Nationalism and Social Order in Public Discourse: Analyzing Mainland Chinese Sentiments Towards the 2019 Hong Kong Protests

Cecilia Wu

Professor Melanie Manion, Faculty Advisor

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

As the 2019 Hong Kong protests highlighted increasing tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong, overwhelmingly negative commentaries about the protests prevailed on the Chinese Internet. This thesis asks: what forms of sentiments are most appealing to the mainland Chinese public in the discourse around the Hong Kong protests? I systematically analyze a sample of 330 popular articles discussing the protests on WeChat, the dominant social media platform in China. Using keyword analysis, I identify two very prominent frames in the discourse: (1) Nationalism and Sovereignty, and (2) Rule and Order. The Nationalism and Sovereignty frame asserts China's national unity, expresses alarm over Hong Kong independence, and denounces foreign influence in the protests. The Rule and Order frame strongly condemns protestor violence and emphasizes the importance of social stability. Both frames strongly resonated with the mainland Chinese public, reflecting long-running political attitudes in Chinese society that are heightened and displayed in response to the Hong Kong protests.

I. Introduction

The 2019 Hong Kong protests, with their striking scale and intensity, were a culmination of long-running tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong over the city's democracy and autonomy. The intense discussion of the protests on the mainland Chinese Internet reflects this and provides insight into public opinion and sentiments in China.

The protests first developed in response to a Fugitive Offenders amendment bill introduced by the Hong Kong government, which would have allowed the extradition of fugitives to jurisdictions including mainland China. Over time, the protests grew from anti-extradition demonstrations in June to a broader pro-democracy movement that extended throughout the rest of the year. It has become the largest unrest Hong Kong has seen in decades, resulting in city-wide disruptions and increasingly violent clashes between protestors and the police.

The Chinese party-state has reacted strongly against the protests, condemning the "extreme acts of violence and crime" and making accusations of foreign interference (Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council 2019). In August, a spokesman for the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office even warned that the protests "have started to show signs of terrorism" and must be combated "with no hesitation or mercy" (Zheng 2019). Echoing messages from the central government, China's state media has portrayed the protests as violent, destructive, driven by separatist forces and influenced by foreign powers.

However, it is not just the government and state media that spread these messages; anger towards and denunciation of the Hong Kong protests are widely shared among social media influencers and ordinary netizens in mainland China. Discussions on the mainland Internet about Hong Kong have been dominated by antagonism and disapproval of the protests. Posts and

videos condemning protestor violence and advocating for patriotism frequently went viral on major social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. Many Chinese netizens adopted the buzzword "waste youth" (废青) to describe the protestors, which, according to an Internet dictionary, refers to:

> *some young people who have no ideals, do not struggle, do not work hard, but feel that they have mature and independent thinking, which are in fact prejudices; they have no contribution to society and might blindly blame or retaliate against society due to dissatisfaction with their own life* ("Waste Youth" 2019).

The influence between state actors and public opinion goes in both directions. On the one hand, through extensive government propaganda and media control, the Chinese Communist Party has sought to shape public opinion with its strong and focused messages (Lu, Aldrich, and Shi 2014). On the other hand, China's political leaders pay close attention to public opinion and have exhibited a certain extent of responsiveness to citizen demands (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016).

The age of the Internet and the rise of social media present mixed implications for the political discourse of Chinese citizens. According to the Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, the number of netizens in China has reached 85.4 million, which is 61 percent of China's total population (China Internet Network Information Center 2019). The decentralized media system has created the potential of loosening the party-state's control over public discourse and developing a citizenry more critical of authoritarian rule (Lei 2011). A study conducted in 2009-2013 found a large number of posts discussing highly sensitive topics, including protests, on the Chinese microblogging platform Weibo (Qin, Stromberg, and Wu 2017). At the same time, tightened Internet control in recent years has significantly restricted the

diversity and spontaneity of online expression in China (Creemers 2017). Prevailing censorship and self-censorship limit the scope of opinions and discussions available online.

The Hong Kong protests are a subject that has seen widespread public attention and intensive online discussion in mainland China throughout the second half of 2019. Analyzing a sample of most popular articles on WeChat about the Hong Kong protests, I find that these articles overwhelmingly express negative views towards the protests and are rarely censored by the platform. Then, using keyword analysis, I systematically examine the content of these articles to find out what forms of sentiments expressed by opinion influencers are most appealing to the mainland Chinese public.

I hypothesize that two frames play important roles in constructing the popular narratives around the Hong Kong protests. The Nationalism and Sovereignty frame denounces the West's influence in the protests, emphasizes the importance of patriotism, and expresses alarm about Hong Kong independence. The Rule and Order frame strongly condemns the violence committed by the protestors and stresses the value of law and stability. I develop a list of twelve keywords for each of the two frames and determine the frame or frames reflected in each article by the occurrence of keywords. The vast majority of the content falls under at least one of the two frames: 52 percent of the influential WeChat articles adopt the Nationalism and Sovereignty frame, while 66 percent adopt the Rule and Order frame. This finding suggests that sentiments of nationalism and values of stability are very prominent and appealing to the mainland Chinese public as they perceive the Hong Kong protests.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. I begin in Section II below by providing some background on Hong Kong's relationship with mainland China and an overview of the 2019 protests. In Section III, I review the literature and develop the theory to support two

proposed frames about the Hong Kong protests in this paper: (1) Nationalism and Sovereignty, and (2) Rule and Order. In Section IV, I describe my data source of WeChat Public Account articles and lay out my keywords and coding rules to analyze the articles. In Section V, I present findings and draw examples to analyze and illustrate specific narratives under the two frames. Section VI concludes the analysis.

II. Background

II.1. The Status of Hong Kong under One Country, Two Systems

In 1842, in the aftermath of imperial China's defeat by the British empire in the First Opium War, Hong Kong was ceded to Britain as a colony. Hong Kong was returned to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, after the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration agreed to the principle of One Country, Two Systems (OCTS) that would give Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy under China's rule as a Special Administrative Region (SAR).

