

Discursive Sovereignty: How China Constructs Hong Kong as an “Internal Affair”

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Abstract

This study examines the discursive construction of sovereignty in Hong Kong through a critical discourse analysis of political speeches, legal documents, and press releases spanning from the 1984 Sino-British negotiations to the post-2020 National Security Law era. The research aims to investigate how the totalitarian party-state in China legitimizes its authority over Hong Kong while simultaneously ignoring forms of British nationality held by Hongkongers, and how democratic states, particularly the United Kingdom, respond through visa and asylum pathways. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis, the study traces the historical and ideological roots of the narrative of “internal affairs” as constructed through key state discourses and examines how these discourses intersect with concepts of self-determination, civic participation, and legal frameworks. The findings reveal that China employs a combination of hegemonic persuasion and institutional control to frame Hongkongers’ political aspirations as illegitimate, while international responses reflect broader tensions between democratic protection and authoritarian compliance. The research highlights the ongoing contestation of norms surrounding sovereignty, rights, and freedom, illustrating how Hong Kong has become a frontline in the global struggle between democratic and authoritarian

discourses. The study concludes that understanding these dynamics provides insight into the mechanisms through which states assert power, control narratives, and shape transnational perceptions of legitimacy, with implications for both international relations and civic activism.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis; political discourses; National Security Law; British National (Overseas); Sino-British Joint Declaration*

INTRODUCTION

On September 29, 2025, Nathan Law, a former Hong Kong legislator now exiled in the United Kingdom, was denied entry into Singapore. While this incident made headlines on its own, it also reflects a deeper struggle between China's growing authoritarian influence and the defense of democratic norms in Asia. The 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration promised Hongkongers a high degree of autonomy, civil liberties, and the rule of law for fifty years. Although primarily a domestic framework, the Joint Declaration also carried symbolic international significance. Hong Kong's ability to engage independently in trade and certain international agreements demonstrates its unique autonomy under this arrangement. Singapore's refusal to admit Law illustrates how autonomy norms can be undermined when states, particularly those with authoritarian-leaning political systems, prioritize strategic alignment with Beijing over normative commitments. The decision effectively treats Hong Kong as part of China's political system, contrary to the international autonomy it was guaranteed.

Using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, this article examines how China's construction of Hong Kong as an "internal affair" operates as a political narrative within a broader discourse of sovereignty that normalizes the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy. To guide the analysis, this paper asks the following research questions:

1. What political discourses underpin the narrative of "internal affairs"?
2. What discursive strategies are used to construct a social reality of China-Hong Kong relations that legitimizes state intervention?

3. How does the narrative of “internal affairs” function to construct a model of regional order that legitimizes certain international actors and marginalizes others?

The paper argues that the narrative of “internal affairs”, rooted in Deng Xiaoping’s doctrine of patriotic belonging, the Basic Law’s inalienability clause, and post-National Security Law moralization, misrepresents the Sino-British Joint Declaration’s original intent under “one country, two systems” and challenges international norms of sovereignty and accountability.

Sociopolitical Context

China has consistently constructed matters relating to Hong Kong as its “internal affairs”. It frames any external support for Hongkongers as “interference”. A representative example of this narrative is China’s accusation that the United Kingdom was interfering in its “internal affairs” when the United Kingdom suspended its extradition treaty with Hong Kong following the imposition of the National Security Law. Beijing has also portrayed the Joint Declaration as a historic document with little contemporary relevance. However, this interpretation overlooks China’s explicit promise to Britain that Beijing will preserve Hong Kong’s autonomy and maintain its separate way of life, a commitment China has breached by the imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong on June 30, 2020. The issue, therefore, extends beyond an “internal affair”. It carries significant international implications for treaty credibility and the United Kingdom’s co-signatory obligations.

