational identity. He argues that since 1997, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) implementation of incorporation policies caused Hong Kong’s peripheral
nationalism to grow even stronger. While the CCP’s policies have attempted to bring Hong Kong under greater control by the Mainland government and promote a sense of Chinese nationalism, they have instead pushed Hongkongers away and driven the rise of local identity. Fong’s focus on identity depicts how peripheral nationalism has led to a sense of discontent with the CCP. As a result, it is evident that identity plays a crucial role in the emergence of social movements in Hong Kong.

In the fourth section, I consider both McAdam and various theories of identity to establish how they may be integrated to create a more comprehensive theory. After reviewing literature on identity theory, I synthesize the theories with the political process model into a more comprehensive framework to analyze how a growing local Hongkonger identity led to the emergence of Hong Kong’s 2019-2020 protests. While McAdam’s theory presents a substantive framework for how social movements often occur, the unique central-local relations in Hong Kong place greater emphasis on the impact of peripheral nationalism in catalyzing social movements. As such, I argue that including identity within the cognitive liberation factor the political process model provides a stronger framework to understand Hong Kong’s social movement emergence.

*Literature Review of Social Movement Theory and Identity Theory*

The prevailing literature on social movements and peripheral nationalism are comprehensive in explaining their distinct issues but fails to consider how one field of thought interacts with the other. Rather than considering how identity acts as a mobilizing factor in social movement theories, much of the literature on
subnational identity and peripheral nationalism is focused on how it is strengthened through centralized policies. I argue that a synthesized theory that considers how identity plays a role in social movement emergence not only more sufficiently explains why the Hong Kong protests emerged but also is a novel contribution to the existing literature on social movements. This literature reviews looks at the prevailing theories of both social movement theory and identity theory before integrating the two.

*Social Movement Theory*

Within the classical model of social movement theory, one of the prevailing fields of literature is on the topic of mass society theory. The mass society theory is relevant to my argument because it is the basis of which McAdam establishes the political process model. While the mass society theory has been critiqued by many social movement theorists, understanding its roots and the factors it considers in movement emergence depicts why an identity-based explanation provides a better solution to understanding Hong Kong’s situation. Within this theory, “mass society” refers to the absence of societal structures which allows individuals to be fully integrated into political life (McAdam 1997, 7). Joseph R. Gusfield defines mass politics as “the form of political action unique to mass societies” (Gusfield 1962, 19). Within mass societies, various forms of strain or political crises often results in extremist responses (Gusfield 1962, 19). Theories of mass societies view society as politically egalitarian and pluralist. As a result, various groups and individuals are able to shift within positions of power and fight for control. Gusfield states that since people are unattached to unequal
political structures, they are capable of spontaneous actions in response to strains (Gusfield 1967, 21). In addition, Gusfield argues that in mass society theory, society is defined by institutions and changes that result in a strain placed on individuals and groups (Enrique, Johnson and Gusfield 1994, 67) As a result, in the classical model, social movements emerge when individuals experience alienation as a result of failed societal institutions (Enrique, Johnson and Gusfield 1994, 67). Alienation is defined within the literature as a feeling of detachment and powerlessness within large-scale organizations (Gusfield 1967, 21). In the mass society model, the rise of collective behavior as a result of alienation is a contrast to regular social life rather than being a part of a fluctuating political environment. While Gusfield argues that the mass society model provides insight into the consciousness of individuals in social movements, he critiques the model in stating that it provides too linear of an approach to movement emergence (Enrique, Johnson and Gusfield 1994, 68). Rather, he states that collective behavior action is a normal part of modern society—a factor that fails to prevail within the of the mass society theory (Enrique, Johnson and Gusfield 1994, 68).

Similarly, to Gusfield, Alberto Melucci argues that the mass society theory is an incomplete explanation for social movements in that it fails to differentiate between the extreme actions of an individual and a full revolution (Melucci 1980, 200). The mass society model is based on the understanding that social movements arise from strain which causes extreme behavior and “disrupts the equilibrium of the social system” (Melucci 1980, 200). The response to the strain felt by individuals is extreme behavior or mass mobilization to correct the shift in
equilibrium (Melucci 1980, 200). However, the strain that affects both individuals and masses is placed on the same level of structural significance and therefore fails to adequately differentiate between various levels of collective action. In addition, Melucci points out that many theories of mass society fail to address how strain may cause various reactions in behavior based on class relations or the appropriation of resources (Melucci 1980, 200). As a result, Melucci’s critique of the mass society theory depicts how the model fails to comprehensively explain the specific factors that cause mobilization beyond social strain.

Another prominent social movement theory that acts as the foundation of the political process model is the resource mobilization model. The resource mobilization model is similar to many contemporary social movement theories in its focus on the relationship between marginalized groups and elites. While aspects of the resource mobilization model are considered in the political process model, the theory is incomplete in explaining how movements emerge in an evolving political environment. In addition, the resource mobilization model fails to address the importance of identity as a mobilizing factor. As a result, presenting the model and its critique depicts how a theory focused on identity as a driving factor provides a stronger explanation.

J. Craig Jenkins first critiques the classical model in stating that the traditional theories surrounding it assume that movement participation is relatively rare and individuals are irrational in their actions (Jenkins 1983, 528). Jenkins states that the new resource mobilization model takes a more political and rational approach to movement participants (Jenkins 1983, 528). Most notably,
Jenkins argues that the resource mobilization model considers all movement actions as rational, the interests of the movement are institutionalized through power dynamics, the mobilization of movements is dependent on changes in resources, and lastly, the success of movements is dependent on the political processes occurring at the time (Jenkins 1983, 528). In addition, Jenkins states that resource mobilization theorists view social movements as an extension of institutionalized actions (Jenkins 1983, 529). Rather than viewing power dynamics within a society as pluralist, the resource mobilization model views social movements as the contention of power between marginalized groups and institutionalized elites (Jenkins 1983, 530). Unlike the grievances ensued in the classical model through structural strain, the resource mobilization model considers the grievances as secondary (Jenkins 1983, 530). In the resource mobilization model, grievances are depicted as relatively constant and derive from “structural conflicts of interest built into social institutions” and that movements arise from long-term changes in resources, group organization, and political opportunities (Jenkins 1983, 530). Jenkins’s comparison of classical models to the resource mobilization model states the necessity of a multifaceted approach to social movement theory. While the political process model takes additional steps to explain the dynamic context of social movements, the resource mobilization model provides a more comprehensive explanation than the classical model.
Doug McAdam: The Political Process Model

Prior to stating his political process model, McAdam restates the two prominent alternative models of social movements—the classical model and the resource mobilization model. He argues that while both of the theories provide some insight to why movements emerge, they are both insufficient in fully explaining the process of mobilization. His critiques of the two models are similar to those of Gusfield and Melucci and acts as the basis of his proposal of the political process model. McAdam states that the name of this model derives from the theory being rooted in a political explanation, rather than psychological, and because he sees social movements as a continuous process rather a divided series of developments (McAdam 1997, 36). Similar to the resource mobilization model, the political process model takes an elite-theory approach. In this model, while McAdam realizes there is a distinct difference in power between elites and excluded groups, he states that this power difference is not inevitable (McAdam 1997, 37). Rather, the theory takes a Marxist approach where insurgents may successfully change inequality in power through social movements (McAdam 1997, 37). The theory includes two forms of actors—members and challengers. Members are individuals who exist within the polity and are formally recognized within the decision-making organization (McAdam 1997, 38). On the other hand, challengers are individuals outside of the polity. Challengers are often not recognized by members and excluded from decision-making processes. In this model, challengers attempt to gain power from the members through social
movements. Rather than accepting that power may be held by elites, this theory assumes that social movements can entirely shift the dynamic.

In the case of Hong Kong’s protests, participants of demonstrations who identify as ‘Hongkonger’ may be viewed as challengers while members of the political elite—including members of the HKSAR government and the CCP—can be viewed as members. The distinction between members and challengers in Hong Kong depicts the importance of considering identity within the political process model. While the political process model defines the two main actors as challengers and members, the model fails to explicitly discuss the importance of defining the two groups in terms of identity. As seen in Hong Kong, the distinction between these two identities has acted as the basis of the protests and characterized the demands by the challengers. The protests have depicted a strong divide between protestors who identify as Hongkongers and members of the local and national government advocating for the CCP’s policies—providing evidence to the necessity of specifically including a discussion of identity in McAdam’s theory.

In addition to defining the two groups as actors as challengers and members, the political process model states that there must be three conditions for a social movement to emerge. The first condition is organizational readiness within the insurgent population. The second is an insurgent consciousness, also known as cognitive liberation. And lastly, third, is the presence of a political opportunities (McAdam 1997, 40). If all three factors are present, McAdam argues that a social movement may occur.
Organizational Readiness

The first condition, organizational readiness, is dependent on a movement having strong members, communication, and leaders. This factor is reminiscent of the resource mobilization model in that it focuses on the resources necessary to exploit political opportunities for social movements. The theory states that members must be successfully integrated into the minority community so that they may be more readily mobilized for protests (McAdam 1997, 44). This point refers to the recruiting of members which occurs either through recruiting members from another social movement or merging two organizations (McAdam 1997, 44). While this point touches upon identity, it focuses more on sharing a similar ideological belief than an identity-driven sense of self. I address this point of identity later in this chapter when I synthesize the political process model with peripheral nationalism. In addition to members, communication and leaders are necessary for the organizational success of a movement. Communication plays a large role in enabling the movement to grow. Without strong channels of communication between members, a movement will be unsuccessful in recruiting and keeping members. Lastly, leaders are crucial to establishing a centralized direction and message (McAdam 1997, 47). Leaders not only help organize the masses in terms of demonstrations but also, help direct the message of the movement.

Insurgent Consciousness or Cognitive Liberation

The second condition is the development of an insurgent consciousness. This factor of the political process model is also where I argue identity should be
included. This form of consciousness develops when individuals feel such discontent with their treatment in society that they join a movement in order to change their deprived state (McAdam 1997, 49). McAdam also refers to this factor as “cognitive liberation” (McAdam 1997, 48). This emphasizes the way in which insurgents change their mental state to mobilize against a system that has previously mistreated them. In social demonstrations, this is the difference between an individual unhappy with her status in society and an individual who is actively protesting to achieve the equal treatment she believes she deserves. While an insurgent consciousness is important in understanding how individuals mobilize in protests, it still lacks an explanation of role of identity. I argue that a greater focus on identity, particularly the distinction between challenger and member identity, is necessary in the discussion of this factor within the political process model. While McAdam’s conception of insurgent consciousness is focused on the cognitive shift between discontent to active mobilization, this factor must consider how one’s individual cognitive shift is a part of a greater challenger identity. Understanding the importance of identity within this factor is crucial to gaining a more comprehensive explanation of how conflict arises between challengers and members during protest. Moreover, considering identity may explain how insurgent consciousness develops more quickly in social movements. Later in this chapter, I will elaborate on how identity should be integrated within the cognitive liberation factor and how this will provide a more comprehensive model of explaining protest emergence.

*Political Opportunities*
The third condition is a shift in political opportunities. Any significant changes in politics can lead to an opening of opportunity for insurgent groups to make a change. Openings are dependent on changes in the political structure which make it vulnerable for exploitation by challengers. Since insurgent groups and their movements are most successful when the current system is vulnerable, protestors may wait until significant shifts have been experienced to gain more power. In Hong Kong, the shift in political opportunities was seen both in 2014 with the crackdown of the potential of universal suffrage and in 2019 with the proposal of the Extradition Bill. Both of these instances depict a change in the political environment caused by the proposal of new policies. The negative response of the public to both policies depicts the wavering legitimacy of the government during these two periods, allowing for a political opportunity to arise and protest to emerge.

Many individuals are puzzled when they think about how the 2019-2020 protests began with the Extradition Bill even though protests continued even after the bill was quickly revoked. The proposal of the Extradition Bill acted as a political opening because of the discontent felt by the Hong Kong public as a result of the sense of Mainland China’s encroaching on Hong Kong’s autonomy. The lack of support for the policy diminished the government’s legitimacy providing insurgents a political opportunity and ability to mobilize against the proposed bill. By understanding the proposal of the bill as a political opening for the movement to emerge, we can better understand how it plays one part in a much more complex process.
McAdam’s political process model considers the many factors necessary for a social movement to emerge. Rather than merely focusing on social strain or resources, the political process model includes the many dynamic factors that are necessary for a movement to occur. However, while McAdam’s theory presents a good explanation for how movements emerge in many contexts, I do not believe it completely explains all social movements. In the political process model, there is no focus on how an identity may affect a marginalized group’s efforts to rise against a central government’s powers. Moreover, while McAdam states that the two important actors in social movements are challengers and members, he does not explicate how the distinction between the challenger and member identities can in itself be a mobilizing factor of protest. Since the Hong Kong protests depict the importance of identity in social movements, a lack of consideration of this factor proves that McAdam’s political process model is unable to fully explain the emergence of the city’s protests. Including identity within his theory is necessary to apply the model to Hong Kong’s protests.

While McAdam may argue that his concept of cognitive liberation considers identity to some extent, this factor is more focused on the personal cognitive shift from an individual sense of discontent to the mobilization of actions. Focusing on identity within the theory depicts how cognitive liberation may occur as a part of being a member of a certain identity. By self-identifying with a specific group, one may be more inclined to change their cognitive perspective from feelings of discontent to active mobilization. Thus, including identity within this factor is crucial to understanding how cognitive liberation
occurs in addition to the larger phenomenon of social movement emergence. In addition, the inclusion of identity within the cognitive liberation factor allows a protest to be analyzed through the lens of subnational identity and peripheral nationalism perspectives. Since identity encompasses these two other theories, it allows for the model to be applied to conflicts that derive from territorial identity clashes.

Critiques of the Political Process Model and New Social Movement Theory

While McAdam’s political process model is one of the most dominant theories within the new wave of social movement theory, many theorists have proposed revised models based on the critiques of the classical and resource mobilization theories. In addition, some of the newly proposed models of social movement emergence have been based on critiques of McAdam’s political process theory. Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon critique the political process model in arguing that the model can too easily be overextended to make it almost analytically useless (Bevington and Dixon 2005, 187). They argue that the key factors such as political opportunities and mobilizing structures can be applied to too broad of topics and fail to act as an insightful analytical tool (Bevington and Dixon 2005, 187). In addition, other critiques focus on one of the political process model’s characteristics—structural bias. Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper focus on the rigidity of the structural bias within the political process model. They argue that because the structural bias depends on structural openings that leads to political mobilization, McAdam insinuates that there exist objective political openings (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 33). However, given that political openings
are interpreted based on a group’s unique cultural perspective, there can be no objective political opening. In addition, they argue that the concept of a structural opening implies that emergence opportunities arise from fixed entities rather than dynamic and strategic changes in the political realm (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 36).

Aldon Morris similarly critiques the political process model and its focus on mobilizing structures. Since McAdam states that social movements emerge from mobilizing structures, Morris argues that this rejects the consideration that movements emerge from “spontaneous, unstructured contexts that thrust marginal individuals into collective action” (Morris 2000, 446). Morris’s critique of McAdam is aligned with Goodwin and Jasper in that the key factors within the political process model are too rigid and do not accurately depict a spontaneous political environment. Morris also points out that many political process theorists underemphasize the importance of culture in fueling social movements (Morris 2000, 447). His argument that culture must play a larger role in the political process model aligns with my argument that placing a stronger emphasis on identity within the political process model can provide a more flexible framework to understand movement emergence. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how by integrating identity into the political process model, culture is also included as it plays a significant role in shaping a group’s identity. In addition, in chapter 4 of this thesis, I discuss how culture, amongst other factors, has helped shape the Hongkonger identity—which has, as a result, contributed to movement emergence.
In addition to the critiques of the political process model, theorists have also put forth arguments for a new understanding of movement theory. John D. McCarthy argues that in understanding the globalization of social movements, one must understand identity on the local and national levels (McCarthy 1998, 249). He states that “understanding transnational activism requires attention to transnational activist identity formation as the source of motivation for activism” (McCarthy 1998, 249). In his analysis of transnational activism, McCarthy points out the connection between protest and identity formation. McCarthy argues that the formation and origin of activist identity shapes the broader movement dynamics (McCarthy 1998, 247). He states that through the process of creating mobilizing frames, activists experience a cognitive process of adopting an activist identity (McCarthy 1998, 247). The idea of adopting an activist identity is similar to my argument that the political process model must acknowledge the differences between the a challenger and member identities. As McCarthy points out, identity plays a large role in shaping mobilization efforts just as activists undergo a process of forming their identity though mobilizing in protest. Understanding the identity behind activists is a crucial aspect of understanding how movements are mobilized and an aspect I argue is necessary to integrate into the existing political process model.