The OCTS concept was first developed by PRC in the 1970s as a policy towards Taiwan to achieve reunification, although the Taiwan government refused the suggestion (Chen 2018). During the Sino-British negotiations over the status of Hong Kong, OCTS became fully elaborated. Under the principle, there is only one China, but Hong Kong retains its own administrative, economic, and legal system for 50 years after the handover; this includes a capitalist economy and the rule of law, both distinct from the socialist system in mainland China. The Basic Law of Hong Kong, enacted by China's National People's Congress in 1990, provides the legal basis for Hong Kong autonomy under OCTS and serves as the de facto constitution of Hong Kong. The OCTS model enshrined in the Basic Law essentially gives the SAR government jurisdiction over all government affairs in Hong Kong aside from defense, foreign relations and

electoral system changes, while Beijing maintains control over the legal interpretation of the Basic Law (Chen 2018). The OCTS arrangement is set to expire in 2047.

II.2. Growing Mainland-Hong Kong Tensions and the Umbrella Movement

Following the handover, Beijing initially adopted a non-interventionist approach in Hong Kong, but turned to more active involvement and incorporation after a large 2003 protest against the proposed National Security Law in Hong Kong (Cheng 2009). As the Chinese central government attempted to subject Hong Kong to tighter political, economic, and ideological control, rising fear of "mainlandization" emerged in Hong Kong over anxiety of losing the city's "core values" of freedom, human rights and the rule of law (Ho and Tran 2019). Since 2009, the Hong Kong local identity has risen while the Chinese national identity has dropped among the Hong Kong population, as a result of its growing awareness of Beijing's intervention and the disruptive impacts of rapid mainland-Hong Kong socioeconomic integration (Yew and Kwong 2014).

The Umbrella Movement took place in 2014 in the context of growing tensions between Hong Kong and mainland China. It started as a civil disobedience campaign, Occupy Central for Love and Peace, advocating for democratic reform to Hong Kong's electoral system. After the first day's confrontation with the police, the campaign quickly scaled up and transformed into a decentralized movement that lasted 79 days (Lee and Chan 2018). Despite the momentum of the movement, it failed to compel the government to concede on proposed electoral reform.

The failure of the Umbrella Movement resulted in further radicalization of Hong Kong's social movements, with the growing appeal of localism and the inclination to employ more confrontational tactics (Lee 2018). At the same time, Beijing adopted a hardline approach

towards dissent in Hong Kong, including the abduction of five Hong Kong booksellers for selling banned books in mainland China, which caused widespread shock and concern in Hong Kong (Chou and Siu 2016).

II.3. The 2019 Hong Kong Protests

The increasing tensions reached a breaking point in 2019. A proposed extradition bill to allow for the transfer of fugitives to mainland China was met with strong public opposition in Hong Kong. Many were alarmed at the prospect of subjecting Hong Kong people to the jurisdiction of the Chinese legal system, which they deeply distrust (Lee et al. 2019). The first large demonstration took place on June 9, as one million Hong Kong people protested the bill. Three days later, protestors surrounded Hong Kong's Legislative Council and clashed with the police. On June 15, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, announced the suspension of the extradition bill, but fell short of withdrawing it. Believing the government's response was inadequate, an estimated two million people took to the streets the next day, marking the largest protest in Hong Kong's history. As the movement progressed, "the originally policy-oriented protests quickly morphed into a summer of discontent and uprising" (Lee et al. 2019, 3).

Since July, the protestors have rallied around five key demands: (1) full withdrawal of the extradition bill, (2) a commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality, (3) retracting the classification of the protestors as "rioters," (4) amnesty for arrested protestors, and (5) dual universal suffrage for both the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive (Wong 2019).

A brief timeline of key events in the protests is summarized in Table 1. As the protests dragged on, violence and confrontations escalated. Some militant protestors confronted riot

police with umbrellas, bamboo sticks, bricks, and petrol bombs, while the police intensified the

use of force, firing gunshots and arresting many protestors (Lee et al. 2019).

Table 1: Timeline of Key Events in the 2019 Hong Kong Protests

Date	Event
June 9	First large protest took place against the extradition bill
June 12	Protestors surround the Legislative Council; police fire tear gas and rubber bullets
June 15	Carrie Lam suspends the extradition bill
June 16	Largest demonstration in Hong Kong's history
July 1	Protestors storm and vandalize the Legislative Council on the anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China
July 21	Protestors deface China's Liaison Office in Hong Kong; at night, a mob in white shirts attack protestors and commuters at Yuen Long Station
August 12-14	Dayslong demonstrations take place at the Hong Kong International Airport, causing flight cancellations; two men from mainland China are tied up and beaten by protestors
September 4	Carrie Lam announces withdrawal of the extradition bill
October 1	Large protests take place on China's National Day; the police shoot a protestor for the first time with a live round
October 4	The Hong Kong government enforces an anti-mask law, invoking emergency powers to ban face masks, which protestors commonly wear for anonymity and protection
November 12-18	Protestors and police clash at university campuses, turning into one of the most violent confrontations as protestors use firebombs and arrows while police fire tear gas and water cannons
November 24	District Council election in Hong Kong attracts record high turnout; pro-democracy camp wins its biggest electoral landslide

III. Theory and Hypotheses

In their analysis of Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement, Lee and Chan (2018) propose three major frames that the government and pro-establishment forces in Hong Kong used to shape public opinion and delegitimize the movement: the Foreign Intervention frame, the Rule of Law frame, and the Public Nuisance frame. The Foreign Intervention frame portrays the movement to be ideologically, organizationally and financially linked to Western forces. The Rule of Law frame emphasizes that the protestors' law-breaking behaviors contradict the city's core value of the rule of law. The Public Nuisance frame highlights the disruptions and inconvenience caused by the movement to Hong Kong citizens' everyday lives.

Since the perspectives of the mainland public are slightly different from those of Hong Kong's pro-establishment camp, and since there are important differences between the Umbrella Movement and the 2019 protests, I revise the three frames based on evidence from existing literature. The two frames I propose for the analysis in this paper are: (1) the Nationalism and Sovereignty frame and (2) the Rule and Order frame.

III.1. Nationalism and Sovereignty Frame

The rise of Chinese nationalism has been observed in the state apparatus, intellectual discourse, and popular society. Nationalism in China is shaped by its historical experience of foreign aggression, when a weak China suffered from imperialist invasions and interventions from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, a period labeled by the official discourse as the Century of Humiliation (Callahan 2004). Following the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, Chinese nationalism received increased prominence, with large-scale government-sponsored

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patriotic education campaigns that emphasize three key themes: Chinese tradition and history, territorial integrity, and national unity (Zhao 2004).

