



From Local Dynamics to Great-Power Narratives: Reframing the National Identity of Hong Kong Youth in the Post-NSL Era

Yexin Wang*

School of Arts and Social Sciences, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong, 999077, China

*s1338827@live.hkmu.edu.hk

Abstract. This paper used frame analysis and comparative text research to examine the construction of Hong Kong youth's national identity in the discourse of China and the United States after the implementation of the National Security Law. Based on 100 official texts from both countries, the study finds that the Chinese narrative shapes young people as "patriotic future builders" who need to be guided and integrated into national development through a chain of "value anchoring - ability forging - action empowerment". The American narrative, by means of a binary framework of "victim-hero-intervention", portrays it as a "democratic fighter" whose rights have been violated but who dares to resist. The two opposing identity labels show the geopolitical implications of Hong Kong youth as discourse proxies. From the perspective of discourse construction and identity politics, this study explains how narrative competition has become a core mechanism in the ideological game between major powers, providing theoretical insights into the new forms of international competition in the 21st century.

Keywords: Sino-US Relations, Official Media, Constructivism.

1 Introduction

The strategic competition between the United States and China has transcended traditional areas such as the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and economic and trade relations, and has extended deeply into the ideological and narrative dominance contest [1]. Base on this backdrop, Hong Kong is a special administrative region under the principle of "one country, two systems" and an important area for China to exercise its national sovereignty. For the United States, it is an important frontier base for implementing its liberal strategy [2]. Therefore, Hong Kong has become the focus of the discourse battle between the two countries.

Since the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law, the identity issues of Hong Kong youth have become increasingly sensitive and complex. This is no longer just a matter of personal belief, but it has become a core topic in the narrative competition between the Chinese and American. Each identity label such as "patriotic

builder" and "democracy supporter" carries ideological connotations and directly affects the self-perception of Hong Kong youth. However, most past studies have focused on local influencing factors between Hong Kong and the Mainland, such as education policy or economy [3]. This often overlooks the key role of China and the United States as external powers in shaping the narrative, creating an important research gap. At the same time, the agency displayed by Hong Kong youth in accepting and thinking about these external narratives is a dimension that has been neglected in existing research. Based on this, this study raises the following core questions: How do the official strategic narratives of China and the United States competitively shape the identity of Hong Kong youth? What are the fundamental differences in the framing strategies and discourse structures of these narratives? Meanwhile, this article takes the subjectivity of the youth as an important focus and explores the complex external narrative competition that Hong Kong's youth are currently facing. To answer these questions, this study adopted a qualitative framework analysis method to systematically compare the official discourses of China and the United States since 2020. The research aims to illustrate the mechanism of the role of external major power narratives in the construction of Hong Kong youth identity, and at the same time provide a new perspective for understanding the different narratives that youth are currently facing.

Theoretically, this study bridges strategic narrative theory and identity politics research, filling the theoretical gap in the field of "great power competition - identity formation" [4]. It also attempts to enrich the understanding of agency in the process of identity construction by introducing the perspective of youth subjectivity. Practically, through an in-depth analysis of the Hong Kong case, the study provides key insights into the operation of narrative power in contemporary international relations. At the same time, it offers references for formulating more inclusive and effective youth policies.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research Progress on Internal Identity Dynamics

Existing research on the national identity of Hong Kong youth has made significant progress in areas such as identity dynamics, demographic differences, and social influences [3]. However, there are still deficiencies in theoretical integration, the inclusion of external strategic factors, and comparative and media perspectives. This article synthesizes multiple key studies, summarizes the following themes, and points out their connections and limitations.

Research indicates that the identity perception of Hong Kong youth has shifted from the traditional binary opposition of "local - national" to a more complex hybrid identity model. Ma & Fung earlier pointed out that Hong Kong people generally form a dual identity of "being both Hong Kong people and Chinese", with economic concepts converging with those of the mainland, but political values diverging [5]. However, this study was based on data prior to 2020 and failed to cover the context after the implementation of the National Security Law for Hong Kong, and also overlooked the influence of global citizenship and political unrest after 2014 on youth identity.

