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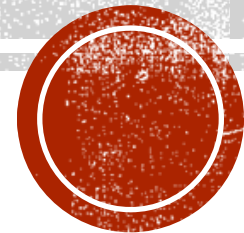
THE IRONY OF THATCHER'S POLITICAL MISCALCULATION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF BRITISH NATIONALITY CLASSES IN HONG KONG

Conference Presentation (4-5 July, 2025)

by **Ka Hang Wong** MAppLingTESOL

PhD Candidate

University of Technology Sydney



THIS PAPER

*This discourse study conducts a **critical discourse analysis** of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's political speeches on the future of Hong Kong, tracing **the origins of tiers of British nationality** established in the territory. It **contrasts Thatcher's rhetoric** with the **narratives of Prime Minister Boris Johnson** to examine shifts in British discourse over time.*



HISTORICAL FACTS AND FIGURES

Under 1984 **Sino-British Joint Declaration**:

- Born before handover → keep British nationality: **BN(O) Status**.
- Limited legal relationship (e.g., passport, consular support).

June 30, 2020: China imposed **National Security Law (NSL)**:

- Imposition violated the JD.
- Erodes freedoms and autonomy of HK.



HISTORICAL FACTS AND FIGURES

July 1, 2020: UK offers **pathway to British citizenship**:

- BN(O)s + family
- Redresses China's violation.
- 5.4 million people of HK potentially eligible.

Since political repression:

- 163,400 BN(O)s exiled to UK (March 2025).
- Over 500,000 people left HK.



BRITISH NATIONALITY IN HONG KONG

Before *British Nationality Act 1981*:

- **Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC).**

British Nationality Act 1981:

- Divided British nationality into three categories.
- Ended ambiguity of definition of a British citizen.

HK: **British Dependent Territories Citizen (BDTC)**:

- Ceased at transfer of sovereignty.
- Replaced by BN(O).
- Cannot be passed on to children born after handover.



BRITISH NATIONALITY IN HONG KONG

Following the signing of JD:

- *Hong Kong (British Nationality) Order 1986* (UK).
- HK people register for BN(O) Status.
- Now, estimated 2.9 million people hold this nationality.

British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990 (UK):

- Full **British Citizenship** to 50,000 heads of households.
- Estimated 225,000 individuals became British citizens.



METHODOLOGY

Documentary research project.

- Obtained data primarily from **Margaret Thatcher Foundation**.
- **Transcribed speeches + interviews**; historical documents related to Hong Kong.

Collected data analysed through:

- Historiographical approach to critical discourse analysis (**CDH**).
- Developed by Flowerdew (2017) in 90s, argues for a **role in writing of history**.



FINDINGS

Granada TV's *World in Action*:

“... people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in”
(Thatcher, 1978, para. 4).



FINDINGS

Context:

- Non-European immigration prevalent.
- Thatcher's rhetoric **reflected public concerns**.
- Created the myth of the “British character”.
- HK last significant colony: supposedly “**different culture**”.



FINDINGS

Manipulation evident, occurs:

“if speakers wilfully make assumptions about their hearers which they know not to be the case of presupposition” (Flowerdew, 2004, p.1561).

- Institutions shaped by “the British character”—common law system, the civil service, English language, etc.
- Historical HK: “Britishness of Hong Kong” (Mark, 2020, p. 579).
- HK’s entire history of civilization rooted in values of the British Empire.



FINDINGS

Inherent contradiction:

- HK's values / institutions = very product of “British character” celebrated.



FINDINGS

Argument:

- HK hearers did not presuppose they have a “different culture”.
- TV interview likely a political strategy appealing to **national pride**.
- Resonated with **anti-immigration sentiments**.



FINDINGS

Manifesto:

*“We shall introduce a **new British Nationality Act** to define entitlement to British citizenship and to the right of abode in this country”* (Conservative Party, 1979, Chapter 4, Immigration and Race Relations section).

- Continued to perpetuate HK Chinese as the **Other**.
- First **legislative step** towards **disengagement**.
- Signals retreat from UK's **legal and moral responsibilities** to Hong Kong.



FINDINGS

Argument:

1981 Act (**coincided** with Sino-British negotiations) created with **two considerations**:

1. Minimise obligations.
2. In line with British public sentiments.



FINDINGS

BN(O) Status:

- Created with these considerations in mind.



FINDINGS

1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre **shifted the narrative:**

- China's democracy movement violently suppressed.
- Up to 10,000 Chinese students / civilians killed by PLA on June 4th.
- Triggered widespread fear across HK.
- Emigration wave already happening.
- Stop the brain drain.



FINDINGS

British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990 (UK):

- British Nationality Selection Scheme.