Demosistō was founded by Joshua Wong and Nathan Law on a call for the democratic self-determination of Hong Kong. Self-determination, a United Nations principle rooted in mid-twentieth-century decolonization movements, affirms the right of peoples to determine their own political future. This principle resonates with the slogan “Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong” (港人治港) enshrined in the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Although Law was elected to Hong Kong’s legislature in 2016, he was disqualified a year later through a Beijing-issued interpretation of the Basic Law, the city’s constitutional

document grounded in the principles of the Joint Declaration. This reinterpretation, two decades after the handover, enabled Beijing to criminalize democratic movements such as Demosistō under the pretext of defending national unity. Beijing now rejects the notion of self-determination because it implies sovereignty. Yet, if a referendum were ever held, one possible option might be for Hong Kong to remain under China's sovereignty. Law's election to the legislature indicates that a segment of Hongkongers supported greater democratic agency and the exercise of self-determination within the city-state, consistent with the autonomy promised under the Joint Declaration.

The United Kingdom's silence over Beijing's 1972 request for the United Nations to remove Hong Kong from the list of non-self-governing territories has allowed China to frame Hong Kong's future as an issue of sovereignty rather than decolonization. This omission now appears a historic mistake, as it precluded Hong Kong from exercising the right to self-determination under international law. China took political control over Hong Kong on July 1, 1997, following the United Kingdom's agreement to hand over its territory to the People's Republic on the promise of "one country, two systems". In response to China's violation of the Joint Declaration, the United Kingdom has now opened the door to 2.9 million British Nationals (Overseas) and their families to live, work, and study in the United Kingdom. In total, up to 5.4 million Hongkongers are eligible for settlement in the United Kingdom under the BN(O) scheme. BN(O) is a form of British nationality connected to residency in the British dependent territory of Hong Kong. The BN(O) pathway to British citizenship thus demonstrates a form of retrospective responsibility, albeit one that relocates its people to the mother country rather than restoring British rule in the outpost itself. In this sense, the United Kingdom's gesture represents an attempt to uphold its moral and historical obligations amid repression by a totalitarian party-state that continues to suppress opposing narratives about Hong Kong's sovereignty and right to self-government under the Joint Declaration (Wong, 2025b).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been extensively employed to investigate the political discourses surrounding Hong Kong. Among the most influential contributors is John Flowerdew, whose research has examined speeches and writings by both colonial and post-handover leaders, including Chris Patten and Tung Chee-hwa. Flowerdew's studies trace the formation of Hong Kong's foundational political principles (1997, 2016), the ideological framing of Chinese identity (2004b), and the metaphorical constructions of patriotism (Flowerdew & Leong, 2007). His monograph *Critical Discourse Analysis in Historiography: The Case of Hong Kong's Evolving Political Identity* (2011) synthesizes earlier analyses, demonstrating how political discourses shifted across the sovereignty transition. In later work, Flowerdew (2017) argues that Hong Kong's political identity developed in opposition to totalitarian authority, identifying recurring metaphors of conflict and resistance during the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

Beyond Flowerdew's contributions, other scholars have examined related discursive phenomena. Wang (2017) traces how colonial and post-handover governments constructed civic identity through policy addresses, while Ng (2020) analyses the recontextualization of Beijing's political voice under the Leung administration. W. Tang (2014) explores diasporic narratives and the imagining of Hong Kong beyond its territorial boundaries, and Wong (2024) shows how Carrie Lam's political discourses during the 2019 protests contributed to legitimizing the subsequent National Security Law. Wong (2025c) also examines how Hong Kong's National Security Law is underpinned by the discursive construction of patriotism towards the "motherland".

Political slogans in Hong Kong function as condensed sites of contestation. Leung (2024) reads "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times" as a call to redress grievances without prescribing solutions, while A. Tang (2022) highlights how it expresses democratic awareness and aspirations for freedom. Wong (2025a) interprets Hong Kong's anthem "Glory to Hong Kong", which contains the protest slogan, as a discursive artefact embodying resistance to Chinese political control over Hong Kong and demonstrating how

political expression extends beyond protest slogans into other symbolic modes of contestation in exile. Wong (2025d) also provides a critical discourse analysis of the slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times” and examines how it acquires new meanings in exile.

