

## HK people do identify as proudly “from Hong Kong”

One can care about China, share some customs, yet be very different and bear a distinct identity. The key is – **acceptance**.

There was neither a school curriculum on the Hong Kong identity nor a political culture of politicians pledging allegiance. The Hong Kong identity grew out of ordinary citizens who accepted that tiny spot on the Southern Coast of China as their home and developed their way of life in a melting pot. **They created and accepted their identity.**



It's tricky trying to describe a dinner table from a Hong Kong family or a café in Hong Kong. Yet, very certainly this is the Hong Kong food culture.

### “You can't have an identity...”

**“You can't be a HongKonger, you're of non-Chinese descent.”** – It is an absurd debate where identity is limited to looks and complexion.

From arguments, as often perpetuated by the Chinese state, being Chinese is bounded by affiliation to a motherland as they became the descendants of the dragon. **It is illiberal as it stigmatises superiority and dangerously establishes that a right to belong can only be based on ancestry roots.**

**Conversely, it also troubles me when activists describe the HK identity as a common script or ideology.** I believe that one does not have to speak Cantonese, be forced to write in the traditional Chinese grammar or that one must have camped on HK streets in protest of the government before being identified as a HongKonger. **The Hong Kong Identity is not articulated by a state or organisation, rather the Hong Kong identity is an identity chosen by self.**

The fact is Hong Kong was an international city. It was a melting pot with mixed marriages. It is relevant to my family. Further, HK was a land of migrants bringing multiculturalism values to HK during the tumultuous post-war years in Asia such as the Cultural Revolution in China, insurgency in Malaya and the Vietnam War. There continues to be a sizeable number of non-Chinese descent who call Hong Kong home. For ethnic Chinese, there is also a substantial mix of Asian cultures. We believe that the Hong Kong identity grew from the common experience of HongKongers from all walks of life from the 1970s to the early 90s.



**“Descendants of the motherland,” as Beijing frequently emphasised?**

**While I would not deny some of CHANs grew up in those lands, the family line recorded a partnership between cultures and ethnicity throughout the generations of mixed marriages.**

**Many of us in Hong Kong have unique experiences and a family lineage compared with families in China.**

**"You can't be a HongKonger because there is no nation."** Hong Kong is a borrowed place on borrowed time. The territories of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon were ceded to the British during the Opium Wars. Meanwhile, the leased New Territories made up 86.2% of Hong Kong. While Claude MacDonald is sometimes attributed to having reported that the 99 years in the New Territories were *"as good as forever"*, few would have agreed that Gladstone believed it or that it was ever the official stance of the British Government. In addition, HK is not practical without 80% of its territory. Whilst, even as Hong Kong is not a nation, and we do not have to go academic, an identity can be born or survive without being a sovereign state as described below.

For the ordinary citizens, none arrived in Hong Kong with any certainty of their future. And HK was a city of 750,000 after the War which grew to 5 million by 1997. Whether it is the million who fled the Great Chinese famine or the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese boat people who sailed to Hong Kong, they did not have in mind the system of governance in Hong Kong or whether it was a nation. The fact is, there was not even a system of good municipal governance until the 1970s. Hong Kong was built on refugees seeking sanctuary.

Nationhood was never a much-discussed priority but the HK identity flourished without a state. Nonetheless, the uncertainties of migrants' newly founded homes lived in their hearts and minds. In the post-war Hong Kong years, there are consistent talks on how sovereignty will be transferred to China. For example, Chiang, as the Nationalist government in China, had spoken on it. Later, the British took the initiative to ask Zhou Enlai during the height of the Communist-linked riots in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, it has not stopped Hong Kong from becoming a prosperous international city. HongKongers found comfort in developing a liberal economy. There was a public health and public school programme unique to Hong Kong. To provide sufficient housing, a social housing programme along some of the world's most expensive private estates was established. Since the establishment of good public services in the 1970s, public policies were conducted through a civil service not run from London, but *'The Efficient'* maintained by Hong Kong residents. Lastly, residents choose to remain in contact with their extended families who did not or could not have fled to Hong Kong, yet everyone surely called Hong Kong their new home.