Social psychology research further reveals the micro-mechanism of identity formation. Lu et al. proposed that stereotypes and intergroup relations play a mediating role in national identity, and pointed out that this effect is weaker among the youth group, highlighting significant age differences [6]. However, this model fails to take into account the shaping effect of external narratives on stereotypes. For instance, different expressions of the same event by American or Chinese media may reinforce or alleviate group biases. Jang et al. introduced an interdisciplinary framework, revealing that the sense of national belonging among young people in Chinese mainland is significantly higher than that among young people in Hong Kong and ethnic minorities, and pointed out the influence of gender and socioeconomic status [7]. However, this study also did not examine how external narratives interact with multiple identities to influence national identity. Overall, although existing research has revealed the internal mechanisms and social differences of identity, it generally neglects the shaping role of external strategic narratives in identity construction, especially among the youth group. This provides space for further integrating theoretical perspectives and incorporating external narrative variables.

2.2 Limitations of Existing Research

The current research has several key shortcomings, mainly reflected in the neglect of the role of external narratives, the lack of theoretical integration, and the scarcity of a comparative media perspective. Most studies attribute the identity formation of Hong Kong youth to internal factors such as interaction between the local and the mainland, social stereotypes, or cross-identities, but fail to systematically incorporate the shaping of identity by external actors such as the United States and China through narrative strategies. For instance, the mediating model of Lu et al. does not include the variable of "external narrative exposure", making it difficult to explain the weaker mediating effect among the youth group [6]. Jang et al. identified differences in sense of belonging but did not explore how narratives from the United States and China influence these differences [7]. Moreover, although existing research has drawn on various theories such as social identity theory, intersectionality, and constructivism, there is a lack of integration with strategic narrative theory, and a systematic analysis of how narratives at the international, national, and issue levels interact with micro-level identity mechanisms is absent.

In terms of media studies, although some scholars have focused on the role of local media in identity construction, there is a lack of comparative analysis of the narrative strategies and their impacts of external media (such as official media from the United States and China). For instance, the different reporting frameworks of the South China Morning Post and The New York Times on the National Security Law of Hong Kong after 2020 may have different influences on young people's national and global identities, but relevant comparative studies are still lacking [8]. These research gaps limit our understanding of the dynamics of identity politics in the post-National Security Law period.

2.3 Research Contributions of This Paper

To address the aforementioned deficiencies, this study proposes an analytical framework integrating strategic narrative theory. Firstly, it introduces the strategic narrative hierarchy proposed by Roselle et al., linking external narratives (such as the "democracy - autocracy" discourse in the United States) with internal identity drivers (such as stereotypes and cross-identities), achieving theoretical integration [4]. Secondly, it focuses on the media as a narrative dissemination intermediary, comparatively analyzing how official media in the United States and China shape the identity of young people, filling the gap in existing media research. Finally, compare the different perspectives of relevant regions such as Taiwan and Macao [9]. These previous studies have shown the differences in identity recognition outcomes among different Chinese-speaking regions due to the different intensities of external narratives. This study reveals how external actors influence identity construction through narrative strategies. This provides an important perspective for understanding the identity geopolitics after the implementation of the National Security Law for Hong Kong.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Theoretical Basis

This study combines constructivist theory with strategic narrative theory to construct a collaborative analysis framework. Constructivism holds that identity is dynamically constructed through discourse and social interaction [10]. This theory explains the mobility of identity among Hong Kong youth. The Strategic narrative theory focuses on how actors actively shape the cognition of goal identity through the three-layer narrative of "international system - country - problem" [4]. This theory shows how China and the United States bind the identity of Hong Kong's youth with specific values. The combination of the two theories has formed a complete analytical chain of "identity fluidity - narrative shaping power", providing theoretical support for analyzing external narrative competition.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed method design of qualitative frame analysis and quantitative frequency analysis. Frame analysis is suitable for systematically analyzing identity construction strategies in texts [10]. This allows for an in-depth exploration of potential identity positioning in narratives from both China and the United States. Quantitative frequency analysis counts the number of occurrences of core identity labels (such as "patriotic youth" and "defender of democracy"). This design objectively presents the main points of each frame and enhances the authenticity of cross-corpus comparisons. The research design balances the depth of meaning and the objectivity of the results.