While CDA is often applied to large linguistic corpora, it is equally valuable for analyzing individual cases and specific discursive mechanisms. For example, Flowerdew (2004a) closely examines three politically charged texts to uncover how Hong Kong was discursively imagined as a “world-class city”, while Wong (2025d) examines the protest slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times”, along with other key political texts to derive the discursive construction of Hong Kong independence. These studies demonstrate CDA’s capacity to reveal ideology even in small-scale analyses. Similarly, this article analyses four key texts. These texts are treated as what Flowerdew describes as “clustering of related genres (that) occurs in the performance of a given social practice” (Flowerdew, 2004a, p. 588), to trace the discursive construction of Hong Kong as an “internal affair”. The analysis exposes how this narrative evolved through Hong Kong’s political history and contrasts it with Chris Patten’s articulation of Hong Kong as part of the wider democratic world.

Although existing studies illuminate local discourses, they leave unexamined the broader narratives through which Hong Kong is discursively positioned as an “internal affair”. Few discourse studies have integrated CDA with contemporary impact on international relations. Wong (2025a, 2025d), for instance, argues that the BN(O) passport functions as a living artefact containing an implicit presupposition: by referencing Hong Kong residency, it frames Hong Kong as territorially administered as a British Overseas Territory, thereby creating a counter-discourse to China’s narrative that the British should “regard Hong Kong as a part of China”. The present article continues this tradition and traces the linguistic and ideological mechanisms that shape such contested construction, showing how Hong Kong’s positioning as an “internal affair” has been discursively

maintained, continuously contested, and adapted across different historical eras and local and international contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The present article forms part of a broader documentary inquiry into how BN(O) status functions as a symbolic and political means of resisting China's totalitarian assault on Hong Kong. Instead of relying on traditional data collection methods such as interviews or ethnography, it adopts a documentary approach that analyses existing materials. These include official statements, media reports, YouTube content, and other public records. As Grant (2018) observes, such documents offer valuable insights into the dynamics of society.

Data Collection

For this article, the following texts were collected and downloaded from official websites:

- a) Deng Xiaoping's 1984 speech to selected Hongkongers during the national celebrations ahead of the signing of the Joint Declaration;
- b) the Sino-British Joint Declaration and its Memorandum;
- c) the Basic Law and its accompanying instruments; and
- d) Chief Executive Carrie Lam's 2021 invocation of "one's own nation" following the electoral reforms.

The variety of texts form genre colonies (Flowerdew, 2004a). They reveal how the narrative of Hong Kong as an "internal affair" is constructed.

Data Analysis

The analysis in this study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) as its main methodological framework, drawing particularly on Flowerdew's (2017) critical

discourse analysis in historiography (CDH). This approach emphasizes how discourse contributes to the construction and reinterpretation of historical narratives. Although the significance of historical context has long been recognized within CDA traditions (e.g., Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Fairclough, 2010), Flowerdew's model stands out for its explicit engagement with Hong Kong's political and historical development. Evolving alongside Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA) in the early 1990s, CDH shifts the analytical focus: while DHA situates discourse within history, CDH instead uses discourse as a lens through which history itself is written and re-evaluated.

Discursive elements were analyzed using four principal strategies: presupposition, othering, framing, and involvement. Presupposition addresses assumptions about the audience's knowledge or contextual conditions (Flowerdew, 2004b). Othering emphasizes perceived distinctions between groups, such as differentiating Chinese mainlanders from Hongkongers (Lin et al., 2022). Framing involves the deliberate selection of language to define actors, actions, and issues, often shaped by authoritative "primary definers" (Flowerdew & Leong, 2007). Involvement strategies foster a sense of connection between politicians and their audience (Flowerdew, 2004b). These strategies have been widely applied in Flowerdew's research on Hong Kong politics.