Just as understanding identity on a local level is crucial to understanding the emergence of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, consideration of how media activism plays a role in social movements is also important to analyzing Hong Kong’s situation. One differentiating aspect between Hong Kong and Mainland
China is the freedom of press and the ability to access a censorship-free internet. As a result, the media contributes to the development of a local Hongkonger identity. In chapter 4 of this thesis, I discuss the important role media activism plays not only in the emergence of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests but how it has helped strengthen the local Hongkonger identity. William K. Carroll and Robert A. Hackett consider how the media plays a role in social movement theory in their work on democratic media activism. In their research, they view democratic media activism as a form of social movement in which they use existing movement theory to explain. Carroll and Hackett use the resource mobilization model and theories of new social movements to explain media activism (Carroll and Hackett 2006, 86). They argue that the resource mobilization model explains how movements form while theories of new social movements explain why collective identity and action emerges (Carroll and Hackett 2006, 86). They state that new social movement theories view movements as a form of collective identity and expression of struggles with the perception of one’s cultural identity rather than a means of common interest organizations (Carroll and Hackett 2006, 86-87). In addition, they argue that social movements depict a shift in values and attitudes which entails self-realization (Carroll and Hackett 2006, 96). This, again, emphasizes the importance of considering identity and a shifting of perceived values in a revised political process model.

Similarly, Greg Martin considers how other societal and cultural factors play a role in social movement emergence. Martin in his paper “Conceptualizing
Cultural Politics in Subcultural and Social Movement Studies” attempts to combine theories from social movement theorists and subcultural theorists to depict how they consider many parallel ideas. He argues that new social movement theories have moved to consider the shifting of symbolic challenges rather than focusing merely on class struggles or resources (Martin 2010, 74). This movement towards a focus on cultural symbols and identity aligns with the focus of many subcultural theorists. As a result, Martin engages the two literatures to argue that a synthesized theory that considers subcultures within social movement theory can explain modern social movements and their focus on symbolic values (Martin 2010, 74). Martin regards Alberto Melucci’s work as a means of considering the role of cultural politics in collective action issues (Martin 2010, 74). He states that Melucci’s research focuses on the intersection between culture and social movements which he attempts to further in his paper. Martin uses the example of Travellers to depict the parallels between subcultural theory and new social movement theory. Travellers face social isolation and challenges as a result of their cultural differences, which Martin argues is a factor of mobilization under the new social movement theory (Martin 2010, 84). Martin argues that the example of Travellers depicts how cultural identity must be included in social movement theory to understand how movements may emerge as a result of symbolic values and cultural differences rather than resources alone (Martin 2010, 84). Martin’s work on combining social movement theory with subculture theory leads into my next section where I review the current literature on identity, subnational identity, and peripheral nationalism.
Identity Theory

Many scholars who write on identity theory focus on the social aspect of forming one’s identity. The formation of one’s identity derives from the ability of an individual to self-categorize oneself as a member of a specific social group which share certain attributes. The concept of understanding identity as an organizing principle has been reviewed by Michael Kalin and Nicholas Sambanis in their paper, “How to Think About Social Identity” (Kalin and Sambanis 2018, 240). While they acknowledge the process of forming one’s identity by identifying with a certain social group, they seek to explain how identity affects behavior, specifically in terms of political actions (Kalin and Sambanis 2018, 240). They base their argument of identity-based political actions and partisanship on the premise that “belonging to a distinct group is sufficient to cause intergroup discrimination” (Kalin and Sambanis 2018, 242). The self-identification with a certain group, and thus a specific identity, can cause clashes between individuals that associate with varying identities. Kalin and Sambanis then apply this idea to their study of how identity can influence voting behavior and partisanship. They state that identity in itself can act as motivation to vote by means of expressing their identity and the associated desires of that social group (Kalin and Sambanis 2018, 243). This focus on identity as a motivating factor in behavior is crucial to understanding how identity can act as a means of mobilizing protest. Considering the weight of identity in individuals’ political actions shines light on the importance of considering the effects of identity during social movements.
Similar to the work of Kalin and Sambanis, Xavier Coller also looks at the impact of identity in political actions. In his paper, “Collective Identity and Failed Nationalism” Xavier Coller discusses how nations may fail to create a sense of nationalism and instead cause the fragmentation of peripheral regions causing mobilization. Collier argues that identity can become politically mobilized if a political opportunity becomes “awakened” (Coller 2006, 103). He argues that collective action arises from a sense of identity and “we-ness” which becomes relevant in mobilization (Coller 2006, 103). In addition, institutions play a role in creating political identity—particularly political institutions and education which contribute to the building of a nationalist identity (Coller 2006, 103). Coller uses Spain’s Basque country as an example of a strengthened peripheral nationalism as a result of institutions and unique cultural differences (Coller 2006, 104).

Collier’s focus on the influence of institutions and culture in developing a subnational identity depicts how nationalist efforts may fail if a subnational identity is institutionally upheld in the region. Coller’s work depicts how the synthesis of identity, and specifically subnational identity, into social movement theory can better explain the current Hong Kong protests.

Literature on identity theory, which encompasses subnational identity, depicts how it can be a significant factor in mobilizing protest. By identifying with a certain social group—specifically one that regionally-based—an individual may be inclined to express that identity through political behavior and even protest. By understanding the social nature of identity theory and its application to movement mobilization, one can see how it should be incorporated into the
political process model. Considering how an individual’s sense of identity influences their actions provides greater insight into why protests emerge and more specifically, how an individual may undergo the process of cognitive liberation.

*Peripheral Nationalism*

Similar to subnational identity, peripheral nationalism looks at identities that arise from social groups within a nation sharing attributes that may be distinct from that on the national level. However, while subnational identity may include identities which derive from shared experiences within a group such as race, language, religion, and culture, peripheral nationalism focuses solely on the identity that forms from a specific peripheral territory. Although there are differences in the definitions of these concepts, subnational identity encompasses peripheral nationalism because of its broader scope. While a peripheral nationalism may include shared characteristics such as language and culture, the social group it originates from is constrained to the specific territorial region. As such, the Hongkonger identity is an example of both a subnational identity and peripheral nationalism. Since the Hongkonger identity derives from the shared experiences of those living in, or originally from, the SAR, it is a strong example of how a peripheral nationalism may differ from the nationalist identity.

Yuan-Kang Wang studies how peripheral nationalism is developed and strengthened within China’s Xinjiang and Guangdong provinces. Wang provides background to the unique examples of Xinjiang and Guangdong in stating that the two provinces are located in the peripheral regions of China and are distanced
from the central government’s power (Wang 2001, 177). As a result of their distance from Beijing, Wang argues that they both have developed their own peripheral nationalism—although Xinjiang more than Guangdong (Wang 2001, 177). While both Xinjiang and Guangdong have distinct local identities, Wang asks the question of “Why is peripheral nationalism virtually non-existent in Guangdong but has long been a problem in Xinjiang? (Wang 2001, 177). Wang argues that previous theories of peripheral nationalism fail to answer this question and instead, his new theory which focuses on national identity and elite status does a better job at explaining the puzzling situation (Wang 2001, 178). In his paper, Wang argues that if a peripheral region’s identity aligns with core nationalist ideals and elites in the peripheral region serve in positions of power, the likelihood of secession is low (Wang 2001, 178). However, if peripheral people do not identity with the core nation’s identity and elites are not involved in political decision-making, the probability for secessionism and peripheral nationalism is high (Wang 2001, 178). The analysis of these two factors—elite status and national identity—is very applicable to the situation in Hong Kong. As a result, understanding this new theory of peripheral nationalism plays a role in the analytic usefulness of Fong’s alternative theory of peripheral nationalism which I later explain.

Susan Olzak analyzes a similar topic as Wang in understanding how peripheral regions and identities become politically mobilized. However, Olzak focuses on the mobilization of ethnic minorities within core nations. Olzak argues that two processes are at the heart of ethnic minority mobilization around the
world (Olzak 1998, 187). The two factors she attributes mobilization to are first, an increasing level of ethnic inclusion in state politics; and second, decreasing levels of ethnic inequality within states (Olzak 1998, 187). Her theory focuses on the shifting power dynamics between ethnic minorities and core countries. She argues that the increasing equality of ethnic minorities within core nations allows ethnic groups to mobilize and gain power in their movement efforts (Olzak 1998, 196). This theory takes a different approach than both Wang and Fong in illuminating a focus on shifting power dynamics in the political structure which should be included in McAdam’s theory.

Brian C.H. Fong: Connecting Peripheral Nationalism with Hong Kong

In Brian C.H. Fong’s paper “One Country Two Nationalisms: Center-Periphery Relations between Mainland China and Hong Kong, 1997-2016” he applies the concept of peripheral nationalism to Hong Kong. He states that in nationalism literature, peripheral nationalism is not necessarily related to secession or achieving a completely independent state (Fong 2017, 524). Rather, peripheral nationalism is “defined as the assertion of a distinct identity by people living within a specific territory of a nation-state” (Fong 2017, 524). As a result, peripheral nationalism is the formation and strengthening of a subnational identity within a greater central state. In addition, peripheral nationalism is formed in “resistance against the incorporation of a centralizing state” (Fong 2017, 524). Fong argues that while central governments may attempt to assert assimilating policies to limit a territory’s sense of peripheral nationalism, this often leads to resistance by individuals holding a sense of peripheral nationalism (Fong 2017,
As a result, attempts to limit peripheral nationalism often lead to protests and even social movements.

In the case of Hong Kong, Fong accounts the CCP’s efforts to implement centralizing policies and how these policies have instead lead to resistance by the Hong Kong people. Fong states that after the 1997 handover of Hong Kong back to Chinese sovereignty, a sense of peripheral nationalism in Hong Kong has only grown stronger. After the implementation of the Joint Declaration, Hong Kong was promised a “high degree of autonomy” and provided more liberal economic and political policies (Fong 2017, 526). However, since 2003, many Hongkongers have felt that the CCP’s policies have encroached upon Hong Kong’s right to autonomy and individual political desires. While the CCP has attempted to tell the narrative of holding ultimate power over the SAR and the presence a central Chinese identity, Hongkongers have instead expressed an even stronger sense of peripheral nationalism. As a result of a growing subnational identity, Hongkongers have used protests to portray their resistance against consolidating policies. The 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019-2020 protests are direct evidence of the resistance rooted in a strong peripheral nationalism.

*Synthesizing the Political Process Model and Peripheral Nationalism*

In Hong Kong, a strengthened sense of peripheral nationalism has contributed to the emergence of the recent protests. Understanding how identity, and specifically peripheral nationalism, has motivated individuals to protest is crucial to understanding the roots of the recent protests in Hong Kong. While literature in the identity theory realm has discussed how identity may be
mobilized as political tool of expression, the current political process model does not include this consideration. As a result, McAdam’s political process model is unable to fully explain why Hong Kong’s protests emerged in the first place. I argue that by integrating identity theory into the political process model, it allows the theory to better explain how growing peripheral nationalism has led to the emergence of demonstrations in Hong Kong. Moreover, by including a discussion of identity in the cognitive liberation factor of the model, one can better understand how identity also plays a part in driving individuals to experience an insurgent consciousness.

Looking at McAdam’s political process model, and the three factors considered within the theory, I argue that peripheral nationalism must be considered within the consideration of “cognitive liberation.” McAdam states that while political opportunities and organizational strength provide a “structural potential” for social movements, these two factors alone are insufficient as the sole causes of protest emergence (McAdam 1997, 48). He argues that cognitive liberation is necessary to explain an individual’s mental state which motivates her to protest (McAdam 1997, 48). In the process of cognitive liberation, McAdam states that the evolving political conditions transform into a set of “cognitive cues” which signal to challengers that the political environment is growing increasingly vulnerable and prime for the emergence of protest (McAdam 1997, 49). The cognitive cues that influence a challenger’s mindset is an important aspect in explaining why people mobilize in the first place.
In addition to the political environment and cognitive cues, McAdam argues that “the very cognitions on which it depends are conditioned by the strength of integrated ties within the movement’s mass base” (McAdam 1997, 49). This suggests the presence of a shared mindset and ideology within the group of challengers. One of the most important cognitions experienced during the process of cognitive liberation is the mental shift of seeing oneself as helpless to feeling a sense of agency to change their situation (McAdam 1997, 50). While the cognitive shift in agency from feeling helpless to protesting is explained on an individual basis, McAdam points out that cognitive liberation is more likely to occur when groups of people experience strong rather than weak social integration (McAdam 1997, 50). This points to the necessity of an ideologically strong mass base to motivate individuals to shift their own mindset. In addition, McAdam states that without strong interpersonal ties within the mass base, individuals may feel powerless and not experience a cognitive transformation moving them to act (McAdam 1997, 51). In McAdam’s explanation of the process of cognitive liberation, it is evident that strong integrative ties within the challenging group is essential to motivating individuals to protest.

While McAdam alludes to a shared sense of ideology and struggles which help individuals feel integrated within the challenging group, I believe that an understanding of identity should be included within this section. Since McAdam stresses the importance of interpersonal networks in successful mobilization, I argue that the inclusion of a shared identity within the group can better explain how interpersonal networks are formed and strengthened. McAdam does not
thoroughly explain what factors contribute to a strong interpersonal network and
fails to consider how identity may be a strong factor in building a strong sense of
social integration. Without considering how shared identity is an important factor
in building integrative networks between challengers, the model fails to explain
how individuals may experience cognitive liberation and mobilize as a member of
a certain identity.

To include identity within the cognitive liberation factor of McAdam’s
model, I argue that the recognition of an individual’s identity and the shared
identity of a group should be an explanation of how strong integrative ties form.
While McAdam states that strong integrative ties are necessary for the process of
cognitive liberation, he does not explain how those ties come to exist. By stating
that a shared identity within the mass base acts as the foundation of strong
integrative ties, the model can better explain how interpersonal networks are
formed and are used to mobilize individuals. Moreover, as seen in the reviewed
literature on identity theory and peripheral nationalism, many academics have
argued that identity may be used as a mobilizing factor—particularly in peripheral
regions and within minority groups. Identifying with the subnational identity of a
certain peripheral region or with the attributes of another subnational group can
act as the basis of influencing an individual to experience cognitive liberation.
Moreover, as depicted in instances of peripheral nationalism, self-identifying with
the local identity of a peripheral region can act as the basis of forming a mass base
and lead to conflicts between challengers and members.
In this figure, I display how identity should be included within the cognitive liberation factor of the political process model. By including the consideration of how identity helps strengthen interpersonal networks and leads to cognitive liberation, subnational identity and peripheral nationalism may also be analyzed as contributing factors. Since subnational identity and peripheral nationalism subsequently fall under broader identity theory, the inclusion of identity theory also allows the revised political process model to consider conflicts that arise when challengers are members of a specific identity within a nation. Moreover, the discussion of identity in this factor of the model allows for the political process model to be more suited to explain the emergence of protests in conflicts between peripheral regions and the greater nation’s government.

While my revision to the political process model arose out of considering how identity has played a role in mobilizing challengers in Hong Kong, this new
model can be applied to other instances of social movements that derive from conflicts between center and peripheral identities.

In the case of Hong Kong, individuals who identify with the subnational Hongkonger identity may experience strong integrative ties within that network and feel a strong motivation to mobilize in protest. Moreover, as Fong argues in his paper, consolidating policies which attempt to assimilate the Hongkonger identity with the greater national Chinese identity may strengthen the peripheral Hongkonger identity and develop closer integrative ties within the mass base. In addition, the strengthened sense of peripheral nationalism in this case explains how individuals may seek to change their situation through cognitive liberation. In Hong Kong, the sense of a distinct Hongkonger identity from the national Chinese identity points to the existence of distinct political desires associated with the peripheral nationalism. By identifying as a member of the Hongkonger identity, individuals may seek to express their differences from the national identity through protest. Understanding how identity not only affects the strengthening of interpersonal networks of the challenging base, but also contributes to a shared sense of discontent with the group’s political environment depicts how identity is a significant factor in the cognitive liberation process and thus, movement emergence.

While the existing political process model explains most aspects of how social movements emerge in a dynamic political environment, without the inclusion of identity, the theory fails to fully explain Hong Kong’s social movements. The existence of a distinct identity and strengthening peripheral
nationalism has not only been established through HKSAR’s unique history and cultural differences but an outrage to the central government’s consolidating policies. As a result, in order to further analyze what factors led to the emergence of protests in Hong Kong in 2019-2020, we must consider identity as a crucial aspect of the interpersonal networks in the cognitive liberation factor.
Chapter 3: Hong Kong’s History and Social Movements

A bustling financial hub and multicultural metropolis, Hong Kong is one of the most important cities in both Asia and the world. Hong Kong’s unique position as a successful capitalist city within the authoritarian regime of the People’s Republic of China provides an interesting environment as many Hong Kong citizens seek greater political freedoms. While the media continues to report on the day-to-day events of the 2019 pro-democracy movement, I seek to dive deeper and better understand how the protests began and why they have occurred.

