

**Center for China Studies, National Chengchi University, Taipei**

**Conference on Border Crossing in Greater China:  
Production, Community and Identity  
13-14 September 2012**

**Ethnic Identity of Hong Kong People:  
An Academic Question turned Political**

Robert Chung and Edward Tai<sup>1</sup>

The study of ethnic identity of Hong Kong people predates the sovereignty handover of Hong Kong by almost 20 years, and the dichotomy of “Hongkonger” (香港人) versus “Chinese” (中國人) as a research instrument was widely used by Hong Kong sociologists in the 1980s. In a 1985 survey, Lau & Kuan<sup>2</sup> reported that “59.5 percent of the respondents identifies themselves as Hongkongese, 36.2 percent as Chinese.” The researchers then considered the proportion of those opting for a Hong Kong identity to be “striking”, and together with other findings, concluded that people’s “sense of attachment to Hong Kong is tremendous”.

Although the study of ethnic identity is very common in the world, it is particularly relevant to societies in transition, like Hong Kong before and after the change of sovereignty in 1997. In a way, the strength of people’s identity towards different cultural, social and ethnic identities reflects their political attitudes and underlying cultural values. For this reason, the authors working at the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong have been tracking Hong Kong people’s ethnic identity changes since 1997. Before 2012, it was basically an academic study cum community service. At the beginning of 2012, due to some high profile comments made by an officer of the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in Hong Kong, the issue has become political.

This paper first examines the methodology and findings of the tracking studies, and then discusses the relevance of recent criticisms.

## **Methodological Framework**

### From dichotomy to one-in-four choices

In 1997, when one of the authors began to study Hong Kong people’s ethnic identity, he inherited the traditional method of requesting respondents to choose one answer out of a dichotomy of

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Chung is the Director of Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong. Edward Tai is the Senior Data Analyst of Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong.

<sup>2</sup> Lau Siu-Kai and Kuan Hsin-chi (1988) *The Ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese*, Chinese University Press, Hong Kong.

“Hongkonger” versus “Chinese”. However, instead of using “don’t know”, “hard to say” and other uncertain answers as the middle choice, two more specific answers were offered, namely, “Hongkonger in China” ( 中國的香港人 ), and “Chinese in Hong Kong” ( 香港的中國人 ). To some people, the concepts of “Hongkonger” and “Chinese” may overlap with each other, thereby making it difficult for them to choose one out of the two. In a way, this “conceptual difficulty” is part of the test itself, and in case lots of people find it difficult to resolve this difficulty, their ambivalence is itself an important indicator generated by the study.

The author accepts this design, but considers it more productive to narrow down some ambivalent answers to more specific labels like “Hongkonger in China” and “Chinese in Hong Kong”. Technically, the first label is interpreted as “ethnically Hongkonger living in China”, meaning a stronger sense of the “Hongkonger” identity, while the latter label is interpreted as “ethnically Chinese living in Hong Kong”, meaning a stronger sense of the “Chinese” identity. The survey has thus expanded the traditional “Hongkonger versus Chinese” dichotomy to become a one-in-four choices design right at the beginning. People who still find it hard to “resolve” their identity can continue to choose “don’t know” or “hard to say”.

In the author’s analysis, the labels of “Hongkonger” and “Hongkonger in China” are sometimes combined to mean “Hongkonger in the broadest sense”, while the other two categories of “Chinese” and “Chinese in Hong Kong” are combined as “Chinese in the broadest sense”. One can of course go back to the traditional analysis of “Hongkonger” versus “Chinese” by dropping the two new labels, for the sake of continuity, but one can also use the new labels for enhanced analysis. The new design has therefore added flexibility to the traditional analysis, after 1997.

In our enhanced analysis, “Hongkonger” and “Chinese” identities can be considered as “strong and pure identities”, while the other two categories can be combined to mean “mixed or ambivalent identities”. The analysis of “strong and pure identities” versus “mixed or ambivalent identities” can itself be a stand alone study. By using an array of identity labels, plus a large group of demographic variables, comprehensive time series analyses could be performed to map the development of Hong Kong people’s ethnic identity.

#### From one-in-four choices to strength ratings

Whatever answer one gives to the dichotomous or one-in-four choices, there is the blind spot regarding the absolute strength of these identities. Put it simple, one may choose “Hongkonger” because one identifies very strongly with this identity, or because one feels very weakly about other identities, but relatively not so weak with this identity. To fill in this methodological gap, the author introduced two more rating questions in the study right from the beginning, which requested all respondents to rate their strength of their “Hongkongers” and “Chinese” identities separately using a 0-10 scale. The two questions are conceptually different from the previous set of identities questions, because they avoid the problem of overlapping identities all together. Besides, the separate ratings themselves can be mathematically computed to indicate one’s “strong” versus “weak” identities, thereby rendering the traditional questions redundant. Nevertheless, for the continuity and possible misplaced computation, the traditional categorical question is kept for backward comparison and consistency check.

After 10 years, in June 2007, the survey is further enhanced to include four more identities for strength rating, namely, “citizens of People’s Republic of China”, “members of the Chinese race”, “Asians” and “global citizens”, in order to depict a clearer picture of cultural and ethnic identities.

