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Abstract

How do people emotionally imagine political others and the competing sovereignty claims they represent, and how are these imaginaries tied to different visions of the collective “us”? Drawing on 93 interviews with Chinese college students in China and the United States between 2019 and 2021, this study examines how Chinese youth’s visions of China’s future organize their emotional responses to Hong Kong and Taiwan. We develop a typology along two dimensions: visions of China’s future (stronger versus freer) and the perceived significance of Hong Kong and Taiwan for that future. A stronger-China vision paired with high perceived significance produces *nationalist defensiveness*, which frames sovereignty in terms of national dignity, security, and the unfinished project of national strengthening. A freer-China vision paired with high perceived significance yields *admiration* and identification with democratic freedoms. Among students who attach less significance to Hong Kong and Taiwan or regard them as given, a stronger-China vision often appears as *apathy*, whereas a freer-China vision more often generates *envy* or *ambivalence*. These orientations are further informed by social positions, out-group interaction, and access to alternative information, which can either reinforce existing visions of “us” or unsettle perceptions of “them.” By foregrounding the interplay between imagined futures of “us” and emotional evaluations of “them,” this study shows how sovereignty debates are mediated through everyday

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emotions and national imaginaries, bridging research on state narratives and public opinion on territorial sovereignty.

Keywords

Chinese youth, emotions, Hong Kong, nationalism, political imaginaries, sovereignty, Taiwan

Introduction

How do people emotionally imagine political others and the legitimacy of competing sovereignty claims, and how are these imaginaries tied to different visions of the collective “us”? Citizens’ orientations toward sovereignty conflicts are rarely expressed as direct positions on war or peace. Rather, they are embedded in emotions and everyday discourses about national belonging, moral boundaries, and collective futures (Goodwin and Jasper, 2006; Goodwin et al., 2001; Jasper, 2018). Emotions help organize political perception, inform judgment, shape identity, and motivate action (Stets, 2005; Thoits, 1989; Turner and Stets, 2006). Examining how ordinary people interpret contested others thus offers a window into the affective and interpretive foundations through which competing sovereignty claims become meaningful, persuasive, or troubling.

Scholarship in the cultural sociology of war and conflict has shown how nationalism draws symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them,” casting political others as threats to sacred national honor and framing the defense of the collective as morally necessary (Alexander, 2006; Malesevic, 2013; Smith, 2010a; Smith, 2010b). Studies of Chinese nationalism and public opinion further show that these boundaries are plural, fluid, and context-dependent, varying across state projects, popular dynamics, transnational pressures, media environments, social positions, and political contexts (Callahan, 2005; Carlson, 2009; Davies et al., 2023; Liu and Li, 2024; Weiss, 2019; Zhao, 2000). Building on this work, this study highlights how competing visions of China’s future organize young people’s emotional orientations toward Hong Kong and Taiwan as sites of contested sovereignty. Instead of treating responses to Hong Kong and Taiwan as direct expressions of fixed national categories, we examine how young people evaluate political others in relation to what they imagine the collective “us” is and should become.

Drawing on 93 interviews with Chinese college students in China and the United States, this study examines how mainland Chinese youth emotionally imagine Hong Kong and Taiwan, and how those views are linked to competing visions of China’s future. Hong Kong and Taiwan are analytically useful cases because interviewees widely understand them as culturally close to the mainland yet politically distinct. In official discourse, both are framed as sharing historical and cultural roots with China (Hurst, 2024), even as they have followed different political trajectories marked by colonial legacies, divergent governance structures, and competing claims over autonomy and sovereignty. Hong Kong’s 1997 return under “One Country, Two Systems” continues to fuel debates over sovereignty, historical redemption, and political legitimacy (Hung, 2022). Taiwan, as a self-governing democracy claimed by Beijing, occupies a more explicitly geopolitical position in relation to regional security and US–China rivalry

(Hurst, 2024; Nachman, 2025). We acknowledge that Hong Kong and Taiwan are analytically distinct cases, with fundamentally different political and legal positions vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China (PRC). We study them in tandem, however, because mainland Chinese youth often discuss them under the colloquial category *gangtai wenti* (the Hong Kong–Taiwan issue), and because both serve as politically salient reference points through which young people imagine China's future.

Focusing on mainland youth is meaningful because, as a digitally engaged generation, they are central to contemporary nationalist debates (Li, 2015; Liu, 2012) and to the contested public sphere where sovereignty issues circulate (Lei, 2017; Xu, 2022; Yang, 2009). Yet existing findings remain unsettled: some studies identify hawkish or chauvinistic positions among younger cohorts who came of age under intensified patriotic education and tightened information control (Davies et al., 2023; Weiss, 2019; Zhao, 2021), while others find considerable variation by social position, gender, information access, and exposure to alternative perspectives (Chen, 2026; Guo, 2026; Pan and Xu, 2018; Zhong and Hwang, 2020). Still, research also shows a weaker sense of social inequality and unfairness among Chinese youth compared with older cohorts (Tang and Fan, 2026). Studying their views, therefore, reveals both the efficacy and limits of state mobilization and the conditions under which official narratives are embraced or resisted.

Our findings identify four broad emotional orientations: nationalist defensiveness, admiration, envy or ambivalence, and apathy or disengagement. We organize these orientations along two analytic dimensions: visions of China's future, ranging from a stronger China to a freer China, and the perceived significance of Hong Kong and Taiwan. These orientations are ideal types rather than deterministic categories. The interviews suggest that students' social positions, out-group interactions, and information access condition how these orientations become salient, but we do not treat these factors as causal predictors of individual placement.

This study contributes to the cultural sociology of conflict by specifying an important mechanism behind the internal variation in nationalist sentiment. While prior scholarship has already established that Chinese nationalism is heterogeneous and contested, we show more precisely that competing visions of China's future structure emotional responses to sovereignty disputes by linking judgments of "them" to imagined futures of "us." In this way, the study connects macro-level state narratives with the micro-level interpretive work through which ordinary people emotionally negotiate national belonging and political differences.

The article proceeds with a literature review on the cultural sociology of conflict, emotions, and boundary-making, then situates Hong Kong and Taiwan within competing visions of China and a contested public sphere. We then outline the research design and present our empirical findings. The article concludes by showing how nationalism can potentially be transformed from within and from the ground up, depending on how youths imagine the future of their nation.

Binary Codes, Emotions, and Nationalist Boundary-Making

How do societies imagine potential adversaries and justify conflict? Existing scholarship has identified a wide range of forces behind military confrontation, including economic

gains, political consolidation, geopolitical strategy, military defense, and ideological ambitions (see Mann, 2023). Political scientists commonly emphasize long-term interstate relationships, short-term elite decision-making, or domestic power struggles (see Wimmer, 2014), whereas comparative-historical sociologists highlight how war itself leads to modern states by enhancing capacities for taxation, territory and population management, and citizenship development (Centeno and Enriquez, 2016; Mann, 2023; Tilly, 1975). Yet conflict is not only shaped by institutions or elites. It also depends on how ordinary people interpret political antagonists and draw boundaries between “us” and “them.”

One influential framework for understanding such boundary-making is Jeffrey C Alexander’s Civil Sphere Theory. Alexander (2006) argues that democratic societies make sense of political life through autonomous binary codes that divide actors, motives, and institutions into the “sacred” (civil) and the “profane” (anti-civil). The “Discourse of Liberty” celebrates traits deemed essential for democracy, such as rationality, autonomy, calmness, openness, and rule of law, whereas the “Discourse of Repression” stigmatizes traits deemed dangerous to society, such as irrationality, hysteria, dependence, deceit, and arbitrary power (Alexander, 2006; Alexander et al., 2020). These symbolic oppositions help structure who is imagined as legitimate, trustworthy, and worthy of solidarity, and who is viewed as dangerous, polluted, or beyond the moral community.