An irony during The Great Chinese Famine. Parcels of food flowed from Mainland China to Hong Kong, only for them to be immediately slapped up by Hong Kong relatives and posted back to their families in Mainland China.  
Credits: British Pathe, screenshot from video Food Parcels Sent To Red China (1961)

*Hong Kong is fundamentally a different society from China. For better or worse, legitimately or stereotype, frictions occur if forcefully told we are just Chinese.*

*Similarly, I do not see a true Chinese identity thriving in China. The eagerness for the Chinese regime to first place the party over the people meant a slow incorporation of a Chinese identity that was enforced, rather than progressed by her citizens.*

I adore the values of liberal democracy. I most certainly rejected the current government in China and will do nothing to try to praise her. Similarly, one will not fail to find similar rejections of Chinese regimes from my forefathers.



Public slogans on Shanghai Metro during the World Expo reading, "The Gathering of Great Civilisations, our Families' World Expo."

For a generation like myself, while proudly describing myself from Hong Kong, home seems like an intangible concept. Practically, just as many immigrated to Hong Kong, there are as many planning to emigrate from the City. Even for my grandparents, as soon as they set up a new home in 1940s Hong Kong during the post-war Chinese Civil War, some family businesses were also settled in Singapore (what was still the Straits Settlements). Likewise, I spent my childhood years in Singapore and Australia, entirely outside of Hong Kong.

Hence, the Hong Kong identity is not forged because of a fixed abode. Academically, there could be a link to a fixed abode due to the closing of the border between HK and Guangzhou at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in China. However, for the layman, **the concept of being a HongKonger is not because of the legitimacy of a sovereignty but is a developed joint declaration of free people who wish to preserve a set of values and fundamentals.**



**“China cannot own Hong Kong. We may only choose to identify with China.”**

*Most Hongkongers like myself do care about the developments in China. We choose to do that, just like choosing to attend Tiananmen vigils. It's because we value our identity. It was out of hope that we could share our values and aspirations with the people in China.*

**You cannot be a HongKonger as your culture closely resembles a Chinese.”** Indeed, many of us are bilingual, of which, most of us are fluent in Chinese. We celebrate two new year occasions, of which one according to the Lunar calendar, and most of us have strong links with families in Mainland China.

**But we are also so different in Hong Kong.** We trusted our legislature and the legal system. We value the rule of law, as well as being a global citizen. We chose to embrace a legal system based on the Common Law based on Britain. We chose internationalist humanitarian values to receive the Vietnamese Boat people during the Vietnam War. These do not have to come at the expense of any natural attachments one may choose to treasure.

Worth noting, as above mentioned, there is a significant population of non-Chinese descent.

From time to time, the people of Hong Kong developed their attachments progressively. My parents did not become Christians or give me an English name because of any norms. And most certainly I have a Chinese name. We chose to forge relationships and there was no denial of the past. One certainty is our emotions are neither artificial nor impressed by a state; but adapted by self.

By my personal feelings, China cannot own Hong Kong. We may only choose to identify with China.



*A calendar combining the Western Christian calendar with the Lunar New Year calendar updated by missionary Johann Adam Schall von Bell.*



*Lady Justice on The Supreme Court in Hong Kong which was built during the colonial years. The Rule of Law had ceased to exist following Beijing's imposing its set of laws onto Hong Kong.*



*My childhood was always away from Hong Kong. The prospect of 1997 under Chinese rule was never appealing to my parents. The family left for Singapore and I spent my childhood in Singapore and Australia.*

*After a few years of working in Australia after graduation, I ventured to Hong Kong. Further later, another 3 years working in Macau, Shanghai and Zhuhai.*



### An Identity that transcends beyond place

**“I treasure the Hong Kong identity inherited from my parents, and I value this identity as much as I regard myself as British – the nationality by birth I proudly value and defend”**

I explored my family roots and I continue identifying as a connection with the Hong Kong heritage rather than Chinese. While I worked in Shanghai, I had an apartment in what was the French Concession area. I certainly tried locating where my great-grandparents used to have a house before their lands were confiscated after 1949. When I congregate at the International Church, I often ventured along the streets trying to think what it would have been like when generations of the Chans used to own businesses in the city. Yet, as much as I found fondness in these links and found representation in some cultural identity, I regarded myself identifying as from Hong Kong rather than China.



