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Presupposition and Discursive Rearticulation in Postcolonial Political Discourse: The Case of Hong Kong's Electoral Reforms

Ka Hang Wong
PhD, University of Technology Sydney, Australia
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0558-7891
Email: kahang.a.wong@student.uts.edu.au

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ABSTRACT
Constitutional transitions involve not only the transfer of political sovereignty but also contestation over the meanings of political concepts. This article examines how presuppositional ambiguity contributed to competing interpretations of Hong Kong's constitutional development during and after the Sino-British transition. Drawing on critical discourse historiography (CDH), the study analyses three key expressions: "constituted by elections" in the Sino-British Joint Declaration, "ultimate aim" in relation to universal suffrage under the Basic Law, and "love the country and love Hong Kong" in post-handover political discourse. The analysis demonstrates that these expressions contained unstated assumptions regarding electoral legitimacy, constitutional authority, national identity, and political loyalty. While British interpretations were informed by liberal-democratic understandings of electoral representation and institutional development, Chinese interpretations reflected a different political framework in which sovereignty, constitutional order, and patriotism were understood through state authority. These competing presuppositions transformed apparently shared constitutional language into sites of political contestation. The article further argues that such linguistic contestations have material consequences. Through subsequent political and educational developments, including electoral reforms and citizenship education frameworks, the meanings of political belonging and legitimate participation were progressively redefined. By examining Hong Kong as a postcolonial case of contested interpretive authority, this study demonstrates how language functions as a mechanism through which sovereignty, identity, and political legitimacy are constructed and negotiated.
Keywords*: critical discourse historiography, presupposition, constitutional discourse*

INTRODUCTION

On the eve of Hong Kong's transfer to Chinese sovereignty, an extraordinary constitutional spectacle was unfolding. In 1996, while the elected Legislative Council continued to sit in Hong Kong under British administration, a "Provisional Legislative Council" was being established across the border in Shenzhen in preparation for the 1997 handover. If the transition had been intended to proceed through the "through train" arrangement, under which the existing legislature would continue into the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, why was an alternative legislature being assembled before the transfer of sovereignty?

The conventional explanation is that the "through train" collapsed because of Governor Chris Patten's electoral reforms, which Beijing argued had breached prior understandings of Hong Kong's constitutional transition. Yet this explanation raises an important question. Neither the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration nor the Basic Law explicitly sets out the detailed composition of the pre-1997 legislature or specifies which electoral reforms would, or would not, be compatible with the post-handover constitutional order. If those constitutional documents were intended to govern the transition, where did the legal basis for rejecting the elected 1995 Legislative Council lie?

This article revisits the language of the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA). It examines how constitutional language was deployed, interpreted, and contested during the final years of British rule. It argues that the apparent ambiguity of the transition framework was not merely a drafting feature but a discursive resource that enabled competing claims over constitutional legitimacy. The dispute over the "through train" was therefore not simply about electoral reform, but fundamentally about who possessed the authority to define the constitutional meaning of Hong Kong's transition.

As the thirtieth anniversary of Hong Kong's handover approaches, the constitutional questions that dominated the transition remain unsettled. The promise of a stable postcolonial constitutional order has instead been accompanied by recurring disputes over

political representation, electoral reform, and the meaning of "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong". Following the unsuccessful campaigns for universal suffrage in 2014 and the profound political changes that have reshaped the city since the 2019 protests, the United Kingdom introduced a bespoke migration pathway for British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status holders and their eligible family members. With around 5.4 million Hong Kong residents eligible to apply for the BN(O) visa, the scheme represents one of the largest nationality-based migration initiatives in modern British history. Whether viewed as a humanitarian commitment, a continuation of Britain's historical responsibilities, or a response to Hong Kong's changing political landscape, its very existence underscores a broader reality: three decades after the handover, the constitutional identity of Hong Kong remains a subject of enduring political contestation. This article argues that to understand why these questions persist, we must revisit the constitutional disputes that unfolded before July 1, 1997.

Scholarship on Hong Kong has consistently recognised discourse as a central arena in which political legitimacy, constitutional authority, and collective identity are constructed and contested. Within the tradition of CDA, the most sustained contribution has been made by John Flowerdew, whose work has traced the evolution of Hong Kong's political discourse from the late colonial era through the post-handover period. His research has examined the discursive construction of political values (Flowerdew, 1997), Chinese national identity (Flowerdew, 2004), patriotic narratives (Flowerdew & Leong, 2007), and the historical transformation of political identities through a critical discourse historiographical approach (Flowerdew, 2011). More recently, Flowerdew (2016, 2017) demonstrates how metaphors of conflict, confrontation, and warfare shaped competing understandings of identity during the 2014 Occupy Movement. Collectively, these studies show that constitutional and political struggles are not merely institutional disputes but are simultaneously contests over meaning, legitimacy, and belonging.

