



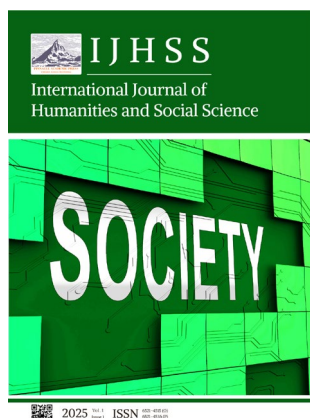
Review **Open Access**

The Construction and Evolution of Hong Kong Identity: Literature Review and Prospects

Siyuan Cai ^{1,*}

¹ School of Humanities and Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China

* Correspondence: Siyuan Cai, School of Humanities and Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China



Abstract: This literature review analyses academic research on Hong Kong identity, focusing on the dynamic construction of Hong Kong identity before and after the 1997 handover and the trends that have emerged in this field in recent years. The review emphasizes that the identity of "HongKonger" is a historically and culturally constructed process that blends Chinese pan-cultural roots with Western influences in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Related research mainly explores political events, cultural symbols, and community interactions, while emerging research explores identity construction on social media. Existing quantitative research faces limitations due to inconsistent definitions of identity in questionnaires. This article concludes that Hong Kong identity remains fluid and is influenced by the changing historical, political, and cultural landscape, and more nuanced methods are needed to capture its complexity.

Keywords: Hong Kong identity; constructionism; post-colonialism; ethnic identity

Received: 14 May 2025

Revised: 27 May 2025

Accepted: 16 June 2025

Published: 25 June 2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

As a unique region, Hong Kong's identity has long attracted academic attention. From its establishment as a British colony in 1842 to its return to China in 1997, Hong Kong underwent significant historical transformations that shaped its identity [1]. In this process, Hong Kong's identity has continued to evolve, influenced by the interweaving of political, cultural, and social factors.

During the colonial period, British rule brought Western political, economic, and cultural elements to Hong Kong, which collided and merged with Hong Kong's original Chinese traditional culture. the 1997 handover marked a new phase of identity development for Hong Kong within the framework of "one country, two systems" [2]. This special historical trajectory makes Hong Kong's identity a topic of great research value. It is not only related to the self-perception of Hong Kong's local residents, but also has far-reaching significance for the region's social stability, economic development, and its evolving relationship with mainland China.

2. Two Consensuses about Hong Kong Identity

The current research on Hong Kong's identity is mainly divided into two types: one is to describe the dynamic formation process of Hong Kong's identity, focusing more on politics and economy; the other is to study the factors that affect identity in this dynamic process, such as political ideas, social situations, economic class, etc. Looking at these studies, we can summarize the following two consensuses:

2.1. The Identity of "Hongkonger" Is Always in a Dynamic Process of Construction

Existing studies have argued that it was not until the 1960s that an autonomous sense of Hong Kong identity gradually emerged, just as people come to identify as "HongKongers" over time, rather than inherently being "HongKongers" [3-5]. Under the theory of cultural construction, identity is defined as "the process of using historical, linguistic and cultural resources to 'become' a certain kind of person rather than 'being' a certain kind of person", and "is produced through specific strategies of representation in specific historical and institutional contexts, in specific discourse-constructed information and practices" [6]. The acquired identity of "HongKonger", characterized by a gradually developed sense of local belonging, should be understood within its unique historical and institutional context. The identity generated in this way in a specific context is dynamic and should not be simplified to a certain origin. Instead, we should focus on the dynamic process of its generation and its influencing factors.

2.2. Hong Kong Possesses a Chinese Pan-Cultural Identity While Integrating Substantial Western Influences to Form a Distinct Hybrid Culture

"Hong Kong is essentially Chinese, and its people are Chinese, even though it is a modern city" [7]. Chinese cultural elements are prominently manifested in Hong Kong through its festivals, celebrations, and long-standing traditions, and "the ancient culture of Hong Kong and Guangdong in the mainland has enough common features to prove that they come from the same origin" [8]. At the same time, a newspaper article in 1996 described Hong Kong business people as follows: "The more they come into contact with China, the more they realize that although they are Chinese, their way of thinking, character, and style of doing things are completely different from those of mainlanders" [9]. Tse therefore breaks down the meaning of the identity of "Hong Kong people" into "a certain kind of 'Chineseness' plus: 'Chineseness plus affluence/cosmopolitanism/capitalism', or 'Chineseness plus English/colonial education/colonialism', or 'Chineseness plus democracy/human rights/rule of law'. From a geographical point of view, this 'plus' is considered to be 'Chineseness plus Westernness', or 'Chineseness plus internationalization'" [3].

