

Research Article

A New Era of National Identity Education: Trends and Political Rationales in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Objective: The issue of national identity in Hong Kong is the product of complicated political, social, and educational factors. School, among others, is often the central field where debates about national identity occur. However, little is known about the latest situation and the political rationales undergirding these changes.

Methods: The Hong Kong government has initiated many significant reforms to better implement national identity education in schools since 2020. This article uses content analysis to review the latest government documents.

Results: This article shows that since 2020, national identity education in schools has entered a new era emphasizing increasing nationalization and promoting national identity as a non-controversial issue.

Conclusion: This article then discusses the political rationales undergirding this new government approach and to what extent it can serve the government's political interests.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Chin, Chinese, national identity, nationalization, education

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1 INTRODUCTION

Identity is a fundamental human need that relates to the ultimate questions of 'Who am I?', 'What groups do I belong to?' and 'What is my relationship with others'^[1]. National identity education is a crucial part of social studies education worldwide and is fundamental for nation-building^[2]. Yet, it has always been a controversial national project worldwide as it concerns how to justly attain national unity while accommodating diversity among different groups (e.g., ethnic, cultural, and religious) within

a nation-state^[3,4].

In Hong Kong, national identity education has always been a tricky political task as it relates to more troubling questions such as 'What is a nation?' and 'Which nation?'. In particular, during the colonial period, the British government never treated Hong Kong as a nation, and a local identity instead of a Chinese national identity was encouraged and developed for better governing local people and developing their local attachment^[5-7]. Since Hong

Kong was turned over to China in 1997, national identity has become more closely connected with identity politics and the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China. Consequently, there have been many controversies over whether and in what dimensions Hongkongers identify with their Chinese national identity, making the issue unresolved and tricky^[8-13]. On the one hand, as a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese government has always attempted to promote the various (e.g., cultural, ethnic, and historical) ties between Hong Kong and the mainland to foster the emotional and psychological return of Hongkongers to the Chinese nation^[14,15]. However, the government's approach was never too extreme or coercive because of the guarantee of a large degree of autonomy under the overall design of 'one country, two systems'.

On the other hand, Hong Kong has experienced the rule and colonization of the Japanese and British governments. This unique colonial history has left a profound imprint on Hong Kong and shaped Hongkongers' identity, such as identifying more with Western values and lifestyles and considering themselves more civilized than their mainland counterparts^[14,16]. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong government's cosmopolitan orientation (e.g., describing Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan society) and the global positioning of Hong Kong (e.g., international financial centre) after the handover have made Hong Kong a *de-facto* multicultural society where respecting diversity is somewhat prioritized over achieving unity, which is different from the mainland, to keep its global reputation and attractiveness^[17,18]. The conflict and contradiction between these two aspects have caused the complexity and controversy surrounding the implementation of national identity education in schools in Hong Kong after the handover.

National identity education has become a more pressing and troubling issue in Hong Kong since 2020 because of pressure from the Chinese government. Since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, he has repeatedly highlighted that national identity education should be strengthened in Hong Kong to foster the construction of a unified Chinese national community, cultivate patriotism and loyalty to the Chinese state and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and align with his other political narratives, such as 'a rising China is not a sick man anymore' discourse^[19]. Under the influence of Xi, the Hong Kong government has proposed a series of initiatives to promote his ideas of strengthening China's control over Hong Kong and national identity education. These nationalistic projects were resisted mainly in Hong Kong to protect its educational autonomy under the 'one country, two systems' formula and its emphasis on critical thinking and other core values (e.g., freedom and democracy), as shown in the Umbrella Movement in 2014^[20,21]. Given strong resistance and criticisms, the government often withdrew these

projects to show respect to public opinion and win their support for other more pressing matters at that time.

However, the situation after 2020 has been different. After the 2019 Anti-extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, despite many Hongkongers expressing concerns and criticisms of the government's nationalistic projects, the Hong Kong government did fall back. Instead, it advanced Chinese nationalism in Hong Kong toughly and defined national identity as a civic duty and a matter of national security that every Hongkonger needs to obey^[22]. With the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020, people who challenge national identity will now face potential legal penalties. In this sense, the political and societal environment for national identity education has changed.

Previous research has investigated some concepts and components related to national identity education (e.g., patriotism) from different disciplinary perspectives, such as historical studies, ethnic studies, and curriculum studies^[9,23-26]. Yet, more attention must be paid to the latest situation after 2020. As this article will show below, 2020 marked a new era for national identity education because many significant changes have occurred. By comprehensively summarizing and analyzing the significant changes related to national identity education in Hong Kong since 2020, this article provides an updated and comprehensive picture regarding how these changes have made national identity education in Hong Kong enter a new era and reflecting on whether and how this new era would contribute to the development of Chinese nationalism and serve the Chinese government's political interests. It starts with a summary of the background information regarding why national identity education has always been a tricky issue in Hong Kong schools. Doing this helps clarify how historical reasons provide a context for understanding the current changes in national identity education. After elaborating on methodology, the article presents findings on the specific measures that have been applied by the government to improve national identity education since 2020, demonstrating that national identity education has entered a new era. Finally, the article discusses the political rationales associated with the recent changes and reflects on the extent to which they can serve the government's political interests.