### From strength ratings to “identity indices”

In December 2008, the study was further expanded by including separate importance ratings for all different identities, from which “identity indices” for different identities can be constructed, by taking the geometric means of “strength” times “importance” then multiplied by 10. This formula is used because both the identity and importance ratings are using a 0-10 scale, so their geometric mean is also a 0-10 figure. By multiplying it by 10, the final value of all indices would become 0-100, which Hong Kong people are more familiar with.

The importance ratings were introduced in the study mainly because some people may give a high rating on an identity, but do not feel that the identity has too much relevance in their political or social life. Therefore, there should be some indicator or indices to show the strength of people’s “feeling” towards different identities. This is the basis for generating the “strength” x “importance” x 10 “identity indices”. With the generation of these indices, the study of ethnic identity for Hong Kong people has become very comprehensive.

To sum up, our methodology involves a one-in-four choices categorical question to measure people’s “compelled choice”, another set of strength ratings and importance ratings to measure the absolute strengths of six different identities, and finally, six “identity indices” are compiled to measure the combined effect of strength and importance ratings.

## **Describing the Trend of Ethnic Identities**

### “Hongkongers” versus “Chinese”

Using the one-in-four choices question, Chart 1 shows the trend of identities changes for Hong Kong people from 1997 up to mid-2012, concurring with the 15th anniversary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). In general, the sense of belonging of the “Hongkonger” identity is stronger than that of “Chinese” identity. The gap between the two general diminishes after the handover, until in September 2001 the gap has practically closed down. Between the 4th and 5th anniversaries, the two curves almost overlapped with each other. After that, the “Chinese” identity surpassed “Hongkonger” for another 5 to 6 years. Then, starting from the end of 2008, the “Hongkonger” identity rebounds, while the “Chinese” identity goes down.

In mid-2012, when asked to make a choice among the four identities, 46% of Hong Kong people identified themselves as “Hongkongers”, 18% as “Chinese”, 23% as “Hongkongers in China”, while 11% identified themselves as “Chinese in Hong Kong”. In other words, “Hongkongers” outnumbered “Chinese” by about 30 percentage points.

In a broader sense, 68% identified themselves as “Hongkonger in the broadest sense” (i.e. either as “Hongkongers” or “Hongkongers in China”), whereas 30% identified themselves as “Chinese in the broadest sense” (i.e. either as “Chinese” or “Chinese in Hong Kong”), 34% chose a mixed identity of “Hongkonger cum Chinese” (i.e. either as “Hongkongers in China” or “Chinese in Hong Kong”).

As a matter of fact, if we only look at the trend of “strong and pure identities” versus “mixed or ambivalent identities” starting from 1997, we could see the percentages of both categories have fluctuated fairly steadily over the years, with “pure identities” always on the upper hand. “Ambivalent identities”, however, can sometimes go as high as 50%, and never lower than 30%.