Under Xi Jinping, who ascended to party leadership in 2012, the cultivation of nationalism has only grown with the official proclamation of the Chinese Dream and the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation (Kuhn 2013). At the same time, popular society has taken on an increasing role in the construction and dissemination of nationalism, leading to more reciprocal influence between state and popular actors (Callahan 2010). Studies find that through the expression of nationalism on online platforms, ordinary netizens have influenced media narratives and constructed alternative nationalist discourses apart from the official line (Chen, Su, and Chen 2019; Ma 2018).

The context of Chinese nationalism is relevant to understanding mainland reaction to the Hong Kong protests for three reasons. First, while the protests are not directly a movement for Hong Kong independence, they nevertheless reflect Hong Kong citizens' discontent with the One Country, Two Systems structure and call into question Hong Kong's ties and identification with China. The protests further reveal the growing tension between Beijing's state-building nationalism in Hong Kong and Hong Kong's peripherical nationalism that arises in reaction to the former's assimilation strategies (Fong 2017). China's claim to national unity and territorial integrity has already been tested by its contentious relationship with Taiwan; the prospect of Hong Kong independence would be very alarming to a Chinese public that unequivocally embraces the One China doctrine on territorial issues.

Second, the Hong Kong protests involve significant discussion and scrutiny of foreign influence and intervention. It has been a persistent frame from Lee and Chan's analysis of the Umbrella Movement, where the narrative of foreign influence "delegitimizes an action by

defining it as something that is dubious and alien" (Lee and Chan 2018, 153). The Chinese party-state has employed national identity discourse that uses negative framing of the West to shift the blame for domestic troubles to hostile foreign forces (He 2018). More importantly, many Chinese are sensitive to the notion of foreign intervention because it reminds them of the compromise of national sovereignty forced upon China during the Century of Humiliation (Wang 2012). This historical narrative is particularly relevant to Hong Kong, which was a British colony from 1841 to 1997 as part of China's experience with Western imperialism.

Finally, nationalism shapes the way that Chinese people view democracy, which in turn affects whether they might be sympathetic towards the pro-democracy motives of the protests. Throughout modern history, debates about democracy and rights in China are frequently tied to the question of national strength and the deemed threat of military or cultural imperialism from the West (Weatherly 2014). Tang and Darr (2012) find that nationalism in China shows a strong anti-democratic, pro-authoritarian tendency, impeding public demand for democratic change.

The hypothesis for the Nationalism and Sovereignty frame is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: In the context of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, sentiments that reflect an assertion of national sovereignty, alarm towards Hong Kong independence, and opposition to foreign influence are appealing to the mainland Chinese public.

III.2. Rule and Order Frame

Chinese political culture is influenced by Confucianism, the dominant ideology in the long history of ancient China, which values harmony, deference, and collectivism, among many other characteristics. The Confucian political tradition promotes "paternalism, blind support for authority, political harmony, and the priority of national interests," as well as "avoidance of

conflicts and disorder in politics in preference to harmony" (Zhai 2017, 268). Under Confucianism, social order is prioritized, while contentious politics is discouraged; it is only acceptable for ordinary citizens to oppose their government under extreme circumstances (Shi and Lu 2010). Developed from the Confucian tradition, Chinese political thought emphasizes collective socioeconomic security over individual rights (Perry 2008).

The modern Chinese state has continued to strongly emphasize order and stability, especially after the 1989 Tiananmen protests, when mainstream political thinking called for greater political stability and social control (Chen 1997). Since then, China has dramatically expanded its stability maintenance apparatus, from empowering public security chiefs to raising local authority's sensitivity to public unrest through new evaluation standards (Wang and Minzner 2015). Meanwhile, China has seen a rising middle class that, in spite of adopting more liberal political attitudes, prioritizes upholding socio-political stability, which it views as foundational to its economic interests (Miao 2016).

The Chinese government and society's emphasis on rule and order directly influences how the public perceives the Hong Kong protests. First, it affects the perceived legitimacy of protests as a form of voicing discontent. Cultural norms play an important role in choices of political participation modes, and public approval of confrontational tactics such as demonstrations and strikes are generally much lower than less confrontational tactics such as signing a petition in China (Shi 2014). In addition, the value placed on rule and order can affect how the Chinese public views the law-breaking behaviors in the Hong Kong protests. While civil disobedience is by nature unlawful yet can sometimes be justified by a higher purpose, those nuances are often not appreciated by either the pro-establishment camp or a public that believes law-breaking actions are inherently wrong (Lee and Chan 2018). During the course of the Hong

Kong protests, Beijing has frequently emphasized the importance for the SAR government to enforce the law and punish violations (Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council 2019).

These contentions become all the more salient in the 2019 Hong Kong protests because of the significant extent of violence involved in the confrontations. Given that violence has been used on both sides, it is unsurprising that stakeholders from different standpoints will selectively publicize certain incidents to buttress their own side of the story. In this case, violent acts conducted by the protestors can become a natural source of outrage for a mainland Chinese audience that has limited sympathy with the movement's cause to begin with and finds that the protestors have resorted to clearly unacceptable tactics. The images of violent protests and incessant chaos form a stark contradiction with the order and harmony that many Chinese people value in their cultural and political attitudes.

The hypothesis for Rule and Order frame is as follows:

Hypothesis 2: In the context of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, sentiments that stress the unacceptability of protestor violence and reflect heightened emphasis on rule and order are appealing to the mainland Chinese public.

IV. Methodology

IV.1. Data

The primary source that this thesis uses are WeChat articles posted by Public Accounts (公众号).[1] WeChat is the most popular messaging and social media app in China, with over 1

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[1] WeChat translates them as "Official Accounts," but this paper uses "Public Accounts" because the latter is a more accurate translation of the Chinese phrase and reflects the diversity of entities that register these accounts.

billion active users worldwide (Jao 2018). Through WeChat, users can create Public Accounts

(equivalent to Facebook Pages) to post articles that can be received by followers and shared to

each individual's own timeline, or Moments (朋友圈), visible to friends and contacts. These

accounts can be registered by a variety of entities, ranging from government agencies and media

outlets to businesses, organizations and individuals. According to Tencent's WeChat Data

Report, there are 3.5 million active Public Accounts as of September 2017.

