

The concept of identity and cultural identity media essay



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This literature review will start by introducing the concept of identity and cultural identity. It will then move to talk about how the British colonialism influenced Hong Kong in the past. It will followed by discussing how cultural imperialism, globalization affected the formation of people's identity in Hong Kong. The literature review will then end by talking about how state's influence affect people's identity in Hong Kong.

Introduction of the concept of identity and cultural identity

The word 'identity' is rooted from a Latin idem 'same' which also mean 'identical' (Lawler, 2008: 2). 'Identity' suggests that people share the sameness as human but at the same time people are unique that make them different from others (Lawler, 2008: 2). Richard Jenkins (1996) defined 'identity' as 'our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)' (Jenkins, 1996 cited in Kidd, 2002: 25). The individual and collective forms of identity are closely linked with ideas of family, local and national history and tradition; the sense of history and tradition is learnt from the 'family, through media, school, National anthems, flags, costumes and holidays, state rituals, national sports teams, pageantry museums, heritage centres, buildings and monuments, historical novels, drama, films, documentaries, etc which create and sustain who we are and where we come from' (Weeden, 2004: 24). Different forms of identity can be found on a person therefore they should be seen as interactive and dynamic with each other (Lawler, 2008: 3). However, there are forms of identity that mutually exclusive from each other. As Stuart Hall argues: 'Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only

because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render "outside", abjected. Every identity has at its "margin", an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it "lacks"...So the "unities" which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, over-determined process of "closure"(Hall, 1996: 5, emphasis in original cited in Lawler, 2008: 3). It demonstrated that identity is not exist naturally or people born with it but constructed by closing and exclusion.

Hall (1990) identified two versions of views on cultural identity (Hall, 1990 cited in Barker, 1997: 192). The first version of view of cultural identity claiming that 'cultural identity in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self", hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common' (Hall, 1990: 223). 'This reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people", with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and "vicissitudes" of our actual history' (Hall, 1990: 223). This version of view of cultural identity is 'known as "essentialism" because it assumes that social categories reflect an essential underlying identity' (Barker, 1997: 192). From the words of Hall, it can be seen that this version of claiming of cultural identity is based on the common history, culture that shared within a particular group from the past,

and it looks at cultural identity without changing and flexibility. Hall's second version of view of cultural identity claiming that 'cultural identity is not seen as a reflection of a fixed, natural state of being but as a process of becoming', 'cultural identity is not an essence but a continually-shifting position, and the points of difference around which cultural identities could form are multiple and proliferating' (Barker, 1997: 194). 'Hall argues (following Derrida), meaning is never finished or completed' and so identity is 'a "cut" or a snap-shot of unfolding meanings; it is a strategic positioning which makes meaning possible' (Barker, 1997: 194). This second version of view of cultural identity is an 'anti-essentialist position', which shown the 'political nature of identity production and to the possibility of multiple and shifting identities' (Barker, 1997: 194). It can be seen that the second version of looking at cultural identity as much more flexible, changeable. Stuart Hall (1990) claimed that 'Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a " production", which is never complete...', so Identity is in a 'moving, fluid, dynamic' form in Hall's view (Hall, 1990 cite in Kidd, 2002: 26). The above two versions of viewing cultural identity are very different. It will be interesting to know how people see their cultural identity in reality.

The history and influence of Hong Kong under the British colonialism

Colonialism refers to 'the establishment by more developed countries of formal political authority over areas of Asia, Africa, Australasia, and Latin

