

Exhibiting Nationalism: National Identity in Museums in Hong Kong

Michael Masterson¹

August 28, 2026

12,375 Words

Abstract

In the early 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party sought to revitalize its nationalist legitimacy in mainland China with the Patriotic Education Campaign. Following the National Security Law and attendant crackdown in Hong Kong in 2020, a similar transformation is taking place centered on the territory's museums. I conducted four rounds of field work from Winter 2017-18 to Summer 2026, to describe changing national identity narratives and to build a theory about the role of museums in propaganda more broadly. I find that official national narratives have shifted sharply towards mainland narratives that emphasize Chinese unity, humiliation, and pride, Hong Kong culture as reducible to Chinese culture, and negative emotions towards Japan and Britain. Further, museums provide a unique tool for identity construction but also enable subversive alternative interpretations. Authorities can craft exhibits to limit grounds for alternative interpretations but these alterations, such as increasing the text to artifact ratio, also decrease the attractiveness of museums. For this reason, governments will only shift towards control when alternative interpretations pose acute threats.

In 2019 and 2020, Hong Kong was rocked by massive protests, first against a bill that would have allowed extradition to mainland China and second against a National Security Law through which the People's Republic of China (PRC) exerted greater control over Hong Kong and that many saw as a de facto end to Hong Kong's special status under One Country, Two Systems (Hung 2022).

¹ All references to exhibits and historical sites are based on the author's fieldwork unless otherwise noted. All quotations from exhibits and displays are the author's translation of the Chinese text on display at these sites unless otherwise noted. For consistency, all Chinese text in this paper is written in simplified characters even when the original was written in tradition script.

Scholars have closely analyzed how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) responded to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, which revealed weaknesses in its legitimacy, with a Patriotic Education Campaign that cultivated nationalism (Zhao 1998; Wang 2012). The CCP in cooperation with the pro-Beijing government in Hong Kong is now attempting a similar transformation. In October 2023 Hong Kong's Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu announced that the Hong Kong government would begin promoting "patriotic education to enhance national identity and appreciation of the richness and beauty of the traditional Chinese culture" (Lee 2023). He explained that this would be carried out by creating the Chinese Culture Promotion Office under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, which oversees the territory's museums and parks, and through the territory's museums. The centrality of museums to propaganda makes sense in Hong Kong, because unlike larger territories, all Hongkongers can easily reach a museum located anywhere in Hong Kong.

This campaign provides an opportunity to further understand museums as a propaganda tool. I use a broad definition of propaganda that includes all speech used to either support or undermine ideas for a political purpose, regardless of sincerity and whether what is said is true (Stanley 2017, 52). Different types of propaganda serve different purposes such as persuasion and signaling state strength (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Huang 2015). Museums are especially suited to persuasion. Theories from museum studies have long argued that museums enabled elites to transform citizens, leading them to "modify their thoughts feelings, and behavior" (Bennett 2002, 18, 24). Experimental research has confirmed that museum exhibits are especially effective at persuading viewers and activating their emotions, particularly if the museum presents a

single narrative rather than a balanced portrayal of competing narratives (Balcells et al. 2022; Balcells and Voytas 2025). This makes museums a critical site for identity construction, which requires citizens to internalize the presented narrative to be effective.

Understanding the content of national narratives is critical as research increasingly finds that the effects of nationalism on key outcomes, including international conflict, depends on its content (Powers 2022; Ko 2023). This study casts light not only on narratives of national identity within Hong Kong but also those of China, the world's strongest rising power, as a whole, because efforts to bring Hong Kong narratives in line with mainland narratives allows a unique perspective on mainland narratives by comparison with narratives on display in Hong Kong prior to 2020 that covered many of the same historical events but with very different framing and emotional registers.

To describe national narratives and to build inductively on theories of museums and propaganda, I conducted fieldwork in Hong Kong during Winter 2017–18, and the Summers of 2024, 2025, and 2026, during which, I visited 9 Museums and Historical Sites (see Figure 1). This longitudinal field work provides not only unique grounds for comparison but also preserves evidence that would otherwise be lost to time as exhibits incompatible with new narratives are altered or eliminated. One particularly important site, the Hong Kong Museum of History, I visited on all four trips, and another key site, the Costal Defense Museum, I visited on three of the four trips. Other museums could not be visited across all periods because they either opened during the period of study, such as the Hong Kong Palace Museum that opened in 2022, or closed during the period of study, such as the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Museum. However, these openings and closures also illustrate the changing national narratives exhibited in Hong Kong.

