

Research Article

Shall We Discuss “The Thing” that is not Supposed to be Discussed? Toward a Rational Approach to National Education in Hong Kong

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Received: December 25, 2024 Revised: January 9, 2025 Accepted: January 13, 2025 Published: January 24, 2025

Abstract

Objective: Since the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020, national education that aims to cultivate Hongkongers’ sense of belonging to the Chinese nation has been widely promoted, yet remains controversial. This study aims to examine how textbooks in Hong Kong promote different elements of national education.

Methods: This study uses summative content analysis to examine how textbooks for the newly created subject of *Citizenship and Education Development* in Hong Kong promote different elements of national education.

Results: Findings show that four elements of national education are promoted as non-controversial, have a correct answer, and are essential for the nation's rejuvenation and for being a good citizen.

Conclusion: the paper discusses the limitations of this way of teaching national education and argues for adopting a rational approach in Hong Kong.

Keywords: national education, national identity, Hong Kong, China, citizenship, schools

Citation: Lin JC. Shall We Discuss “The Thing” that is not Supposed to be Discussed? Toward a Rational Approach to National Education in Hong Kong. *J Mod Educ Res*, 2025; 4: 1. DOI: 10.53964/jmer.2025001.

1 INTRODUCTION

National education has been a controversial topic worldwide^[1,2]. In Hong Kong, it is a new creation aiming to promote Hongkongers’ sense of belonging to the Chinese nation at all levels. Previously, it was often called civic/citizenship education. After political protests in Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020, national education was introduced and implemented mainly as a political project, along with implementing the National Security Law. Given that national education is a new phenomenon and has been an

umbrella term since then, there is no consensus on what it entails or how to implement it in schools.

As Hong Kong is increasingly influenced by the Chinese government, the Chinese government’s approach to topics related to national education (e.g., patriotism and national identity) –treating them as non-controversial and a moral duty—provides a context for understanding national education in Hong Kong^[3]. In Mainland China (hereafter referred to as ‘China’), national education-related topics

are highly politicised by the government and heavily promoted in education^[3]. In this top-down mode of the authoritarian system, the government majorly designs the direction, and diverse stakeholders (e.g., educators and students) are supposed to follow passively. Consequently, there is little space for the public to actively and rationally discuss these topics, let alone criticising them. Since a series of nationalistic moves, such as the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020 and the significant change in the school subject and curriculum afterwards, it was anticipated that this approach would also be applied in Hong Kong for teaching national education. However, whether and to what extent this is the case in Hong Kong remains unknown in the literature.

National education in Hong Kong has widely been considered a political project to recolonise/Mainlandise Hong Kong. Previous studies have examined it from teachers' perspectives. In particular, a few studies explored how the change from citizenship education to national education has impacted teachers and pointed out their confusion and coping strategies in practice^[4,5]. However, very few (if any) studies have differentiated different elements of national education and examined how they are promoted in textbooks in Hong Kong.

This paper adopts summative content analysis to demonstrate how different elements of national education are incorporated and promoted in related school textbooks in Hong Kong. In particular, it focuses on the newly created *Citizenship and Education Development* subject because of the political rationales behind it. The paper first provides a theoretical defence of a rational approach to teaching controversial topics. Then, it elaborates on how national education is a controversial issue in Hong Kong and clarifies the methodology of this paper. By analysing the textbook for *Citizenship and Social Development*, I show various ways in which national education is promoted in the Hong Kong curriculum as a non-controversial issue and a duty. Finally, the paper discusses the limitations of this way of teaching national education and argues for adopting the rational approach as an alternative in Hong Kong.

2 A RATIONAL APPROACH TO TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Rationally discussing controversial issues and presenting diverse perspectives fairly has been widely considered beneficial (e.g., fostering critical thinking and driving democracy) in many areas of education, including but not limited to civic/citizenship education and multicultural/intercultural education^[6,7]. Research indicates that students still benefit from discussing controversial issues even in authoritarian societies such as Singapore and China^[3,8].

Hand^[9] identified 'three classes of standards' that should be taught differently: (1) 'standards [that] are

robustly justified', (2) 'standards [that] are supported by justificatory arguments the soundness of which is a matter of reasonable disagreement among reasonable people', and (3) 'standards that are straightforwardly unjustified'. To teach controversial issues falling into the second category, I agree with Hand^[9,10] that neither directly teaching for any viewpoint nor not discussing controversial issues at all is appropriate in schools. According to Hand, a nondirective inquiry is more suitable for teaching controversial topics. By *inquiry*, he means 'the investigation of whether and which standards are justified', and *nondirective* refers to the idea that 'teaching about standards is deliberately noncommittal, [and] the teacher refrains from promoting or endorsing a view'^[9].

