Top-down Patriotism and Bottom-up Nationalization in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper maps the discursive struggles between different versions of nationalization in post 1997 Hong Kong. Once a de-nationalized colony, Hong Kong has been caught up in the cross road where previous de-sinicized discourses of localism, internationalism and cosmopolitanism are re-negotiating with the new discourses of nationalism and patriotism. Visible top-down call for patriotism has been met with equally visible public resistance, while the less visible bottom-up nationalization processes have been very effective in bringing the imagination of the nation closer to the general public. The paper explores Hong Kong’s bottom-up nationalization in terms of four aspects of everyday experience: national spatiality, social diversity, ethnic connections and the national market. By thick ethnographic description, the paper traces the less visible but no less powerful nationalization processes in everyday encounters, in which the nation takes shape through the redrawning of psychological boundaries between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese people in daily life.
Top-down Patriotism and Bottom-up Nationalization in Hong Kong

This paper maps the struggles between different versions of nationalization in Hong Kong. Since 1997, the dysfunctional Hong Kong SAR government has triggered massive anti-government demonstrations and public criticism, while the Central Chinese Government has stepped up its top-down nationalization programs in Hong Kong. Once a de-nationalized colony, Hong Kong has been caught up in the cross road where previous de-sinicized discourses of localism, internationalism and cosmopolitism are re-negotiating with the new discourses of nationalism and patriotism. While these highly visible and politicized discourses are competing for cultural and moral leadership, another set of bottom-up discourses on nationalism is invisibly but powerfully re-shaping national imaginations among Hong Kong people. Ironically, visible top-down call for patriotism has been met with equally visible public resistance, while the less visible bottom-up nationalization processes have been very effective in bringing the imagination of the nation closer to the general public. I will categorize these competing discursive processes, and focus more on the micro-politics of how Hong Kong people acquire a national imagination while traveling, doing business, and meeting friends in mainland China. By thick ethnographic description, I will trace the less visible but no less powerful nationalization processes in everyday encounters, in which the nation takes shape through the redrawing of psychological boundaries between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese people in daily life.

In the decades after World War II, Hong Kong gradually developed a strong local identity
that was distinctly different from that of mainland China. In order to maintain political and economic stability, both the colonial and the Chinese governments refrained from attempting to mobilize strong nationalistic sentiments in the territory (Luk 1995; Sinn 1995), and it was the media that took up the role of creating a collective Hong Kong community, one formulated in cultural rather than political terms. This mediated imagined community was sustained by the great difference in ways of life in the colony as opposed to the mainland in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. These differences can be described within the two broad categories of state and market. Hong Kong had a weak state and strong market, exhibiting a highly consumerist lifestyle, while lives on the mainland were marked by a highly visible state and a deficient market. Hong Kong politics were absorbed into colonial “managerialism” (King 1975; Law 1998) while mainland politics were turned into frequent “revolutions” and destructive campaigns. In Hong Kong, colonial politics were not very conspicuous because of the implementation of elaborate sets of administrative procedures. In the Mainland, the state was conspicuously visible because of frequent campaigns to consolidate the power of the ruling Communist Party.

Since the 1990s, especially after 1997, the differences between Hong Kong and mainland China have been less distinctive. This change has been brought about through various processes: the initiatives of the Hong Kong government to launch various projects to promote nationalism, the weakening of the Hong Kong economy, the strengthening of the mainland economy and thus the blurring of the China-Hong Kong economic differential, and most importantly, the more and more extensive linkages between Hong Kong and
mainland people in their everyday lives. These latest developments converge on the question of re-sinicization, which is one of the most significant changes in Hong Kong culture after 1997. Nationalization, as the political dimension of re-sinicization, is the focus of this paper. I will talk about both top-down and bottom-up processes of nationalization, with a bigger emphasis on the often-neglected aspects of nationalization in everyday life.