Many observers of Hong Kong’s recent protests argue that the current pro-democracy sentiments expressed derive from the region’s complex history of changes in power. Looking at Hong Kong’s unique history as a region under Imperial China’s rule, then transitioning to British colonial power, and in 1997, back to Mainland China answers some of these questions. Throughout Hong Kong’s many transitions of governance, a distinct Hong Kong identity has developed. In this thesis, I use the definition of identity that derives from psychological research viewing identity as a means of self-categorizing oneself as a member of a certain group with shared attributes (Stets and Burke 2000, 224). Moreover, I refer to Katherine J. Cramer’s definition of identity to provide context to Hong Kong’s development of a distinct subnational identity. In Cramer’s The Politics of Resentment, she defines identity as one’s association with social groups (Cramer 2016, 8). She argues that identity “helps us figure out how we ought to behave and what stances we should take” (Cramer 2016, 8). In addition, Cramer states that identity plays a significant role in defining our
political attitudes and behavior (Cramer 2016, 8). In the case of Hong Kong, identity has been shaped by the unique political and social differences between the region and Mainland China. The greater political autonomy and unique history experienced in Hong Kong has established political and social groups distinct from that of Mainland China. These social groups have, in turn, led to a distinct Hongkonger identity that holds its own political views and demands. Hongkongers’ self-identification as different from the greater Chinese identity informs its political actions and drives the expression of their differences through protest.

In this chapter, I provide some background to Hong Kong’s tumultuous change in power from Imperial China to British colonial rule and back to a new, and more authoritarian, China. In addition, I depict that social movements and protest have played a significant role in Hong Kong’s history and that the mass demonstrations in 2019 are not a new occurrence in the SAR. Understanding the unique history of Hong Kong’s transition in power and the history of political activism in the city provides the foundation for my argument that a subnational Hong Kong identity has developed and now plays a significant role in the emergence of the current protests. In addition, the historical context of Hong Kong’s social movements provides evidence that political activism is a crucial part of the unique Hongkonger identity and its distinction from the national Chinese identity. Through protests, the Hong Kong people have attempted to express the differences between the Hongkonger and Chinese identities and seek equal recognition for their subnational identity. Recognizing the prevalence of a
distinct Hongkonger identity, and its roots in political activism, is crucial to seeing the connection to the emergence of the 2019-2020 protests. Moreover, understanding the importance of identity within the case of Hong Kong’s social movements depicts how existing social movement theory must be reformed to consider local identity as a mobilizing factor.

Background on Hong Kong’s Transitions of Sovereignty and Social Movements

The perceived erosion of Hong Kong’s political and economic freedoms post-1997 depicts the tensions between China-Hong Kong relations that are present today. Although Hong Kong was granted more political freedoms than Mainland China in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and Hong Kong’s mini-constitution the Basic Law, many citizens have recently felt as though these freedoms have been increasingly encroached upon by the central government since 1997 (Victor 2019). In 2003, the central government implemented a “new Hong Kong policy” which includes a more controlling approach to China-Hong Kong relations and the assertion that the CCP has “supreme constitutional powers to control Hong Kong’s scope of autonomy and democratic reforms” (Fong 2017, 528). Mainland China’s tightening grip over Hong Kong has caused many citizens to believe that the promises of the Joint Declaration were not kept and created the impetus for the emergence of a Hongkonger identity. China’s Hong Kong policies planted the seeds of Hongkongers’ refusal to accept Beijing’s authority which has played a large role in defining the subnational identity (Fong 2017, 527). The discontent felt over the governance of Hong Kong, and the failure to recognize the
existence of a distinct Hongkonger identity, has contributed to the emergence of the city’s social movements.

More recently, the 2019 protests and the 2014 Umbrella Movement have grabbed much of the global media’s attention. The 2014 and 2019 protests depict the seeds of discontent between the Hong Kong public and the central government’s more centralized Hong Kong policies. In addition, these protests depict the building anti-China sentiment that has become intertwined with the Hongkonger identity. While the more recent protests have grabbed greater attention from the international community, social movements are not new to the city. Dating back to 1967, Hong Kong citizens protested colonial rule demanding greater social and political reform (AFP 2017). Moreover, since Hong Kong transitioned back to Chinese rule in 1997, there have been numerous protests as a result of the dissatisfaction with the central government’s governance of the SAR. In many of the protests since 1997, advocacy for democratic values has played a significant role. However, understanding the protests as solely advocating for democracy only captures part of the larger reason behind Hong Kong’s political activism. Advocating for democratic values is an important aspect of the greater Hongkonger identity. Understanding the city’s protest history as a display of subnational identity provides a broader explanation of the root its protests. Democratic values and a more liberal political mindset is undoubtedly a part of the city’s subnational identity and has played a role in catalyzing the 2019 protests. Beyond Hong Kong’s search for democratic freedoms, the Hong Kong people seek to be recognized within the Chinese political system for their distinct
identity and their differences from the homogenous Chinese identity. The recent protests did not emerge solely from the demand of democratic freedoms but rather, the recognition of the Hongkonger identity and their distinction from the identity and desires of the greater Chinese population.

The 2019 protests first began on March 31st in response to a proposed bill that would allow for extradition to China (Purbeck 2019, 467). However, even after the Extradition Bill was dropped by the Hong Kong government, citizens continued to protest and express their dissatisfaction with the central government (Pubrick 2019, 472). Moreover, the movement transitioned from peaceful demonstrations to violent clashes between protesters and police on June 12th after five thousand riot police violently clashed with protestors outside of the Legislative Council complex (Ives, May, and Yu 2019). As a result, the demands of the organizing leaders turned to call for an independent inquiry of police brutality and amnesty for the hundreds of people arrested over the summer of 2019 (Ives, May, and Yu 2019). While the stated demands of the movement are specific to the current events of the 2019 protests, the foundation of the protests is the concern that Beijing is eroding the autonomy promised to the city in 1997 (Ives, May, and Yu 2019). This sentiment depicts Hongkongers’ recurring demand for democratic freedoms and desire to be recognized as distinct from the greater Chinese population. The desire to be recognized as a population with a distinct identity and political demands is a theme prevalent throughout Hong Kong’s history.
In order to understand the roots of the 2019 protests, I will first outline Hong Kong’s status under British rule and how the city’s struggle for autonomy has played a role in developing its subnational identity. Next, I will recount Hong Kong’s social movement history to depict how the struggles over identity have been a recurring theme in the city’s past. Understanding the lineage of Hong Kong’s social movements depicts how the recent protests are not a new incident but an expression of its unique past.

*Hong Kong Under British Colonial Rule*

While there are many negative aspects of the United Kingdom’s occupation of Hong Kong as a colony, the period under British rule had many long-lasting, and positive, effects on the city. During the 156-year history of British colonial rule in Hong Kong, the city evolved to become an economic powerhouse and one of the world’s largest trading harbors (AFP 2019). Moreover, the political freedoms and democratic values instilled in the institutions during this time led to the development of a Hong Kong identity rooted in a division from the rest of China. While one may argue that Britain’s occupation of the city had many harmful effects due to the negative nature of colonialism, this era changed the course of the city and ultimately led Hong Kong to experience a widely different process of development.

In 1841, during the First Opium War, Hong Kong was taken over by the British as a colony. As a result of defeat during the war, the Qing Dynasty agreed to give up control of Hong Kong to the British through the Treaty of Nanjing (Blakemore 2019). In 1843, after ratification of the treaty, Hong Kong was
officially declared a British Colony (Dwyer 1984, 1). In the following years, the British gained control of the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories. Soon after gaining control of much of the land that makes up modern-day Hong Kong, the 1898 Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory leased Hong Kong to Britain for 99 years (Dwyer 1984, 2). As a result of this convention, Hong Kong would be handed back to China on July 1, 1997 (Blakemore 2019). During British Colonial rule, Hong Kong became a prosperous economy based on trade. Over the century of British rule, Hong Kong rose to be one of the most economically productive cities in the world. From 1980 to 1995, the city’s real GDP growth rate averaged 7 percent annually (Husain 1997, 3). Hong Kong’s impressive GDP growth rate at the time depicts its status as one of the greatest financial capitals in recent history. While the city experienced immense growth in the later years of Britain’s occupation of Hong Kong, its economic success may be attributed to its founding economic policies during this era.

Since the British first occupied the city, Hong Kong was built on capitalist policies. Hong Kong’s first British leader, Captain Charles Elliot, stated that Hong Kong would be free of tariffs (Rabushka 1997). Moreover, the British regime in Hong Kong pursued the protection of economic policies such as private property, low taxes, and a balanced budget (Rabushka 1997). Colonial officials stressed the approach of “positive non-interventionism” in economic activities which helped Hong Kong become a hub for free trade and global financial institutions (Chan 1997, 573). This focus on conservative economic policies depicts a stark difference from the direction that Mainland China was moving towards at that
time—a centralized and socialist government. In addition to the divergence of economic policies between Hong Kong and Mainland China, Britain pursued a very different approach to political institutions than Mainland China. While Hong Kong’s economic success may be attributed to specific free-trade policies and a laissez-faire economic approach, legal and civil institutions also played a major role in Hong Kong’s development.

In addition to Hong Kong’s capitalist economic approach, the establishment of a British-style common law system is one of the defining factors of colonial Hong Kong society. Under the common-law system, Hong Kong experienced an independent and impartial judiciary (Chan 1997, 567). The preservation of this aspect of Hong Kong’s legal system is one of the essential factors of the high degree of autonomy promised as the region transitioned from a British colony to a Special Administrative Region (SAR) under the People’s Republic of China (Chan 1997, 567). Today, the protection of a fair and transparent legal system is still a crucial aspect of Hong Kong society’s unique identity and played a significant role in the 2019 protests. Having a fair legal system, unlike that of Mainland China, is engrained in the more liberal political values of the Hongkonger identity and was depicted through the demands of the 2019-2020 protests. This is one reason why the proposal of the extradition bill caused so much outrage by the Hong Kong public. Not only did Hongkongers feel as though their right to a transparent legal system was being stripped but also, that their unique identity and associated political desires were being attacked.
During the creation of Hong Kong’s common law system, English was adopted as one of the official languages of the region. Legal proceedings were held in English and individuals were required to speak English in order to participate in jury duty (Chan 1997, 568). While the establishment of a British-style legal system benefited many citizens for its supposed strive for fairness, many of the policies were discriminatory towards Hong Kong citizens. Despite English not being the native language to many Cantonese speaking Hong Kong citizens, it was required in all legal activities (Chan 1997, 568). As such, the institution of these legal policies led to the exclusion of many Hong Kong natives. This sense of exclusion from formal proceedings in the legal and political systems is still experienced today, although by different means. In Hong Kong’s legislative council, only a small group of officials represent the pro-democracy ideals held by many Hongkongers. Many locals feel as though Hongkongers have an insufficient level of representation in their formal institutions and that pro-Beijing actors take up much of that space.

While the establishment of a common-law system did benefit Hong Kong in many ways, and has become a significant aspect of the Hongkonger identity, it would be amiss to not recognize the discriminatory effects of the system. The discrimination in the legal system was mirrored in the political leadership of the colony. British expatriate officials were seen as more favorable for top rank positions than local government officials (Chan 1997, 572). However, as scholar Ming K. Chan argues, this created a “glass ceiling,” that prevented locals from holding high positions in the Hong Kong colonial government (Chan 1997, 572).
The exclusion of Hong Kong citizens in the political and legal systems of the region set the precedence of oppression by the city’s governing body. The favoring of expatriate leaders over locals in the local government mirrors that of pro-Beijing officials holding power over pro-democracy leaders today. Although Hong Kong’s current political and legal systems are incredibly different from colonial Hong Kong’s, the lack of representation of Hong Kong people in decision-making is still prevalent and a significant source of contention.

While British colonial reforms of Hong Kong had many negative effects on society—for example, the enactment of discriminatory policies—one cannot argue that this period did not have a lasting impression on the region’s subnational identity. The value placed on free-trade and legal transparency have carried on today and played a crucial role in the development of Hong Kong’s unique identity. These more liberal perspectives on the economy and the legal system are present in the Hongkonger identity—particularly in seeking recognition as distinct from the Mainland Chinese identity. The influence of the common law system is depicted today as Hongkongers continue to fight for the transparent legal system that they were promised and believe is a part of their identity. The divergent paths that Mainland China and Hong Kong took during this period solidified the separate identities that have come to exist today. As a result, the Hongkonger identity exists as distinct from that of Mainland China and has only strengthened as Hong Kong fights to preserve its high level of autonomy.
In the 1970s, China and the United Kingdom began talks to discuss the future of Hong Kong after Britain’s lease expired (Blakemore 2019). These talks continued into the early 1980s where the principle of “one country two systems” was first proposed by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (Carter 2017). The principle was initially created for Taiwan-China relations, but was eventually applied to Hong Kong (Weng 1987). “One country two systems” was developed by Deng Xiaoping to reconcile communist China with Hong Kong (Carter 2017). The principle sought to connect the two regions while still allowing for the continuation of Hong Kong’s capitalist, more democratic, and westernized policies. This infamous principle was enshrined in the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 which would provide Hong Kong a high level of autonomy for 50 years after the territory was handed back to China (Blakemore 2019). The Joint Declaration, signed by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang, stated that China would reassume control over Hong Kong on July 1, 1997 (Cheung 2019). The Joint Declaration stated that for 50 years after the 1997 handover, the legal policies outlined in the Basic Law would remain unchanged (Cheung 2019). Moreover, as outlined in the Joint Declaration and Hong Kong’s Basic Law, Hong Kong was to experience a “high level of autonomy” and the preservation of its British-style legal and judicial systems until 2047 (Cheung 2019). The specific text in article three, sub-clause two of the Joint Declaration asserts that:
“The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will be directly under the authority of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will enjoy a high degree of autonomy, except in foreign and defense affairs which are the responsibilities of the Central People's Government” (Joint Declaration 1984).

This clause points out that while Hong Kong was promised a high degree of autonomy, it remains under the powers of the central government. The declaration’s assertion that the HKSAR exists directly under the authority of the central government insinuates that the CCP is able to assert its power over the region and hold greater control than Hong Kong locals may desire. The ambiguity surrounding Hong Kong’s promised “high degree of autonomy” has played a huge factor in the more recent protests and become engrained in the local identity as a result of its legal indoctrination.

In addition to the promise of a high degree of autonomy, the Joint Declaration states that the laws implemented during the colonial period would remain during the region’s transition to Chinese sovereignty. Article three, sub-clause three states that “the laws currently in force in Hong Kong will remain basically unchanged” (Joint Declaration 1984). This asserts that the use of Hong Kong’s British-style Basic Law would continue to be used in the newly established HKSAR. The Basic Law includes the right to many political freedoms that are not protected in Mainland China. For example, in article 27 of the Basic Law, it states that Hong Kong citizens will be granted the “freedom of speech, of
the press and publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and to strike” (The Basic Law 1990). The protection of political individual rights and many Western ideals within the Basic Law depicts the more liberal mindset held by many Hong Kong citizens as a result of the legal system. The political rights that are enshrined in the Basic Law depict the basis of Hong Kong citizens’ sense of entitlement to certain political freedoms. Moreover, the protection of these rights in Hong Kong is starkly contrasted with the lack of rights in Mainland China. Not only do Hongkongers self-identify as distinct from the Chinese identity, but on a legal basis, they are subject to very different laws. The distinction between the two sets of laws plays a role in informing Hongkongers’ political views and further shaping their identity.

In addition to the protection of numerous political freedoms, the Basic Law outlines the election process for Hong Kong’s leader. In article 45, the Basic Law states that Hong Kong’s Chief Executive will be selected “by election or through consultations held locally and be appointed by the Central Peoples Government” (The Basic Law 1990). Moreover, the law states that “the ultimate aim is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures” (The Basic Law 1990). This asserts that while Hong Kong exists under the power of the central government, its regional elections would operate in a much more democratic process than that in Mainland China. In addition, the promise of working towards universal suffrage is absent from the election process
in Mainland China and depicts another distinction separating Hongkonger and Chinese political attitudes. The assertion that universal suffrage should be the “ultimate aim” of the selection process of the Chief Executive has also played a key role in more recent protests. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement and even the 2019 protests, fulfilling the promise of universal suffrage was one of the demands in both series of events. Hongkongers have felt that progress towards universal suffrage has not occurred and instead, the CCP has implemented policies that pull Hong Kong even further away from democratic processes.

While Hong Kong’s Basic Law protects many political freedoms and claims working towards universal suffrage, the HKSAR government is far from a democratic system. Moreover, in recent years, Hong Kong’s autonomy has appeared to continuously erode and become even more controlled by the CCP. The laws and procedures of electing Hong Kong’s legislative body and Chief Executive provide evidence to the pseudo-democracy in the political system. In the next section, I provide greater details on voting procedures and the CCP’s influence on the HKSAR election process.

*Hong Kong’s Legislative Council and Election Process*

In order to understand the demands of Hong Kong’s recent social movements, it is necessary to understand how Hong Kong’s Legislative Council (Legco) and electoral processes work. Hong Kong’s Legco was established in 1843 to act as an advisor to the British Governor and act as the legislative branch of the city’s government (The Legislative Council Commission 2019). The Legco is Hong Kong’s partially democratic institution which debates the laws and
budget proposals set forth by the executive branch (Carter 2016). The Legco consists of 70 seats (Carter 2016). However, only 40 of those seats are elected by universal suffrage (Carter 2016). The other 30 seats are chosen by “functional constituencies” which represent different industries and social classes (Carter 2016). However, many argue that the election of these 30 seats, through functional constituencies, prioritize the elite and are undemocratic in practice.

