



## National Identity and Intercultural Outlook: a Critical Review of Hong Kong's Civic Education Since the 1980's

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### Abstract

*This paper argues that in the new landscape of a postmodernist world, civic education would need to nurture national identity and promote intercultural outlook hand in hand. This article reviews development of Hong Kong's civic education development in this light. In the case of post-colonial Hong Kong, a sensible balance is most needed as the city is to continue as an international city that functions as one of China's windows to the world.*

### Introduction

The essay explores the development of civic education in Hong Kong's against two important aims of education: developing national identity and promoting intercultural outlook of the people. The period 1980's are chosen as the base line of the present discussion because of the following reasons. First, the talk on Hong Kong's political future between China and the United Kingdom was initiated in this period. The talk, which resulted in the return of Hong Kong to China, had important repercussion on the citizenship status of Hong Kong's people. Second, the reforms to build up

representative government also took off in this period. The enfranchising of Hong Kong's people altered significantly the political landscape and imposed demand for the first time on empathy and skills related with political participation. In fact, a document, Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools (hereafter known as Guidelines), was published in 1985, one year before the signing of the Joint Declaration. This was followed by a second issue released in 1996, a year before the handover.

The present discussion is composed of two sequential parts. First, the nature of the two concepts, national identity and intercultural outlook, will be analyzed from the perspective of education. Discussion of the two concepts will then inform the reflection on civic education development in Hong Kong since the release of first civic education guidelines in the 1980's.

### **Education and national identity**

If Aristotle suggested correctly that people are social in nature, the question that remains is how social living is organized. Families, clans and tribes each can frame social interactions and form the basis of human identity. In fact, numerous examples can be found in history when such different identities conflicted and competed for allegiance. Nation-state building in Europe during the nineteenth century resulted in the unification of Italy and Germany in the 1870's and ushered in a period of nationalism. It was believed that national identity should be the highest social identity to which people pledge their ultimate allegiance.

Edwards (1985) expresses that national identity is related with self-government politically and culturally represents an extension of self-defined ethnic identity.

Accordingly, it is pointed out that national identity comprises the following defining features:

- i) the conception, usually of a subjective kind, of groupness based on emotional bond
- ii) the emphasis, though not necessarily, on objective features, e.g. common language, ancestors etc., as boundary marker(s)
- iii) the call for group solidarity
- iv) the whole thing being a ready form of human categorization.

It should be remembered that national identity is a dynamic rather than a static concept, being able to ebb and rise; change and be transformed with time.

Promoting national identity has long been a major aim of public education as it is believed that solidarity of the political entity will be enhanced. Smith (1991) summarizes that “national identity underpins the state and its organs, or their pre-political equivalents in nations that lack their own states”. This is particularly important for the newly created states, especially those in the third world, which are marked by racial and linguistic divisions. Even for the developed countries like the United States, the government has deliberately worked to ensure that the immigrants would be assimilated into the main stream culture. In the case of Canada, the failure to develop an acceptable form of national identity among the French-speaking population in Quebec has put the state repeatedly on the verge of breaking up. In fact, examples of such disintegration were plentiful in the history of the modern world. Failing to create a uniform national identity, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia succumbed to disintegration one after the other. Each of the breaking up came with enormous political instability and human suffering on a massive scale.

The new challenge to identity discussed in the recent literature is related to the process of globalization. Kubow and Fossum (2007) argue that globalization results in the increasing interdependence and integration of countries and this arise due to the worldwide movement of ideas, capital, labor, and goods. In this light, people are increasingly looking across their national boundaries and relying beyond international institutions for framing their daily living. Bottery (2003) believes that in the globalized world the nation-states are increasingly unable to handle problems especially those about pollution, trade and movement of capital. This inability of the nation states has impact on the national consciousness of the people as people no longer define their identity only with reference to their national citizenship status. Whilst affiliation of the people towards nation changes, the opportunities of exposing to, intermingling with, and working with people from other cultures have been increasing rapidly. This gives rise to the need to the nurturing of an intercultural outlook through education to which we should now turn.

### Education and intercultural outlook

Intercultural capacities can be construed as the ability to mediate between different cultures. It can take place within the confines of one's own national boundaries. In that case, it would involve the issues of minorities and the mainstream culture. When occurs across the frontiers, it then becomes international.