3.3 Data Sources and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to construct a corpus of official narratives from China and the United States. This study includes a total of 100 texts (collected between July 2020 and August 2025). The specific composition of the text is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. 100 texts sources

Country of origin	Media	Number of text	Selection criteria
China	People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, CCTV News, China Daily	50	The mainstream orientation of the official narrative on the identity of Hong Kong youth representing China
The United States	The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, U.S. State Department' Hong Kong Policy Act Report	50	Reflecting the stance of the official and elite public opinion in the United States towards the identity of Hong Kong youth.

3.4 Analysis Steps

In terms of coding scheme, the study was based on literature and preliminary analysis, and finally two types of coding units were determined. Meaning unit: A sentence or paragraph that expresses a complete identity viewpoint. Rhetorical unit: Value words that emphasize identity, symbolic signs, etc. Framework extraction, after system coding, the core framework is summarized, such as the Chinese "Patriotic Future Builder" framework and the US "Victim-Hero" binary framework. Cross-narrative comparison, combining quantitative frequencies (such as the word frequencies of "patriotism" and "democracy") to compare the framework differences between China and the United States, reveals the logic of identity binding.

3.5 Reliability and Validity Control

To enhance the reliability of the research, two researchers independently coded a portion of the samples and resolved any discrepancies through discussion. Regarding validity, the coding categories were constructed based on mature theoretical frameworks (constructivism, strategic narrative), and representative official media and policy texts were selected to ensure content validity.

4 Result

This chapter presents the research results of the content analysis of the official narratives of China and the United States. It first explores how Chinese official media shape the national identity of Hong Kong youth through the framework of "patriotic future

builders", then analyzes the prevalent "victim-hero" binary framework in the official narratives of the United States, and finally contrasts the fundamental differences in the logic of identity construction between the two.

4.1 The "Patriotic Future Builders" Framework in China's Official Narrative

China's official media constructs the identity of Hong Kong youth through a three-dimensional narrative structure.

Value Anchoring: Establishing "Patriotism and Love for Hong Kong" as the Core Identity. The narrative prioritizes "patriotism and love for Hong Kong" as the moral and emotional foundation. Texts frequently use terms such as "national sentiment," "roots," and "proud Chinese." It mentions historical responsibilities such as "paying tribute to the predecessors who defended Hong Kong" to strengthen national belonging. Work sets the basic direction for youth identity by focusing on emotions and morality.

Capacity-building. The desired outcome is to mold the character of young people to the "demands of the nation." This narrative fosters among youth the desire to be turned into essential ingredients for national development. Young people are repeatedly associated in the texts with "technological innovation" and "entrepreneurship." They stress the need for a "global vision" and knowledge of "international standards." These capability expectations are mainly meant to serve national development strategies and to align individual development with the institutional pathway of the nation.

Action Enabling. Orienting youth to participate in national development activities. The narrative ultimately sketches out specific action paths, guiding young people from identity recognition to practice. The text repeatedly takes the "Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area" and the "National 14th Five-Year Plan" as the core stage for development. Reports about young people's participation in activities such as "One Hundred Young People See the Motherland" indicate that young people are expected to transform from "bystanders of national development" to "participants" and "contributors". Individual actions are ultimately linked to the national goal of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

In conclusion, Chinese official media have employed this coherent three-dimensional narrative to shape the identity of Hong Kong youth as "patriotic future builders". This framework systematically binds the development expectations of young individuals with the strategic demands of the country through a clear growth path setting.

4.2 The "Victim-Hero" Binary Framework in the Official Narrative of the United States

The narratives of the official and elite media in the United States present a distinct binary framework of "victim-hero".

