

Booing their own national anthem: Hong Kong's postcolonial misidentification

Leiya Lee

(1st rough draft)

As a former British colony, Hong Kong has been returned to its original sovereign country, China, as an autonomous region since 1997, under the principle of "one country, two systems"¹. However, 21 years on, the city, now officially known as Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, is still undergoing a confusing decolonisation phase. The state of its confusion is particularly evident in one peculiar behaviour found in some of the city's football fans, their booing their own national anthem.

Despite not being a country, Hong Kong, as an autonomous region, has its own international football team that plays on the international stage in competitions such as the Asian Cup and the World Cup qualifiers. As per convention, before each international game of football, the national anthems of both home team and away team are played while spectators, players and staff all stand solemnly to pay respect to the two countries (or regions) involved. After the handover back to China, naturally, the Chinese national anthem, "March of the Volunteers" represents Hong Kong. However, since 2015, at matches where Hong Kong are host, large groups of home fans have been booing, showing obscene gestures and even throwing objects to the pitch during the playing of the national anthem which is supposed to represent themselves. [show a few clips of these booing protests] As a result, FIFA, the international football governing body, has issued warnings to and even fined the Hong Kong Football Association for "improper conduct"². But despite this, these fans-cum-protestors are still carrying on their disrespectful behaviour. These acts of disrespect are purported to be protests against what they believe to be Beijing's encroachment on Hong Kong's autonomy and their attempts to introduce laws in Hong Kong to criminalise any disrespect of the national anthem³ (which has yet to be passed as law⁴)

Meanwhile, in the US, there have, similarly, been protests involving sports events and the national anthem. Since 2016, in the NFL, to protest against police brutality and racial inequality that had happened at the time, former San Francisco 49ers Colin Kaepernick first sat during the U.S. national anthem. He later switched to kneeling, because he wanted to "get the message back on track and... not take away from pride in [our] country but keep the focus on what the issues really are."⁵ Other players soon followed suit and have been protesting since.⁶ This prompted the President, Donald Trump, to comment "Wouldn't you

¹ References to be located.

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-41521670>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-41870206>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-china-34457916/why-were-hong-kong-fans-booing-their-anthem>

<http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2119909/hong-kong-soccer-fans-grow-bolder-they-boo-chinese-national>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXp4akolvl8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtDoVklZkjlw>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/09/defiant-hong-kong-football-fans-boo-china-national-anthem>

⁴ <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2137510/intention-key-determining-whether-national-anthem-insult>

⁵ <https://abcnews.go.com/Sports/colin-kaepernick-takes-knee-anthem-joined-teammate-eric/story?id=41814559>

http://www.espn.com/blog/san-francisco-49ers/post/_id/19126/transcript-of-colin-kaepernicks-comments-after-preseason-finale

⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/taking-a-knee-national-anthem-nfl-trump-why-meaning-origins-racism-us-colin-kaepernick-a7966961.html>

love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He's fired! He's fired!'"⁷, to which he received a round of applause and cheer for about half a minute.⁸

In other countries: In India, the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act was passed in their parliament in 1971⁹. In Japan, the then-Governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, "mandated in 2003 that teachers in public high schools and other institutions who refuse to stand up, face the flag and sing the country's national anthem during school ceremonies should be reprimanded."¹⁰

Back in Hong Kong, the booing protesters have neither been persecuted nor prosecuted. These protestors who booed and jeered at their own national anthem find their actions justified because they feel that Beijing is clamping down on their freedom of speech and delaying their progress towards full democracy as promised, whether or not these protestors' claims actually hold true requires a separate discussion that is well beyond the scope of this paper, which I wish it to remain apolitical. But from the [video clips] and the examples set by other countries, I believe the current freedom of expression is at an almost anarchic level.

Furthermore, these protestors also have a slogan, "We are Hong Kong", which they shout after they finish booing their national anthem. This slogan, along with the insulting of their national anthem, seem to suggest that the "we" in the slogan are different from China and that "we" are not Chinese. If we set aside any political and ideological differences for a moment and just think about these implications, it should be apparent that one's unrestrained contempt for one's own national anthem is absolutely absurd; and, on top of that, the denial of their identity, of being Chinese, to which they clearly belong is even more problematic.

I would argue that this conveniently positioned but ill-defined "we" is a demonstration of a serious underlying problem that was caused by Hong Kong's colonial history and its post-colonial struggles. Franz Fanon, in his 1952 seminal work *Black Skin White Masks*, describes how the colonised person is divided in their self-perception as they are caught in between the colonising culture, which is inculcated as the superior civilisation, and their original native culture, which is seen as inferior under the coloniser's rule. As a result, an "inferiority complex" is developed within the colonised person. Having grown up in colonial Hong Kong, I can attest that while the cultural assimilation from the British was almost nonexistent (which was a deliberate strategy by the British), certain key areas were (and, strangely, continue to be) strategically conditioned by the colonial rule. The most significant area is the disparity in languages. Post Colonial writers such as Abdul R. JanMohamed, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha have all identified language as an "instrument of control" for colonisers (Ashcroft et al., pg). During the colonial era, debates in the parliament, or the Legislative Council as it is known, were conducted in English even though it was not the mother tongue for most of its members. Legal documents were, and still are, written in English (where Chinese translations are not legally binding when discrepancies appear between the two language