Building upon this foundation, subsequent studies have examined how different political actors mobilise discourse to construct competing visions of Hong Kong. Wang

(2017) demonstrates how official policy addresses discursively construct civic identity and desirable forms of citizenship, whereas Ng (2020) analyses the localisation of Beijing's political narratives within Hong Kong's public sphere. Beyond the territory itself, W. Tang (2014) illustrates how Hong Kong identity continues to be negotiated among diaspora communities. Although differing in their empirical focus, these studies converge in showing that language is instrumental in shaping political identities and competing conceptions of constitutional community.

Following the implementation of the National Security Law, scholarly attention has increasingly shifted towards the discursive construction of patriotism, sovereignty, and constitutional authority. Existing research has explored official narratives surrounding patriotism (Wong, 2025c), the representation of Hong Kong as an "internal affair" of the Chinese state (Wong, 2025b), and the linguistic strategies used to legitimise official interpretations of the 2019 protests (Wong, 2024). Comparative work has further examined how historical narratives underpin different approaches to speech regulation in Hong Kong and other liberal democracies (Wong, 2026d), while studies of protest slogans, political symbolism, and resistance discourse have highlighted the continuing contestation of Hong Kong's political identity (A. Tang, 2022; Leung, 2024; Wong, 2025a, 2025d; Iu, 2025a, 2025b). This literature demonstrates that discourse remains fundamental to understanding the ongoing negotiation of identity, sovereignty, and political authority in Hong Kong.

Despite the substantial body of scholarship examining Hong Kong's political discourse and constitutional development, the longer-term postcolonial implications of the constitutional transition warrant further examination. Flowerdew's work has made important contributions to understanding the discursive construction of Hong Kong's political identity, competing representations of its constitutional position during the transition to Chinese sovereignty, and the political developments surrounding the Umbrella Movement. Building on this scholarship, the present article revisits the constitutional assumptions embedded in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and subsequent

political discourse, with particular attention to how presupposition and lexical ambiguity accommodated competing interpretations of legislative continuity, political authority, and constitutional legitimacy. Its contribution lies in connecting these competing constitutional interpretations with their longer-term postcolonial consequences, particularly in light of the constitutional rupture of 2019–2020, the subsequent restructuring of Hong Kong's electoral system, and Britain's renewed political engagement through the BN(O) route. The article therefore extends existing historiographical discussions beyond the immediate circumstances of the handover and subsequent political movements to examine how unresolved constitutional expectations continued to shape the relationship between Hong Kong and its former colonial power. This broader perspective also raises questions about the enduring political responsibilities of former colonial powers following decolonisation, as illustrated by the Netherlands' 2026 apology to the Moluccan community for its treatment of Moluccans relocated to the Netherlands in 1951. The article addresses the following question: how did competing presuppositions and lexical ambiguities embedded in Hong Kong's constitutional transition shape the subsequent development of its political discourse, constitutional identity, and postcolonial relationship with Britain?

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design. Documentary analysis enables the systematic examination of institutional and policy texts as primary data sources, drawing directly on written records rather than elicited data such as interviews or surveys (Grant, 2018). This approach is particularly suited to studies of constitutional and policy discourse, where meaning is embedded in formal textual formulations and their institutional contexts.

The study forms part of a broader critical discourse historiographical (CDH) inquiry into the language of Hong Kong's constitutional transition. CDH, as developed in critical discourse studies, combines discourse-analytic techniques with attention to historical context in order to examine how institutional texts produce and stabilise meanings over

time (Flowerdew, 2017). In this framework, discourse is understood as a historically situated social practice through which assumptions about authority, governance, and legitimacy are constructed and circulated (Statham, 2022).

CDH is particularly appropriate for this study because its objective extends beyond examining how constitutional interpretations were articulated during Hong Kong's transition to Chinese sovereignty. It also investigates how assumptions embedded in the original constitutional settlement acquired significance through subsequent political developments and how these developments have reshaped the historical understanding of Hong Kong's decolonisation. The approach therefore provides a historiographical basis for connecting the language of the original constitutional settlement with its subsequent political consequences and the continuing questions of sovereignty and belonging that these developments raise.