**Top-down Patriotism**

Ideas of the nation usually carry a top-down image of a state exercising power, claiming sovereignty, mobilizing common myths, building military arms, legislating rights and duties, energizing the economy, producing cultural consent, and consolidating national pride and political loyalty (e.g. Gellner 1997; McCrone 1998). These conspicuous political strategies were unfamiliar to Hong Kong people before, but after 1997, campaigns promoting national identity, such as political ceremonies, patriotic education, and rewriting of the historical canon, have been highly visible. The intensity of the debate on patriotism has reached a new height since the massive anti-government demonstration on July 1\(^{st}\), 2003, the 6\(^{th}\) anniversary of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty. On that day, more than 500,000 Hong Kong people took to the street to protest against the Hong Kong SAR government in general and the proposed imposition of a national security law in particular. The demonstration of people’s power sparked off a series of changes in Hong Kong politics, which include the demand for faster pace of democratization, the weakening of local governance, the stepping in of mainland rule,
Reacting to the growing local demand for universal suffrage in elections, the Chinese government has orchestrated waves of political debates aiming at installing patriotism as a civic duty and a basic requirement for all Hong Kong politicians interested in public services. Since populist Hong Kong public opinions demonstrate a weak nationalism, strong localism and aspiring internationalism, full democracy, as perceived by the central Chinese government, would lead to the institutionalization of de-nationalizing impulses; thus democratizing without nationalizing Hong Kong is considered not in the interest of the ruling Communist Party. By the end of 2003, opinion polls indicated that more than 70% of Hong Kong people demanded universal suffrage in the 2007 SAR Chief Executive and 2008 Legislative Council elections.2 Fearing Hong Kong politics might go out of control, the central government’s ideological apparatus was activated to inject into Hong Kong a strong version of nationalism, even to an extend of equating loving the Chinese nation with loving the Communist Party. The avalanche of political inhibition and interpellation had tempered the demand for universal suffrage to 60% as of April 2004.3 However, official top-down patriotism has stirred up intense debate and aroused strong reactions among Hong Kong pro-democracy groups. On April 26, 2004, the central government went one step further to release an official ban on universal suffrage in the 2007 and 2008 elections. Analyzing these political debates, two most prominent public discourses on nationalism are identified below. They are illustrative in the sense that they represent the rupture of the previously hegemonic discourse of Hong Kong’s de-nationalized localism and the war of positions to compete for a new hegemony.
Two Competing Discourses on Nationalism

In the colonial years, Hong Kong people were subscribing to a hybridized ideology of localism, capitalism, internationalism and cosmopolitanism. All four “isms” were propelled by a strong desire of de-nationalization, of separating from the rule of communist China. Local culture was strengthened by “othering” China. Hong Kong’s market-led economy was differentiated from China’s state-led economy. Hong Kong people identified themselves more as members of the international community then members of the Chinese nation. Hong Kong’s urban imagination was more of a westernized cosmopolitan than a Chinese city. These interlocking discourses were harmonized to become a hegemonic discursive system of what can be called “Hongkongism” in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, this de-nationalized discursive system has been terminally defied by the discourse of re-sinicization, as visualized in figure 1, column A. Hong Kong is re-narrated into the rising Chinese nation in historical, political, geographical, cultural and economical terms. The rising popularity of the term “Greater Pearl River Delta” in the media is indicative to the re-imagination of Hong Kong not as a distinctive colony, but an integral part of South China. Historical and cultural ties are re-discovered; economic integration re-constructed; geographic permeability re-mapped. These dimensions of integration are met with little resistance; in fact, they are welcome in the wake of the need for rejuvenating Hong Kong after the 1997 Asian economic crisis. The
most controversial of the re-sincization process has been on the political dimension. Although nationalism and patriotism are compatible with Hong Kong mainstream public opinion, Hong Kong’s version of patriotism is pragmatic, with thin emotionality, and even with cynicism. It involves accepting the construction and imagination of a big Chinese nation in historical and cultural terms. However, accepting the ruling Chinese Communist Party as the sole sovereign power of the Chinese nation is problematic to most Hong Kong people. The Chinese Communist Party had been a symbol of repression, especially since the 1989 Tiananman massacre. In the 1999s, accepting its sovereignty and legitimacy was a political taboo not to be publicly articulated even by pro-China politicians. But recently a full blown and multi-dimensional discourse of re-sinicization has been activated to re-nationalize Hong Kong. In early 2004, Chinese officials and Hong Kong pro-China spokesmen for the first time openly invited people to express patriotism by showing political loyalty to the ruling Communist Party. This call for political loyalty has been directed towards Hong Kong people in general and local politicians in particular. The ruling Communist Party is actively promoting state legitimacy using the discourses of the nation. The notion of “state” tends to be defined as the administrative apparatus that controls a national population, and monopolizes power within that population. The notion of “nation” is the imagined commonality and solidarity that a given nationally-bounded population feels. In this case, the state, monopolized by the Chinese Communist Party, legitimates itself by portraying itself as the sole representation of the Chinese nation.⁴
Patriotic interpellation has ruptured the previously hegemonic Hongkongism, forcing local elites and politicians to re-negotiate a new Sino-Hong Kong discursive balance. The rupture has prompted a revision of the existing political conceptualization of the Chinese polity. The most visible reaction to the call for patriotism is the discourse of “Hong Kong as pioneer” (column B in figure 1). In the early 1990s, there was a popular saying of “minzhu jugong” (resisting communists by democracy). However, in the face of the demand for re-sinicization, the discourses of “resisting communists” and “othering China” are political incorrect and have been quickly suppressed in public discussion. Instead of resisting and othering China, democrats and pro-democracy opinion leaders re-state Hong Kong as part of China but at the same time particularize Hong Kong as the pioneer of Chinese modernity. China is not the negative other but a positive partner. Hong Kong, as a modern city with strong traditions of the rule of law, free press, regulated market economy, and bureaucratic rationality, can serve as a window and exemplar for China’s colossal project of modernization, proposed the democrats. However, this discourse of liberalizing China is unstable, transitory, and reactionary. It cannot be institutionalized and enforced by the Hong Kong political structure, which is skillfully steered by the Chinese government. The democrats are high handedly marginalized by the mainland authority as radicals detrimental to the stability of the territory.
Bottom-up Nationalization