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests>
<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/22/politics/donald-trump-alabama-nfl/index.html>

⁸ Historical protests during anthems in the U.S. also include: in 1968, at the Mexico City Olympics, African-American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists for racial equality, kicked out of the Olympic team and never ran for their country again (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-us-canada-41558696/kneeling-in-the-nfl-anthem-protests-have-a-history-in-the-us>); in 2004, Major League Baseball player Carlos Delgado sat down in the dugout during "God Bless America" in protest against the invasion of Iraq and got booed later that season (http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/17648761/carlos-delgado-12-years-later-colin-kaepernick-protest-ideals); in 2014, a group of St. Louis Rams players held a "hands up, don't shoot" pose during the national anthem in support for the Black Lives Matter protests. (<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2014/dec/01/st-louis-rams-hands-up-famous-sport-protests>)

⁹ http://www.nationallibrary.gov.in/nat_lib_stat/pdfs/Prevention_Insults_National_Honour_Act1971.pdf

¹⁰ <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/06/world/la-fg-japan-anthem-20110206>

versions). Meanwhile, almost all secondary schools taught all but Chinese academic subjects in English (although the standards of the English being used were questionable). Even today, 21 years after the handover and the campaign for “mother-tongue teaching” had been under way before the 97 handover, many schools are still using English as their official “medium of instruction”, whereas the majority of schools, having Cantonese (the mother tongue) as the teaching medium, still bear the stigma of being academically inferior¹¹. What Fanon calls the “inferior complex” has been tangibly catalysed by the adoption of English in the former British colony. Those who speak English well are considered more educated, more cultured, generally “superior”, while those who do not speak it, or speak it poorly are inferior.

Furthermore, throughout the years of colonisation, the native language of Cantonese, which literally means the language of the Guangdong province (or Canton), has been transformed into a creole with many English-inflected terms, to a point that many other users of Cantonese within China or overseas may not be able to understand the Hong Kong variety. The issue of language disparity gets even more complicated when the official language and common national speech for the rest of China is *Putonghua*, or Mandarin as it is usually known in the English-speaking world. In a nutshell, Cantonese and Mandarin are two very different languages, in much the same way as English and French are two very different languages: a lot of their words share similar origins, but they are pronounced very differently, and knowing one does not necessarily guarantee knowing the other, even though there exists a certain advantage in learning one if you already know the other. Speaking from personal experience, Mandarin was hardly ever heard anywhere in colonial Hong Kong and it was not taught in most schools until quite recently. While many schools today are starting to use *Putonghua* (Mandarin) to teach Chinese as an academic subject¹² — hence today’s children are relatively more well-prepared for both languages, the biggest problem, I believe, lie in the “millennial generation” (of which, sadly, the speaker is one) where, their identity of a colonial hybrid, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s word, have brought about the perception that English is superior and Mandarin is somehow inferior. This issue became painfully manifest when in early 2018 an eight-hour standoff occurred between students and staff at Hong Kong Baptist University after the university introduced an exemption test for students to bypass a compulsory Mandarin course as a graduation requirement and students failing the test, rather than accepting the language course, complained that the test was unreasonable¹³. This generation of Hong Kongers also see many going into politics with an anti-China or pro-independence agenda. From [the clips] we have seen, most of the booing protesters are also from this generation who seem to have, above all else, identified China as the “new coloniser” judging by their resistance which is akin to the fervour in Fanon’s writings!

The national anthem of China, “March of the Volunteers”, was, naturally written and sung in Mandarin. [Brief history of “March” to be omitted because another paper at the conference appears to solely focus on that?]

From the point of view of language alone, the Chinese national anthem seems more alien than familiar. I remember the national anthem was taught as an unfamiliar new song at school only around the time of the handover when I was about 9. Before then, there was no national anthem at all: as a primary school kid, I was not aware of the British national anthem, “God Save the Queen”, nor the concept of a national anthem. Then, suddenly, a new entity, in an almost alien language. Coupled with a lack of exposure to the

¹¹ As the global ranking on English proficiency of Hong Kong students appears to be sliding down in recent years, some blame it on the adoption of the mother-tongue teaching policy. See <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/1875254/mother-tongue-teaching-policy-blame-hong-kong>

¹² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-40406429>
<https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/04/09/cantonese-putonghua-english-language-politics-hong-kongs-school-system/>

¹³ <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/2130419/how-compulsory-mandarin-course-caused-chaos-hong-kong>

languages and cultures in the mainland of China, it is at least understandable that my generation find it difficult to find the connection.

While there is undeniably political agenda behind protesting against their own national anthem, the disparity in language alone prevents it, for the current moment, from being entirely Hong Kong's own. This disparity in language has been brought on by the colonial rule, and, arguably, the subsequent failure to successfully decolonise. Besides language, this disparity extends to all facets of culture between Hong Kong and the mainland of China.