Data Collection

The dataset consists of two principal constitutional documents governing Hong Kong's transition to Chinese sovereignty: (1) the Sino-British Joint Declaration and (2) the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The Basic Law incorporates key elements of the Joint Declaration into Hong Kong's post-handover constitutional order. These documents were selected through purposive sampling because they constitute the foundational constitutional framework governing the transition and provide the principal textual basis for examining competing interpretations of institutional continuity. Both texts were obtained from official government websites to ensure textual authenticity and reliability. To contextualise their interpretation and examine their subsequent political implications, the study also draws on relevant supplementary documentary sources, including official government statements, policy and constitutional documents, parliamentary debates, and educational policy frameworks. These materials provide historical and institutional context for tracing how competing constitutional interpretations were articulated, contested and reflected in subsequent political and institutional developments.

Following Flowerdew's (2017) approach to critical discourse historiography, this study adopts a historically situated, autoethnographic documentary approach. As a Hongkonger who experienced the political and constitutional developments examined in this research, the author draws on personal knowledge and recollections of the Sino-British negotiations, the 1997 handover, and subsequent political developments, including the introduction of the BN(O) route in 2021. This historical familiarity informed the identification of key phrases and passages in the constitutional documents for closer examination, particularly those containing implicit assumptions or allowing competing interpretations. Their significance was established through textual analysis, with interpretations assessed against the wording and historical context of the documents and corroborated through supplementary official texts and institutional records. Personal recollections therefore informed the researcher's engagement with the material, while the documentary record provided the evidential basis for the analysis.

Data Analysis

The analysis employs Critical Discourse Historiography (CDH) as an analytical framework to examine how constitutional meaning is constructed through language in historically specific contexts. Historical context occupies an important place within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as recognised by scholars such as Fairclough (2015) and Wodak and Fairclough (2010). Flowerdew's (2017) historiographical approach to discourse analysis, however, offers a distinctive methodological orientation by positioning Hong Kong's historical and political development at the centre of discourse analysis. Developed contemporaneously with Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), CDH differs in its analytical emphasis. Instead of drawing upon history principally to explain discourse, it examines discourse as a historiographical resource through which historical narratives are constructed, contested, and rewritten.

The focus of analysis is on discursive strategies through which institutional assumptions were embedded within constitutional wording. In particular, the study conducts a close textual analysis of presupposition and lexical ambiguity, with attention to

how key terms such as “elections” and modal constructions such as “ultimate aim” accommodated competing institutional interpretations. Presupposition refers to the implicit assumptions that speakers or writers make regarding what their audience is expected to already know, as well as the underlying conditions, concerns, or perceived problems that are presented as requiring attention (Flowerdew, 2004). Lexical ambiguity, by contrast, concerns the capacity of particular words or expressions to accommodate multiple interpretations depending on their linguistic and institutional context. These two analytical concepts are complementary: while presupposition reveals what constitutional wording treats as given, lexical ambiguity draws attention to the interpretative possibilities that remain within constitutional expressions. They enable an examination of how constitutional language articulates principles of governance while leaving their practical implementation open to contestation.

The analysis focuses on the linguistic properties of constitutional expressions and the assumptions and interpretative possibilities embedded within them. The study does not seek to provide a comprehensive explanation of the ideological, legal, or political interests underlying the respective positions of the British and Chinese governments. These interests are recognised as part of the wider historical context in which constitutional discourse was produced and interpreted. The analytical concern, however, is with how particular linguistic expressions encode implicit assumptions, leave aspects of constitutional arrangements underspecified, or accommodate different interpretations. Accordingly, the analysis distinguishes between assumptions that can be identified through textual and linguistic examination and broader political interpretations that require additional historical or institutional explanation. The latter are considered only insofar as they help contextualise the competing readings of the constitutional texts.

The analysis understands the documents as discursive artefacts that encode assumptions about legitimacy, authority, and institutional design. This approach allows for an examination of how constitutional texts function not only to describe political

arrangements, but also to shape the boundaries of what can be understood as legitimate forms of governance during the transition period.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

"Constituted by elections": Presupposition and Competing Electoral Imaginaries

A key formulation in the constitutional framework governing Hong Kong's transition is the reference to a legislature "constituted by elections". At first glance, this expression appears to establish a clear normative commitment to representative governance in the post-1997 order. However, a closer discourse analysis suggests that the phrase operates primarily through presupposition. It assumes elections as the foundational principle of legislative legitimacy, while leaving open critical questions regarding franchise design, institutional structure, and the temporal sequencing of political reform. Within the framework of Critical Discourse Historiography (CDH), this formulation can be understood as presupposing a shared but under-specified institutional category of "elections". By not defining what constitutes electoral legitimacy in operational terms, the constitutional texts stabilise agreement at the level of principle while deferring institutional detail. This creates a discursive space in which different political actors can project distinct institutional models onto the same constitutional signifier.