Moreover, 24 of those 30 seats are held by pro-central government parties (Carter 2016). This ensures that Hong Kong’s government protects Beijing-backed legislature. The influence that the Communist Party has on Hong Kong’s Legco depicts the pseudo-democracy present in the city and a key aspect of discontent with the political system.

While the election process for seats in the Legco is biased towards pro-Beijing parties, much of the public supports the democratization of the system (Bush 2014). In the most recent 2019 district council elections, 2.94 million registered electors turned out to cast their vote—a record high of 71.2 percent participation (Tan 2019). In addition, the recent elections demonstrated significant support for Hong Kong’s democratic parties. Democratic candidates won almost 90 percent of 452 district council seats—a landmark showing of the public’s demand for democratic freedoms (Siu and Pang 2019). The overwhelming support for democratic parties in the 2019 elections depicts the significant demand for democracy present in Hong Kong—even despite the biased political system.
In regards to the election process of the Chief Executive, it is similarly undemocratic in many ways. Rather than electing Hong Kong’s leader through universal suffrage, the Chief Executive is selected and voted in by a 1,200-person Election Committee (Kirby 2019). This ensures that Beijing is able to “screen out” any candidates who may go against the central-government’s policies (Carter 2017). As a result, while there is some form of democratic election of the city’s Chief Executive, the process is highly exclusive to many Hong Kong citizens. The upset with Hong Kong’s lack of democratic ideals and universal suffrage has fueled many of the protests—particularly the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Carter 2017). While Hong Kong boasts greater political freedoms and engagement than in Mainland China, it is still far from a full-fledged democracy.

Sources of Contention

Throughout Hong Kong’s history, the city has experienced a handful of protest campaigns. The largest and most impactful demonstrations occurred during the years 1967, 1989, 2003, 2012, 2014, and 2019. While each protest was sparked by its own unique cause or event, all of them have an underlying theme of fighting for democratic ideals. Moreover, while many of the protests present demands for greater autonomy and democratic processes, the Hongkonger identity is at the heart of the demonstrations. The desire for autonomy and democracy is instilled in the Hongkonger identity. Thus, the protests have been fueled by a sense of outrage at the central government’s failure to acknowledge the SAR’s distinct subnational identity.
While China-Hong Kong relations is one factor in shaping the distinct subnational identity, internal issues within Hong Kong have also played a role in shaping the discontent which defines the Hongkonger identity. One example is Hong Kong’s housing crisis and immense wealth inequality. Some scholars argue that the serious wealth inequality in Hong Kong is evidence to tensions that have caused a greater dissatisfaction with both the Hong Kong and central government (Bush 2014). Income inequality has almost always been a pervasive issue in Hong Kong and caused a widening gap between rich and poor socioeconomic groups (Wu 2009, 1034). For the past 25 years, Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient has been above 0.4 (zero representing complete equality and one being maximum inequality) (Wu 2009, 1034). In addition, in June 2018, Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient was measured to be 0.539—the highest figure in 45 years (Wong 2018). Despite the significant income inequality present in Hong Kong, the local government has failed to increase its spending in effort to subside the problem.

In 2017-2018, the Hong Kong government only spent 14.4 percent of its GDP on social goods which was lower than 15.7 percent during the SARS outbreak in 2003 (Oxfam 2018). In addition, the Hong Kong government has spent less on healthcare and social welfare in comparison to other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries including Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Oxfam 2018). The lack of government expenditure to address the issue has only perpetuated income inequality in Hong Kong and the negative sentiment surrounding the local government. Many young people believe that the widening inequality gap and
rising prices in Hong Kong has made their chances of a standard of living similar to their parents almost impossible (Bush 2014). Young people, and particularly university students, believe that the great wealth inequality is a result of the Hong Kong elite holding significant economic and political power and a lack of representation for those struggling in the SAR (Bush 2014). The belief that the Hong Kong government has failed to provide social goods or represent the demands of the lower socioeconomic groups has fueled a sense of outrage within the city. Moreover, income inequality and the sense of discontent surrounding the issue has been used for political mobilization and demanding democracy since 2003 (Wu 2009, 1035). The dramatic rise of asset prices in Hong Kong has significantly impacted younger individuals or those in lower socioeconomic groups; driving the wealth gap even further apart. Moreover, individuals who do not hold assets in Hong Kong face the greatest impact of the rising housing costs in the city and feel a strong sense of frustration with the economic environment (Wong and Wan 2018, 38). This sense of economic frustration in turn leads to the development of political grievances and anti-government sentiment (Wong and Wan 2018, 38). The immense wealth inequality and housing crisis in Hong Kong establishes the context in which individuals mobilize against the government.

While economic inequality and the absence of government effort to subside the issue in Hong Kong has been portrayed as a mobilizing factor in democratic movements, I argue that this sense of discontent plays a role in shaping the Hongkonger identity which provides a broader explanation to the issue. By understanding the experience of income inequality and the failure of the
HKSAR government to respond as a part of shaping the subnational identity, one can understand how identity has played a significant role in anti-government demonstrations. Hongkongers’ strive for democratic representation and recognition of the city’s economic inequality is encompassed in its subnational identity and has fueled many of the city’s protests over the years.

**Hong Kong’s Social Movement History**

From the anti-colonialist protests of the 1960s to Hong Kong’s 2019 pro-democracy movement, Hong Kong citizens have a long history of political activism and demonstrating for their rights. While the demands of each movement have changed, so has the approach taken by protesters. In contrast to the mostly peaceful protests seen in 2014 and prior, the 2019 protests have depicted a more violent side of Hong Kong protesters and showed an even greater sense of desperation to be heard (Duhalde and Huang, 2019). The violence in the 2019 protests has reached a point that is incomparable to previous protests. In November 2019, the first death was experienced as a result of conflicts between protestors and police and another individual was in critical condition after being shot by police (Palmer 2019). Meanwhile, another individual was set on fire after shouting pro-Beijing sentiment (Palmer 2019). These instances of violence depict the extreme nature of the most recent protests and their transformation to an incredibly intense and long period of conflict. The extremely violent nature of the 2019 protests provides evidence of built-up anti-China sentiments and a struggle over recognizing Hong Kong’s subnational identity. Increased feelings of discontent and the government’s failure to recognize the political desires of
Hongkongers act as two factors which caused the city to erupt into a series of mass demonstrations.

*Pre-2014 Protests*

While the 2019 protests depict a more violent side of Hong Kong’s history, what the recent protests and those prior have in common is a fight for the recognition of the Hongkonger identity—which includes the demand for democratic freedoms. Democratic sentiment instilled in the Hong Kong identity dates back to 1967 when protestors demonstrated against British colonialism in a territory-wide campaign (Yep 2012, 1009). While the protest began as an industrial dispute at a factory in Kowloon, it quickly evolved into a large demonstration focused on politicized anti-imperialist sentiment (Yep 2012, 1009). The protests displayed incredible intensity and violence, even including the use of bomb attacks, which eventually led the Hong Kong government to enact emergency powers (Yep 2012, 1009). This protest was met with a crackdown by the government and the enactment of the Public Order Ordinance—a law established by British colonial authorities (Purbrick 2019, 470). The Public Order Ordinance outlaws and defines any gathering of three or more people as an “unlawful assembly” if they are acting in a way that is seen as disorderly and intimidating (Purbrick 2019, 471).

The enactment of the Public Order Ordinance was seen again in 2019 when police interpreted the protests as a “riot” which is defined in the ordinance as any person partaking in an unlawful assembly (Purbrick 2019, 471). The definition of the most recent protests as “riots” is significant because the offence
of participating in a riot is maximum penalty of conviction of ten years of imprisonment (Purbrick 2019, 470). The harsh response by police in 2019 is similar to that of 1967, particularly because of the enactment of this colonial era law. The backward nature of enacting such a dated and restricting definition of “riots” goes against the protection of the right of assembly in the Joint Declaration. The struggle to express their political views without facing extreme crackdowns is an issue Hongkongers have faced for decades. Seen both in the 1967 and 2019 enactment of the Public Order Ordinance, outdated and vague laws cloud the rights Hongkongers were supposedly granted by both Britain and China. The ambiguity of Hongkongers’ political rights and autonomy has pervaded the city’s history and identity—playing a key role in differentiating Hongkongers from Mainland Chinese.

Moreover, the enactment of the ordinance led to greater restrictions in later years. Since 1997, public gatherings of 50 or more people require individuals to inform the police seven days before the processions (Duhalde and Huang, 2019). While both the Hong Kong local government and the CCP have attempted to restrict public protests, demonstrations have continued to play a large role in Hong Kong’s political history.

In June of 1989, 1.5 million people gathered to protest against the Chinese government’s actions during the Tiananmen Square massacre and march in support of the pro-democracy protesters in Beijing (Cheng 2016, 389). The protest was the largest public gathering in Hong Kong’s history at the time and depicted the wide-spread support of democracy in the city (Duhalde and Huang,
2019). Since 1989, each year people gather in Hong Kong to protest for democratic reform and in remembrance of the pro-democracy protestors killed in Beijing. The yearly June 4 vigil in remembrance of Tiananmen Square has become a significant aspect of the city’s and fight for democracy. The massive protests during this year expressed not only Hong Kong’s support for democratic ideals but also the public’s concerns that “one country two systems” would not be upheld after the handover. Moreover, the large demonstration in support of the Tiananmen Square protesters is evidence of the roots of Hong Kong’s distrust of the central government and a distancing between central-local relations.

After the handover, Hong Kong continued to see a presence of protests. In 2003, Hong Kong experienced the largest protest since the 1997 handover at the time. 500,000 individuals protested against a legislation proposal under Article 23 (Cheng 2016, 389). The proposed Article 23 legislation by a Hong Kong official aimed to prohibit any acts of subversion against the central Chinese government (Duhalde and Huang, 2019). The legislation was understood by Hong Kong protestors as a “loyalty pledge to the new sovereign” (Cheng 2016, 389). Hongkongers took to the streets to protest against what was perceived as a direct attack on the city’s values of freedom and autonomy. The Article 23 bill was eventually withdrawn but the disapproval of Mainland China’s influence on Hong Kong’s internal affairs continued (Duhalde and Huang, 2019).

Almost ten years after the Article 23 protests, Hong Kong experienced another massive demonstration against the Chinese government’s influence on internal affairs. In 2012, some 90,000 individuals gathered to protest the
implementation of a mandatory nation-wide school curriculum called “Moral and National Education” (Duhalde and Huang 2019). The national education curriculum prompted the establishment of the groups “Parents Concern Group” and “Scholarism” on June 17, 2012 and rallied individuals through social media to participate in the protests (Cheng 2016, 393). Individuals feared that the implementation of a city-wide curriculum would disseminate Chinese propaganda and criticize democratic processes (Duhalde and Huang 2019). The marches lasted several months and eventually led the Hong Kong government to withdraw the proposal (Duhalde and Huang 2019).

Protest participation from 2010 to 2012, the period during the anti-curriculum event, reflects a 14-fold increase in the two years (Cheng 2016, 392). The significant increase in protest participation depicts the growth of political activism in modern Hong Kong and evidence of political activism within the Hongkonger identity. Moreover, the general focus of the protests in opposition of consolidating policies by the central government depicts the SAR’s desire to advocate for the distinction between the Chinese and Hongkonger identities.

*The 2014 Umbrella Movement*

In 2014, Hongkongers protested again for democratic values and the preservation of the city’s autonomy. Occupy Central, also known as the Umbrella Movement for the common use of umbrellas by protesters to shield themselves from tear gas, caused parts of Hong Kong to be at a standstill for 79 days (Birsel 2019). The movement was in response to Beijing’s restricted framework for implementing universal suffrage in the election of the city’s Chief Executive
(Duhalde and Huang 2019). In the Basic Law, it states that election of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage is its “ultimate aim” (Birsel 2019). However, the Standing Committee of China’s legislature, a part of the National People’s Congress, stated in August 2014 that any candidate for Chief Executive would need majority support from the election committee—which consists of mostly of pro-Beijing officials (Birsel 2019). The vetting by the central government of candidates for the city’s leader would make it almost impossible for any pro-democracy officials to be elected, or even considered, for Chief Executive.

While the Umbrella Movement was a landmark event in Hong Kong’s social movement history, the extent of the 2014 event was based on the buildup of previous demonstrations of street politics (Cheng 2016, 401). Of the Umbrella Movement protestors, approximately 85 percent of participants has engaged in previous sit-ins or rallies (Cheng 2016, 401). The movement arose out of frustrations with this policy by Beijing and the public’s desire for universal suffrage. The movement, initially called Occupy Central with Love and Peace was a nonviolent civil disobedience campaign that was first proposed by law professor Benny Tai in 2013 (Birsel 2019). The movement expanded with the help of Chan Kin-man, a former professor, and Chu Yiu-Ming, a retired pastor (Birsel 2019). The expansion of the leadership of the movement allowed the protests to occupy many parts of Hong Kong’s city center and grow into the monumental event that it did. While the movement began as a peaceful sit-in in the business district, the events intensified as student protesters later stormed the government headquarters (Duhalde and Huang, 2019). Young activists, including
members of Scholarism (the organization created during the 2012 protests), such as Joshua Wong led the storming of the Civic Square (Cheng 2016, 401). Chaos ensued when police arrested many protesters and attempted to disperse the crowds using pepper spray (Chiu and Chan 2014). After demonstrations consumed Hong Kong for over two months, the movement slowly lost steam and ended without its demands of universal suffrage being met (Duhalde and Huang 2019). While the movement was unsuccessful in catalyzing political reform, it did make a landmark statement of the pro-democracy sentiment felt throughout the city. The Umbrella Movement depicted the strong sense of political activism in the Hongkonger identity and a theme carried on in the most recent 2019 protests.

The 2019-2020 Protests

The most recent protests in 2019 have taken much of the global media’s attention for its longevity and use of violent measures. Unlike those seen in the previous demonstrations, or even the Umbrella Movement, the 2019 protests depicted a much more aggressive side of Hong Kong protesters. The more extreme tactics used by protestors were met by police using riot tactics originating from the 1967 protests and even reverted to colonial era laws (Purbrick 2019, 465). While the current protests began as a peaceful demonstration against the proposed Extradition Bill by Chief Executive Carrie Lam, they quickly escalated to consist of many instances of violent clashes between protesters and police (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). The strategic decision to take violent measures came from the urgency to satisfy the needs of modern Hongkongers (Purbrick 2019, 465).
Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s pro-Beijing Chief Executive, proposed an amendment to the current Fugitive Offenders Ordinance which was the initial cause of the 2019 protests (Duhalde and Huang, 2019). The amendment would allow for individuals to be extradited from Hong Kong to Mainland China to undergo trial (Purbrick 2019, 466). However, many Hongkongers feared that such a policy would allow individuals to fall subject to Mainland China’s less transparent legal system and undergo an unfair trial. In response to the proposed bill, even pro-institution actors raised concerns (Purbrick 2019, 467). Senior business leaders and even the former Chief Secretary Henry Tang Ying Yen voiced their concerns with the overbearing extent of the policy (Purbrick 2019, 467). While the protests began as a response to the extradition bill and a fear of Hong Kong’s eroding legal autonomy, the demands of the protests later came to include other requests and present a greater sense of discontent with the central government.

On June 9, the protest organizer, Civil Human Rights Front, reported that over a million people marched from Victoria Park to the Admiralty District in response to the discontent over the bill (Purbrick 2019, 468). Chief Executive Carrie Lam’s response to the June 9 march was that “the bill will resume its reading” (Purbrick 2019, 468). Her response in a news media briefing depicted the failure of the Hong Kong administration to understand the urgent demands of the public (Purbrick 2019, 468).

Carrie Lam’s response resulted in another public demonstration which took a more extreme approach. On Wednesday June 12, a protest began outside of
the Central Government Offices and Legislative Council (Purbrick 2019, 469).
The gathering of protestors outside of the government buildings caused officials
to be unable to enter the buildings and the police to respond with the deployment
of anti-riot equipment (Purbrick 2019, 469). While many of the protestors were
peaceful in their demonstration, a few hundred protestors were able to enter the
Legislative Council compound which led to a violent clash with the police
(Purbrick 2019, 470). The extreme measures taken by both protestors and the
police established the precedence for the additional protests in the coming
months.

On June 16 2019, two million citizens of the city’s seven million
population stormed the streets to march in protest of the proposed bill (Duhalde
and Huang, 2019). This incredible turnout was the largest public gathering in
Hong Kong’s history (Duhalde and Huang, 2019). In response to the protest,
Carrie Lam first suspended the bill and later withdrew it in a public apology (Wu,
Lai, and Yuhas 2019).