Each Public Account article shows the number of Views (阅读) and Likes (在看)[2] that it

receives. When an article reaches over 100,000 Views or Likes, it only shows up on the app as

"100k+", so the exact number is unknown above that point. A report finds that about 9 out of

100 original articles reach "100k+" Views, while it is much rarer to receive "100k+" Likes

("WeChat Public Account Data Report" 2019).

For this analysis, I treat all Public Account articles with "100k+" Views as popular

among the Chinese public and influential in shaping public opinion. I collect all such articles

posted from June 9 through December 31, 2019 that contain the word "Hong Kong" (香港) in

their titles. These include both original articles (where the Public Account article is the original

post) and reposted articles (from other accounts, platforms, or sources), which I differentiate in

analysis. Because the Hong Kong protests are such prominent events in China throughout this

time period, the overwhelming majority of these articles are about the protests.

There are 3596 total articles that meet the criteria: 652 original and 2944 reposted

articles. The distribution of all articles and original articles over time is shown in Figure 1.

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[2] "在看" literally translates into "Reading," but it functions as Likes.

Figure 1: WeChat Public Account Articles on Hong Kong over Time
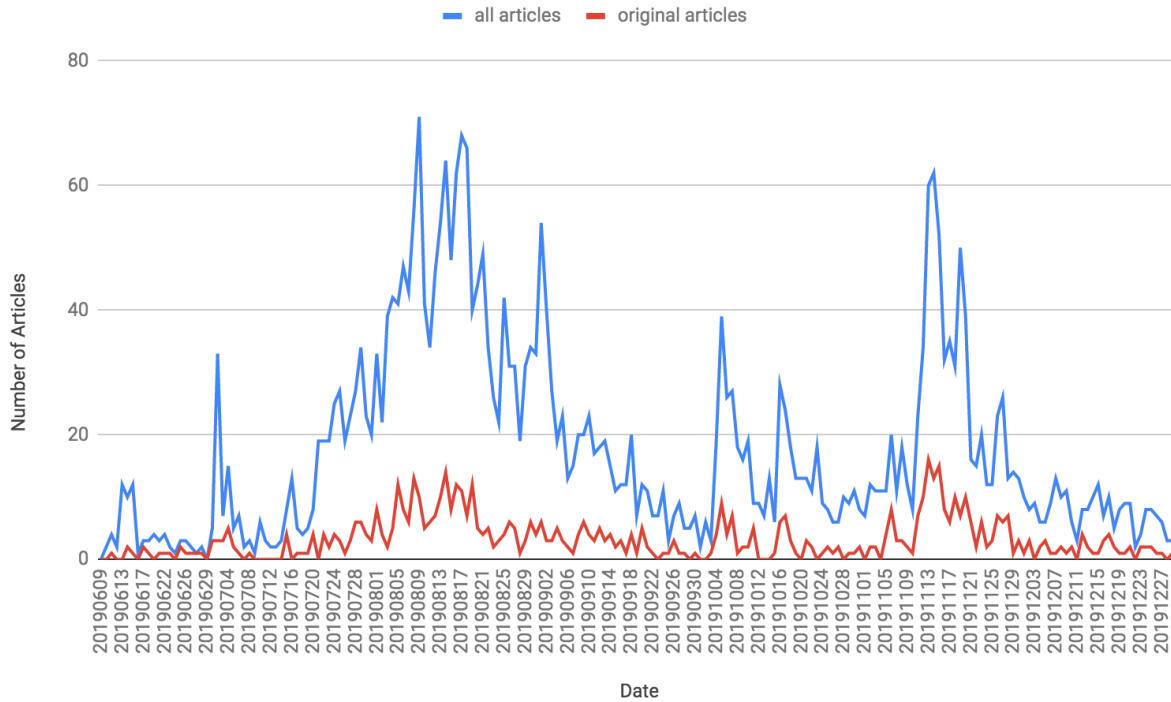
Overall, the discussion around the Hong Kong protests was relatively quiet on mainland social media in June. There was a spike of attention on July 2, following the protestors' break-in and vandalization of the Legislative Council the day before. Afterwards, the Public Account articles on Hong Kong steadily ratcheted up from mid-July to early August, reaching the record of 71 widely viewed articles on the single day of August 9. Another spike occurred in a few days, when mass protests at the Hong Kong International Airport caused flight cancellations and a mainland reporter was beaten for supporting the police. Afterwards, the social media attention gradually cooled down, before reaching another spike in October, around the time when the Hong Kong government banned the protestors from wearing masks. The intensity of Public Account articles surged again in mid-November, when escalating conflicts on campuses caused major disruption to universities around the city. Attention was lowered throughout December.

The 652 original articles are posted by 178 unique Public Accounts, including a range of accounts categorized under Media, Politics, Current Affairs, Culture, Life, Entertainment, and Finance, among others. Most Politics accounts are operated by government agencies. Media accounts and some Current Affairs accounts are operated by media outlets, including both state and non-state media. The majority of the remaining accounts, referred to as self-media (自媒体) in China, are independently operated platforms managed by individual WeChat users (Yu 2018). A breakdown of the 178 accounts and 652 articles into different account types is listed in Table 2. Media accounts consistently produce a large number of articles on Hong Kong, while articles written by individual users constitute over half of the total articles analyzed.

Table 2: Distribution of WeChat Account Types among Original Articles

Account Type	Total Number of Accounts	Total Number of Articles
Government accounts	6	26
Media accounts	27	273
Individual accounts	145	353

The Chinese government is known to censor social media expressions. If a WeChat article is censored, its link and title still appear in the database, but the article will show that "this content is unavailable because it violates relevant regulations." The Chinese government is also known to fabricate and post social media comments as if they were expressed by ordinary people. However, these fabricated comments usually avoid discussing controversial issues and focus on cheerleading for the government's achievements (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). In addition, since the popularity of WeChat articles in this paper is measured by the number of Views and Likes, instead of comments, they are much more likely to be the result of genuine public sentiments, rather than state manipulation.

I analyze my data in the following way. First, I develop a list of keywords to reflect the occurrence of my two frames. Then, I sample around half of the 652 original articles and run a keyword search on each article to determine which, if any, frame(s) it falls under.