The above discursive struggles are visible and thus ideologically not very effective in concealing state power. The Chinese government is imposing patriotism rather than winning heart-felt consent. However, Hong Kong has been nationalized in a less visible but more powerful process of what can be termed “bottom-up nationalization”. In the past ten years, there has been a massive increase in the frequency of mainland Chinese traveling to Hong Kong and Hong Kong residents traveling to mainland China. In the followings, I will examine the impact of the opening up of the mainland-Hong Kong boundary on the popular imagination of the nation in Hong Kong—a process controlled not by any government but rather by the day-to-day life experiences of Hong Kong people. I derive my observations from an ethnographic project in which I regularly visited a factory and a disco bar in South China (my assistants and I worked as factory workers and waiters) in which interactions between Hongkongers and mainlanders were frequent. From these research sites we branched out to other social networks for interviews and participant observation. Through this ethnographic data, we can glimpse the reformation of the Chinese nation in the minds of mainlanders and Hong Kong Chinese working and consuming in South China. I will discuss Hong Kong’s bottom-up nationalization in terms of four aspects of everyday experience: national spatiality, social diversity, ethnic connections and the national market.
Expanding National Spatiality

The site of analysis of Hong Kong’s bottom-up nationalization is the liminal zone of national spatiality in South China, in particular, the ethnographic space of Hong Kong people working and traveling across the Hong Kong-China border. In this liminal zone, national spatiality is expanding and establishing itself to embrace the once de-nationalized Hong Kong colonial spatiality. Recent geographers (Brenner et al, 2003) have been problematizing state spatiality, which is considered to be a pre-given and relatively unchanging feature of modernity. The case of Hong Kong is theoretically interesting and significant, because we can trace the footsteps of Hong Kong people walking into this territory and examine national spatiality “in-the-making”. In other words, in this particular historical juncture, we can see the processes of how national spatiality is naturalized into a relatively settled imagination. Top down nationalization is the claiming of spatial sovereignty in the abstract, but bottom up nationalization is the packing of spatial experiences into narratives of a great Chinese nation-state. Following Lefebvre (2003), I will pay attention to the construction of national spatiality by looking into the physical territory and everyday routines within this territory.

In the 1990s, Hong Kong identity was bounded within a relatively small territory: essentially, the 400 square miles comprising Hong Kong. People worked and lived within that territory and considered China a foreign land; this was in fact a rather strange imagining, since most Hong Kong people have family ties with mainland Chinese, but made sense given the vast difference in scale between the two territories. Hong Kong has well-developed mass transportation and highway systems, and it is easy to travel from
one end of the territory to the other within an hour. However, as more and more Hong Kong people travel and work on the mainland, a vastly larger mental map of a national territory has been emerging.

Mr. Leung, a Hong Kong businessman who owns a 500-worker toy factory in Dongguan, the southern Chinese province adjacent to Hong Kong, has been visiting his factory twice a week since the mid-1990s. A typical trip begins at 7:30 am. Leung drives from home in Shatin and leaves his car in a car park near the Hong Kong-China border, takes a train ride to the border, goes through immigration and meets his driver at Shenzhen, the Chinese city immediately across the border from Hong Kong. The driver, driving at 140 kilometer per hour on the highway, takes Leung to Dongguan city, where he stops by a Hong-Kong-style teahouse and has his Hong-Kong-style breakfast. Leung begins his work at around 10:00 am. In China, he does a lot of travel in his private car to meet officials, business partners, and suppliers, and to make shipping arrangements. In the early stages of my fieldwork, I worked closely with Leung and met some of his friends, who are also Hong Kong businessmen and factory owners at Dongguan. All of them travel in a similar pattern, with a private driver serving them wherever they go. Leung had been an aircraft maintenance engineer in Hong Kong for more than ten years before he quit and started a small electronics company in the 1990s. Later his company was refashioned into a toy-manufacturing company. Now he still has a small office in Hong Kong, but most of the production and packaging are done in China. Although he still considers Hong Kong his home base, the spatial map of his daily activities has undergone drastic changes. Instead of a closed circuit of city travel when he was an engineer in
Hong Kong, now he has a travel network that sprawls over a vast territory in South China, expanding through his everyday routine his image of the nation.