America' (Scott & Marshall, 2005: 88). Britain and The Qing government signed three treaties stating that the Qing government to give up sovereignty of Hong Kong which includes Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New Territories and Outlying islands (Thomas, 1999: 47). Since then, Hong Kong had become a British colony from 1842 to 1997. In this hundred and fifty year time, the people who lived in Hong Kong experienced differently with those in mainland China. Hong Kong has its own history and cultural identity. How does this distinct Hong Kong identity formed? From 1842 to 1997, Hong Kong was under British colonial rule and British colonial government had adopted an economic laissez-faire and social non-interventionist policy that it just treated Hong Kong as a commercial entrepot (Ma, 1999: 23). First, it wanted to avoid conflict with the Chinese government, second, it wanted to maintain a commercial, apolitical place for economic and diplomatic reasons (Ma, 1999: 23). In the late 1940s, there were huge amount of newcomers went from mainland to the British colony Hong Kong and these people sought to escape from the civil war, economic crisis, and the ruling of the rigid communist, etc and this brought a large number of labour force and manufacturing base to Hong Kong (Thomas, 1999: 79-80). In the late 1940s, among the refugees there were experienced entrepreneurs, who brought capital and technical knowledge with them (Wong, S. L., 1988 cited in Ma, 1999: 25). In 1950s, Hong Kong established a solid light industrial sector; in 1960s, it shifted to plastic industry; in 1970s, it transformed to manufacturing industry of clocks, watches, electronic toys; in 1980s, Hong Kong started to develop a tertiary industrial sector, emphasis on financial and human resources sectors, and this created a large group of middle class (Thomas, 1999: 80-81).

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On the education side, the 'Anglicised education system' had reduced the Chinese identity of the local people in Hong Kong (Ma, 1999: 29). The British colonial government was seriously concerning about the content of Chinese studies and it deliberately did not create a sense of national identity to the students (Luk, 1989 cited in Ma, 1999: 29). Students didn't learn much about the modern Chinese history and development since the colonial government just emphasized and focus on the economic value of Hong Kong as a middle person between the trade of China and Britain (Lane, 1994; Sweeting, 1992; Tang, 1994 cited in Ma, 1999: 29). The colonial government also aimed at making a Hong Kong Chinese who can speak both the languages of China and Britain but at the same time without any strong sense of belonging to either country, as well as local history was ignored to prevent Hong Kong to become independent itself politically (Ma, 1999: 29).

On the social policy side, the development of the public housing policy carried out by the British colonial government in the 1950s created 'collective experiences of mobility and resettlement' and 'social memory' for the HK people (Ma, 1999: 30). The resettlement process was often showed in the mass media: 'children running along corridors of the government estates; parents coming back from work; residents watching TV together after dinner', and 'these familiar images on TV dramas and government-produced documentaries formed of a "home in HK" mentality' (Lui, 1988a cited in Ma, 1999: 30). These collective memories of the residents indirectly reinforced the sense of belonging to Hong Kong and enhancing the 'HongKongese' identity. As a British colony, Hong Kong was imported a lot of cultural products from the Great Britain and also from other western

countries. It can be seen that in post Second World War period, 'Hong Kong was modernizing by incorporating Western lifestyles; it was attuned to a hybrid, cosmopolitan cultural environment which was increasingly receptive to imported cultural products like Hollywood movies' (Ma, 1999: 27). The 'capitalist' ideology of Hong Kong and the 'communist' ideology of Mainland China generated the 'us vs. them' identification between both sides and this assisted that development of the distinct Hong Kong identity with demonstrating the difference between Hong Kong community and Mainland China (Thomas, 1999: 83).

The above factors led to something unique emerged in Hong Kong which is the 'Hong Kong Man'. The 'Hong Kong Man' is 'go-getting and highly competitive, tough for survival, quick-thinking and flexible', also 'he wears western clothes, speaks English or expects his children to do so, drinks western alcohol, has sophisticated tastes in cars and household gadgetry, and expects life to provide a constant stream of excitement and new openings', however, 'he is not British or western', at the same time, 'he is not Chinese in the same way that the citizens of the People's Republic of China are Chinese' (Baker, 1983: 278 cited in Ma, 1999: 32-33). It can be seen that a distinct Hong Kong identity was developed under the British colonial rule. Although the Great Britain adopted a non-interventional attitude for the colony Hong Kong, it surely still had impact on shaping the cultural identity of Hong Kong in the past as 'colonialism produced new losses and gains, allowed new forms of identity to ascend, and debased or crushed others' (Papastergiadis, 2000: 180). For instance, the British colonialism brought the western capitalist ideology, the language of English, fashion, etc to Hong

Kong. The style of ruling also helped to create the indigenous identity and sense of being 'HongKongese' to the people who lived in Hong Kong.