Inspired by Hand's ideas, I developed a rational approach to better fit the Chinese context^[3]. This rational approach teaches about the possibilities and risks associated with national education and equips students to critically discuss how to better implement national education and decide for themselves the value of national education, is more appropriate for teaching controversial topics such as national education. As I will show later, a common practice in the current irrational/blind approach to teaching national education is neglecting the complexity surrounding national education, cherry-picking data as if most Hongkongers are supporting national education, and downplaying/denying the negative impact that national education brings to the public. On the contrary, the rational approach recognises that (1) whether national is justifiable and how it should be conducted is a matter of reasonable disagreement, (2) different elements of national education should be critically and rationally reflected and discussed in education, and textbooks should not attempt to guide students to subscribe to national education, or persuade them that the government's understanding of national education is the only correct understanding, and (3) textbooks should empower students to make independent decisions about how to deal with national education, especially given its controversies in the society.

3 CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING NATIONAL EDUCATION AND CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN HONG KONG

Since Hong Kong was turned over to China in 1997, there have been many debates and controversies over whether and to what extent Hong Kong is a part of the Chinese nation, and whether national education is necessary and how it should be implemented in schools^[11,12]. The colonial history and the cosmopolitan orientation deeply embedded in Hong Kong have made Hongkongers believe that Hong Kong is unique and significantly different from other parts of the Chinese nation^[13]. The Moral and National Education controversy in 2012 demonstrated that many were concerned about losing educational autonomy, critical thinking, and freedom of expression when national

education is conducted in a way that selectively focuses on the positive side of the nation and discourages students to critically and rationally discuss controversial topics related to national education (e.g., the colonial history in Hong Kong and the Cultural Revolution)^[14]. To reduce the resistance among the public, the government withdrew the plan to introduce a new *Moral and National Education* subject to replace *Moral and Civic Education*.

Similar concerns were once again brought to the table by Hongkongers throughout 2019 and 2020; only this time, their voices and appeals were largely neglected and denied, and the government imposed national education. Worse, after implementing the National Security Law in 2020, many Hongkongers have been punished for expressing these concerns in the public space and ‘poisoning’ the public to go against national education^[15-17]. However, this does not change the fact that different elements of national education remain controversial among diverse stakeholders in Hong Kong. For example, many school principals, teachers, and educators are confused about how to integrate national education into the existing curriculum because the government has only proposed some political slogans instead of concrete guides^[18].

Meanwhile, because national education has been levelled up to a matter of national security, school principals, teachers, students, and parents are all concerned about the vague boundary between professionally expressing views about national education and being accused of endangering national security^[15]. As a result, Hong Kong witnessed a new wave of emigration, and many educators have resigned^[4,19]; for the rest staying in Hong Kong for various reasons, many choose a safe path: being silent and not discussing national education at all in public^[15,16]. Studies also found that beneath the public transcripts of compliance in schools, educators and students in Hong Kong are resisting national education quietly, such as cultivating students’ independent thinking by using less politically sensitive issues and using metaphors, jokes, and prayers to convey hidden messages^[20].

Despite the controversies surrounding national education among the public, the Hong Kong government tends to ignore this and promotes national education as a non-controversial topic. Certain elements of national education (e.g., national identity, law-abidingness, solidarity, and unity) have been included in the latest curriculum framework and guides as crucial moral values that are important for values education across all school levels^[21]. In particular, the latest *Values Education Curriculum Framework* (2021) clearly states that the focus of the revision was to strengthen national education^[22]. Moreover, as the findings section will show, diverse voices among stakeholders regarding different aspects of national education are denied and the data regarding how the public

feels about national education is somehow manipulated in textbooks to justify the promotion of national education.

To address the obstacles in promoting national education in Hong Kong schools, the Chinese government led by Xi Jinping has increasingly paid attention to constructing a unified Pan-Chinese national community, and considered this as a matter of national security and a principle that should be prioritised^[3,17]. Under this political pressure, *Citizenship and Social Development* was created to replace the controversial *Liberal Studies* in senior secondary schools which has been accused by the Chinese and Hong Kong governments and pro-Beijing groups of promoting anti-national education elements, though to what extent this accusation was true remains debatable in society^[11,23]. Starting from the 2021/22 school year, *Citizenship and Social Development* has been widely implemented across Hong Kong as a core and compulsory subject. As stated in the curriculum guide, one of the main rationales for creating the subject was to promote different aspects of national education^[24]. At the same time, the government firmly stated that ‘All themes [in the subject] should be addressed in line with the framework of the Constitution and the Basic Law’^[22], which ensures that national education can be taught and promoted in a way that the government expects. In this sense, *Citizenship and Social Development* provides a promising case for this study.

