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Architecture of thought: Identity construction through educational policies in today's Hong Kong



Impressum

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1. Introduction: Identity construction in turbulent times

Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously “born” in each individual brain: they have had a centre of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion—a group of men, or a single individual even, which has developed them and presented them in the political form of current reality. (Gramsci 1930, cited according to Hoare/Smith 1999: 423)

Hong Kong, the former British colony and now Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC), experienced a tense political atmosphere in the years since the hand-over of the city in 1997: uprisings in 2003 against a proposed National Security Law, unprecedented protest in the city in 2014 and 2019 by pro-democracy activists, and demonstrations against the harsh COVID19 policies. Most of these mobilisations were resistance against policies introduced by the Hong Kong (HK) government that sparked fear in the population of an increasingly authoritarian grip of the PRC's government on the city. The ideas of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and democratic rights created the basis for social action, for voicing one's opinion and trying to reach more and more people to join the movement. With the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020, the HK government responded by taking measures to suppress the emergence and activities of anti-Beijing/pro-democracy movements. This legislation triggered widespread outrage on a global scale (Al Jazeera 07.01.2020). Yet, what caused less outrage is the developments in one influential centre of idea formation: institutionalised education. It is in kindergartens and schools, that, as Gramsci (Gramsci 1930, cited according to Hoare/Smith 1999: 423) puts it, ideas and opinions are disseminated and presented in a political form of current reality.

Therefore, the research question of this paper is: which identities do the curriculum and educational policies in HK aim to construct? I would like to investigate in which ways education is used by the executive in reaction to the social unrest and uprisings in the past years and how thoughts, ideas, and values are trying to be constructed in students' minds. Since January 2022, all schools are obliged to display the national (PRC) flag on each school day; so-called “National Security Education” must be taught in schools and the curriculum for Chinese language education must contain elements of “moral and affection” and an “appreciation for the Chinese culture” (Curriculum Development Council 2021: 5; Ho 2020: 45; Curriculum Development

Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 6). These keywords and educational practices influence the students' perception of themselves as well as their idea of belonging.

The relevancy of that research results from the empirical situation as well as a theoretical consideration. Firstly, the PRC is an emerging superpower, yet the government's means and strategies to consolidate its power are still a black box to foreign researchers. The discourse surrounding Confucius Institutes¹ is a prime example of the uncertainty and lack of research on Chinese education programs and their effects. The situation in HK is unique as it is one of the few special administrative regions and holds an extraordinary history. However, discussions about the influence of Chinese-made curricula are also prevalent here. Through my research, I aim to shed light on the specific policies employed by the government of the PRC and the HK government in dealing with a population that showed resistance against anti-democratic changes in their legislation. From the perspective of political theory, this research is particularly interesting as it highlights subversive means to establish and legitimise political rule. It aims to provide empirical evidence to support constructivist approaches as a framework for analysing how social identities influence political dynamics and vice versa.

As a result of my research, I argue that it is not multiple identities, but one identity that is conveyed by the education policies. This singular identity is based on a closed and unmalleable concept of culture, that creates a clearly defined ingroup and outgroup. A circular argument that postulates that social morals and the law result from one another and serve as both foundational basis and effect of this culture is furthermore a finding of my analysis. Lastly, I demonstrate in this research, that the term "critical thinking" used in the official documents is eroded from the inside and in fact, refers to a thinking in the boundaries of the law. The findings are based on a qualitative content analysis using materials from the Education Bureau (EDB)² and the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSARG) concerning

¹ The controversies about Confucius Institutes concern several fears: that the institute is used as propaganda tool for the government of the PRC, that it limits academic freedom of their employees as well that it lacks transparency regarding the control and funding of the Confucius Institutes by the government of the PRC (Repnikova 2022: 443).

² The Education Bureau is the administrative body that is responsible for all matters regarding education and schools in HK. It is affiliated to the Secretary for Education (currently Dr Choi Yuk-lin 蔡若蓮), who is subordinate to the Chief Secretary of Education. Hierarchically above that post is only the Chief Executive (currently John KC Lee 李家超).

school curricula, extra-curricular education, and language policies. I examine the content of the written sources as well as their respective context systematically in an iterative process deploying Content-Structuring Content Analysis (*inhaltlich-strukturierende Inhaltsanalyse*) by Philipp Mayring. This approach grasps the subliminal as well as articulate meanings of written material, creating an inductive category system as the basis for interpretation.

The theoretical foundation of this research is Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Gramsci's ideas on education and cultural hegemony. Research about identities finds itself at the crossroads of psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, and even more disciplines. I will draw on research of (social) psychology and political theory to interpret the results of the analysis. Social psychology distinguishes between the self-concept (the individual identity) and social identity. The former is a private dimension and experience of individual uniqueness, the latter is influenced by group membership and derives from cognitive and emotional awareness of commonality and sameness (Demmers 2012: 19–20). In this research, I will focus on the latter aspect of identity, adopting a constructivist perspective on identities in general.

The first part of this paper is going to outline the basic principle of the HK polity as well as events of political unrest in HK since the handover to the PRC in 1997 to embed the research in a historically informed context [0]. In that chapter, I will emphasize on mass mobilization and protest movements in 2003, 2012, 2014, and 2019 as most of these had not only significant political implications but furthermore created moments of identification and solidarity among HK citizens against the government and certain legislation. Then, I will elaborate on SIT and discuss some Gramscian thoughts on the relation of education, identity, and the state [0] as well as explain the methodological approach [0]. The results of my research are structured in three parts: “Chinese culture and belonging” [Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.], “Values, morals, and law-abidingness” [0], and “Critical thinking” [Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.]. Lastly, I will critically reflect on the limitations of this research [Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.] and conclude by pointing to further research gaps [0].

2. Historical background, literature review, and theoretical framework

2.1 Historical background: Identification in moments of resistance

This historical context briefly covers some events and developments that are important to understand the setting in which the corpus material was published and interpreted. Firstly, I will focus on one of the basic elements of the HK – PRC relation: the “One Country – Two Systems” principle. After that, I will elaborate on points in time, when a significant amount of HK citizens engaged in political action to resist government policy proposals, especially but not only relating to the education sector. Political action is, according to SIT, driven by the feeling of group identity (among many other factors) (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 4–5). Individuals and groups resorting to collective action or solidarity perceive a specific commonality and identity as salient and a guiding principle of action. Therefore, the protest movements of the past can be understood as product of and constructed by a social identity. Policy actors take this into consideration when drafting policies. The material under scrutiny was produced under the impression of the events outlined below and the assumption about social identities that result from it.

One Country - Two Systems

“One Country, Two Systems” is a principle developed by the Chinese prime minister Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 that constituted the basis for the “Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong”. This diplomatic treaty, signed in 1984 between the government of the PRC and the British government, structured the handover of power over HK to the government of the PRC. As a result of this handover, the Chinese government regained control and sovereignty over HK territory from July 1st 1997, after the city had been a British crown colony for more than 150 years. Furthermore, the treaty ensured that HK enjoys a high degree of autonomy regarding its governmental structure, legal system, and capitalist economy for 50 years (Yuen/Cheng 2020: 130; Koo et al. 2003: 137). One country – the PRC – but two legal, economic, political, and administrative systems. It allowed HK to be

a partly democratic island in the authoritarian state. Yet, among the citizens as well as within media and academia, doubts about whether the government of the PRC sticks to the “Two Systems”-part of the principle are being voiced since the first day after the handover (van Wingerden 2022; Auswärtiges Amt 25.03.2023; Leong 11.12.2020; Lam 2016: 112).

The first Special Administrative Region of the PRC “experienced an economic downturn and rapidly politicizing environment as a whole” (Lam 2016: 113). While the attitude towards the communist regime as well as national identity were controversial and divided public opinion, several incidents show the politicized and conflicted atmosphere of the decades after the handover.

2003 – The Anti-NSL movement

In 2003, the HK government proposed the “National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill”, following its obligation stipulated in Article 23 of the Basic Law. The proposed changes included what was later called “the seven crimes” by the press: treason, secession, sedition, subversion, theft of state secrets, link with foreign political organisations and special police investigation powers (Ma 2005: 467). After the first reading by the Legislative Council in February 2003, a public consultation period followed, which led to a sudden and strong awakening of civil society. On July 1st 2003, the anniversary of the handover in 1997, more than 500 000 people took to the streets to voice their opposition against the proposed law. The activists feared that the new legislation would curb their freedom of expression, assembly, and right to a fair trial. Especially journalists, lawyers, human rights activists and members of the Catholic Church and Falun Gong 法轮功 saw themselves as targets of the new law. The opposition of the proposed bill denounced that it was too vague and could therefore be abused by the authorities to crack down on civil liberties and human rights in HK. In schools and universities, librarians voiced their fear “claiming that they could easily be charged for ‘displaying’ potentially seditious publications” (Ma 2005: 470), one of the elements of the new legal charge of sedition. In the later stages of the protest, legal experts opposing the bill printed pamphlets and distributed them on the streets and in secondary schools to explain the content and danger of the bill. Meanwhile, pro-government social actors defended the bill and engaged in counter-mobilisation. They supported their view with patriotic principles and the argument, it represented a constitutional duty of HK to enact Article 23 (Ma 2005: 474). On the official side, the Security Bureau emphasized that the proposed laws were going to be interpreted in a lenient way and were generally more lenient than some national security laws of Western states. A

broad range of civil society actors created alliances such as the “Civil Human Rights Front”, organising large-scale support for their opposition against the HK government and the decreasing freedoms in HK. The unprecedented opposition forced the government to withdraw the bill in September 2003 (Ma 2005: 465). The 2003 Anti-NSL protest represented the first political mass mobilisation since the solidarity movement with protests in the PRC 1989 and demonstrated to the authorities, that “large numbers of Hong Kongers prized rights based rule of law and wanted the region’s legal system to remain distinct from the Mainland” (Chopra/Pils 2022: 295). On June 4th 1989, the protests in Beijing and other mainland cities were violently ended by the PRC police. Since then, a yearly vigil took place in HK to commemorate the activists who were killed. In 2020 and 2021, the HK government banned civil society actors to mobilize to the streets, claiming that there was a risk of COVID-19 spreading. In 2022 and 2023, the main sites of protest and remembrance stayed empty, too, as police sealed the sites and the administration used the space for other events (Chen 05.06.2023).