2 NATIONAL IDENTITY AS A TROUBLING ISSUE IN HONG KONG SCHOOLS

To better understand the Hong Kong context, this article broadly perceives national identity education as a multi-dimensional, complicated, and controversial project that the government designs and implements, aiming to shape students into patriotic citizens who have a sense of national belonging, a sense of national pride and social responsibility, and affection for the CCP and mainland Chinese people.

This definition recognizes that national identity education is neither a completed nor non-controversial project but an ongoing and debatable political project troubling many Hongkongers and should be inclusively co-constructed and negotiated by all stakeholders.

Chinese national identity has rich connotations, including politics, culture, ethnicity, history, law, values and other dimensions^[27-29]. Arguably, it is mainly designed and used as a political concept aiming to unite people across the world with various connections (e.g., ethnic Chinese people) to China to build a pan-Chinese nation led by the CCP^[15,30,31]. From the CCP's perspective, on the one hand, Hong Kong is on the periphery of this circle because it is more considered a mix of Chinese and Western instead of authentic Chinese in terms of aspects such as political, legal, and values systems^[33]. This makes any attempts by Hongkongers to question or challenge the central status of mainland China in this circle unacceptable.

For example, for a long time, some Hongkongers considered themselves defenders of traditional Chinese culture (e.g., traditional Chinese characters and Cantonese, which are closer to the ancient Chinese language)^[34]. For them, the CCP somehow betrayed the traditional Chinese path to modernization and relied on destroying traditional Chinese elements (e.g., during the Cultural Revolution) to serve its political missions at different times^[35], including designing Mandarin and simplified Chinese characters which are 'useless and illiterate writing' and 'incomplete characters that lost all Chinese character's connotations and charms' to reduce the illiteracy rate^[16]. A sense of local superiority accompanies these belittlements of the language and culture associated with the mainland^[36].

To the CCP, this view is unacceptable because it challenges the authority that mainland China enjoys in defining what is authentic Chinese and who is the true inheritor of Chinese heritage^[30,33]. Therefore, the CCP has been trying to promote Mandarin and simplified Chinese characters in Hong Kong to make it more similar to the mainland. However, the process had been slowed down in the first decade following the handover in 1997 because pushing this political agenda was unhelpful for more urgent political agendas at that time, such as building CCP's global image and reputation as respecting differences and keeping its promise of the 'one country, two systems' and winning Hongkongers' support^[37]. In the second decade, especially after Xi came to power, accelerating mainlandization became the priority^[38]. Thus, it was unsurprising that the CCP had made more efforts to accelerate this process, such as proposing a new *Moral and National Education* subject in schools. With the legal support of National Security Law, this process has been significantly accelerated recently by measures including requiring students and teachers to learn Mandarin and teach some subjects in simplified Chinese

characters, and changing some street signs from English and traditional Chinese characters to simplified Chinese characters only^[39]. These countermeasures endorsed by the Chinese government show its attitude toward maintaining its central status in defining the authentic Chinese nation.

On the other hand, this peripheral area has always been indispensable to the CCP's political construction of a unified Chinese nation because the economic development and global reputation of Hong Kong can complement mainland China in many aspects, as demonstrated by Hong Kong's financial support for mainland China during its many difficult times (e.g., the 2003 SARS and 2008 Sichuan earthquake) and its role in channeling investment to the mainland. Therefore, for the CCP, keeping the uniqueness and strengths of Hong Kong instead of making it simply another Chinese city is more beneficial to the Chinese nation's development^[40]. For example, keeping the uniqueness and strengths of Hong Kong to a degree that does not endanger the authority of the CCP helps convince the global community (including Taiwan) that Hong Kong is in good hands after the handover. This explains why, even today, the Chinese government is still seeking a way to balance the traditional inward-looking Chinese nationalism and Hong Kong's outward-looking global orientation so that a new form of inward-and-outward-balanced nationalism can be developed in Hong Kong to better serve China's development by complementing mainland's weakness (e.g., internationalization)^[41,42].

Since Xi Jinping came to power, Hong Kong's unique place in his vision has become more significant. In particular, in the new China vs U.S. rivalry, Xi has been committing to downplaying the humiliating history while emphasizing a 'greater and unified China' discourse to justify his initiatives to achieve the Chinese dream of the rejuvenation of the nation and take up greater global leadership (e.g., through The Belt and Road Initiative and leading the United Nations)^[19,43]. In this vision, it is necessary to provide evidence to the global community that Hong Kong is finally on the right path under Xi's great leadership after so many years of turmoil. He also put forward agendas such as 'great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' and 'a global community of shared future' to criticize and challenge American supremacy^[44]. Again, Hong Kong's special role lies in its pledging allegiance to the CCP and standing with Xi to criticize the U.S.' malicious intentions to weaken China by supporting localism and other terrorist actions in Hong Kong^[45]. Hong Kong's support is crucial in condemning the U.S.' global expansion and justifying China's peaceful development and why its commitment to world harmony is better than the U.S. in taking a greater global leadership^[46].