4 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study’s primary review materials are the latest *Citizenship and Social Development* textbooks. Since 2020, the Education Bureau has been updating related textbooks in schools to ensure they promote national education effectively. The Education Bureau has established its official Recommended Textbook List (<https://www.edb.gov.hk/rtl/>) to facilitate schools in making the alleged ‘appropriate’ choices of ‘quality’ textbooks and learning materials^[25]. Textbooks on the list have been reviewed and officially considered acceptable. This study chose textbooks of *Citizenship and Social Development* on the recommended list that are available for use: *New Focus in Citizenship and Social Development* (3 textbooks), *Modern Citizenship and Social Development* (3), and *New Horizon Citizenship and Social Development* (3). They were published in 2022 and 2023 by three reputable and major publishers: Marshall Cavendish Education, Modern Educational Research Society, and Hong Kong Educational Publishing Company.

I used summative content analysis to examine relevant content from textbooks^[26,27]. I first read all of them page by page to select text content relevant to a substantive discussion of the following content: (1) different elements of national education and (2) how they are promoted. Given that all three series followed the same curriculum guide, the titles of each textbook are the same: ‘Theme 1: Hong Kong under One Country, Two Systems’, ‘Theme

Table 1. Themes and Examples of Topics Covered

Theme	Examples of topics covered
Legal and Citizenship element	Constitution and Basic Law National Security Law and national security Hong Kong residents are Chinese citizens
Cultural element	Shared Chinese culture Chinese culture as the dominant in Hong Kong Hong Kong has inherited and innovated Chinese culture Hong Kong people should contribute to the development of Chinese culture and its promotion
History element	Hong Kong has always been a part of China Denying the colonial history
Ethnicity element	Shared ethnicity and blood

2: Our Country since Reform and Opening-up’, and ‘Theme 3: Interconnectedness and Interdependence of the Contemporary World’. During the data collection and analysis, I found that most relevant data are in Theme 1, and a few in Theme 2. In total, I identified 307 relevant pages, including *Modern Theme 1* (110 pages), *New Focus Theme 1* (109 pages), *New Horizon Theme 1* (85 pages), and *New Horizon Theme 2* (3). Given that textbooks were written in English, no translation was needed.

Four major themes were identified and developed, which will be discussed in detail in the next section. Table 1 provides examples of coding criteria regarding how different relevant topics discussed in the results are categorised into themes.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Legal and Citizenship Element

Out of 307 pages, 178 (58%) cover topics within this element. The first topic is about the Constitution and Basic Law. Textbooks highlight the paramount status of the Basic Law in Hong Kong and use this to promote the nationalist ideas that Hong Kong is part of China in terms of legal status and that Hong Kong’s autonomy depends on China’s authorisation. For example, one extract clarifies that the Basic Law is not a ‘mini constitution’ by saying that Hong Kong cannot draw up its own constitution because it is a part of China and not an independent state. The Constitution of the PRC is the only constitution of China. The Basic Law is a law of authorisation enacted under the Constitution. Therefore it is a ‘constitutional document’ of the HKSAR and not a “mini constitution”^[28].

Other texts reinforce the idea by summarising the constitutional relationship between the state and HKSAR as: ‘Sovereignty and jurisdiction belong to the Central Authorities’, ‘Power of the HKSAR originates from the Central Authorities’, and ‘Relationship of authorising and being authorised’.

Textbooks then continue to highlight the justifications regarding the Chinese government’s rule over Hong Kong in nearly all aspects, which were seriously questioned by

the public during the recent social movements in Hong Kong. In the section on ‘Power directly exercised by the Central Authorities’, textbooks state that the power includes ‘Establishing the HKSAR and its systems’, ‘Forming the organs of political power in the HKSAR’, ‘Taking up the responsibility of foreign affairs and defence’, and ‘Amending and interpreting the Basic Law’^[28]. This section is used to convince students that given Hong Kong is subservient to China (e.g., ‘The Chief Executive reports his/her work to the Central Authorities every year and shall be accountable to the CPG for upholding and implementing the Basic Law’), the Chinese government has authority to implement new laws (e.g., the National Security Law) and amend or cease any laws that contravene the Basic Law, and students should also obey the Basic Law and support national education^[28].

Interestingly, this section uses a case study (i.e., ‘Does the HKSAR have any consuls?’) that Hong Kong ‘begs’ China to protect its residents to further illustrate that Hong Kong does not have the authority to protect its people, because Hong Kong people are Chinese nationals and thus, protecting them is a matter of the Chinese government:

“As sending consuls to foreign countries is a matter of foreign affairs, the HKSAR is not authorised to do so. The responsibility for protecting the rights of Hong Kong residents overseas rests mainly with the Embassies of the PRC. In February 2020, Hong Kong tourists on board the Diamond Princess were struck in Japan because of the outbreak of coronavirus on the cruise. The HKSAR Government sought help from the Foreign Ministry of the PRC, the Embassy of the PRC in Japan, etc., to arrange chartered flight for sending healthy Hong Kong tourists home”^[28].