The absence of explicit specification regarding the scope of pre-1997 institutional reform in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law created a zone of constitutional ambiguity that required interpretation by the relevant political actors. Within this context, different interpretive assumptions emerged regarding the normative implications of textual silence. This ambiguity became particularly consequential during the final phase of British administration under the governorship of Chris Patten. The 1995 electoral reforms expanded elected elements within the Legislative Council framework, including widening the franchise base, lowering the voting age to 18, and broadening participation in selected functional and local-level electoral mechanisms (Flowerdew, 2016). From the perspective of the British administration, these reforms were consistent with a liberal-democratic presupposition of elections as a mechanism of progressive

enfranchisement and incremental expansion of political participation. Within this interpretive framework, electoral reform was understood as part of a gradual constitutional trajectory in which legitimacy was enhanced through broader inclusion and increased representativeness over time. The introduction of expanded electoral arrangements was therefore presented as compatible with the principle of a legislature "constituted by elections" under the forthcoming constitutional order.

From the perspective articulated in Chinese official discourse on the transition, the constitutional arrangement was understood as establishing a bounded framework for institutional continuity, in which major structural changes to the political system were expected to align with the agreed post-handover design of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. In this reading, the absence of explicit textual authorisation for substantial electoral restructuring prior to 1997 was interpreted not as an open licence for institutional redesign, but as an indication that such matters should be reserved for implementation within the post-1997 constitutional order. By contrast, the British administration's approach appears to have been informed by an alternative interpretive presupposition, under which the absence of express prohibition in the constitutional texts left scope for continued incremental reform during the remaining period of British governance. This produced divergent understandings of residual authority and constitutional temporality during the final phase of the transition.

The resulting disagreement therefore did not arise from contradictory textual provisions, but from competing assumptions about how constitutional silence should be interpreted within a transitional sovereignty framework. The Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, in this sense, did not resolve questions of institutional design in their entirety, but displaced them into the domain of interpretive practice, where they became subject to conflicting readings by the principal actors involved in the handover process. The disagreement over the scope of electoral reform can also be understood in light of fundamentally different conceptions of what constitutes a legitimate election. Within liberal-democratic constitutional traditions, elections are generally associated with open

political competition, broad electoral participation, and the possibility that governing authority may change through the ballot box. By contrast, the constitutional practice of the People's Republic of China has historically operated within a one-party political system in which electoral processes function within the overarching leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Consequently, while both constitutional traditions employ the same lexical item, they attach different institutional assumptions to that term.

This divergence became increasingly visible in later debates over Hong Kong's constitutional development. The controversy surrounding the proposed electoral reforms in 2014 demonstrated that disagreement was not whether elections should take place but centred on the institutional conditions under which elections could be regarded as satisfying the promise of representative government. Competing interpretations of candidate nomination, political competition, and constitutional authority reflected broader disagreements over the meaning of electoral legitimacy that had remained unresolved within the earlier constitutional texts (Flowerdew, 2017). The ambiguity surrounding the term "elections" in the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law thus created the conditions for subsequent conflicts over constitutional interpretation and democratic development.

"Ultimate aim": Temporal Indeterminacy and Competing Constitutional Imaginaries

A second key term in the constitutional discourse is the use of the adjective phrase "ultimate aim" in relation to the development of representative government in Hong Kong. By not specifying a fixed timetable or institutional sequence, the term introduces a teleological orientation toward an undefined end point of constitutional development. In this context, "ultimate aim" does not function as a temporal marker with a determinable horizon. Instead, it operates as a form of structured indeterminacy, signalling an intended direction of institutional evolution while deferring the question of timing and implementation.

The significance of this formulation lies in its capacity to sustain multiple and potentially incompatible interpretations of political time. On one reading, "ultimate aim" may be understood as implying gradual and incremental development toward expanded

electoral participation. On another, it may be interpreted as a conditional aspiration, contingent upon political stability and institutional readiness. Within the context of Hong Kong's transition, this temporal openness became a site of contestation. Competing actors could invoke the same term to justify different understandings of the pace, scope, and legitimacy of electoral reform. This ambiguity reflects the broader constitutional strategy of deferring institutional closure while maintaining agreement on general principles.

The strategic significance of the term "ultimate aim" lies in its temporal indeterminacy. Unlike constitutional provisions that prescribe implementation within a specified period, the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law do not attach any timetable to the anticipated development of representative government. The commitment is therefore expressed as an objective, leaving unresolved the question of when the constitutional endpoint should be regarded as having been reached. This indeterminacy permitted competing temporal interpretations of constitutional development. In British constitutional practice, political reform is often embedded within electoral cycles and fixed terms of office, creating expectations that governments should implement their policy programmes while they remain constitutionally responsible. Against this background, the expansion of electoral representation during the final years of British administration could be presented as a legitimate step in fulfilling the constitutional trajectory towards an elected legislature before the transfer of sovereignty.