IV.2. Sample

The sample is drawn with a stratified design with proportional allocation, using each month as a stratum. Given that the tone and content of articles can vary across time, this measure ensures an adequate sample size from each period. Within each stratum, half of the articles are selected with probability proportional to size, using the number of Likes as the measure of size. Since all articles in the population have "100k+" Views, the number of Likes, usually much lower than the number of Views, becomes a proximate measure of article popularity and influence. The more popular and widely-liked an article is, the more likely that it will be sampled. Finally, there are six articles in the population that received "100k+" Likes. I consider them viral articles, given that the average number of Likes in the population is only 4,540, and the article with the highest number of Likes below the "100k+" group is at 62,257. These six viral articles are sampled with certainty.

IV.3. Keywords

The frame-identifying keywords are as follows.

In the Nationalism and Sovereignty frame, four keywords reflect sentiments of patriotism: *patriotic* (爱国), *motherland* (祖国), *national flag* (国旗) and *Chinese people* (中国人). Two keywords highlight attacks to the Chinese nation: *anti-PRC* (反中) and *anti-China* (反华). Two keywords emphasize China's rule over Hong Kong and the issue of Hong Kong

independence: *sovereignty* (主权) and *Hong Kong separatist* (港独). The final four keywords highlight the narrative of foreign intervention in Hong Kong affairs: *external forces* (外部势力), *Western* (西方), *intervention* (干预) and *interference* (插手), with the last two words synonymous to each other.

In the Rule and Order frame, four keywords containing the Chinese character for "violent" (暴) stress the problem with violence: *violence* (暴力), *violent rioter* (暴徒), *violent act* (暴行) and *violent riot* (暴乱). A fifth keyword to describe violence is *beat* (殴). Another keyword for violence on a more extreme level is *terrorism* (恐怖主义). Three additional keywords focus on social stability: *stability* (稳定), *order* (秩序) and *damage* (破坏). Another keyword, frequently used in conjunction with "stability," emphasizes stability from an economic perspective: *prosperity* (繁荣). The final two keywords directly address the law: *rule of law* (法治) and *illegal* (非法).

Table 3 summarizes the list of keywords for each of the two frames.

Table 3: Keywords for the Two Frames under Analysis

Frame	Keywords
Nationalism and Sovereignty frame (12 keywords)	patriotic, motherland, national flag, Chinese people, anti-PRC, anti-China, sovereignty, Hong Kong separatist, external forces, Western, intervention, interference
Rule and Order frame (12 keywords)	violence, violent rioter, violent act, violent riot, beat, terrorism, stability, order, damage, prosperity, rule of law, illegal

IV.4. Coding Rules

I code an article as within a frame if the keywords belonging to that frame occur in the article at least five times. A keyword can, of course, appear multiple times in an article, but my unit of analysis is the article. An article can fall under more than one frame. If an article does not meet the criteria for any frame, I code it as "no frame."

I set the criteria to be five mentions because, on the one hand, the keywords need to be recurring in an article in order for them to constitute a narrative; on the other hand, some articles are shorter pieces that, despite having a narrative, would not contain a large number of keywords. Since most articles are over 1,000 words, and since the range of keywords defined in this paper is relatively broad, I consider it reasonable to use five mentions as a cutoff for coding an article into a frame. For a robustness check, I also include the results for alternative coding rules where (1) an article falls under a frame if the frame keywords appear at least three times, and (2) an article falls under a frame if the frame keywords appear at least seven times.

V. Findings and Discussion

There are 330 total articles in the sample. Among them, eighteen articles are unrelated to the protests. Twenty-seven articles have been deleted by the author. Fifteen articles have been censored by WeChat, showing that "this content is unavailable because it violates relevant regulations." I analyze the remaining 270 articles.

V.1. Overall Attitudes

Two general observations stand out from these WeChat articles. First, the sample shows that the vast majority of Public Account articles containing "Hong Kong" in the title are indeed about the protests. Considering there are 652 original articles and 3596 total articles over a

period of 214 days that each received more than 100,000 Views, that means the discussion of the Hong Kong protests has been rather viral and persistent on the mainland Chinese Internet. Furthermore, when it comes to the most popular posts on WeChat, China's censorship apparatus has mostly given these discussions free rein, censoring only a very small proportion of them. This is in spite of the fact that censorship in China is aimed at silencing the representation and potential of collective action, which means protests are supposed to be quite sensitive topics for online discourse in China (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013).

The lack of censorship in this case may not be surprising after all, because the attitudes towards the Hong Kong protests expressed in these most popular WeChat articles are overwhelmingly negative, regardless of whether the article comes from a government, media, or individual account. Even the censored articles, judging from their titles, are negative about the protests as well.

Further evidence for the wide popularity of anti-Hong Kong protest sentiments come from Public Accounts that are usually not concerned with politics. About a quarter of the popular articles in the population come from accounts that fall under categories such as Entertainment, Culture, Finance, Technology and Travel. For example, Read at Ten (十点读书), an account that writes about book recommendations, life tips, and aesthetics, nevertheless posted articles condemning the Hong Kong protests in August. Hong Kong Shopping Guide (香港购物血拼大全), an account devoted exclusively to sharing shopping opportunities and discounts in Hong Kong, posted multiple articles over the course of the protests, all supporting the police and denouncing Hong Kong separatism.

This does not mean that all mainland Chinese citizens are against the Hong Kong protests: some Public Accounts at odds with the Chinese government have been blocked

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altogether so that they can no longer post articles, and self-censorship may have caused people who support the protests to not express their views on a platform like WeChat. Notably, during early June when the protests first started, there were posts of "Let's go Hong Kong" (香港加油) on China's microblogging site Weibo, which became a sensitive world censored by the platform (China Digital Times 2019). However, as the protests drew on and public attention increased, the supportive views of the protests were quickly drowned out by negative accusations. The fact that the antagonistic WeChat articles in the sample consistently receive the most Views suggest that they have resonated with a significant section of the Chinese public.

V.2. Frame Distribution

The keyword analysis pins down dominant narratives among the negative commentaries of the protests. According to the results of keyword search, listed in Table 4, Rule and Order is the most prevalent frame among the WeChat Public Account articles, while Nationalism and Sovereignty also shows up in over half of the articles. Under the coding rule, 53 percent of the original articles fall under the Nationalism and Sovereignty frame, and 66 percent of them fall under the Rule and Order frame. Thirty-eight percent of all articles adopt both frames, while 20 percent adopt neither. Modification to the coding rules results in changes to the number of articles in each frame, but does not significantly alter the general picture.

