



## The irony of Thatcher's political miscalculation: A critical discourse historiographical analysis of British nationality classes in Hong Kong

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### Abstract

This 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 the 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. The analysis highlights racial demarcation and elitist discourses during the Thatcher era, compared with the Johnson administration's focus on shared values. The paper argues that the current British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) scheme represents a significant reversal of historical policy missteps and recommends that the British government revisit the British Nationality Selection Scheme to extend citizenship to individuals who have fought for Hong Kong's freedoms against a totalitarian state's encroachment but remain ineligible for the BN(O) scheme. This is a timely study that addresses a pressing issue, particularly in light of the recent political jailing of 45 Hong Kong politicians who participated in primaries ahead of the 2020 Legislative Council election.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong; British National (Overseas); British Nationality Selection Scheme; critical discourse analysis; historiography

## 1 Introduction

On June 30, 2020, China imposed a National Security Law on Hong Kong. As a result of this imposition, the British government accused China of violating the agreements in the Sino-British Joint Declaration, signed between the two sovereign states in 1984. To redress the Chinese violation, the British government created a bespoke citizenship pathway for British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) passport holders to live, work, and study in the United Kingdom. Following residence in the United Kingdom for five years, BN(O) status holders can apply for settlement, and after a further year, full British citizenship. This arrangement is popularly known as "5+1" scheme. At the time of writing, 166,300 BN(O)s have arrived in the United Kingdom (GOV.UK, 2025, British National Overseas (BN(O)) route section).

Using a historiographical approach to critical discourse analysis (CDH) (Flowerdew, 2017), this article traces the origins of British nationality classes in Hong Kong. It analyses key political speeches both before

and after the handover in relation to the British government's responsibility towards Hong Kong. By analysing a political speech by Hong Kong's last governor Chris Patten, this critical discourse study exposes the inequality of the British Nationality Selection Scheme that granted full British citizenship to 50,000 Hong Kong elites and their dependents prior to the 1997 handover. In total, an estimated 225,000 people in Hong Kong were granted full British citizenship, while the majority of Hong Kong's population received BN(O) status. Patten posits that the people who are persecuting the "post-handover" Hongkongers are the very people to whom the British government awarded citizenship. He contends that the Hong Kong elites were granted full British citizenship because of their perceived shared values with Britain, but they have since betrayed those commitments (Hong Kong Watch, 2022, [6:22]).

This article makes three related arguments. First, the Conservative Party, upon Thatcher's ascension to the Prime Ministership, created tiers of British nationality to distance the British government from any continuing responsibility towards Hong Kong beyond the 1997 handover. Second, it argues BN(O) status was created for a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it maintained a "White Britain" narrative at home; on the other, it offered Hongkongers some kind of legal connection to the United Kingdom beyond the transfer of sovereignty. By not granting the BN(O)s a right to resettlement in the United Kingdom, Thatcher appeased her home constituents, who feared the United Kingdom would be "swamped" by Hong Kong Chinese; and the Hong Kong public, who faced political uncertainty ahead of the handover. Finally, the article argues the new BN(O) scheme is a correction of a historical mistake created by the British Nationality Selection Scheme. Although the present BN(O) scheme has been expanded to allow the "post-handover" generation to apply for the citizenship pathway, this article argues that further action is required to correct this imbalance. It suggests the British government could expand its nationality selection scheme to grant full British citizenship to eligible Hongkongers who have fought for Hong Kong's freedoms but are excluded from the existing BN(O) pathway. This is particularly urgent in light of the recent political repression in Hong Kong, where 45 pro-democracy politicians were sentenced for participating in the 2020 primaries, which were deemed acts of subversion against Chinese state power under the broadly defined National Security Law. Some of these individuals may lack BN(O) status or any alternative nationality, leaving them vulnerable and in dire need of international protection.

## 2 Historical background

Although Hong Kong was historically a part of the British Empire, it was an outlier case. There is little scholarly literature about Hong Kong within the broader context of British decolonisation in the twentieth century. Hong Kong was the only British colony where decolonisation took the form of a transfer of government to another sovereign state. This form of decolonisation stands in stark contrast to the general pattern of British decolonisation at the time. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the British Empire facilitated colonies to gain independence and become sovereign nations. However, this would not be the case for Hong Kong, which was transferred to China through a Joint Declaration signed between the two states. BN(O) status was offered to Hongkongers as a unique compromise within that broader context.

When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, the United Kingdom was experiencing a surge of racial tension and anti-immigrant sentiment, exacerbated by the visibility of the National Front and broader anxieties about postcolonial migration. During an interview on Granada TV's *World in Action*, Thatcher (1978, para. 4) brought in race politics before gaining power:

*... 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.*

Although Thatcher invoked “democracy” and “law” as hallmarks of the British character, her language echoed the rhetoric of the far-right National Front. In this context, “the British character” functioned as a euphemism for an imagined ethnically homogeneous “White Britain” (Mark, 2020). In this paper, such values are treated not as timeless moral benchmarks but as discursive constructs mobilised to define belonging and justify exclusion, as will be further illustrated in Johnson’s narrative. Whereas Thatcher deploys these values to implicitly racialise the British character as timeless traits exclusive to a white, native population, Johnson recasts them as shared civic ideals, enabling a narrative of inclusion, particularly in relation to Hongkongers.