2012 – The Anti-National Education Movement

In 2011, a significant change in the primary and secondary school curriculum occurred. In May 2011, the HK government announced the transformation of the subject “Moral and Civic Education” to “Moral and National Education” within the following year (Lin/Lin: 3). The plan included teaching Mandarin as a compulsory subject in all schools and a passage criticising multi-party political systems while praising the one-party state (Chow 2014: 50; Wong/Wright 2020: 1747). The government planned to make the implementation of the new plan mandatory for all public schools. Teachers, parents and especially students verbalized heavy discontent with the plan and took to the street. Mid 2011, students created the Facebook group “Scholarism”, but it was not until September 2012, when the government issued a three-year curriculum plan for the new subject, that it got active on the street. The accusation of “brainwashing” (Ho 2020: 45) and the framing of Moral and National Education as propagandistic education by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sparked increasing discontent so that activists of Scholarism allied with the “Parents Concern Group” and other associations in the “Civil Alliance Against National Education” (Wong/Wright 2020: 1746). On 29th July 2012, 90 000 people protested in front of the government headquarters, a few people engaged in sit-ins and a petition was initiated by teachers to pledge their support for the protest. University students boycotted their classes in solidarity with the students, parents, and teachers. As a peak of the protest, Scholarism led a 3-day hunger strike on August 30th 2012 (Lin/Lin: 10; Wong/Wright 2020: 1748). The activists focussed on one message: the new curriculum policy has to be re-

versed as it leads to systematic brainwashing of students, an allegation Chief Executive Leung 梁振英 denied publicly (BBC News 09.01.2012). In September 2012 the HK government saw no other option but to recoil and change one aspect of the Moral and National Education curriculum plan: its implementation would not be mandatory but optional for schools (Lin/Lin: 3). It can reasonably be argued that the Anti-Moral and National Education movement was a precursor the 2014 Umbrella movement as well as to the protest in context of the government election in 2017: it created a group of young people who learned to organise among themselves to defend HK against Beijing's influence (Wang 2017: 128). Online as well as offline means of protest, solidarity, and organisation developed and new alliances formed (Wong/Wright 2020: 1747). Furthermore, the events in 2012 raised awareness for education as a significant point of influence for the government of the PRC on the population of HK. It demonstrated to the governments of HK and the PRC, that civil society defends the autonomies and freedoms of HK, ready to mobilise masses online and on the streets and not hesitant to resort to radical action.

2014 – The Umbrella Movement

In January 2014, shortly before what would later be known as “Umbrella Movement”, the EDB posted a statement on its webpage saying that Cantonese was a Chinese dialect, rather than its own language. This led to a public discussion about the role of Cantonese in society and education resulting in demonstrations during which activists displayed anti-Putonghua-slogans (Ho 2020: 42). The statement on the website was quickly removed, yet the alarm bells of activists were still ringing regarding the standardised Beijing-Chinese creeping into HK's education. Furthermore, this represented anew a moment of political organisation and informal debate of young people (Chopra/Pils 2022: 299).

A few months later, the Umbrella movement was sparked by a decision by the National People's Congress issued on August 31st, 2014. The decision issued that candidates for the post of the Chief Executive needed to be approved by a primarily pro-Beijing body, the “Election Committee”. This was interpreted as a means to silence opposition and hinder any pro-democratic politician to get into office. Large scale protest erupted: sit-ins of squares and official buildings, boycotts of pro-Beijing shops and strategic violence dominated the city for 79 days (Lai/Sing 2020: 43; Chopra/Pils 2022: 297). The police reacted heavy-handedly to the protest, using tear gas and arresting several hundred activists. Eventually, the protests faced an ending when the policed cleared the last remaining road occupations in December 2014.

2019 – The Anti-Extradition-Bill Protest

In 2019, civil society took to the streets in protest against a bill that proposed to amend the “Fugitive Offenders Ordinance”, effectively leading to the possibility of extraditing fugitive offenders from HK to the PRC judicial system (Ho 2020: 40). The uprisings lasted for 10 months, the activists engaging again in street demonstrations, artistic protest, and civil disobedience. Many creative ways of showing solidarity with the activists developed, such as singing the newly invented song “Glory to Hong Kong” or publicly displaying the HK flag (Tang 2022: 677). As in the previous protest, extraordinary alliances formed to make the uprising present in every part of daily life: associations lobbied foreign governments, pro-democracy legislators filibustered in parliament to block pro-government legislators, and activists protested in front of official buildings. Parts of the activist groups resorted to more violent and radical strategies: vandalism and throwing Molotov Cocktails at police were part of the strategic repertoire of some groups as well (Tang 2022: 660; Lai/Sing 2020: 48–49). More than two million citizens demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the increasing influence of the PRC in HK and their fear of the loss of rule of law (Chopra/Pils 2022: 297). The police reacted with tear gas, pepper-spray, and even rubber bullets, leading to decreasing public trust in the police (Tang 2022: 669; Lai/Sing 2020: 47). In September 2019, the government announced the withdrawal of the bill, yet the protesters continued to mobilize for weekly demonstrations. It was the outbreak of the COVID-19-pandemic that caused the protest to be paused (van Wingerden 2022).

2020 – The National Security Law

The “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region” (for short “National Security Law” or even shorter “NSL”) is a criminal statute that was added to Annex III of the HK Basic Law. It was passed on June 30th 2020 and immediately implemented (Chopra/Pils 2022: 299).

The NSL establishes four new categories of criminal behaviour: secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces, all of which can be committed through non-violent means and still fulfil the criteria of the definition of the offences (Chopra/Pils 2022: 300). The maximum sentence for these offences is life imprisonment, while no bail should be granted to the suspect unless there is good reason. The formulation of the law is partly vague, allowing anything to be framed into a threat to security. For instance, Article 24 (5) states that the suspect shall be found guilty for the crime of terrorism if they engage in “other dangerous activities which seriously jeopardise public health, safety or security” (Government of the HKSAR 30.06.2020). Furthermore, the law introduces new central authorities in HK: one of them rep-

resents an autonomous police force the members of which can legally be recruited from the PRC and are not under scrutiny of the HK police or the judicial system (Chopra/Pils 2022: 302). It is remarkable, especially in the context of the reaction to the Extradition Bill in 2019, that the NSL allows cases to be transitioned to the mainland judiciary system if the Central Government of the PRC decides that one of the three vague criteria (complexity of the case, inability of the HK government to enforce the NSL or a major and imminent threat) is fulfilled (Chopra/Pils 2022: 302).

There is little doubt about the fact that the NSL targets pro-democratic activists, journalists, teachers, and politicians and aims to crack down on everybody who challenges the shift of authority to Beijing (van Wingerden 2022). Chopra and Pils analyse:

It is [...] a blow not only to the rule of law but also to the democratic process and promotion of democracy in Hong Kong that the NSL has drastically thinned out the range of civil society actors advocating for civil and political rights, separation of powers and democratisation, as well as the range of opinions that can be comfortably aired. (Chopra/Pils 2022: 307)

The law was internationally condemned, official statements called it regrettable, draconian, and pointed out, that it was undermining the “One Country – Two Systems”-principle (Al Jazeera 07.01.2020). The British government offered HK residents to apply for a British National Overseas Visa, a call over 30 000 persons followed in the year after (van Wingerden 2022). Domestic reactions to the law were the self-dissolution of human rights groups, labour unions, and pro-democracy groups. Teachers, lawyers, companies and think tanks feared accusations; self-policing and self-censorship became ubiquitous (Chopra/Pils 2022: 308).

The education sector is explicitly named as an important aspect of the NSL in Article 9 and Article 10, saying that the HK government must take action to strengthen national security and implement the NSL in schools and universities (Government of the HKSAR 30.06.2020). A former university teacher, Peter Baehr, describes that instead of waiting for instructions from the authorities, universities anticipated them and implemented their own rules to avoid any confrontation with the executive. Lingnan University requires its lecturers now to record their classes – creating an atmosphere of intimidation and self-censorship for students and teachers alike (Baehr 2022: 228). The Academic Freedom Index underlines this point, showing that the academic freedom in HK has been in a phase of rapid decline since 2009 after more than 50 years of relatively stable high academic freedom. Very few countries have decreased their score

in the index within the last ten years as drastically as HK has³ (Michael Coppedge et al. 2023: 7; Spannagel/Kinzelbach 2022). The 2023 report explicitly names the NSL as the source of “unprecedented pressure on academic freedom” (Michael Coppedge et al. 2023: 7).

It is against the backdrop of persistent discontent expressed by civil society about the government's policies, as well as the new NSL that my research and material must be regarded. Quantitative research has revealed that the majority of participants in the 2019 protest were aged between 20 and 30 and had attained higher education. Additionally, half of the respondents reported their involvement in the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Lee et al. August 2019). These findings demonstrate that the youth has played a prominent role in protests in HK over the past decade. Their active participation indicates their significance in shaping the sociopolitical landscape in the city. Their identity has been and will continue to be crucial in policymaking in HK over the years. As I will elaborate in the theory-chapter, identity, especially social identity, can serve as a powerful driving force for social and political action. Shaping the identities of individuals and groups in HK is essential for policymakers as it influences their motivations, beliefs, and aspirations, which, in turn, shape their stance on various issues and their engagement in political activities. Prior to addressing this question directly, I will situate the present study within the existing body of scholarship on identity construction and education in Hong Kong. While this field has received some scholarly attention, the contribution of this research is twofold: it extends the temporal scope beyond the period most frequently examined in the literature which are the years preceding the enactment of the NSL and introduces Social Identity Theory and cultural hegemony as an analytical framework that remains underutilized in this context.

2.2 Literature Review

Vickers and Kan (2003) analyse the role of education and especially the history curriculum in constructing identity in HK. They establish a framework of a three-dimensional identity in HK: a local dimension, a pan-Chinese dimension, and an international dimension. Their research finds that the local identity is only shallowly rooted in consciousness of a local HK history but is countered in the curricula by an appeal to an “all-embracing Chineseness” (Vickers/Kan 2003: 448). They conclude by asserting that “the new regime is engaged in a long-term cam-

³ HK is not considered a country but coded as a Special Administrative Region and assigned a separate index ranking.

campaign to resocialize Hongkongers as uncritical patriots who identify first and foremost not with Hong Kong, but with the Chinese ‘motherland’” (Vickers/Kan 2003: 401). Six years after the official handover of administration from Britain to Beijing, they point out that there is an attempt to indoctrinate the youth of HK into feeling part of a homogenous Chinese society, sweeping the “Two Systems”-part of the “One Country – Two Systems” principle under the rug.

Morris and Vickers (2015) elucidate the background of the 2012 protests against the Moral and National Education framework by historically analysing the emergence of a HK local identity. They argue that there have been successive official attempts to use schooling for purposes of political socialization and creating a patriotic relationship with the PRC. According to their research, the curriculum pre-handover established an ethno-cultural Chinese identity, that transcended political arrangements while the civic identity was a democratic and local one. This “dual identity was both the ‘problem’ Moral and National Education was designed to solve, and the ultimate cause of its demise” (Morris/Vickers 2015: 8). They conclude that the protests in 2012 represent a part of a larger pattern of rejection of Beijing’s understanding of the “One Country – Two Systems” principle and prompts the government of the PRC to intervene more directly in local politics and political identity formation (Morris/Vickers 2015: 16). This finding is supported by research of Veg (2017): his study regards the discourses that challenge civic identification with the PRC in three case studies of open civil protest⁴. He establishes a model of ethno-cultural vs. civic mode of identification in a pan-Chinese vs. local framework of reference, stating that since approximately 2008 there is a tendency towards a stronger civic identity that opposes Chinese cultural nationalism and locates the claim for democratic rights in a local identity (Veg 2017: 343).