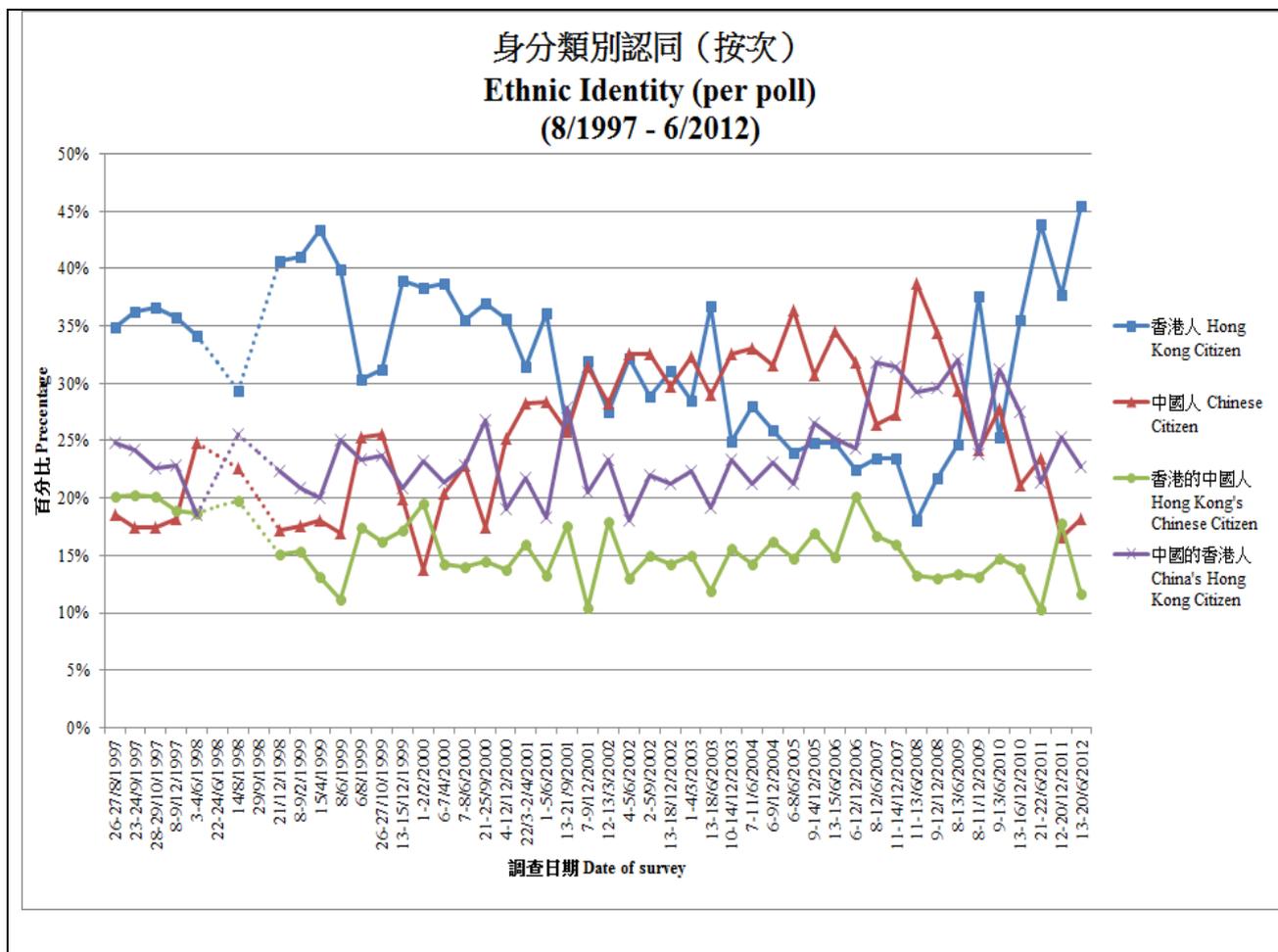


Chart 1 – Ethnic Identity (per poll)

One useful analysis is to collapse the categories into “broad groups”, and see if there are significant trends of change. Chart 2 shows the time trend of “Hongkongers in the broadest sense” and “Chinese in the broadest sense”. While it is important to study why the identities of “Hongkongers in the broadest sense” and “Chinese in the broadest sense” almost overlaps between 2003 and 2008, it may be even more important to study why the two identities are pulling further apart after 2008. In mid-2012, the “broad Hongkongers identity” is hitting the record high of almost 70%, while the “broad Chinese identity” is going down to 30%.