Emotions are central to this process. They are the affective means through which such codes become meaningful and politically powerful. Emotions inform attitudes, motivate action, and shape how people respond to threats and moral claims (Stets, 2005; Thoits, 1989; Turner and Stets, 2006). They also serve as an “affective glue” that binds citizens to values, institutions, and collective identities (Marcus, 2000; Shah, 2024). Some emotions, such as moral outrage, anger, and hope, can fuel mobilization and civil repair (Goodwin and Jasper, 2006; Goodwin et al., 2001; Jasper, 2018). Others, including fear, anxiety, and resentment, can be mobilized to fracture solidarity and sharpen boundaries between a pure “we” and a threatening “they” (Marcus, 2000; Shah, 2024). Populist politics often works precisely like this by translating social and economic grievances into visceral anger that deepens polarization (e.g. Vasilopoulos et al., 2019).

Nationalism appropriates these broader civil binaries and applies them to specific territorial, ethnic, or political boundaries, continually defining who deserves inclusion and solidarity, and who must be excluded or defeated (Alexander, 2006; Alexander et al., 2020; Brubaker, 1996). When nationalist discourse successfully codes a domestic minority or a foreign rival as “profane,” “irrational,” or “dangerous,” it activates powerful mobilizing emotions such as fear, disgust, moral outrage, and righteous anger (Alexander, 2006; Smith, 2010b; Yazdih and Boen, 2025). Conversely, assigning “sacred” status to the nation’s symbols, leaders, culture, or history generates feelings of dignity, pride, and hope (Greenfeld, 2019; Wimmer, 2014). Nationalism also relies on kinship metaphors such as “motherland” and “brothers in arms” to produce loyalty and emotional attachment to the otherwise abstract and bureaucratic entity of the nation-state (Malesevic, 2013; Smith, 2010a).

These dynamics become especially consequential in moments of perceived threat. Emotional reactions are channeled through binary codes to identify who belongs to the pure in-group and who represents the polluted out-group. For example, Philip Smith

(2010b) shows how wars are legitimized through “narrative inflation,” a process by which mundane or localized disputes are elevated into apocalyptic struggles between good and evil. In this apocalyptic narrative, the enemy is inscribed with the anti-civil “Discourse of Repression,” portrayed as mad, secretive, dictatorial, and deceitful, while the home nation is aligned with the civil “Discourse of Liberty” (Smith, 2010b). These stark moral binaries generate the terror, pity, and righteous anger needed to persuade populations to accept the enormous sacrifice and disruption that war requires (Alexander, 2006; Smith, 2010b). Contemporary Chinese state nationalism adapts these civil-sphere binaries by intertwining sacred–profane codes with the historical narrative of the “Century of Humiliation” (Gries, 2004; Wang, 2014). In this framework, loyalty, national unity, and ethnic kinship are coded as pure and sacred, while secessionism, foreign alignment, and disloyalty are coded as polluted, profane, and dangerous (Carrico, 2022; Zhao, 2021). Hong Kong and Taiwan thus become key boundary-defining cases, which the next section examines in greater detail.

While insightful, this scholarship leaves two gaps. First, it often remains at the level of macro narratives and state discourse, giving us less purchase on how ordinary people emotionally interpret sovereignty disputes in everyday life. We know far more about how elites frame political others than about how citizens absorb, revise, or distance themselves from these framings through their own experiences, social positions, and interpersonal encounters. This is especially important for people who have directly interacted with politically stigmatized or “polluted” out-groups, or who have themselves experienced exclusion, marginalization, or restricted rights.

Second, while scholarship increasingly recognizes that nationalist boundaries are plural, fluid, and contested (Callahan, 2005; Carlson, 2009; Zhao, 2000), it has paid less attention to what organizes this variation in people’s everyday emotional responses and interpretations. We argue that competing visions of the collective future structure how people emotionally evaluate political others. Individuals do not simply classify “them” through fixed national categories. They do so in relation to what they want “us” to become. Different imagined futures for China generate different emotional responses to Hong Kong and Taiwan, while encounters with Hong Kong and Taiwan can sharpen, unsettle, or redirect those visions. This study also contributes to research on emotions and politics by highlighting admiration and envy as neglected but consequential affective states. Beyond anger, fear, or pride, these emotions show how comparison with culturally proximate but politically distinct others can produce aspiration, self-doubt, and attraction to alternative political futures.

Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Visions of China

Hong Kong and Taiwan occupy fundamentally different political and legal positions in relation to PRC, yet both function as critical sites where Chinese sovereignty is performed and contested. Hong Kong, a former British colony, was returned to PRC sovereignty in 1997 under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, an arrangement designed to integrate the territory’s distinct colonial legal system and liberal-civic identity into the national body (Hung, 2022). This legal pluralism was substantially reconfigured following the 2019–2020 protests,¹ which Beijing interpreted as an existential

challenge to sovereign authority. The subsequent imposition of the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020 marked a “sovereign turn,” initiating a fundamental transformation of political culture that moved the city away from its tradition of civil contestation toward a model of state-led patriotic alignment. This shift underscores a broader effort to synchronize Hong Kong’s social and cultural identity with the PRC’s national security imperatives (Hung, 2022; Ortmann et al., 2025).

Taiwan, by contrast, has evolved from a Japanese colony (1895–1945) and a post-1949 seat of the Republic of China (ROC) into a consolidated democracy (Rigger, 2011). The transition from decades of martial law to a vibrant multi-party system has fostered a distinct Taiwanese identity, shifting political cleavages from traditional party loyalty to foundational questions of territory and sovereignty (Nachman, 2025). While Taiwan functions as a *de facto* independent state with its own military and constitution, it has limited formal diplomatic recognition and is regarded by Beijing as an inalienable part of Chinese territory (Lin, 2022). Beijing has employed a range of hybrid influencing strategies towards Taiwan, including diplomatic measures, economic pressure, legal and information operations, and military signaling, while framing reunification as integral to national rejuvenation (West and Insisa, 2024; Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and State Council Information Office, 2022).

Cross-strait people-to-people exchange has also narrowed sharply since the mid-2010s. Mainland tourism to Taiwan was curtailed in 2019, educational exchange declined amid rising tensions, and travel to Hong Kong became politically charged after the 2019–2020 protests and further restricted during the pandemic (Cole, 2020; Hung, 2022). As a result, many mainland young people encounter Hong Kong and Taiwan primarily through mediated sources such as online discourse, news media, and popular culture, which shape how these places are understood and emotionally evaluated.

Despite their differences, mainland Chinese youth often discuss Hong Kong and Taiwan in tandem under the colloquial category *gangtai* (港台, short for “Hong Kong and Taiwan”). This usage crystallized during the reform era as popular culture from these regions circulated widely in the mainland, representing a shared “modern” and desirable Chineseness emanating from outside PRC borders (Gold, 1993). The category persists today as both a cultural shorthand and a political register, serving as an important anchor for how mainlanders imagine the geographic and moral boundaries of the nation (Shambaugh, 1995). Crucially, what *gangtai* signifies depends on which “prototype” of China is being invoked. The conceptualization of “China” has never been a static territorial project, but rather a shifting set of cultural and political prototypes that define the nation’s relation to the world (Tu, 1991). Hong Kong and Taiwan operate as liminal mirrors in which these prototypes are projected, contested, and revised.