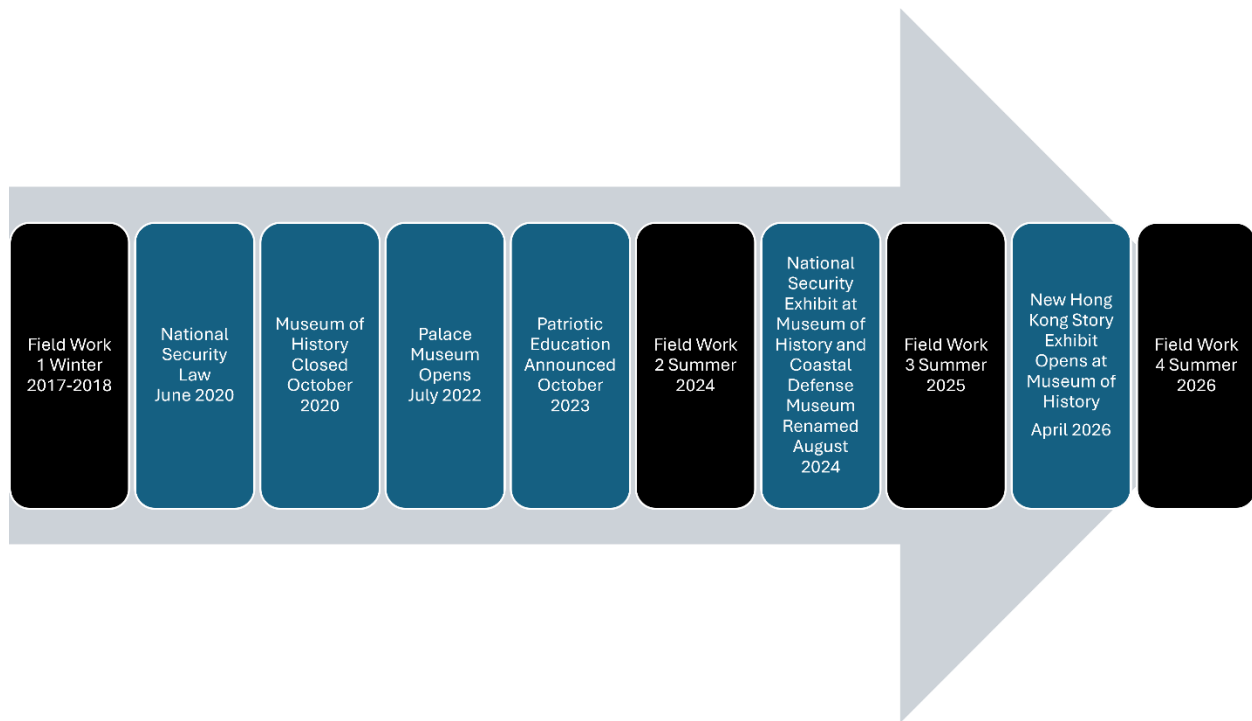


Figure 1: Summary of Field Work in Hong Kong

I find that national narratives presented at museums and historical sites have shifted sharply towards mainland narratives that emphasize Chinese unity and pride, Hong Kong culture as reducible to Chinese culture, and negative emotional narratives towards Japan and the former imperialist powers, especially Britain, embodied in the phrase ‘Century of National Humiliation’ that refers to the time period from the first Opium War in 1840 to the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Wang 2012). This is particularly notable as some scholars have claimed that such humiliation narratives “are no longer central to the increasingly self-assertive and aspirational national metanarrative” in the PRC (Chang 2021, 2022, 991), while others have concluded humiliation narratives remain important (Qian and Liang 2026, 2). This debate is crucial as scholars have linked these narratives of national humiliation to a higher propensity for international conflict (Wang 2012; Callahan 2010; Masterson 2024). In my fieldwork in

Hong Kong, I find both an increased emphasis on national humiliation as compared with the period before 2020 and an increased emphasis on Chinese national pride, which suggests that these narratives are best seen as two sides of the same coin rather than as competing narratives in which one has been sidelined in favor of the other. In this telling, a formerly humiliated China is portrayed as having been raised to greatness by the CCP of which Chinese should feel proud.

I also find that regimes that use museums as a tool of propaganda must navigate a trade-off between control of narrative presentation and the attractiveness of these museums to their target audience. I construct an inductive theory of features associated with a greater emphasis on control, including increased reliance on textual displays, increased security presence in museums, use of recordings rather than interactions with docents, and restricting visitors' pathway through the museum. I also theorize that governments will prioritize control when alternate interpretations are especially threatening. I find in Hong Kong that the government has shifted significantly towards a preference for control since 2020, the same period over which it began attempting to alter identity perceptions in Hong Kong in a way that could be anticipated to provoke resistance.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section lays out my theory about the balance between narrative control and museum attractiveness. The third section analyzes my field work in Hong Kong to describe the changes in narratives of national identity presented and strategies of narrative control used after 2020. The final section offers concluding comments.