By contrast, official political discourse in the People's Republic of China frequently employs long-horizon formulations to articulate state objectives. Expressions such as the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" are framed more as enduring national projects than commitments tied to immediate implementation. Where the Chinese authorities have intended constitutional reform to occur within a defined period, they have generally done so through explicit institutional decisions that specify a timetable. The 2007 decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, for example, identified 2017 as the earliest possible date for the election of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage, thereby replacing an open-ended aspiration with a defined constitutional schedule.

These contrasting examples illustrate different discursive approaches to constitutional time. The ambiguity of "ultimate aim" in the constitutional texts enabled both sides to project different temporal expectations onto the same commitment. For the British administration, the provision was compatible with continued democratic development before 1997; for the Chinese government, it remained an aspirational constitutional objective whose pace and implementation would be determined after the transfer of sovereignty. The constitutional language therefore functioned as a mechanism through which fundamentally different understandings of political time could coexist within a single legal text.

"Love the country and love Hong Kong": From Political Slogan to Discursive Constitutional Principle

A third dimension of constitutional discourse in Hong Kong concerns the emergence and institutionalisation of the principle commonly expressed as "愛國愛港" ("love the country and love Hong Kong"). Unlike references to elections or temporal development, this formulation does not appear in either the Sino-British Joint Declaration or the Basic Law. It therefore originates outside the formal constitutional texts governing Hong Kong's post-1997 order and functions initially as a political norm.

The phrase can be traced to early political discourse associated with statements made by Deng Xiaoping in 1984, in which loyalty to the state and commitment to Hong Kong's stability were articulated as expectations surrounding the handover arrangement (Wong, 2025c). At that stage, the expression operated primarily as a normative discourse, circulating as part of the broader political framing of the transition. Over time, however, this discourse increasingly acquired interpretive force within official political and administrative settings. This development is significant because it demonstrates how extra-textual political language can gradually become embedded within constitutional interpretation through repetition, institutional uptake, and administrative practice (Flowerdew, 2004). In this sense, 愛國愛港 functions as an example of discursive

constitutionalisation, whereby the repetition of a political slogan becomes progressively relevant to the definition of legitimate political participation without formal incorporation into the constitutional text.

Although the Sino-British Joint Declaration establishes that Hong Kong would become a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997, neither the Joint Declaration nor the Basic Law defines patriotism or specifies what it means to "love the country" within Hong Kong's post-handover constitutional order. While the constitutional referent of "the country" is established through the transfer of sovereignty, the political and normative obligations associated with loving that country are left unspecified. The expression consequently relies upon assumptions that extend beyond the constitutional text itself, treating a particular understanding of patriotism as self-evident.

This presupposition cannot simply be taken for granted, however. Hong Kong possesses a distinct constitutional identity under British administration, and residents still maintain legal and civic ties to the United Kingdom through various forms of British nationality, including BN(O) status. Within this historical context, the constitutional documents themselves do not explicitly require that political identity or civic attachment be exclusively oriented towards the People's Republic of China. Consequently, subsequent official discourse surrounding **愛國愛港** performs an important interpretive function by discursively fixing "the country" as referring to the People's Republic of China instead of leaving its referent open to constitutional or historical interpretation.

The term "love" in the expression **愛國愛港** similarly functions as a presuppositional category. It presupposes a particular orientation towards the state and the nature of civic responsibility. Within official discourse, this presupposition has increasingly been articulated in terms of political loyalty, constitutional fidelity, and support for the constitutional order under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. By contrast, within the liberal-democratic political traditions in Hong Kong, love of one's country is commonly understood as compatible with critical engagement, including the right to

question, scrutinise, and oppose governmental policies while remaining committed to the nation itself. The coexistence of these competing interpretations demonstrates that "love" is not a fixed semantic category but a contested presupposition through which political legitimacy, citizenship, and constitutional identity are discursively constructed and negotiated.

The increasing prominence of this interpretive framework had important implications for the 2014 electoral reform debate and the emergence of the Umbrella Movement (Flowerdew, 2017). Although the constitutional language continued to affirm the principle of "universal suffrage", disagreements emerged over nomination procedures and the conditions under which electoral participation could be considered meaningful. Official discourse associated legitimate participation with alignment to the constitutional order and its governing principles, whereas pro-democracy actors emphasised a procedural conception of universal suffrage grounded in open electoral competition. These competing frameworks did not arise suddenly in 2014 but reflected earlier ambiguities in the constitutional texts regarding elections and political development.