The results probably underestimate the number of articles in each frame, since some articles are categorized as "no frame" because they are either too short to contain enough keywords or primarily consist of pictures and videos so that the frames cannot be detected by searching the text. However, even by the most stringent coding threshold, over 70 percent of articles in the sample fall under at least one of the two frames.

Table 4: Distribution of WeChat Articles under Each Frame

Frame		Nationalism and Sovereignty	Rule and Order	No Frame
N = 5	Number	141	178	54
	Percentage	52.2%	65.9%	20.0%
N = 3	Number	164	200	34
	Percentage	60.7%	74.1%	12.6%
N = 7	Number	111	146	78
	Percentage	41.1%	54.1%	28.9%

Note: N = 5 (3, 7) means an article is coded under a frame if keywords appear at least five (three, seven) times. Number refers to the number of articles under each frame. Percentage means the percentage of articles under each frame.

Figure 2 shows the occurrence of frames across time. The distribution of frames remains relatively consistent throughout the development of the protests.

Figure 2: Frame Distribution over Time

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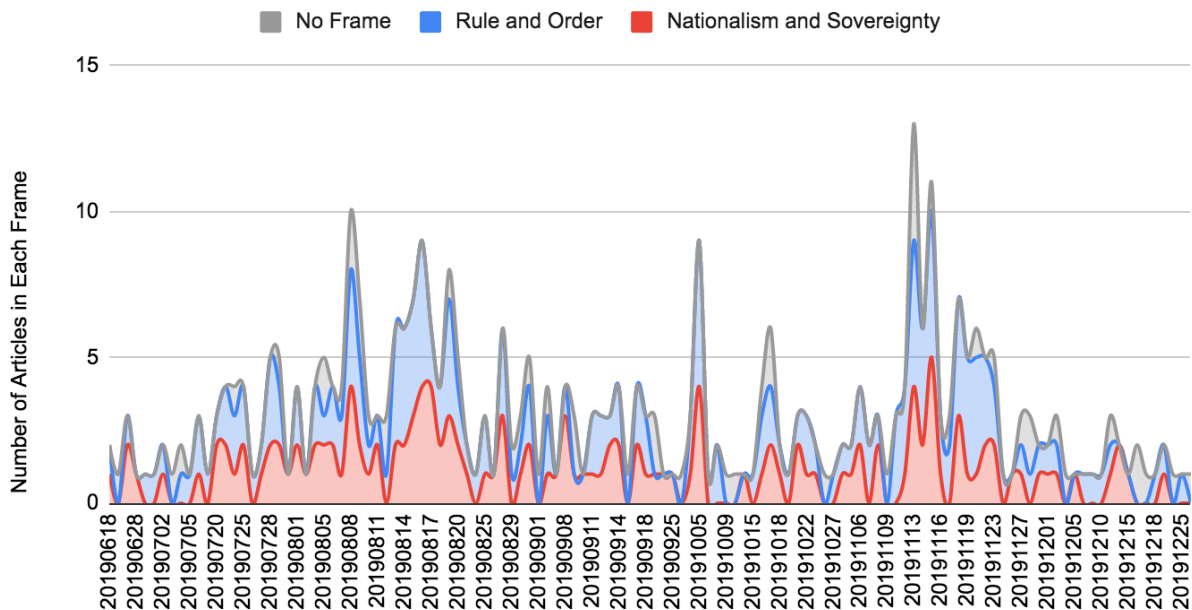
V.3. Nationalism and Sovereignty Frame

Table 5 lists the number of times that each keyword in the Nationalism and Sovereignty frame occurs. "Western" is the most frequently invoked word, appearing in 37 percent of all articles, followed by "Chinese people," "patriotic," and "Hong Kong separatist."

Table 5: Keyword Results in the Nationalism and Sovereignty Frame

Keyword	Total Occurrence	Article Occurrence	Article Percentage
Western	490	99	37%
Chinese people	274	93	34%
patriotic	260	86	32%
Hong Kong separatist	254	76	28%
motherland	222	76	28%
national flag	147	57	21%
sovereignty	84	39	14%
intervention	59	37	14%
anti-China	53	27	10%
anti-PRC	40	24	9%
external forces	28	19	7%
interference	24	18	7%

Note: Total occurrence is the total number of times that a keyword occurs in the entire sample of articles. Article occurrence is the number of articles in which the keyword appears. Article percentage is the percentage of articles in which the keyword appears.

The fact that invoking the West is the most popular narrative in the expression of nationalism shows that blaming and rallying against a foreign adversary is very effective in drawing public support. On the one hand, the notion of foreign influence serves to delegitimize

the Hong Kong protests. On the other hand, the Hong Kong protests become a convenient channel for many people to voice and reconfirm their deep-rooted skepticism towards Western countries and their notions of democracy.

Some articles examine the protests' connection with a variety of foreign agencies, citing the latter's program, training, and financing in Hong Kong to suggest their responsibility in inciting the protests. For example, one such article scrutinizes the operations of the National Endowment for Democracy, a U.S. organization:

> *It is worth noting that the National Endowment for Democracy in the United States has many years of extensive experience in conducting subversion and "color revolutions" around the world, and is very adept at street politics... NED has become the biggest black hand undermining Hong Kong's stability, far more harmful than those Hong Kong separatists on the front stage* (Xiong 2019).

Other articles condemn Western politicians' comments on the protests, interpreting them as interference in China's domestic affairs and accusing them of imperialist mindsets. One of the most common targets is the United States, which passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, among other measures to support the protestors. The United Kingdom is another common target, given its history of colonial rule in Hong Kong. For example, when Britain expressed its concern about freedom and democracy in Hong Kong in response to the protests, many articles point out that Britain itself gave Hong Kong less than democracy during its rule, and they denounce British politicians' colonialist thinking:

> *It has been 22 years since Hong Kong's return to China, but some British politicians have remained in the barbaric, bullying, and colonialist era, wishing to arbitrarily interfere with China's sovereignty* (Housha 2019).