Ho (2020) extensive analysis of post 1997 school curricula focusses on language policy, censorship in the curriculum, and nationalism. He asks how political culture and identity has been promoted in schools and concludes that the curriculum strives to establish a unified cultural identity. With reference to a Foucauldian understanding of power, Ho points out how knowledge produces, reproduces and consumes power: “As education is a social institution, there is a question of [...] how knowledge is identified, delivered, and contextualized in the classroom pertaining to teachers’ and students’ identity construction” (Ho 2020: 48). His anal-

⁴ Namely the June 4th vigil, the 2012 anti-Moral and National Education protest, and the 2014 Umbrella Movement

ysis reveals that a new identity is in the process of formation, one that integrates local and global identities into a “new cultural/national identity” (Ho 2020: 47). However, at the time of his writing, the NSL had just been published and its effects were still unclear. The literature reveals that identity in HK is not a monolithic entity but structured along different axes (local, pan-Chinese, global, civic), with a trajectory towards a more assertive local identity that stands in tension with the increasing attempts at national homogenization through the CCP government in Beijing. It furthermore demonstrates that formal education has consistently functioned as an important site for political contestation, deployed as instruments of ideological socialization while provoking social uprisings against it. However, these studies predate the NSL and the COVID 19 pandemic and its aftermath, a gap this research seeks to fill. In the following, I will introduce SIT as the theoretical framework for this analysis, drawing on its concepts of creation of social identity, in-group cohesion and external identification of groups. Furthermore, Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony will be elaborated upon, pointing to how political power is stabilised through consent rather than coercion. This will be followed by an account of the empirical material as well as the discussion of the results of the analysis.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

*You have no idea who I am. I've had so many identities, I don't remember
who I am anymore.
(Frank Abagnale Jr. in Catch Me If You Can 2002)*

Who am I? And who am I not? This question lies at the core of the concept of identity. Frank Abagnale Jr., the main protagonist of the movie “Catch me if you can”, points out two important aspects of the questions around identity: on the one hand, the quote indicates that identity has something to do with being understood by others as having that identity, a need for external verification. On the other hand, it points out the changeability and multitude of identities. The character in the film is a con artist and master of deception who assumes multiple identities throughout the film to evade capture by the FBI. While the protagonist is changing from one persona to the next, questions such as “who *is* he really? How much of the personification sticks to his *real self*?” inevitably come up.

Scientifically, identity can be described as a container term to categorise and label people, groups, and even organisations or businesses. Nowadays, the term is inescapable in everyday life as well as in political science and many other fields of research. It gained prominence in social analysis in the 1960s in the US, originally adopted from a psychoanalytical context, then linked to sociological role theory and research on ethnicity (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 2). While the concept was thought of individualistically in the beginning, the rise of the Black Power Movement shed light on the social dimension of identities.

In some contexts, the concept of identity is believed to be an unchangeable and socially consequential attribute to a person or a group, linked to a set of characteristics, norms, and beliefs distinct to members of a certain identity category; citizenship, gender, or religion, for instance. Especially with the constructivist turn in social sciences, the concept was rethought to be a contingent product of a socially constructed world instead of a natural and inalterable category. Constructivist approaches perceive identity categories as socially produced and shaped by human action and speech. The content and boundaries are considered fluid, malleable and permeable (Fearon/Laitin 2000: 848). This goes hand in hand with an understanding of the modern "self" as fragmented and unstable (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 7). Therefore, scholars ask how, why, and by whom group boundaries and the content of identity categories are drawn and maintained. Furthermore, a constructivist perspective seeks to explain social and political action in a non-instrumental, non-self-interest-driven way (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 7; Demmers 2012: 24–26).

Research about identities finds itself therefore at the crossroads of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science. Approaching the research question of which identities are created through education in HK, an interdisciplinary perspective is therefore crucial. I will draw on research of social psychology before elaborating a perspective of political theory on identity to interpret the material.

SIT was primarily coined by Henri Tajfel in 1971. Through the experience of the horrors of WW2, the social psychologist and polish Jew Tajfel became interested in the social dynamics of prejudice, inter-group hatred, and discrimination. His work is on its basis psychological, yet especially in the field of conflict studies it has been applied and developed to explain phenomena such as partisanship, inter-group violence, and war. Research in this field has already been manifold, but Tajfel aimed at explaining "what possible social dynamics result from group attachments, and what are the forces driving the this dynamic" (Demmers 2012: 47). A group

in this context is not an “objective” category, but the result from categorization of the social environment in way that is meaningful to the individual (Tajfel 1974: 69). Categorization means to socially locate oneself and others in relation to others or a certain narrative in a specific situation. Therefore, it is not to be understood as a fixed term but as a process serving the purpose of creating a feeling of security, order and simplification, belonging as well as a positive self-understanding (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 14; Demmers 2012: 40). This process is at the same time emotional, evaluative as well as cognitive; It can be tacit as well as articulate. Through this process, the individual takes over the social identity of a group it categorizes itself in. Tajfel defines a social identity as follows:

For our purposes we shall understand social identity as that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership. (Tajfel 1974: 69)

The intensity of the different social identities that one individual feels attached to varies according to the degree and the internalisation of that identification (Hornung et al. 2019: 218). According to Hornung et al. (2019), the degree of the identification and therefore the strength of the social identity depends on the depth of the emotional bond, the history of the group and the individual membership in it, and the frequency and intensity of contact with other members of the group (Hornung et al. 2019: 214). Furthermore, the social identity must seem significant and meaningful to the individual in the given context. In other words:

a social identity may be more salient when the social identity is stronger. This seems tautological, but it is not: A salient identity is the social identity that is perceived by an actor in a specific situation as the guiding principle of action. A social identity may be weak but still be salient in a specific situation due to the context. (Hornung et al. 2019: 214)

The social group as the result of the meaningful categorization can be characterized by shared collective values that distinguish the ingroup from the rest of society. Individual values can be seen in relation to values of the group, which oftentimes drive collective political action (Hornung et al. 2019: 215). Proceeding on the assumption that the individual strives for a positive self-concept, distinctiveness on the level of these values from other social groups that is positively connotated from the members of the ingroup is essential to the membership (Tajfel 1974: 72). In SIT, the process of categorization, identification, and social-identity-creation is inevitably bound to “the other”. It is the counterpart against which the individual and the group stand out. The external recognition of the group is one of the external forces shaping social identities,

others are public opinion or relevant events influencing the group or its individuals. The success or failure of a group member, the internal group image or interpersonal relations in the group are internal factors relevant to the social identity connected to it (Hornung et al. 2019: 218).

In his research, Tajfel revealed that individuals quickly identify with a group, perceive it as favourable, and seek advantages for it, even when the boundary-setting of the ingroup in the laboratory experiment is completely random (e.g. preference for either painter Kandinsky or Klee) (Tajfel 1974: 67). The bias towards the ingroup affects “not only evaluative but also distributional and perceptual dimensions” (Hornung et al. 2019: 213). Social identification is an individual and inter-personal process in the first place, but inter-group relations bring it to a meso-level. Rejecting realist claims that material issues are the driving force behind intergroup conflict and in general collective action, SIT explains preference formation of actors through the ingroup as well as intergroup relations and interactions (Demmers 2012: 44). Research on party attachment and voting behaviour for example show, that it is interrelated with partisanship which is formed by early socialization and social group membership, rather than it being a consequence of the individual’s core opinions and values (Hornung et al. 2019: 215).

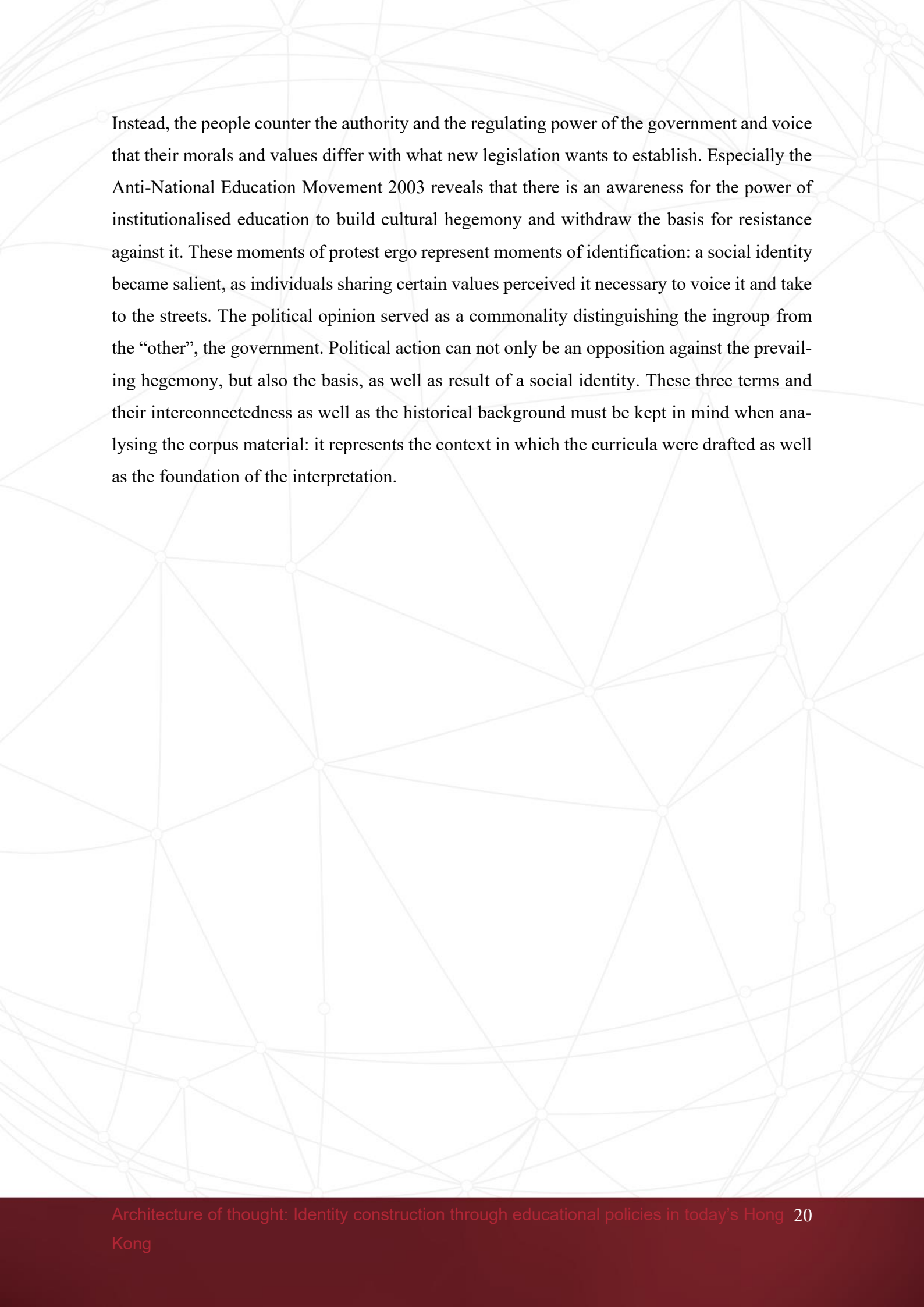
A powerful actor in the external identification of groups is the state: through symbolic as well as material force it creates categories and shapes them. The declaration of two genders in the individual’s passport, the central registration of religious membership or the ascertainment of ethnic groups and specific policies targeted at these groups have an impact on the dynamics of social identification. Teachers, bureaucrats or the jurisdiction are bound to work with these categories to fulfil their jobs (Brubaker/Cooper 2000: 14). It is a formalized and codified system of categorization, employed and developed by institutions and the state. Educational institutions such as schools, kindergartens, and universities are an integral mechanism to put the state’s system of categorization into practice. Defining certain schools as male/female-only schools establishes binary gender identities and schools for “natives” and for “foreigners” construct social identities that go along the line of ethnicity or nationality – that is the formalized dimension of the categorization system. Students quickly internalize this categorization and adopt the social identity of the group they share (imagined) commonalities with, where they feel a connection to other individuals of the group and where a groupness develops. As demonstrated in the experiment by Tajfel, as soon as ingroups and outgroups are constituted, individuals will act in a biased way towards their ingroup. The point I want to make here is that even