Although the phrase "Hong Kong is where Eastern and Western cultures meet" may sound clichéd, the hybrid culture of the city significantly shapes the values, perspectives, and identity of its inhabitants.

In 1952, scholar's Black Skin, White Masks criticized the dichotomy of "black and white" and "self and other" in colonial society, and raised an open and pragmatic question about the future of once-colonized communities: in the postcolonial context, they are trapped between alien cultures and the familiar "white" world [10]. Some scholars echo the paradoxical view of identity, revealing the intertwined relationship between identity and colonialism, arguing that it is a negotiated process in which rulers and colonial subjects compete for power and reconstruct themselves within a common colonial discourse [11]. Therefore, cultural identities in the colonial and postcolonial worlds cannot be clearly demarcated because they ambiguously blend time, space, and emerging local and global developments.

We should not overlook the impact of colonial history on Hong Kong. On the contrary, it is essential to critically examine the unique historical contexts and political structures before, during, and after the 1997 handover in order to understand the formation of Hong Kong's present identity.

3. Three Emphasis in Research Content

Whether it is about this dynamic process or its influencing factors, the focus of academic research is mostly on political, cultural and community analysis.

Politically, scholar describes Hong Kong as "a narrative in which events concerning China's territorial concerns have continued to redraw a local cultural landscape" [12].

Moreover, even though "Hong Kong was not apolitical in the 1970s, political movements (for instance, Chinese as an official language, protecting the Diaoyu Islands) were generally connected to a pan-Chinese cultural identification" [13]. Any thorough exploration of Hong Kong's history and culture must address the integral role of politics. Regarding specific political events that have influenced identity, scholars have mostly analyzed the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, annual public commemorations in Victoria Park, the 2012 protests over national education reform, the 2014 Umbrella Movement, and the 2019 Anti-ELAB demonstrations. These movements often highlight distinctions between in-groups and out-groups, becoming focal points for identity boundary formation, and therefore have become the focus of identity boundaries. Of course, there are also researches that trace back to Hong Kong's pre-colonial history and examines Hong Kong's descent, "in that Hong Kong is a very Chinese city even today, its precolonial past is as relevant as its colonial history" [14]. However, the main literature still focuses on colonial and post-handover politics and history.

From a cultural perspective, scholars explore how mass media such as newspapers, novels, and movies, as well as cultural symbols like language and lifestyle, reflect and influence the development of Hong Kong's identity. *Ethics after Idealism*, a book examining cultural differences, uses Hong Kong as a case study and cites many Hong Kong cultural products as supporting examples. "The upsurge of nostalgia in Hong Kong... has long been present in both elite and mass culture, in the form of art and ethnographic museums, auctions, films, music, retro-dressing, and much more" [15]. Scholar then talks about how film "yan-zhi-kou", music "Huang Hou Da Dao Dong", Leung Ping-Kwan's poetry etc. play a role amid the identity crisis of Hongkong. Other scholar agrees that "Many Hong Kong films draw on Confucian ethics, such as filial piety, to explore moral and social issues, reflecting a strong Chinese cultural identity" [16]. The discussion of cultural symbols such as language mainly focuses on the dynamic status between Cantonese, Mandarin and English. Researcher, in his work *Language and Identity*, claims that "in every act of speaking or writing, through the particular forms of Chinese and English they speak – often intermittently within a single sentence – they enact their identities as Hong Kong Chinese who have reached the top of the educational ladder. "To speak Standard British or American English would not be desirable, as it would mark them as outsiders; to speak no English would be even less desirable, marking them as unc cosmopolitan, uneducated, undesirable as marriage partners" [17]. There are also arguments that Hong Kong identity is more of a cultural lifestyle than a political entity. In his book on Hong Kong in the 1960s, researcher writes that Hong Kong's ultimate fate after the handover was that Hong Kong people "lost their unique identity and were left with only a capitalist 'lifestyle' to maintain" [18]. In this context, local identity is linked to material culture and consumer culture. For instance, researcher has examined Hong Kong's postcolonial identity through the lens of local consumption of Japanese cultural imports [19]. Furthermore, a 2018 study analyzes how luxury consumption may contribute to negative emotions and tensions between some Hong Kong residents and mainlanders within specific socio-economic contexts [20].