Four prototypes recur in contemporary Chinese national thought. The first is a *universalist civilizational vision*, drawing on imperial-era frames such as *tianxia* (天下, “all under heaven”) and the self-image of China as a benevolent center that holds together a diverse periphery through cultural and ritual alignment rather than direct administrative control (Callahan, 2008; Zhao, 2000). In this view, Hong Kong and Taiwan figure as cultural bridges, distinct entities that can coexist within a pluralistic Chinese world. The second is a *modernizing vision* oriented toward democratic institutions and civic life, rooted in the 1920s New Culture Movement and its embrace of science and democracy,

recurring through the 1980s Cultural Fever and the growth of civil society activity in the early 2000s (Tu, 1991; Wang, 1996). Here, Hong Kong and Taiwan appear as laboratories of the future, societies that have already shown how Chinese culture can coexist with democratic institutions and that offer the mainland and other Asian countries possible models for their own development. The third is a *defensive sovereign-nation vision*, catalyzed by the experience of foreign domination during the so-called “Century of Humiliation,” in which China appears as a wounded nation that must reassert territorial and ideological unity against external interference (Gries, 2004; Wang, 2014). From this standpoint, the peripheries appear as unhealed wounds, and their distinct political systems read as threats to national integrity (Carrico, 2022). The fourth is a *resurgent global-power vision*, in which China’s rise is understood as the emergence of a new model of state-led modernization that offers an alternative to Western liberalism (Doshi, 2021). In this framing, Hong Kong and Taiwan are components to be integrated into a unified national project, with the balance tilted decisively toward “One Country” over “Two Systems.” These prototypes are not mutually exclusive, and many citizens hold them in combination, generating various emotional and evaluative orientations.

Survey research on Chinese youth has produced contested findings on these orientations. While Weiss (2019) finds younger cohorts to be increasingly hawkish, other studies question the consistency of age effects and document significant ambivalence among youth exposed to foreign media or alternative perspectives (Pan and Xu, 2018; Qi et al., 2023; Zhong and Hwang, 2020). Support for armed unification often declines once the potential costs and US involvement are made salient (Liu and Li, 2024; Qi et al., 2023). Furthermore, Chinese nationalism is not monolithic but consists of multiple, internally differentiated strands with varying political alignments (Chen, 2026; Guo, 2026; Pan and Xu, 2018; Zhong and Hwang, 2020). This literature suggests heterogeneity rather than a uniform youth nationalism, but it does not fully explain how factors like social position, media exposure, and interpersonal contact become meaningful in young people’s own accounts.

These orientations unfold within a grey-zoned media ecology that is vibrant, fragmented, and emotionally charged. Beyond official state media, this ecology includes state-aligned influencers, commercial nationalist accounts, and ostensibly independent online voices that amplify official narratives while appearing organic. Scholarship on the Chinese digital public sphere has long shown that digital platforms create constrained but consequential spaces for public expression, deliberation, and the circulation of contested opinions, often with strong emotional intensity (Yang, 2009). The rise of Weibo in the early 2010s and WeChat thereafter marked a decisive shift, transforming China’s media landscape and enabling new forms of public participation, mobilization, and contention at an unprecedented scale (Tong, 2015; Tu, 2016). Lei (2017) argues that authoritarian rule, media commercialization, and law have together produced an unintended contentious public sphere that sustains rights claims within constraint. Since 2013, information control and persuasive pro-state messaging have become more visible (Repnikova and Fang, 2018). Yet the diversity and contestability of Chinese online opinion remain evident across recent flashpoints, including debates over COVID policies (Lu et al., 2021) and the Russia–Ukraine war (Zhou and Repnikova, 2024). The Chinese information environment is thus internally differentiated rather than ideologically uniform, exposing young people to multiple, sometimes conflicting evaluative cues.

Building on these scholarships, this study examines how mainland Chinese youth emotionally imagine Hong Kong and Taiwan, and how these emotional evaluations of “them” are conditioned by competing visions of the collective “us.” It bridges research on state-sponsored narratives and public opinion by attending to the micro-level interpretive work through which people make sense of sovereignty debates and national belonging.

Data and Methods

This study draws on a larger project examining the political socialization of Chinese youth in transnational contexts. For this analysis, we focus on semi-structured interviews with 93 Chinese students enrolled at three comprehensive research universities—one in China and two in the United States—all highly selective institutions that attract academically high-achieving students from mainland China. All interviewees were born and raised in mainland China and pursued higher education either domestically or abroad.

Comparing China-based students with those studying in the United States helps illuminate how overseas education moderates or reinforces nationalism. While some scholars suggest that studying abroad fosters openness and internationalism (Guo, 2025; Han and Zweig, 2010), others argue it can strengthen nationalism through perceived exclusion or confrontation (Fan et al., 2020; Guo, 2026; Hail, 2015), or result in no significant attitudinal change (Wilson, 2016). By investigating these contexts comparatively, this study pinpoints precisely what aspects of overseas experience, such as out-group interaction and media consumption, reinforce or challenge alignment with official narratives.

Interviews were conducted by the first author between 2019 and 2021, a period that encompassed the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Law protests and Tsai Ing-wen’s 2020 re-election in Taiwan, with 33 interviews in China (2019–2020) and 60 in the United States (2019–2021). Each session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed and translated from Mandarin to English with assistance from trained undergraduate research assistants. To facilitate access, the first author collaborated with a student liaison at each site who helped recruit participants through online postings and personal referrals, using a snowball sampling strategy. The final sample was deliberately diverse in terms of gender, class background, media use, and political orientation. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1, and a complete list of participants is provided in the Appendix.

This study relies on interviews rather than media or discourse analysis because online content related to Hong Kong and Taiwan is heavily censored in China, reflecting state narratives rather than the everyday views of young people. In contrast, interviews capture students’ own interpretations and emotional responses, especially those studying abroad who have wider access to uncensored information and competing perspectives. Discussions of Hong Kong and Taiwan emerged organically as students reflected on questions of national identity and sovereignty. When these issues arose, the first author followed up with questions about their knowledge of the Hong Kong protests, their views on Taiwan’s political status, and their reasoning about why sovereignty matters. While not initially framed as a study of Hong Kong and Taiwan, the prominence of these topics

Table 1. Aggregate demographic information of interviewees.

Demographics	China-based students	USA-based students
Average age	21	21
Gender		
Female	16	39
Male	17	21
Year in college		
Freshman & sophomore	16	24
Junior & senior	17	32
Graduate	0	4
Major (minor not counted)		
Humanities	6	5
Social sciences	11	13
STEM*	16	32
Business	0	5
Undeclared	0	5
Social class		
Lower-middle & working class	16	0
Middle class	7	34
Upper & upper-middle class	10	26
Total	33	60

*STEM is science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

in students’ narratives prompted a necessary inquiry into how sovereignty, state legitimacy, and national identity are perceived.

Transcripts were analyzed in MAXQDA through an iterative coding process. The first author began with keyword searches for “Hong Kong” and “Taiwan” to isolate relevant segments, then conducted open coding to identify how respondents described the two regions, their people, and their relationship to mainland China. In the next stage, these coded passages were grouped into three broad orientations (i.e., positive, negative, and ambiguous) to capture the overall direction of respondents’ evaluations. Through repeated comparison within and across transcripts, four recurring emotions were then inductively identified: defensiveness, admiration, envy, and apathy. These emotions are best understood as analytic categories that capture recurrent emotional patterns in how respondents interpreted Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China’s future. The analysis also attended to recurring influences mentioned by respondents, especially lived experiences of discrimination or inequality, out-group interaction, and exposure to alternative information. We focus on these three influences because they appeared most frequently and consistently across cases during coding and have also been noted in prior research (e.g., Chen, 2026). We treat them as suggestive contextual conditions rather than causal predictors, and the study does not aim to predict individual placement from demographic variables such as class, gender, field of study, urban or rural origin, or prior political socialization.