minor decisions in the educational system can contribute to the interpersonal dynamics of groupness and salience of social identities as well as to the intergroup dynamics.

2.3.2 Gramsci: Institutional education as an apparatus of cultural hegemony

I would like to place SIT and its relevance for my research in a broader theoretical framework of Antonio Gramsci's work on education, to emphasize on the implications of education and identity construction not only for the individual, but for society and the state. Education, in its comprehensive sense beyond formal institutions, is intertwined with social and political systems. It is moulded and shaped by the prevailing conventions and morals of the surrounding environment. At the same time, education plays a significant role in systematically producing and perpetuating these moral norms and ways of life, creating the foundation for a functioning society (Bernhard 2006: 14). Gramsci points out that education is essential to re/producing or challenging what he calls "cultural hegemony" – a wide consent to this certain way of life, that constitute power structures of domination (Langemeyer 2009: 76–77). This consent need not be actively granted or coerced; rather, it is ingrained in the everyday culture of society, where the status quo and its values are recognized, legitimized, and accepted (Ives 2009: 92). Whether or not a hegemony of a group can be established depends on the pedagogical meditation by that group and whether it results in approval and consent by society. Intellectuals play an important role here, as their knowledge and power are a potential for questioning the cultural hegemony. To uphold the hegemony, an ideological attraction must be created through formulating a moral and ethical attitude on life (Gramsci 2004: 38–39). It is not (necessarily) physical or psychological force, but a multidirectional regulating power that influences the development of structures of domination. Ergo, institutional education represents an important sphere where a basis for cultural hegemony can be created, moulding the morals of future generations and potential intellectuals. However, Gramsci points out that within "apparatuses of hegemony", such as institutionalised education, moments of resistance and counter-hegemony happen. Yet, a precondition for any emancipation from the existing hegemony is an independent consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) that itself depends on education (Bernhard 2006: 19).

Against the backdrop of SIT and Gramsci's theoretical perspective on education, the historical events in HK outlined earlier, can be interpreted as a part of a struggle for cultural hegemony. The repeated protests display that the wide consensus with the current hegemony is not given.



Instead, the people counter the authority and the regulating power of the government and voice that their morals and values differ with what new legislation wants to establish. Especially the Anti-National Education Movement 2003 reveals that there is an awareness for the power of institutionalised education to build cultural hegemony and withdraw the basis for resistance against it. These moments of protest ergo represent moments of identification: a social identity became salient, as individuals sharing certain values perceived it necessary to voice it and take to the streets. The political opinion served as a commonality distinguishing the ingroup from the “other”, the government. Political action can not only be an opposition against the prevailing hegemony, but also the basis, as well as result of a social identity. These three terms and their interconnectedness as well as the historical background must be kept in mind when analysing the corpus material: it represents the context in which the curricula were drafted as well as the foundation of the interpretation.

3. Methodology: Qualitative Content Analysis

SIT can be considered as part of a social constructivist theory as both consider the world and social reality not as “natural” but understand them as generally intersubjectively constructed through institutionalised practices (Hurd 2008: 301). Christiansen et al. (1999: 538) point out:

the constructivist project explicitly raises questions about social ontologies, directing research at the origin and reconstruction of identities, the impact of rules and norms, the role of language and of political discourses. Moving from this recognition to developing frameworks of analysis requires the identification of the elements of the process of polity formation.

It is this concept of identities and the social world from which certain methodological implications can be derived. As mentioned in the quote, constructivism is mostly about *understanding*, rather than *explaining* phenomena in a linear causal mode (Schlichte/Sievers 2015: 72). Understanding means to grasp meanings and interpret norms, ideas, and behaviours; it is based on a heterogenous concept of causal relationships and factors of influence (Blatter et al. 2007: 34). Scientific research dealing with constructivist theory therefore often applies qualitative rather than quantitative research, as qualitative approaches are better suited to capture the in-depth context, complexities, and nuances of social realities (Schreier 2014: 16). Qualitative Content Analysis as one of many qualitative research methods aimed at grasping the subliminal as well as articulate meanings of textual material. Unlike other approaches (hermeneutic approaches or Grounded Theory), it follows very clear rules and is based on theory, meaning that the present state of research in the respective field is taken into consideration in all steps of analysis (Mayring 2015: 53). Content Analysis developed in the 1980 with the purpose of qualitatively researching mass media (Mayring/Fenzl 2019: 634). Since then, a very heterogenous field of methods and approaches under this broad term have developed. Qualitative Content Analysis can be considered a mixed-methods-approach as it can include at the same time qualitative and quantitative elements, approach text deductively as well as inductively, be descriptive as well as scaling. One may consider it a toolbox: there is a variety of options regarding the design of the category system, the strategy of interpretation, or level of abstraction of which the researcher can pick and choose (Schreier 2014: 22). It is this possibility of combination that is so attractive, as one can find the best combination of options and strategies that is suitable for the material and content without losing systematics and quality criteria of scientific research.

From the large toolbox of Qualitative Content Analysis approaches, in this research I apply the so-called “Content-Structuring Content Analysis” (*inhaltlich-strukturierende Inhaltsanalyse*)

by Philipp Mayring. In the following I will elaborate on the features of this approach and explain why it seems appropriate to the material, theory, and research question that is the basis of this paper.

3.1 Content-Structuring Qualitative Content Analysis

In the process of the Content-Structuring Content Analysis one identifies, conceptualises, and systematically describes certain aspects of the material relating mainly to its content (instead of its formal criteria, for instance) (Schreier 2014: 4). The procedural steps can be summarized as follows:

1. Preparation: The researcher decides on the topic and purpose of the analysis as well as on the type of textual material, she is going to use (for instance interviews, historical documents, articles, ...).
2. Choosing Material: From the total of material, a sample is taken after indicated criteria, e.g., random or relating to the appearance of a certain element in the text.
3. Coding: Relevant passages of text are being marked and summarized to so called coding units. This term refers to the smallest element of material that is analysed on its own and can be assigned a category. This could be words, phrases or whole sentences (Mayring 2015: 61). There are three strategies of coding the text to develop a useful category system: summarising, explication, and structuring. Which of these independent procedures is applied depends on the material and the purpose of the research. Summarising aims at reducing the size of the corpus without losing content, creating a manageable corpus size that still represents the total of the material (Schreier 2014: 13). Important passages from the corpus are paraphrased in short and unified language. Then, the paraphrases are bundled, selected, and generalized to further reduce the quantity and create an overview (Mayring 2015: 69). While summary is aiming at reducing material, explication is a method which can enlarge the corpus to explain a text passage in question. It is part of contextualising the corpus and certain passages of importance. An explanandum in the corpus is identified and described. In the next step, it is explained using other passages in relation to the explanandum from the corpus, or external material is consulted (Schreier 2014: 15). While the first two methods are mainly inductive, structuring means approaching the material with deductively created categories. The researcher derives them from relevant theory or background knowledge (Schreier 2014:

- 12). The dimensions of structuring can include formal criteria such as syntax (language elements and their combination) or the structure of arguments and the content. All three coding strategies are part of the toolbox; thus, they can be combined.
4. Categorization and creation of category system: The coding units are being grouped in categories of recurring themes or features. The categories are then subsumed and reduced to main categories, creating a category system. Definitions and explications are developed to describe, which criteria need to be fulfilled to qualify a text passage from the material for a certain category.
 5. Analysis: The whole material is analysed, and the category system applied. Qualitative and quantitative methods can be used in this step, such as quantitative analysis of the frequency of certain categories or certain qualitative connections between categories that have been invisible before. One possible approach is to go through the material in small steps and search for aspects that fulfil the selection criterion. The desired level of abstraction must be defined when approaching the material, the subsumption to another level of abstraction can be done several times. Assuming that Content-Structuring Content Analysis is an iterative approach, the set of categories can be reviewed and altered during the investigation of the material (Mayring 2015: 61). It is essential to keep in mind, that the categories serve the purpose of answering the research question.
 6. Evaluation and contextualisation: The results are being evaluated in the context of the research topic and question (Blatter et al. 2007: 74).

3.2 Material collection and sources

There are several options regarding the material to answer the question “which identities do the current curriculum and educational policies in Hong Kong construct”, such as surveys or interviews about self-identification of HK citizens. Given the constraints of access and feasibility that such methods would entail, as well as the scope of this research, this study instead draws on an analysis of official documents issued by administrative institutions of the HKSAR. Namely by the “Education Bureau of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China”, the “Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China”, and the “Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China” as well as secondary bodies and institutions of the afore-mentioned (e.g., the “Task Force on Review of the School Curriculum”). The total of the material comprises all legislative documents on educa-

tion in HK between 2019 and June 2023, a sample of 13 documents was drawn. The sample was drawn based on relevancy to the research question. The material was published between 2019 and 2023 and assembled between March 2023 and July 2023 through online. All of it was freely accessible on the respective institution's website in English language. The material differed in length and type: some texts are part of a periodical (such as the "Education Bureau Circular Memorandum"), others are reports by advisory bodies to the government; some are addressed to teachers and school administration, other texts are for a general public. An overview over the material can be found in the appendix.