In terms of community, this research tendency examines the integration of different groups (divided by race, occupation, etc.) into local identity in Hong Kong, which can be regarded as a micro-dimension of cultural identity. Although they focus on a specific group, they show the interaction between that specific group and "Hong Kong people". From this interaction, we can feel the boundary, which is an important part of identity. As a highly commercialized multicultural society, Hong Kong has a strong class consciousness, and the standards for dividing class boundaries (regardless of whether there is a high or low distinction) and then defining groups can be occupation, race, economy, religion, gender, and various intertwined areas. For example, some studies focus on the social problems experienced by NMCI and the discrimination they face from locals, others investigate the interaction and social integration between MSP and locals, some examine the social identity and integration of Muslim communities in Hong Kong, and others explore

cultural influences within the Hakka community [19,21-25]. This kind of community research re-examines cultural identity from a micro dimension, thereby obtaining a more vital cultural identity confirmation that is constantly superimposed and accumulated. This, to a certain extent, helps to protect the historical connotations of the uniqueness of different cultural identities that are ignored by abstract generalizations in the macro dimension.

4. Recent New Tendency

In recent years, with the development of social media, there has been a trend to study how Hong Kong people in different contexts construct their own identities on social platforms. Social platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have achieved widespread global adoption. This research method provides a large and diverse dataset, and the way users present themselves on these platforms naturally aligns with the concept of social identity—when the posting action is completed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the symbolic boundaries between self and others are already established. Social media platforms have become a place for self-presentation and identity management [26,27]. Some researchers analyzed Twitter posts using specific tags to explore the collective identity of Hong Kong people during the 2019 protests related to the extradition bill [28,29]. There is also a study investigating social media in a broader context, not based on one single movement, but based on the social media postings by localist advocacy groups in the long run [30]. Some researchers studied the role and influence of social media as an important "public sphere" in the development and promotion of the 2014 Umbrella Movement [31]. Scholar also notes that social media played a role in stimulating a sense of shared identity, efficacy, and anger, which in turn fueled participation in the protests in Hong Kong [32].

However, since the social media craze has only been around for a short time and requires a certain technical background, research in this direction has just begun and the number is small. With the development of online ethnography, the number of studies in this direction may see a big increase.

5. Limitations of Current Quantitative Design

There are some limitations in the existing quantitative data on Hong Kong identity. This limitation does not lie in the methodology itself, but in how identity is conceptualized and operationalized in questionnaire coding.

The quantitative data sources often cited in the existing literature are Hong Kong Panel Studies of Social Dynamics (HKPSSD), Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong (HKUPOP) and Pew Research Center. In HKPSSD, the data coding of the questionnaire is: "D20_1. I am a Hong Konger. I am a Hong Konger. Please say whether this statement applies to you in a scale of 1 to 7. 1 refers to 'Strongly disagree', 4 refers to 'Neither agree nor disagree' while 7 refers to 'Strongly agree'. Please answer with 1-7 points, 1 means strongly disagree, 4 means neutral, and 7 means strongly agree." After this question, HKPSSD provides a similar scoring question about "I am a Chinese". In the survey conducted every two years by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (HKPORI), respondents are asked to select from four self-identification categories: "HongKonger", "HongKonger of China", "Chinese in Hong Kong", and "Chinese". In the Pew Research Center study, respondents were asked to choose the identity they most identified with from the following three indicators—"primarily a HongKonger, primarily Chinese, or both a HongKonger and Chinese".

It can be seen that each of the three major questionnaires adopts a different definition of the identity of "HongKonger". The HKPSSD adopts a parallel measurement approach that may imply a binary understanding of identity. However, the personal identities that researchers try to measure are not necessarily mutually exclusive [33]. This questionnaire actually implies the logical premise of "either a Hong Konger or a Chinese". HKUPOP further offers the option of a hybrid identity; however, as scholars point out, the meanings

of "Hong Kong people of China" and "Chinese in Hong Kong" are not immediately clear [34]. Among the three options of the Pew Research Center, there is significant overlap and ambiguity among the response options, because citizens with a higher degree of Chinese identity usually also have a strong or moderate Hong Kong identity, in this case, the respondents can strictly choose both options [19,35]. At present, there is no universally recognized questionnaire for identifying Hong Kong identity in academia, which is also one of the academic gaps.

6. Conclusion

By integrating research on the interaction between Chinese pan-cultural roots and Western influences, this review highlights the hybrid nature of Hong Kong identity and its negotiation in colonial and postcolonial contexts. This review also integrates recent research on the role of social media in the construction of Hong Kong identity and proposes the prospect of incorporating online ethnography into research directions, thereby enriching the theoretical discourse on identity formation in hybrid cultural contexts.