Mr. Fung, a restaurant owner, is more direct in talking about a change in his spatial imagination. In the 1990s, Mr. Fung was the chief executive of a very famous chain restaurant in Hong Kong. He made a lot of money and emigrated to Canada with his family in 1997. In 2000, he left his family in Canada and started a new chain restaurant in Guangzhou. I met Mr. Fung at one of his restaurants in Guangzhou in spring 2003. While showing me around his restaurant, he could name many of his customers, who were mostly Hong Kong professionals and executives working in China. During the interview, his wife called from Canada and he cheerfully talked about what he was doing that day. He holds a Canadian passport, but he is a self-proclaimed Hongkonger. Despite this, however, when I asked about his “Hong Kong style tea-house,” he reacted quite strongly and corrected me by claiming that his restaurant is a modern Chinese restaurant with different styles of food – Peking style, Shanghai style, Thai, Vietnamese… “A Hong-Kong-style tea house is cheap!” he said. When I asked whether he was based in Guangzhou rather than in Hong Kong, since he did not reside in Hong Kong, he said: “You are really outdated. Working in Guangzhou is like working in Yuen Long [a town in northern Hong Kong]….It only takes two hours to go back to Hong Kong from Guangzhou. It makes no sense for me to talk about whether I am based in Guangzhou or not. Today I am here; tomorrow I will be in Hong Kong. Next year, I may be in Shanghai.”
Macro, a bar owner in his thirties, went to Shenzhen from Hong Kong in 2001. He co-owns a small Shenzhen bar and serves as waiter, disc jockey and sometimes bartender. He said, “I jump on a bus or mini-van whenever I feel like it. It only costs a few dollars for me to go from the west to the east tip of Shenzhen. I jump on a long-distance bus and within an hour I can be in a Guangzhou bar. I like hanging around in bars and talking to strangers, especially girls. Inland flights are cheap. I’ll take a few days off and go to the bars in Shanghai when I’m free. Yes, I’m single and free! China is much bigger than Hong Kong.” Outside the windows of buses and coaches, there are vast pieces of land, endless highways and winding roads, geographic features very different from compact, mountainous and densely populated Hong Kong. None of my Hong Kong informants ever explicitly articulated the official discourse of patriotism, and some are very critical towards the Chinese government. However, the spatial imagination of a big nation and a big country has become a taken-for-granted part of their everyday conversations and experiences. This is the new “national imagination” gradually emerging among many Hong Kong people (see Figure 2).

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**Figure 2: Expanding National Spatiality**

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**National Diversity: Breaking up the “Other”**

In the past, the binary opposition of a strong and authoritarian China state vis-à-vis a
modern and market-led Hong Kong colony was kept alive in Hong Kong by vivid but
crude representations of mainlanders. The invention of a Hong Kong identity was
strengthened by the othering of mainland Chinese and seeing them as a monolithic
collectivity of uncivilized mass. However, for those Hong Kong people who live in or
make frequent visit to China, mainlanders come to be seen as much more diversified, and
cannot easily be fit into those stereotypes that dominate the Hong Kong media. In this
section, I will describe some groups of mainlanders as seen through the eyes of my Hong
Kong informants.

In the factory where I did my field study, the largest group of mainlanders is factory
workers. They are mostly unskilled migrants from rural areas of China. They seem more
or less to fit into the stereotype of mainland “country bumpkins,” which has been a very
popular image in Hong Kong. They think highly of all those things coming from Hong
Kong—some may ask a Hongkonger whether s/he is a friend of a movie star like Andy
Lau or Jacky Cheung, because they think that there are many movie stars walking in the
streets of Hong Kong. Most Hong Kong people look down upon these migrant workers.
One morning when I was having my breakfast in a Hong Kong-style teahouse at
Dongguan, a Hong Kong boss dropped a fork on the floor. A waiter stood by him but did
nothing. The Hong Kong boss lost his temper and shouted at the waiter. “Why didn’t you
bring me another fork? You mainland bumpkins are so stupid! You won’t stand a chance
in Hong Kong!”