Less than a month later, demonstrators on July 1st, the anniversary of
Hong Kong’s handover back to China, stormed and vandalized the Legco (Wu,
Lai, and Yuhas 2019). While defacing the Legco, protesters hung the British
colonial-era flag over the Legco president’s desk, suggesting that some
Hongkongers experienced greater political freedoms during the colonial era than
under China’s sovereignty as a SAR (Chan 2019). In addition, protestors sprayed
slogans on the walls of the chamber including “It was you who taught me
peaceful marches do not work” (Purbrick 2019, 472). The use of violence in this
incidence foreshowed the extremity of the situation and the extent of the ongoing protests. The storming of the Legco is one of the most symbolic instances of violence in the 2019 protests, which has now become a focal point of the demonstrations. The government’s response to the protestors’ actions was Carrie Lam’s announcement that “the Bill is dead” (Purbrick 2019, 472). This marked a turning point where it became evident that the future protests would no longer be solely about the bill but demonstrate the deep discontent with the HKSAR government and the lack of representation of Hongkongers’ desires, even in domestic institutions.

As protesters increasingly turned to violent measures, police responded with hundreds of rounds of tear gas and physical clashes with citizens (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). On August 5th, police fired 800 rounds of tear gas and arrested dozens of people (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). On August 11th, a female protester who was shot in the eye by police became a symbol of the movement and marked a turning point from nonviolent to violent protests (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). Her injury has since then been used as a symbol of the increasingly violent tactics used by Hong Kong police against protestors (Kilpatrick 2019). As a result, many protesters wore eyepatches in her honor and included the demand of an independent inquiry into police brutality (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). The impact of this woman’s injury depicts the growing tension between Hong Kong protestors and police. In combination of using an eye patch to symbolize police brutality, protestors have incorporated the chant “an eye for an eye” to express the
sentiment that increasingly extremist actions will be taken by protestors in fighting for the identity and freedom of Hongkongers (Kilpatrick 2019).

Two days later, on August 13th, protesters shut down the Hong Kong airport (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). The disruption of one of the world’s busiest airports is evidence of the movement moving to the global stage. On August 31st, the fifth anniversary of the 2014 protests, even more violent protests broke out (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). The protests in recognition of the previous movement for universal suffrage depicted the citizens continued demand for democratic practices in Hong Kong politics.

On October 1st, the 70th anniversary of China under communist rule, another violent outbreak occurred which led to the shooting of a protester by police (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). The protests soon turned even more serious with the death of a student protestor and a man being set on fire (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019). The violent protests continued throughout the city as two of Hong Kong’s largest universities became battle grounds between public enforcement and student protesters. Riot police stormed the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong as protesters at the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong hid gasoline bombs and bricks inside (Wu, Lai, and Yuhas 2019).

As intense and violent clashes between protesters and police have continued in Hong Kong, the movement’s demands have departed from merely the removal of the extradition bill proposal. Rather, the protests have changed their focus to an issue of police brutality, a recognition of Hong Kong identity, and the protection of the city’s autonomy. The five demands listed by movement
leaders are the withdrawal of the extradition bill, an inquiry into police brutality, the retraction of the term “riots” to define the protests, amnesty to arrested protesters, and political reform to ensure universal suffrage (Amnesty International 2019). The desire for recognizing the Hongkonger identity goes hand-in-hand with the demand of political reform. A significant part of the Hongkonger identity is the more liberal political beliefs held by the SAR’s population and the demand to protect the city’s greater political freedoms—which includes the desire for universal suffrage. In addition, the protest’s clear opposition to Mainland Chinese policies and beliefs provides evidence to the distinction between Hongkonger and Chinese identities. The demand of universal suffrage can be interpreted as a part of the political activism that is integral to the Hong Kong subnational identity. As a result, the movement’s political demands fall under the greater desire to be recognized as a peripheral region with its own distinct identity and political demands.

While observers of the 2019-2020 protests are unsure of how the movement will end, or more importantly, how the central government will react, it is evident that the demands of the organizers mirror the pro-democracy demands of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. The 2019 protests began in opposition to the extradition bill but quickly became a public cry for universal suffrage and the recognition of a distinct Hongkonger identity. Although the current protest’s extreme violent measures are new, the desire for greater political reform is not. Looking at Hong Kong’s unique history of the transition of power tells the story of a city yearning for freedoms that it will likely never be granted. As Hong Kong
has experienced the rule of two very different global superpowers—Britain and China—the Hong Kong identity is intertwined with a sense of political activism that has become even more pervasive. The history of Hong Kong’s social movements is crucial to understanding the specific factors that have led to the strengthening of its subnational identity. I believe that by outlining Hong Kong’s political history and its political institutions, one can better understand how the Hongkonger subnational identity has existed for decades and played a role in the emergence of social movements.
Chapter 4: Identity as a Factor of Hong Kong Protest Emergence

Since 1997, the rise of the Hongkonger identity has appeared to grow increasingly stronger and demonstrated the desire of local Hong Kong people to be recognized as distinct from Mainland Chinese. The prevalence of this peripheral identity has not only depicted the growing trend of self-identification as Hongkonger rather than Chinese, but demonstrated Hong Kong’s resistance to assimilating policies by Beijing. In surveys analyzing the ethnic identity of individuals in Hong Kong, a dramatic rise in self-identification as Hongkonger can be observed. Moreover, while prior to 2008, identification as Hongkonger and Chinese followed similar trends of fluctuating between periods of growth and decline; since 2008, the two trends diverged significantly—the Hongkonger identity rising up to 52.3 percent and the Chinese identity falling to 10.8 percent in 2019 (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1). The transition from self-identification as Hongkonger and Chinese following similar trends to moving in opposite directions after 2008 depicts that the rise of the Hongkonger identity is a relatively new phenomenon. While the growing strength of the Hongkonger identity is evident in data taken from public opinion polls, I seek to understand what factors have led to the strengthening of this subnational identity in recent years and how it has been politicized through social movements. By analyzing the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity in addition to the emergence of the 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong, I attempt to depict a connection between these events and argue that identity is the main factor behind the recent social protests.
While scholars such as Brian C.H. Fong argue that the strengthening of Hong Kong’s peripheral nationalism derives from resistance to consolidating policies of the CCP, I believe the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity also includes a desire to seek recognition as a distinct body with distinct political demands. Rather than attributing the growth of the Hongkonger identity solely to anti-China sentiment, I argue that it has strengthened as a result of distinguishing itself as a group with separate political needs. This confirms with interviews of participants. Johnson Yeung, an experienced activist and student organizer of the movement, stated in an interview that the “Hong Kong identity isn’t just based on the rejection of Chinese identity, but a collective sense of resilience and autonomy and saying no to oppression” (McLaughlin, Hong Kong’s Protests Have Cemented Its Identity 2019). While it may appear that identity-focused conflicts in Hong Kong arose solely as a result of anti-China sentiment and discontent with the CCP’s control, Yeung makes it clear that the issue is deep-rooted in the resistance to oppression. The recent 2019 protests have been much more than solely a demonstration against the proposed Extradition Bill but rather, an expression of Hong Kong’s distinct identity.

By understanding the growth of the Hongkonger identity as a demonstration of the distinct experiences and political expectations of the SAR’s citizens, one can understand how it may act as the basis of protest mobilization. In this chapter, I seek to explain what the Hong Kong identity entails and further Yeung’s point that it is defined by a strong sense of autonomy and desire to be recognized as separate from the rest of China. Moreover, while depicting the
definition of the Hong Kong identity is crucial to understanding the movement’s emergence, I also seek to explain how this identity has strengthened in recent years. By showing the strengthening of the distinct Hongkonger identity and its connection to the 2019-2020 social movement, I argue that an identity-focused explanation provides a more comprehensive approach than purely economic arguments in explaining the emergence of the movement.

In this chapter, I first consider the question of ‘what defines the Hongkonger identity?’ Moreover, in answering this question, I seek to depict the differences between the subnational Hongkonger identity and the national Chinese identity. Understanding what it means to self-identify as Hongkonger illuminates the reasons why mass demonstrations have emerged in response to the CCP’s policies. I explain the factors that define the Hongkonger identity in three main categories—political differences, economic policies, and culture. In each of these categories, it is clear that Hongkongers hold many different characteristics and expectations than the general Mainland Chinese population. Understanding what defines the Hongkonger identity and explaining the differences from the Chinese identity helps us understand the roots of Hongkongers’ desire to be recognized as a separate peripheral identity.

After defining the Hongkonger identity, I then seek to provide evidence of the rise of peripheral nationalism in Hong Kong. In order to depict the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity, I review literature on Hong Kong’s identity and public opinion polls which depict trends in the city’s self-identification. Looking at the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity provides
evidence to the politicization of the subnational identity and points to its role in protest emergence. In addition to depicting the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity, I consider what factors have contributed to its rise. I look at what specific events and experiences have caused the dramatic rise of the Hongkonger identity.

In the next section of this chapter, I argue that identity is the main factor behind the 2019-2020 protests and provides a better explanation than one based in economic grievances. I argue that through oppressive policies of the CCP, Hongkongers feel unrepresented for the differences they hold as a part of their subnational identity. This, in turn, motivates Hongkongers to mobilize in protest. Moreover, looking at subnational identity in Hong Kong as the main explanation of the protests provides a greater picture than looking solely at the economic explanation. Considering identity as the main mobilizing factor allows us to understand how the differences in Hongkongers’ political, cultural, and historical experiences have caused them to seek recognition as a distinct group.

After explaining the rise of the Hongkonger identity and its impact on the 2019-2020 protests, I discuss how this depicts the necessity to include identity as a mobilizing factor within Doug McAdam’s political process model. By not including the consideration of identity in the cognitive liberation process of the model, the political process model cannot fully explain the emergence of protests; particularly in cases such as Hong Kong where identity plays a large role in causing conflicts. In addition, I apply my revised version of the political process model to analyze the emergence of the 2019-2020 movement in Hong Kong and how it may be attributed to the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity.
What Defines the Hongkonger Identity?

Through the recent 2019-2020 protests, the expression of a distinct Hongkonger identity has become more prominent than ever. Many of the news outlets covering the events expressed the existence of a Hongkonger identity driving the protests. Headlines by both the New York Times and The Atlantic, refer to the 2019 Hong Kong protests as evidence of an “identity crisis” (McLaughlin, Hong Kong’s Protests Have Cemented Its Identity 2019) (Fisher 2019). While the mass attention placed on the current events in Hong Kong has informed the world of the identity-based clashes between Hong Kong and Mainland China, what the Hong Kong identity entails is a complex question. Before one can understand how the subnational Hongkonger identity has influenced the emergence of the 2019 pro-democracy movement, the Hongkonger identity must first be defined.

The Hongkonger identity has been shaped throughout the city’s complex history. However, it is only recently that identification with the subnational identity has risen so dramatically. The development of the modern Hongkonger identity can be traced back to the 1970s (Ma and Fung 2007, 173). Although Hong Kong was previously perceived as an immigrant city of refugees from China, the 1970s defined a cognitive shift within the Hong Kong population from a “refugee mentality” to a sense of belonging in the region (Yew and Kwong 2014, 173). This greater sense of belonging encouraged individuals to become more politically active and become more aware of the city’s affairs—a characteristic still prevalent in the modern Hongkonger identity (Yew and Kwong

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Beginning in the 1970s, this shift towards a Hong Kong-centric mindset and a growing resistance to the CCP was a result of observing the Cultural Revolution from the outside (Yew and Kwong 2014, 173). Many Hong Kong citizens viewed the Cultural Revolution with fear and viewed it as a threat to the city’s autonomy and political freedoms (Mathews 1997, 7). The terrible events of the Cultural Revolution provided evidence of the growing distance between a capitalist and cosmopolitan Hong Kong and an authoritarian China (Mathews 1997, 7). Through the dichotomy of the development of Hong Kong and Mainland China, Hongkongers began to view the Chinese as ‘other’ and perceive the CCP more cynically. The events of the Cultural Revolution in China caused many Hongkongers to become more protective of the city and established the foundation for a unique Hong Kong identity to develop.

As depicted through Hong Kong citizens’ cognitive distancing from Mainland Chinese ideals, Hongkongers began to identify with the values and experiences exclusive to the city. While Hong Kong existed as a British Colony at the time, scholars argue that Hong Kong lacked a sense of nationalism or political connection with a larger sovereign state (Ma and Fung 2007, 173). The Hong Kong people saw themselves as neither Chinese nor British, and began to identify with their own local identity as a result of the unique experiences of the region. The unique combination of Chinese heritage mixed with British institutions formed a society distinct from both China and Britain—priming the city for the establishment of a strong subnational identity.
The immense differences between the historical development of Hong Kong and Mainland China contributed to the growth of a distinct Hongkonger identity. The transition from British Colony back to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 alone depicts the changes in its governance which have shaped the political expectations that contribute to the Hongkonger identity. While Mainland China underwent a dramatic transformation towards an authoritarian society under Mao Zedong, Hong Kong was experiencing its own transformation of becoming a capitalist hub with liberal political freedoms protected through the Basic Law. Hong Kong’s adoption of a free market and transparent legal system, depicts a stark difference to the institutions developed in Mainland China at the time. These Western economic and political ideas contributed to development of the Hongkonger identity and a feeling of greater sophistication than their Chinese counterparts (Vickers and Kan 2003, 406). Some scholars have defined the Hongkonger identity as a hybrid of Chinese and Western values as a result of the city’s history as a British colony (Mathews 1997, 9). Moreover, Gordon Mathews stated that when interviewing individuals who identified as Hongkonger what it means to identify with this subnational identity, they expressed sentiment of feeling a sense of “Chinese plus” (Mathews 1997, 9). This term included variations such as “Chinese plus capitalism” and “Chinese plus democracy/human rights/the rule of law” (Mathews 1997, 9). This suggests that while Hongkongers recognize their similarities with the Chinese population, they see themselves as something more, and something distinct. The idea of being Chinese plus valuing capitalism and democracy points to the differences in the Hongkonger and
Chinese identity as a result of the very different political and economic experiences of these two bodies. Moreover, it points to the lack of these institutions in Mainland China, and the fear that Hong Kong people could be stripped of these rights under the CCP’s control.

The idea of being “Chinese plus” alludes to the anti-China sentiment that began to develop out of the separation between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Hong Kong people saw themselves as superior to Mainland Chinese with respect to being more civilized, educated, and Western (N. Ma 2015, 41). Hong Kong popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s often depicted Mainland Chinese as lazy, less civilized, and indoctrinated by the Chinese communist ideals spread by the CCP (N. Ma 2015, 41). The cultural separation between Hong Kong and Mainland China caused Hongkongers to hold negative views of Mainlanders as lesser and feel a strong urge to protect their freedom and way of life (N. Ma 2015, 41). The perspective of Mainland Chinese people as lazy and less civilized caused Hongkongers to develop a sense of elitism both in their views of society and politics. Hongkongers saw themselves as elite because of the capitalist system and greater political freedoms within the city. Moreover, the economic differences between Hong Kong and Mainland China made many Hong Kong inhabitants nervous that a migration of Mainland Chinese would strain the city’s resources and negatively affect their way of life (N. Ma 2015, 41). Ngok Ma argues that the anti-China sentiment that developed in Hong Kong increased during the 1997 handover and reached a peak during the 2012 Legislative Council elections. While many Hong Kong citizens originated as immigrants from Mainland China,
the increasing desire for distancing between the two bodies, as a result of anti-
China sentiment, depicted the establishment of a Hongkonger identity that
demanded recognition as separate from the nationalist Chinese identity.

In more recent years, the Hongkonger identity has depicted a stronger
sense of political activism and democratic freedoms than a mere sense of elitism
over the greater Chinese population. Rather, the Hongkonger identity has been
shaped by the strong desire to protect the political freedoms and autonomy
promised in the 1984 Joint Declaration. While some anti-China sentiment may
still persist within the Hong Kong population, Hongkongers have come to oppose
the rule of the CCP rather than experience general negativity towards the Chinese
population.

Yew and Kwong state that the Hong Kong identity constitutes of two main
factors: “Hongkongers’ sense of entitlement in politics, and a psychological
resistance to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)” (Yew and Kwong 2014,
1095). This idea of “entitlement in politics” derives from the view that Western
democratic ideals brought to Hong Kong allows Hongkongers to participate in
certain democratic processes and political activism. Because of the power of the
authoritarian CCP in the rest of China, Mainland Chinese people do not
experience this same sense of entitlement to participate in politics. Both factors
may be attributed to the cultural and political differences experienced in Hong
Kong and China. However, while these factors may be traced back historical
experiences, these attributes can still be viewed today.
Hong Kong’s psychological resistance to the CCP and the presence of the Hongkonger identity has only become more prevalent in recent years. This sentiment is especially pronounced through Hong Kong’s protests. On July 1, 2003, half a million Hong Kong protestors demonstrated against the National Security Ordinance, which was eventually overturned as a result (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1096). The July 1 protest depicted a turning point in the political activism of Hongkongers and demonstrated a stronger desire for democracy (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1096). Moreover, the 2003 protests depicted a change in the CCP’s approach to Hong Kong, taking a more hands on approach to the governance of the city, as opposed to allowing it greater autonomy although promised in the Joint Declaration. The Hong Kong people’s increased support for democracy clashed with the heightened control of the CCP, causing Hong Kong’s autonomy to feel threatened and setting the precedence for even greater political activism to come.