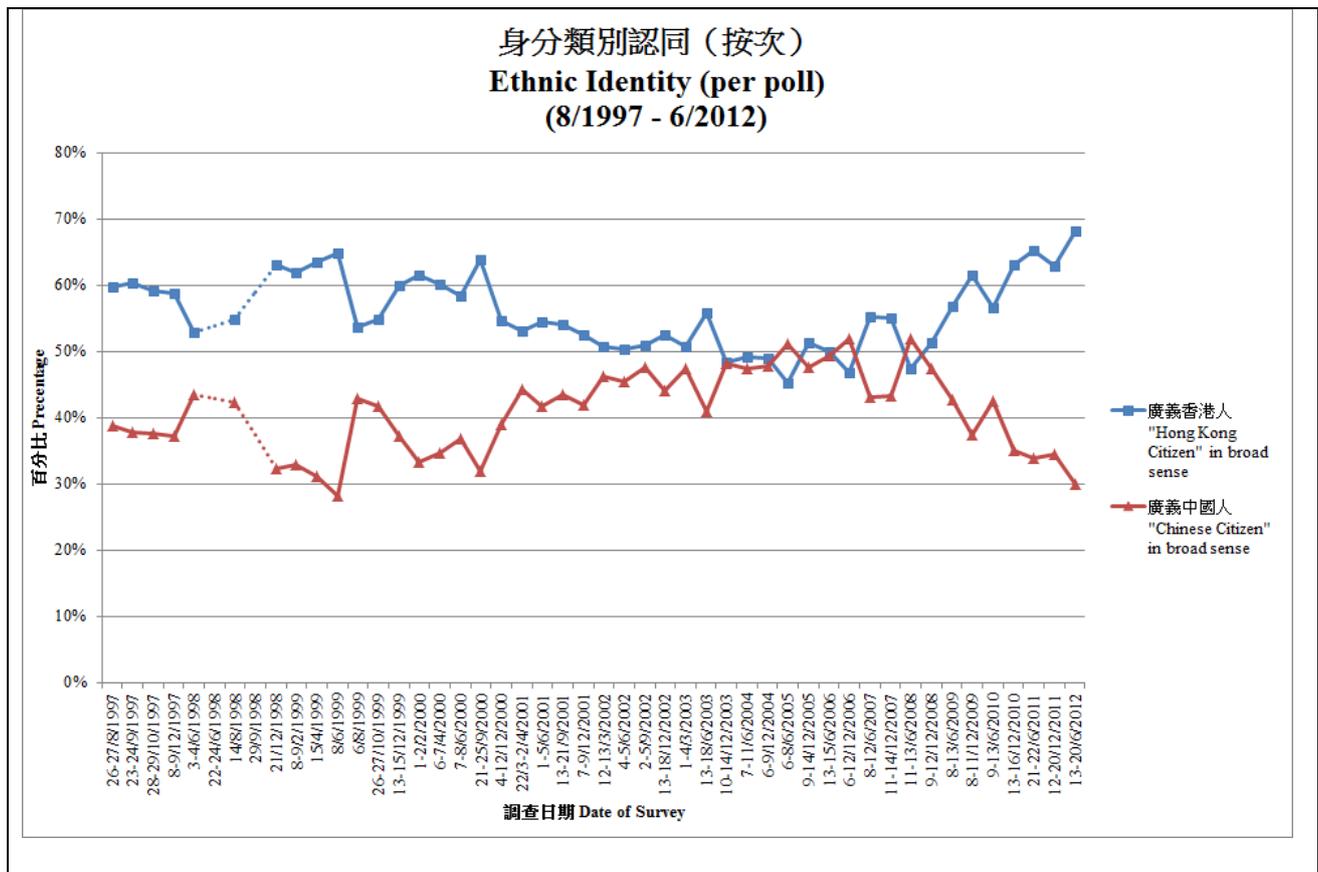


Chart 2 – Ethnic Identity (per poll) – “Hongkongers in the broadest sense” vs “Chinese in the broadest sense”

Strength rating for identities – “Hongkongers” vs “Chinese”

Chart 3 shows the strength ratings of “Hongkongers” vs “Chinese” over the years since 1997. One can see that the two curves basically covary with each other, but after 2009 the absolute rating of “Hongkongers” goes up while that of “Chinese” goes down. From our latest survey, the absolute rating for “Hongkongers” is 8.1, which that of “Chinese” are 7.0. Generally speaking, “Hongkonger” ranges from 7.4 to 8.4, while “Chinese” ranges from 6.8 to 8.1. The two lines get very close to each other between 2000 and 2008, and then pull apart again. By the end of 2011, the “Hongkonger” rating has reached a ten-year high, while that of “Chinese” has dropped to a 12-year low. The latter drops even lower in mid-2012.

Chart 4 shows the strength rating of the “Hongkongers” since 1997 broken down by age groups of under 30 and 30+, in order to show the effect of age. Generally speaking, the 18-29 group has a lower identification associated with “Hongkongers” identities. Chart 5 shows a similar breakdown of the “Chinese” identity by age group. It can be seen that the 18-29 group also have lower identity ratings compared to the 30+ group, but their distance is farther, and from 2009 onward there is a big plunge. In our latest survey, the absolute rating of the 18-29 agegroup towards the “Chinese” identity is only 5.1.