3.3 Analysis of the material

The category system in this research was developed inductively. In a first step, about two-thirds of the text were analysed and relevant text passages identified and paraphrased in coding units [Table 1]. These were then grouped and subsumed in categories [Table 2]. In a second step, the whole of the material was inspected, and the category system was reassessed and altered. Having the research question in mind, the categories were reduced to three main categories to meet the required complexity of the topic and the interconnectedness of the units of analysis that are comprised in the categories [Table 3]. The main categories are "Chinese Culture and belonging", "Values, morals, and law-abidingness" and "Critical thinking". The coding process consisted of summarizing and narrow explicative coding.

The following coding units have been analysed:

Coding unit	Paraphrase	Keywords from the material
CU1	Affection	Affection for the Chinese people
CU2	Belonging	Sense of belonging to the nation, the people and the community
CU3	Chinese culture	Chinese literature and classics; inheriting Chinese culture; developments of our country, history, and culture
CU4	Critical thinking skills	Reflection on the world and themselves; capacity to look at issues from multiple perspectives; creativity
CU5	Law-abidingness	Respect for the law; Abiding by the law
CU6	Morals	Chinese morals; Social moral values
CU7	National identity	Sense of national identity; cultivate student's national identity; nationhood; patriotism

CU8	National security	Holistic understanding of security; duty to protect national security; homeland security
CU9	Our country	Unifying our country
CU10	Positive values and attitudes	Responsibility; national identity; law-abidingness
CU11	Responsibility	priority values and attitudes; national identity; safeguarding national security
CU12	The people	Affection for the Chinese people; belonging to our country and the people
CU13	Unity	Unifying our country and our people

Table 1: Overview of the coding units

The coding units were then grouped into the following categories:

Category	Description	Related coding units
C1	Appreciation for the Chinese culture	CU1; CU3
C2	Belonging to one country, national identity	CU2; CU7; CU12; CU9; CU13
C3	Morals, values, virtue, ethics	CU5; CU6; CU10; CU11
C4	Safeguarding National Security	CU8; CU11
C5	Critical Thinking	CU4

Table 2 Categories

The analysis process revealed that some categories are closely connected and hard to isolate from one another. For instance, the narrative around “Safeguarding National Security” (C4) must be regarded in interrelation with the concept of morals (C3). The respective key words and coding units are not only collocationally related but also intertwined as concepts. Therefore, they were subsumed to one of three main categories:

Category	Description	Related categories
C1'	Chinese culture and belonging	C1; C2
C2'	Values, morals, and law-abidingness	C3; C4
C3'	Critical thinking	C5

Table 3 Main categories

While C3' is equivalent with C5, C1' and C2' result from further abstracting the first set of categories. The following part of this paper will be structured by these three main categories and describe and interpret the interrelation of the coding units.

4. Results

4.1 Chinese Culture and Belonging

The term “Chinese culture” is mentioned in all analysed documents. There is no doubt left over the question whether there is a connection between Chinese culture and HK: “Hong Kong is a Chinese society with the roots grounded in Chinese culture” (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 15). But what exactly *is* Chinese culture? Who is included and who is not?

The content of Chinese culture: historic narrative and connection to language

Looking at the question of what Chinese culture is, some features of “the Chinese culture” are explicitly articulated in the documents such as “traditional festivals, customs, etiquette” (Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong 2021: 12). What those are exactly is not specified. Yet, the term “traditional” evokes the connection to historically meaningful social practices and belief systems. These references to history are underlined by framing Chinese culture as a “valuable heritage” and “time-honoured” (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum 2019: 18–19). This framing evokes the image of a material object with a fixed form and objective features that is handed on from generation to generation without changing; preserved and honoured by its holders. In that narrative, each individual has the responsibility to keep up the long tradition and stands in a long history of heiresses, as if it was a huge family. This concept of culture as an ancient product that must be preserved excludes the possibility of transformation or even rift development in the culture.

However, there have been several rifts in the past centuries: Most notably HK has been under British rule for about 165 years, a time during which partly democratic political structures developed and a capitalist economy influenced the city’s life (Zhang 2022: 242). It is mainly this political separation from the mainland that creates the basis for the argumentation of a separate HK culture and identity. The EDB’s narrative negates this separate development, putting 165 years of colonization in the shade of several thousand years of Chinese history. Playing down the time when HK was not governed by Beijing implies sweeping under the rug the development of separate cultures with their own norms, traditions, and polity.

The rifts and separate developments are not solely found in the realm of history, but also in language, another important element of culture and identity in HK (Ho 2020: 41). As pointed out in the historical context, the contemptuous remark by the EDB that Cantonese was a dialect rather than a language caused outrage in 2014, signifying the importance of that language to many HK citizens. The primary language of instruction in ordinary schools in HK is Cantonese, however, two of the four core subjects are English and Chinese language studies, the other two being mathematics and so-called “Citizenship and Social Development” (CSD) (Curriculum Development Council 2021: 9). Learning about Chinese culture is supposed to be part of mainly two subjects: CSD and Chinese language classes. While the English language curriculum does not include any cultural elements, the Chinese language classes are supposed to convey “reading, writing, listening, speaking, literature, Chinese culture, moral and affection, independent language learning and thinking” (Curriculum Development Council 2021: 11). However, the time that is supposed to be allocated to English and Chinese is the same. Most HK citizens’ first language is Cantonese, a language belonging to the group of Chinese languages. Mandarin, another variant of the Chinese languages, is a second language to most HK students just like English is. It is notable, that the curriculum for Chinese language is supposed to exceed the acquisition of the mere language skills but acknowledges openly, that it is not only a communication tool but also product and reproducer of a culture and a belief system. On the contrary, it seems like English is perceived as a global and culturally disconnected tool, instead of a source of identification. It is only the Chinese language and culture that is constructed as a fixed and clear entity tied to a territory and a people. The mutual influence of culture, language and morals in Chinese language class is accounted for and an explicit learning goal, while in English it is not. Culture is not only time-honoured but also tied to the Chinese language.

Rhetorical framing and contextual influences to convey the idea of culture

If the Chinese culture is a singular entity that consists of fixed and unmalleable characteristics, norms, and practices handed down from generation to generation, who is the holder of Chinese culture? The groupness that is appealed to here is a familial bonding, an inevitable interconnectedness under the supposedly shared commonality of inheriting Chinese culture. This implies that culture is not something that can be learned or acquired through practice or knowledge. Instead, it is given on to you, with all responsibilities and features attached to it and without the possibility of changing it. Students are called upon to understand this Chinese culture as their own, to incorporate that identity. This argument is supported by the use of possessive pronouns: “[to] help students learn about the conditions of our country, and enrich their understanding of our country’s history, culture and latest developments” (Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong 2021: 1) or “‘cultivate students’ [...] sense of responsibility to our country and our people” (Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong 2021: 18). This framing addresses the students and the teachers directly and produces an ingroup linguistically. Additionally, the keyword “belonging” contributes to this rhetoric:

Through promoting Constitution, Basic Law and national security education within and beyond the classroom, students acquire an understanding of our country, a sense of national identity and a sense of belonging towards the country so that they are concerned about society [...] and become citizens who are responsible, appreciative of Chinese culture and committed to society and our country. (Curriculum Development Council 2021: 18)

The continuous and explicit reiteration of “belonging to the country” and the implementation of this narrative into the curriculum avoids any critical reflection such as “who is *we*? What is *our country*? Do I want to belong to this group?”. The groupness is clearly stated, representing an external categorization of the individual through stipulating where it belongs. Not only should teachers convey the idea of “our Chinese culture” in the classroom, other so called “contextual influences” should also contribute to the sense of belonging. Of significance here is especially the flag raising ceremony. In 2020, new regulations on the raising and display of flags as well as on the national anthem were issued. According to these, all primary and secondary schools as well as kindergartens are obliged to conduct a flag raising ceremony of the national flag (meaning the flag of the PRC) and the regional flag (meaning the flag of HK) on a weekly basis (Education Bureau HKSARG December 2021: 9). The attendance of all students and teachers is expected. The reasons behind the introduction of that practice is to “enable

students to learn about the relevant regulation and etiquette through attending national flag raising ceremonies in person, and enhance the sense of belonging to the country and national identity among students through contextual influences” (Education Bureau HKSARG December 2021: 3) or even more explicit: “safeguard the proper use and preserve the dignity of the national flag and the national emblem which are the symbols and signs of the People's Republic of China [...] and promote patriotism” (Legislative Council 20.09.2021: 2). Having SIT in mind, the flag raising ceremony shows that groupness is no longer an abstract feeling or concept that should be conveyed but materializes physically. Students, teachers and school administration all assemble weekly to perform a ceremony that binds their groupness to several symbols: the flag of the PRC, the flag of HK and the PRC’s national anthem. The ceremony itself and teaching it is connected with a certain “spirit” and “etiquette” that is learned, performed and embodied by the students (National Flag, National Emblem, National Anthem and Regional Flag 2021: 3). Performing the flag raising ceremony weekly as well as singing the anthem can be regarded as a means to establish cultural hegemony: it is integrated in the everyday culture of the society and functions as a performance that shows consent with the prevailing hegemony.

The boundaries of Chinese culture: who is in, who is out?

The concept of culture that should be conveyed in the education is that it is a group of people who are, as heiresses of that culture, bound and belonging together like a family. This describes the character of the groupness, but not its boundaries. One of the proclaimed goals of the education is “nurturing citizenship rooted in Chinese culture with a global perspective” (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 10–11). Here, a connection between Chinese citizenship and Chinese culture is drawn. Citizenship is a formal status, that connects the individual with the nation-state and comes along with rights and responsibilities. According to the “Nationality Law of the People’s Republic of China” a person is a Chinese national, if one or both of their parents is Chinese national while dual citizenship is impossible. The appendix to the law states that “All Hong Kong Chinese compatriots are Chinese nationals” (Immigration Department Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: 10) as of June 1st 1997⁵. Their British national overseas status is no longer recognised.

⁵ Many residents of HK hold a so-called “Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China passport”, which grants them different rights and obligations than holders of the “People's Republic of

Tying Chinese culture to the formal and legal status of PRC-citizenship implicates that it is no longer a personal question, which culture and which group feels attached to or wants to identify with, but a result from the legal status; written down in one's passport. The boundary of the imagined Chinese culture is congruent with the boundary of the nation – the Chinese nationality comes with Chinese citizenship which inevitably comes with Chinese culture. The argument works both ways: citizenship is rooted in Chinese culture and Chinese culture is a prerequisite and a basis for being a citizen: “an appreciation of Chinese culture [...] is a basic attribute of Chinese nationals” (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum September 2020: 20).