This construction of British values often overlooks the fact that the United Kingdom formally includes Northern Ireland. Political discourse frequently uses terms like “the United Kingdom” or “British” without acknowledging Northern Ireland’s distinct constitutional and cultural identity. References to “British values” or “the British character” typically draw on norms rooted in Great Britain—particularly England—while erasing internal national and sectarian differences. For example, although Northern Ireland had legal and democratic institutions, these were historically dominated by Unionists, with systemic discrimination against the Catholic minority. Such abstraction enables a coherent yet reductive projection of Britishness, especially in postcolonial contexts such as Hong Kong.

The infamous “rather swamped” interview underpinned the formulation of the Conservative Party’s manifesto and, upon gaining power, the *British Nationality Act 1981* (UK). The 1981 Act divided the previous umbrella category of Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC) into three classes, of which Hongkongers were reclassified as British Dependent Territories Citizens (BDTC). The change ended the ambiguity of British nationality and separated British citizens from those who were not. BDTC provided an option for the white populations of Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands to register as British citizens under Section 4 of the 1981 Act and the *British Nationality (Falkland Islands) Act 1983* (UK), respectively. This caused the Unofficial Members of the Executive and Legislative Councils to complain that Hong Kong Chinese were being treated as “second class” British citizens (Mark, 2020).

It is thus not difficult to surmise that British nationality classes were created with the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong in mind. Hong Kong Chinese were deemed to be “people with a different culture” and the British public feared that “it might be swamped” by them ahead of the handover. The Sino-British negotiations, which took place between 1982–84, further sealed the political future of Hongkongers. In one respect, the British government offered BN(O) status that came with no right of abode in the United Kingdom; in another respect, the Chinese government only recognised the BN(O) passport as a “travel document” and unilaterally claimed Chinese nationality of Hong Kong Chinese (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, 1984). In effect, BN(O) status was a token of British nationality that allowed Hongkongers to maintain some kind of legal relationship with Britain beyond the handover, replacing BDTC which ceased to exist on July 1, 1997. For instance, BN(O)s could continue to seek British consulate assistance while travelling in third countries after July 1, 1997. The 2020 announcement expanded that right and now offers a route to full British citizenship. The Chinese government responded by derecognising the BN(O) passport as a valid proof of identity to curb the transfer of mandatory provident funds to the United Kingdom (Yu & Lam, 2023).

Notwithstanding the different classes of British nationality created by the 1981 Act, the British government created a further imbalance within Hong Kong's society itself through the *British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990* (UK). The Act facilitated the implementation of the British Nationality Selection Scheme, through which the Governor of Hong Kong would recommend 50,000 heads of households, along with their immediate families, for registration as British citizens. The scheme was offered against the backdrop of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. The British government gave out full British passports to these individuals to facilitate an escape route to the United Kingdom should the political situation in Hong Kong turned tumultuous (Chuang, 1990). It was estimated that some 225,000 individuals were provided with British passports through the scheme. But the scheme essentially created a stratified society within Hong Kong. Elites deemed important to the future of Hong Kong were awarded British citizenship. Ordinary Hongkongers who were judged as less important were granted BN(O) status as a token of British nationality that gave them a "travel document" with no right of abode in Britain. This article argues that the awarding of British citizenship to a small section of Hong Kong's society through the British Nationality Selection Scheme was a historical mistake that the British government is now trying to address through the new BN(O) scheme, offering a pathway to British citizenship to those affected.

By the time Johnson became Prime Minister, the United Kingdom was experiencing significant economic and political uncertainty. Brexit had caused a drop in immigration level and resulted in labour shortage (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2022). Politicians from across the political spectrum were keen "to demonstrate a contemporary understanding of Britishness and a commitment to openness, which is not defined by race or ethno-national identity but rather by shared history, social values, and political principles" (Yu, 2023, p. 447). The United Kingdom has spoken up for Hong Kong because of its "shared history, values, and systems" (Yu, 2022, p. 518). At the launch of the BN(O) scheme, Johnson himself referred to these values as "values both the UK and Hong Kong hold dear" (GOV.UK, 2021, para. 6). Thus, the definition of Britishness appears to have shifted from Thatcher's era to Johnson's, moving from a racially coded identity toward one framed around shared civic values.

### 3 Brief review of literature

Political discourses relating to Hong Kong's identity have been a topic of interest in applied linguistics research. In the early years after the transfer of sovereignty, a study was conducted to investigate English major students' conception of their citizenship and identity (Jackson, 2002). The study found the students used family metaphors to describe their emotions about the change of government. John Flowerdew has been a leading contributor to the study of political discourses on Hong Kong's identity. His major works encompass critical discourse analysis of political speeches by Governor Chris Patten in the creation of four bedrock principles of Hong Kong (Flowerdew, 1997a; 2016), the discursive construction of a new national identity in the postcolonial era by Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa (Flowerdew, 2004b), and the metaphoric construction of patriotism under the new regime (Flowerdew and Leong, 2007). Flowerdew's (2017) study identified metaphors of war and conflict during the Occupy movement in 2014. He argues that Hong Kong's identity has been established through opposition to the Chinese regime. Flowerdew (2011) illustrates the evolving political discourses from the outgoing administration to the new government. In addition, Ng (2020) analyses how Beijing's voice has been recontextualised in different ways by Chief Executive C. Y. Leung and the pro-democracy politicians. Wang (2017)'s volume is another applied linguistics study that examines the discursive construction of Hong Kong's identity through twenty-two policy addresses by the colonial and post-handover governments. Wong (2024) provides a critical analysis of the political responses

of Chief Executive Carrie Lam, exposing her underlying beliefs and values that ultimately led to the Chinese imposition of the National Security Law.