The Umbrella Movement can therefore be understood not as an isolated rupture, but as a reactivation of unresolved constitutional ambiguities. The tensions surrounding the ambiguities embedded in the foundational texts re-emerged as a visible conflict over the boundaries of representation. The movement thus illustrates how earlier discursive structures continue to shape later political contestation through the persistence of competing interpretive frameworks. This process became more pronounced in the post-2019 period, when debates over electoral reform intensified questions concerning the relationship between political eligibility and institutional legitimacy. In official discourse, the notion of 愛國者治港 ("patriots governing Hong Kong") was increasingly articulated as an interpretive framework for assessing participation in governance (Wong, 2025c). While not explicitly derived from the Sino-British Joint Declaration or the Basic Law, this

framework introduced an additional discursive layer through which political actors and institutions were evaluated.

This development may also be understood in relation to the Basic Law's principle of港人治港 ("Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong"). While the Basic Law affirms that Hong Kong should be administered by its own permanent residents under a high degree of autonomy, it does not itself define "Hong Kong people" in ideological or political terms, nor does it expressly prescribe patriotism as a qualification for political participation. At the time of the constitutional transition, the expression therefore operated through the presupposition that the political community of Hong Kong itself would constitute the primary basis of governance. This illustrates how later political discourse supplied normative criteria that were not explicitly articulated in the constitutional text, thereby reshaping the discursive boundaries of political legitimacy and participation.

The political significance of 愛國愛港 extends beyond electoral discourse to the construction of national identity and political belonging. The expression establishes an expectation that loyalty to the Chinese nation and attachment to Hong Kong should constitute compatible and complementary forms of political identification. This normative expectation has become particularly prominent in official educational discourse following 2019. Successive curriculum documents, including the revised Citizenship and Social Development curriculum, the National Security Education Curriculum Framework, and the Values Education Curriculum Framework, repeatedly emphasise that Hong Kong is an "inalienable" part of the People's Republic of China and that national identity should be cultivated through schooling (Wong, 2026a, 2026c).

Viewed through the lens of presupposition, 愛國愛港 carries an underlying assumption that Hong Kong's political identity should be understood within the framework of Chinese national belonging. The repeated articulation of Hong Kong's inalienable relationship with the People's Republic of China in educational policy further reinforces this understanding as an established constitutional and national premise. These curricular

texts therefore illustrate how official discourse seeks to reproduce and stabilise particular understandings of national identity, patriotism, and citizenship through education. In this context, 愛國愛港 functions not merely as a political slogan, but as a normative framework through which official discourse defines the relationship between national allegiance, Hong Kong identity, and legitimate political belonging.

The presupposition surrounding the meaning of "love" also contributes to the emergence of a more structured discursive opposition in official political discourse. Political positions that emphasise alternative constitutional arrangements or contestations of electoral legitimacy are frequently positioned in contrast to this normative ideal of patriotism (Wong, 2025c). This implies the gradual formation of a polarised interpretive field in which "patriotism" operates as a benchmark of political legitimacy. In this process, opposing positions are framed within a contrasting interpretive category often associated in official discourse with being outside or opposed to the national political community.

This process of discursive differentiation is reflected in oppositional political discourse. Protest slogans such as "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" and the emergence of the protest anthem "Glory to Hong Kong" articulate alternative understandings of political community, constitutional identity, and civic belonging that differ from those advanced in official discourse (Iu, 2025a, 2025b; Wong, 2025a, 2025d). These expressions foreground values such as freedom, democracy, autonomy, and the preservation of Hong Kong's distinct British civic identity. These competing symbolic texts illustrate that political legitimacy is being constructed through rival interpretive frameworks in place of a universally shared understanding of patriotism.

The subsequent criminalisation of certain protest slogans and symbolic expressions further illustrates the political consequences of these competing constructions. In this sense, official and oppositional discourses do not merely communicate competing political preferences; they advance fundamentally different presuppositions regarding the relationship between sovereignty, patriotism, and the political community.

Sovereignty Transition and Shifts in Interpretive Authority

The findings of this study suggest that changes in sovereignty are accompanied by shifts in the interpretive authority over key political and constitutional signifiers. In the case of Hong Kong, the transition from British to Chinese sovereignty did not merely involve institutional restructuring, but also a reconfiguration of the discursive frameworks through which concepts such as "elections", "ultimate aim", and "patriotism" were understood. Sovereignty change can thus be understood as a process through which the authority to stabilise or redefine political meaning is progressively transferred and renegotiated across institutional contexts.