Victim Framework: Constructing narratives of rights deprivation. The main strategy is to portray Hong Kong youth as "victims" whose rights have been systematically deprived. The relevant text repeatedly emphasizes that "autonomy has been destroyed" and "freedom has been weakened", and directly refers to the National Security Law as

a "tool for oppression". Use words such as "sacrifice" and "suppression". This framework puts young people under passive structural oppression, weakening their complexity as agents of social change.

Hero Framework: A moral symbol shaped as democratic resistance. From interviews with victims, the US calls Hong Kong's young people "heroes" fighting against "authoritarianism." The prose is peppered with positive descriptions, including "brave" and "fighting for freedom," to laud them. The media frame their actions within a broader global narrative of "democracy vs authoritarianism," and young people in Hong Kong are referred to as "frontline defenders." But any violent or unlawful acts they committed along the way are whitewashed. That "hero" narrative also influences how young people view themselves as players, constricting the scope of what they think their actions can mean to just confrontation.

Intervention Frame: Youths are to find their legitimacy through external action. This binary logic concludes that they require outside assistance. US interventions, including passing legislation and levying sanctions, are depicted in reports as a "moral obligation" to "stand with the people of Hong Kong." This kind of thinking also places the young people of Hong Kong in the role of a group needing to be rescued by others, undermining their primary function in local social transformations.

4.3 Comparison of Core Frameworks

This is turning out to be a fundamental contradiction between the two narrative frameworks. The Chinese discourse operates through identity and differentiation. The media portray the youth as the mainstay of national progress. Their agent is displaying in actively responding to and participating in the nation's call. The American framework, on the other hand, emphasizes conflict, pity, and salvation. Reports say young people as moral symbols in need of external salvation.

Both frameworks simplify the complexity of the Hong Kong youths' identity through different logics. The Chinese narrative guides the initiative of the youth onto an institutionalized track through a preset development path, while the American narrative limits the initiative of the youth within a confrontational framework through a dual role allocation. This contrast indicates that the identity of Hong Kong youth has not only become the core stage of the narrative competition between China and the United States, but also its own complex and diverse agency has been systematically reshaped and simplified in this competition process.

5 Discussion

5.1 How do the Narratives of China and the United States Shape the Identity of Hong Kong Youth

The results show that following the enactment of the National Security Law, Chinese and American official narratives portray Hong Kong youth in starkly different ways. Chinese media portray youth as "patriotic builders of the future," who are morally aligned with the country, able, and engaged with the national development agenda. By

way of contrast, U.S. accounts follow a “victim–hero–intervention” narrative template in which youth are framed as victims of authoritarian repression and as moral heroes guarding democratic ideals. Taken together, these conflicting representations indicate that Hong Kong youth have become the core symbolic target of the geopolitical discursive battleground. Yet, this can also be said about these opposing narratives tend to simplify youth agency into tools of rhetoric as opposed to defining actors.

5.2 Theoretical Significance: Integrating Constructivism and Strategic Narratives Perspective

This study adds nuance to existing discussions of identity politics and strategic narrative theory. It corroborates constructivist claims that identity is not essential but constituted through interaction - social and communicative. Most critically, it demonstrates that the process transcends the nation-state, being powerfully influenced by transnational narratives and relations of power. By incorporating strategic narrative theory, it is possible to see that narratives are not simply containers for meaning but are also tools of power—they determine who can speak, who is heard, and who remains silent. With this in mind, a new way of considering the ‘global’ in global competition now seems possible – enacted culturally and symbolically.

5.3 Practical Significance: Policy Implications and Reflections on Narrative Strategies

To the policymakers, this study is informative. The Chinese storyline is designed to establish a common identity based on development and national cohesion. This “development-first” mentality mirrors China’s mode of governance. However, this narrative construction has difficulty fulfilling the diverse value requests of the populace. The United States' narrative serves its outward-oriented values diplomacy, using a moralized narrative framework to undermine the legitimacy of its opponents. While this strategy can gain short-term support in international public opinion, it may intensify opposition and overlook local complexities.