RESULTS

Early Discursive Framing of Hong Kong as an "Internal Affair"

The first text examined is Deng Xiaoping's 1984 address to a Hong Kong delegation in Beijing. Although he acknowledged the audience's varied social and political backgrounds, Deng presupposed unanimous support for China's "resumption of the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong" (Deng, 1994, p. 80). This phrasing strategically implies historical continuity, erasing Hong Kong's colonial past and presenting Chinese sovereignty as a natural restoration rather than a new political arrangement. Though his claim has never been tested by any international court, Deng's speech exemplifies early discursive efforts to legitimize

Hong Kong as China's "internal affair" through distorted historical framing. This framing not only presupposes unanimous acceptance of Chinese sovereignty but simultaneously suppresses Hongkongers' right to self-determination, reflecting a broader mechanism within China's political discourse whereby historical narrative and semantic control are employed to legitimate authoritarian authority.

Central to this narrative is the call for a "love for the motherland and for Hong Kong" (Deng, 1994, p. 80), a phrase that redefines belonging along national rather than civic lines. Deng's wording presupposes that Hongkongers' "motherland" is China, even though they held a form of British citizenship and identified politically with Britain's legal and democratic traditions. The term "motherland" thus operates ideologically and transforms emotional attachment into an expectation of political loyalty. This logic would later crystallize in the post-handover era, where "loving the nation and Hong Kong" (愛國愛港) became a requirement for nomination as a candidate in the Chief Executive election and, ultimately, an expression of loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rather than to the civic values inherited from Britain (Wong, 2025c).

In short, both the phrase "resumption of the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong" and the injunction to "love the motherland" entrench the framing of Hong Kong as an "internal affair". The former naturalizes sovereignty as historical restoration, while the latter moralizes political loyalty as national belonging.

Discursive Framing Written into the Sino-British Joint Declaration

In the Joint Declaration, both the United Kingdom and China described the 1997 handover as a "transfer of government" in the Joint Declaration text (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, 1984a, Article 5). This terminology frames the event as an administrative handover rather than a return of Hong Kong to a motherland which Hongkongers had never politically recognized as theirs. The negotiations excluded the local population. This exclusion effectively integrated Hong Kong into a totalitarian party-state without the consent of its citizens.

The characterization of the handover as a “recovery” and “resumption of sovereignty” appeared solely in a unilateral statement by China in Article 1 of the Joint Declaration (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, 1984a, Article 1). This reflects China’s rejection of the legal validity of previous treaties ceding Hong Kong, using the terms “recover” and “resume” to assert historical claims. While the United Kingdom accepted this wording to facilitate a smooth transition, it did so as a diplomatic compromise rather than a legal endorsement (Wong, 2024). Under Article 2, the United Kingdom nonetheless acknowledged China’s position, declaring it would “restore” Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, 1984a, Article 2). By emphasizing “resumption” and “restoration”, China established a discursive foundation for framing Hong Kong as an “inalienable part” of China. This framing pre-emptively legitimized its later narrative of an “internal affair”.

Discursive Framing Became Law

The notion of Hong Kong as an “inalienable part” of China was formally entrenched in the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s post-handover constitution (The Government of the HKSAR, 2021a). This designation provides the ontological foundation for Beijing’s broader claim that Hong Kong affairs are purely “internal”, thereby transforming a historical and international issue into one of domestic sovereignty. This phrase, repeated four times across the Basic Law and its annexes, presupposes that Chinese sovereignty is both natural and unquestionable. Hardliners frequently cite this constitutional wording to legitimize the view that Hong Kong’s sovereignty falls exclusively within China’s domestic jurisdiction. Through such textual repetition, the narrative of the “internal affair” becomes institutionalized, transforming a political claim into a legal axiom. The 2017 disqualification of Nathan Law and other pro-democracy legislators demonstrates how this framing is operationalized through legal and administrative mechanisms to discipline dissenting voices.