Museums and Message Control

To understand the potential effects of museum exhibits on visitors' understanding of their own identities as well as state attempts to control these understandings, I draw on psychology to theorize exhibits as sources of affordances (Gibson 2015). Broadly speaking, affordances are aspects of the environment that affect cognition either by providing the preconditions for certain actions or constraining others (Greeno 1994). In the context of collective identity and historical narratives, affordances are sources of information about group history that provide the raw material for constructing collective identity content. These affordances invite some interpretations and foreclose others (Babińska et al. 2025, 3).

The other area from which I draw theoretical inspiration is a combination of the work on experimental methods and that on media effects. We can conceive of the state's motive in designing an exhibit as seeking maximize the affordances associated with its preferred identity content while minimizing those that fuel alternative interpretations. This is analogous to a researcher seeking to create an experimental condition that treats respondents on the intended variable without altering other variables. In experimental terms, researchers do not want their treatment to be "bundled," meaning that the treatment contains multiple manipulations that each could affect the outcome (Gerber et al. 2017, 2). In the same way, states do not want their pro-regime narrative exhibits bundled with affordances that could support alternative interpretations. The form of media used to send a message greatly affects both the control the sender has over the content of the message and the room for audiences to interpret the message.

While control decreases the space for subversive interpretations, it also decreases the attractiveness of exhibits. The most obvious form this trade-off between control and attractiveness takes is the ratio of texts to artifacts. However, images tend to be more attractive to audiences but are also “more open or ambiguous in meaning” compared with text (Page et al. 2022, 7). This illustrates a larger principle of exhibits containing more vs. less information in which the response of citizens to exhibits with more information is “less predictable” because they may use this information to support a variety of interpretations (Shr et al. 2019, 384).

For example, a plaque with text about soldiers charging the enemies’ defenses for national glory conveys the intended interpretation less ambiguously than a photo of soldiers making this charge, which could be interpreted in any number of ways, including potentially subversive ones, such as anger at the authorities that sent them to their deaths (Bennett 2002, 146–47). An exhibit with too many artifacts and too little text might provide citizens with the material to construct their own narratives of history, while an exhibit with too much text and too few artifacts might come across as stale and lifeless, leading to reduced attendance and reduced attentiveness of those who do visit (D. Y. Ho 2017, 15).

Governments recognize the value of attractive exhibits. For example, the PRC Central Committee Secretariat instructed in 1959 that museum exhibits should be “life-like, lively, and clear” (Denton 2014, 55). A government’s willingness to sacrifice this attractiveness for control reflects both how strictly the government seeks to maintain control generally and how sensitive it is to control over the message conveyed in the museum specifically. The need for control also rises when the government anticipates that

visitors might be more likely to interpret exhibits subversively. I find that exhibits in Hong Kong, become much more text heavy relative to the number of artifacts on display following the crackdown associated with the National Security Law in 2020.

This theory about the interpretability of media is not the same as theories from media studies about hot and cold media, which argue that cold media leaves greater room for audience interpretation by leaving more blanks for them to fill in (McLuhan and Lapham 1995, 22–23). My theory of exhibits as affordances is in many ways the opposite of this, arguing that additional information and detail provide viewers resources to construct their own interpretation. It is not the information that is left out that allows interpretation but the information that is present that provides viewers with interpretable raw material.

Another area in which control and attractiveness trade off relates to museum security measures. The more guards present in a museum, the greater the regulation of visitor conduct and the more visitors feel the disciplining gaze of authority, which may lead them to self-regulate their conduct and even, to some extent, their thoughts. On the other hand, no one wants to contemplate art or historical artifacts in a room filled with security guards. Museum designers recognized this as far back as the founding of the British National Gallery in early 1800s, which lead to the decision to limit guards to two per room and rely on crowds to supervise each other (Bennett 2002, 55). When the state fears the loyalty of citizens and cannot trust them to police each other's conduct, it must implement greater security measures, which in order to deter citizens must be visible. For example, authorities may fear vandalization of national symbols tied to the state that might be destroyed in acts of resistance. Consistent with this, the national se-

curity exhibit at the Hong Kong Museum of history, which opened in 2025, condemned protestors' vandalization of PRC flags, included PRC flags as an important part of the exhibit, and featured a significantly greater security presence than previous versions of the museums.