Finally, a number of articles criticize the West's ideological influence in Hong Kong that uses "empty slogans" of democracy and freedom to mislead young people. In fact, the word "democracy" (民主) appears in 35 percent of all articles, and "freedom" (自由) appears in 36 percent. Many Public Accounts do not try to evade the fact that the protestors are pursuing democracy; they directly attack the protestors for holding naïve and misguided views about democracy and freedom. One of the most viral articles that received "100k+" Likes, titled "The Hong Kong Problem and the Truth of the World," cites the damage that the West has caused to other countries around the world and writes:

> *One problem we have to face frankly is that young people under the age of 30 in Hong Kong have basically been steeped in the ideology of the Western world. The education and online media they received from childhood has given them a demonized perception of mainland China… The mainland people have experienced more pain and are more likely to understand that the truth of the world is cruel. Behind the Western words of "democracy and freedom" stands the law of the jungle* (Lu 2019).

Immediately after "Western," the keywords "Chinese people" and "patriotic" appear in 34 and 32 percent of all articles, respectively. "Motherland" appears in 28 percent of the articles, and "national flag" appears in 21 percent. Patriotism is a consistent message used to shame the Hong Kong protestors and form rallying cries in these WeChat articles. One of them writes:

> *Since it is "One Country, Two Systems," Hong Kong can be institutionally different [from the mainland] and follow its own capitalist path. However, under the condition of "One Country," Hong Kong people are Chinese people. They must love China, they must have a patriotic spirit, and they must have a national consciousness* (Yingxiongjian 2019).

In particular, strong messages of national unity are appealing in light of confrontation and divide. On August 13, during the protests at the Hong Kong International Airport, Fu Guohao, a Chinese state media reporter, was assaulted by the protestors after saying: "I support the Hong Kong police. You can beat me now" (Wen and Wong 2019). The quote quickly went viral on Chinese social media. A WeChat article was titled, "I Support the Hong Kong Police! 1.4 Billion Chinese People Wait for the Hong Kong Rioters to Come Beat Us." It expresses outrage towards the protestors' violence and highly praises Fu's patriotic act:

> *When you said, "I support the Hong Kong police," you shouted out the voice of nearly*
> *1.4 billion people. You showed what a righteous Chinese person looks like. You are the*
> *hero of 1.4 billion Chinese people!* (Nanke yimeng 2019)

Finally, the term "Hong Kong separatist" appears in 28 percent of the articles, usually used to label the protesters. In fact, the Hong Kong protestors are almost never referred to as "protestors" in the articles, but rather exclusively as "Hong Kong separatists," "violent rioters," or "waste youth." Characterizing the protests as inherently pro-independence fuels antagonism and intolerance from the mainland public. A viral article ends with the stern warning:

> *Enough is enough. Stop challenging the bottom line of the central government. If you*
> *continue to do so, one day, all you have will be gone. Hong Kong separatists, beware*
> (Huanhuanjun 2019).

V.4. Rule and Order Frame

Table 6 lists the number of times that each keyword in the Rule and Order frame appears in the WeChat articles. Violence is a ubiquitous theme, with 81 percent of all articles containing the Chinese character for "violent" in either "violence," "violent rioter," "violent act" or "violent

riot." Among them, "violent rioter" and "violence" are the most common phrases, each occurring in over half of the articles. "Order," "stability" and "prosperity" are also prominent narratives, occurring in 31 percent, 29 percent and 24 percent of the articles respectively. Finally, 23 percent of the articles mention "illegal" and 21 percent mention "rule of law."

Table 6: Keyword Results in the Rule and Order Frame

Keyword	Total Occurrence	Article Occurrence	Article Percentage
violence	757	169	63%
violent rioter	1276	159	59%
damage	303	107	40%
violent riot	261	80	30%
rule of law	164	56	21%
order	155	83	31%
stability	139	78	29%
illegal	127	62	23%
prosperity	111	66	24%
beat	111	59	22%
violent act	76	43	16%
terrorism	35	13	5%

Note: Total occurrence is the total number of times that a keyword occurs in the entire sample of articles. Article occurrence is the number of articles in which the keyword appears. Article percentage is the percentage of articles in which the keyword appears.

From as early as late June, condemnation of protestor violence can be found across the board in the WeChat articles, which selectively amplify incidents of violence committed by the protestors and largely neglect to discuss any cases of police violence. Anti-protest stances

expressed through anti-violence sentiments only grow stronger as the protest develops. In a viral article with "100k+" Likes, the phrase "violent rioter" appears as many as 40 times in the article's total 2,236 words. The article was written on November 12, when protests and strikes around the city forced the closure of many universities and metro stations. It opens with:

> *The violent riots in Hong Kong fully escalated yesterday, with beating, smashing, looting, and burning everywhere. The rioters expanded their targets of violence from patriots, Hong Kong police, establishment figures, and mainland tourists to ordinary citizens, children, and even foreigners. More than 60 people were injured in the violence yesterday, two of whom are in critical condition. The situation is getting out of control, and Hong Kong has seen its darkest day since the riots began* (Qianxian 2019).

The opening paragraphs are followed by a list of accusations substantiated by 42 dramatic images of protestor violence and damage in Hong Kong.

Figure 3: Some Images Included in the Viral Article
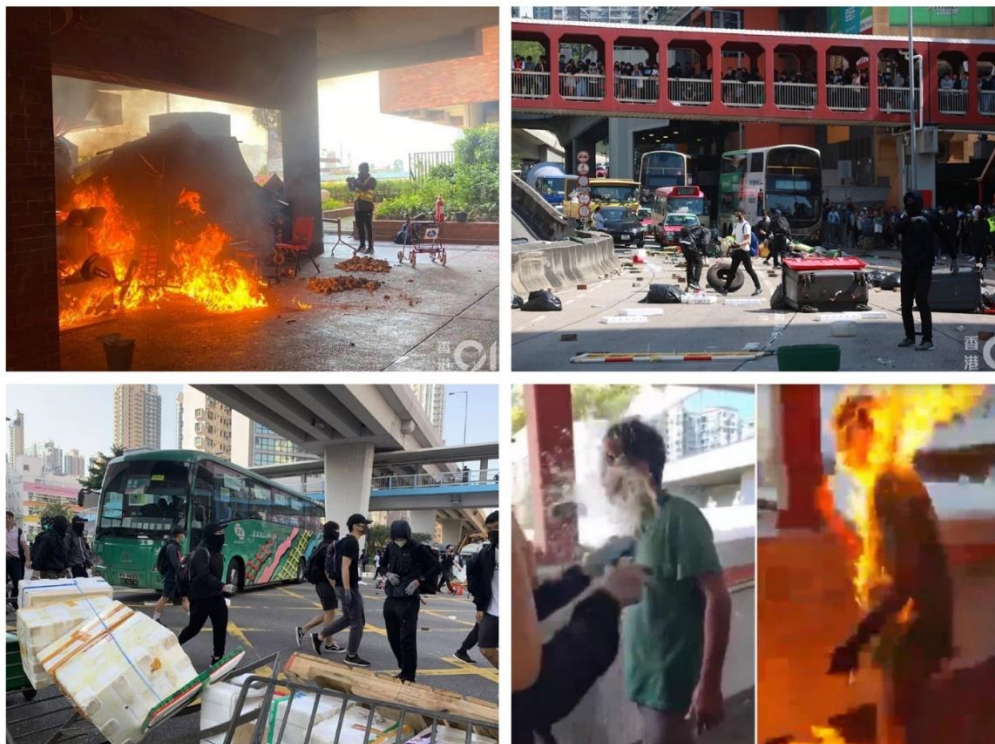
Another article writes:

The protestors in black often smashed banks, shops, and metro stations. Multiple

ordinary people were wounded and fainted. Actress Celine Ma was beaten in the head

and covered with blood for taking videos of the street violence… The ways the protestors

dress and act are no different from terrorists (Du 2019).

The sensational portrayal of violence and the black-and-white moral arguments has

attracted a lot of attention and support from the mainland audience. Since attitudes against

violence are rather uncontroversial, describing the Hong Kong protests as extremely violent is

effective in raising public outcry from the consumers of social media content.

In addition to condemning violence, many WeChat articles also emphasize the

importance of stability and prosperity, thus criticizing the damage caused by the protests to

social order. One article expresses the widely echoed sentiment:

I hope you understand that true "democracy, freedom and human rights" are based upon

the prosperity and stability of your country… True freedom is where the country provides

you with the security guarantee, so that you can freely do the things you like (Zhuozi

xiansheng 2019).

Other articles criticize the protestors' disregard for social order and the destruction they

bring to Hong Kong society:

Judging by the words and behaviors of many young people in Hong Kong, they do not

really understand freedom and human rights. For them, as long as they use the slogan of

freedom and democracy, then public order, public facility, and public welfare can all be

sacrificed (Qin 2019).

Calls for order and stability are frequently used in conjunction with emphasis on the rule of law. In fact, several articles acknowledge that the rule of law in Hong Kong had been the envy of mainland China, and go on to lament how the great tradition of the city has been devastated by the unlawful protesters:

> *Back then, I was stunned by how orderly and law-observing Hong Kong people are… The rule of law is the foundation of Hong Kong's good business environment and the cornerstone of Hong Kong's prosperity and stability. But now, it is saddening that the rule of law is abandoned, and it is necessary to rely on violence to contain violence and maintain basic order* (Leisilin 2019).

In these narratives, the concepts of stability, prosperity, law and order are often lumped together to describe how a well-functioning society, and Hong Kong society in particular, should look like. They form a sharp contrast with the chaos depicted in Hong Kong brought by the protests and lead to the condemnation of the protestors' damage to the city.

V.5. Limitation and Further Research

A limitation of this research is that public opinion is only reflected in the number of Views and Likes of popular WeChat articles, rather than direct expressions from the Chinese public. The texts analyzed in the paper are written by a small group of social media influencers, likely not representative of the broader Chinese population. The reason I did not analyze public expressions directly is because WeChat Public Accounts only selectively show a very small number of comments from its readers, and individual WeChat users' posts on their own timelines are much more difficult to track from a technical perspective. Further research can analyze a

wider range of posts on WeChat and on other Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and

Douban, which have different user compositions.

VI. Conclusion

The strong negative reactions the mainland Chinese public has exhibited towards the

Hong Kong protests reflect popular sentiments in Chinese society. When confronted by the

disruptive, intense, and ideologically charged event of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, two

influential narratives emerged from the coverage and discussion of the protests by WeChat

Public Accounts that received widespread attention and support. First, nationalistic sentiments

are broadly echoed, as shown by the popularity of articles that stress national unity, accuse the

protestors of Hong Kong separatism, and blame Western powers for interfering in China's

domestic affairs. Second, the narrative that portrays the protestors as extremely violent and

highlights the social disruptions of the protests has been strong and effective, resonating with the

Chinese public's belief in stability, rule, and order.

The findings supplement existing literature on political attitudes and values of the

Chinese public by providing an important case study. The Hong Kong protests triggered and

enabled the prominent display of long-held public sentiments among the Chinese people. The

aspects of the protests that challenge China's national unity and sovereignty draw strong public

reactions that reinforce patriotism, attack separatism, and denounce foreign influence. The

tendency provides further evidence to the prevalence of nationalism in China's popular society

and its increasing role in constructing political discourse, particularly when it comes to issues of

territorial integrity that many Chinese view as non-negotiable. At the same time, the aspects of

the protests that feature violence and undermine social order receive the fiercest criticism from

the mainland Chinese public, reflecting its distaste for contentious politics and value on social stability. This is an illustration of how the Confucian values of harmony and conformity, as well as the Chinese party-state's emphasis on order and stability, continue to resonate with the Chinese public.

This thesis also contributes to our understanding of dynamics in the China-Hong Kong relationship. People in mainland China and Hong Kong perceive the 2019 protests in very different ways. While in the eyes of the Hong Kong society, the protests represent a broadly popular pro-democracy movement, the mainland Chinese public mainly views them from the perspective of separatism and chaos, a perspective constantly reinforced by popular social media influencers. The increasing tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong is not only an issue of autonomy and control, but also a value conflict between two populations that hold distinct views regarding national identity, democracy, political participation, and social stability.

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Appendix

Additional keywords that are searched for but not included in the frame analysis:

Keyword	Chinese	Total Occurrence	Article Occurrence	Article Percentage
politics	政治	530	118	44%
economy	经济	618	116	43%
freedom	自由	491	96	36%
democracy	民主	458	95	35%
education	教育	494	93	34%
"waste youth"	废青	284	48	18%
rational	理性	47	34	13%
brainwash	洗脑	48	25	9%
discrimination	歧视	34	19	7%
stupid	愚蠢	33	18	7%
ignorant	无知	16	16	6%
delude	蛊惑	18	14	5%

Note: Total occurrence is the total number of times that a keyword occurs in the entire sample of articles. Article occurrence is the number of articles in which the keyword appears. Article percentage is the percentage of articles in which the keyword appears.