What then does it involve when one is to be able to mediate across different cultures? Rey (1991) emphasizes exposure to foreign cultures (books, songs, speeches, festivals). Rassool (1998) states that there is the need to pick up a new paradigm of both language and culture, which need to be multiple and much more fluid than previously believed. Kim (1988) pinpoints on the socio-psychological aspect. It is pointed out that the determination to adapt across cultures is crucial. Such determination comprises both a willingness to accept a minimum level of deculturation of one's own (childhood-learnt) culture and a certain amount of acculturation of the host (foreign in case of international contact) culture. To transcend one's own ethnic culture in favor of cross-cultural communication is deemed essential. Focussing on communication, Kress (1996) brings out that successful cross-cultural communications requires a command of knowledge in foreign cultures and histories, appreciation of different forms of genre and ability to engage in new forms of communications. Ting-Toomey et al. (2005) on the other hand illustrate how a student-centred pedagogical approach can be taken in the education of intercultural communication.

Also on the topic of intercultural communication, Byram (1996) concludes that a true intercultural mediator would need to be interested in intercultural contacts and be critical and questioning on one's own culture. Besides, the skills of discovering new data and information about foreign cultures and the skills to interact socially are both necessary. Can education foster interculturalism? It concerns not just linguistic skills but more importantly changes in one's attitude and value system. I find the work by Berger and Luckmann (1996) to be informing. It is pointed out that individual is inducted into the objective world through socialization, which actually is a process through which values and understanding are internalized. Two points supportive of cultivating intercultural values through education are: i) cultural values and beliefs ontologically can be planned and

altered; and ii) secondary socialization, which happens after childhood, is highly flexible, and is grounded primarily on instrumental calculation of pragmatic benefits.

As far as Hong Kong is in concern, a recent research sponsored by Oxfam indicates that there is a strong reckoning by Hong Kong educators, as well as their counterparts in the mainland, that there is a need to implant education of global citizenship (Lee and Koo, 2004). It is opined that such education should comprise, inter alia, study with an international perspective, the following: history, politics, economics, pollutions and wars etc. and it should be delivered in a way to foster analytical and critical skills.

### **Can national identity coexist with interculturalism?**

Prima facie, national identity and interculturalism would not be easy partners as they head in opposite directions.

The basic contradiction outstanding is centred on the matter of perspective and habitual allegiance.

To be a national entails not or not just bearing a piece of certificate identifying one's citizenship. It refers more to affiliation and emotional bond with a national group. This implies both a ready cognitive frame of reference and a pledge of loyalty. The former results from prolonged internalization. Thus, to be a Chinese means it is natural for me to see the world and what it ought to be (world relationship, human history, gender roles and family relationship etc.) in a Chinese way. This is crucial as without it, my Chineseness is at risk. Allegiance brings forth the "we versus them" conceptual dichotomy. This is a prism upon which rights and wrongs are sometime refracted in the most distorted manner. Besides, any attempt to cross the cultural/group line in moral reasoning can easily be construed as treacherous and bring forth enormous amount of guilt feeling.

Notwithstanding this, I am confident that national identity and interculturalism not just can, but actually need to, exist side by side in this new age. Thanks to the advancement of technologies both in communication and transportation. We are now living a world which is getting much smaller than it used to be with neighboring countries never as close before. It has been suggested we are now dwelling in a global village. This is an exaggeration of the present state

of affairs so long as sovereignty and hence the ultimate right to resolve conflicts is still in the hands of national governments and national identity continues to be cherished as a form of psychological anchor and collective uniqueness. Notwithstanding, our livings are no more in the confines of national boundaries and that our socio-economic well being now depends much on international interactions. As such nation-states are getting much less relevant as the dimension of planning and action. Globalization, a worldwide horizon of thinking and acting, is now the trend and this development necessarily weaves different cultures together. Cushner (1994) explains this vividly: " Finally, our dependency on international linkages is also greater than ever before. It is estimated that four out of five new jobs presently created in the United States are the result of foreign trade. Add to this the fact that over 6,000 American firms have operations overseas and 6,000 international firms have branch offices in this country. It quickly becomes apparent that young people in today's schools stand a great chance of having significant contacts with individuals from background quite different from their own..." Another statement by Rob Gilbert (1997) is also very revealing. He expresses: "Globalization and its associated processes of localization, are in many respects reducing the power and importance of national governments. The legitimacy of national governments is put in question when their decisions can be challenged in international forums, and their authority over their citizens is similarly weakened. This along with the significance of minorities in much of the world, must raise questions about the nation as a source of identity and a base for community." Apart from the international concern, Gilbert brought out another salient development very obvious since the ending of the WWII and the concomitant process of decolonisation: migration. In fact, the so-called mainstream population in the domestic scene is increasingly mixed with minorities that come from other parts of the world. Intercultural mixing is a hard reality within and across the national boundaries. There is then an inevitable thinning of cultural and racial uniqueness and global values, despite regional differences in construal, will arise. If the above is true and that, as Berger and Luckmann put forth, secondary socialization is largely based on pragmatic consideration, I deem national identity in this new age would necessarily transform itself and become flexible enough to comprise intercultural elements. In fact, to be unable to adapt to and work with foreign cultures is to be parochial and ineffective, both internationally and