But one's identity cannot be separated from the issue of nationality. Few studies in the academic literature have addressed the topic of Hong Kong's nationality. Mark (2020) has presented a historiography of the *British Nationality Act 1981* (UK). He argues that during that period Hong Kong was losing its Britishness. Similarly, Hau (2021) addresses the Sino-British negotiations between 1982-84 against the backdrop of the 1981 Act. Both scholars found the British viewed Hong Kong Chinese as not having a strong sense of connection with the United Kingdom. Hong Kong's lack of cultural identification with Britain is mainly due to the lack of British cultural and history studies during the colonial era (Hampton, 2011, 2012). Hampton found that although the British Council aimed to promote British culture through broadcasting, the colonial government turned away from instilling a Britishness in Hong Kong, and schools did not teach British history. Ching (2018) has explored the concept of nationality vs. ethnicity. He argues that many Hongkongers who have obtained foreign citizenship are not aware of their Chinese nationality claimed by the Chinese government. He posits that when Hongkongers use their "Mainland Travel Permit", a travel document issued by the Chinese government even in the colonial era, to travel to the Chinese mainland, they unconsciously declare themselves as Chinese nationals. The use of Chinese-issued documents to travel to the mainland is due to China's non-recognition of foreign passports held by Hongkongers. Ching highlights that the shackled Chinese nationality of Hongkongers can only be removed by making a formal declaration of a change of nationality.

Despite the lack of strong cultural identification with the United Kingdom, both academic and grey literature show that many Hongkongers have retained a colonial identity decades after the handover. This contrasts sharply with the experience of other former British colonies, where populations overwhelmingly adopted new national identities upon gaining independence. The "British Hongkonger" identity—emerging through the BN(O) scheme and grounded in shared civic values with Britain—extends the "Hongkonger" identity (Yue, 2023). The term "Hongkonger" has been recognised by the Oxford English Dictionary since 2014. As discussed in the background section, the British identity was framed through a lens of cultural exclusivity and whiteness during the Thatcher era (Mark, 2020). This reinforced anxieties about immigration and the British character. However, more recent political discourse, particularly under Boris Johnson, repositions Britishness as a civic identity rooted in shared values rather than race or heritage (Yu, 2022, 2023). This ideological shift provides the framework for extending the BN(O) scheme, as it casts Hongkongers as rightful inheritors of liberal democratic values, thus making them symbolically "British" even in the absence of full citizenship.

With respect to how Hongkongers position themselves, the Welcoming Committee for Hongkongers (2023) found that many new arrivals are committed to settling permanently in the United Kingdom, with little intention of returning to Hong Kong. Similarly, Yue (2023) reported that most identify as either "British Hongkongers" or simply "Hongkongers", suggesting a preservation of cultural identity alongside an embrace of British civic values. Notably, few participants identified as Chinese, indicating a broader rejection of affiliation with the Chinese state. This reluctance to return may reflect widespread resistance to life under totalitarian rule. Benson et al. (2024a) observe that some respondents now regard the United Kingdom as their "motherland", drawing a contrast between the freedoms and prosperity found in Britain and the political repression experienced in post-handover Hong Kong. Further, Benson et al. (2024b) argue that the extension of BN(O) visa rights to descendants reflects a broader tradition of ancestry-based immigration policy. Yu (2022, 2023) similarly contends that the recognition of shared Britishness between Britons and Hongkongers, particularly as it facilitates integration, underpins the United Kingdom's willingness to assist its former subjects.

Hong Kong's status is also discussed in the legal academic literature. Legal scholars such as Lim (2022) and Chua (1990) have covered the historiography of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the resulting BN(O) status in Hong Kong. Prominent scholars including Jayawickrama (1991) and Petersen (2019) have argued that the United Nations had no right to remove Hong Kong as a non-self-governing colony in 1972. They argue the status could only be terminated by a free choice of the colonised people concerned to become an independent nation, associate with another state, or to integrate into an independent state. Hong Kong's integration with China was not a result of free and voluntary choice expressed through a referendum, but a secret negotiation between two sovereign powers without regard to the wishes of the colonised people most affected by the transfer. Jayawickrama (1991) argues that this lack of free choice renders the Joint Declaration invalid.

While these scholars have addressed the issue of Hong Kong's identity and Hongkongers' nationality from historical, legal, and discourse-analytic perspectives, this article fills the applied linguistics literature void by examining political discourses in the years leading up to the handover. It additionally analyses key British political statements following the Chinese imposition of the National Security Law. This critical discourse study contributes to the scholarship on the historiography of BN(O) status through a critical discourse historiographical approach to the study.