Findings

The findings identify four emotional orientations through which Chinese youth interpret sovereignty issues involving Hong Kong and Taiwan: nationalist defensiveness, admiration, envy, and apathy. These orientations are organized by two intersecting dimensions: visions of China's future, ranging from a stronger China to a freer China, and the perceived significance of Hong Kong and Taiwan for that future (see Figure 1). We treat "stronger China" and "freer China" as analytic poles rather than mutually exclusive visions. A free China can also be a strong China, and some students combined elements of both. In today's China, however, "strength" carries specific meanings associated with national dignity, unity, security, development, and global standing, as captured in state narratives such as the "Chinese Dream" (Garlick and Bennett, 2018). "Freer China," by contrast, refers to a future organized around openness, civic agency, pluralism, and individual rights. In practice, one vision usually became more salient when students interpreted Hong Kong and Taiwan. Among students who saw these regions as highly significant, those who prioritized a stronger China tended toward nationalist defensiveness, while those who imagined a freer China were more likely to express admiration. Among students who attached less significance to Hong Kong and Taiwan or regarded them as given, a stronger-China vision often appeared as apathy, whereas a freer-China vision more often generated envy or ambivalence.

This typology captures fluid patterns in how youth draw emotional boundaries between "us" and "them." The four orientations describe interpretive tendencies that shift with context, and they do not sort people into fixed categories defined by background characteristics. As the study shows, how youth imagine China's future shapes whether Hong Kong and Taiwan appear threatening, admirable, or peripheral. At the same time, what they learn about Hong Kong and Taiwan can in turn sharpen, unsettle, or redirect those visions of China's future.

Nationalist Defensiveness: Securing a Stronger China

Among students who expressed the strongest attachment to Hong Kong and Taiwan as "China's" issues, their views are organized by what we call nationalist defensiveness: the sense that China is rising but has not yet become strong enough, and that Hong Kong and Taiwan must therefore be defended as part of a stronger China still in the making. In this framework, the imagined "us" is the Chinese nation, including Hong Kong and Taiwan, while the imagined "them" consists of foreign powers, especially the United States and the West, as well as local separatists perceived as aligned with them. Hong Kong and Taiwan matter not simply as territories, but as symbols of whether China can finally become secure, respected, and unified, mobilizing both the sovereign-nation and resurgent global-power visions discussed earlier.

The first layer of nationalist defensiveness treats sovereignty as inseparable from national strength and sacrifice. Helen (Humanities, USA) described nationalism as a necessary form of cultural belonging rooted in historical suffering and collective memory:

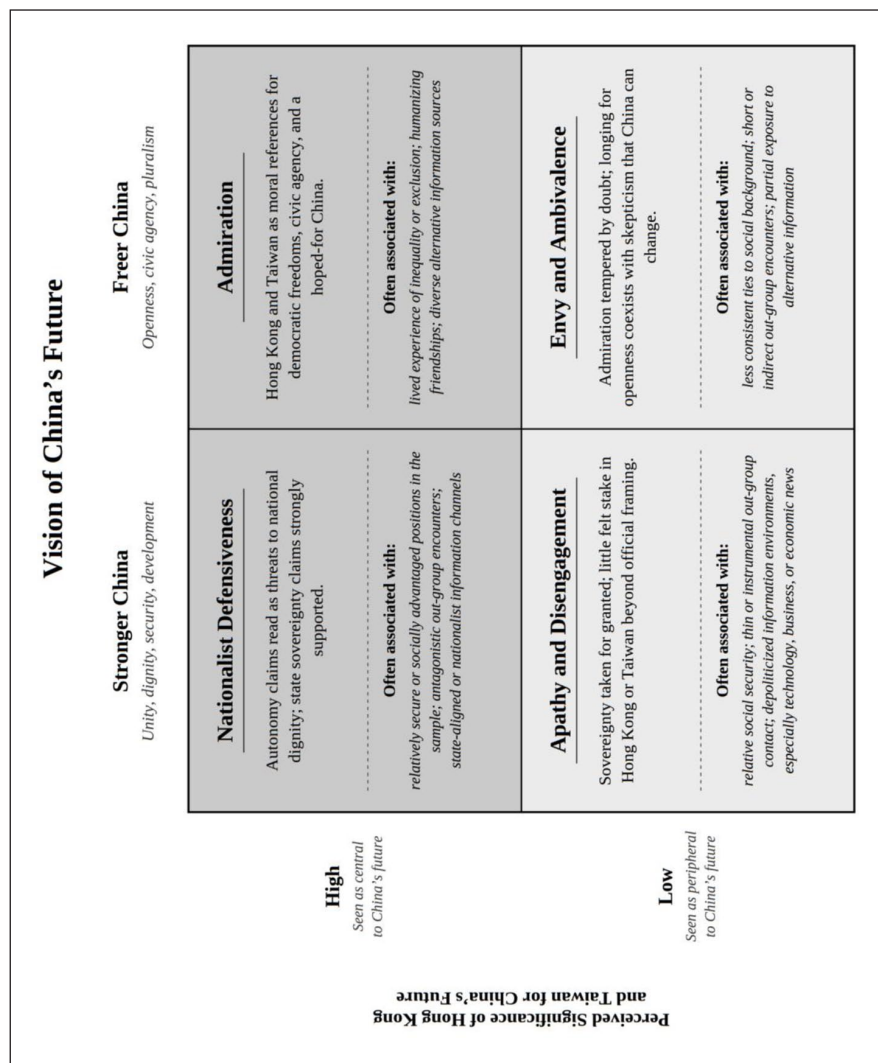


Figure 1. Ideal-typical emotional orientations toward Hong Kong and Taiwan among mainland Chinese students.
Note. Associated factors summarize recurring patterns in the interviews and should not be read as deterministic predictors of individual placement.

About nationalism [. . .] I think you need to have some sense of cultural belonging [. . .] I do not mean that people cannot survive without this belonging, but I consider it significant [. . .] For instance, my roommate and I discussed the Nanjing Massacre last night. She's from Nanjing and has been to the memorial hall for the massacre. The memorial hall was built on the site where thousands of bodies were buried. People all feel pity for the massacre. However, if you think of it from another perspective, that these people buried underneath were your compatriots, you become more emotional.

She also defended sacrifice in the name of national development: "I'm strongly against the idea that 'we should only care about the people, not the development of the nation.' Sometimes, you need to sacrifice for the greater good." James (STEM, USA) expressed a similar developmental view, arguing that democracy could not achieve China's long-term goals as effectively as a political system capable of concentrating resources and collective effort. Donald (Social Science, USA) likewise justified a strong centralized state by emphasizing China's size, historical trajectory, and the difficulty of governing such a large population. These students believe that China is still in the process of becoming stronger, and Hong Kong and Taiwan are indispensable parts of that future China.

A second layer involves treating sovereignty challenges as insults to national dignity. Xiaoyuan (STEM, China) explicitly linked patriotism to defending China from humiliation:

We need to keep our sovereignty and territorial integrity. We must protect it from the insult of others. For instance, a game called 'Devotion' was made by Taiwanese, and they insulted our national leader. Such things were unforgivable. We can talk about problems, but we can't accept humiliations. Taiwan and Hong Kong are inalienable parts of China.