Meanwhile, as China's economic slowdown has deepened recently, maintaining social stability has become

more arduous, and the public is more likely to challenge the legitimacy of CCP^[47]. Being a traditional global financial centre, Hong Kong's strengths in internationalization, innovation, and attracting international investment and talent can complement China's limitations on over-relying on manpower and its current manpower shortage^[40]. In this sense, China's support for Hong Kong to keep its status as a global financial centre and strive to become a global innovation hub also benefits China's development^[48].

In this sense, it is fair to say that the significant differences between Hong Kong in terms of aspects such as cultural, political, legal, and value systems can be considered as both an asset and a challenge to the CCP and have made how to answer the question of 'to what extent I am a national citizen' an unavoidable puzzle for many Hongkongers.

This national identity being a societal problem is also reflected at the school level. Although how national identity has been a tricky issue in schools is complicated for multiple reasons, here the author elaborates on it from three major perspectives. The first is the issues within the education system left over from colonial history. Under the overall design of 'one country, two systems', the Basic Law states, 'Educational institutions of all kinds may retain their autonomy and enjoy academic freedom^[49].' These rights apply not only to the areas of education less linked to national identity (e.g., Math) but also to those closely related to national identity, including social studies-related areas. Although the Chinese government has the right of supervision, it often adopted a more laissez-faire attitude and rarely intervened directly because of the worry that its direct control would cause unnecessary domestic and international criticisms^[14,15].

After the handover, the Hong Kong government largely continued the practice during the colonial period: handing over the design and management of most schools to their sponsoring body and Incorporated Management Committee (IMC), leaving them to decide on matters such as the vision and mission for the school, the mode of running and managing the school, the compilation and selection of teaching materials, and the deployment and evaluation of principals and teachers^[50]. This practice directly led to the situation that only a tiny part of schools in Hong Kong are under the complete control of the government, and a large number of schools are funded and run by various associations, organizations, and religious groups, which are *de facto* out of government supervision^[51]. At the same time, the IMC system encouraged different stakeholders (including teachers and parents) to participate in and jointly decide on the school management model and specific rules and regulations, allowing groups with different stances towards national identity to influence school policies^[52].

The autonomy of the sponsoring body and IMC was

also reflected in the compilation and selection of textbooks. Although the government has issued a list of officially recommended textbooks (<https://cd.edb.gov.hk/rtl/search.asp>) for schools to use, schools are not required to choose only textbooks from the list; each school could still decide whether to use textbooks and what editions and publishers to use or even develop their textbooks. Because of the complexity and diversity of the textbook publishing system, many popular textbooks in the Hong Kong market did not promote national identity in the way that the CCP wanted^[53,54]. For schools that did not use textbooks for teaching or rely on school-based textbooks, their teaching resources were primarily obtained from the internet and news media, wherein the content was uneven and sometimes went against the CCP's intention^[16].

In teacher evaluation, given that critical thinking and freedom of speech are widely considered Hong Kong's core values left by the colonial period, political stances and attitudes towards national identity were often not included in the evaluation criteria. The insistence on freedom of speech in teaching and learning to cultivate students' critical thinking and independent judgement and the resistance to brainwashing created a relatively safe environment where teachers and students dared to express their political stance in the teaching and learning process^[21].

Second, in contexts like Hong Kong, where people often have a fluid identity and the general education system prioritizes standardization and heavily relies on examinations^[55], national identity education was neither an independent school subject nor a core component of the entrance examination. Instead, it was scattered among different subjects. For example, *Chinese History*, a core course for strengthening national identity, was a selective rather than compulsory school subject. Most students chose another *History* subject based on a Western historical perspective, making the already precarious national identity-related subject an empty shell^[56].

Meanwhile, unlike other subjects focusing on 'objective' knowledge and skills (e.g., Math), national identity is more about subjective identification. It is widely believed in Hong Kong that individuals should not be forced to hold any identity. The complicated and fluid nature of Hongkongers' identity makes the cultivation of national identity harder to be standardized^[36]. This explains why, although the government generally stated that national identity is essential, it did not clearly define what and how to teach it in schools. The lack of a straightforward and consistent definition of teaching objectives, contents, and concepts made national identity understood and practised differently among schools and teachers^[57]. Consequently, because of the emphasis on critical thinking and independent judgement in schools and education, it was a relatively common practice among most teachers that they should

only show diverse perspectives so that students could freely develop their standpoints instead of directly teaching for national identity in the classroom^[57,58].