Differences in Political Views

Looking at the definition of the Hongkonger identity, I approach it by analyzing differences between Hong Kong and China’s political views, economic policies, and cultural norms. First analyzing Hong Kong’s political views, its support of democratic values has been explicated in the series of protests since the 1997 handover. Moreover, protests directed specifically at China’s political past has depicted the Hong Kong identity being rooted in political ideals that differ from those in Mainland China. In addition to the 2003 protest which presented a turning point in Hong Kong’s expression of democratic ideals, protests in 2009
marking the 20th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown demonstrated further advocacy for democracy and human rights (N. Ma 2015, 49). The Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement in China, an umbrella organization for pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong, organized the event with a historic attendance of over 150,000 individuals (N. Ma 2015, 49). The success of the June 4th vigil in 2009 was followed by increasing attendance numbers of the annual event in following years and a demonstration of the significance placed on democracy and human rights in Hong Kong. Events such as this not only depict the importance of democratic values in the Hong Kong identity but also express the differences between the political views of Mainland China and the SAR.

In Mainland China, democratic values are almost absent from the political environment and any recognition of the Tiananmen massacre is outlawed. Individuals in Mainland China are not only banned from participating in social demonstrations such as this, but fear punishment for criticism of the CCP’s actions. As a result, Mainland Chinese people experience a dramatically lower level of political freedom than that in Hong Kong. In the 2019 Human Freedom Index, China was ranked 126th of all countries in terms of human freedom while Hong Kong topped the list at third (Vásquez and Porčnik 2019). The stark difference in the level of freedom in Hong Kong versus China depicts the immense differences of the political environments of the two bodies. The lack of democracy and political freedoms in Mainland China poses an eminent threat to Hong Kong’s autonomy and has only strengthened the sense of political activism in the Hongkonger identity. Hongkongers believe their political freedoms and
autonomy are a right upheld by the Joint Declaration and Hong Kong’s Basic Law. The sense of encroachment upon Hong Kong’s autonomy has only strengthened the sense of activism within the Hongkonger population and identified the distinctions between the Hongkonger and Chinese identities.

Differences in Economic Policies

In addition to the distinctions between Hong Kong and Mainland China’s political perspectives, the differences in economic policies have also played a role in shaping the two identities. Since Hong Kong’s establishment as a British colony, capitalist values were injected into the city’s society and established the prevalence of Western ideals. Hong Kong has historically been seen as a highly capitalist city founded on free market policies. Meanwhile, as a result of the CCP’s rule, China has experienced a post-socialist economy largely dependent on state-sponsored industries and reliance on state owned enterprises (SOEs). In Mainland China, SOEs are controlled by the CCP which allows for the state to uphold monopolies in certain industries and even elect the leadership of large Chinese corporations (Meltzler and Shenai 2019). In addition, SOEs make up 50 percent of non-agricultural GDP (Morrison 2019, 25). Moreover, SOEs constitute 50 percent of the 500 largest manufacturing companies and 61 percent of the top 500 service sector enterprises in China (Morrison 2019, 25). China’s immense dependence on state control of the economy presents a distinction from the policies in Hong Kong which champion a free market.

While China still has a high level of dependence on SOEs, economic reforms have also opened up the state to more privatization. In 2014, there were
7.26 million registered private companies and 1.77 million privately controlled limited liability companies (Lardy 2016, 38). Moreover, by 2014, private firms accounted for 77 percent of investment in manufacturing (Lardy 2016, 44). These figures depict that despite China’s focus on a state controlled economy, the private sector has grown significantly and contributed to China’s economic success. However, although China has allowed for greater privatization and foreign investment, the state continues to closely monitor the private sector and assert its control over the economy.

Considering the economic freedom in China, it is still extremely low in comparison to other states. China’s world ranking in the 2020 Index of Economic Freedom was 103 (The Heritage Foundation 2020). Similar to its ranking of human freedoms, China is at the bottom of the list in its economic freedom. The lack of freedom in China’s economy is contrasted with the high levels of freedom in Hong Kong’s. In the 2020 Index of Economic Freedom, Hong Kong was ranked number one, being the freest economy in the world (The Heritage Foundation 2020). Hong Kong has been ranked number one since 1995, demonstrating the presence of strong free market values that have existed in the city for decades (The Heritage Foundation 2020). The stark difference between the economic freedom experienced in Hong Kong in comparison to China demonstrates another point where the two differ. The historic strength of Hong Kong’s open economy has also contributed to distinctions between the Hongkonger and Chinese identities. While China was experiencing immense economic struggles during the Cultural Revolution, Hong Kong had been a
thriving capitalist city. The economic success experienced earlier on in Hong Kong than Mainland China allowed the Hongkonger identity to grow from a foundation of capitalist ideals while the Mainland Chinese identity derived from a model of unsuccessful socialist policies during the Maoist era. While today both Hong Kong and Mainland China experience high levels of economic growth, the historical differences and distinct economic models depict a dichotomy that has affected the development of a distinct Hongkonger identity.

Differences in Culture

In addition to the differences in political and economic aspects of Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese society, culture has also played a significant role in distinguishing the two identities. In Hong Kong, one factor that has contributed to the establishment of a Hongkonger identity is language. Another distinction between the Mainland Chinese and Hongkonger identities is the use of Putonghua (also known as Mandarin) and Cantonese. In Mainland China, Mandarin is the official language of the state and represents a sense of nationalist pride. At the expense of local dialects, schools in China are instructed to carry out lessons in Mandarin (Vickers and Kan 2003, 407). Meanwhile in Hong Kong, the use of Cantonese is still incredibly important to Hong Kong society as the historically dominant dialect. In Hong Kong, over 90 percent of the population speaks Cantonese (Vickers and Kan 2003, 407). While many individuals in Hong Kong have the ability to speak Mandarin, Cantonese still prevails in society as the original local dialect of the region. The use of Cantonese is seen as a defining factor of the Hongkonger identity and portrays Hong Kong as distinct from the
rest of China (Mathews 1997, 11). The division between Chinese and Cantonese in Hong Kong demonstrates the distinctions between the two identities and Hong Kong’s resistance to officially adopting Mandarin Chinese as the rest of the country has done.

In addition to the distinction between Cantonese and Chinese, the use of English in Hong Kong has also played a role in defining the Hongkonger identity. In Hong Kong, the use of English is even more of a distinctive marker of the city’s difference from China (Mathews 1997, 11). English is widely spoken throughout the city and has been a unique factor of the city’s identity since its colonization. Hong Kong adopted English in many of its local institutions, including local education.

In July 1997, two months after Hong Kong’s reunification with China, the HKSAR government established new guidelines for instruction in secondary schools (E. Chan 2002, 271). The new guidelines stated that Hong Kong public secondary schools were to adopt the use of Chinese in instruction of Forms one to three (E. Chan 2002, 271). Prior to this, lessons had been taught in English. While Hong Kong had just transitioned back to Chinese sovereignty and it made sense in the eyes of the CCP to implement this policy, the public reacted against the guidelines in an extraordinarily strong matter. The resistance to the policy depicted the Hong Kong public’s refusal to assimilate into Mainland Chinese ideals (E. Chan 2002, 271). Hongkongers’ negative reaction to the policy depicted the importance of English within the city and its use as a symbolic feature of the Hongkonger identity. Moreover, the use of English within Hong Kong was, and
still is, viewed as a distinguishing factor of Hong Kong from China (E. Chan 2002, 272).

Even after reunification, Hongkongers sought to uphold their cultural differences from the rest of China by resisting the implementation of Chinese in Hong Kong society. The conflicts between the use of Cantonese, Mandarin Chinese, and English in Hong Kong depict the complex cultural background of the Hongkonger identity. However, what the struggles with the implementation of Mandarin Chinese as the official language in aspects of society depicts is the Hongkongers’ continuous attempts to separate themselves from the national identity. The use of language in defining the Hongkonger identity again depicts the importance of resisting assimilation attempts to bring Hong Kong under greater control of the CCP.

What defines the Hongkonger identity is a complex question. The unique history of the SAR in addition to a difference of current policies between Hong Kong and China depicts the formation of a distinct local identity separate from Mainland China. While the roots of the Hongkonger identity derive from a physical separation from the rest of the state, a cognitive divide has also brought the emergence of this subnational identity. The focus on liberal political ideals, capitalism, and distinct cultural differences define what it means to be a Hongkonger. Moreover, a large aspect of the Hongkonger identity is a strong sense of duty to protect the rights of the Hong Kong people. Beyond the differences in political and cultural backgrounds between Hong Kong and China, Hongkongers see themselves as a politically active identity that must resist
oppression by the greater Chinese nation. Being a Hongkonger means seeing oneself as different from Chinese and advocating for the rights and freedoms provided to this distinct subnational identity. Understanding the historical and political basis of the Hongkonger identity allows us to see why a sense of peripheral nationalism has risen in recent years. In the next section, I look at how the Hongkonger identity has strengthened and its role in the city’s social movements.

Evidence of Hong Kong’s Strengthening Identity

The rise of the Hongkonger identity has been displayed in largely growing political events. Since 1997, some academics have pinpointed the growth of the Hongkonger identity to protests and displays of political activism in response to centralist policies by the CCP (Fong 2017; Yew and Kwong 2014). Since Hong Kong’s transition back to Chinese sovereignty, it appears that resistance to Beijing-backed policies does not just depict a rejection of the central government but provides evidence to a strengthening local identity. The growth of this subnational identity has been promoted by political activists and student leaders who champion the recognition of a Hongkonger identity distinct from the rest of China. Moreover, a generational shift in identification as Hongkonger versus Chinese has been observed. Younger generations in Hong Kong have been a staple of the city’s movements and depicted the expression of the modern Hongkonger identity. Sebastian Veg argues that it is the generation born around 1997 and educated after the handover that identifies the least with the nationalist Chinese identity (Veg 2017, 324). In fact, this generation not only identifies more
with the Hongkonger identity but almost rejects the Chinese identity as whole (Veg 2017, 324). Since 2008, polls depict the movement of the Hongkonger and Chinese identities in opposite directions (Veg 2017, 325). Moreover, polls depict that a majority of 18-29 year olds identify almost exclusively with Hong Kong (Veg 2017, 325). The younger generation’s strong identification with the local identity depicts its significant rise.

While the generation born after 1997 has played a role in strengthening the Hongkonger identity and bringing to focus the role of political activism in Hong Kong, many scholars attribute the rise of the identity to a resistance of CCP policies. Since 2003, the CCP has adopted “a new Hong Kong policy” which consists of a much stronger grip on Hong Kong’s political affairs (Fong 2017, 527). The new approach to Hong Kong taken by the CCP demonstrated a fear that Hong Kong would become a territory of confrontation and delegitimize the CCP’s powers (Fong 2017, 527). As a result, Beijing began to implement more assimilating policies to try and build a greater sense of nationalism within the SAR. The attempts to assimilate Hong Kong into Mainland China not only includes political reforms but also the spread of ideology which Hongkongers viewed as an attack on their distinct subnational identity (Fong 2017, 528). Fong argues that while these incorporation strategies attempted to erode Hong Kong’s sense of peripheral nationalism, it actually led to the rise of the Hongkonger identity as a result of the resistance to these tactics.

Fong states that the CCP’s incorporation strategies mainly consist of using supreme constitutional powers to limit Hong Kong’s autonomy in addition to
strengthening the Central Government Liaison Office (CGLO) in HKSAR which acts as a governing body of Hong Kong’s internal affairs (Fong 2017, 528). The first tactic of exercising supreme constitutional powers uses the narrative that all powers given to Hong Kong derive from the central government through the Basic Law (Fong 2017, 528). This means that even though Hong Kong has its own domestic politics, the CCP will ultimately have the last say on political decisions. Beijing’s narrative of “one country two systems” understands the relationship with Hong Kong as being such that the CCP exercises greater jurisdiction over the HKSAR, even despite Hong Kong’s own political system (Fong 2017, 529). While Beijing allows for Hong Kong to believe that it has some autonomy by having its own political institutions, it argues that it has overall control of the outcomes of Hong Kong’s systems (Fong 2017, 529).

The other way in which Beijing demonstrates incorporating strategies is the strengthening of the CGLO in Hong Kong. The CGLO is seen as a “second governing team” in Hong Kong (Fong 2017, 529). However, rather than being a governing body that is native to HKSAR, the body is controlled directly by the CCP. One of the most evident ways in which the CGLO is used to control Hong Kong’s autonomy is through its influence in the election process (Fong 2017, 530). During elections, the CGLO liaise with pro-Beijing forces in attempts to gain greater influence within Hong Kong’s political system (Fong 2017, 530). This tactic has been relatively discreet in Hong Kong however demonstrates the great efforts the CCP undertakes to try and erode Hong Kong’s autonomy and political independence.
In addition to incorporation strategies used in the political realm, the CCP has also attempted to erode the Hongkonger identity through education. In 2001, the Hong Kong government implemented a reform of the curriculum of local schools which encouraged the education of a “national identity” as one of seven learning goals in Hong Kong schools (Fong 2017, 538). The curriculum uses Chinese soft power to promote Chinese culture, language, and ethnic history (Fong 2017, 538). The implementation of this nationalist curriculum depicts the attempts to spread nationalist ideology throughout Hong Kong. The reforms to education showcase efforts to replace the presence of a subnational Hongkonger identity with the national Chinese identity.

While the central government has made many attempts to use incorporation strategies to limit Hong Kong’s autonomy, these policies have been met with resistance and actually led to the strengthening of the Hong Kong subnational identity. In recent years, the politicization of the Hongkonger identity has depicted the strengthening of the peripheral nationalism and a struggle to resist Beijing’s oppressive strategies (Fong 2017, 540). The rise of the Hongkonger identity has been seen as an attempt to protect Hong Kong from Mainland policies and mobilize against policies that attempt to suppress the rights held by the region (Fong 2017, 541). Rhetoric surrounding defending Hong Kong and protecting its unique identity depicts the mobilization of identity as a political tool and the growing prevalence of peripheral nationalism sentiment. Fong argues that peripheral nationalism is about the resistance by the periphery against incorporation strategies by the center (Fong 2017, 548). Many individuals in
Hong Kong feel as though the city’s autonomy is under threat by the central government and have moved to feel a stronger sense of local identity in a means to act against it. While the CCP has made great attempts to erode Hong Kong’s autonomy and assimilate the city into nationalist ideals, it has only pushed Hong Kong further away. The resistance by Hongkongers depicts not only the rise of the subnational identity but also the political activism that acts as the foundation of the identity.

Other scholars have also analyzed how Beijing’s incorporation strategies have led to the rise of the Hongkonger identity. Yew and Kwong state that fears of “Mainlandization” and the erosion of Hong Kong’s autonomy have led individuals to feel an even greater sense of subnational identity (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1102). In 2004, over 300 professionals issued a declaration to uphold Hong Kong’s values of human rights, rule of law and democracy in response to the threatening erosion of the Hong Kong identity (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1103). Since then, Hong Kong has seen greater restrictions in expressing the core values of Hong Kong which include liberal freedoms and the protection of human rights. In 2011, police set greater restrictions for approval of the organization of the June 4 Tiananmen vigil and July 1 protest (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1103). The attempt to block these annual events in Hong Kong provides evidence to the central government’s attempts to limit Hong Kong’s autonomy and expression of peripheral nationalism. The result of these policies have not been the greater incorporation of Hong Kong but rather, a dramatic resistance to these efforts. The strengthening Hongkonger identity proves that the incorporation strategies by the
CCP have not only failed but contributed to the growth of Hong Kong’s desire for democracy and autonomy.

Elections in Hong Kong’s Legislative Council (Legco) also portray the rise of the Hongkonger identity and its growing recognition in political institutions. The 2016 election marked a historic win for pan-democratic and localist parties in Hong Kong (Kaeding 2017, 161). Although it was predicted that the election would result in pro-establishment parties holding control over the Legco, the results demonstrated the growing support of democratic ideals and the representation of the local identity in politics. Pan-democratic and localist parties combined won 19 of 35 geographic constituencies, 3 out of 5 super seats, and 7 seats in the functional constituencies (Kaeding 2017, 161). More importantly, this win allowed pro-democratic parties to gain enough seats to hold a minority veto in the council (Kaeding 2017, 161). This win depicted the growing sense of localist and democratic views in Hong Kong’s politics and expressed a previously lacking recognition of the Hongkonger identity.

In addition, the 2019 election for Hong Kong’s district councils also depicted an incredible win for pro-democracy candidates. Three million voters casted their ballots and elected 389 pro-democracy candidates to the total 452 elected seats (Bradsher, Ramzy and May 2019). Pro-Beijing candidates were only able to get 30 seats, a dramatic drop from the previously held 300 (Bradsher, Ramzy and May 2019). This incredible event was celebrated by Hongkongers who championed democratic ideals in the midst of protests throughout the city. The representation of pro-democracy candidates in the district council depicts the
prevalence of the Hongkonger identity in politics and the growing representation of the subnational identity’s political desires.