However, how much influence of the British colonialism in shaping the cultural identity of Hong Kong still remains today? Is this still a strong element in shaping cultural identity of Hong Kong now? Or it has already been replaced by other factors?

Cultural imperialism, National Identity, Globalisation and Hybrid identity

Cultural imperialism may play a part in shaping Hong Kong's cultural identity. Cultural imperialism refers to 'the domination of one culture over another, most commonly posed in terms of nationality', so 'cultural imperialism is understood in terms of the imposition of one national culture upon another and the media are seen as central to this process as carriers of cultural meanings which penetrate and dominate the culture of the subordinate nation' (Barker, 1997: 183). This theory 'stresses the homogenization of global culture through the spread of capitalist consumerism'; also it 'stresses the loss of cultural diversity and the growth of sameness' (Barker, 1997: 185). Is this homogenization of culture under the cultural imperialism implying Hong Kong's cultural identity is being more like other countries in the globe which following the American and the West but lost its own distinct characteristic of identity? However, Tomlinson (1991) argues there are problems that related to the 'cultural autonomy inherent in the cultural imperialism' (Tomlinson, 1991 cited in Barker, 1997: 187). He argues that 'cultures are not bounded entities but consist of changing practices and meanings; one cannot legitimately endow an amorphous set of

practices with ontological identity and agency' (Tomlinson, 1991 cited in Barker, 1997: 187). The above demonstrated the problem of cultural imperialism theory that 'the nationally-based cultural domination is problematic' (Barker, 1997: 187). This thesis didn't explain 'the formation of collective identities in general, and cultural and national identities in particular', also, in this theory 'a national cultural identity is assumed as a finished product rather than a process which is constantly emerging and changing' (Barker, 1997: 188).

For the development of national identity, as 'Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that national identity is an imagined and constructed one assembled in relation to a territorial and administrative category taking as its reference symbols and rituals intend by administrative authorities to enlist identification which the nation is an imagined community' (Anderson, 1983 cited in Barker, 1997: 189). It can be seen that national identity isn't come innately or people born with it but is socially constructed by social action and activities. 'Both the cultural imperialism thesis and Anderson's conception of national identity posit the subject as a whole person and national identity as a unified position so that diversity and difference are subsumed beneath the sign of the nation' (Barker, 1997: 190).

Stuart Hall saw that 'national identities as potentially in decline' and 'replaced by new hybrid identities' (Barker, 1997: 191). Globalization is the main factor that leads to the forming of this hybrid identity. 'Population movement and settlement', during the periods of 'colonial and post-colonial globalization', and globalization of 'electronic communications' have made the 'juxtapositioning', 'meeting', 'mixing' available, therefore, globalization <https://assignbuster.com/the-concept-of-identity-and-cultural-identity-media-essay/>

enhanced the 'production of hybrid identities' by providing the 'range of sources and resources for identity construction' (Barker, 1997: 191-192). Hybrid identities prevent a person with a fixed or given identity, but let a person to change or choose to adopt different identification according to different circumstances (Barker, 1997: 195). For instance, a young Asian woman may have 'identifications with being Bengali, English, a woman, with youth culture and with rap, an American-Caribbean hybrid, Anglo-Bengali' at the same time (Barker, 1997: 195). What we can see from the above example is that this young Asian woman can shift and adopt the different identifications above in different circumstances. Moreover, the above example also demonstrated a 'hybrid identity' by picking and adopting 'multiplying global resources' (Barker, 1997: 195) like rap culture from the Caribbean, etc. Pieterse claimed that 'Introverted cultures, which have been prominent over a long stretch of history and which overshadowed translocal culture, are gradually receding into background, while translocal culture made up of diverse elements is coming to the foreground' (Pieterse, 1995: 62 cited in Barker, 1997: 197). It may imply that the national identity that formed by culture that bounded or tied to place is declining. In contrast, the hybrid identity that formed by culture that learnt trans-locally is enhancing. However, there are limitations of the thesis of hybrid identity. It was claimed by Parker that the hybrid identities are limited by the number of empirical evidences despite there is theory to support that (Barker, 1997: 196-197).