Another section uses a ‘concept clarification’ (i.e., ‘How “high” is the high degree of autonomy in the HKSAR’) to counter a prominent understanding among the public that the Chinese government’s interference is the destruction of Hong Kong’s autonomy:

“A ‘high degree of autonomy’ is neither absolute autonomy nor becoming independent. The HKSAR only enjoys broader autonomy when compared to the provinces, municipalities or autonomous regions in the Mainland”^[28].

Given that the provinces, municipalities, or autonomous regions in the Mainland enjoy minimal autonomy, this text implies that the autonomy Hong Kong enjoys is also quite limited (which, to some extent, contradicts the common understanding promoted in society since the handover regarding the ‘high degree of autonomy’). Like many other sections, this section also constantly highlights that all ‘the laws enacted [in Hong Kong] must not contravene the provisions of the Basic Law. ...[any] law that is considered not in conformity with the provisions of the Basic Law... shall immediately be invalidated.’^[28] It also emphasises that although Hong Kong has the right to participate in external affairs, it should always use ‘Hong Kong, China’ because this is the only legal name for Hong Kong to use. Here, textbooks constantly remind students that Hong Kong is part of China and subject to its governance.

The significance of the Basic Law and its legal basis are repeatedly emphasised in textbooks to promote other crucial ideas related to national education^[28]. In particular, ‘Hong Kong as part of China’, national unity, territorial integrity, political legitimacy, and national security are associated with the promotion of the significance of the Basic Law. Also, texts portray an image that the international community widely recognises the Basic Law to convince students that the Basic Law and nationalist ideas associated with it are out of the question and should be accepted by Hongkongers.

Some new texts were added to textbooks specifically to counter a common understanding of ‘one country, two systems’, that ‘two systems’ is more important than ‘one country’ for the development of Hong Kong, which was widespread during social movements in Hong Kong^[28,29]. Obviously, this understanding is dangerous to the Chinese government, because it challenges national unity and the rule of the Chinese government over Hong Kong. Therefore, seeing how frequently such content appears in textbooks to ‘correct’ students’ minds is unsurprising.

The second topic within this element is national security and the National Security Law. In the Chapter called ‘safeguarding national security’, it only uses positive sentences to describe safeguarding national security as ‘a prerequisite for the well-being of the people’ and ‘for the fundamental interests of the people’ instead of a political agenda that serves the government’s nationalistic interests^[28]. After introducing the meaning and significance of national security and the holistic view of national security invented by Xi, one text justifies the establishment of National Security Education Day as ‘an important milestone in the work of safeguarding national security’^[28]. At the same time, another text presents a picture showing ‘Citizens put stickers onto a jigsaw board to create a thematic mosaic, symbolising unity of all parties, conveying the message of safeguarding our nation and homeland, and building a

better home together’ on the National Security Education Day to illustrate the point that ‘together we safeguard our nation and homeland-community mosaic wall’^[30].

After justifying that the Chinese government ‘has the authority and responsibility to enact laws to safeguard national security in Hong Kong’, textbooks portray the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020 as ‘to safeguard national security and ensure the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong under “one country, two systems”’^[28]. Again, only positive meanings are associated with it here, to refute a criticism of the Law saying that it is an unjust law that people have no obligation to obey but should challenge. Another text also disproves another criticism: ‘the National Security Law has weakened the jurisdiction of Hong Kong courts’^[28].

Given that the National Security Law is promoted in textbooks as a just and necessary Law that can only do good for Hong Kong, texts continue to state that it is a duty of the HKSAR to ‘promote national security education in schools to raise the awareness of Hong Kong residents of national security and of the obligation to abide by the law’, and that ‘Protecting our country and safeguarding national security is also the responsibility of every Hong Kong resident’^[28]. One textbook even uses a photo depicting ‘Hong Kong residents showing support on the first day of the implementation of the National Security Law’ and a survey conducted in June 2021 indicating that ‘Hong Kong citizens generally satisfied with the effectiveness of National Security Law and increased their confidence in “one country, two systems”’ to prove that Hongkongers welcome the Law because it is good for Hong Kong^[29].