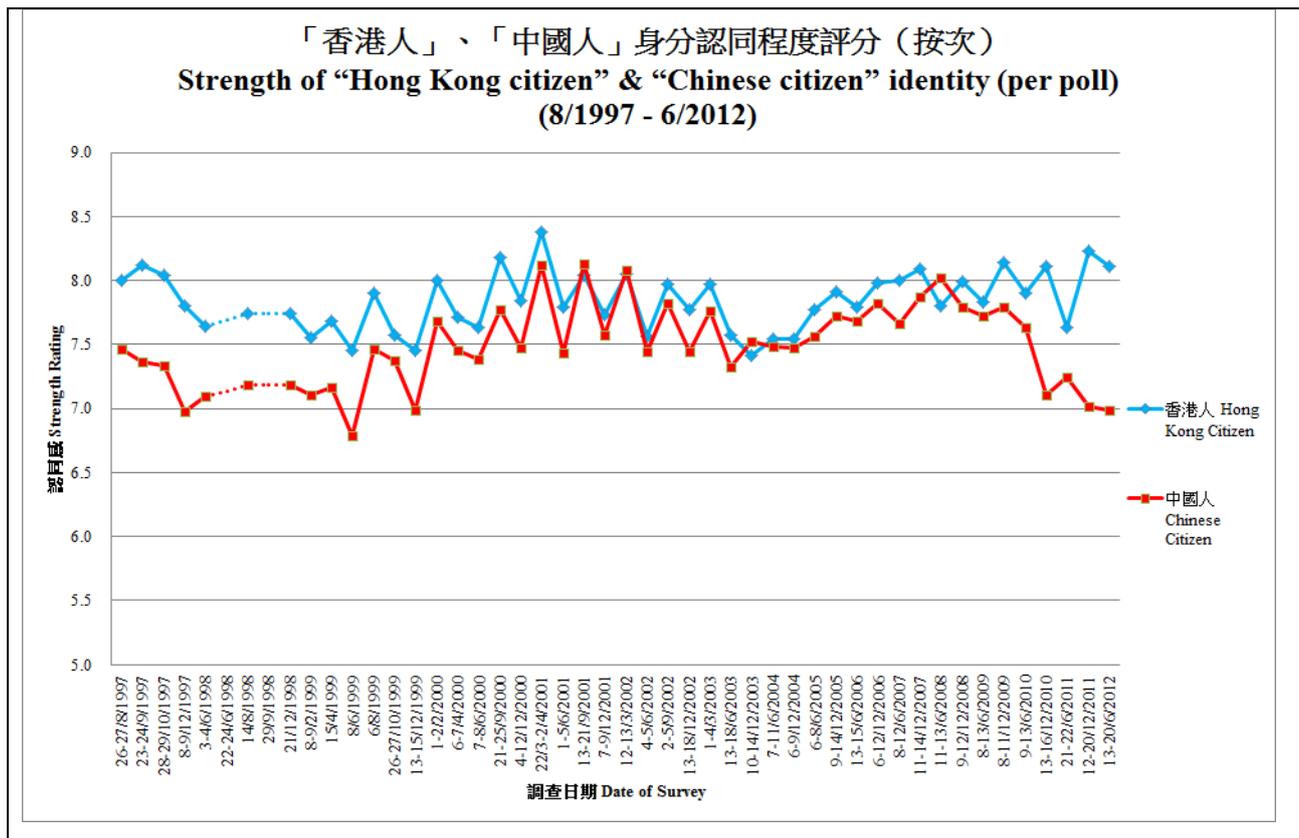


Chart 3 – Ethnic Identity (per poll) – “Hongkongers” & “Chinese”