Yet, this constitutional narrative obscures Hong Kong's plural legal and civic identities. Although its territory now falls under Chinese control, many Hongkongers retain British nationality and continue to identify with the legal and political traditions inherited from British governance (Flowerdew, 2004b, 2016, 2017). Beijing's insistence on exclusive sovereignty therefore functions not only as a territorial claim but also as an ideological project aimed at erasing alternative identities and loyalties. By downplaying Britain's historical sovereignty and Hongkongers' enduring nationality ties, the CCP's discourse seeks to consolidate national unity by redefining Hong Kong's identity through the lens of the "internal affair".

Discursive Framing Explicitly Defined

Across four decades of political discourses, the phrases "resumption of sovereignty", "love for the motherland", Hong Kong as an "inalienable part" of China, and, more recently, "one's own nation", have collectively entrenched the framing of Hong Kong as an "internal affair". Each expression performs a distinct discursive function culminating in a narrative that denies Hong Kong's civic distinctiveness inherited from British colonial rule.

The Basic Law's repeated assertion that Hong Kong is an "inalienable part" of China transformed a diplomatic settlement into a legal doctrine of national unity. This discourse re-emerged with renewed force under the post-National Security Law regime. Following the National People's Congress deliberation on the principle of "patriots administering Hong Kong", the then Chief Executive Carrie Lam declared that "the criteria for a patriot are to respect one's own nation, sincerely support the resumption of the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong by the Motherland, and not to impair Hong Kong's prosperity and stability" (The Government of the HKSAR, 2021b, para. 3). Lam's discourse marks a significant shift from her earlier image as a professional civil servant shaped by British administrative values to a figure reproducing CCP ideological language. The phrase

“resumption of the exercise of sovereignty” mirrors the CCP’s long-standing narrative that Hong Kong was merely returned to its rightful owner. By adopting this wording, Lam legitimizes Beijing’s view that Hong Kong’s governance and political reform are purely domestic concerns, discursively reinforcing the “internal affair” frame.

Lam’s statement also deploys presuppositional and reframing strategies to redefine patriotism as political obedience rather than civic virtue. The presupposition that “one’s own nation” refers to China assumes an uncontested national identity. This linguistic move collapses the “one country, two systems” promise into a single national logic, erasing the space for plural loyalties or competing interpretations of belonging. In doing so, Lam’s discourse naturalizes Beijing’s sovereignty claim as common sense and positions dissent as the Other who betrays the nation. Her speech thus exemplifies how the language of patriotism operates as an ideological mechanism that entrenches Hong Kong’s subordination under the “internal affair” narrative.

DISCUSSION

Political Discourses Underpinning the Narrative of “Internal Affairs”

Despite the promise of “one country, two systems” being enshrined into the Joint Declaration, Deng’s appeal to patriotism sought to overwrite this distinct civic identity with a notion of national unity framed as an “internal affair”. Yet, Hong Kong’s civic identity was shaped entirely under British governance. This identity is grounded in the rule of law, individual freedoms, and administrative autonomy. For many, these values, rather than loyalty to a distant socialist state, formed the basis of their attachment to Hong Kong (Flowerdew, 2016, 2017). Deng’s discourse thus laid the foundation for a broader ideological project: redefining Hongkongers’ sense of belonging by erasing British values and transforming them into political obedience to a totalitarian party-state. The imposed conception of the “motherland”

has continued to conflict with Hongkongers' self-understanding, both before and after the enactment of the National Security Law.

In its aftermath, the United Kingdom opened the BN(O) pathway for up to 5.4 million Hongkongers to resettle in Britain and gain British citizenship. Given Beijing's breach of its commitments under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, Hong Kong's status is far from a purely domestic matter. This exchange illustrates how competing narratives of sovereignty and belonging continue to reproduce ideological boundaries between civic autonomy and nationalist control, revealing the enduring tension between Hong Kong's historical civic identity and the state-imposed nationalism that followed the transfer of sovereignty.