While the resistance to incorporation strategies and pro-democratic wins in Hong Kong’s government has provided significant insight into the rise of the Hongkonger identity, trends in the self-identification of Hong Kong people strengthen this story. The University of Hong Kong Public Opinion Program (HKU POP) has tracked the self-identification of Hong Kong people since 1997. The survey asks individuals whether they identify as Hongkonger, English, Chinese in Hong Kong, and Hongkonger in China (Public Opinion Progamme, The University of Hong Kong 2019). The survey tracks the responses of the surveyed population to understand how individuals in Hong Kong self-identify and how these trends have changed since 1997. In 2019, the survey recorded a historic high of individuals self-identifying as Hongkonger at 52.9 percent and with only 10.8 percent of the population identifying as Chinese (Public Opinion Progamme, The University of Hong Kong 2019). While the trends of both the Hongkonger and Chinese identities have fluctuated over the years, there has been a noticeable increase of self-identification as Hongkonger since 2008.
Figure 2: Self-identification of individuals in Hong Kong. Source: Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong (https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/english/popexpress/ethnic/identity/poll/datalines.html) Note: This figure has excluded responses as "mixed identity", "other", and "don’t know".

The figure 2 depicts the trends of self-identification in Hong Kong since 1997. The graph (figure 2) looks specifically at the trends of the ‘Hongkonger’, ‘Hongkonger in China’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Chinese in Hong Kong’ identities. Looking specifically at the trends of the Chinese and Hongkonger identities, it is clear that they have fluctuated significantly since 1997. However, in 2008, the Chinese identity reached a record high of 38.6 percent of the sampled population self-identifying as Chinese over the other options. Moreover, at this date, the Hongkonger identity reached its lowest point at 18.1 percent. However, after 2008, the Hongkonger and Chinese identities began to trend in opposite directions, the Chinese identity experiencing a steady decline while the Hongkonger identity grew dramatically. Yew and Kwong attribute the height of
the Chinese identity in 2008 to the Beijing Olympics and a strong sense of nationalism at the time (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1088). However, after 2008, self-identification as Chinese declined until reaching its lowest point in 2019 at 10.8 percent. Contrarily, the increase of the Hongkonger identity after the 2008 Beijing Olympics fluctuated greatly but reached its highest point of 52.9 percent in 2019. Currently, the Hongkonger identity has the highest levels of self-identification within the Hong Kong population. While the Hongkonger identity was also the most prominent identity in 1997 directly after the handover, it had only reached 34.9 percent. The 18 percent increase since 1997 depicts a clear rise of the Hongkonger identity since its transition back to Chinese sovereignty.

What is also noticeable in this graph is the trends of the ‘Hongkonger in China’ and ‘Chinese in Hong Kong’ identities. Since 2010, the Hongkonger in China category has seen higher levels of self-identification than the Chinese identity. However, the Hongkonger in China identity has primarily seen lower numbers than the Hongkonger identity alone. This suggests that the view of seeing oneself as purely Hongkonger, rather than a Hongkonger living within the greater nation of China is more popular. In addition, the Chinese in Hong Kong identity has almost consistently been recorded as the identity with the lowest numbers. This could suggest that individuals who view themselves as Chinese are more likely to not identify as Chinese in Hong Kong because of their views that Hong Kong is a part of China.

The trends from the data collected by the University of Hong Kong tell a clear story of the rise of the Hongkonger identity in recent years. Even despite the
fluctuations of the Hongkonger identity since 1997, it has seen a steady increase since 2008 and reached a record high during the midst of the 2019 pro-democracy movement. One reason for 2008 marking a turning point is Beijing’s hosting of the Olympics. During the 2008 Olympics, Hong Kong experienced a greater sense of national pride as a result of China’s athletic success and from hosting the event (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1089). In addition, after the Olympics ended, the CCP ensured that Chinese medalists visited and performed in Hong Kong (Yew and Kwong 2014, 1089). This depicts another way in which the central government attempted to establish a stronger nationalist identity based on this sense of pride.

While Chinese nationalism reached a peak during this year, data from the polls depict that the strength of the Chinese identity in Hong Kong was not sustainable. The trends of self-identification in Hong Kong bolster the evidence of growing peripheral nationalism as a result of the central government’s incorporation strategies.
Figure 3 looks specifically at the trend of self-identification as Hongkonger by age group. Since 1997, individuals in the 18-29 age group have identified more strongly with the Hongkonger identity than their counterparts in the 30+ age group. Moreover, looking solely at the trend of the 18-29 age group, self-identification as Hongkonger has steadily risen. In 2019, 92.5 percent of individuals within the 18-29 age group identified solely as Hongkonger. This expresses the strong support of the subnational identity within the younger generation and gives greater context to the presence of student protest leaders. In addition, while the 30+ age group has seen lower levels of self-identification as Hongkonger, it has also experienced an increase since 1997. In 2019, the 30+ age
group’s self-identification as Hongkonger reached its highest point at 76.4 percent. This represents a majority of the older Hong Kong population viewing themselves as Hongkonger rather than other identities present in the city. The rise of the Hongkonger identity in both the 18-29 and 30+ age groups in Hong Kong depicts the strengthening of the subnational identity but also provides further context to the demographic breakdown of the Hongkonger identity’s popularity.

In addition to analyzing data on the self-identification of individuals in Hong Kong, I also look at Hong Kong people’s views of the level of democracy and freedom in the SAR. I argue that looking at the appraisal levels of democracy and freedom in Hong Kong also explains the rise of the Hongkonger identity. Since the Hongkonger identity is rooted in the support of democratic ideals and the protection of Hong Kong’s freedoms, comparing the trends of the Hongkonger identity with views on these two ideas provides interesting contextual information on what has caused the Hongkonger identity to grow in recent years.

In the University of Hong Kong’s surveys on the appraisal levels of democracy and freedom in Hong Kong, they asked individuals to rank Hong Kong’s levels of both democracy and freedom. In the survey on the appraisal levels of the degree of democracy in Hong Kong, they asked “If you were to use 0-10 to evaluate whether Hong Kong is a democratic society, with 10 indicating absolutely democratic, 0 indicating absolutely not democratic, 5 indicating half-half, how would you rate Hong Kong?” (Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong 2019). Moreover, in their survey on the levels of freedom in Hong Kong they asked a similar question: “If you were to use 0-10 to evaluate whether
Hong Kong is a free society, with 10 indicating absolutely free, 0 indicating absolutely not free, 5 indicating half-half, how would you rate Hong Kong?” (Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong 2019). The responses to these two questions have been collected since 1997. While the responses to both of these questions have fluctuated over the years, the perceived level of democracy and freedom in Hong Kong has seen a significant decline since 2018. Both of these graphs depict a spike in the level of freedom and democracy in 2018 however immediately afterwards, see a sharp decline.

![Appraisal of Degree of Democracy in Hong Kong](https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/english/popexpress/socind/socq45/poll/databables.html)

**Figure 4: Appraisal of Democracy in Hong Kong. Source: Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong**

Note: Researchers asked respondents the question “If you were to use 0-10 to evaluate whether Hong Kong is a democratic society, with 10 indicating absolutely democratic, 0 indicating absolutely not democratic, 5 indicating half-half, how would you rate Hong Kong?”

In figure 4, depicting Hong Kong people’s perception of the level of democracy in Hong Kong, October 2018 marked the lowest degree at 5.1. This
depicts that many Hong Kong people view the city as being “half-half” in terms of democracy. This is contrasted with the highest point during 1997 at 6.7. The decline in Hong Kong people’s view of the level of democracy since 1997 may be attributed to the CCP’s governance of Hong Kong since the handover and the incorporation strategies that attempt to erode Hong Kong’s level of autonomy. Moreover, Hong Kong people’s demand for greater levels of democracy has been evidenced in recent protests and may be a response to the perceived decrease of democracy in the SAR.

Data from figure 5 on the degree of freedom in Hong Kong followed a similar trend to that of the degree of democracy. However, the overall numbers of the perceived degree of freedom in Hong Kong is higher than those in the survey on democracy (figure 4). In 1997, surveyed individuals ranked the degree of
freedom in Hong Kong at 7.6—a relatively high rating given that 10 marks Hong Kong being a “free society.” However, in the most recent survey, individuals stated that the degree of freedom in Hong Kong was 6.6. This decline in the perceived levels of freedom in Hong Kong also may be attributed to implementation of controlling policies by the central government.

The decline of the perceived degree of both freedom and democracy in Hong Kong depicts that Hong Kong citizens may increasingly view their rights as being eroded. Moreover, when considering the decline of democracy and freedom in Hong Kong with the rise of self-identification as Hongkonger, this provides greater evidence to the resistance to incorporation strategies. As a result of the declining political freedoms experienced in Hong Kong, more individuals have identified as Hongkonger expressing the strong sentiment to protect their rights. In addition, the decline of perceived democracy and freedom in Hong Kong may have also contributed to the emergence of the 2019 pro-democracy movement. This movement has been understood as a strong expression of the Hongkonger identity and the fight to protect the city’s autonomy.

Considering the arguments of rising peripheral nationalism in response to Beijing’s incorporation strategies paired with data that shows the growth of the Hongkonger identity, it is clear that the subnational identity has become more important than ever in the SAR. While the CCP has attempted to gain greater control over Hong Kong’s domestic affairs and oppress the prevalence of the Hongkonger identity, their tactics have in fact caused the opposite reaction to occur. Instead, Hongkongers have mobilized against the oppressive tactics by the
CCP and, in fact, strengthened the distinct subnational identity. In the next section, I apply the evidence of a growing Hongkonger identity to the 2019 protests to argue that identity is at the root of the movement. Moreover, I argue that an identity-focused approach better explains the emergence of the protest in comparison to an economic explanation.

*Identity as the Main Factor Behind the 2019-2020 Protests*

While the 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong began with the proposal of the Extradition Bill, they quickly escalated to a violent demonstration of the Hong Kong people’s disapproval of the CCP and the seeking of recognition as distinct from the rest of China. While the protests that occurred directly after the proposal of the bill expressed a mass anger with what was seen as a threat to Hong Kong’s autonomy, the events that occurred even after the bill’s withdrawal depicts a much deeper issue between the Mainland and the SAR. The continuation of protests even after the Extradition Bill was fully withdrawn depicts that the 2019 protests were a direct expression of the Hongkonger identity and a response to the CCP’s oppressive policies. The protests have opened up questions as to what it means to be a Hongkonger and how policies such as the Extradition Bill directly threaten their distinct identity. The proposal of the Extradition Bill is another example of Beijing’s incorporation strategies which attempt to further assimilate Hong Kong into the rest of China. However, as seen in previous attempts of incorporation, this has only led Hong Kong to experience even stronger peripheral nationalism and prolonged the demonstrations.
Moreover, the 2019 protests have been distinct from previous events because of the clear resistance to Chinese ideals and projection of a local identity. During the protests, individuals took aim at symbols of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to showcase the movement’s roots in seeking recognition as a separate identity with separate political expectations. When protestors stormed the Legco offices on July 1st, black spray paint was used to deface symbols of the PRC (McLaughlin, Hong Kong’s Protests Have Cemented Its Identity 2019). Moreover, protestors hung the colonial-era Hong Kong flag over the Legco president’s desk expressing the city’s separate history and identity from the rest of China (Chan 2019). These symbolic acts depicted Hongkongers’ resistance to the central government’s attempts to erode the SAR’s autonomy. In addition, a group of protestors were arrested for throwing the PRC’s flag into the Hong Kong harbor (McLaughlin, Hong Kong’s Protests Have Cemented Its Identity 2019). This, again, is a direct symbol of Hongkongers’ rejection of the nationalist Chinese identity and the rise of a distinct local identity.

During the protests, rhetoric by protestors also played a significant role in pronouncing the movement as one based in identity. Exclamations such as “we are not Chinese” were heard during many events of the 2019 protests and presented the movement as rooted in identity clashes between Hong Kong and Mainland China (McLaughlin, Hong Kong’s Protests Have Cemented Its Identity 2019). A student who participated in the protests at the Hong Kong airport stated “I am a Hong Konger, not Chinese” (Higgins 2019). The sentiment expressed during protests depicted a strong passion to demonstrate the strength of the
Hongkonger identity and the sense of duty to protect the SAR’s rights. Protestors who denounced their identity as Chinese and proudly stated that they were a Hongkonger showcased a sense of unity within the Hong Kong people to ensure their subnational identity was heard.

After the July 21st incident of the Yuen Long thugs beating protestors in a subway station, the slogan “Retake Hong Kong, the Revolution of Our Times” became widely heard at protests throughout the rest of 2019 (Y. Lee 2019). The slogan highlights the actions of Hongkongers to protect the core rights and freedoms within the city. Moreover, the word used for “retake” in Chinese is directly translated to “return to the light” (Higgins 2019). This suggests that the movement is focused on preserving the Hongkonger identity and the political rights associated with it. Even more, the slogan, and its translation, points to the fear that the central government is taking away the sense of “light” and freedoms that Hongkongers see as a core part of who they are. The resistance to incorporation strategies by the CCP depict that the Hongkongers’ response is not dissimilar from protests that occurred prior to 2019. The CCP’s attempt to increase its control over Hong Kong has once again been met with a rejection of nationalism and caused the Hongkonger identity to become even more pronounced.

In addition to the use of symbols and slogans during the protests, the five demands made by protestors further explain the roots of the movement being based in the recognition of the Hongkongers’ core ideals. Protestors used the slogan “five demands, not one less” to state that all of the movement’s demands
must be met or the protests would continue on (Shek 2020). The five demands included “full withdrawal of the extradition bill”, “retracting the classification of protesters as ‘rioters’”, “amnesty for arrested protesters”, “an independent commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality”, and “dual universal suffrage, meaning for both the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive” (Shek 2020). These demands point to the protestors’ attempts to protect the rights of Hong Kong. While the demands may be perceived to focus directly on legal protection of the actions that occurred during the protests, they all relate back to protecting the political freedoms that Hongkongers view is a part of their identity. Moreover, these political freedoms were promised to Hongkongers in the Joint Declaration and Basic Law. Thus, by incriminating protestors and not implementing universal suffrage, the government is retracting the rights provided to citizens in the Joint Declaration and Basic Law. By demanding that protestors have amnesty and that an investigation into police brutality occurs, the Hong Kong people are not only protecting the livelihood of protestors, but upholding their right to demonstrate in the first place. Moreover, the demand of universal suffrage has been a theme in many historical protests, particularly in the 2014 Umbrella Movement. The strong desire for full-fledged democracy has played a massive role in the Hongkonger identity. Hongkongers’ continuous demand for universal suffrage depicts the strengthening of the city’s peripheral nationalism and the refusal of Hongkongers to back down.

Although the protests began as a response to the Extradition Bill, the longevity and size of the protests portrays that the movement was much more than
a response to a specific policy. Rather, as seen in symbols, such as defacing the Chinese flag and government buildings, and statements that proclaimed “we are not Chinese”, the 2019-2020 protests were a display of the Hongkongers’ fight against oppressive policies by the CCP. As a result, while other factors contributed to the emergence of the protests, identity was the main focus of the movement and the reason behind its incredible support. Beyond the disapproval of specific Beijing-backed policies, the movement showcased the rise of the Hongkonger identity and its ability to mobilize individuals to resist attempts to threaten the city’s autonomy.

While I argue that identity is the main factor behind the emergence of the 2019-2020 protests, some attribute the movement to economic factors. Despite Hong Kong’s economic success as a city, a large proportion of the population faces immense wealth inequality and significant challenges to find affordable housing. The sense of frustration with Hong Kong’s inequality is particularly felt by the younger generations who are most affected by the economic challenges in the city. Some argue that as a result of economic struggles, there is a significant sense of hopelessness which motivates individuals to protest. During the 2019 protests, it is estimated that approximately 40 percent of the protesters were students (D. S. Chan 2020). The large population of the younger generation participating in the protests depicts that their economic grievances may have acted as a large motivator in mobilizing. Young people feel as though it is almost impossible to earn a good living in Hong Kong and feel very frustrated with the high cost of housing in the city (Wong and Liu 2019). For the past nine years,
Hong Kong has been the least affordable property market in the world (Wong and Liu 2019). The high prices of property and the immense wealth inequality have caused the younger generations to be especially impacted by the economic circumstances. Some argue that because of these economic grievances, young protestors are driven to mobilize out of anger with their situation. The frustration with wealth inequality and the lack of government response to subside these issues has incited a sense of resentment within the population and contributed to the desire to protest (Wong and Liu 2019).

Although it is true that issues such as affordability, wealth inequality, and social mobility in Hong Kong have attributed to the resentment of Hongkongers towards the government, identifying the emergence of the 2019 protests as a result of economic grievances is too narrow of an approach. The economic explanation is insufficient in explaining the historical context to the emergence of protests in Hong Kong. While it does give insight into why individuals feel resentful and inclined to protest, an economic explanation alone does not consider how China’s encroachment on the city’s autonomy has led to a rise in local identity. Moreover, while economic grievances are a part of the issue, what is even more important in the protests is the recognition of Hongkongers as separate from the rest of China. An economic explanation would ignore the evidence of an identity-based issue depicted through the symbols, slogans, and demands of the 2019 movement. Thus, I argue that taking an identity approach allows for a much more comprehensive understanding of why the protests emerged. Using solely an economic approach understates the size of the issue and overlooks the signs that
the protests emerged as a result of seeking recognition for Hongkongers’ political desires and fighting against oppressive policies.