A more conspicuous group, but until now less familiar to many in Hong Kong, is the
rising middle class in China. These young white-collar workers have taken up well-paid jobs in the expanding Chinese economy, although their income remains many times lower than that of Hongkongers in comparable jobs. In the factory, there are a few mainland accountants, managers and supervisors who are hardworking, knowledgeable, and ambitious. In the bar where we served as waiters, the customers included many mainland journalists, designers, advertising people, fashion retailers, lawyers and people from others business sectors. Among this group, Hong Kong people are not necessarily “superior” in the way they dress, converse, and spend money when compared with members of this new Chinese middle class.

At the higher end of this emerging social group, there are professionals who have social, cultural and economic capital far greater than the average Hongkonger. Let me mention two illustrative cases, of people we met during our fieldwork. Mr. Lam is a high-powered lawyer in Guangzhou who is earning big money and enjoying a luxurious lifestyle. A few years ago he was offered Hong Kong citizenship and also a chance to emigrate to Canada, but he declined. Now he pays frequent visits to Hong Kong to buy quality golf clubs and electronics products. He resides in a luxurious flat at the heart of Guangzhou and tours around all the big golf courses in south China during the weekend. “Life is better in Guangzhou then in Hong Kong. China is a great nation and a great market. Why should I leave?” He didn’t care whether I was a reporter or a professor from Hong Kong and gave me red pocket of RMB$1,500 after my interview with him, reflecting the frequent mainland practice of wealthy interviewees rewarding those who interview them. Another case is a designer-turned-entrepreneur who owns a very successful array of
discos, bars and restaurants in Shenzhen. We did our fieldwork in one of his bars and interviewed him several times. As mentioned earlier, his bar serves a mix of mainland and Hong Kong customers. He is well-connected to officials in China and movie stars in Hong Kong and Taiwan. He drinks red wine, smokes cigars, owns a yacht in Hong Kong and a big resort farm in South China, and appears in the lifestyle features of various mainland newspapers and popular magazines. Hong Kong people who work in China will surely meet or hear stories about newly rich people such as him. The representation of poor and uncivilized mainlanders may have been generally valid fifteen years ago, but today has been left behind by a rapidly evolving Chinese social reality, rendering China far more complex, with a far greater variety of social types.

In residential areas, workplaces, shopping malls, restaurants and bars in China, Hong Kong people interact with a great variety of mainlanders who cannot fit into the popular imagination of a modern Hong Kong versus a less modern China. The “nation” appears in their minds not as in the official discourse of a great country nor as the stereotypical image of a repressive state; instead, the nation appears in the everyday interaction with various social groups, which combine to foster the imagination of a huge Chinese nation with great social diversity. It may appear normal and natural to readers that a country as large as China should appear diverse. And yet, China in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s was indeed poor, and did show little diversity in its population; this image continued to be portrayed in the mainlander stereotypes in Hong Kong mass media in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, in a newly capitalistic China, this is clearly no longer the case; but learning, through their daily life experiences in China, that it is indeed no longer the case comes as
a shock for many Hong Kong people in China. Literally and theoretically speaking, this “learning process” is the breaking up of the representation of mainland Chinese as the monolithic other. The breaking up of the mainland “Other” suggests the loosening up of a distinctive Hong Kong identity and the re-imagination of a big and diversified nation (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Breaking Up the Imagination of the Other

The Nation and the Extended Family

Most Hong Kong Chinese have family ties in mainland China. These family ties were downplayed during Hong Kong’s three formative decades from the 1970s to the 1990s, when Hong Kong developed into a highly modernized capitalistic city. Hong Kong people perceived themselves as a de-nationalized community with a locally- and territorially-bounded identity. Historical and familial connections with the mainland were selectively de-emphasized during this period.

However, since the 1990s these suppressed family networks have been re-emerging. In my field work in Dongguan and Shenzhen, I found that many Hong Kong factory owners employed a few of their mainland relatives to take up key supervisory positions. Mrs. Leung, the wife of factory boss Mr. Leung, co-owns another big toy factory with some
two thousand workers. The management circle comprises seven family members; all of them longtime Hong Kong residents. The eldest brother has a mainland second wife and has made a new home in Dongguan. The other brothers and sisters commute from Hong Kong to the factory several times a week. In my second visit to the factory, Mrs. Leung took me with her to all of her activities on that working day. In the morning, she introduced me to some of her subordinates who migrated to Dongguan from her hometown Chiu Zhou. Unskilled relatives usually work at the production line, while those relatives with a higher education take care of more demanding clerical jobs. Of course there are many competent employees who are not from the extended family network but are able to take up key positions through their own merits; but relatives do play a significant role, reemphasizing the familial linkages between Hong Kong and China.