Thatcher **stood firm** on her ground:

- *“it would not be right to suggest that 3.5 million people should automatically have the right of abode in this country” (Hansard, 6 June 1989 col 16).*

British Nationality Act 1981 (UK):

- Prevent mass immigration from HK.
- If all granted = **betrayed manifesto**.



FINDINGS

Rationale:

- *“It is obviously not an easy thing to select the people who are absolutely critical. Some of them who have worked for us in certain positions obviously select themselves. Others, it is a question of those who really, without whose services we could not keep either the prosperity going or the movement in or out and so on” (Thatcher, 1990, para. 50).*



FINDINGS

Presupposition:

- British passport = will stem the brain drain / will keep essential services going.
- Emigration = will disrupt prosperity.

Framing:

- Civil Service elites = “obvious” **custodians of the “British character”** -> deserve British citizenship.



THATCHER'S VISIT TO CHINA IN 1982

- British administration beyond handover (titular sovereignty):



FINDINGS

- Made **political (mis)calculation**: gov't officials running the future HK will be full **British citizens** whom the British has trained.

Hypothetical Example:

- If no rules about principal officials.
- Carrie Lam: **British Citizen** appointed to the post of **Chief Executive of the HKSAR** under titular sovereignty of PRC.



FINDINGS

Derive a two-fold Argument:

- BNSS designed to keep people **working in HK** rather than encourage emigration to Britain.
- BNSS designed to **secure continuation of British influence** in HK for as long as possible.



FINDINGS

Boris Johnson:

- *“We have stood up for freedom and autonomy—values both the UK and Hong Kong hold dear”* (GOV.UK, 2021, para. 5-6).
- Stark contrast.
- “people with a different culture” -> framing of **shared values between Britain and Hong Kong**.
- 40 years after 1981 Act, remarkable turnaround.
- Hkers now welcomed in UK.



THE UNHAPPY PARADOX

Chris Patten

- *“Every one of my successors as Chief Executive of Hong Kong either had a foreign passport or had members of their family with foreign passports. The [present Chief Executive had a British passport](#), which she gave up to become Chief Executive. [Her husband has a British passport. Her sons have British passports.](#) Now I’m not against that. I hope they’ll enjoy the liberties and freedoms which come with being a British citizen with that passport, but what is of course a rather [unhappy paradox](#) is the people at the moment, [the quislings](#), including members of the police force, doing the persecuting, [have British passports](#), and [the ones who are being persecuted, the ones who are being locked up, don’t](#). I think we should address that rather unhappy imbalance in due course”* (Hong Kong Watch, 2022, 6:22).



THE IRONY

Elites (granted full British citizenship):

- **Pragmatic approach** and quickly abandoned their “British character”.
- **Collaborated** with the enemy force.
- **Suppressed** the very values Thatcher had hoped they would uphold.



THE IRONY

True custodians of “British character”:

- Ordinary Hongkongers **deemed unworthy for British citizenship.**
- Evident: 2019 HK protests.
- Protesters = “British character”.
- HK Government/Police = Betrayal of that character.



THE IRONY

British Government fixing a **historical miscalculation** through the BN(O) pathway.

- Now expanded.
- Allows post-handover generation to apply independently of BN(O) parents.
- “the ones who are being locked up”.



HISTORICAL PATTERN

BG grants **British citizenship** (or a pathway to citizenship) to Hongkongers:

- CCP's assault on the "**British character**" (at its core: **law** and **democracy**).

BNSS:

- Trigger: **Tiananmen Square Massacre** when British character **under threat**.

BN(O) pathway:

- Trigger: **National Security Law** when British character **betrayed**.

Comparing the two events:

- Both in response to **state-sanctioned repression** by CCP to suppress **democratic freedom** and **rule of law**.



MOBILITY AND NORMALCY

Citizenship pathway:

- **Tangible step** towards ideals articulated by HK slogan “Liberate HK, Revolution of Our Times”.
- “...a need to **rectify a problem** and to **return to the original**, more **desirable state of affairs** for Hong Kong” (Leung, 2024, p. 647).
- Enables meaningful form of **self-determination** for Hongkongers in a new land.



RECOMMENDATION

Patten could also be referring to another group:

Out of 3.5 million BDTs:

- 225,000 full British citizens.
- 2.9 million current BN(O)s.
- 375,000 people unable to escape ongoing political repression.
- A HK gov't under totalitarian regime.



RECOMMENDATION

In light of recent **political jailing** of 45 opposition politicians (and others):

- British Government create another Nationality Act.
- Award **full British citizenship** to those identified as having fought **against China's encroachments**.
- Consistent with **historical pattern** seen since **Tiananmen Square Massacre**.



TWO PICTURES THAT ENCAPSULATES THE IRONY



UNDER PEER REVIEW



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THANK YOU