Within this process, ambiguity in constitutional language plays a central role. The Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law provide shared signifiers but do not fully stabilise their institutional meanings, thereby enabling competing interpretive frameworks to emerge. These competing frameworks are not merely linguistic disagreements; they reflect different assumptions about constitutional temporality, political legitimacy, and the boundaries of permissible institutional change. As a result, discourse becomes a site through which sovereignty is not only exercised but also continuously interpreted and contested.

More significantly, these linguistic and interpretive contestations have concrete political consequences. Over time, efforts to stabilise or close interpretive ambiguity within Hong Kong's constitutional order have been accompanied by increasing institutional regulation of political participation and identity. Such developments can be understood as attempts to reduce discursive indeterminacy by linking key political concepts—particularly those related to patriotism and constitutional allegiance—to specific criteria of political legitimacy. This process reflects a broader tendency in transitional sovereignty contexts for interpretive plurality to give way to more consolidated frameworks of meaning.

At the same time, shifts in interpretive authority have also influenced external political narratives. The failure to achieve the five demands of the 2019 protests, including universal suffrage, marked a turning point in Hong Kong's political development. It was

followed by the imposition of the National Security Law and a renewed British discourse of historical responsibility in response to China's violation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. In the British context, evolving policy discourse on Hong Kong has increasingly drawn on retrospective framings of shared values, historical responsibility, and institutional continuity (Wong, 2026b; Yu, 2022, 2023). This is particularly visible in policy discussions surrounding the extension of mobility pathways for holders of BN(O) status, where historical constitutional relationships are re-articulated as grounds for contemporary political and moral responsibility. Such re-narrations illustrate how post-sovereignty relationships are often re-signified through the language of continuity, friendship, and obligation, even after formal constitutional authority has ended.

A further illustration of presuppositional contestation can be observed in diplomatic responses to the United Kingdom's extension of rights to BN(O) holders. During parliamentary debate, the Chinese ambassador urged British politicians to "regard Hong Kong as a part of China, not as a part of the UK" ("Hong Kong protests: UK should not interfere, says Chinese Ambassador", 2019, para. 11). This statement rests upon a presupposition that territorial sovereignty alone determines the appropriate framework through which Hong Kong should be understood. Within this interpretive framework, Hong Kong is treated exclusively as a territorial component of the People's Republic of China, and any alternative basis for British engagement is rendered illegitimate. However, the British debate concerned not territorial sovereignty but the legal and historical relationship between the United Kingdom and holders of BN(O) status arising from the constitutional arrangements established before 1997. By foregrounding territorial sovereignty while backgrounding questions of nationality, historical obligation, and constitutional responsibility, the ambassador's statement shifts the interpretive frame of the debate. The result is a form of presuppositional manipulation in which two distinct relationships—territorial jurisdiction over Hong Kong and the United Kingdom's continuing relationship with BN(O) status holders—are conflated into a single proposition, thereby narrowing the range of legitimate interpretations available within public discourse.

Comparable discursive patterns can be observed in other post-imperial contexts, where former colonial powers later reinterpret relationships with displaced communities through narratives of historical responsibility and renewed solidarity. A relevant parallel can be found in the trajectory of the Republic of South Moluccas (RMS), where approximately 12,500 Moluccan soldiers and their families were relocated to the Netherlands following the collapse of the RMS movement in Indonesia (Steijlen, 2012). For many RMS supporters, this displacement was connected to the perceived failure to realise earlier political expectations concerning Moluccan self-determination. Decades later, Dutch political discourse reframed the relationship through narratives of recognition, responsibility, and reconciliation, culminating in formal acknowledgement of historical injustices.

The Dutch government's 2026 apology to the Moluccan community illustrates how former imperial powers may retrospectively reconstruct relationships shaped by sovereignty transition and unresolved political expectations. In his speech at the National Moluccan Monument Ulu Kora, Prime Minister Rob Jetten acknowledged the state's failures in the treatment of the first-generation Moluccan community, framing the apology through narratives of recognition, responsibility, and historical justice (Jetten, 2026). Although the RMS and Hong Kong cases differ in their historical and constitutional circumstances, both illustrate how broken political expectations arising from sovereignty transitions can generate new discourses of obligation between former imperial powers and affected communities.

These developments suggest that constitutional transitions are not only legal or institutional events, but also discursive processes in which the meanings of political concepts are continuously renegotiated. The RMS case demonstrates how concepts such as "independence" and "self-determination" may become sites of contestation during periods of decolonisation, as different political actors attach competing meanings to the legitimate boundaries of sovereignty and political community. Whereas Indonesian nationalism interpreted independence as the establishment of a unified sovereign state following

colonial rule, RMS supporters understood self-determination as extending to the creation of a separate political entity.