domestically. Education must ensure the building up of intercultural attitudes and skills to be a smooth process.

Since civic education is usually entrusted with the work of national identity building, it should be the crux of any attempt to redefine or extend identity in the intercultural direction.

Deriving from the above discussion, my postulation is that civic education, while nurturing national identity, should be able to foster intercultural outlook. As such it would be defined by the following:

1) It helps learners to acquire a national identity which is understood against the backdrop of a closely-knit world.

2) It induces learners to critically understand the nation's history, culture, social systems and practices.

3) It allows learners to make moral judgment which is informed by a worldview and multiple perspectives.

4) It promotes among learners interest and skills in intercultural contacts, both domestically and internationally.

5) To facilitate (4) above, learners would need to develop tolerance and be able to manage plurality in morality, beliefs and customs.

6) The learners should be helped to develop a global identity, with strong interest in global and foreign issues and commitment to help in solving problems that happen across own national boundaries.

7) It would help learners to guard against prejudice of any kind which is based on stereotypes of color, race or ethnicity.

### **Civic education in Hong Kong: development since the 80's**

#### ***Background***

Civic education emerged from its dormant stage in the 1980's. Before that the colonial government's main aim was to ensure the depoliticization of schools and the playing down of any notion of national identity. In this direction there were specific clauses in the education ordinance that forbid political teaching and strict

requirement for all schools to seek approval for their teaching materials<sup>1</sup>. These were paralleled by the actions taken by the government to curtail both leftist (Communist) and rightist (Nationalist) schools from time to time. Morris (1997) aptly describes: “ In effect the political depoliticization of the curriculum and consequently the neglect of civic education was achieved in the period 1945-1965 by direct government intervention... Throughout the 1970’s, neither the annual Education Department reports nor the various white papers on education made any reference to civic education.” Through education, the students acquired a sense of city instead of state identity notwithstanding the fact that the status of the colony was marching to an end with the expiry date of the lease of the New Territories (which comprise over 90% of the total area and virtually all the water supply) drawing near.

The beginning of the 1980’s saw the negotiation of the British Government and the People’s Republic of China on the future of Hong Kong<sup>2</sup>. Soon it was made known to the Tory government under Margaret Thatcher that any hope to extend the lease would be out of the question. Finally the Joint Declaration was signed in 1984 with the effect that China would resume sovereignty over all of Hong Kong in 1997.

This drastic change gave rise to the call for reinstating civic education as students would live their future lives as citizens of the People’s Republic of China, a hitherto completely different and distant political entity.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Regulations released in 1971, Section 98(1) specified: “ no instruction, education, entertainment, recreation or propaganda or activity of any kind which, in the opinion of the Director, is in any way of a political or party political nature, and prejudicial to the public interest or the welfare of the pupils or of education generally or contrary to the approved syllabus, shall be permitted upon any school premises or upon the occasion of any school activity.” In the same Regulations, there were provisions allowing the Director to expel any students involved in political or partisan activities and to enforce that schools only teach according to the officially approved syllabuses.

<sup>2</sup> The treaty which granted the British Government the lease of the New Territories, which comprises 90% of the land, would expire in 1997.