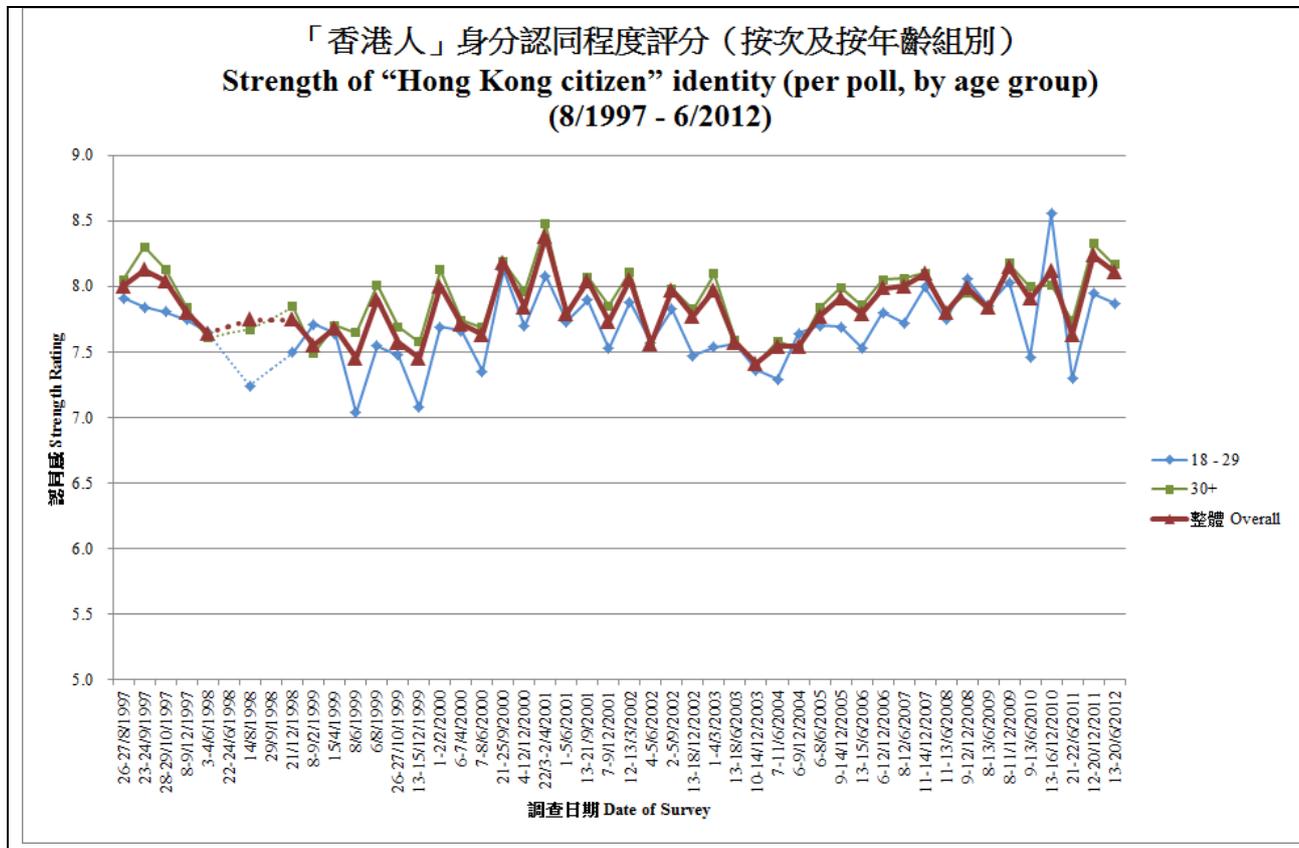


Chart 4 – Ethnic Identity (per poll) – “Hongkongers” by age group

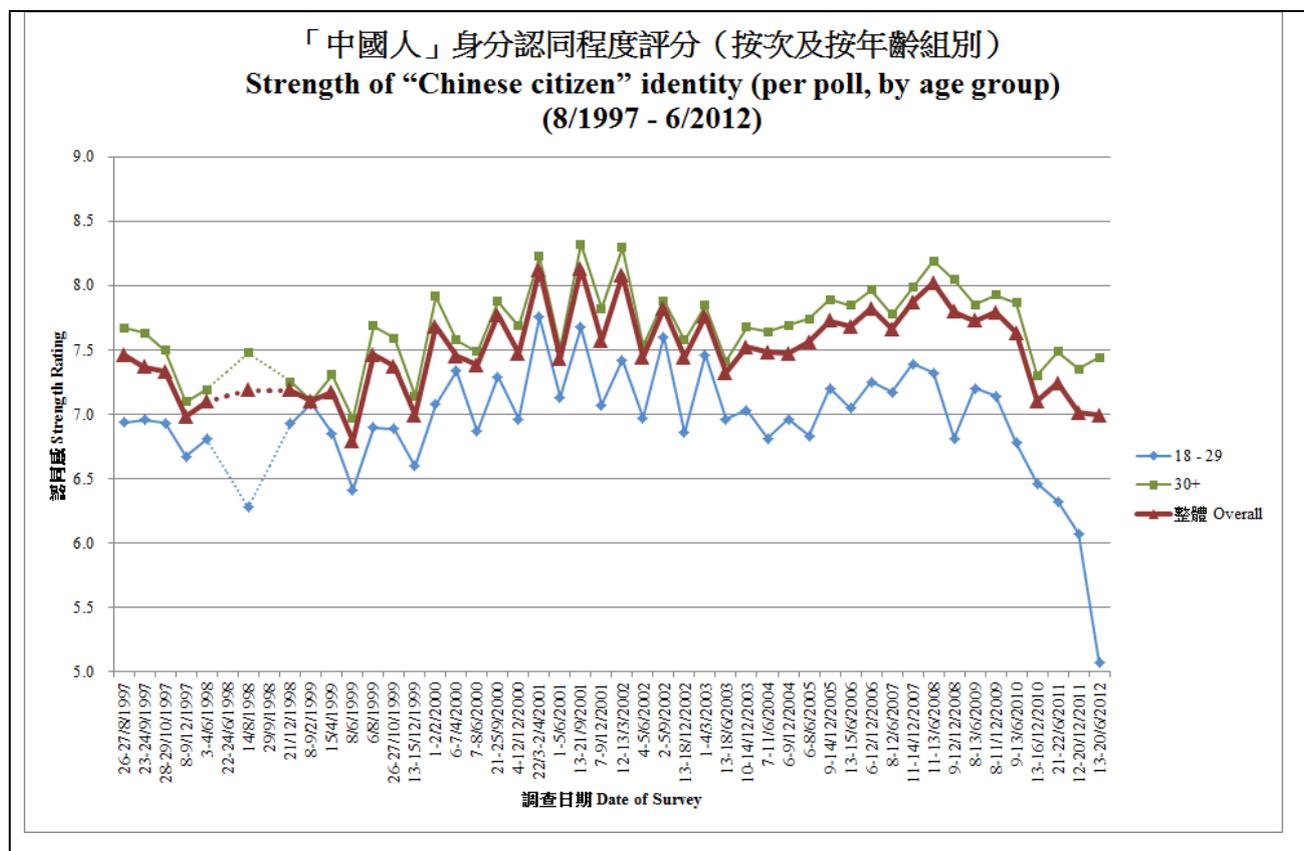


Chart 5 – Ethnic Identity (per poll) – “Chinese” by agegroup

### “Identity indices” – All six identities gathered together

As explained, six “identity indices” were introduced in December 2008, to indicate the combined effects of strength and importance of the different identity ratings. Chart 6 shows the profile of the 6 “identity indices” over the past 4 surveys. Besides the “Hongkongers” and “Chinese” identities, there are also identities of “citizens of the People’s Republic of China”, “members of the Chinese race”, “Asians” and “global citizens”.

“Identity indices” have numerical values ranging from 0 to 100, computed by taking the geometric mean of strength and importance ratings multiplied by 10. The higher the index, the stronger the identity. From our latest survey in June 2012, Hong Kong people’s feeling is the strongest as “Hongkongers”, followed by “members of the Chinese race”, then “Asians”, “Chinese”, “global citizens”, and finally “citizens of the PRC”.

All in all, whether we are comparing the absolute strengths of the identity ratings, or people’s categorical choices, the “Hongkonger” feeling prevails, followed by a number of cultural identities, then the political identity of PRC citizenship.