Similarly in Hong Kong, the principle of "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" was interpreted by some political actors as embodying a form of political self-determination and the right of Hong Kong society to determine its own political future. This interpretation was reflected in the emergence of political movements advocating greater autonomy and, in some cases, alternative constitutional possibilities. The electoral success of groups such as Demosistō in 2016 before the disqualification of legislators in 2017 demonstrates that such interpretations had previously gained visibility within Hong Kong's electoral system following the Umbrella Movement. The subsequent exclusion of these positions reflected a narrowing of the permissible meanings attached to autonomy, self-governance, and constitutional identity. In both the RMS and Hong Kong cases, therefore, political conflict emerged not only from institutional arrangements themselves, but from competing interpretations of the concepts through which those arrangements were legitimised.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article has examined how constitutional ambiguity can become a site of discursive contestation during periods of sovereignty transition. Through a critical discourse historiographical analysis of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law of Hong Kong, the study has demonstrated that key constitutional expressions, including "constituted by elections" and "ultimate aim", were not accompanied by sufficiently stable presuppositions shared by the principal actors. These expressions became subject to competing interpretations shaped by different political traditions and understandings of constitutional authority. The analysis further demonstrates that the subsequent emergence of the political slogan 愛國愛港 ("love the country and love Hong Kong") introduced an additional normative layer of political discourse that was not explicitly articulated in the constitutional texts, but which increasingly shaped official understandings of patriotism, political legitimacy, and civic participation. The findings therefore suggest that

constitutional transitions involve not only the transfer of legal sovereignty, but also the transfer and contestation of interpretive authority over fundamental political concepts.

The analysis further demonstrates that these discursive contestations are not merely linguistic phenomena. Divergent understandings of constitutional language have significant institutional and political consequences, influencing electoral development, the construction of political legitimacy, and competing conceptions of citizenship and national belonging. The Hong Kong case therefore illustrates how ambiguity within foundational constitutional texts may generate long-term political contestation when shared presuppositions concerning key political concepts are absent.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how presuppositional instability and interpretative openness within constitutional discourse can provide resources for competing claims to interpretive authority. The findings highlight the importance of examining not only how constitutional language reflects existing political differences, but also how implicit assumptions and unresolved meanings within foundational texts become consequential through subsequent political and institutional developments. The study therefore offers an analytical perspective for examining the relationship between constitutional language, interpretive authority, and the historical construction of political legitimacy during sovereignty transitions.

Beyond Hong Kong, these findings have broader relevance for the study of postcolonial transitions. Similar questions of political identity, historical responsibility, and post-imperial belonging continue to arise in contexts involving displaced or stateless political communities such as the Republic of the South Moluccas (RMS). Although these cases differ considerably in their historical trajectories, they illustrate how the end of formal colonial rule does not necessarily resolve questions of constitutional identity or political community. Former colonial powers sometimes reconstruct their relationships with former colonial populations through migration schemes, nationality laws, or official acknowledgements of historical responsibility. These responses differ in scope and

motivation, but they suggest that decolonisation may generate enduring constitutional, political, and moral relationships rather than a complete severance of ties. Such questions may continue to evolve through competing discourses of sovereignty, citizenship, and historical responsibility.

Future research should examine how postcolonial constitutional relationships may require a broader reconceptualisation of sovereignty in the contemporary international order. The analytical approach adopted in this study may also inform research into other postcolonial constitutional disputes, particularly where competing historical narratives, implicit assumptions in constitutional texts, and contested interpretations of political authority shape questions of sovereignty, national identity, and electoral legitimacy. The Hong Kong experience demonstrates that sovereignty, territorial jurisdiction, and political belonging do not always remain aligned: individuals may reside within the territory of one sovereign state while maintaining legal, historical, and constitutional affiliations with a former sovereign. This raises questions about whether existing models of sovereignty are sufficient to address communities whose constitutional identities and democratic aspirations extend beyond territorial boundaries. One possible avenue for future research would be to explore whether host states could facilitate democratically elected representative institutions in exile, enabling displaced political communities to preserve constitutional continuity, democratic participation, and civic identity without challenging the territorial sovereignty of the state exercising effective jurisdiction. Such developments may point towards an emerging realignment of sovereignty in which political representation and constitutional belonging are no longer understood as being exclusively determined by territorial control but may also reflect enduring historical and constitutional relationships across borders.

AI Declaration

The author declares that ChatGPT was used only as assistive instruments during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, ChatGPT was used to support language clarity,

grammar, and formatting. ChatGPT did not generate, fabricate, or manipulate research data, analysis, interpretations, or references. All ChatGPT-generated outputs were carefully reviewed, verified, and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript. This use of ChatGPT complies with the Publication Ethics Statement of the Journal of Linguistics, Culture, and Communication.

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