National Identity in Museums and Historical Sites in Hong Kong

Table 1: Summary of National Narratives in Hong Kong Museums and Historical Sites Over Time

	Before 2020	After 2020
Who We Are	Hongkongers and sometimes Chinese (contested)	Chinese and proud of it Loyalty to China implies loyalty to the CCP
Relationship to Japan	Negative but mostly without emotional emphasis	Negative with strong emotional emphasis
Relationship to Britain	Mixed but largely positive	Negative
Control	Moderate with some space for contestation	High with little room for message variance or contestation

Hong Kong before 2020

This section is based on my fieldwork in Hong Kong during Winter 2017–18, which puts it prior to the 2019 extradition bill that triggered protests, the 2020 National Security Law, and the 2023 launch of patriotic education. During this period, Hong Kong museums and historical sites had space to depart from PRC narratives. They centered the history and experience of the people of Hong Kong, up to and including narratives

that posited a unique Hong Kong identity that, while not being exclusive of wider Chinese identities, was not necessarily dependent on them either. Further, museums showed a preference for attractiveness over control, featuring large, varied collections of vibrant artifacts and a relatively minimal security presence compared with after 2020.

Hong Kong Museum of History

The most important site of memory construction in Hong Kong is the Hong Kong Museum of History, which I visited during all four rounds of field work.² It was founded during the British colonial period in 1962 and moved to its current massive 17,500 square meter site in 1998, after the handover (Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2025). Despite the decision to revamp the museum immediately following the handover, the version on display in January 2018 showed remarkable independence from the PRC narrative. In my analysis that follows, I will focus the “The Hong Kong Story” permanent exhibit which took up the vast majority of the museum’s floor space.

I was also struck by the large number of visually striking artifacts on display, such as life-sized figures on various festivals and cultural activities. These exhibits were in the open as opposed to encased in glass. All of this made the museum very attractive to visitors. The wealth of visual exhibits invited visitors to form their own interpretations of the artifacts rather than strictly rely on the provided text.

The first exhibit covered the geological formation of Hong Kong Island. This is remarkable because the formation of Hong Kong Island by volcanic activity sets it apart

² To refresh my memory and check exact texts for quotes, I also consulted the Hong Kong Free Press’ photo archive of “The Hong Kong Story” exhibit that was created just before the Museum closed for its post National Security Law renovations in October 2020 (Hong Kong Free Press, 2026).

from the mainland. The appeal to natural history is one way to elongate the national past (Bennett, 2002, pp. 149–150). For example, writing about natural history in Australian national understanding, Lowenthal comments, “the Australian heritage incorporates not only the few decades since European discovery but the long reaches of unrecorded time comprised in Aboriginal life and, before that, in the history of nature itself . . . Thus the felt past expands, enabling Australia to equal the antiquity of any nation” (86). In the same way the portrayal of Hong Kong’s geologic past implicitly invites viewers to imagine a pre-China Hong Kong in which current Hong Kong identity finds its anchor. The preface to the exhibit invited readers to explore Hong Kong’s “four hundred million years of history and culture” (历史文化), which formed an interesting contrast with later displays that argued Hong Kong culture formed a part of ancient Yue culture in South China, which the museum dated to “about three to four thousand years ago.” Reading between the lines a visitor could have noted this implied about 396 million years of pre-China Hong Kong.

Continuing this theme of representing a Hong Kong that while associated with China has an identity that is not simply reducible to China, the museum featured a large globe that an official pamphlet explained allows “visitors to locate China and Hong Kong.” Similarly, the fourth exhibition hall’s focus on “Folk Culture in Hong Kong,” suggests the existence of a unique culture with a long history in Hong Kong that includes groups with their own “customs and beliefs” while at the same time placing these groups in the context of, without necessarily reducing them to, a larger Chinese identity by classifying them into “the four principle ethnic groups of Hong Kong and South China.”

The Museum of History never went as far in presenting an explicitly separate Hong Kong identity as museums in Taiwan that display separate timelines for Taiwan's history and the history of China. The museum's attention to events in the mainland and incorporation of these events into The Hong Kong Story clearly placed Hong Kong within the context of China. For example, a sign introducing the prehistoric exhibits claimed that archaeological findings show "Hong Kong's prehistoric culture is aligned to the ancient Yue Culture of South China. As a result, archaeologists believe that Hong Kong's early inhabitants originated from ancient Yue tribes." This posits both a primordial cultural link with China as well as a common decent. One placard makes the political implications explicit with respect to Hong Kong's status as part of China, listing the Chinese "jurisdiction" (县治) that governed Hong Kong from 214 BCE to 1841 AD.