3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study applies summative content analysis to examine how the Hong Kong government has pushed national identity education in schools since 2020 to respond to the demands from the Chinese government and how their measures mark a new era. Data come from government documents, mainly in the form of text. Content analysis was chosen because it is beneficial for examining data already recorded in documents as text and for interpreting text by systematically categorizing content and identifying themes or patterns^[59]. Specifically, this study adopted a summative approach to content analysis. In this approach, keywords or topics are first coded, and then the words of the text are counted, compared, and finally interpreted^[60]. These features make it a proper method for this study to reveal the pattern and hidden messages in the government's approach to national identity education.

Given that this study focuses on the government's new approach to national identity education in schools, the author used *guomin jiaoyu* (national identity education) and *xuexiao* (schools) as keywords to search all columns on the Hong Kong government website (<https://www.gov.hk/tc/>). This website was chosen because it is a relatively comprehensive site used by the Hong Kong government to provide information to the public. It covers many types of government-endorsed information, including government documents, press releases, curricular guides, and political leaders' speeches. Although the website has different languages, the traditional Chinese version was chosen because many related documents only have Chinese versions. For the data range, the author chose 30 June 2020 to 31 December 2023 to reflect the latest situation from when the National Security Law was implemented to when the data collection ended.

A total of 631 results were obtained after applying the search criteria. Then, the author read each result one by one and selected those substantially containing content that discusses the following topics: (1) the government's new school requirements (e.g., school management) to promote national identity education. (2) the government's new initiatives and plans to support schools in promoting national identity education; and (3) the government's new changes to the education system (e.g., school subjects and curricula). In total, 332 relevant results were identified. Representative content has been translated into English and presented in the next section.

4 RESULTS

The analysis found that since 2020, the Hong Kong government has urgently strengthened national identity

education in schools to meet the political requirements of the Chinese government. In particular, the government has significantly increased the importance of national identity by including it as a matter of national security. Correspondingly, the government has successfully promulgated and implemented concrete measures to improve national identity education in schools. This section summarizes and analyzes these measures from five aspects.

4.1 Implementing Laws and Regulations Stipulating National Identity Education as a National Security Issue and School Responsibility

Compared with the ambiguity of the legal provisions before 2020, newly promulgated Laws stipulate that national identity education is a national security issue and an unavoidable responsibility of schools. On 30 June 2020, the National Security Law was enacted in Hong Kong. It includes national identity in the scope of national security, which is a matter of principle; it also clarifies that safeguarding national security is Hong Kong's constitutional responsibility^[61]. Meanwhile, the Law also clearly stipulates severe penalties for crimes such as secession, subversion of state power, organizing and carrying out terrorist activities, and colluding with foreign or external forces to endanger national security. Given that the final definition and interpretation of what counts as these crimes is up to the Chinese government which 'has an overarching responsibility for national security affairs relating to Hong Kong.'^[61] Hongkongers worry that whether teachers or students express views against the government's promotion of national identity will be classified as any of the abovementioned crimes^[62].

Under the National Security Law requirement, the Hong Kong government has issued further regulations to regulate schools' responsibility in national identity education. Take the two guidelines issued by the Education Bureau on 4 February 2021-*National Security: Maintaining a Safe Learning Environment, Nurturing Good Citizens* and *National Security Education in School Curriculum-Implementation Mode and Learning and Teaching Resources*-for example: they pointed out the direction of how schools can cultivate students' national identity (including the concept of a nation, national feelings, and awareness and a sense of responsibility to jointly safeguard national security). These two guidelines stipulated the responsibility of schools to carry out national identity education and put forward corresponding requirements for school personnel at all levels.

Specifically, *National Security: Maintaining a Safe Learning Environment, Nurturing Good Citizens* clearly stated that all schools should:

- (1) ensure all school staff to uphold professional ethics, abide by the law;
- (2) step up the prevention and suppression of teaching or

other school activities that are in breach of the Basic Law, the National Security Law and all laws applicable to Hong Kong; prevent political or other illegal activities from permeating schools and handling such matters so that schools' normal operation and students' learning are not affected; and follow up promptly on rule-breaching behaviours;

(3) help students gain a correct understanding of the legislative background, message, importance and significance of the National Security Law as well as the important concepts covered by national security, so as to facilitate students' learning of the spirit of the rule of law, and enhance their national security and law-abiding awareness, thereby nurturing them to become good law-abiding citizens^[63].

At the same time, it emphasized that The management systems, curricula and arrangements for learning and teaching of international schools as well as other private primary schools, secondary schools and kindergartens solely offering non-local curricula differ considerably from schools offering local curricula. Nonetheless, as a principle, [they] also have the responsibility to help their students (regardless of their ethnicity and nationality) acquire a correct and objective understanding and appreciation of the concept of national security and the National Security Law, as well as the duty to cultivate a law-abiding spirit among their students. These schools should, in accordance with the fundamental principles set out in paragraph 9 above and by making reference to the guidelines herein and the specific measures and templates attached, devise and continuously review relevant strategies and measures to... ensure the campus is a place which is politically neutral and free of illegal activities, so as to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment for students^[64].