The group of Chinese citizens are also tied together through their heritage of the Chinese culture. This answers on who *is* part of Chinese culture implicitly asks: who is *not*? As elaborated in the chapter “Theory”, social identities need an external verification; they need an “other” from which they can distinguish themselves and categorize what and who is part of the ingroup and what is outside of it. In the case of the EDB's publications, the “other” is constructed as people who are not considered part of the Chinese culture. Students should “understand, appreciate and inherit Chinese culture and treat other cultures with respect, receptiveness and appreciation, and become responsible and committed citizens” (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 6). This quote hints at the conceptualisation of other cultures as separate groups with clear boundaries and fixed characteristics, differentiable from the one Chinese culture. Even though students are called upon to treat the “other” respectfully, there is a clear boundary between “us” and “our culture” and “them” and “their culture”.

To sum up, in the narrative of the analysed material, the Chinese culture is a singular entity that has clear boundaries and consists of fixed and unmalleable characteristics, norms, and practices. The fact that there are various subcultures within that culture deriving from economical, historical, and language differences is not elevated. The question “who is part of that culture?” or “who is part of the ingroup?” is answered through referring to citizenship: Chinese citizens inherit the Chinese culture, which is at the same time the basis of their citizenship. The historical dimension and the idea of inheritance appeal to a familial understanding of the ingroup. It is a clearly defined group and “other cultures”, which serve as external verification, are to be respected but also understood as fixed entities outside of the “us”.

China Passport”. I will not elaborate further on this, as the material emphasizes that both are without doubt Chinese Citizens and this is what my argument is about.

4.2 Values, morals, and law-abidingness

As quoted above, language is conceptualised as an element of culture and language classes should not only teach Chinese culture, but also “moral and affection”. These keywords are not only omnipresent in the material but represent a core element of the identity construction that the EDB aims at. In 2012, the EDB announced the introduction of the subject “Moral and National Education”. The same subject was called “Liberal Studies” (LS) before (between 2009 and 2012), and the predecessor to LS was “Moral and Civic Education” (2001 – 2009). Since 2021 it is called “Citizenship and Social Development”, yet the aim to teach about morals is still a key component of the curriculum (Chow 2014: 50; Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 3). Understanding what is meant by “morals” is difficult to extract from the documents. The argument I want to make is that in the EDB’s publications, moral is understood as equivalent with the law and vice versa.

According to the material, so-called “Chinese morals” are underpinned by “universal core values” (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum September 2020: (ii)). Of significant occurrence in this context is the rhetoric of cultivating, teaching or nurturing “positive values and attitudes” (Measures to Optimise the Four Senior Secondary Core Subjects 2021: 15).

Nurturing positive values and attitudes is the core element of the Hong Kong school curriculum. [...] [It] should emphasise the cultivation of good characters and behaviours which meet social expectations in students as well as guide them to differentiate right from wrong, make responsible decisions and understand the roles and responsibilities / obligations that individuals should undertake in society, the country and the world. (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 41)

This quote shows what is meant by positive values and attitudes: they are a feature of a “good character” who fulfils their role in society, lives up to society’s expectations, and shows responsibility on all levels. A good character, knowing their responsibilities, is furthermore guided by knowing right from wrong.

Responsibility, law-abidingness and moral: a circular argument

The question is: responsibility for *what*? And what *is* right and wrong? The NSL and the concept of National Security Education (NSE) reveal some of what is meant by that. To elaborate on that, I would like to point to another important part of the curriculum and proceed to the NSE after that.

A recurring term in the material is the list of “priority values and attitudes” that is supposed to be the foundation of the curriculum. These values and attitudes are intended to provide guidance for all subjects and events within and beyond the educational context. In 2002, the “Curriculum Development Council (CDC) recommended setting *perseverance, respect for others, responsibility, national identity and commitment* as priority values and attitudes [original emphasis]” (Curriculum Development Council 2021: 18). In 2008, “integrity” and “care for others” were added and in 2020 “law-abidingness” and “empathy” were included in the list. Most likely, it is no coincidence but a causal relation between the addition of law abidingness to that list and the introduction of the NSL in HK. In the EDB’s publications on NSE it is explicitly mentioned that students should understand the rule of law and learn to “willingly assume the responsibility for safeguarding national security” (Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong 2021: 4; Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong 2021: 1). The content and learning goals of NSE are described as follows:

to develop in students a sense of belonging to the country, an affection for the Chinese people, a sense of national identity, as well as an awareness of and a sense of responsibility for safeguarding national security. It should enable students to become good citizens who have a sense of national identity, show respect for the rule of law and abide by the law. (National Security Education in School Curriculum - Implementation Mode and Learning and Teaching Resources 2021: 1)

As if anticipating objections, NSE is supposed to furthermore teach students that “the National Security Law (NSL) does not infringe the rights and freedoms of Hong Kong residents” (Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong 2021: 5). Yet, it aims to promote “striking the balance between rule of law and human rights” (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 9), revealing the possibility of contradictory elements. Interestingly, this contradiction is framed differently in Article 4 of the NSL: “Human rights shall be respected and protected in safeguarding national security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The rights and freedoms [...] shall be protected in accordance with the law.” (Government of the HKSAR 30.06.2020). The first sentence implies that human rights are included in the NSL and in safeguarding the latter, the

former is protected as well. The second imposes the condition that whatever rights and freedoms there might be, the law (including and especially the NSL) is above it.

In the analysis of the concept of NSE as well as both recurring terms “positive values and attitudes” and “priority values and attitudes” it is notable that responsibility is considered a central value and an important character trait that should be nurtured in students. The answer to “responsibility for *what?*” is mainly provided in the policies of NSE: it is about the responsibility to safeguard national security, which equals respecting the rule of law and having a national identity. Respecting the rule of law is depicted as equal with “differentiating right from wrong” (one of the features of a good character and part of the concept of “positive values and attitudes”). The question of what *is* right and what *is* wrong is resolved in the NSE: right is what is in accordance with the law - especially the NSL - and wrong is everything beyond that. The dichotomy of right/wrong can be translated to lawful/unlawful. But in common use, the framing “right” or “wrong” appeals to a standardized ethics of a community that provide orientation for both individual and collective action. In other words, it appeals to morals: being a moral person means adhering to what is deemed right by the community. If the dichotomy of right/wrong can be translated to lawful/unlawful and at the same time to moral/immoral, a circular logic reveals itself. Something or somebody is moral if she behaves right which means behaving in accordance with the law. Each of the terms is (at least partly) explanatory for the other ones, each of them strengthening the other and the entire chain of argumentation.

The following graph illustrates that logic:

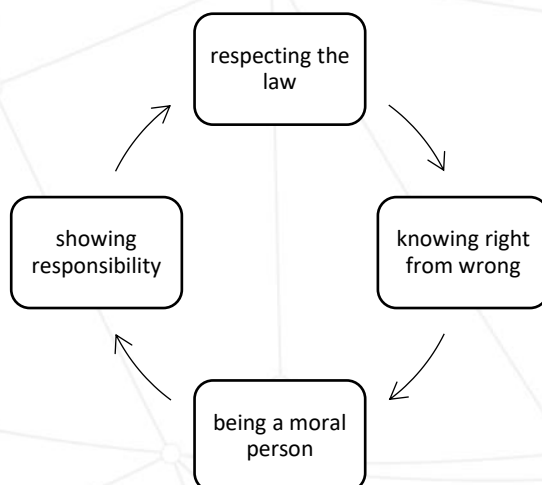


Figure 1 The circular argumentation of law-abidingness and morals

The psychological function of this logic can be explained by SIT. Demmers (2012) points out that groupness and social identity emerges from the individual human need for consistency,

simplification, order and a positive self-image (Demmers 2012: 47). It is the need for these feelings that is satisfied in that approach. Considering law and morals equal makes it simple for the individual to evaluate right and wrong – it means adhering to the NSL and other laws. As these are written down and enforced by the state institutions, they provide a certain order and consistency in the personal and social realm. The values depicted in Figure 1 are interconnected in a self-affirmative chain so that there seems to be reliant and strong grounds of arguing which supports the consistency. According to SIT, the individual strives for a positive self-image and the positive connotation of values, morals, and actions by members of the ingroup is essential to serve this need. The curriculum and the publications by the EDB name explicitly what “good citizens”, meaning moral citizens, have and do: a national identity and respect of the law. This assures the individual and strengthens its feeling of connectedness with the group as it finds itself upheld and supported. At the same time, implicitly it is clear that the support is conditioned: bad citizens who break the law are not belonging to the ingroup but are considered as part of the “other”.

Responsibility is constructed as on the one hand being law-abiding, on the other hand, it entails the narrative of having a national identity. National identity is also part of the priority values and attitudes:

The EDB designates “National Identity” as one of the education goals, and priority values and attitudes. It is the responsibility of schools to help students cultivate positive values and acquire knowledge and foster a sense of belonging to the country and national identity. (Curriculum Development Council 2021: 18)

The keywords “priority values and attitudes”, “positive values”, and “belonging to the country” come together under the umbrella of a national identity, it is an element that connects all of them. Furthermore, this quote is an example for how “country” (meaning the state) and “nation” are used as if they were equivalent. While the former usually refers to a political and geographical entity that is governed through state institutions, the latter denotes a collective of people who perceive themselves as belonging together on the basis of shared cultural, historical, or social ties and who are imagined as inhabiting and constituting a common political space. This framing emphasises that there is only one point of identification which is the nation that is equivalent to the state (the PRC). A strong identification with another political polity would contradict that understanding.

The EDB publications emphasize that teachers should nurture national identity from an early age on:

KGs [kindergartens, note from the author] should help young children recognise Hong Kong as a part of the country and their Chinese identity, and learn about the national flag and the etiquette to be observed in a national flag raising ceremony, so as to foster a sense of belonging to the country and a sense of national identity. (Education Bureau HKSARG December 2021: 9)

This quote reveals that national identity is a Chinese identity and connects it with national symbols such as the flag as well as with the performance of the flag raising ceremony. Again, the categorization that is supposed to be the result of the intra- and extra-classroom activities is explicit: young children should feel a groupness and belonging to the nation. Introducing this social identity to children at an early age strengthens its internalisation, as children are more likely to identify with a group on an emotional level rather than through a cognitive process that might question what they are being taught. Thus, the acquisition of the norms and values such as “national identity” happens early and manifests strongly in the individual’s identity.

I aim to underscore the significance of the circular argument at a more abstract level, drawing from Gramsci's theoretical insights on education and hegemony. As previously highlighted, cultural hegemony hinges on the widespread consent of society, underpinned by moral and ethical values (Langemeyer 2009: 79). Consequently, the emphasis on law-abidingness, positive values, as well as the recurring themes of "belonging" and "national identity", form a fundamental aspect of dismantling the groundwork for counter-hegemony, particularly in the form of protest against future legislations. The NSL operates by instilling fear: young activists engaged in oppositional activities face severe consequences if prosecuted, potentially deterring them from taking to the streets. However, the establishment of a societal perspective wherein legal frameworks ensure moral behaviour, rendering protest unnecessary as any immoral or wrongful situation is subject to state prosecution, represents another subtle yet effective method of fortifying cultural hegemony.