***The 1985 Guidelines on Civic Education  
in Schools: neither national identity nor real  
intercultural outlook***

In 1985, upon enormous public pressure, the Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools were released. This was interpreted as a makeshift and rather ineffective attempt to introduce a balanced civic education. The much-demanded part of national identity and dedication were deliberately left ambiguous. The general aims of civic education (2.2) only stated: “to promote a growing understanding of the nature and workings of our community-based institutions ...” and “to develop the social and political skills necessary for a rational appraisal of the basic issues which affect the life of the community...”. For the teaching objectives relevant for kindergartens and primary schools (2.3a), it became just “to promote an elementary understanding of Hong Kong’s way of life” and “to foster a growing concern for community affairs...”. For secondary schools (2.3b), it was merely: “to enable pupils acquire an understanding of the structure and working of the Hong Kong Government...”; “to help pupils develop knowledge and awareness of the basic issues which affect the life of the community” and “to promote an appreciation of Hong Kong’s cultural heritage...”

Nothing about intercultural and international contacts were mentioned in the general aims of the Guidelines. Students were however required to develop an understanding of Hong Kong as "(a) a cosmopolitan city (fusion of culture); (b) an export-oriented city (dependence on world market); (c) a financial centre (dependence on foreign investment); (d) a tourist centre (dependence on tourists). Accordingly, it was emphasized that students would acquire respect for different cultures, races, creeds, and appreciation of the importance of free trade and factors contributing to Hong Kong's financial well being. This portion of the civic education program was simply a narrowly defined guide for economic survival.

***The 1996 Guidelines on Civic Education  
in Schools: A balance between national identity  
and intercultural outlook***

In 1996, the scenario in Hong Kong was grossly different from that of 1985. The political development in preparation for the handover proceeded steadily in the transitional period since 1995. The Basic law (i.e. constitution of Hong Kong) was prepared. A Chief Executive designate was chosen by an 800-strong electoral college and was endorsed by Beijing. For the British administration, the time was counted. There was also a change in mentality among the people. Due largely to the continued economic prosperity, the uncertainty and outright fear about the return to China was wearing thin though the quarrels between Governor Patten and the Chinese Government never subsided.

It was against this new landscape that the new Guidelines were released. The new Guidelines have been much more positively accepted than the previous one.

The Guidelines is believed to be better than its 1985 predecessor in many ways. The followings are some of the outstanding merits.

The Guidelines seems to be much more able to deal with the national identity question in a direct and positive manner. In the first chapter (1.1), it is spelt out that "In the transition to the twenty-first century and with the resumption of the exercise of sovereignty by China over Hong Kong in 1997, there is a special need for schools to strengthen civic education, with a view to preparing students to become rational, active and responsible citizens...". Chapter two (2.2) specifies that "to develop in them (the students) positive attitudes and values conducive to the development of a sense of belonging to Hong Kong and China so that they are ready to contribute to the betterment of the society, the state and the world."

Chapter Two (2.3) outlines the following objectives:

*Kindergarten and primary level comprise:*

- To promote students' understanding of Hong Kong's relation with the mother country, its political, economic and cultural ties with neighbors and to develop concern for the major events of Hong Kong, China and the world.

- To help students acquire a basic understanding of the Chinese nation and the Chinese culture.

*Secondary level:*

- To help students understand the special features of the Chinese culture, identify with the noteworthy aspects of the Chinese culture, and strengthen their esteem for it.
- To equip students with the necessary social and political skills...to make contributions to the Hong Kong society and the nation.

Apart from pinpointing on national identity building, the Guidelines works to maintain a balance by emphasizing a regional and world perspective, dovetailing the postmodern intercultural trend as previously discussed.

Chapter two (2.2) of the Guidelines states specifically that: “The aim of school civic education is: “To enable students to understand how the individual as a citizen, relates to the family, the neighboring community and the world...”. As such, in the case of kindergarten and primary level, (2.3) states that “ To promote in students an understanding of common issues faced by peoples of the world, such as poverty, wars, uneven distribution of resources, and an urge to improve such situations through efforts of the individuals...”. For secondary level (2.3) reads: “To help students develop open-mindedness and objectivity towards their own people and other peoples, their cultures, values and ways of life”. It emphasizes strengthening students’ awareness of the relations and conflicts in the international arena. Now intercultural and international contacts and interflows are treasured for their own sake while formerly importance of these is construed narrowly in terms of pecuniary gains for Hong Kong.

In fact a very elaborate conceptual framework is given for schools to work with. The themes for study are given in the following table.