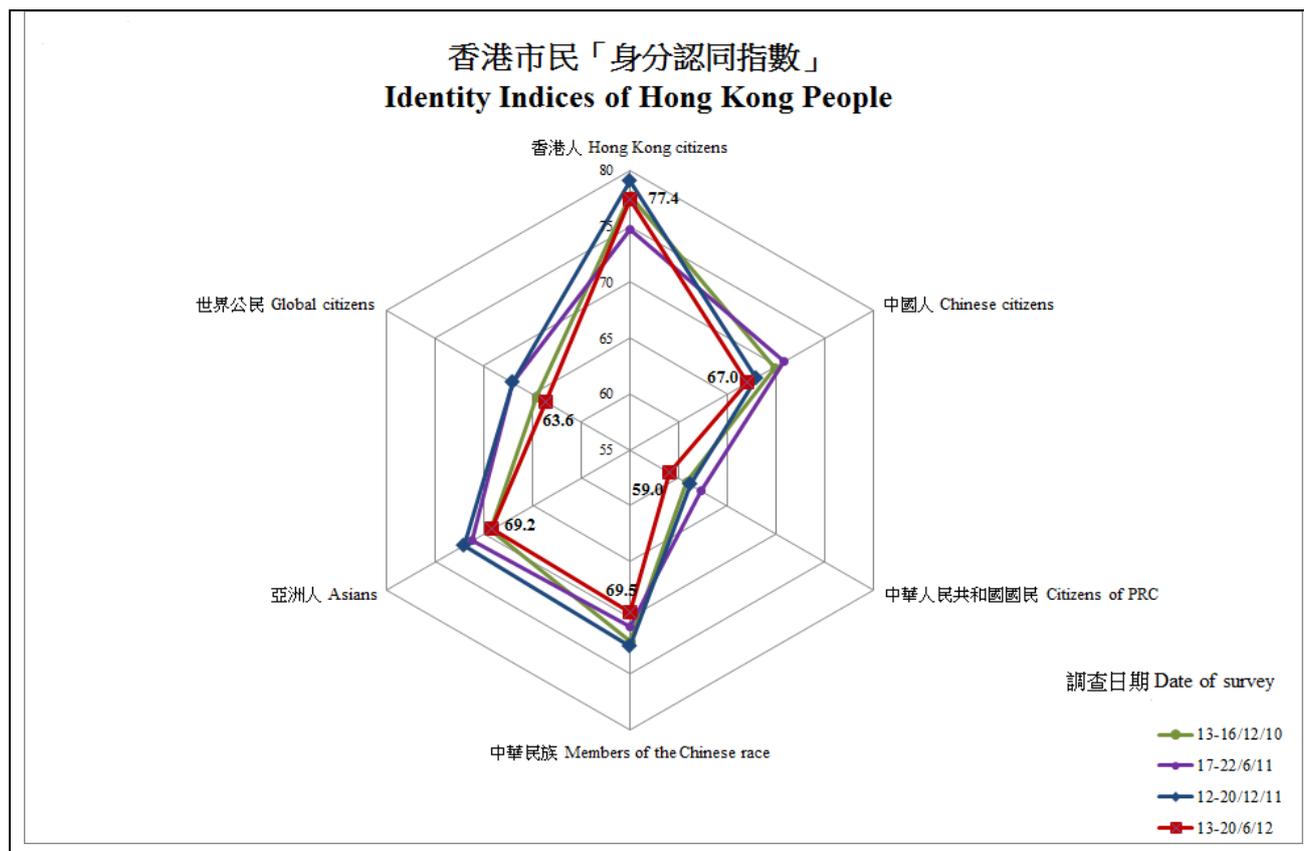


Chart 6 –Identity indices (latest 4 polls)

### Ethnic Identity turned Political

On 28 December 2011, the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong releases its latest findings from this survey series, by means of a press release which mentioned, among other things, that “in terms of absolute rating, people’s identification with ‘Hongkonger’ has reached a ten-year high, while that of ‘Chinese’ has dropped to a 12-year low”. One day later, Hao Tiechuan, Director of the Publicity, Cultural and Sports Department of the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in Hong Kong openly criticizes the survey as “unscientific” and “illogical”, because it uses a dichotomous measurement of “Hongkongers” and “Chinese”, which is not mutually exclusive. Immediately after Hao’s criticism, leftist commentators in Hong Kong use *Tai Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po* to launch their severest attacks on the Programme and the author of the press release, using Cultural Revolution type rhetoric and accusations. Down to the basics, these criticisms can be summarized into three lines of arguments:

- (1) Because the survey requires people to choose between the identities of “Hongkongers” and “Chinese”, it is unscientific and illogical.
- (2) The survey conducted before Hong Kong’s handover was not of a problem, but when carried out after the handover, it becomes “unscientific”.
- (3) The survey advocates the independence of Hong Kong and thus has an ulterior motive.

After this wave of criticism initiated by Hao Tiechuan, the study of Hong Kong people's ethnic identity has suddenly become a political issue. Such a development was seen by some analysts in Hong Kong as a prelude to leftist commentators' attacks on the "3.23 Civil Referendum" Project proposed by the author near the end of 2011, and scheduled to take place on 23 March 2012. To many academics and human right advocates in Hong Kong, Hao's criticism constituted an infringement of academic freedom in Hong Kong by the Beijing Central Government.

At a meeting of the Panel on Education of the Hong Kong Legislative Council held in March 2012, the author officially files his rebuttal of these criticisms with the following points:

- (1) In many questionnaire surveys, including those of handover anniversary surveys, respondents are asked "How do you feel?" The answers offered may include "happy, excited, worried, afraid, ambivalent, complicated" and so on. Whether the question accepts single or multiple answers, the choices offered are often overlapping and at times contradicting. In other words, it is accepted that the respondent may have a variety of overlapped and complicated feelings at the same time, but as long as they can point out their main or major feelings, indepth analysis can be conducted. Take another example, a survey may ask a respondent "which problem do you think the government should handle first?" The answers offered may include "economic problem", "labour problem", and so on. However, labour problem can in fact be considered as one of the many economic development problems. That means labour problem can be subsumed under economic problem, while economic problem can encompass labour problem, but as long as the ostensive definitions of the two remain different, they are worth studying as separate entities. Therefore, asking people to choose the most desired identities among four overlapped options, namely, "Hongkongers", "Chinese Hong Kong citizen", "Chinese" and "Hong Kong Chinese citizen" is not unreasonable, even though it may have problems of "subsumption and inclusion". Survey questions are not logical tests, they are thermometers measuring peoples' complicated feelings, a tool for social science research.
- (2) Taking several steps backward, even if the above question on "Hongkongers" versus "Chinese" is inappropriate, the results released by the author at the end of last year, showing a 10-year high in people's identity as a "Hongkongers", and a 12-year low in people's identity as a "Chinese", has nothing to do with this question. They come from two separate and independent questions which even leftist commentators dare not criticize up to this moment. The two questions require respondents to rate on a scale of 0-10 marks the strengths of their "Hongkongers" and the "Chinese" identities. These are single-item questions which do not involve any "logical" problem mentioned by the Director-General Hao Tie-chuan. Hao and scholars with different backgrounds have simply not read our survey and press releases carefully. They are not at all serious with their arguments.
- (3) In the field of scientific research, it is impossible for a study be change from "scientific" before the return of sovereignty to become "unscientific" after the handover. Scientific method is a serious enquiry process. One can at most say that a certain survey has no reference value, but one cannot say that its "scientific nature" or "logical dimension" changes with the political climate. People holding this view either lack adequate understanding of the scientific method or try to override the spirit of science with political interests.
- (4) For the same reason, if the above survey methodology is "unscientific" in Hong Kong, then similar surveys on ethnic identity cannot be "scientific" elsewhere in the world. The author would ask: If our Hong Kong surveys are "illogical" and "unscientific" , how about the frequent conducted ethnic identity studies in Taiwan, which often contrast the "Taiwanese" identity with

“Chinese” identity? How about the study of “Chinese” identity among overseas Chinese? What about the recent discussions over the ethnic identity of American NBA basketball player Jeremy Lin, that he is a “Taiwanese”, “Chinese”, “mainlander”, “immigrant to Taiwan” or “American Chinese”? Why did Hao and the leftist columnists not criticize such discussions? Are “American Chinese” not “Chinese”? The author believes that “political interests” can only override “the spirit of science” in authoritarian societies. For Hong Kong to remain free and open, we must stand firm on our core values.

- (5) As for the reference value of the survey, if one takes a look at the recent clashes between Hong Kong people and mainlanders on their daily lives, and also read the result of such surveys carefully, especially the drastic drop in the strength of “Chinese identity” among the “post 80s”, one would have appreciated the warning signals triggered by these surveys. Comprising 13 opinion questions plus 9 demographics variables, the study is already very comprehensive and useful. Hao’s complete denial of the 22-question strong survey, straddling over 15 years, with one single question which he considers “illogical”, is just too arbitrary and dogmatic.
- (6) Finally, it is probably not worth discussing the criticisms that this series of surveys has a hidden agenda and is driven by an ulterior motive. The accusation by leftist commentators that the author has met with foreign spies and has accepted black gold are obviously false charges. However, the proposition that the author is splitting the country in the name of academic research, against all academic ethics and morals, is a direct discredit of the author’s research achievements. While the author can easily laugh off these groundless accusations and Cultural Revolution type smearing campaigns, this is white terror to many colleagues and young scholars. Academic institutions should pay attention to this, and should even consider to provide appropriate legal protections for the innocent academics.

### **What next?**

Six months after the leftist commentators launched their attack, in June 2012, the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong again releases its latest findings of the same survey. The author’s commentary this time is: “people’s identification with ‘Hong Kong citizens’ has dropped back a bit compared to 6 months ago, but their identification with ‘Chinese citizens’ has dropped to a 13-year low since the end of 1999. In-depth analysis shows that the rating of those under 30 years of age continues to drop since mid-2009, and plunges to just over 5 points in the past 6 months. This warrants special attention... the proportion of people identifying themselves as ‘Hong Kong citizens’ outnumbers that of ‘Chinese citizens’ both in their narrow and broad senses, by about 28 to 38 percentage points. For those under 30 years of age, the gap widens to 60 to 72 percentage points. For the overall sample, the percentages of those identifying themselves as ‘Hong Kong citizens’ both in its narrow and broad senses (including ‘Hong Kong citizens’ or ‘Chinese Hong Kong citizens’) have reached record high since the 1997 handover. Moreover, if we use ‘identity indices’ ranging between 0 and 100 to measure the strengths of people’s identities (the higher the index, the stronger the identity), Hong Kong people’s feeling is the strongest as ‘Hong Kong citizens’, followed by ‘members of the Chinese race’, then ‘Asians’, ‘Chinese citizens’, ‘global citizens’, and finally ‘citizens of the PRC’. All in all, Hong Kong people feel strongest as ‘Hong Kong citizens’, then followed by a number of cultural identities. The feeling of being ‘citizens of the PRC’ is the weakest among all identities tested...”

The release concurred with the 15th anniversary of the HKSAR. This time, the leftist commentator remain silent.