Using the involvement indexical "we", Hong Kong's last British governor, Chris Patten, warned that the erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong is not merely a local concern but a signal to the democratic free world (BBC News, 2023). Patten framed Hong Kong's freedoms as "the sort of freedom we take for granted in most Western societies" (48:50), thereby positioning Hong Kong within the moral and cultural sphere of the West. Under his governorship, Patten highlighted that British rule had shaped the territory's institutions to support a free-market economy, uphold the rule of law, protect individual liberties, and promote democratic norms (Flowerdew, 1997, 2016). Although a fully elected legislature was established before the 1997 handover, Beijing swiftly reversed these democratic gains (Wang, 2017). These British-influenced institutions continue to anchor Hong Kong in a liberal democratic tradition. Patten noted that attacks on the kinds of liberties common in Western democracies carry wider consequences if left unchecked. With its historical ties to the United Kingdom and longstanding civic identity, Hong Kong has long been regarded as a space where democratic norms were respected. It is therefore misleading to frame Hong Kong as part of China's "internal affairs", since its political and legal systems originated from and continue to embody Britain's governance model.

Discursive Legitimization of State Intervention Through the Construction of China-Hong Kong Relations

During the Sino-British negotiations, the Chinese government insisted Hongkongers would become Chinese at the transfer of sovereignty irrespective of their British nationality status. This was written into the Memorandum appended to the Joint Declaration (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, 1984b). Hongkongers' Chinese nationality thus has been imposed by Beijing without the consent of those most affected. This imposition stems from Deng Xiaoping's flawed understanding of Hong Kong's sovereignty, as discussed above. His historical distortion continues to shape China's reinterpretation of the past today. In this sense, China is enforcing its rules and values on a people once benevolently governed by Britain but now subjected to what can be described as a form of "Chinese colonialism" (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 4). In effect, a significant portion of Hongkongers holds a form of British nationality that the totalitarian party-state ignores, along with the British values and identity enshrined under the Joint Declaration. Deng's distortion of history illustrates how hegemonic control is exercised to legitimize state authority. A comparable discursive mechanism operated in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4, 1989, when the Chinese government distorted its verdict by framing the student protesters as counterrevolutionaries, thereby legitimizing the state's use of lethal force that killed thousands.

To survive under a new order, the colonized Hong Kong elites persecute those who refuse to assimilate, othering them as a danger to "our country", a phrase that ironically serves only as a façade for the elites themselves. Under extreme duress, their survival strategies bear resemblance to historical instances where oppressed communities were forced into morally compromising positions in order to survive, such as Marshal Philippe Pétain in Vichy France, who outwardly complied with superior powers to preserve stability or avoid harsher reprisals. In

Hong Kong, this dynamic has facilitated a form of cultural and institutional cleansing, with the government inadvertently assisting the occupying state in reshaping society by silencing opposition through legal mechanisms (Wong, 2024).

But as Lee and Law (2016) argue, “the colonized resist by turning to their past and seeking connectedness with other colonial subjects to form solidarity” (p. 90). While originally framed in relation to Western colonialism, this logic of resistance is recontextualized here to describe how Hongkongers resist assimilation under a new political order. Wong (2025a; 2025d) illustrates how the protest anthem “Glory to Hong Kong” and the slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times” function as cultural artefacts of resistance, contesting the government’s authority and reframing Hongkongers as the moral counterpoint to the state. Resisting the Hong Kong elites, therefore, becomes a means through which two imagined communities in Hong Kong are formed in opposition to each other (Flowerdew, 2017). While Hongkongers have engaged in an ongoing struggle to reclaim their identity, the combined power of Beijing and the local elites has ultimately dominated the discursive field. The brutality of the National Security Law has thus rendered these subaltern voices silent.

The assistance in transforming the community is most clearly exemplified by Carrie Lam, the then Chief Executive who presided over China’s imposition of the National Security Law. Initially affirming core British liberal-democratic values “such as inclusiveness, freedoms of the press and of speech, respect for human rights, and systems which have taken generations to establish” (“In victory speech, Hong Kong chief executive-elect Carrie Lam vows to heal divisions, reach out to young”, 2017, para. 19), Lam later aligned herself with the totalitarian party-state after failing to provide a solution to the 2019 protests. Following the 2021 electoral changes, she invoked the need to support “one’s own nation”, even though her own family are British citizens.