At around noon, four cars took the bosses and guests to a restaurant. Drivers made a second trip to take relatives and minor managers to lunch. Other workers and “line captains” eat in the factory canteen. The eldest brother and his second wife arrived at the restaurant in their own car driven by another private driver. In fact, the second wife has also employed an extended network of relatives from her hometown to work in the factory. After lunch, Mrs. Leung took me to a small store at the front gate of the factory. It is a shanty selling cigarettes and instant noodles. We sat in a torn wooden bench outside the store and had a small cup of ice cream. The storeowner is Mrs. Leung’s uncle, who is very grateful to Mrs. Leung for giving him such a good site where workers come in regularly. During our brief stay, there were already a dozen friends, relatives, and workers
hanging around smoking cigarettes, chatting, and gossiping. The eldest brother took me
to a luxurious Taiwan coffee house in the late afternoon, telling me his story of being
jailed--some local officials had wanted to get some easy money from this Hong Kong
factory. It was a rich relative who bought him out of jail for a reasonable price. After
this tea break, Mrs. Leung brought me to yet another tea gathering. We went into a
medium-size store that trades rice and industrial petroleum. The owner, a man in his
thirties, is also a relative from Chiu Zhou. He worked in the factory for a few years and
started his own store several miles from the factory. The connections with nearby
suppliers and factories he cultivated as a purchaser in Mrs. Leung’s factory have become
valuable networks for him to run his own business. Inside the store, we had a long Chiu
Zhou tea session involving an elaborate brewing ritual, over which family disputes were
settled between the storeowner and a few of Mrs Leung’s other relatives. Within and
beyond Mrs. Leung’s factory are dense familial, social and business networks, which
connect the Hong Kong side of the family with their mainland counterparts. These
networks are supported by ethnic affiliations, self and collective interests, traditional
values, and modern business management skills. Relatives from both sides are
contributing their social resources to make the business a success (see Kwok & So eds,
1995).

Certainly there are innumerable other cases that can illustrate the extensive ethnic ties
between Hong Kong and south China, but the limited cases presented above are enough
to argue that the once relatively stable and self-contained imagined community of Hong
Kong has recently been expanding. For those people whose arena of everyday life has
moved into China, their Hong Kong identity has not been merged into a well-articulated national identity, but has been connected to a larger web of familial, ethnic, and regional collectivity. The imagined community of Hong Kong is based on a common way of life of a modernized city, while this emerging regional imagination is based both on a distinct regional culture and various clusters of familial and cultural connections. South China, with its distinctive weather and geographic features, has long been fostering a unique way of life different from northern regions of China. Because of its geographic proximity to the outside world, this area has been historically one of the wealthiest regions in China; it has long been the hub for domesticating new and foreign ideas. This is not the place to go into detail about South China’s regional culture (see Gong, 1999); but clearly Hong Kong is historically, culturally and geographically part of this great Pearl River Delta area. This regional collectivity is not national; but the rediscovery and reactivation of these networks is vital to the formation of the imagination of a “home country” far larger than merely Hong Kong (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Re-mapping National Imagination in Family Networks

The National Market

In recent years, Hong Kong people have traveled to mainland China less because they seek to “know their home country” than for reasons of consumption and business
development. The “nation” enters into the popular imagination less as the interpellation of the state and more as the push and pull of the market. In the 1980s and 1990s, a key discursive component of Hong Kong identity was economic success. The belief in the vibrant Hong Kong economy and the unfailing capitalistic system was the cornerstone of collective pride. However, after the Asian economic crisis in 1997 and the subsequent prolonged economic downturn of the Hong Kong economy, the opening up of the mainland Chinese market has become an attraction for Hong Kong people: a way to make a better living in the present, and the locus of their future hopes (Lin, 1997).

In 2003, the Hong Kong SAR government proposed a new initiative to quicken the merger between the Hong Kong economy and the Pearl River Delta economy on the mainland. This new incentive has served to further the extent to which the national market has come into the vision of Hong Kong businessmen, job seekers and consumers alike. For consumers, the mainland has become a shopping paradise, offering services and products at very attractive and competitive prices. One can easily hear the comment that mainland restaurants offer cheaper prices and better service than those in Hong Kong. Restaurant owners say they have a constant supply of cheap young migrant workers, flooding into Shenzhen and other south China cities from less developed rural areas. Thus in most mid-size restaurants, they can afford to have several waiters and waitresses serving a single table at any time of the day. In the disco bar where we did our fieldwork, the head manager is able to pick from a large pool of youngsters and hire only men and women who are good-looking. A Hong Kong man who goes to the bar regularly told us why he likes the place. “Here you have good services and reasonable prices. If you look
for bars with live bands in Hong Kong, you can only find cheap Philippine musicians playing old-fashioned songs. Here the bands are good. At least they sound like real live bands! You have better choices because very different bands are coming to Shenzhen from all over China.”