**Knowledge, reflection and actions in relation to the world community**

**Table 1**

<b>Kindergarten and primary level</b>	<b>Secondary level</b>
<p><u>a) knowledge</u>            A world of multi-nations and ethnicity            Life of children in different parts of the world            Festivities of world-wide significance            Interactions between nations            International organizations            Promotion of international exchange, understanding and collaboration            Equality and universal brotherhood and sisterhood</p>	<p><u>a. knowledge</u>            A world of varieties, e.g. nations, ethnicities, religions, languages, cultures etc.            Historical events of worldwide significance            Global events            Functions of important international organizations            Concepts of global village            Human rights            Global responsibilities: e.g. peace keeping, environmental protection etc.</p>
<p><u>b) reflection</u>            Apart from Hong Kong, which ethnic life interests me most?            How should I react to customs and behaviors different from my own people's?            What role can Hong Kong play in promoting international exchange?            In what ways are global issues relevant to me?</p>	<p><u>b. reflection</u>            What is my feeling to those people suffering from various worldwide problems?            Will I identify myself as a global citizen and why?            In what way do I respect human rights in my daily life?</p>
<p><u>c) actions</u>            How can I learn more about other nations and people?            How can I promote international brotherhood and sisterhood?            How can I promote the concern for global issues?</p>	<p><u>c) actions</u>            What can I do to help those people suffering from worldwide problem?            What can I do to promote understanding, respect and appreciation of different cultures and customs?            How can I become a contributive global citizen?            How can I promote human rights personally, socially and internationally?            How can I promote the rights of the minorities?</p>

Underpinning the above are a set of values meant to be nurtured among schools at different levels.

*Individual values:* sanctity of life, aesthetic capacity, honesty, human dignity, rationality, creativity, courage, liberty, affectivity, and individuality.

*Social values:* equality, benevolence, kindness, freedom, common good, mutuality, justice, betterment of mankind.

### ***Further development and the way forward***

The return of Hong Kong to China was achieved on 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1997 and thereafter emphasis has been placed on the promotion of national identity and patriotism. This has been reported in the literatures. Morris, Kan and Morris. (2001) points out that Tung Chee Hwa (the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) repeatedly emphasized the need to be patriotic. It's important to display love for the motherland and traditional Chinese culture. Values like filial piety, love for the family, modesty, integrity, the desire for continuous improvement and collective responsibilities should be stressed while sensitive topics should be avoided. The promotion of patriotism is in fact understandable in view of Hong Kong's reunification with China in 1997 (Morris and Cogan, 2001). It should be noted however that the patriotism being promoted is a form of cultural patriotism. Besides, there is a trend of depoliticization in Hong Kong. These have been reported in literatures (Leung and Print, 2002; Leung and Ng, 2004). The attempt to play down the political dimension of patriotism can be understood against the fact that Hong Kong people's understanding of freedom, democracy and human rights can be different from those upheld in the mainland. The need to find a common denominator thus brings back the notions of historical and cultural uniqueness and the traditional values. These are needed for the boundary marking now that the call to promote national identity and patriotism are emphasized. It might be too early to arrive at a conclusion. However, we should note that such a move may have impact on the promotion of intercultural outlook that emphasizes world concerns and universal values as discussed earlier. This perhaps may be an area future researches should be directed.

## Conclusion

Recapitulate what have been discussed, I believe national identity and interculturalism can be and should be promoted together. This should be part of the education our students receive as they are living in a post-modern world where thinking and planning need to be highly internationalized. In fact, cross-cultural contacts are simply unavoidable even if we choose to stay within our national boundaries as a result of the growth in tourism, international trade, multi-national firms and immigration.

To promote both national identity and cultural outlook, on the other hand, is not an easy matter. A sensible balance of the two requires the determination not just to have more cross-cultural interflows. It requests us to set aside the customary way of viewing other and other's perspectives through our own ethnocentric paradigm. It means we have to see both others and ourselves critically. It means eventually we may have to restructure our beliefs and values, not necessarily in line with traditional norms. In the case of Hong Kong, the return of Hong Kong to China requires the development of a new national identity which was discouraged in the colonial era. On the other hand, the rise of the nationalist tide, evident of many newly-decolonized places, has to be finely balanced by the building up of an intercultural outlook. Such outlook is primarily based on critical evaluation of cultures, Chinese and foreign cultures both inclusive. In this light, we may have to examine the efforts Hong Kong has made in her civic education. This is important both for Hong Kong itself as a cosmopolitan city and Hong Kong as one of China's windows to the world.

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