Charlotte (Business, USA) described a similar reaction when a company listed Hong Kong and Taiwan separately during a job application, saying that she no longer had "good feelings" toward the company. Such defensive reactions could coexist with practical calculations about China's rise. Although Charlotte later developed a more nuanced view of Taiwan's history after taking courses in the United States, she still grounded her position in China's growing economic weight: "Taiwan should not distance itself from China in the future [. . .] Nobody wants to piss China off. The economic system in China is bigger and more powerful." In this sense, reactions to symbolic insult were tied to a broader conviction that China's future power would make closer integration both necessary and beneficial.

A third layer treats sovereignty as a matter of national security. Natie (STEM, China) framed Taiwan as strategically indispensable:

I still believe in it [i.e. unification] because geographically, it would pose great danger to our country if Taiwan weren't a part of China. Taiwan is located on the first island chain,² which would threaten the security of our homeland, say, if it is seized by America.

Others made similar arguments in broader geopolitical terms. Xinqi (Social Science, China) described Taiwan as important both militarily and politically, calling it "a card" in international relations. Stella (Social Science, China) linked Hong Kong, Macao, and

Taiwan to China's broader vulnerability to foreign influence, arguing that the country was "currently not strong enough" to handle such issues with greater tolerance or flexibility. Across these accounts, calls for a firmer stance reflected a view of China as a rising yet still vulnerable power, one for which openness remained conditional on future strength.

Other students extended this geopolitical narrative beyond territorial questions to a broader story of resisting Western dominance and building national self-sufficiency. For example, Steven (Humanities, China) emphasized technological independence as central to China's future: "Currently, the most important thing is to realize technology independence and minimize our reliance on importing technologies from overseas."

This same logic shaped how some students interpreted Hong Kong. Rather than emphasizing rights or democracy, they saw the protests through the lenses of colonial history, economic dependence, and Western interference. Particularly, Mica (STEM, USA) dismissed the protestors as driven less by democratic values than by money, pride, and colonial attachment: "They don't have any opinions of their own; they are for the money [. . .] They feel that they were very comfortable with the previous British rule."

These defensive nationalist reactions reflect students' social positions in part. Socially dominant groups, particularly middle-class, male students in STEM or social science fields, were more readily aligned with official narratives that frame Taiwan and Hong Kong through security, strategy, and national competition, a pattern consistent with previous survey research (Liu and Li, 2024; Qi et al., 2023). Natie's focus on the first island chain, James's and Donald's defense of concentrated state power, and Xinqi's description of Taiwan as a strategic "card" all illustrate this security-oriented framing. For these students, sovereignty was closely tied to state capacity, military vulnerability, and China's place in the global order.

Negative out-group interaction can also reinforce this orientation. Charlotte's antagonistic encounters with Taiwanese peers in the United States did not soften her views but made the issue more personal. As she recalled, "They would belittle Chinese from the mainland, and therefore I belittled them as well [. . .] If you ask where they are from, they will say that they are not Chinese, but Taiwanese. I said that Taiwan is a part of China, and the whole table of people was shocked." Feeling publicly challenged turned an abstract sovereignty issue into a personal insult, echoing findings that negative experiences abroad can intensify rather than weaken nationalism (Fan et al., 2020; Guo, 2026; Hail, 2015).

Information accessed through state-controlled media matters as well (see Table 2 for respondents' information sources). Students who relied on such information were more likely to frame Hong Kong and Taiwan through sovereignty, stability, and national interest. Xiaoming's (Social Science, China) reading of Taiwan through *People's Daily* illustrates this clearly. Referring to Taiwan's legalization of same-sex marriage, she interpreted it not as political divergence but as evidence that "Taiwan will come back sooner or later" and that China itself was becoming "more open and tolerant." Here, political difference was absorbed into a narrative of China's eventual rise, openness, and reintegration.

For students in this group, then, Hong Kong and Taiwan are emotionally salient because they condense larger concerns about national humiliation, Western

Table 2. Interviewees' information sources.

Category	Description	Examples mentioned by interviewees
State-aligned channels	Official party-state outlets and platforms that directly produce or distribute state-endorsed content	Chinese state media: <i>People's Daily</i> , <i>Xinhua News</i> , <i>Global Times</i> , <i>The Paper</i> .
Less state-aligned channels	News outlets operating outside or at a greater distance from state control, including Western traditional or online media, Chinese market-oriented media, and overseas Chinese-language media	Party member applications: <i>Xuexi Qiangguo</i> (学习强国) Western news media: <i>CNN</i> , <i>BBC</i> , <i>New York Times</i> , <i>Wall Street Journal</i> , <i>The Guardian</i> , <i>Bloomberg</i> , <i>Washington Post</i> , <i>The Economist</i> , <i>New Yorker</i> , <i>The Verge</i> , <i>The Times Magazine</i> , <i>AP News</i> , <i>The Huffington Post</i> , <i>Fox News</i> , <i>Morning Brew</i> (business newsletter) Chinese market media: <i>Caixin</i> , <i>Southern Weekly</i> , <i>Phoenix News</i> , <i>Jiemian</i> , <i>Qdaily</i> , <i>36kr</i> , <i>Huxiu</i> Overseas Chinese-language media: <i>Initium Media</i> , <i>South China Morning Post</i> , <i>China Digital Times</i>
Information-sharing and aggregation platforms	Venues that gather, redistribute, and circulate content from a range of sources, hosting everything from official narratives and commercial nationalist accounts to grey media and alternative perspectives	News aggregators: <i>Google News</i> , <i>Apple News</i> , <i>NetEase</i> , <i>Toutiao</i> , <i>Tencent News</i> , <i>Sina News</i> Chinese social media: <i>WeChat</i> , <i>Weibo</i> , <i>QQ</i> , <i>Hupu</i> , <i>Zhihu</i> , <i>Douban</i> International social media: <i>Twitter</i> , <i>Instagram</i> , <i>Facebook</i> , <i>Reddit</i> , <i>YouTube</i>

encirclement, internal disorder, and China's unfinished rise. Their attachment to these regions is future-oriented rather than simply backward-looking nationalism. As such, demands for autonomy or freedom are troubling not simply because they challenge existing borders, but because they threaten a desired future in which China will finally be secure, powerful, and unified.

Admiration: Imagining a Freer China

If nationalist defensiveness is anchored in the desire for a stronger China, admiration is tied to a different imagined future: a freer China. Students in this group do not primarily evaluate Hong Kong and Taiwan through territorial integrity or national security. Instead, they perceive these places as political and moral reference points for a different kind of collective life, echoing the modernizing vision oriented toward democratic institutions and civic life. The imagined "us" here is not the nation-state, but ordinary citizens across mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan who seek freedom, dignity, and meaningful participation. The imagined "them" is less Hongkongers or Taiwanese than authoritarian and overly centralized systems that restrict public discussion, political agency, and individual rights.

This emotion often begins with frustration toward domestic politics in mainland China. Rick (Social Science, USA) described politics in China as fundamentally closed and unreliable:

In China, just like in any society, where you are under a system that is not open and transparent, or even under a top-down autocracy, the politics that you talk about can only be private. Politics open to the public is propaganda. The rest is sensitive and can only be called rumors.

Similarly, Sarah (STEM, USA) contrasted China with the United States, where people could "speak freely" and form their own political opinions. She recalled learning about modern Chinese history only after leaving China and described how this changed both her view of Taiwan and her sense of what political discussion could look like. For Sarah, Hong Kong and Taiwan mattered because they were linked to a broader hope for more open public debate, freer expression, and less tightly controlled historical interpretation in China itself. She even tried to start a difficult conversation with her conservative family about why "Taiwan is a country" after returning to China from her first year in the United States.