However, the museum also differed from the PRC narrative in its portrayal of national others and its emotional register. Representations of the Opium Wars and the British colonial period lacked the language of national humiliation associated with the mainland narrative. The representation of British colonialism was also much more nuanced than a strictly negative portrayal. For example, the exhibit on the start of the British period was titled "Hong Kong's Opening to Trade and Early Development." The phrase early development indicated that the economic development that took place prior to the British colonial period was relatively minimal and signaled the importance of the British period in the city's development. An official pamphlet explained that the exhibit covered "developments" (发展) in politics, governance, people's livelihood, and education" that took place during the British period. Describing these events as "developments", put them in a clearly positive context. While the exhibit covered discrimination against Chi-

nese during the British period, this was not a focus of the exhibit and was not described in the language of national humiliation.

I only found one mention of national humiliation in the entire museum. It occurred during a video featured in the museum's 7th exhibit, which focused on the Japanese occupation. According to my field notes, which capture the gist if the not the exact words of the video, the narration said, "no picture or description could do justice to the suffering and humiliation caused by the Japanese Invasion."

Interestingly, much more focus was placed on the British as defenders of Hong Kong from Japan relative to the activities of Communist guerrillas, which were only mentioned in passing. Narratives of pride in Chinese resistance against Japan were muted if present at all.

Further, showing the space for viewpoints that challenged the PRC line, one photo even featured Hong Kong citizens marching in 1989 in solidarity with the Tiananmen protesters. The text accompanying it said that more than one million Hongkongers took part and demanded "democratic reforms" (民主改革). While this display was relatively small and did not mention the killing of protesters in Beijing, it still is remarkable that it was featured at all and shows that during this period there was still space even in official narratives for topics that would be completely off limits in the mainland.

The portion of the museum in which the PRC narrative was the most visible was the final section titled "Modern Metropolis and the Return to China." The final exhibit of the museum and the centerpiece of this section was a video, titled "Looking Back on Sino-Hong Kong relations from 1841 to 1997" that culminated in the story of the handover.

After the British takeover, the video showed a Chinese person looking through a fence, suggesting a sense of sadness that the Chinese people have been separated. For the British period after WWII, the video emphasized natural disasters, riots, and poverty in Hong Kong. This was in contrast to the museum's portrayal in the exhibit dedicated to period, Birth and Early Growth of the City, which is described above. The handover ceremony was shown with joyous music, fireworks, and close ups of happy Chinese officials.

Hong Kong Coastal Defense Museum

The Hong Kong Coastal Defense Museum was located in an old coastal fortress and covered the history of coastal defense in Hong Kong. It particularly focused on Britain's fight against Japan in defense of Hong Kong in what it called the "Battle for Hong Kong" (香港保卫战). According to a now inaccessible page on the museum's website, the decision to preserve the site was made in 1993, but the museum did not open to the public until 2000. According to a plaque in the museum, Dr Solomon Matthew Bard, who served in the Hong Kong Volunteer Defense Corp during the Battle for Hong Kong, was the source for many of the displays. The museum presented a largely positive view of the British as brave defenders of Hong Kong. I first visited the museum on January 6, 2018.

Near the compound's entrance sat several British military vehicles with a sign that said in English and Chinese "treasure (爱护) our heritage (文物). Please do not sit on the exhibits." A more literal translation of 文物, is 'cultural relic.' In the PRC cultural relics have important status in museums and are used as "symbols of the nation" (D. Y.

Ho 2017, 4). This makes it especially remarkable that these British vehicles would be labeled that way, presenting a version of Hong Kong identity that included the British period as part of its heritage. Even more remarkably, these vehicles were too new to have been used against Japan. According to the placard these tanks were brought to Hong Kong during and after the Korean War, making them the same kinds of vehicles that fought against PRC troops and PRC-backed North Korean forces. In this way, the display positioned the PRC as more other to Hong Kong than Britain.

The exhibits in the main museum building continued this ambivalent portrayal of the relationship between Hong Kong and China. A display on the Ming period that described pirates who troubled Hong Kong noted that while they are commonly referred to as “Japanese pirates” (倭寇), their membership frequently included Chinese. By presenting both Chinese pirates and Ming defenders, the exhibit depicts a China that is simultaneously self and other.