## 4 Methodology

This article is derived from a doctoral research project in history examining how BN(O) status evolved from a token gesture of British nationality into a tool of political resistance against Beijing's hegemony over Hong Kong. The study uses documentary research as the overarching methodology. The term "documentary research" is a broad term covering data contained in traditional documents as well as social media (Grant, 2018). Studies of ethnicity, nationality, and identity have adopted documentary analysis as rigorous methods of research in their studies (e.g., Ching, 2018; Tse, 2014; Wang, 2017). The recently declassified documents of the Thatcher administration have made access to historical documents possible.

In this study, relevant documentary data were obtained primarily from Margaret Thatcher Foundation, which contains a library of transcribed speeches and interviews as well as historical documents related to Hong Kong during the Thatcher administration. In addition, contemporary British government announcements as well as political speeches recorded on YouTube videos also provide valuable data. The documentary data were downloaded, and relevant sections were analysed. In the case of a video, relevant data were manually transcribed by the author.

As a Hongkonger, the author has been exposed to political events in Hong Kong over a period of forty years. The author has lived through the Thatcher era to the transfer of sovereignty, and from the handover to political events that led to the new BN(O) policy. These lived experiences have enabled the author to search for documents based on his recollection of events. This autoethnographic approach shaped the way the author analysed BN(O) status within a broader context of British decolonisation of Hong Kong. It offered an insider's perspective into understanding its significance.

The variety of sources selected for this article form a network of genre colonies. The term "genre colonies" refers to the different genres of texts that work together in the discursive construction of a discourse (Flowerdew, 2004a). According to Flowerdew, these genres may include websites, documents, and videos. In genre colonies, "clustering of related genres occurs in the performance of a given social practice" (Flowerdew, 2004a, p. 588). For instance, Flowerdew (2004a) has analysed three texts representing different genres in the discursive construction of Hong Kong as a world city: a public consultation booklet, the *Hong Kong 2000* yearbook, and a promotional video. In addition, Flowerdew

(2017) has collected a variety of texts to understand Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement as a discursive event, including a news corpus, artefacts, and messages. Another example is a research project that Flowerdew was engaged in that was "based upon a corpus of speeches, public addresses, public meetings, broadcast interviews, press conferences, interactions in the Hong Kong Legislative Council, writings, press reports, and other data relating to Patten" (Flowerdew, 1997b, p. 315).

The collected data were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA). Specifically, this study draws on Flowerdew's historiographical approach to CDA, known as critical discourse analysis in historiography (CDH), which foregrounds the role of discourse in the writing of history (Flowerdew, 2017). While many CDA theorists acknowledge the importance of historical context in discourse interpretation (e.g., Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Fairclough, 2010), Flowerdew's framework is distinctive in its sustained application to the political and historical context of Hong Kong. Developed in parallel with Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA) in the early 1990s, Flowerdew (2017) argues that CDH highlights a historiographical dimension of CDA. Whereas DHA primarily uses history to analyse discourse, CDH uses discourse to write and reinterpret history.

In this instance, while a traditional historian might explain the *British Nationality Act* of 1981 by drawing on primary sources, CDH analyses the discursive functions of such texts to reveal how they both create and frame historical narratives. A historian might view Thatcher's "rather swamped" interview as evidence leading to the Act, whereas CDH would examine how that discourse itself shaped the narrative of Britain under threat and legitimised restrictive nationality policies. By contrast, a DHA analysis would reconstruct the broader historical context, such as parliamentary debates on immigration and race relations, to situate Thatcher's interview within longer-term policy trajectories. In line with CDH, the present study adopts a historically grounded analysis to examine how political discourse has influenced British nationality policy in relation to Hong Kong. While other CDA models offer valuable general tools, few have engaged with the Hong Kong context in comparable depth. CDH therefore offers the most contextually appropriate analytical lens for the aims of this study.

This analysis examines four discursive strategies: foregrounding, presupposition, othering, and framing, as outlined in Flowerdew's work (e.g., Flowerdew, 2004b; Flowerdew & Leong, 2007). In addition, the term "supposition" is used to describe instances where speakers present hypothetical scenarios or projected outcomes not necessarily assumed to be shared knowledge. This is distinguished from "presupposition", which refers to backgrounded assumptions presented as common ground between speaker and audience. While both may function rhetorically to shape interpretation, the distinction is important for identifying whether a claim is being presented as self-evident or speculative.

The paper draws on Anderson's (2006) notion of "imagined communities" and their construction through appeals to shared values. While this article does not directly examine Hong Kong's own discourse, Fong's (2020) conception of Hong Kong as a stateless nation suggests that the United Kingdom's appeal to shared values may resonate with a population increasingly defined by liberal-democratic ideals rather than territorial sovereignty. This aligns with perspectives from BN(O) emigrants, who assert that "Hong Kong is not a place; it's a people" (Ho, 2023, p. 264).

## 5 From Thatcher to Johnson: Shifting British policies on Hong Kong

The findings suggest an overwhelming voice of disengagement and rejection of moral responsibility to Hong Kong during the Thatcher era. However, the study also finds a stark contrast in the British approach to Hong Kong during the Boris Johnson era. This section presents the findings through a historiographical approach to critical discourse analysis.