Admiration also emerges through identifying with Hong Kong and Taiwanese citizens as political actors in their own right, people who decide, organize, and speak up for what they believe in. This is different from the defensive nationalists' perception of them as misguided members of the nation who need to be brought back in line. Ginger (Humanities, China) captured this orientation most clearly. Instead of seeing Hong Kong protesters as manipulated or irrational, she viewed them as people acting on real beliefs about freedom and rights. She said she would support them because "they know what freedom means," and added that if she lived in Hong Kong, she would join the demonstration, whereas in mainland China, she could not imagine herself openly advocating for anything. Similarly, Maomao (Social Science, USA) described Taiwan's democratic

participation as something people could love and identify with. For her, patriotism could be grounded in elections and civic life, not in territorial unity. Ashley (Business, USA) likewise distinguished between what “the regime wants” and what “we want as citizens,” and said she could understand why Taiwanese and Hongkongers thought as they did. Across these accounts, admiration rested on a different moral boundary: one that linked ordinary citizens across political contexts and cast centralized, suppressive systems as the problem.

This freer-China vision often extends beyond Hong Kong and Taiwan themselves. Admirers are drawn to broader ideals of social justice, mutual respect, and generational change in comparison with other countries. For instance, Ella (STEM, USA) expressed hope that “after twenty or thirty years, when our generation takes charge, society may be better.” She expressed admiration for the United States because of its tolerance toward difference: “I was really impressed by the fact that, as long as you are not acting against the law, people respect your opinions. There is no right or wrong, just differences.” Her dissatisfaction with sexism and rigid hierarchy in China drew her toward a more open and egalitarian society. “We want equality, not discrimination,” said Ella. In this sense, Hong Kong and Taiwan were two reference points among others in a wider horizon of imagined futures for China, not the only ones. They mattered because they made alternative political and social futures imaginable.

Like nationalist defensiveness, admiration maps onto social position, out-group interaction, and information access, but in opposite ways. Particularly, less privileged positions and lived experiences of inequality or exclusion drove students to evaluate China through dignity, fairness, and inclusion rather than national strength. Ella’s frustration with misogyny, Sarah’s negative interactions with extremely conservative parents, and Ginger’s sense that the regime had failed her working-class rural family all point in this direction. Positive out-group interaction also matters, especially when it humanizes Taiwan and Hong Kong and avoids turning them into sites of confrontation. Maomao began to understand the Hong Kong protests only after talking with Hong Kong friends and learning that political pressure and censorship had existed for years. Ashley’s friendships with not only people from Taiwan and Hong Kong but also sexual and racial minorities, likewise, helped her understand perspectives different from her own and deepened her longing for a freer society in which everyone could live with dignity and respect. Such humanizing relationships made it harder to reduce political others to official categories and easier to develop interpretive frameworks beyond a narrative of national humiliation.

Access to alternative information is equally important. Sarah’s history courses in the United States, along with Rick’s and Maomao’s regular reading of uncensored outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*, expanded the “cultural toolkit” (Swidler, 1986) through which students could think about China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. While exposure to alternative information did not automatically liberalize students, it helped create distance from state narratives and made freer political futures more thinkable. Combined with lived experience and constructive out-group interaction, it enabled students to interpret Hong Kong and Taiwan less as territorial issues than as visible examples of rights, dignity, and civic engagement. From this

standpoint, Hong Kong and Taiwan are important because they illuminate what China itself may one day become.

Envy and Ambivalence: Wanting Change But Doubting It

Like admirers, students in this group are drawn to the idea of a freer China. Unlike the admirers, however, they are less convinced that such a change is achievable. Their encounters with Hong Kong and Taiwan are often limited, indirect, or fragmentary: an online post, a brief visit, a news story, or a passing realization about what exists elsewhere. As a result, Hong Kong and Taiwan become less objects of strong identification than reminders of what mainland Chinese may want but cannot easily attain. This is the modernizing vision held in suspended form, recognized but not believed to be achievable. The imagined “us” here is mainland Chinese living within a system they doubt can change, while the “them” is Hong Kong and Taiwan as places that seem to possess freedoms, rights, or civic possibilities missing at home.

For some students, Hong Kong and Taiwan first trigger reflection on China itself. Zhiyong (STEM, China) described coming across a social media post defending Hong Kong protesters against the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) dismissal of their democratic aspirations. He found the argument persuasive, even though he remained uncertain about democracy as a system. What struck him was Hong Kong’s activism and, beyond that, the difficult question it posed for the mainland:

“When the CCP claims the democracy they want is naive, and condemns their democracy as fake, have you ever thought of giving them a mature, true democracy? Who could offer that? Then, what’s wrong with what Hongkongers have been doing [for their democracy]?”

That question was sharpened by his own brief experience with campus-level elections to elect deputies to the National People’s Congress, where students had to re-vote several times because “we really don’t know what the process looks like.” This experience left him feeling that “China has no true democracy.”

Similarly, Stephen (STEM, China), a gay man from a small rural town in northern China, spoke about Taiwan’s legalization of same-sex marriage as a marker of what inclusion might look like:

I myself am gay. It should be okay to tell you that. I once wanted to work in the government, but the environment there must be oppressive. I don’t think I will get married. Therefore, I can’t work in the government. It’s not until the CCP and the system suddenly become more inclusive, or even like what happens in Taiwan [i.e. legalization of same-sex marriage], that I can see myself becoming a civil servant.

In both cases, young people valued Hong Kong and Taiwan for the comparative advantages that illuminated what China lacked. Yet this recognition did not generate the more hopeful, future-oriented confidence found among admirers. Instead, it led to envy toward others and frustration and doubt about China itself. That frustration often deepened when students reflected on how difficult change seemed in China itself.

For other students, that doubt arose less through reflection on Hong Kong and Taiwan directly, and more through frustration with how little seemed possible at home. Isabella (STEM, USA) was troubled by the extent of cultural regulation in China, from restrictions on television content to seemingly arbitrary rules imposed by the state. “The screenwriters do not have full control over the play,” she said. Her criticisms pointed toward a desire for a more open society, but they did not add up to a clear political alternative. Hannah (STEM, USA) expressed a similar combination of exposure and pessimism. Access to Google and YouTube had shown her “a variety of shocking things [about China],” yet she concluded that democratization in China would be extremely difficult because people treated politics as gossip and lacked political efficacy. She concluded, “We don’t have the sense of what we can change or what people can do.” For these students, awareness of restrictions did not produce a strong belief in reform. It produced a sense of blockage.

Unlike in admiration and defensiveness, social position, out-group interaction, and information access are less clearly tied to this suspended emotion. Students in this group did not necessarily share a common class background or political profile. Some, like Stephen, occupied marginalized positions while being a CCP member, which made the limits of China’s existing social order especially visible. Others, like Hannah, were privileged enough to travel to different parts of the world and see differences firsthand. What united them was a heightened awareness that life could be organized differently elsewhere, paired with uncertainty about whether such alternatives could be realized in China.

Their out-group encounters tended to be short or indirect, sparked by online posts, news stories, or brief travel rather than sustained relationships, while their access to alternative information was partial: enough to expand what they could see, but not enough to stabilize a coherent alternative vision. The key difference between envy and admiration, then, is that admiration depends on some basis for believing that alternatives are meaningful and at least potentially achievable. Without that basis, exposure more often produces envy or ambivalence.

Apathy and Disengagement: “Politics is None of My Business”

A fourth orientation, apathy and disengagement, treats the stronger-China vision as the default political background and delegates sovereignty questions to the state, a passive endorsement of the resurgent global-power prototype. These students do not actively defend a strong China as defensive nationalists do, admire a freer China as admirers do, or long for one with the ambivalence of the envious. Students are not unaware of Hong Kong and Taiwan, but they simply see them as matters the government is already handling, which frees ordinary people to focus on their own lives. In this sense, the imagined “us” is ordinary people pursuing personal futures, while political and sovereignty issues belong to “them,” particularly the state.