*Applying the Revised Political Process Model to Hong Kong*

Now that I have depicted the rise of the Hongkonger identity and its role in the emergence of the 2019-2020 protests, I will apply the revised political process model to Hong Kong. By applying the revised model to the case of Hong Kong, we can see how identity has a crucial role in mobilizing individuals to protest. This provides evidence to my argument that identity should be included within McAdam’s model to ensure that it can be applied to instances of conflict that arise from identity.

The first factor of McAdam’s model is organizational readiness. To summarize this factor, it is the presence of strong leaders, communication, and members. Organizational readiness in the 2019 protests is depicted in the student leadership of the protests, the use of social media as a means of communicating between challengers, and a large mass base of Hongkongers. First looking at the presence of leaders within the movement, the protests were largely organized by student activists who had experience in protesting during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Nathan Law are three of the leaders of the pro-democracy group “Demosisto” that have made a presence during the recent protests (Chappell 2019). While the protests have lacked a singular leader leading the movement, these student protestors have been very vocal about the movement’s strive to protect Hong Kong’s freedoms. In addition, the student leaders played a significant role in the 2014 Umbrella Movement with Wong and
Law even being sentenced to jail in 2017 because of their leadership in organizing the protests. Protestors in the 2019 movement see these student leaders not only as individuals leading the organization of the protests but also as symbols of the younger generation of activists fighting to uphold Hongkongers’ core values.

In addition, the Civil Human Rights Front—a coalition of over 50 pro-democracy groups including political parties—has also played a significant role in sustaining the protests (McLaughlin, Why These Hong Kong Protests Are Different 2019). The coalition of groups depicts that while there is the lack of an individual symbolic leader, the protests have risen from a group effort of organizing the movement. In this sense, the leadership of the 2019 protests differs from the 2014 Umbrella Movement where leadership was attributed to a small handful of people. However, even despite the broader leadership of the 2019 movement, the presence of an organized group leading the protests is still prevalent through its longevity and success.

In addition to the presence of student-activist leaders, the organizational factor of the protests can also be observed in the means of communication between protestors. One of the most innovative ways in which protestors communicated with one another is the use of hand signals (McLaughlin, Why These Hong Kong Protests Are Different 2019). These hand signals would signify the need for gloves and inhalers after police would fire pepper spray at demonstrators (McLaughlin, Why These Hong Kong Protests Are Different 2019).
Beyond the use of hand signals, the 2019 protests also saw an increased use of social media to not only communicate between protestors but also share images of police brutality and spread awareness of the movement (Shao 2019). The image of a woman wearing an eye patch as a result of police brutality was spread via social media channels and acted as a symbol in mobilizing individuals to protest against the violence (Shao 2019). The use of social media also allowed individuals to share their opinions of the protests and explain the protest plans anonymously (Shao 2019). Through Facebook groups and messaging through the application Telegram, protestors were able to quickly spread information about the events and provide information about upcoming protest plans (Shao 2019). In Hong Kong, first time downloads of the secure messaging app Telegram increased 323 percent from July 2018 to July 2019 (Shao 2019). The popular use of social media and specifically encrypted messaging apps allowed challengers to easily mobilize and spread information on the protests.

Lastly, the final factor of the organizational readiness factor is a mass base of supporters of the movement. It is evident from the size and the timeline of the protests that the 2019 protests experienced a surge of protestors participating in the movement. At the peak of the protests, over two million protestors marched against the proposed bill (Duhalde and Huang 2019). Of the seven million residents in Hong Kong, the protest turn-out of over two million depicted a massive base in the city and participants from all socio-economic groups. This also alludes to the use of the Hongkonger identity in unifying people to organize in protest. The massive support of individuals in fighting for the representation of
the Hongkonger identity against oppressive Beijing policies depicted the strength of the local identity and the growing awareness of the issue. The factors McAdam includes within the organizational readiness of the political process model are all present in the 2019 pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. While the movement lacked a singular leader organizing the protests, protesters turned to innovative means of organizing events.

The next factor that McAdam includes within his political process model is the presence of political opportunities. This states that a movement has some kind of shift in the political environment which allows for insurgents to mobilize. A change in the political environment provides an opening where insurgents perceive the political system as vulnerable. I argue that in 2019, the proposal of the Extradition Bill acted as a shift in the political environment which challenged the system’s legitimacy. As a result of the mass disapproval of the bill, protestors saw the opportunity to act against it as a means of mobilizing. Carrie Lam’s eventual withdrawal of the bill also depicts how insurgents utilized the political opening to resist against the government’s actions and make changes in the system. This political opening was based on the growing Hongkonger identity and the rise of negative sentiment towards the governance of the city. The growing resentment towards previous policies which threatened to erode Hong Kong’s autonomy peaked during the 2019 protests and was mobilized in the emergence of the movement.

The last factor that McAdam includes in the political process model, and the factor that I argue must be revised to consider identity is the process of
cognitive liberation. The prevalence of an insurgent consciousness, that derives from the process of cognitive liberation, depicts the cognitive shift from feeling a sense of discontent with the political system to actively mobilizing to change one’s situation. Moreover, McAdam states that cognitive liberation is more likely to occur when there is the existence of strong interpersonal networks between individuals of the mass base. I argue that identity plays a significant role in establishing the strong interpersonal networks between insurgents. Without a shared sense of identity, individuals may feel less connected with the ideals of the movement and not feel motivated to mobilize in protest. In addition, analyzing how identity plays a role in developing a sense of insurgent consciousness depicts how challengers mobilize as a result of sharing similar demands and a cultural background.

In Hong Kong, it is clear that the rise of the Hongkonger identity has led more individuals to feel passionately in mobilizing against the oppressive policies of the CCP. The huge population of 18-29 year olds in Hong Kong who identify as Hongkonger acted as the foundation of the interpersonal networks that established a sense of unity in mobilizing against the proposed Extradition Bill. In addition, by observing the strong presence of the Hongkonger identity in the city, an individual who experienced discontent with the government may feel a greater sense of belonging as a result of being a member of the subnational identity and thus, experience the process of cognitive liberation shifting their mindset to one of mobilizing. The rise of the Hongkonger identity strengthened the ties between insurgents and acted as the basis of cognitive liberation leading to the movement’s
emergence. Seen through the rhetoric and symbols of the 2019 protests, the Hongkonger identity acted as a large factor in recruiting individuals to the movement and motivating individuals to participate in the protests. By looking at the evidence from the protests, it is clear that the Hongkonger identity strengthened the interpersonal network between protestors and led to the mass process of cognitive liberation leading to the movement’s emergence. The political process model without the consideration of identity, and thus, lacking any discussion of peripheral nationalism, would fail to fully explain how the 2019 protests reached the extent to which they did. Thus, the revised political process model that I propose, which includes the consideration of identity, uses a more comprehensive framework to analyze how the movement emerged and its roots in peripheral nationalism.

While the original political process model can explain many aspects of the emergence of the 2019 pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, the inclusion of identity within the theory causes it to be insufficient in describing the root cause of the protests. Evidence of the rise of the sense of peripheral nationalism in the city depicts how Hongkongers felt a greater sense of connectedness with the movement and motivated to protest against the incorporation strategies of the central government. The consideration of identity within the revised political process model is key to understanding why the 2019 Hong Kong protests occurred and, more specifically, how the cognitive liberation process was experienced by insurgents in the city.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis looks at the rise of the subnational Hongkonger identity and its connection to the emergence of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. Through evidence of the strengthening trend of the subnational identity, I argue that identity played the largest role in mobilizing the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Moreover, by applying the revised political process model to Hong Kong’s protests, this thesis analyzes how identity is not only at the root of the protests but must be considered within existing social movement theories. The revised theory proposed is different from the prevailing literature on social movements because of the importance it places on identity as a mobilizing factor. The inclusion of identity theory into the existing political process model ensures that the revised model is applicable to understanding Hong Kong’s case. Moreover, by including some aspects of identity theory within the political process model, the revised model is able to explain protest emergence in conflicts between peripheral regions and central governments. Thus, revising the existing model makes it not only applicable to Hong Kong’s protests, but also other movements that derive from identity clashes.

Before connecting the rise of the Hongkonger identity to the emergence of Hong Kong’s 2019-2020 protests, I explain how this subnational identity has been developed over the city’s history. Through Hong Kong’s tumultuous history of changes in sovereignty from Imperial China to Great Britain, and back to the People’s Republic of China, the Hongkonger identity has developed as a result of its unique political experience. The separation of Hong Kong from the rest of
China during its period as a British colony led to significant political, economic, and cultural differences between the two bodies. While Mainland China experienced a dramatic transformation to state socialism during the rule of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, Hong Kong experienced its own transformation of becoming a capitalist hub with Westernized political and legal institutions. The stark differences in the development of Hong Kong and Mainland China during Hong Kong’s period as a colony established deep rooted distinctions between the two populations. Hong Kong people began to identify with democratic political ideals and embraced the cultural differences such as language which define the city. Rather than identifying with either British or nationalist Chinese identities, Hong Kong lacked a sense of connection with either sovereign and developed its unique local identity (Ma and Fung 2007, 173). The colonization of Hong Kong led to a separation between the region and the rest of China which greatly impacted the development of its subnational identity.

Moreover, Hong Kong’s adoption of capitalist policies and democratic political ideals led Hongkongers to feel a sense of elitism over their Mainland counterparts (N. Ma 2015, 41). This sense of elitism developed from the perceived sophistication of Hong Kong’s political and economic institutions in contrast to the poverty and authoritarian rule that resulted from the Maoist era in Mainland China. The very distinct paths that Hong Kong and Mainland China experienced during this period caused many Hongkongers to develop a strong urge to protect their freedoms and way of life (N. Ma 2015, 41). The desire to
protect Hong Kong’s freedoms is still seen today and became more present than ever in the 2019-2020 protests.

Another factor that played a significant role in the historical development of the Hongkonger identity was the enactment of “one country two systems.” Prior to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong back to Chinese sovereignty, the “one country two systems” policy was established to ensure that Hong Kong would maintain its political, economic, and legal institutions after reunification. This would also ensure that Hong Kong would have a high degree of autonomy and continue the use of the city’s Basic Law. While this policy promised that Hong Kong would stay relatively separate from the rest of China, it has recently been a large source of contention. As China has implemented more centralized policies to tighten its grip over the SAR, many Hong Kong people fear that “one country two systems” is not being upheld. Rather, they view the CCP’s Hong Kong policies to be infringing upon their autonomy. The freedoms that Hong Kong historically experienced prior to 1997 have been increasingly encroached upon and caused Hongkongers to fear that their way of life is being directly attacked. Moreover, the failure to uphold the “one country two systems” policy has made many Hongkongers believe that their distinct political, economic, and cultural differences are being neither respected nor represented.

In Hong Kong’s more recent history, Hongkongers have fought to be represented as a distinct identity with separate political expectations. Fears that the central government is eroding their sense of autonomy has been expressed in the city’s social movements. 2014 and 2019-2020 marked two of the most
significant movements in Hong Kong’s history. While the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019-2020 pro-democracy movement were incited by different political incidents, both depicted Hongkongers’ strong desire to be recognized as distinct from the rest of China. Moreover, both movements defined universal suffrage as one of the demands of the movements. The desire for universal suffrage and democratic processes depict the distinct political expectations in Hong Kong which have developed through its unique history. The demand for democracy in Hong Kong points to more than just tensions between the central and peripheral governments. Rather, the political activism depicted in the city’s protest history portrays the expression of the distinct Hongkonger identity and its recent strengthening.

While the Hongkonger identity has become more prominent throughout its history, evidence shows that self-identification with the subnational identity has reached new heights in recent years. Public opinion polls portrayed that more than half of the Hong Kong population identifies solely with the Hongkonger identity in 2019 (Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong 2019). Moreover, in 2019, over 90 percent of individuals in the 18-29 age group identified with the Hongkonger identity (Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong 2019). This portrays that the Hongkonger identity has strengthened in recent years and depicted a further rift between the nationalist Chinese and subnational Hongkonger identities. While the CCP has attempted to spread nationalist ideals in Hong Kong through education policies and soft power tactics, such as unifying around the Chinese Olympic team, Hong Kong has seen
an even greater increase in identification with the local identity (Yew and Kwong 2014) (Fong 2017). It is clear that the Hongkonger identity has become more prominent than ever and been a focal point in the city’s social movements.

The 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests further portrayed the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity and its role in mobilizing protest. While the protests began in response to the Extradition Bill, they have persisted to a great extent even after the bill was formally revoked. Since the first protests in response to the bill in March 2019 to the most recent demonstrations on May 1, 2020, the movement has now persisted for over a year. The continuation of the movement after the bill was revoked by Chief Executive Carrie Lam depicts that the protests are rooted in much deeper issues. Moreover, the incredible longevity of the movement displays that protestors are unwilling to back down.

The symbols and rhetoric used by protestors portray that the movement is not just about the Extradition Bill but is about protecting their rights and seeking recognition as a distinct subnational identity. During demonstrations, protestors stated “I am a Hong Konger, not Chinese” portraying the disassociation with nationalist sentiment (Higgins 2019). Moreover, other protestors were arrested for throwing the PRC’s flag into the Hong Kong harbor during the events (McLaughlin, Hong Kong’s Protests Have Cemented Its Identity 2019). This symbol of resistance against the CCP provides evidence to the identity-rooted issues of the movement. While the symbols of the movement allude to a rejection of the CCP and nationalist ideas, what is more crucial is the fight to protect the Hongkonger identity and its associated freedoms. The movement is not solely
about rejecting the CCP’s policies but rather, a display of the subnational
identity’s strength and its fight against oppression. The 2019-2020 protests
portray Hongkongers’ desire to be recognized as a distinct identity and their
strong urge to protect the city’s freedoms.

In addition to portraying the rise of the Hongkonger identity and its
connection to the 2019-2020 movement, this thesis provides a revised political
process model that can better explain the emergence of movements such as in
Hong Kong. The revised theory proposed combines Doug McAdam’s political
process model with aspects of identity theory. I argue that this integrated theory
better explains how mass bases grow as a result of a shared identity which then
leads to movement emergence. I state that identity should be considered within
the cognitive liberation factor the political process model. By including a
discussion of identity within this factor, the model can better explain how
interpersonal networks between challengers form. A shared identity, and
specifically subnational identity, can act as a strong means of establishing a
connection within a mass base which can lead individuals to experience cognitive
liberation. By identifying with a specific group’s identity, one may feel more
inclined to experience a cognitive shift that would lead her to mobilize. As a
result, understanding identity as an important factor within the cognitive
liberation process strengthens the model and makes it able to explain the
emergence of movements that derive from identity-clashes.

I show that in applying the revised model to Hong Kong’s 2019-2020
protests, identity has played a significant role in leading individuals to mobilize.
Moreover, I argue that in looking at Hong Kong’s protests through the framework of the revised political process model, it becomes evident that identity must be considered in social movement theory. Without including identity within the existing political process model, the model is unable to fully explain how the Hong Kong protests emerged, and would similarly fail to explain other identity-based movements. Applying the revised political process model to the 2019-2020 protests shows that increased self-identification as Hongkonger was a large factor in establishing a mass base and causing the movement to emerge. The revised political process model and its application to Hong Kong further depicts the connection between the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity with the emergence of the recent protests.

_Future Research Agenda Generated from this Thesis_

This thesis looks specifically at the role of identity in the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. I argue that the rise of the subnational Hongkonger identity was the main factor behind the recent movement. Further, I create a revised political process model which includes aspects of identity theory and peripheral nationalism. This revised political process model is then applied to Hong Kong to depict that identity is at the root of the movement’s emergence in addition to arguing that more emphasis should be placed on identity in existing social movement theories.

While this thesis focuses on providing evidence of identity as a mobilizing factor in the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, further research should consider how the Hongkonger identity played a role in previous demonstrations. Moreover,
further research may be conducted on how the strengthening of the Hongkonger identity has affected other aspects of Hong Kong society. Considering how Hong Kong’s peripheral nationalism has impacted its political, cultural, and economic institutions should also be discussed in future political science research. Looking at the significant impact in which identity has played in mobilizing protest, I postulate that further research may find that identity has similarly large impacts on other aspects of civil society.

Additionally, the revised political process model that I propose may be applied to other movements that derive from identity-based issues. Including identity within the political process model makes the theory more applicable to understanding how movements emerge as a result of differences of identity between the center and periphery. Further research should apply the revised model to similar cases such as in Catalonia, Spain to understand how protests have similarly emerged from differences in center and periphery identities. In addition, further research may analyze more closely how identity helps establish the interpersonal networks that help cognitive liberation occur. By researching how identity acts as a means of developing interpersonal networks between challengers, we can better understand the specific processes that lead to the establishment of a large mass base and thus, social movements.
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