### 5.1 British disengagement and rejection of moral responsibility

The first speech analysed is Thatcher's "rather swamped" interview before she took power (Thatcher, 1978, para. 4):

*... 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.*

Critical discourse analysis relies on the context to understand discourses. As mentioned in the background section, anxiety about non-white immigration was rife at the time. Despite the legal safeguards that restricted the right of entry of colonial citizens, Thatcher's rhetoric reflected public concerns. The *Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962* (UK) had already designated colonial citizens no longer had an automatic right of entry to the United Kingdom. Although Thatcher made no mention of Hong Kong Chinese, Hong Kong was the last significant British colony, supposedly "with a different culture" at the time. Gibraltar and Falkland Islands had large British populations, but Hong Kong had a majority ethnic Chinese demographic. It was thus highly probable that one of the groups Thatcher was referring to was Hong Kong Chinese.

Discursive strategies are evident. Thatcher presupposes that Hong Kong Chinese are a "people with a different culture", treating this as accepted common ground for her British audience. However, this presupposition also involves manipulation, which occurs "if speakers willfully make assumptions about their hearers which they know not to be the case of presupposition" (Flowerdew, 2004b, p. 1561). While Thatcher's speech was aimed at the British public, Hong Kong Chinese themselves would likely contest this characterisation. By the time of her speech, Hong Kong had already developed institutions influenced by the British character, which Thatcher refers to as democracy and law. Hong Kong's character is therefore shared with the British (Yu, 2022, 2023). The core values of Hong Kong: a free market, freedom of the individual, rule of law, and democratic participation, have been set into place during the colonial era (Flowerdew, 1997a, 2016). The historical Hong Kong is referred to as "Britishness of Hong Kong" (Mark, 2020, p. 579). The common law system in Hong Kong was derived from British tradition, and Hong Kong's official language was English until as recent as 1974 when Chinese was added.

Thatcher's claim thus presents an inherent contradiction, for Hong Kong's values and institutions are products of the very systems and values Thatcher was celebrating. Hong Kong's entire history of civilisation up to that point had been shaped by the British Empire. Thatcher presupposes a cultural difference, presenting it as a fixed and unproblematic reality, thereby reinforcing an inaccurate and misleading framing of Hong Kong Chinese. This article argues, therefore, that her *Granada TV's World in Action* interview was a political strategy that appealed to national pride and resonated with anti-immigration sentiments rather than a logical argument.

A myth is naturalised when politicians reiterate the same themes (Flowerdew, 2004b). In the same interview, Thatcher repeated the theme of fear. That is, the British people were frightened because they were being threatened by an increasing minority who had a different culture (Thatcher, 1978, para. 12):



*In my view, that is one thing that is driving some people to the National Front. They do not agree with the objectives of the National Front, but they say that at least they are talking about some of the problems. Now, we are a big political party. If we do not want people to go to extremes, and I do not, we ourselves must talk about this problem and we must show that we are prepared to deal with it. We are a British nation with British characteristics. Every country can take some small minorities and in many ways they add to the richness and variety of this country. The moment the minority threatens to become a big one, people get frightened.*

In the extract above, Thatcher frames the National Front as an extremist party, but people are drawn to it because the party highlights “some of the problems” with immigration that resonate with people’s concerns. Despite the 1962 Act, Thatcher presupposes that the British public already accept the immigration issues highlighted by the National Front as factual, thereby normalising the party’s framing of the problem. She agrees the problem exists. The plural indexical “we” and the phrase “must talk about this problem” contrast the Conservative Party’s nuanced nationality policy with the extremist objectives of the National Front. Thatcher illustrates a strong sense of obligation and urgency to address the problem through the deontic modal “must”. Using othering strategy, she frames the National Front as the Other, but not in the same sense of othering Hong Kong Chinese. Thatcher frames the group as a reactionary Other within mainstream British society. She discursively creates a myth of the British nation and foregrounds its characteristics. She reiterates the myth that British values would be threatened if the whole population of Hong Kong migrated to the United Kingdom and became a big minority. In short, Thatcher acknowledges the voters who might vote for the National Front and persuades them to vote for the Conservative Party instead. This paper argues that Thatcher’s political purpose was achieved by aligning with the narratives of the National Front and scapegoating Hong Kong Chinese.

The Conservative Party’s manifesto promised to introduce a new British Nationality Act that would redefine a British citizen (Conservative Party, 1979, Chapter 4, Immigration and Race Relations section):

*... firm immigration control for the future is essential if we are to achieve good community relations ... We shall introduce a new British Nationality Act to define entitlement to British citizenship and to the right of abode in this country.*

The manifesto’s emphasis on “firm immigration control” as essential to achieving “good community relations” functions as a supposition about future social cohesion. However, it is rhetorically framed in a way that presupposes this causal link as accepted by the audience, thereby legitimising stricter immigration policies. The manifesto perpetuates the status of Hong Kong Chinese as the undesirable Other whose “different culture” is incompatible with the British community. The introduction of the *British Nationality Act 1981* (UK) can be interpreted as the first major legislative step towards disengagement from legal and moral obligations to Hong Kong Chinese. While the 1981 Act did not change the right of abode status of Hong Kong Chinese (as the 1962 Act had already restricted their entry), it formalised this exclusion by ending the ambiguity of CUKC.