This orientation often appears in contradictory but passive views of the regime. Cheris (Social Science, USA) sharply distinguished the country from the CCP, saying, “Personally, I don’t like to put the Party above the country.” Yet she did not turn that distinction into a strong political position. Instead, she treated the CCP as historically

important, possibly replaceable, but not something she needed to resolve herself. Kevin (Business, USA) expressed a similar disengagement in a more relativist form. After seeing freedoms in Taiwan and Hong Kong firsthand—"They can vote; they can use Facebook"—he no longer accepted simple nationalist certainty. At the same time, he rejected Western moral absolutism and concluded that all countries existed somewhere on a spectrum between freedom and control. In his view, China's restrictions were part of the country's political reality, something to be accepted rather than politically confronted.

Jialin (Social Science, USA) pushed this logic further. She wanted to keep her Chinese cultural identity while also securing a second citizenship "as a backup plan." When asked to imagine political collapse or major change in China, she concluded: "It's too complicated; it's hard for me to choose. I still don't want to think about it." Rather than trying to shape China's future, she preferred to keep her personal options open and leave collective questions to the state.

This disposition also appeared in more everyday forms of disengagement. Some students, such as Kyle (STEM, USA), felt uncomfortable even listening to a neutral classroom discussion of Taiwan in the United States. Other students, like Shiwei (Social Science, USA), developed epistemological withdrawal after being exposed not only to competing Chinese and Western media but also to sharply divergent American outlets, such as *The New York Times* and Fox News, which he described as "talking to themselves," leaving him unable or unwilling to take a clear stance. Such cognitive withdrawal was deepened by structural impossibility of political discussion in China. Feng (Humanities, China) described a political climate so sensitive that "we just cannot discuss anything [in China], such as [. . .] what happened in Hong Kong and Taiwan." In all these cases, sovereignty questions felt both settled and personally distant and irrelevant. Students were aware of them, sometimes even uneasy about them, but did not experience them as something requiring their own judgment or responsibility.

Among the three conditioning factors, social position is the most distinctive for this group: privilege enabled disengagement. These students generally did not have strong personal reasons to care about Hong Kong, Taiwan, or any politics. Unlike admirers, they did not describe feelings held back by inequality, exclusion, or lack of rights in ways that made Hong Kong or Taiwan meaningful alternatives. They were more likely to be relatively privileged, able to focus on education, career, mobility, and even a second citizenship instead of collective political futures (also see Guo and Liu, 2025). In this sense, the absence of immediate personal stakes made disengagement an easy default.

Out-group interaction tended to be weak or superficial. Students in this group rarely described meaningful relationships with people from Hong Kong or Taiwan that might complicate official categories or make those places feel personally significant. Information access followed a similar pattern. These students mostly paid attention to technology, business, or economic news that mattered for their own futures. Politics entered their world mainly as a background risk to be managed rather than as a field of moral or civic engagement. Like Jialin, many apolitical students, especially those in the United States, had a flexible approach to citizenship and exit options. In this sense, disengagement was itself a political stance, one that accepted the state's authority over collective political questions while directing attention back to private life and self-preservation.

Discussion and Conclusion

For ordinary people, imagining political others is everyday work: deciding who belongs to the nation and who stands outside it. We examine how Chinese youth engage in this interpretive work in sovereignty disputes, drawing on in-depth interviews with students based in China and the United States. We show that responses to Hong Kong and Taiwan are organized by two dimensions: visions of China's future (strength vs. freedom) and the perceived significance of Hong Kong and Taiwan for that future. These dimensions produce a typology of four emotional orientations: nationalist defensiveness, admiration, envy, and apathy. By highlighting emotions, we show that debates over sovereignty and national identity are lived not only through ideology or policy, but also through everyday interpretations of who "we" are, who "they" are, and what collective futures are possible.

The central contribution of this study is to show how competing visions of the national future organize emotional orientations toward sovereignty disputes. Cultural and political sociology has long emphasized symbolic divisions between "us" and "them" and the moral coding through which adversaries are cast as threats (Alexander, 2006; Malesevic, 2013; Smith, 2010a; Smith, 2010b). Scholarship on Chinese nationalism has further shown that nationalism is plural, fluid, and context-dependent (Callahan, 2005; Carlson, 2009; Zhao, 2000). Building on this work, our study specifies how such variation becomes emotionally meaningful in everyday interpretation. Students who imagine China's future through unity, security, development, and global standing tend to evaluate Hong Kong and Taiwan through the lens of sovereignty and national strength. Those who imagine a freer China are more likely to read Hong Kong and Taiwan as moral references for openness, civic agency, pluralism, and individual rights. Young people's judgments of "them" are tied to what they hope, fear, or doubt "we" can become. Sovereignty, in this sense, is felt through aspiration.

This argument also refines accounts of nationalism, state discourse, and public opinion. Official narratives provide powerful symbolic resources, but they do not dictate emotional interpretation uniformly. Young people make sense of these narratives through lived experience, out-group contact, and information environments. These conditions do not causally determine individual placement in the typology, but they help make certain orientations more plausible. A sense of relative social security can make political distance easier to sustain, while experiences of exclusion or marginalization can make freedom, dignity, and civic agency more desirable. Encounters with people from Hong Kong and Taiwan can also unsettle inherited categories, especially when students come to see these places as distinct political communities with their own aspirations and grievances, not mere extensions of China. Conversely, when Hong Kong and Taiwan are understood primarily through a strong-China vision, their demands for autonomy or democracy are more easily interpreted as threats to unity and national revival.

Our findings suggest that nationalism is produced from two directions at once: while the state or political elites impose it from above, ordinary citizens can interpret, negotiate, and potentially transform it from below and from within. Even among a generation that came of age amid intensified national pride and tightened political control, sovereignty disputes can become occasions for reimagining what national belonging should mean. Hong Kong and Taiwan are therefore both territorial questions and symbolic mirrors through which young people read what China is and what it could become.

This study has limitations that point toward directions for future research. Our findings indicate that class position, gendered experience, institutional location, media exposure, and out-group contact inform how young people interpret Hong Kong and Taiwan, but without a large, randomized sample, the research design cannot determine the independent effects of these factors. Field of study, urban or rural origin, CCP membership, and prior political socialization may also matter, though they appeared unevenly across our cases. Future research could examine these factors more systematically through longitudinal, comparative, or mixed-method designs. Although the proposed typology is not a causal model, it offers a valuable framework for analyzing how sovereignty disputes become emotionally meaningful through competing visions of a national future. Future studies can further refine, apply, and test this framework across different political and national contexts.

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Ethical considerations

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Data availability statement

The data of this article cannot be shared publicly for the privacy and safety of individuals who participated in the study.

Notes

1. The 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, also known as the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement, began as mass demonstrations against a proposed extradition bill and later

expanded into broader demands for democratic reform. The movement was met with heavy police suppression.

2. The “first island chain” refers to a strategic line of islands stretching from Japan through Taiwan to the Philippines, seen by Chinese policymakers as a critical barrier to foreign military encroachment and a key factor in regional security.

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Author biographies

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Wendy Weile Zhou is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Digital Technology for Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia and a Faculty Associate at the Public Tech Media Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As a critical-cultural scholar, she examines identity-making and patterns of information production and circulation across Chinese and Asian diaspora media, transnational journalism, and international student communities. Her work has been published in *The China Journal*, *Global Media and China*, and *Asian Journal of Communication*, among others.

Appendix. Full list of interviewees.