From the government's perspective, this fills the gap before 2020: international schools and other private schools that are not directly funded and governed by the government could still conduct teaching and other activities that oppose, avoid, or weaken national identity education.

In terms of school planning and management, the *National Security: Maintaining a Safe Learning Environment, Nurturing Good Citizens* stated that School sponsoring bodies, Incorporated Management Committees/Management Committees/ School Management Committees (hereafter collectively referred to as 'school governance authority') and all levels of school personnel should perform their respective functions and work in collaboration to facilitate the effective formulation and implementation of measures for safeguarding national security in schools. This is to ensure that relevant measures are timely devised and implemented in areas such as school administration, learning and teaching, guidance and discipline as well as staff training to enable staff and students to understand the importance of national security and to enhance their law-abiding awareness and sense of national identity^[64].

The *National Security Education in School Curriculum - Implementation Mode and Learning and Teaching Resources* also required each school to set up a relevant working group or dedicated personnel to be responsible for overall planning and coordination of national identity education and to effectively formulate, implement, and supervise related content in schools in a whole-school manner, and report to the relevant departments regularly^[65] (Education Bureau, 2021b).

4.2 Policy and Societal Shift Towards Prioritizing National Identity Education

In the Chief Executive's 2023 Policy Address, John Lee Ka-chiu highlighted that strengthening national identity education will be a highlight and priority of the government^[66]. Under his leadership, the government has implemented several measures to achieve this aim, including 'Integrate patriotic education into our national education system', 'Establish the Chinese Culture Promotion Office', 'Set up two museums about our country and the war of resistance', and 'Strengthen [national] education for school children'^[66].

This shift in policy prioritization has significantly influenced the overall societal environment for national identity education. For example, many education places and centres specifically built for national identity education have been established and operated, and various new activities and festivals have been initiated to promote national identity education^[67]. Moreover, many noticeable changes at the societal level, such as hanging national flags all across streets, encouraging mainland companies to run business in Hong Kong, inviting mainland scholars and important figures (e.g., members of The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) to give speeches in Hong Kong, and incorporating mainland and national identity elements into various kinds of performance (e.g., fireworks and sports events), all illustrated that the Hong Kong government has made great efforts in demonstrating to the CCP that Hong Kong is shifting towards prioritizing national identity education to actively meet its requirements^[68-70].

4.3 Adjust the School Curriculum Framework

In the previous curriculum framework, national identity education was mainly taught indirectly through limited social studies-related courses, especially *Chinese History* in secondary schools. Given that the Chinese government and pro-China parties have accused the teaching content and methods of *Liberal Studies* of involving elements of national identity contrary to the official position, the Education Bureau has made systematic adjustments to the school curriculum since 2020 to address this concern.

In the new curriculum framework, national identity, law-abidingness, and unity have been added to the twelve

priority values and attitudes sought to be cultivated in primary and secondary schools, and values education (including national education) has been reintegrated into the five essential learning experiences at the school level (Education Bureau). The updated seven learning goals of primary education emphasize the importance of national identity-related topics, such as understanding the country and the Chinese culture, nurturing a sense of belonging and national identity towards the country through national education and national security education, and values education^[71]. Similarly, the updated seven learning goals of secondary education particularly emphasize ‘national identity’, meaning ‘to enable students to become an informed and responsible citizen with a sense of national identity, appreciation of proper values and attitudes as well as Chinese culture’^[72]. Additionally, to enhance students’ Mandarin proficiency and deepen their sense of communication and identity with the mainland at the language level, the Education Bureau has incorporated the enhancement of Mandarin proficiency into the ‘government’s policy objectives and highlights’ at the primary and secondary education levels. At present, the curriculum of the *Putonghua* subject covers primary to junior secondary school levels, requiring students to pass tests and practice Mandarin much more than before^[73].

A notable change in the new curriculum is the newly promulgated *Values Education Curriculum Framework* for schools in 2021, which clarified the desired learning objectives for different stages of national identity education. The document highlighted that the focus of the revision was to take Chinese culture as the backbone, pointing out that Hong Kong is an inseparable part of China and that cultivating Hong Kong students’ national identity is the proper responsibility of the school. According to it, after the large-scale social turmoil, national identity education is more important today than ever, so one of the focuses of values education will be to strengthen students’ idea of the nation from an early age, assist students from an early age to correctly understand national history, appreciate Chinese culture and traditional values, and respect national symbols and signs, recognise the importance of the Constitution and the Basic Law, establish national identity, and understand that as a Chinese, we have the responsibility to protect our family and defend our country^[74].

The document also stressed that the above focal point on values education applies to ethnic-Chinese and non-ethnic-Chinese communities^[74].