Notably, with the vague definition of four categories of offences and penalties associated with them in the National Security Law, textbooks do not help clarify or ease people’s concerns that innocent people could be accused of committing to these crimes by the authority because of various reasons (e.g., political) and receive penalties accordingly. Instead, textbooks only positively portray the Law by selectively choosing and presenting materials from a particular perspective. For example, texts only justify and praise the implementation of the Law in many aspects of society, including education (e.g., ‘the Education Bureau has formulated a Curriculum Framework of National Security Education and required schools to teach concepts related to national security in different subjects’) and law enforcement and prosecution (e.g., arresting and prosecuting the founder and staff of *Apple Daily* and the forty-seven participants of the pan-Democrats’ legislative primaries); while no other perspectives (e.g., those questioning the arrests and persecutions) were shown^[28].

Textbooks then summarise the functions of the National Security Law as ‘facilitating the long-term development of

Hong Kong’ and ‘balanc[ing] between the rule of law and human rights’^[28]. Regarding the first function, textbooks state that the Law helps ‘safeguard the security of the country and Hong Kong’, ‘maintain social stability’, and achieve ‘the restoration of peace in society’^[28]. For the second function, although textbooks clarify that human rights will be protected by the National Security Law, many studies have shown that the reality is that human rights have been largely destroyed because of the Law and many dissents have been arrested; as a result, the public has begun dare not to question the Law^[17,28]. In this sense, the extent to which the law truly helps Hong Kong is questionable, but the textbook only reflects the view of the government authority.

The last topic under this element is promoting the idea that Hong Kong residents are Chinese citizens. Over the past few decades, many Hongkongers have used Hong Kong citizens rather than residents to emphasise that they are not Chinese citizens and that Hong Kong is different from China (e.g., Hong Kong citizens have their own Hong Kong passports). To ‘rectify’ this understanding, textbooks state that “*Person of Chinese nationality under the National Law of the People’s Republic of China are Chinese citizens. Under this law, Hong Kong residents who are born in Chinese territory (including Hong Kong) and are of Chinese descent are Chinese citizens.*”^[28]

Then textbooks continue to say that ‘*it is the primary moral duty of Hong Kong residents to comply with the Basic Law and [other] national laws*’, to ‘*be a good citizen and understand and care about national affairs, and contribute to national development*’, and to ‘*develop national identity: Enhance their understanding of the country, such as attending the flag-raising ceremony, and deepen their understanding of the Basic Law and “one country, two systems”*’.^[29]

5.2 Cultural Element

70 (23%) of 307 pages cover topics within this element. The first topic is about how people of Hong Kong share Chinese culture. In the section called ‘sense of national identity of Hong Kong residents’, textbooks highlight that culture is a crucial component of a sense of national identity, and the generation of a sense of national identity often involves factors such as cultural inheritance^[27]. Following this logic, texts continue to say that “*The inheritance of traditional Chinese culture helps establish the Chinese national identity among Hong Kong residents. Most Hong Kong residents are Chinese, who have inherited traditional Chinese culture and customs, and therefore consider themselves as members of the Chinese nation and have developed a sense of identity as Chinese.*”^[28]

As a response to one criticism of the promotion of national education in Hong Kong – it is uncommon for

Hongkongers to have a national identity– one text clarifies that ‘*Hong Kong residents have generally inherited Chinese culture and taken pride in the profoundness of Chinese culture. All of these manifest the sense of national identity of Hong Kong residents.*’^[28]

The second topic is Chinese culture as the dominant in Hong Kong. In the section titled ‘*factors shaping the characteristics of cultural diversity with Chinese culture as the mainstay in Hong Kong*’, textbooks start with describing ‘*Chinese culture being the root of Hong Kong culture*’ and ‘*Chinese culture has become the key to shaping the culture in Hong Kong.*’ Texts were used to convince students that it is natural and logical for Hongkongers to welcome national education and develop national identity because Hong Kong and China belong to the same Chinese nation that shares the same culture^[28,29].

Meanwhile, numerous archaeological findings (e.g., painted pottery) across different periods throughout history (e.g., from prehistoric to pre-Qin period) were referenced in textbooks to prove that ‘Hong Kong culture was originated from Chinese culture. Chinese culture is the root of Hong Kong culture.’ The native inhabitants (e.g., the ‘Five Great Clans of the New Territories’) before the 19th century and the Mainland immigrants from 1841 to 2021 were also used in textbooks to emphasise that because they were all Chinese, ‘They brought about Chinese cultures with special characteristics, constituting the Hong Kong local culture with Chinese culture as the mainstay.’^[28]

Notably, to disprove a prevailing belief in Hong Kong that it has been significantly shaped by Western culture and thus should be considered more as a Western society instead of Chinese society, textbooks repetitively clarify that Chinese culture (e.g., Taoism and Lunar New Year) has always been the majority and has the most followers in Hong Kong. For example, texts often state that “*The cultural exchanges between Hong Kong and the Mainland did not stop during the British rule of Hong Kong. The motherland was deep in the heart of many local Chinese elites. The continuous interaction between the two places helped maintain the sense of Chinese culture in Hong Kong society.*”^[28]

One text cites the mottos of different universities in Hong Kong to prove the abovementioned point^[28].