My Missionary trips in China when it was still possible. Many of them were in Rural villages in Guangxi and Qinghai. But quite a few trips were in major provincial cities as my Church funded children to study at better schools outside their 'Hu-kou' area. - the Hukou is a household registration system which fundamentally controlled population flow as one will not receive free public services outside their assigned area.

I still remember on one of those trips, we were speaking to a group of high school students in a so-called 'No.1 Secondary School'. They students haven't finish classes at 9pm and we were due to give a talk on Friendship in English as part of their English lesson. A Party Member stood silently at the side, which I gather his mission is to rephrase my speech in a way that fits the Party's agenda after I've left.

By the way, today, you would never be able to open up a Bible in a school canteen. Let alone preach in a public space. Even back then, I often found my Visa to China abruptly cancelled long before it was due to expire.

“HK could never be home because of 1997,” was a common memory for children like myself. Our parents were the baby boomers born in Hong Kong and our grandparents became HongKongers when they settled in the city for sanctuary. For ourselves, either we spend most of our years outside Hong Kong or we witness our classmates saying farewells one by one. I treasure the Hong Kong heritage brought overseas by my parents, and I value this identity as much as I regard myself as British – the nationality by birth I proudly value and defend.

Now, 27 years after the handover and the death of any prospects that Beijing will forge an international order of tolerance and multilateralism, I worry that the Hong Kong Identity can only be inherited and not further developed progressively.

Hong Kong, as a place, will fundamentally become a different society. Indeed, Hong Kong was not a country and to argue whether it is, could or should be a country seems lost in factional arguments.

Similarly, I do not see a true Chinese identity thriving in China. The eagerness for the Chinese regime to first place the party over the people meant a slow incorporation of a Chinese identity that was enforced, rather than progressed by her citizens.

I adore the values of liberal democracy. I most certainly rejected the current government in China and will do nothing to try to praise her. Similarly, one will not fail to find similar rejections of Chinese regimes from my forefathers.

Nonetheless, it is undisputed the people of Hong Kong share certain freedoms, a journey in which they fought to achieve such freedoms and certainly a set core of values which, for better or worse, legitimately or stereotyped, do cause friction with citizens across the border.

On Beijing's part, it has rolled out its own set of narratives that any thoughts of the Hong Kong identity are constructed by Western imperialism or *the remnants of intelligence services* such as the CIA. Our media do not repeat these narratives not because they are controlled, but because there is not a single ounce of evidence.

Alas, I return to the question of whether the Hong Kong Identity can only be inherited or even without the city the identity may be further developed. Truthfully, with a rapid decline of freedom in HK and the increasing geopolitical priorities to face Beijing as a challenging regime, I do not have an answer though I most certainly have hope.

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Hong Kong, as a place, is fundamentally now a different society from the Hong Kong I knew.



## The LD Friends of HK

Hence, Larry and I formed the LD Friends of Hong Kong where the HK identity can congregate to preserve or discuss the future of the Hong Kong Identity.

The people of Hong Kong constructed the narratives of our Hong Kong identity in a free and open society.

But what will the future hold in the inevitable reality of geopolitics? This organisation serves as a vessel for thoughts from liberal, progressive HongKongers. We cannot tell in another 27 years whether the Hong Kong Identity will be in status or developed.

As progressive liberals, we believe a Hong Kong diaspora will generate new knowledge about identity. Appealing to our desire for freedom in thoughts and beliefs, the identity thrives through global debates on facing China as a challenging regime, the sharing of knowledge on the Party system in China and vocal on what we believe should be free and open societies in the Far East.



Above, In China, 2010 |  
Right, campaigning in my  
ward, 2024

## About Nicholas:

Growing up in Singapore with a HK heritage, Nicholas trained in Psychology and Law in Australia and the UK. Previously, Nicholas practices as a psychologist giving expert evidence, policies on rehabilitation system and researching anti-human trafficking. He is now training in law focusing on Criminal Law and social justice.

Nicholas stood as a Parliamentary Candidate in Chatham and Aylesford in GE2024. He flies the liberal flag with the Medway Liberal Democrats. Nicholas often writes on local issues in the local papers on social housing advocacy, concerns on quality of living and human rights.