In the previous section, I discussed how Hong Kong people are linked to China by kinship; here, I emphasize how Hong Kong people are linked to China through consumption. These two groups overlap; many Hong Kong people go back to China to visit their relatives as well as to shop in newly constructed malls, in order to exploit the Hong Kong /China price differential. These two groups also have their differences. Those who are linked to China by kinship are more deeply involved in family and business ties; they may engage in family rituals on the mainland, such as marriages and rites of ancestral worship, and may seek to retire and to relocate their home on the mainland. Their cross-border experiences are woven into the lifeworlds of their local relatives. On the other hand, those linked to China by consumption are from the general public of Hong Kong, with diverse social backgrounds; their visits to China are more random and idiosyncratic. There are, for example, some Hong Kong young people who rent flats and stay in Shenzhen during weekends. Fred, a Hong Kong man in his late twenties, emigrated to Canada in the mid-1990s and returned to Hong Kong in 1998. He owns a computer company in Canada and is able to run the company by phone and fax. Since 1999, he has been staying in Shenzhen for long periods of time, becoming a bar regular. He may be an extreme case, but there is a group of Hong Kong young men who share the very common practice of “fooling around” in China. Fred said, “In the bars of Shenzhen,
you can meet girls from all over the country. Those from Shanghai are whiter and taller; those from rural areas are nice. In Kong Hong, you can only meet girls with a bad attitude.”

Besides consumption, production and selling to the national market are also vital for Hong Kong businessmen who venture into China. Factory owner Mr. Leung exploits the cheap labor in Dongguan to produce toys for Western markets. The new products he is now developing include an electronic device which allows restaurant customers to call the waiter and check the bill by clicking a button placed at the dining table. He cautions that although the China market is huge, it is an extremely difficult market for a mid-size company like his. Pirating of product designs, low profit margins, and fierce competition are some of the problems he is facing. Since he is quite determined to develop the national market for his products despite the difficulties involved, I asked him whether it has something to do with patriotism. He replied abruptly: “I love my country, but my country doesn’t love me! They won’t do a thing to protect our business interests!” “The country,” as embodied in acts of local officials, Leung experienced in a prohibitive and even vicious sense—he was fined arbitrarily several times, and his brother-in-law, as mentioned earlier, was put in jail without a trial. Nevertheless, the huge national market remains a key target for his company. Selling his own brand of Hong Kong-style products all over China is not only a personal ambition but also a huge corporate opportunity. The discourse of the nation appears not in a direct patriotic sense, but in the strategic planning of the company to exploit the emerging national market at this particular historical juncture.
Let me end this section by talking about an interesting interview in which the interviewee asked me about the possibility of starting a new business with her. Ms. Chen was formerly a pilot in the air force of the PLA; she now works for a government-owned airline and has recently bought a luxurious flat in Shenzhen. The planned interview was about how she decorates her flat (I was seeking to investigate the Hong Kong-China linkages of “taste”), but the conversation abruptly turned to the subject of business ventures. Saying that it was a much-anticipated decision to leave the government unit and start her own business like many of her peers, Ms. Chen proposed to work with me on a very “lucrative” project of producing and retailing chartered water purifiers. She pulled out some documents from her bag and explained to me how it was a sure-win project. “I am well-connected to people in high places in all the major cities of the country!” she explained. Endorsed by a professor from Hong Kong, the product would have a high prestige in the mainland market. Her plan was to start a company in Hong Kong and build a factory in Shenzhen. She could take care of all the official arrangements in China and secure the chartered retailing right in all major cities in China. In her analysis, many newly-emergent middle-class families fancy a modern and environmentally friendly home. A chartered water purifier produced and distributed by a Hong Kong company
would be a much sought-after item for modern Chinese homes. It was indeed a quite sophisticated plan. Honestly speaking, I found myself wavering, secretly entertaining the idea of making big money in this rising national market.

Factory owner Mr. Leung later told me that this kind of business proposal is not uncommon in China. Ms. Chen was willing to talk to a stranger like me because she was eager to walk in the footsteps of her friends who have left the government and made their fortunes in the national market. In her plan, recruiting a Hong Kong partner is worthwhile because Hong Kong, as part of the great nation, is still valued as a symbol of good quality, more than is mainland China. Combining the cultural capital of a Hong Kong professor and her own social capital (her “connections”: guanxi) in the military, she believed her project could be translated into considerable economic gain. Our conversation was revealing in the sense that after years of patriotic discipline in the army, Ms. Chen was talking enthusiastically about the nation not in terms of the state and its glory but the market and its potential for profit. The nation in this sense is not a collective that demands personal sacrifice, but a realm of opportunities for the personal pursuit of wealth and “the good life.”