The timing of the Act coincided with the Sino-British negotiations that lasted from 1982-84. Thus, it is not difficult to surmise that key considerations of the 1981 Act were two-fold. First, the Act was designed to minimise any obligations that the United Kingdom government may have had towards Hong Kong by preventing emigration to Britain. Second, considerations were made in-line with British public sentiments about immigration at the time. This article argues that, following the Sino-British negotiations, BN(O) status was created with these two considerations in mind. The replacement of BDTC with BN(O), made possible through the *Hong Kong (British Nationality) Order 1986* (UK), allowed Hong Kong Chinese to

continue a limited legal relationship with Britain beyond the handover. It also reassured the British public that Hong Kong Chinese would never come and live in Britain.

The 1989 Tiananmen Massacre brought anxiety to Hong Kong Chinese, who faced political uncertainty ahead of the handover. An emigration wave was already happening following the signing of the Joint Declaration, but the massacre compounded the effect of a brain drain out of Hong Kong. Statistics indicate the number of emigrants peaked in 1992 at 66,000 (“Newcomers to provide windfall for developers”, 1995). However, Skeldon (1994) estimates that the total movement was likely to be up to 80,000 that year. Two days after the massacre, Thatcher continued to hold a firm position and rejected moral responsibility to Hong Kong (Hansard, 6 June 1989 col 16):

*Currently 3.5 million people in Hong Kong hold British dependent territory citizens’ passports. Since 1945 there have been 1.6 million immigrants to Britain from the New Commonwealth. I cite those figures to show the enormity of the task. Obviously, some people, especially those who have worked in certain positions for the British Crown, already have preference in securing British passports... it would not be right to suggest that 3.5 million people should automatically have the right of abode in this country.*

In the extract above, foregrounding strategy is evident. Thatcher foregrounds the main issue: if Britain granted British citizenship to all 3.5 million Hong Kong BDTCs, it would exceed the total number of immigrants in all the years since 1945. A supposition strategy is also at play. Thatcher supposes or projects that the entire BDTC population would migrate to Britain if given citizenship, framing this hypothetical scenario as a national threat. Her reference to “the enormity of the task” signals a fear-based justification for restricting nationality rights. As argued in this article, the prevention of mass immigration from Hong Kong was the primary goal of the *British Nationality Act 1981* (UK). If the Conservative Party had now changed its mind, it would have betrayed its own manifesto. The British government eventually compromised on the issue and granted British citizenship to 50,000 key personnel and their dependents through the *British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990* (UK). The British Nationality Selection Scheme was implemented under this Act. It was estimated that some 225,000 Hong Kong individuals were awarded British citizenship through the scheme (Chuang, 1990). Thus, Hong Kong Chinese deemed important to the future of Hong Kong were awarded the right of entry to the United Kingdom, while Hong Kong Chinese who were considered as not important enough were not granted such an escape route.

The rationale for the British Nationality Selection Scheme was based on a presupposition, as can be seen in the above extract. Thatcher presupposes that service for the Crown is a major criterion for awarding British citizenship. Although the criterion of service to the Crown is not explicitly debated or justified, Thatcher presents it as unproblematic through the use of the word “obviously”, thereby presupposing that her audience shares this understanding as common ground. In this sense, Thatcher presupposes a shared understanding that loyalty and service to the British state are valid grounds for citizenship. She further presupposes the rest of the population who do not work for the Crown are less deserving of that right. This presupposition strategy selectively acknowledges contributions to the Crown while erasing the broader collective contributions of Hongkongers towards the British Empire.

Thus, Thatcher stood firm on her strategy: to appease the British public that the United Kingdom would not suddenly be “swamped” by 3.5 million Hong Kong Chinese. The result was the creation of a stratified society in Hong Kong, where the elites were privileged for their perceived alignment with the British character, and the rest of the population were perceived to be “people with a different culture”. This cultural othering reflected a colonial mindset that sought to define worthiness through proximity to British values. Although Thatcher’s discourse often invokes a “White Britain” imagined community, the British Nationality

Selection Scheme's granting of 50,000 passports and family reunification rights reveals a contradictory practice of selective inclusion within this exclusionary framework.

Thatcher explains her rationale in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* (Thatcher, 1990, para. 50):

*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.*

Here, a supposition strategy can be seen. Thatcher's supposition likely rests on the observation that many Hongkongers who acquired foreign citizenship in the post-declaration era eventually returned to Hong Kong. Based on this, she appears to hypothesise that granting British citizenship to Hong Kong elites without requiring them to emigrate would encourage them to remain engaged with Hong Kong, thereby stemming brain drain and sustaining essential services ahead of the handover. Thatcher frames the elites holding official positions ("some of them who have worked for us in certain positions") as people who are "obvious" custodians of the British character, which, in her own words, encompasses "democracy" and "law", and deserve British citizenship. In other words, Thatcher frames the "non-elite class" as not capable of maintaining the British character. If the elites had emigrated, the British government could not have simply sent over British officials to replace them. The principle of the Joint Declaration was to implement an autonomous government run by local inhabitants after the handover. Thus, if there had been a void in governance, people who Thatcher regarded as underserving would have replaced them. If lower-level officials had been promoted to fill this void, there would have been a crisis in Hong Kong's British character. This article therefore argues that the British Nationality Selection Scheme was designed to keep the elites working in Hong Kong rather than encourage emigration to Britain. In this sense, the British government hoped British citizenship held by Hong Kong elites would help secure continuation of British influence in Hong Kong for as long as possible after the handover, even though the British would lose political control over Hong Kong beyond July 1, 1997.