Another significant change is that starting from the 2021/22 school year, *Citizenship and Social Development* has been used to replace the previous *Liberal Studies* subject in senior secondary schools. The new *Citizenship and Social Development* subject contains core themes such as ‘Hong Kong under “One Country, Two Systems”’ and ‘Our Country

since Reform and Opening-up’, and students are required to undertake a total of about ten hours of ‘Mainland Study Tour’ within the curriculum^[75]. Meanwhile, *Putonghua*, *Chinese History*, and *Citizenship and Social Development* are now core subjects. As three critical subjects in national identity education, the significant improvement of their status is of great symbolic significance to the government’s commitment to national identity education.

In the new curriculum framework, the government also made significant changes to existing related subjects (e.g., *General Studies*) to ensure they assume essential responsibilities in national identity education. For example, the *General Studies* subject will be divided into *Humanities* and *Science* subjects from the 2025/26 academic year. The new *Primary Humanities Curriculum Framework* was issued in November 2023, stating that the subject will contain six major fields that aim to promote national identity education in different stages for students between grades one to six: ‘Health and Living’, ‘Environment and Living’, ‘Finance and Economy’, ‘Society and Citizenship’, ‘The Nation and I’, and ‘The World and I’^[76]. Based on the framework, the principle of reorganizing the *Humanities* subject is to In line with the direction of patriotic education proposed by the country, enable students to further understand the country’s historical and cultural heritage and its comprehensive and rapid development, and understand the close relationship between the mainland and Hong Kong, so as to strengthen students’ cultural self-confidence and establish national identity, jointly inherit the spirit of the Chinese nation, enhance their national awareness and cultivate patriotic feelings, and contribute to the well-being of the country and society^[76].

In relation, the learning foci of the new *Humanities* subject include ‘Our country’s territory, geographical features and places of interest’, ‘the economic development of the country and Hong Kong, and the economic relationship between the two’, ‘Education on the Constitution and the Basic Law’, ‘the Development of National History and Historical Figures’, ‘the Characteristics and Inheritance of Chinese Culture’, ‘Interesting National Events or Things’, ‘Cultural Heritage of the Nation’, ‘the Importance of National Security’, ‘the Modern Development of the Country’, ‘the National Flag, Emblem, Anthem, and Regional Flag and Emblem’, and ‘the relationship between the Central Government and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’^[76]. These themes demonstrated that national identity education is the new *Humanities* subject’s focus, which can address the CCP criticism that the previous *General Studies* did not put much emphasis on national identity education.

4.4 Revise Textbooks and Regulate Other Teaching Materials

Under the current situation of the coexistence of multiple

publishers and editions of textbooks in Hong Kong, the Education Bureau has requested textbook publishers to re-examine and revise their ‘potentially problematic’ textbooks and to add national identity-related content according to the latest documents and instructions. The Education Bureau established its official Recommended Textbook List to facilitate schools in making the alleged ‘appropriate’ choices of ‘quality’ textbooks and learning materials^[77]. Textbooks and learning materials on the list have been reviewed and officially considered acceptable. To be awarded the title of ‘Quality Textbooks’ and recommended by the Education Bureau to schools, publishers must submit their new/revised textbooks to the Textbook Committee formed by the Education Bureau for approval^[77]. The committee will evaluate the textbooks submitted for review according to several major aspects, such as ‘content’, ‘learning and teaching’, ‘structure and organization’, and ‘language’, and require publishers to make corresponding adjustments and revisions according to the opinion^[63]. Although the Education Bureau does not oblige schools to use textbooks it has reviewed and recommended, its strong recommendation and the current political environment have made schools increasingly cautious in choosing textbooks to be politically correct. Consequently, most of them would select textbooks from the recommended lists. This market environment has also pushed publishers to be more willing to revise/add content related to national identity to pass the review and be included in the recommended textbook list.

In addition to revising textbooks, the Education Bureau requires schools to review their existing teaching materials and content and think about how to naturally link the content of different aspects of national identity into various subjects so that national identity education can be carried out systematically and coherently. To serve as an example, the Education Bureau has taken the lead in producing a series of exemplary teaching textbooks and other resources related to national identity, covering Constitution and Basic Law education, national security education, Chinese history and Chinese culture education etc., for teachers to use in the classroom (Education Bureau, 2023c). Meanwhile, the Education Bureau has also established a unified platform on its website, providing resource support for teachers to teach national identity-related subjects better and achieve the sharing of teaching resources^[78].

Moreover, the Education Bureau requires schools to set up and strengthen a monitoring mechanism to regularly inspect teaching content other than textbooks (including school-based curriculum, test papers, homework, extracurricular reading materials, and video and television teaching clips) to ensure that they are in line with the current curriculum aims, objectives, and content of national identity education^[79]. Correspondingly, teachers’ autonomy in choosing teaching resources and materials has been significantly reduced because all the teaching content,

materials, assignments, and examination questions they choose and design should be politically correct and in line with the learning aims and objectives of the revised guidelines, and can enable students to acquire knowledge of the Constitution, the Basic Law, and national security, and cultivate positive values and attitudes as well as a sense of national identity^[64] (Education Bureau, 2023d). According to the government, this could largely avoid the chaos of uneven teaching resources for national identity education in the classroom in the past^[65].