Further, presenting Britain as part of Hong Kong’s identity, the exhibit on the British colonial period in Hong Kong was titled “The British Period” making it comparable to “The Qing Period” exhibit that preceded it and unlike “The Japanese Occupation” exhibit that followed it. However, in other parts of the museum, the British period was referred to as an occupation, indicating the coexistence of multiple views of Britain. Even these more negative portrayals of Britain lacked the language of national humiliation. The museum did contain some limited emotional language referring to the Japanese occupation, with one placard stating that the occupation was a “miserable period” (悲惨岁月) for the Hong Kong people. The placard described the poverty as well as food and fuel shortages of the era.

British forces were portrayed as having fought bravely in defense of Hong Kong during the Second World War. For example, a display on the Royal Hong Kong Regiment (The Volunteers) said, “they fought stubbornly and bravely, and suffered heavy casualties in some of the fiercest battles . . . The courage of the Volunteers of the 4th Battery in fighting off the Japanese at Pak Sha Wan was outstanding.”³ Another placard labeled “The Lasting Honour” described volunteer corps members making a “gallant last stand” against the Japanese. A life-size model of two of these soldiers, pictured below, accompanied the display. In contrast to its focus on the Battle for Hong Kong, the museum only briefly mentioned communist guerrilla resistance against Japan.

One room in the rear of the museum was devoted to the Hong Kong Garrison of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). This room seemed out of place relative to the other exhibits in the museum. A sign noted that the People’s Liberation Army Hong Kong Garrison provided “all exhibits and images in this gallery,” indicating it was prepared by a different group than the main museum. The official translation of the title of one of the displays, “Goodwill between the Garrison and the People of Hong Kong” reveals the general thrust of the exhibit.

³ The quotations in this paragraph use the museum's official translation.



Figure 2: Exhibit Labeled 'The Lasting Honour' Depicting a British Last Stand against Japan

Other Museums and Historical Sites

Over the Winter of 2017—2018, I also visited several other museums and historical sites in Hong Kong. The picture that they painted was largely consistent with what I have already described, so I will provide only a few examples that are especially striking. The Hong Kong Sun Yat-sen Museum presented Sun as well as the Guomindang as a whole in a positive light and the British in a mixed light. On the one hand, discrimination under the British fueled “patriotism” (爱国) in Hong Kong that led Hongkongers to donate to Sun’s cause. On the other hand, Hong Kong’s “Freedom of Speech” during the

British period was credited for making revolutionaries like Sun possible. Even Japan was credited for hosting dissidents like Sun. The CCP was hardly mentioned except for Sun's order in 1920 to cooperate with the communists.

Flagstaff, which was Headquarters House during the British Colonial period was a teaware museum when I visited in January 2018. The museum contained relatively little mention of politics. However, among tea sets crafted by Hong Kong students that received either awards or an honorable mention was one titled "Hong Kong My Home" (香港一家), a teapot painted to look like a Union Jack. For this student at least, it seems that the ties to Britain were an important part of Hong Kong identity, and the authorities recognized this depiction as exceptionally laudable and worthy of display.

Hong Kong after 2020

After the protest movements and repression following the 2019 extradition bill and the 2020 National Security law, the representation of history at museums and historical sites in Hong Kong changed dramatically to come much more in line with the PRC narrative. Establishment forces were alarmed at displays of support for a kind of Hong Kong identity and calls for independence during the 2019–2020 protests, which increased their incentive to ensure narratives unambiguously excluded the possibility of a non-Chinese Hong Kong. Moreover, the balance between attractiveness and control shifted decisively in favor of control. The text to artifact ratio increased dramatically as did the presence of security officials.

Hong Kong Museum of History Temporary Exhibits While Under Renovation

No site demonstrates the changes in representations of Hong Kong history following the government crackdown more vividly than the Hong Kong Museum of History. The museum closed for renovations in October 2020, shortly after the passage of the National Security Law at the end of June (Hong Kong Free Press 2026). I visited the museum in June 2024 while the permanent exhibition was still under renovation and again in July 2025 and 2026 after the museum reopened with its new National Security Exhibit in August 2024 and opened its Hong Kong Story Exhibit in April 2026.

In Summer 2024, only two temporary exhibits that occupied a tiny portion of the museum's floor space were available to view. The larger one covered ancient Chinese history in the mainland province of Henan. In several places it specifically highlighted the importance of national unity. A message from Hong Kong's Director of Leisure and Cultural Services explained that the exhibit was created to implement government objectives that included "increasing Hongkongers' national identity and cultural self-confidence." The exhibit featured an introductory "message" from the Director of the Henan Provincial Administration of Cultural Heritage that selected these exhibits that made clear its purpose to foster Chinese identity in Hong Kong. The message said that the exhibits were selected to "implement the goals of the CCP Central Committee" to promote "Chinese culture" and "spirit." Further, the message expressed hope that visitors would gain a better understanding of the "origins of Chinese civilization" and its "great achievements" and increase their "cultural self-confidence and self-reliance." Of course, for visitors to have their cultural self-confidence strengthened by an exhibit that

focuses exclusively on mainland Chinese cultural history they would have to accept this culture as their own.