In this subchapter I analysed the content and argumentative structure around values, morals, and law-abidingness. In the following subchapter I will elaborate on the method how one element of this argumentative structure, the NSE, is integrated into the realm of institutionalised learning.

Method of applying the circular argument

The repeated appeal to responsibility and duty covers a very articulate and cognitive approach to the matter. However, teachers are also encouraged to connect e.g. elements of national security “naturally with and integrated organically into the curriculum content of various subjects” (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 39). This can be seen in the variety of events and activities, that are implicitly or explicitly about the values connected with NSE. Yearly on April 15th the “National Security Education Day” is celebrated in HK’s educational institutions (National Security Education Day 2023 2023: 1). The EDB organises several activities and events such as a poster-design-competition in order to “enhance the understanding of national security, the Constitution and the Basic Law, as well as cultivate the awareness of respecting national sovereignty and safeguarding national security among teachers and students, [...] thereby creating a positive atmosphere” (National Security Education Day 2023 2023: 1). The process of internalisation that is essential to strengthen a social identity is intensified through the subliminal inclusion of the content of NSE in various subjects as well as activities outside the classroom (Curriculum Development Council 2021: 18). It can be considered a holistic approach to convey these values and practice group behaviour to manifest the social identity and its content which should consist among others of national identity and law-abidingness.

NSE is furthermore embedded in the rhetoric of culture and belonging. The following quote from the Curriculum Framework of National Security Education⁶ serves as an example for this analysis: “[Learning element for Senior Secondary Students:] Understand the impressive cultural tradition of our country, and recognise that safeguarding cultural security is an important foundation in unifying our country and our people, as well as maintaining stability of our country” (Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong 2021: 14). What is meant by cultural security is not explicitly mentioned in the material. The wording “impressive cultural tradition” reaffirms the need for a positive self-identification and self-affirmation of the group. By employing a positively connotated adjective, the evaluation of the tradition is pre-established, thereby strengthening social identity. Moreover, a connection between cultural security, the objective of “unifying our country” and “stability” is created. Teaching students about this supposed interrelation appeals to the individuals need for both stability and security.

⁶ The Curriculum Framework of National Security Education is a framework drafted by the EDB that is supposed to serve as a guideline for the implementation of NSE at primary and secondary schools.

The “other” and the security narrative

But what is comprised in the term “security” in the way the EDB uses it? The documents show that the term is understood in a very broad sense, containing “political security, homeland security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social security, technological security, cyber security, ecological security, resource security, nuclear security, overseas interests security and new security [domains]” (Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong 2021: 3), all of which should be considered in the teaching approach. Most of these are not elaborated upon, so that their interpretation and specific implications stay vague. However, it is noteworthy that any situation or issue in private as well as educational contexts can be found in one of these terms, everything can be considered cultural, economic, or political. With the introduction of the NSL in 2020, the discourse around security gained prominence in all spheres of life. The narrative of threats and security as an omnipresent topic is strengthened in the provisions for NSE. Having in mind how the ingroup is rhetorically constructed as a society of responsible and law-abiding citizens with a good character, the security narrative ties to the construction of the outgroup, the “other”. It is the other against whom the ingroup must move closer together, from whom the ingroup distinguishes itself, and from whom the ingroup must protect itself and its values. The afore mentioned “other” – referring to the “other cultures” – was a positively connotated concept of other: an external group that should be respected and appreciated without forgetting that it is not part of the ingroup. Conversely, here the external verification mechanism is the distinction between “us” and the “negative and dangerous other”. In both cases, the distinction is without nuances and the boundary of the ingroup is definitive and not to be crossed or questioned.

4.3 Critical Thinking

According to the CSD curriculum, students should be helped to “become critical, rational, reflective and independent thinkers” (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 5). It is elaborated as to enabling them to make “reasonable judgements, evaluations and suggestions, using multiple perspectives, creativity and appropriate thinking skills (including social moral values)” (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 63). From all arguments above, it seems irritating if not contradictory to teach students critical thinking. Critical thinking can be defined as meta cognitive skill through which the critically thinking subject is “continually analysing and evaluating their own thinking” (Atabaki et al. 2015: 96). It is an open process of

individual reflective thinking and analysis of facts to evaluate and judge a certain issue (Atabaki et al. 2015: 94). Critically thinking about one's individual identity means to reflect on the cultural, social, and personal norms and values one has incorporated that guide one's behaviour. It furthermore involves examining how one's beliefs are shaped by one's surroundings and might include rejecting dominant social norms. However, I have pointed out that the EDBs education policy plans do not allow or encourage this reflection but sets norms and values in advance that should characterize the ingroup and each individual. It creates strong boundaries of who is good, moral, and to be respected and who is not. It is these intense social rules and institutions that limit the capacity of the individual to shape its identity creatively and freely (Demmers 2012: 21). Sharp boundaries limit the space for thought, critical thinking widens it. So, does the appeal to encourage critical thinking represent a contradiction to other elements of the curriculum?

Critical thinking in boundaries of appropriateness

The analysis of the term “critical thinking” in the examined material shows that this is not the case. The quote above reveals, that instead of locating critical thinking skills in the personal realm, it is connected to “appropriateness” and “social moral values”. The individual process of thinking and evaluating is taken to a social level, where the world outside of the individual significantly shapes the idea of what is “right” and “good” and what is not. Within these walls, any result of the critical thinking process that is inconsistent with the ingroup's moral is impossible. Instead of encouraging students to think outside the box, the term “appropriateness” confines the critical thinking to the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. The following quote underlines this analysis. In the definition of the EDB, critical thinking is not an open process but aims at the result of making decisions that are in line with the law:

[students should be able to] identify different views and the values behind various topics; and apply in an integrative manner critical thinking skills, [...] so as to make law-abiding, rational and affective judgements and decisions based on facts and evidence; as well as develop positive values and attitudes. (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 6)

This paragraph pretends to be supportive of an open process of reflection that includes changing the point of view and considering evidence, yet the outcome of this process is not open and cannot be conflicting with or questioning of the law.

“Facts and evidence” represent key terms here. Many different passages in the material connect “critical thinking” to an idea of an objective truth that is measurable through statistics and data

or that is fixed and expressed in indisputable facts. Students should be provided with the information on the objective truth to enable them to make judgements (which must be, as outlined earlier, in accordance with the law). Critical thinking in this narrative must be based on these truths. Therefore, so-called “information/media literacy” is an educational goal since 2020. In the Curriculum Guide for CSD, the term is defined as “identifying false information; morals and conduct in using technologies; observing the relevant laws” (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 12). Again, the circular argument is reproduced: the equivalence of moral and lawfulness is strengthened and expanded by the dichotomy of true/false. The moral dimension of right/wrong here is tied to a factual dimension of “the right, correct facts” and the “wrong, incorrect facts”.

Critical thinking confined by politically sensitive issues

The need to teach information literacy is justified by the “extensive involvement of students” in “the tumultuous social events that took place” (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum September 2020: 2) or more specific, by the “large-scale social unrest in Hong Kong in which many youngsters were involved” (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum September 2020: 17). Even though it is not named explicitly and there seems to be no agreement on how to frame it, these passages refer to the protests in 2019 against the extradition bill in HK. It is elaborated, that there were many fake news and propaganda spread through digital channels. For that reason, a stronger emphasis should be given to conveying to students how to access official and reliable information and teaching them “ethical and prudent use of IT” (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum September 2020: 17). The following quote is less explicit about the social movements in 2019 but in the context of the other material, it is evident that there is a reference to these events. It furthermore follows the outlined narrative and objective concerning information, facts, evidence, and data:

The information and numerical data provided should be carefully scrutinised for objectivity and reliability. Newly emerging current events and issues are usually very controversial, and may lack comprehensive, objective and reliable information. Also, the related media reports and comments change with the development of events. It is difficult for students to conduct impartial and evidence-based discussions. Therefore, this kind of topics is not suitable for enquiry learning so as to avoid misunderstandings among students about the development of the events and subsequent premature judgements. Enquiry learning should not guide students to confine their direction of enquiry to the dichotomy between ‘for’ and ‘against’ only, so that students’ understanding of topics which involve different dimensions would not be restricted. In fact, such dichotomy does not exist in topics involving history and culture, moral standards, legal prin-

ciples and the rule of law, religions and races. (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 46–47)

This quote is an example for how the CSD curriculum puts a limit on critical thinking: it tells teachers to not discuss “newly emerging” events because students are not cognitively capable of judging them. Additionally, to the supposedly unclear and unreliable field of information, these topics are considered to go beyond the maturity of the students and therefore to be avoided. In fact, the report by the Task Force on Review of School Curriculum answers to the claim that the curriculum and realisation of the subject “Liberal Studies” might be responsible for the protests in 2019: “There are also various allegations holding the subject responsible for the violent and radical behaviour of some youngsters in the recent social unrest, and individual teachers for abusing the LS subject as a platform to put forward their own political views.” (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum September 2020: 26). They recommend scrutinising the textbooks and a vetting by the EDB. Additionally, they recommend organising teacher professional development programs to refresh their knowledge of the objective of the topic. This advice was carried out in the new curriculum for the renamed subject CSD and implemented in November 2020. It seems like the EDB wants to avoid any conversation about the protests in recent years. The quotes and analysis reveal that it is reacting to the social discontent and try to radically prevent protest from happening through eliminating controversial topics from the classroom and prohibiting “incorrect” facts from being discussed. This is contradictory to the idea of critical thinking, which needs a broad scope of facts, ideas, and perspective to consider in the reflection.

The preceding quote posits that issues pertaining to history, culture, or morals do not conform to a binary categorization of “for” or “against”. In contrast, the subsequent statement contends that there exist matters that can indeed be examined within the dichotomy of right and wrong: those characterized by explicit adherence to legal principles. Teachers should actively avoid and cut possible discussions that are on the wrong side, the illegal side:

This subject [CSD] also emphasises the nurturing of students’ positive values and attitudes. Therefore, any events or topics which are illegal or immoral should not be used as topics for enquiry learning so as to avoid negative influence on students’ values and behaviours. Regarding issues with absolute right and wrong or clear legal principles, teachers should clearly state all the facts about the history, moral standards and legal principles, and point out to students that there is no room for discussions or compromise. Teachers should also point out that the facts about the development should not be twisted so that students have a correct understanding of the issues. Regarding the topics

related to the constitutional relationship between our country and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, reference should be made to the Constitution and the Basic Law, which constitute the constitutional basis. (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 47)

This framing ties to the circular argument that anything that is illegal is wrong and therefore immoral. It suggests that certain (sensitive) historical events can be categorized as clearly right or wrong and stating the objective truth about these events leads to the right conclusion. Allowing discussion about the facts or the issue is considered a danger to the positive values and character of the students. In the EDB's logic, there is a right way to talk about and evaluate these events and there is a "twisted" way, which is incorrect, immoral, and ergo unlawful.