Interestingly, when describing the development of Hong Kong under British rule, one text even designs an extended learning material titled ‘Hong Kong, a place where the Great Qing Legal Code was enforced for the longest time’ to show how Chinese culture is deeply embedded in Hong Kong:

Many people thought that after the British occupied Hong Kong, they would govern Hong Kong by fully implementing

laws of the British style. However, this was not the case. The Hong Kong government adopted the strategy of “ruling the Chinese with Chinese laws”. It adopted the provisions in the Great Qing Legal Code as the customary law to govern the Chinese. After the Qing Dynasty collapsed, the Great Qing Legal Code became invalid in the Mainland. However, the Hong Kong government still used it as the basis for governing the Chinese^[28].

The third topic of this element is that Hong Kong has inherited and innovated Chinese culture. Textbooks emphasise the importance of inheriting and advancing Chinese culture in Hong Kong, because it shows that Hong Kong never forgets that it is a Chinese city and its duty to the motherland (e.g., contribute to the national development in culture)^[28]. Examples provided to demonstrate the inheritance and innovation of traditional cultures in Hong Kong include pop culture, wuxia novels, design of cheongsam, and Kwan Kwa^[28].

The final topic is that Hong Kong people should contribute to developing Chinese culture and promoting it to the world. This topic is mainly manifested in the ‘nurturing citizenship rooted in Chinese culture’ section. One text summarises that *“Hong Kong residents should establish a sense of identity with Chinese culture and utilise their advantage of cultural diversity to promote Chinese traditional culture. They should become citizens with feelings for our motherland and contribute to Chinese culture and world civilisation.”*^[28].

Here, students are not given any other choices besides accepting the ideology, because according to textbooks, ‘Chinese culture connects the hearts of every Chinese, affecting their thoughts and feelings. It is also a priceless asset for all Chinese in the past, present and future’^[29]. In fact, any challenges posed by students to their so-called ‘duties to the nation’ (e.g., inheriting and promoting Chinese culture) risk being judged as ‘betraying one’s own country’ and ‘endangering national security’.

It is vital to notice that textbooks promote cultural inheritance also to serve other political purposes in national education, such as maintaining social hierarchy and harmony so that the government’s rule is more likely to be smoothly accepted and obeyed. As one text implies,

Despite the influence of the imported foreign culture and the change of social environment, Chinese culture still has important functions and values in modern society. For example, family ethics such as filial piety and respect for the elderly still play an important role in maintaining family and social harmony^[28].

5.3 History Element

44 (14%) pages discuss topics of this element. First, textbooks promote the idea that Hong Kong has always

been a part of China throughout history, even in the colonial period. Many Hongkongers believe that given that the British government ruled Hong Kong, Hong Kong was not part of China during the colonial period and should not be considered simply a Chinese city after the handover. This idea has prevailed during social movements over the last decade. To ‘correct’ this belief, in the section of ‘the origin of the question of Hong Kong’, textbooks first repeatedly use texts and activities to convince students that Hong Kong was a part of China in ancient times and that ‘China had the right to garrison troops in Hong Kong and had jurisdiction over Hong Kong’^[30]. Representative texts include ‘Hong Kong has been a part of China’s territory since the Qin Dynasty and has been governed under different provincial authorities’^[30].

Then textbooks clarify that this connection between Hong Kong and China has never ceased even when Hong Kong was under British governance. As texts emphasise: ‘Hong Kong is always part of the territory of China. Such a fact does not change even when Hong Kong was occupied by Britain’^[28]. Finally, textbooks state that this close ties between Hong Kong and the Mainland ‘had grown even closer since reform and opening-up’, which provides a societal and psychological basis for justifying and promoting national education^[30].

The second topic is related to the first, because it strengthens the first by denying the colonial history and saying that Hong Kong has never been a colonial society. In particular, in the section of ‘the origin of the question of Hong Kong’, textbooks constantly remind students that Hong Kong was not a colonial society because ‘Britain forced the Qing government to sign three unequal treaties. This violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China’, and that ‘The issue of excluding Hong Kong from the list of “colony” is crystal clear.’ Meanwhile, in the section on ‘China’s position on the question of Hong Kong’, texts highlight that the Chinese government never recognises this colonial history and that ‘China’s refusal to recognise the three unequal treaties is based on the grounds of international law [e.g., the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties]’^[28]; therefore, Hong Kong should not be legally considered having a colonial history.