Despite the contributions of this review, some unresolved issues were also identified. As highlighted by Wong et al., the lack of a set of standardized questionnaires for measuring Hong Kong identity remains a major shortcoming, which in turn contributes to inconsistencies in findings across studies. In addition, this emerging field of social media research lacks sufficient longitudinal data to fully understand its long-term impact on identity construction.

To address these gaps, future research should try to develop a universally accepted questionnaire, or develop a weighting framework to reconcile individual surveys and better capture the hybrid and multifaceted nature of Hong Kong identity, and may draw on mixed methods that combine quantitative surveys with qualitative online ethnography. Finally, an interdisciplinary approach integrating anthropology, sociology, and media studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of Hong Kong identity, which will not only contribute to academic discussions but also facilitate practical exploration of its complex identity.

References

1. M. Adorjan, P. V. Khiatani, W. H. Chui, "The rise and ongoing legacy of localism as collective identity in Hong Kong: Resinicisation anxieties and punishment of political dissent in the post-colonial era," *Punish. Soc.*, vol. 23, no. 5, pp. 650-674, 2021, doi: 10.1177/14624745211040308.
2. S. Gu, E. Fong, "Ethnic Identification among Mixed Children in a Post-colonial Asian City: A Case in Hong Kong," *Sociol. Perspect.*, vol. 67, no. 4-6, pp. 242-260, 2024, doi: 10.1177/07311214241275047.
3. S. S.-W. Tse, *Building the Queen's Road: Hong Kong Identity Examined Through Post-Colonial Theory*, M.S. thesis, Harvard Univ., 2025.
4. F. H. Alvi, "International entrepreneurial orientation amidst post-colonial upheaval: entrepreneurs during the Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution," *Crit. Perspect. Int. Bus.*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 572-598, 2021, doi: 10.1108/cpoib-03-2020-0016.
5. A. H.-C. Leung, P. C.-W. Lee, "Ethnic group affiliation and second/foreign language accentedness in English and Mandarin among Hong Kong speakers," *Lang., Cult. Curric.*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 171-185, 2024, doi: 10.1080/07908318.2023.2285797.
6. K. Pan, "On Collective Trauma:(Post) colonialism and Its Myths in Modern Society," 2022, doi: 10.25236/etmhs.2022.052.
7. J. Y. F. Lau, "Colonialism, Politics, and the Development of Philosophy in Hong Kong," *APA Stud. Asian Asian Am. Philos. Philos.*, 2024.
8. J.-x. Liu, Y.-l. Liu, "A Post-colonialism Approach to Intentional Mistranslation—Comparative Study of Two English Versions of Shuo Ren," *J. Lit. Art Stud.*, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 491-497, 2022, doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2022.05.013.
9. Q. Zhuang and Y. Li, "The transforming cultural identity of Hong Kong as reflected in Jackie Chan's Police Story series," *Eng. Lang. Lit. Culture*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 159-164, 2020, doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20200504.16.
10. Z. Zhong, "Identity and Diaspora: An Overview of Postcolonial Translation Studies in Chinese Mainland (1997-2024)," *Arab. J. Transl. Stud.*, vol. 3, no. 9, pp. 120-131, 2024, doi: 10.63939/AJTS.m8ppkv61.
11. H. Liang, "Exploring the Translations and Translating of Yueju (Cantonese Opera)," *Commun. Across Borders Transl. Interpret.*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2022.
12. C. Y. Wang, "Hong Kong identities through food: tracing developments and variations of pineapple buns in modern complexities," *Food Cult. Soc.*, vol. 25, no. 5, pp. 917-933, 2022, doi: 10.1080/15528014.2021.1932274.