No.	Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Major	Social class	Media use
1	Umi	USA	Female	Social sciences	Middle	Wall Street Journal (WSJ)
2	Rick	USA	Male	Social sciences	Middle	New York Times (NYT), WSJ, Reuters, AP News, BBC, Twitter, YouTube, South China Morning Post (SCMP), Weibo
3	Rose	USA	Female	Undeclared	Upper middle	WeChat
4	John	USA	Male	STEM	Upper middle	WSJ, Sina News
5	Helen	USA	Female	Humanities	Middle	Zhihu
6	Isabella	USA	Female	STEM	Upper middle	WeChat, Weibo
7	Wendy	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	Vista Story
8	James	USA	Male	STEM	Middle	WeChat, Weibo, Apple News, 36kr
9	Hannah	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	Google News
10	Tim	USA	Male	Business	Middle	Weibo
11	Donald	USA	Male	Social sciences	Upper middle	WeChat, BBC
12	Allan	USA	Male	Undeclared	Middle	WeChat, BBC
13	Ella	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	Weibo, Hupu
14	Vincent	USA	Male	Social sciences	Middle	Google News, Southern Weekly
15	Beth	USA	Female	Business	Middle	WSJ, NYT
16	Cheris	USA	Female	Social sciences	Upper middle	WeChat, Weibo
17	Sarah	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	WeChat, YouTube
18	Sandra	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	WeChat, Economists, NYT, Global Times, Morning Brew
19	Kevin	USA	Male	Business	Middle	WeChat, Phoenix News
20	Charlotte	USA	Female	Business	Middle	WSJ, NYT
21	Jason	USA	Male	STEM	Upper middle	WSJ, WeChat, 36kr
22	Roger	USA	Male	STEM	Upper middle	NYT, BBC, Toutiao, Zhihu, WeChat
23	Nancy	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	WeChat, Weibo, Toutiao
24	Jane	USA	Female	STEM	Upper middle	WeChat, Weibo
25	Zoe	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	WeChat, The Paper
26	Kyle	USA	Male	STEM	Middle	NYT, Toutiao
27	Yu	USA	Male	STEM	Middle	Caixin, NYT, WSJ, Bloomberg, CNN
28	Jenny	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	WeChat
29	Fred	USA	Male	STEM	Upper middle	WeChat, Weibo
30	Chao	USA	Male	STEM	Middle	Qdaily, Economists, NYT, Washington Post, New Yorker

(continued)

Appendix. (continued)

No.	Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Major	Social class	Media use
31	Jack	USA	Male	Undeclared	Middle	YouTube
32	William	USA	Male	Humanities	Upper middle	NYT
33	Ashley	USA	Female	Business	Upper middle	None
34	Ruth	USA	Female	STEM	Upper middle	None
35	Jessica	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	None
36	Qiuyu	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	None
37	Brandon	USA	Female	Humanities	Middle	NYT
38	Ice	USA	Female	STEM	Upper middle	Apple News
39	Maomao	USA	Female	Social sciences	Upper middle	NYT, Washington Post, NetEase
40	Mica	USA	Female	STEM	Upper middle	None
41	Zoy	USA	Female	STEM	Upper middle	BBC
42	Shiwei	USA	Male	Social sciences	Upper middle	Huixiu, Jiemian News, CNN, WSJ, NYT, Fox News, BBC
43	Jialin	USA	Female	Social sciences	Upper middle	Initium Media, NYT, New Yorker, Weibo
44	Emily	USA	Female	Social sciences	Middle	Reddit, local news radio
45	Lihong	USA	Female	Social sciences	Upper middle	SCMP, CNN, BBC, NetEase, Sina News
46	Haitian	USA	Male	Social sciences	Upper middle	Fox News, NYT
47	Xiaohua	USA	Female	Humanities	Middle	Weibo, China Digital Times
48	Chuanbao	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	Weibo
49	Anna	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	Weibo
50	Wang	USA	Male	Humanities	Middle	WSJ, NYT, Tencent News
51	Brian	USA	Male	STEM	Upper middle	None
52	Calvin	USA	Male	Undeclared	Middle	None
53	Laura	USA	Female	Social sciences	Middle	SCMP, Global Times, The Paper, Weibo
54	Susan	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	Toutiao
55	Yixuan	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	None
56	Amy	USA	Female	Social sciences	Upper middle	Weibo
57	Katie	USA	Female	STEM	Upper middle	The Paper
58	Milla	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	WeChat, YouTube, Washington Post, NYT
59	Spencer	USA	Female	STEM	Middle	Google News, NYT
60	Aria	USA	Female	Undeclared	Middle	Bloomberg
61	Stephen	China	Male	STEM	Lower middle	WeChat, Zhihu
62	Tony	China	Male	STEM	Working class	People's Daily, Xinhua News, Zhihu, Toutiao

(continued)

Appendix. (continued)

No.	Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Major	Social class	Media use
63	Xiaoyuan	China	Female	STEM	Lower middle	NetEase
64	Stella	China	Female	Social sciences	Middle	Weibo, WeChat, Douban, Zhihu
65	Gavin	China	Male	Social sciences	Upper middle	Economists, The Guardian, The Times Magazine
66	Changzhi	China	Male	Social sciences	Upper middle	The Guardian, WeChat
67	Astrid	China	Female	STEM	Upper middle	Huffington Post, CNN, BBC
68	Dolores	China	Female	Social sciences	Middle	Weibo, WeChat, Douban, The Paper
69	Baozi	China	Female	STEM	Middle	The Paper, WeChat
70	Meimei	China	Female	Humanities	Upper middle	Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu, The Paper, BBC
71	Matt	China	Male	STEM	Working class	Xuexi Qiangguo
72	Shanchang	China	Male	Humanities	Middle	The Paper, Southern Weekly, People's Daily
73	Allin	China	Female	STEM	Upper middle	WeChat
74	Jun	China	Male	Social sciences	Lower middle	Weibo
75	Natie	China	Male	STEM	Upper middle	WeChat, Google News
76	Xinghe	China	Female	Social sciences	Working class	WeChat, Weibo
77	Shiyu	China	Female	STEM	Middle	WSJ, Economists
78	Luyang	China	Male	STEM	Middle	None
79	Yanbo	China	Male	STEM	Lower middle	WeChat, The Paper, VOA
80	Yiqing	China	Male	STEM	Lower middle	Phoenix News, NetEase, Vista Story, WeChat
81	Seven	China	Male	Humanities	Upper middle	The Paper, Jiemian News, NetEase, Sina News, CNN
82	Feng	China	Female	Humanities	Upper middle	WeChat, Weibo, Facebook
83	Danzai	China	Female	Social sciences	Working class	WeChat, Xuexi Qiangguo, People's Daily, Xinhua News
84	Ginger	China	Female	Humanities	Lower middle	CNN, BBC, Twitter, Instagram, Weibo, WeChat
85	Ninmeng	China	Female	Humanities	Lower middle	Weibo
86	Ding	China	Male	STEM	Upper middle	None
87	Xiaoming	China	Female	Social sciences	Middle	The Paper
88	Xinqi	China	Male	Social sciences	Lower middle	Toutiao, WeChat, QQ
89	Sue	China	Female	Social sciences	Lower middle	Xinhua News, WeChat, NYT, Kyodo News, Asahi Shimbun, The Times Magazine
90	Tianyi	China	Male	STEM	Working class	The Verge, Google, Bloomberg
91	Zhiyong	China	Male	STEM	Upper middle	The Guardian, CNN, Google News, WeChat
92	Shaobo	China	Male	STEM	Working class	WeChat, Weibo
93	Zihan	China	Female	STEM	Lower middle	Weibo