## 5.2 "Profound ties of history and friendship"

Hong Kong's British nationality returned to the political agenda during the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The then Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) took soft partisanship with the protest movement, and Hong Kong Watch coordinated meetings between Hong Kong activists and United Kingdom politicians (Summers, 2022). China saw the protests as a window of opportunity to promulgate a National Security Law in Hong Kong (Wong, 2024). The British government responded with the expansion of rights to the BN(O)s (GOV.UK, 2021, para. 5-6):

*I am immensely proud that we have brought in this new route for Hong Kong BN(O)s to live, work and make their home in our country. In doing so we have honoured our profound ties of history and friendship with the people of Hong Kong, and we have stood up for freedom and autonomy—values both the UK and Hong Kong hold dear.*

We can notice there is a stark contrast in the rhetoric about Hong Kong during the Boris Johnson era. Johnson served as the Conservative Prime Minister between 2019 to 2022. By honouring "profound ties of history and friendship with the people of Hong Kong", Johnson welcomes Hongkongers escaping totalitarian repression. Instead of othering Hong Kong Chinese, Johnson creates a sense of communality with the people of Hong Kong. According to Flowerdew (2004b), "leaders need to discursively construct a

set of values which they can share with their constituents” (p. 1563). Rather than presupposing that Hong Kong Chinese are a “people with a different culture”, Johnson frames freedom and autonomy as shared values between Britain and Hong Kong, invoking their “profound ties of history and friendship” as common ground. Forty years after the 1981 Act, this ideological change in the British position represents a remarkable turnaround, and Hongkongers are now made to feel welcomed to make their home in the United Kingdom.

But to understand the changed position, we must explore the context in which the new BN(O) scheme was created. The Joint Declaration was signed between the United Kingdom and China because of a promise made by the Chinese government to preserve Hong Kong’s lifestyle for fifty years, in return for Britain forfeiting its legal right to sovereignty over Hong Kong (Chua, 1990). The National Security Law, however, is widely seen as a violation of that agreement. For instance, the Chinese-imposed National Security Law restricts many of the freedoms promised to Hong Kong and violates the autonomy of Hong Kong to legislate a security legislation on its own under the Basic Law. Setting aside the National Security Law, the Joint Declaration also promised Hong Kong would have the autonomy to elect its own government through popular elections. However, this promise has also been dishonoured by China. In times of political instability, sovereign states have a responsibility to facilitate the repatriation of their nationals residing abroad or stranded in foreign countries. In the context of the promulgation of the National Security Law, the United Kingdom obviously has a moral and legal responsibility to protect the BN(O)s, who are British nationals under political repression from another sovereign state.

Notwithstanding the responsibility Britain owes to Hongkongers, the BN(O) scheme offers the United Kingdom a potential strategy for overcoming an economic downturn. The United Kingdom has been struggling economically since Brexit. This struggle has been compounded by Covid-19 in the post-Brexit era. The BN(O) announcement was made during the pandemic. This article posits that while United Kingdom fulfils its responsibility to Hongkongers who are British nationals under its jurisdiction, the BN(O) scheme also facilitates economic recovery from the impacts of Brexit and Covid-19. This is achieved through the labour and skills that Hongkongers bring to the United Kingdom, and the minimisation of public expenditure due to the “no recourse to public funds” clause of the BNO visa. A Home Office estimate reveals the BN(O) policy will result in a Net Present Social Value of £2.65 billion (legislation.gov.uk, 2020). Furthermore, The Centre for Economics and Business Research estimates that BN(O)s could help boost the United Kingdom’s GDP by £12-40 billion (CEBR, 2020). BN(O)s and their dependents could bring highly positive impact to the United Kingdom for many generations to come.

## 6 The irony of Thatcher’s political miscalculation

The findings suggest the existence of a racial demarcation discourse embedded in the framework of the *British Nationality Act 1981* (UK). Thatcher played into the anxiety of the British public and persuaded her constituents to vote for the Conservative Party. While Thatcher disagreed with the extremist position of the National Front, she nevertheless acknowledged the problem discussed by the group. Thatcher discursively constructed the abstract idea of a “British nation with British characteristics” that excluded “people with a different culture”. Upon gaining power, the Conservative Party immediately worked to create the 1981 Act that further distanced the United Kingdom from any legal responsibility towards Hong Kong. Although the 1962 Act had already barred colonial citizens from an automatic right of entry to the United Kingdom, the creation of different tiers of British nationality through the 1981 Act ended the ambiguity of the definition of a British citizen.

BN(O) status was created to replace BDTC following the Sino-British Joint Declaration. The status granted Hong Kong Chinese a limited legal relationship with Britain beyond the transfer of sovereignty on July 1, 1997. However, the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre had brought anxiety to Hong Kong Chinese, who feared political instability ahead of the handover. The British government was again under pressure to offer British citizenship to Hong Kong Chinese. However, Thatcher stood firm on her grounds and instead only granted British citizenship to 50,000 Hong Kong elites and their dependents through the 1990 Act. The British Nationality Selection Scheme was created to prevent these elites from leaving Hong Kong rather than encourage emigration to Britain.