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have mapped out the competing discourses of nationalization in Hong Kong. Top down nationalization is visible, high power, abstract, and coercive. However, as explicated in the above, bottom up nationalization is empirical, embodied, and
improvising. Bottom up national experiences are raw, yet to be narrated, multi-vocal, and thus can be mobilized for or against top-down patriotism. In examining how the cultural imaginations of many Hong Kong people are expanding because of their experiences in south China, this paper explores how national identity may be fostered not only through a “top down” approach—government-promulgated discourses about the greatness of the nation—but through the “bottom-up” experiences in ordinary people’s everyday lives. To the once de-nationalized community of Hong Kong, emotionally-loaded patriotic discourses are only active and effective on brief occasions of heated political debates and dramatic international conflicts or contests. However, the nation, in a more indirect sense, powerfully reveals itself in the changing routines of everyday life. As more and more Hong Kong people travel to and live and do business in mainland China, the idea of a territorially-cocooned Hong Kong has given way before the fragmented yet concrete notion of the nation. This version of the nation is significantly different from the national identity that the Hong Kong SAR government has attempted, through laws and mass media, to instill in Hong Kong people. This version of the nation is less abstract and official, more empirical and everyday; and this is the version of the nation that is most effectively causing Hong Kong people to revise their concept of China and identify themselves with China.

This analysis depicts only a tiny fragment of the panorama of emerging lifeworlds in South China. My analysis is of a sensitive zone in South China, in which the changing Hong Kong notion of the nation in a unique moment of historical transformation can be seen. In this zone, the “nation” enters into popular imagination of northbound Hong Kong
people as a great national territory, a collective of a great diversity of people, an embodiment of familial networks and a huge consumerist market. These ideas of the nation loosen up the Hong Kong imagination, help breach the mental walls defending Hong Kong against Chineseness, and offer a new perception of what it means to be Chinese. The people of Hong Kong and South China are producing a regional hybridized culture that is gradually overcoming the sharp boundaries once drawn by many Hong Kong people vis-à-vis their Chinese neighbors; the binary of Hong Kong/China is being replaced by pluralized points of reference (north, south, urban, rural China) under the catch-all discourse of market-driven post-socialist China. This is indeed Hong Kong people’s imagining and experiencing the nation; but it is not necessarily the same nation that the Chinese state seeks to promulgate, which meets substantially more resistance from Hong Kong people.

References


paper, Conference on Hong Kong society and culture, Chinese University of Hong Kong.


Figure 1: Two discourses on Nationalism and Sino-HK relation

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<th>A: Nationalizing Hong Kong:</th>
<th>B: Liberalizing China:</th>
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<td>Hong Kong being absorbed into the rising Chinese nation</td>
<td>Hong Kong as pioneer in China’s leap into modernity</td>
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Figure 2: Expanding National Spatiality

China

HK

Figure 3: Breaking Up the Imagination of the Other

China

HK
1 SAR for “Special Administrative Region.”

2 As of 14-16, July 2003. See the Hong Kong University public opinion website at http://hkupop.hku.hk/

3 See the public opinion website at http://hkupop.hku.hk/

4 See Paulantzas 2003 for a discussion of state, space, and nation.

5 In the mid-1990s, there were roughly 2 million visits made by mainland Chinese to Hong Kong and 3 million visits made by Hong Kong people to mainland China. The figures have increased to 6.8 and 5.6 million in 2002 (partnerNet.hktb.com). As this last figure reveals, traveling to China has become an everyday experience for many in Hong Kong today, as is shown, for example, by the massive crowds of Hong Kong shoppers to be found just over the border in Shenzen every weekend, in search of bargain prices.

6 As of the time of writing, Hong Kong citizens need to file on foot past immigration controls upon leaving Hong Kong for China or upon re-entry. Only a limited number of ordinary people can drive their cars across the border.

7 Hong Kong style teahouses (offering freshly brewed milk tea, fusion fast food, etc.) have been a reflexive symbol of local Hong Kong culture (Leung, 2003).

8 Paid journalism is a common practice in China: journalists attending press conferences and interviewing managers receive money from those they interview most of the time (Zhao, 1998).

9 These incidents have become less frequent in recent years; but in my limited ethnographic visits in two factories from 2001-2003, I heard of two similar incidents.

10 This is the Mainland Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, abbreviated as CEPA. See the Hong Kong Trade and Industry Department website: www.tid.gov.hk/english/cepa/fulltext.html