Further research has found that the narratives of both sides show a clear path dependence in their strategic choices. China continues its narrative tradition of “development-oriented”, while the United States adheres to the discourse model of “value-oriented”. This path dependence to some extent limits the ability to interpret the complexity of Hong Kong youth's identity [11]. Hence, in order to be truly effective, youth policies need to move beyond the competition over symbols, attend to the actual needs and development autonomy of youth, particularly give space to and include the voices and multiple identities of Hong Kong youth, and they should avoid taking them as passive consumers of narratives. Policy makers must be aware that overly instrumentalized identity narratives may result in the opposite effect, further alienating youth.

5.4 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. It is predominantly concerned with the construction of official discourse and does not systematically examine the ways in which young people understand and/or resist such narratives. Studies to follow may utilize interviewing or surveying methods to study reception and perception, which would allow a more holistic understanding of the ways in which these narratives are taken up – or discarded – by the youth themselves. Furthermore, the integration of textual analysis with visual or social media content may shed light on the transmedia circulation of narratives across platforms. A longitudinal contrast and comparison, tracking shifting frames over time, could further enable an examination of the development of identity politics in varying geopolitical situations.

6 Conclusion

This study analyses the national identity of Hong Kong youth in the post–National Security Law era and the role of the Chinese and U.S. official narratives in reformulating it. After a discourse analysis of one hundred official texts, two competing narratives structures emerged: China’s “patriotic future builder” and America’s “victim–hero–intervener” matrix. Contrasting tales like these illustrate how youth identity has become a vital geopolitical and ideological battleground.

Theoretically, the study bridges constructivism and strategic narrative theory to show that identity formation is influenced not only by internal social processes but also by the deliberate narrative strategies of external powers. This synthesis offers a way to connect macro-level political competition with micro-level identity construction. Practically, the study cautions against reducing Hong Kong youth to symbols within global ideological conflicts. Instead, it calls for renewed attention to their diverse experiences, aspirations, and capacity for self-definition.

Ultimately, understanding how conflicting narratives shape and limit young people’s identities can enable both researchers and policy advocates to transcend rigid understandings of loyalty and resistance and see the nuanced, dialogic agency of youth who are embedded in politically contested environments.

References

1. Jo, S. S.: Toward Sino-American Ideological Clash? The Lasswellian World Revolution Approach. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 18(1), 35-62(2025).
2. Fong, B. C.: Great Power Competition in Non-sovereign Entities: US–China Tug-of-War over Hong Kong, 1950–2020. *Pacific Focus*, 37(2), 251-288(2022).
3. Adorjan, M., Khatani, P. V., & Chui, W. H.: The rise and ongoing legacy of localism as collective identity in Hong Kong: Resinicisation anxieties and punishment of political dissent in the post-colonial era. *Punishment & society*, 23(5), 650-674(2021).
4. Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A., & O’loughlin, B.: Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, war & conflict*, 7(1), 70-84(2014).

5. Ma, Eric K. W., and Anthony Y. H. Fung.: "Negotiating Local and National Identifications: Hong Kong Identity Surveys 1996-2006." *Asian Journal of Communication*, 17(2), 172–85(2007).
6. Lu, A., Cai, S., Zheng, S., Hu, H., & Song, P.: Stereotype and national attachment in Hong Kong Chinese context: a moderated mediation model of perceived inter-group relationship and age. *Social Indicators Research*, 135(1), 357-371(2018).
7. Jang, S. T., Halse, C., Lee, D. H. L., & Hon, Q. C. K.: Belongingness and national belonging among youth in Hong Kong. *Youth & Society*, 54(8), 1307-1329(2022).
8. Liu, M., & Zhong, J.: Between national and local: Identity representations of post-colonial Hong Kong in a local English newspaper. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 36(100401), 1-9(2020).
9. Cai, T., Tang, R., Wang, H., & Li, S. D.: One country two systems: a comparative study of national identity between Hong Kong and Macau. *Chinese Sociological Review*, 54(2), 107-130 (2022).
10. Pan, Z., & Kosicki, G. M.: Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political communication*, 10(1), 55-75(1993).
11. Wang, S., & Yang, D. Y.: Policy experimentation in China: The political economy of policy learning. *Journal of Political Economy*, 133(7), 2180-2228 (2025).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