This article has argued that Thatcher had hoped these British-trained elites, particularly the senior civil servants, would maintain their loyalty to British values after the handover. It has argued that the British had hoped to extend British influence through custodians of the British character. This paper posits that Thatcher's awarding of British citizenship to a small section of Hong Kong's society was a political miscalculation of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) capacity for power and control. Beijing's hegemony turned the Hong Kong elites into pragmatists who quickly abandoned their ideological values and changed their political allegiance. Far from being custodians of the British character, the elites suppressed the very values Thatcher had hoped they would uphold. It has transpired in the post-handover era that the true custodians of these values are the ordinary Hongkongers whom Thatcher had deemed unworthy of British citizenship. This irony is manifested most prominently during the 2019 Hong Kong protests. Hong Kong's British-trained Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who was awarded British citizenship prior to the handover, was widely criticised for failing to uphold human rights. Conversely, the protesters, who do not possess British citizenship, were internationally regarded as upholding liberal values, such as universal suffrage and democracy. The protests led to the Chinese promulgation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong and subsequently the British government's BN(O) response.

According to Hong Kong's last governor Chris Patten, the British Nationality Selection Scheme has created an undesirable imbalance: the elites, and the underclass, in which the former persecutes the latter (Hong Kong Watch, 2022, [6:22]):

*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.*

As a former governor of Hong Kong who oversaw, in part, the British Nationality Selection Scheme, Chris Patten is a "primary definer" of the phenomenon. The term "primary definers" refers to official voices that possess the authority to generate meaning and establish definitions of particular situations (Flowerdew & Leong, 2007). The context of the above extract is a debate in the House of Lords on the expansion of the BN(O) scheme. Patten frames Carrie Lam and members of the police force as "quislings" for betraying the values they were entrusted to uphold. He contrasts the escape route available to elites with the inaccessibility of the BN(O) pathway for the "post-handover" generation. He proposes that the British government address this imbalance. His statement supposes that the protesters are part of the "post-handover" generation ("the ones who are being locked up, don't"), because those born after July 1, 1997, possess no form of British nationality. In this sense, the supposition functions as Patten's own implicit argumentative conclusion, rather than a presupposition shared with his audience. Unlike the British

citizenship granted to 225,000 individuals under the British Nationality Selection Scheme, BN(O) status could not be passed to descendants. As a “primary definer”, Patten’s words carried significant weight in the debate. Since 2022, the “post-handover” generation can independently apply for the BN(O) visa by proving a direct relationship with a BN(O) parent.

But Patten’s statement could also refer to another significant group of people. This group was born before the handover but did not take up the option of registering for BN(O) status. They no longer possess any form of British nationality after their BDTC lapsed on July 1, 1997. An estimated 2.9 million people (out of the 3.5 million former BDTCs) currently possess BN(O) status. This suggests that some 375,000 former BDTCs (excluding the 225,000 Hong Kong residents who received full British citizenship) are left out of British protection. Notwithstanding the expansion of the BN(O) scheme, the imbalance remains. This group may include dependents—children born between 1979 and 1997—whose parents registered for BN(O) status but did not subsequently include children born after their own registration, as well as individuals whose families chose not to register at all. Many likely saw no practical value in obtaining a BN(O) “travel document” at the time and are now left vulnerable, without any form of British protection against totalitarian repression.

## 7 Conclusion and recommendations

This critical discourse study has contributed to the historiography of British nationality classifications in Hong Kong by integrating critical historiography with discourse analysis. It has demonstrated how political discourse, particularly that of Margaret Thatcher, surrounding the *British Nationality Act 1981* (UK) and the British Nationality Selection Scheme, deployed strategies that reinforced hierarchical and exclusionary notions of belonging. By revealing the stratified social order produced through these policies, where elites were privileged and the broader Hong Kong population marginalised, the study shows how discourse can sustain structural inequalities. It argues that the recent BN(O) visa policy represents an attempt to redress this historical imbalance, both symbolically and materially.

This study argues that further action is required to protect vulnerable Hongkongers, particularly those who have fought for freedoms but remain excluded from the BN(O) scheme. The colonial-era elites selected under the British Nationality Selection Scheme were chosen on the assumption that they embodied British values such as freedom and democracy and would defend these ideals against totalitarian encroachment following the Chinese takeover. However, this assumption failed to account for the broader population of Hongkongers who continue to uphold these values despite being excluded from British citizenship, while some individuals granted British citizenship have since aligned themselves with the totalitarian party-state in Beijing, effectively functioning as quislings in service of a repressive regime that has violated its agreement with the United Kingdom. This irony calls into question the moral basis of the original selection criteria.

This paper therefore recommends that the British government revisit the British Nationality Selection Scheme and amend the *British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990* (UK) to remove its temporal and numerical restrictions. Such reform would enable the inclusion of Hongkongers who embody democratic values but were previously excluded by the discriminatory criteria of the Thatcher era. While the BN(O) visa scheme represents a significant step forward, it does not fully redress the structural injustices embedded in earlier nationality policies. Reinstating and expanding the Selection Scheme would offer a more comprehensive remedy and extend protection to those still vulnerable to political repression due to their ineligibility for the BN(O) pathway.

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