13. Y. Zhu, "The Poetics of Presence," in *Proc. 3rd Int. Conf. Humanities, Wisdom Educ. Serv. Manag. (HWESM)*, Atlantis Press, 2024, pp. 152-168, doi: 10.2991/978-2-38476-253-8_22.
14. Y. F. Fan, A. H. Abu Bakar, "Recontextualizing Landscapes and Mapping Identity in Taiwanese New Cinema: Decolonizing the Screen," *Int. J. Acad. Res. Bus. Soc. Sci.*, vol. 14, no. 9, 2024, doi: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i9/22831.
15. R. Ferrari, A. Thorpe, "Introduction: Mapping the terrain: Hong Kong, Singapore, and the city as method," in *Asian City Crossings*, Routledge, 2021, pp. 1-30. ISBN: 9781003043157.
16. S. Yue, "Decolonisation practices with cultural identity: Gen Z Chinese fashion students in UK."
17. A. Ho, *Reflecting and reimagining transnational Chinese identity through composition*, Ph.D. diss., Royal Coll. Music, 2024, doi: 10.24379/RCM.00002500.
18. J. K. Rajah, "Managing Ethnic Politics in Plural Societies: The Autonomous Power of The State."
19. A. K. Wong, "Beyond queer liberalism: On queer globalities and regionalism from postcolonial Hong Kong," in *Sexualities, Transnationalism, and Globalisation*, Routledge, 2021, pp. 107-120. ISBN: 9780429352102.
20. H. Shum, "Oculus power! Arts and technology's mediation of postcolonial neoliberal nationalism in Hong Kong," *Glob. Media China*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 84-100, 2024, doi: 10.1177/20594364231194671.
21. C. Song, "Cultural Untranslatability of Heteroglossia: Hong Kong Poetry in Colonial Time," in *Transcultural Poetics*, Routledge, 2023, pp. 152-168. ISBN: 9781003368168.
22. E. K.-m. Chong, "Reinstating global citizenship education in Hong Kong's school curriculum and teaching," *Jpn. J. Citizensh. Educ.*, vol. 2, pp. 15-26, 2022, doi: 10.69296/citizenshipeducation.2.0_15.
23. Y. Li, X. Liu, "Why Hong Kong people dislike Mandarin? A critical policy analysis of the implementation of the Bi-literacy and Trilingualism Language Policy in postcolonial Hong Kong," *J. Res. Reflect. Educ. (JRRE)*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2022.
24. C. Tan, "A Foucauldian analysis of research Assessment in a postcolonial context: the example of Hong Kong," *J. Educ. Policy*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 660-678, 2024, doi: 10.1080/02680939.2023.2269382.
25. D. D.-w. Wang, "8 Sinophone Postloyalism," in *Sinophone Stud. Across Disciplines: A Reader*, Columbia Univ. Press, 2024, pp. 161-175, doi: 10.7312/chia20862-009.
26. C. Fu, L. Liao, J. Xu, "The Exploration of Psychological Integration Mechanism and Behavioral Public Policy of National Identity of the Youth in Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area," in *Front. Res. Behav. Public Admin.*, Singapore: Springer, 2023, pp. 115-134. ISBN: 9789811699160.
27. M. K. Bhowmik, A. H.-T. Chan, C. M. Halse, "Multiculturalism and the cultural politics of racism in Hong Kong," *Multicult. Educ. Rev.*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 13-27, 2022, doi: 10.1080/2005615X.2022.2040142.
28. Y. Li, "A critical policy analysis of the implementation of the bi-literacy and trilingualism language policy in Hong Kong: From a postcolonial perspective," *SFU Educ. Rev.*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 33-49, 2021, doi: 10.21810/sfuer.v14i1.2368.
29. C.-y. Shih, "Post-Chinese, post-western and post-asian relations: Engaging a pluriversal East Asia," *China Rep.*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 270-288, 2021, doi: 10.1177/000944552111023906.
30. L. L. Hu, "Transcultural Movement–Shang Palace, Chinese Haute Cuisine in Paris," 2022, doi: 10.21427/m9y8-pv30.
31. K.-I. Tong, *Rethinking the Politics of Scale: Independent Publishing for Social Changes in Hong Kong and Beyond*, Ph.D. diss., UCL, 2025.
32. C. Lam, R. Pai, "Teaching Hong Kong: Cantonese Humor as a Resource."
33. M. A. Çelikel, "Does Post-Colonial Still Have Relevance?," in *Post-Theories Lit. Cult. Stud.*, 2022, pp. 53. ISBN: 9781666913880.
34. Q. Zhang, "Language as Control: A Postcolonial Critique of Inner Mongolia's Education Policies," 2025, doi: 10.7939/r3-dzyk-z228.
35. F. Y. Lai, "Migrant workers and LGBT activism: A comparative study of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong," *Sexualities*, vol. 27, no. 1-2, pp. 113-135, 2024, doi: 10.1177/13634607211025903.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The views, opinions, and data expressed in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of PAP and/or the editor(s). PAP and/or the editor(s) disclaim any responsibility for any injury to individuals or damage to property arising from the ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.