4.5 Change the School Environment and Increase Activities Related to National Identity Education

From the government’s perspective, as the main front of national identity education, whether the school has a suitable atmosphere and environment for cultivating national identity is crucial. In the past, schools had always been a field of ideological debates between groups with different political positions and values, and the environment created was generally not friendly to national identity education. In the new era, this situation has been significantly changed. In 2023, the newly issued *National Security: Specific Measures for Schools* specifically put forward regulations regarding how schools can create an environment for national identity education on campus, including ensuring that all words and objects displayed within the school (e.g., buildings, classrooms, poster boards, books, and library collections) and all activities carried out on the school or held in the name of the school do not involve contents or acts that endanger national identity, prohibiting anyone from bringing illegal objects (e.g., books) into the school, banning people from outside the school from carrying out political propaganda activities within the school premises, and discouraging staff and students from participating in political propaganda activities or forming organizations to make political remarks^[79].

Under this new school environment, teachers are no longer free in speech and behaviour as in the past, such as treating national identity as a controversial topic that students can question. In contrast, they must ensure that the information conveyed to students is politically correct and actively cooperate with schools to implement and promote various measures to promote national identity education^[64]. Specifically, the Education Bureau stated that National security is too important, so that teachers should not simply deal with it as a controversial issue. For example, when teaching issues that have a clear distinction between right and wrong and have clear legal principles, although teachers can help students understand the events from different perspectives, they should cite objective facts and justifications, such as history, moral standards, jurisprudence, and other facts, and firmly point out that safeguarding national security is our responsibility as national citizens, and there is no room for debate or compromise on issues involving national security^[79].

As mentioned, nearly all issues related to national identity education are classified as relevant to national security. This regulation implies that teachers should teach national identity as a non-controversial issue.

Meanwhile, the same document suggested that teachers should also not influence teaching because of their political stances, or even mislead students and inculcate negative or wrong values. ... Teachers shall not be allowed to promote their political positions or convey distorted values to students, make inflammatory remarks, infiltrate content or materials that are biased/lack of factual support/inconsistent with the aims and objectives of the curriculum, or even directly or indirectly encourage or acquiesce in students' participation in off-campus political activities, etc^[79].

The Education Bureau has clarified that all the above acts breach teachers' professional ethics and that teachers should bear corresponding responsibilities^[80]. Yet, given that the *Guidelines on Teachers' Professional Conduct* was just released in 2022 to match with the changes in forbidding teachers from questioning national identity education, plus which speeches or behaviours will be classified as misconduct remains somewhat vague, teachers expressed worries that this would become 'political persecution'^[58].

To select those teachers who have professional skills and ethics in carrying out national identity education, the Education Bureau has implemented a regulation that starting from the 2023/24 school year, all newly-appointed teachers in schools are required to pass the *Basic Law and National Security Law Test* to be considered for appointment^[81].

In line with the changing school environment, the Education Bureau has also requested schools to increase important symbolic activities related to national identity education. In particular, the government has initiated a new website to provide specific tasks and activities for schools to promote national identity education throughout the 2023-2024 academic year^[67]. The *National Security Education in School Curriculum - Implementation Mode and Learning and Teaching Resources* also proposed that schools should increase activities related to national identity in the following aspects: (1) providing students with diversified and all-round learning activities, including organizing visits to local 'Basic Law' libraries and participating in mainland exchange programmes, and incorporating participation in mainland study visit and exchange activities into the school curriculum; (2) making use of various important holidays and special occasions that can help shaping national identity, including the New Year's Day, the Establishment Day of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the National Day, the National Constitution Day, the National Security Education Day, and the Chinese Culture Day; (3) regularly hoisting the national and regional flags and

singing the national anthem, so that students can develop the habit of respecting these national symbols and confirm the fact that they are Chinese citizens^[75]. In addition, schools are also required to organize teachers and students to participate in National Security Education Day, and the Education Bureau has set up a homonymous website (<https://www.nsed.gov.hk/>) for teachers and students to learn and formulate corresponding school-based activities. It is worth mentioning that the website deliberately provides a variety of ethnic minority language versions (e.g., Hindi, Nepali, and Urdu) for non-ethnic Chinese people to learn and participate in.

5 CONCLUSION

So far, the author has shown that national identity education has entered a new era that features nationalizing Hong Kong and teaching national identity-related topics as non-controversial. In this new era, the government's approach to national identity education has, to some extent, successfully achieved some of its political purposes. In particular, as mentioned, in the current China vs U.S. rivalry, Hong Kong is somehow in the middle and has a unique role. By standing with the CCP, the current Hong Kong government's approach to national identity education provides necessary support that undergirds the CCP's (especially Xi's) ambition to reunite the Chinese nation further to take greater global leadership, promote great power diplomacy, and challenge the American supremacy^[46].