The concluding text of the exhibit stated that the ancient Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties caused the development of a Chinese “race” (族群) with the same “cultural and psychological identity” (文化，心里认同). According to the text, this reached its natural political conclusion with the Qin Dynasty, after which “the great, unified era of the Chinese nation began.” The exhibit also featured a video that claimed archaeological investigation showed “Central Plains Culture” is the “primary root of Chinese civilization.” In other words, there is no possibility of a Hong Kong identity that is associated with but autonomous from mainland Chinese identity.

Prior to 2020, the Hong Kong History Museum did have elements that put Hong Kong identity in the context of a larger Chinese identity. However, this exhibit was not only much more direct in claiming that Chinese make up a single race with a single culture and psychology but also blatantly announced that its goal was to foster Chinese national identity in Hong Kong.

The smaller temporary exhibit was titled “Fallen Leaves Returning to their Roots” and covered the Tung Wah Group of Hospital’s (located in Hong Kong) efforts to retrieve the remains of Chinese who died abroad and return them to their hometown, which was usually in mainland China. Its message was that no matter where in the world people of Chinese heritage find themselves, they have a spiritual link to the mainland. For example, an exhibit titled “Going Abroad and Returning Home” stated that Chinese migrants “called themselves overseas Chinese, implying they would ultimately return home.”

National Security Exhibit

When I returned to visit the Hong Kong Museum of History in July 2025, the changes were even more dramatic. The museum now features an enormous 1,100 square meter “National Security Exhibit” (Lam 2026). The first change I noticed was the increased presence of security guards in the entryway. Their presence was relatively heavy and noticeable throughout the National Security Exhibit.

The first set of exhibits explain and justify the 2020 National Security Law. Major themes explored include the claim that “Hong Kong has been part of China’s territory since ancient times” and that the 2019–2020 protests were not a grassroots movement but were sparked by international agitators. The forward to the exhibition states that ever since the “return” of Hong Kong, “external forces have continuously infiltrated and colluded with anti-China forces to incite the masses” against the authorities and to promote ideas such as self-determination. The conclusion of the first exhibition hall states that “with the support of the motherland” (祖国) Hong Kong will become more stable and prosperous. Following this are displays claiming high rates of Hongkonger support for the National Security Law and that Hong Kong has improved in various world economic rankings since the law was enacted.

One of the first rooms is a large theater that shows a video that tells the regime’s version of events from the 2019 extradition protests to the present. This video focuses on footage of property destruction during the protests and of protesters using firebombs. It claims the protests were part of a “color revolution,” citing evidence of supposed foreign coordination and assistance, such as that protesters’ signs were not “written in

crayon” and the presence of American flags at protests. In other words, the protesters represent a foreign force, not a valid form of Hong Kong identity.

The video uses the symbols of the PRC flag, emblem, and anthem. Both the flag and the national emblem are defiled by protesters in the video, in what musical cues indicate should be upsetting movements of the audience. The exhibit in the next room has large displays about each of these three symbols and says that “every citizen and organization should respect and cherish” the national flag, emblem, and anthem, in case the message was not clear. Usefully from the CCP’s perspective, these symbols not only call to mind Chinese national unity but, as each of them are official symbols of the PRC, also equate the nationalism this invokes with state loyalty. Another exhibit makes this point explicit, stating that “only the Chinese Communist Party can find the path to China’s national rejuvenation.”

The exhibition further makes clear that the CCP and Xi Jinping himself are the deserving objects of patriotism and national pride. One display features a large image of Xi and contains quotes from two of his speeches that embody themes such as the dedication of the CCP to “the happiness of the Chinese people and the revival of the nation” as well as the importance of “strengthening the great unity of the entire nation.” Similarly, the exhibition features a large (4 by 2.3 meters) replica of an oil painting of Mao at Tiananmen Square in 1949 titled “The Founding Ceremony of the People’s Republic of China.” This painting continues to use the symbol of the national flag with about 70 flags featured among the people in Tiananmen Square that Mao overlooks. Another display highlights the national security law and its implementation as “a moment of glorious historic pride” for Hong Kong.