Textbooks even design a ‘Q&A Drill’ for students to ‘state three characteristics of an unequal treaty’ and clarify why the three treaties are unequal treaties in terms of the way of signing them and their content^[29]. However, all three perspectives are what the government wants students to believe: ‘use of force’, ‘inequalities in rights and duties’, and ‘violation of national sovereignty or interests’. No other perspectives are provided for students to understand the historical events.

Moreover, in case students would think that this

government's position is only a 'self-comfort' that is not recognised by others, texts justify that the position of 'Hong Kong did not have colonial status. Hong Kong does not fall under the category of "colonial territories" has long been widely accepted by the international community and thus, should also be accepted by Hong Kong people^[28,30]. One page even designs an activity for students to answer why China demanded to remove Hong Kong from the list of colonial territories was justifiable. No other views are provided or encouraged in the activity.

This denial of colonial history is mainly to respond to a prevailing 'colonial mentality' (戀 殖) in society, saying that Hong Kong developed better during the colonial period and the colonial history left Hong Kong various valuable legacies (e.g., freedom of speech and the rule of law) that are increasingly destroyed by China's interference^[31]. They prefer the colonial rule under the Britain over being part of China, and some argue for independence or self-determination. Obviously, this 'colonial mindset' has brought severe challenges to China's rule over Hong Kong and is unacceptable to the Chinese government. This explains why the denial of colonial history was never seen in the previous textbooks for other social studies-related subjects (e.g., *Chinese History* and *History*), but was added to the new *Citizenship and Social Development* subject.

5.4 Ethnic Element

15 (around 5%) pages contain this element which mainly focuses on the shared ethnicity and blood between Hong Kong and the Mainland (e.g., belong to the same 'big family' and have the same ancestors) to pave the way for national education because 'blood is thicker than water'. Specifically, textbooks repetitively emphasise that the native inhabitants of Hong Kong were Chinese^[28,29]. Then textbooks use Mainland people moving into Hong Kong in different periods (particularly from 1841 to 2021) to further prove that Hong Kong has always been a Chinese-dominated society and that the two places share the same blood and ethnicity^[28].

Following this logic, textbooks say that nowadays, 'Most Hong Kong residents are Chinese who feel a sense of common origin', and that 'Chinese has always been the majority in Hong Kong'. One text also references the 2021 Population Census to demonstrate 'Hong Kong as a Chinese-dominated society' because 'majority of Hong Kong's population has roots in the Mainland; and over half of them are native Hong Kong people^[28,29]'.

However, as studies have pointed out, ethnicity is only one aspect of national identity, plus given the fact that this aspect is not out of people's free choice, it should not be overemphasised or used in a way that neglects diversity among people who share the same ethnicity/blood^[17,32]. Meanwhile, the extent to which different Chinese ethnicities

can be counted into one pan-Chinese ethnicity is also an unsolved question^[33-35]. In this context, diversity and complexities among the so-called 'Chinese' ethnic group should neither be overlooked nor simplified in textbooks.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I found that different elements of national education have all been promoted in textbooks as a non-controversial topic with objectively correct and incorrect answers, which is essential for the rejuvenation of the nation and for being a good citizen. In this sense, accepting the indoctrination in national education has become a political requirement and a moral duty instead of a free choice. This promotion of national education as a non-controversial topic does not reflect controversies surrounding all its elements. This 'directly-teach-for' approach is also different than more common approaches (e.g., 'teach about') worldwide where topics related to national education (e.g., citizenship and patriotism) tend to be treated as controversial that deserve rational debates.

Some recent political changes in Hong Kong significantly contribute to this situation. In particular, the Chinese government's increasing control over Hong Kong and Mainlandisation provide a background for understanding these changes. After the social unrest in 2019 and 2020, the creation of the new subject and its textbooks may serve as a political gesture by the Hong Kong government, showing the Chinese government that Hong Kong is fully committed to integrating into national development. If this is the case, political rationales are prioritised over educational concerns. Meanwhile, based on the previous research about textbooks in Hong Kong and China^[3,17,35,36], the examined textbooks have become increasingly similar to textbooks in China (especially in terms of the discourse regarding national education). The current nationalistic moves in many sectors of society make it logical to assume that the trend will likely continue and strengthen^[37]. Under this circumstance, it is not surprising to see that the current approach to promoting national education in textbooks, as identified above, serves several political purposes, including strengthening unity, creating nationalistic and anti-West sentiments, maintaining political legitimacy, justifying and promoting Xi's thoughts, and constructing a Pan-national identity.