Moreover, Hong Kong schools' teaching and learning content (especially public schools) are becoming more similar to those of the mainland. Many of Xi's visions, discourses, and initiatives (e.g., the Chinese dream, a rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, a strong and greater China, and a holistic view of national security) have significantly been introduced and incorporated into different schooling sectors^[82]. Students are now required and given many more opportunities to learn about and experience Xi's 'great leadership' and the development of the Chinese nation in different aspects (e.g., cultural and economic). One central argument the Chinese government used was that Hong Kong students did not have a strong national identity mainly because they did not know much about or have first-hand experience with China and its recent development^[83]. In the new era, the Hong Kong government has proposed a series of measures to address this concern. In this sense, the Chinese government should consider its concern has been somewhat addressed.

Meanwhile, nowadays, national identity has primarily become a 'hot potato' that many Hongkongers either lose interest in or dare not to speak about. Arguably, this apolitical tendency and passive civic environment could be something the Chinese government would like to see and is similar to the Chinese government's long-

standing strategy in governing schools in mainland China regarding discussing controversial civic topics^[84]. From the Chinese government's perspective, an active civic environment where students actively participate in politics and debate controversial civic topics is less helpful for the CCP's rule^[85]. In this sense, the CCP's political purpose of removing obstacles in strengthening its control over Hong Kong could be considered somewhat successful in terms of creating an apolitical civic environment through schooling so that students are more likely to either lose interest in politics or realize that individuals 'throwing eggs against rock' would never improve politics.

This also serves with the CCP's other political interest of making Hong Kong an economic centre and technology hub to attract global investment and talent while removing potential political troubles and challenges it could bring to the CCP's governance. Studies have shown that in the CCP's vision, the current positioning of Hong Kong is to use its long-standing advantages (e.g., high-level internationalization) to complement the strengths and weaknesses of mainland China^[40,48]. In this vision, ideally, Hongkongers should focus on less politically controversial areas (e.g., hard sciences and economic development) instead of political development (e.g., democracy and the legitimacy of the CCP). This explains why the current strategy areas of the Hong Kong government are mainly about science and technology (e.g., AI) and economic development rather than more controversial political areas.

It should be noted that some emerging challenges and risks are associated with the new government's approach that may go against its intention and fail to serve its political interests. For example, although it is the government's justification for its recent changes that students would develop a strong sense of national identity after they know more and have more first-hand experience about China and its recent development, whether this is the case is questionable. This still requires more time and research to answer, but the existing literature has shown that the situation may not be as favourable as the government expects because the factors influencing students' national identity are much more complicated^[83,86]. In this sense, this justification may not work in practice shortly if it turns out not to be true.

Meanwhile, recent changes may cause more resistance and criticism, both locally and internationally, such as making an undesired example for Taiwan and worsening the CCP's global image. Research has shown that Taiwan and Hong Kong people's views of the CCP have significantly worsened since 2020 because the government pushed for its political agenda in education in Hong Kong^[87]. Research also found that the CCP's global image has deteriorated because of international criticism of violating its promise of 'one country, two systems' and protecting Hong Kong's core values. Hong Kong has also witnessed a new wave

of migration because Hongkongers were dissatisfied with the new national education agenda^[88]. In this sense, the Hong Kong government's pledging allegiance to the CCP by strengthening national identity education appears to be more likely to worsen the CCP's global reputation and Hong Kong's global attraction and lose local people's trust and support to the government.

Moreover, although the government claims that the specific measures it put forward were to rectify and address obstacles to promoting national identity education that existed at the school level in the past, whether the measures can indeed promote Hongkongers' national identity as the government claims and expects remains to be further observed and analyzed. This is partially because the new era has just begun, and new measures have not yet been widely applied and tested. For example, the textbooks for *Citizenship and Social Development* have just started to be used in schools, and many new editions of textbooks for other subjects (e.g., *Chinese History* and *Humanities*) have not yet been released. Therefore, what exactly do schools and teachers carry out national identity education is a question that needs further exploration in future research. As some existing research has observed, many stakeholders (e.g., teachers) are resisting national identity education in various ways, which further poses challenges to the abovementioned government's claim and expectation^[58,88,89].

The article's contributions and originality lie in two aspects. It initiates a conversation about the current official approach to national identity education and its impact on diverse stakeholders (e.g., schools, students, and teachers) in Hong Kong by summarizing it and revealing its political rationales. Given that national identity education has become a 'hot potato' that divides society and many Hongkongers are troubled by it, this article offers a relatively comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the official approach so that diverse stakeholders have a basis for re-evaluating the nature and implementation of national education and for rational and critical dialogue. Meanwhile, other Chinese societies (e.g., Taiwan) that have been struggling with and are increasingly influenced by Chinese nationalism can benefit from this study by reflecting on to what extent this extension of Chinese nationalism in Hong Kong by strengthening national identity education would likely influence them as well.

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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.

Abbreviation List

CCP, Chinese Communist Party

IMC, Incorporated Management Committee

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