So, how about the situation in Hong Kong at the moment? As Hall argued that hybrid identity is replacing the national identity under the globalization process, it seems that the hybrid identity should be winning in Hong Kong.

However, there is an opposite view from Gordon Mathews. He argued that 'Hong Kong's international character in belonging to the global cultural supermarket and its national character in belonging to the Chinese state are presented as opposites, and it seems to be the latter which is winning' (Mathews, 2001: 308). He also claimed that 'Hong Kong is one of the few places in the affluent world today in which the market is giving way to the state, and in which international identity is being eroded by national identity' (Mathews, 2001: 309). So, is the national identity in belonging to the Chinese State winning or the hybrid identities that draw from the global cultural market winning in Hong Kong?

The influence of state to Hong Kong's cultural identity: British colonial state and Chinese state

The word 'state' refers to 'the body politic or the political community'; it is the 'major locus of power and authority in every modern society' (Thomas, 1999: 43). State is a concept that against the 'global cultural supermarket', 'by shaping people to believe not that they can pick and choose who they are from all the world, but rather that they belong to a particular culture, whose values and traditions they must uphold' (Mathews, 2001: 291).

Practically state moulds cultural identity by 'school education and mass media; train their citizens to believe that they must defend their cultural tradition and their way of life' (Mathews, 2001: 291). The concept of state contradicts to the concept of cultural supermarket since state ask people to treasure and protect their own country and culture; however, global cultural supermarket ask people to pick things that you like around the world (Mathews, 2001: 291). Hong Kong has never become a 'nation-state', not in

the period of colony nor after the hand-over (Tse, 2006: 55). During the colonial period from 1950s to 1980s, Hong Kong's civil education was 'a-political' and 'a-nationalistic'; students at that time were just being taught as 'residents' or 'subjects' who live in a colonial state, but nothing about nationality and citizenship (Morris 1992b; Tsang 1994, 1998 cited in Tse, 2006: 56). From 1984 to 1997 was the transitional period of the civil education in Hong Kong. Since the 'sense of Hong Kong-centeredness' and 'Hongkongese' identity were being established under the different mode of governing by Hong Kong and Mainland China (Lau and Kuan 1988; Choi 1990, 1995a cited in Tse, 2006: 57), reform of civil education to foster the national identity and unity were needed for preparing the time after 1997. After 1997, the new Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government focused a lot on the civil education. It aimed 'to create unquestioning political commitment and strengthen social order through the promotion of a unifying Chinese identity and values to the exclusion of a distinctive Hong Kong cultural identity and individual rights' (Tse, 2006: 61). The actual measures that being carried out under the HKSAR government included 'reintroduction of independent civics as a school subject, revisions of school syllabuses, the strengthening of Chinese history as a school subject, textbooks changed to reflect the new political reality, wider use of Putonghua as the medium of instruction, more schools displaying the national flag and singing the national anthem, exchange activities with mainland to boost nationalism and sense of social responsibility', etc (Tse, 2006: 62). The above demonstrated that Chinese state has been influencing the Hong Kong's cultural identity by commanding the HKSAR government to use different strategies in civil education in order to reinforce the national

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identity and 'Chineseness' of Hong Kong people. However, how much influence does the Chinese state itself and its policies play a part in shaping the cultural identity of the people in Hong Kong actually?