“Internal Affairs” as a Discursive Construction of Regional Order and International Legitimacy

Power can be conceptualized along two main dimensions (Statham, 2022). In everyday or non-academic contexts, it is often seen as a form of domination, exercised from above through institutional mechanisms such as laws. The National Security Law is a clear example of this form of power. In this view, states enforce compliance among their populations by exerting control and dominance, using institutions capable of punishing dissent or resistance. The second dimension emphasizes hegemony, where power operates by persuading subordinate groups that the state’s values and authority are legitimate. Here, discourse is central to the process of legitimization. For instance, the totalitarian party-state asserts its authority by convincing the international community that Hong Kong rightfully belongs to China, thereby rendering discussions of any alternative status illegitimate. Such hegemonic narratives have been systematically promoted to shape not only Hongkongers’ perceptions and acceptance of the state’s authority, but also those of other sovereign states.

The implications of China’s narrative of “internal affairs” thus reverberate internationally, affecting how states position themselves in relation to China’s asserted sovereignty. The narrative functions as a strategy of legitimization, delineating acceptable forms of state behavior and silencing competing narratives about Hong Kong’s right to self-government. The international responses to Nathan Law’s case reveal this process in action. Singapore’s refusal to admit him, despite his valid Singapore-issued visa, demonstrates how some states reproduce China’s framing of Hong Kong as an “internal affair”. Its justification that hosting Law would not be in its “national interest” reflects a discursive alignment with China’s narrative, prioritizing sovereignty and stability over human rights and political asylum. The United Kingdom, by contrast, granted asylum to Law, reflecting both the limits of the BN(O) pathway and the discourse of democratic protection and

historical obligation. This decision prompted China to reinforce its “internal affairs” narrative.

This case also highlights the broader discursive struggle over Hongkongers’ citizenship and belonging. China’s directive that other states should not recognize BN(O) passports extends the “internal affairs” narrative into the global arena, normalizing its authority and delegitimizing Britain’s ongoing responsibility under the Joint Declaration. Democratic states such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada have framed their visa pathways as instruments of humanitarian protection, while authoritarian-leaning states either align with China’s narrative or remain silent. Even large democratic countries such as Indonesia, which maintain active legal and diplomatic relations with Hong Kong, have remained publicly neutral, avoiding commentary on Hong Kong’s political autonomy or the National Security Law. Collectively, these examples show how China’s narrative of “internal affairs” operates as a transnational strategy of discursive colonization: it compels even democratic states to negotiate, accommodate, or internalize China’s ideological dominance under the guise of respecting sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

Through critical discourse analysis in historiography, this article has contributed to an understanding of China’s narrative of “internal affairs” by tracing the historical development of its underpinning discourses. Singapore’s denial of Nathan Law’s entry illustrates how discursive constructions of legitimacy shape both domestic actions and international responses, reflecting a world increasingly divided between states that uphold democratic norms through discourse and those that accommodate China’s narratives. By breaching the Joint Declaration and framing Hong Kong’s right to self-determination as illegitimate, Beijing’s discourse challenges global interpretations of sovereignty, rights, and treaty obligations.

The United Kingdom’s expansion of the BN(O) pathway for Hongkongers exemplifies how democratic states deploy counter-discourses that reaffirm liberal

notions of rights and citizenship. This response not only resists China's narrative of sovereignty but also exposes the fragility of global consensus on human rights when authoritarian discourse gains normative influence.

Democratic states' extension of asylum and citizenship pathways for Hongkongers can be seen as producing counter-discourses that contest Beijing's hegemonic framing. Yet even within democracies, the reach of China's discursive power highlights the fragility of global norms surrounding sovereignty, rights, and freedom. Once a bridge between systems, Hong Kong has become a discursive frontline where competing narratives of democracy and authoritarianism intersect, showing that China's portrayal of Hong Kong as an "internal affair" carries implications far beyond its borders.

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