To come back to the question at the beginning of this subchapter: is the aim to teach critical thinking contradictory to other elements of the curriculum? The analysis of the way the term is used and understood reveals that it is not. Critical thinking in the EDB's policy papers is not an open and unlimited process of reflection, scrutinizing one's beliefs and behaviours and examining one's social identities. It is considered more of a thinking with boundaries – boundaries of the correct facts, moral and appropriate behaviour, and boundaries of the law. The boundaries appear as a very consistent and strong red lines as they create a logic of morals = law = facts, each of the terms and concepts strengthening the other. Any discussion by students that challenge one of these red lines should be cut by the teachers, as there is "no room for discussions or compromise" (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 47). Teachers should avoid so-called misunderstandings by leaving newly emerging developments or events out of the classroom and instead emphasize on teaching students' information and media literacy. This should enable them to make decisions and evaluations that are in accordance with the law.

If the concept of critical thinking is eroded from inside and stands just as a shell for the idea of adhering to social moral standards which are equivalent with the law, why is it in the curriculum at all, one might ask. Most likely, the EDB included the term critical thinking in the curriculum in anticipation of the argument, the government tried to "brainwash" the students. This is especially probable, as this was a major argument for the activist of Scholarism in the protest 2012 (Lin/Lin: 16). This strategy deflects the accusation by pointing to the fact that critical thinking, which can be considered as contradictory to brainwashing, is mentioned several times in the curricula. Yet, looked at in detail, it turns out to not encourage students to reflect their identity, question facts and narratives, or scrutinize the basis of their social identities.

4.4 Limitations of Research

This paper examines influences on identity construction through the education system in HK. However, due to the limited amount of collected and analysed material, the scope and generalizability of this study are also limited. Even though most of the HKSARG's documents are available in English, there is a significant number of government publications that are only accessible in Chinese. Since these Chinese documents were not included in the analysis presented in this paper, the total amount of material examined is limited. Conducting bilingual and a more large-scale research, including both Chinese and English documents, would provide a more comprehensive understanding and allow for a deeper linguistic analysis, including the examination of connotations and nuances in government communication.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the analysis of government documents has its limitations in understanding what is happening in the practical and lived realities of educational contexts. Often, government policies are not implemented as written, and teachers, bureaucrats, and educational institutions adapt their behaviour accordingly. Sometimes policies are taken very seriously, while other times they are interpreted in a broader way and allow for more flexibility. Participant observation, surveys, or interviews with teachers, parents, and students could shed light on the efficacy and effects of changing curricula and political landscapes in contemporary HK. This would provide a deeper understanding of the actual practices and their alignment with the policy intentions. Examining potential resistant practices of students and teachers in their daily life's would furthermore contribute theoretically to the anthropological field of everyday resistance.

This research is limited in its depth as it does not look into what has not been written down. In HK, administrative and legislative bodies are subject to institutionalised censorship and self-censorship of various degrees. What I examined are the documents that have been verified and checked multiple times. So far it is impossible to know which discussions about educational policies happened behind closed doors or which versions of the documents were existent before the publication of the material at hand now. However, interviews with beauroucrats and politicians might allow for a more detailed understanding of the process of drafting these policies. Lastly, the generalizability of the analysis is limited in so far as the documents I analysed apply only to schools that are administered by the EDB: many of the international schools in HK apply their own curricula and teaching strategies are not fully bound to follow the policies of the executive bodies.

Further research around questions of identity construction and educational policies could examine similar material from a different theoretical angle such as Nation Building Theories or a Foucauldian Governmentality Perspective. This could focus on the everyday practices and knowledge production that construct what I call the ingroup and its individuals as well as examine the productive power that is involved in it. Comparative research could add to the literature on identity construction and educational policies through examining different governance contexts in semi-autonomous regions where state-led nation building intersects with post-colonial and contested identities.

5. Conclusion: Subliminal steps in an authoritarian direction

In this paper I analysed 13 official publications by the Education Bureau (EDB) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region using Qualitative Content Analysis. The research question guiding my analysis was “which identities do the current curriculum and educational policies in Hong Kong construct?”. I examined the material against the background of Social Identity Theory and Gramsci’s theoretical insights on education and cultural hegemony. The results of the analysis can be grouped into three broader dimensions.

First, the dimension of “culture”. According to the EDB, students are encouraged to incorporate “Chinese culture” into their identity and to understand it as a historical heritage they are expected to value, preserve, and transmit. Through the use of possessive pronouns such as “our country” or “our people”, the social identity is framed through a process of external categorisation, positioning students as members of a collective “we” defined by shared cultural belonging. This identification is further reinforced through collective practices such as the weekly flag-raising ceremony, where the physical gathering of students and their engagement with national symbols – such as the flags of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Hong Kong (HK) – visually and performatively establish group belonging. Social identities are commonly constructed in relation to an “other”, and in this case that “other” appears in the form of individuals or groups associated with different cultural backgrounds. With the EDB’s publications, culture is thus presented as a bounded set of norms, values, and traditions that delineates membership and serves as the shared foundation that binds all individuals together.

Secondly, the dimension of moral and law-abidingness. In HK's educational policies, law-abidingness, responsibility, and morals are key words. The analysis shows that these terms are being positioned towards one another in a circular logic: to act responsibly means to respect the law and the law is the reincarnation of social values and morals. The boundaries of "right" or "wrong" are considered congruent with the written law. Therefore, students are taught that they "should abide by laws and regulations, nurture good character, foster the awareness of safeguarding national security, and make contributions to society and our country." (National Security Education Day 2023 2023: 12). Law-abidingness is awarded an extraordinarily prominent position with regards to the National Security Law and the respective National Security Education. The aspect that the law is conceptualized as realizing the norms and morals of the society fulfils the individual and collective desire for simplicity and order, as assumed by Social Identity Theory. Against the background of the security narrative, there is a construction of the "other" as all those who do not regard protecting national security as their duty or mean harm to the national security. Through a broad concept of "security" that applies that term to any sphere of social life, a threat from the "other" is constructed and potentially omnipresent. This intensifies the emotional bond within the ingroup, as the supposedly ubiquitous threat from the "other" drives the ingroup to stick together to protect themselves.

Lastly, there is the dimension of critical thinking. Helping students to "identify different views and the values behind various topics; and apply in an integrative manner critical thinking skills [...] so as to make law-abiding, rational and affective judgements and decisions based on facts and evidence" (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 6) are some of the declared goals of the educational policies. Critical thinking is commonly understood as an open process of reflecting one's beliefs and behaviour as well as examining one's social identities and their basis. It might seem contradictory to encourage students to reflect critically, given the extremely strict definition of social rules outlined above and the strong dichotomy of right and wrong. Yet, the analysis reveals that, in fact, the concept of critical thinking is eroded from the inside: the process should not be open but always result in law-abiding behaviour. It can be considered critical thinking within boundaries of the law. Furthermore, the analysis of the term shows that students should understand that only the so-called correct facts lead to a moral and lawful conclusion and nurture a good character (Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021: 41). An objectivist approach is the basis for this argumentation, stating that there are objective information and an objective and correct truth, which should be taught. The circular argumenta-

tion is expanded to include the terms “correct/incorrect” as well as “objective truth/twisted truth” – an issue is moral if it is lawful, which means that it is based on the correct facts that represent an objective truth.

In my initial research question, I asked for the plural term “identities.” However, my findings suggest that in fact, it is only one social identity which is constructed. It is an all-compassing social identity that leaves minimal space for individual influence on that group identity. Conversely, the categorization of individuals happens externally through the state’s institutions and the basic characteristics of this categorization of the group are conceptualized as fixed. In the framing of the EDB, the students should learn to consider themselves part of a social group which is ruled by strict laws and a clear set of norms, traditions, and values that represent the supposed commonality of the society. The curriculum places more emphasis on enhancing the individuals’ willingness to be lawful and act according to society’s expectations rather than develop multiple identities that are under regular reflection of critical thought. The construction of that social identity is one with clear boundaries, instead of a loose group with an undefined distinction between “us” and “them” as other concepts of culture assume.

It is to keep in mind, that this research does not investigate what is happening in student’s and teacher’s lived experiences and the actual implementation of the mentioned policies and curricula. However, it excavates the norms and ideals of the authorities drafting the curricula. In Gramscian terms, it offers an insight into the way cultural hegemony is produced and helps to understand which values and attitudes towards life are perceived as important to upholding and reinforcing the prevailing hegemony.

I began this paper with a quote by Gramsci, stating that no ideas were born in an individual brain, but have a centre of formation and a group of people who present them in the form of political reality. No individual is free of societal influences on their identity and everywhere schools are a tool to influence the behaviour and values of future generations. However, my analysis indicates that education policies in Hong Kong function not merely as pedagogical frameworks but also as instruments for shaping a form of social identity aligned with political expectations of the government of the PRC and aimed at national unity and non-democratic governance. It is the social identity of a law-abiding society in which every individual acts responsibly and in accordance with what is deemed “appropriate”. It is a society that feels belonging towards the PRC. My findings contribute to the fear of citizens, activists, and scholars that personal freedoms and civil rights in HK are dismantled step by step. In this circum-



stance, it is important to conduct research as long as it is possible, to raise awareness for the impact on collective and individual realities, and to not oversee the supposedly small and subliminal steps in an authoritarian direction.

Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSD	Citizenship and Social Development
HK	Hong Kong
HKSAR	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
HKSARG	Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
IT	Information Technology
KG	Kindergarten
LS	Liberal Studies
NSE	National Security Education
NSL	National Security Law
PRC	People's Republic of China
SIT	Social Identity Theory

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Appendix

Overview over the corpus material

Table 4: Overview over corpus material

Short-hand code	Date of publication	Title of the document
D1	2019	Task Force on Review of School Curriculum. Consultation Document
D2	September 2020	Optimize the curriculum for the future. Foster whole-person development and diverse talents (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum. Final Report)
D3	03.12.2020	Education Bureau Circular Memorandum No. 180/2020. Latest developments in values education
D4	04.02.2021	EDB Circular No. 2/2021. National Security Education in School Curriculum - Implementation Mode and Learning and Teaching Resources
D5	01.04.2021	Education Bureau Circular Memorandum No. 39/2021. Measures to Optimise the Four Senior Secondary Core Subjects
D6	May 2021	Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong
D7	20.09.2021	Report of the Bills Committee on National Flag and National Emblem (Amendment) Bill 2021
D8	11.10.2021	EDB Circular No. 11/2021. National Flag, National Emblem, National Anthem and Regional Flag
D9	December 2021	National Flag, National Emblem, National Anthem and Regional Flag. Frequently Asked Questions and Answers
D10	2021	Supplementary Notes to the Secondary Education Curriculum Guide (2017)
D11	2021	Citizenship and Social Development. Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 - 6)
D12	05.10.2022	“2023 Let’s Join Hands in Safeguarding National Security” Programme
D13	16.03.2023	EDB Circular Memorandum No. 45/2023. National Security Education Day 2023