However, a 'blind' approach that treats different elements of national education as non-controversial and having a simple and correct answer in textbooks is particularly questionable in the current Hong Kong political environment. As many have argued, the preservation and the flourishing of Hong Kong over the last few decades were because it adhered to core values including freedom, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, a high degree of autonomy, and clean governance^[38]. These core values depend on an education system that upholds and cultivates critical thinking, presents diverse perspectives, and

encourages students to explore and discuss controversies and make independent and informed judgments. Arguably, the current approach to national education erodes the abovementioned foundation for effective and justifiable teaching and learning, mainly because diverse perspectives are missing and students are encouraged to believe or even justify whatever textbooks deliver. In this process, students are not given opportunities to explore counterarguments and make independent and informed judgments.

As an alternative, I argue for a rational approach to national education, which aims to recognise diverse understandings of national education, more even-handedly teach about the pros and cons of national education, and empower students to critically discuss how to better implement national education and decide for themselves how to evaluate national education-related knowledge, skills, and values promoted by the government. In the school setting, this approach encourages students to realise that national education is called, understood, and practiced differently across contexts, within and beyond Hong Kong. Given the controversies surrounding all elements of national education, textbooks should present different views evenly and create opportunities for students to connect each element of national education with their lives and critically evaluate their value. During this process, textbooks should avoid only showing the government's understanding of national education or judging other understandings as wrong. Instead, they should encourage students to present and consider different views about national education to foster an inclusive environment for rational discussion. With the free exploration of diverse understandings, this approach empowers students to explore national education more openly and comprehensively.

A rational approach encourages students to consider diverse voices regarding different rationales (e.g., political, societal, and educational) behind the promotion of national education, and the effect of national education (both positive and negative) in relation to the future and global image of Hong Kong and the preservation of its core values. Given that national education is a vague term that has been widely promoted everywhere in Hong Kong, people have expressed worries about to what extent it would become brainwashing (Griffiths, 2021). In this context, a more comprehensive and critical perspective is needed for students to better understand and evaluate its value. Despite the political discourse saying that national education will only do good for Hong Kong and its people and that schools should spare no effort to promote national education, studies have pointed out that national education has caused negative effects in practice, especially regarding freedom, educational autonomy, and critical thinking^[16]. As a result, national education has, to some extent, become a hot potato that people either lose interest or dare not to express their opinions^[17,39]. Textbooks should acknowledge

and include cases where national education brings troubles and encourage students to examine and address these cases. This approach will help students develop a more comprehensive understanding of national education and equip them with the knowledge, skills, and values to deal with problematic expressions and actions in the name of 'national education' in society.

The central tenet of a rational approach is a reflection on the extent to which national education can be justified and promoted. This is particularly important in the current environment where national education is being promoted in a way that goes against people's common understanding of what 'brainwashing' is and what 'education' is. Unless students are given opportunities to reflect on what they have been taught and freely express their views, the concern that national education being 'brainwashing' will grow among Hongkongers and cause more migrations and loss of talents^[4]. Eventually, national education will be more likely to be rejected or simply become a political performance that loses its educational value.

Students have every right to support national education and develop national identity if they choose to do so after careful reflection. However, it is against the nature of education for textbooks to deprive students of their opportunities to experience this process, assigning national identity for them, and forbidding them from questioning national education. After all, there is no singular or correct way of doing national education; the form that national education takes and should take is up to people living in a society to negotiate and co-construct. An effective approach to teaching national education as a controversial issue in any so-called 'democratic' society does not force students to believe and practice the government's view, but instead shows students the complexity of national education, listens to their concerns and voices, and empowers them with abilities to make independent judgments and become responsible and active citizens.

This study's limitation lies in its reliance on textbook content and in not interviewing educators and students. This paper contributes to the field by adding Hong Kong and Chinese perspectives in understanding global approaches to national education. This is particularly meaningful in the current world where conservative forces (e.g., the banning of Critical Race Theory in the United States) and nationalism are rising^[40]. Although the boundary between politics and education and the connection between the government stance and textbook production are varied worldwide, this study provides a basis for future research to compare the impact of conservative forces and nationalism on education in different societies.

Meanwhile, this research provides an interesting case, showing how a previously colonised society struggles

between different forces (e.g., decolonisation and nationalisation), especially how its colonial history is being denied in the nationalising process and how this impacts people's identity. Future research is encouraged to explore the similarities and differences between Hong Kong and other societies with a colonial history, further showing the complexity of the intersection between decolonising and nationalising (or recolonising) forces and identity struggles across contexts.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the [University Grants Committee (Hong Kong) Early Career Scheme] under Grant [number 28600524], and [National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences Youth Project] under Grant [number CAA220305].

Conflicts of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article and its supplementary information files.

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Author Contribution

The author contributed to the manuscript and approved the final version.

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