The National Security Exhibit also introduces narratives that emphasize the past victimization and humiliation of the Chinese people. Along with this has come a much more unambiguously negative portrayal of Hong Kong's colonial past with Britain. A display on the 1997 handover states that “Hong Kong’s return to the motherland finally washed clean the Chinese people’s one hundred years of national humiliation (百年国耻) over Hong Kong’s occupation.” It describes the handover ceremony as taking place “amidst the grandeur of the national anthem and both the People’s Republic of China national flag and the Hong Kong Special Administrative District Flag.” Another display titled “Unfair Treatment Suffered by Hong Kong Chinese During Colonial Rule” emphasizes Britain’s “monopoly” of government power and “extreme exclusion of Chinese” from governance. The exhibit highlights “racial discrimination against Chinese,” including the use of “hanging and other tortures,” as well as discrimination in trials and sentencing. This is a complete reversal of the framing of the pre-2020 version of the museum that described “developments” in Hong Kong’s politics, law, and peoples’ livelihood during this period.

The Homeland Security display describes the one hundred years of national humiliation stating that “from the late Qing period until the end of World War 2 (1840 to 1945) our country was invaded by Britain, the United States, Germany, France, Russia, Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Japan, and other countries.” It continues that during the Second-Sino Japanese War, all Chinese were “united by hatred of a common enemy” (同仇敌忾). It notes that during the war Japan “implemented every kind of premeditated bloody atrocity, including the December 1937 Nanjing Massacre that killed over 300 thousand.” The CCP led Hongkongers in resisting occupation after the British au-

thorities “only resisted for 18 days before surrendering to the Japanese forces.” This exhibit also features content that I recognized from visiting the Nanjing Memorial in mainland China, including a newspaper article about two Japanese soldiers who competed to see how many Chinese they could behead. The repetition of this content in a new exhibit in a location far removed from Nanjing challenges interpretations that “the victimhood theme is no longer central to the CCP’s main message” (Chang 2021, 1167).

A further exhibit titled “The Threat of Spies is Everywhere” (间谍威胁无所不在), warns that foreign intelligence agencies threaten national security and national secrets and that it was “on behalf of” (代理) such agencies that the 2019 color revolution in Hong Kong was conducted. It specifically warns against threats from American and British intelligence. It then calls on citizens to uphold their duty of protecting national security and report suspicious activity, stating “the enemy could be right next to you.” Here the emphasis on increased control has moved beyond the increased security presence and penetrated the exhibits themselves.

Further, this highly negative portrayal of not only past but also present relations with the US and Britain is a significant departure from the mixed and somewhat positive picture of US and particularly Britain that Hong Kong sites tended to give before 2020. No longer is Britain part of Hong Kong’s heritage with a mix of contributions and blemishes on its record but an other that threatens Hong Kong.

Just before the end of the exhibit is a section that focuses on children that includes an animated video in which anthropomorphic bugs must work together to protect their garden from a human-faced spider and learn that to do so successfully they must follow the rules and sacrifice some freedom. It also includes a display promoting nation-

al security education (国家安全教育) that gives “strengthening the youth and society’s feelings of identity and belonging towards the nation and Hong Kong” as a key goal. The display touts a “fully mobilized, interdisciplinary, and all-encompassing strategy” to “promote national security education” both within and beyond the classroom.

The “Closing Remarks” sum up the intended message, “patriotism is the core of Chinese national spirit . . . We must closely unite and internalize (内化) national and Hong Kong patriotism.”

The Multifaced Hong Kong Exhibit followed the National Security Exhibit and substituted for the Hong Kong Story Exhibit until it was reopened in April 2026 at which time the Multifaced Hong Kong Exhibit closed. Despite the lack of irreplaceable historical artifacts in the National Security Exhibit, there were noticeably fewer security officials in this section of the museum than the National Security Exhibit. This suggests that guards are present more to prevent acts of symbolic vandalism, such as against the large PRC flag and national emblem featured in the exhibit than to protect irreplaceable artifacts.

The content of the Multifaced Hong Kong Exhibit largely prefigured the 2026 Hong Kong Story Exhibit, so for the sake of space I will omit a detailed discussion of its content to focus on the Hong Kong Story Exhibit in the next section.

Hong Kong Story Exhibit at Museum of History

In April 2026, the Hong Kong Museum of History reopened its Hong Kong Story permanent exhibit, which had been closed since 2020 and previously was the largest and most important exhibit. Despite arriving at the museum just as the museum reo-

pened following the downgrade the Hong Kong Observatory's tropical cyclone signal on July 26, 2026, the new exhibit quickly became crowded.

The Hong Kong Story exhibit was largely unrecognizable when compared with its pre-2020 version. Gone is the large display on Hong Kong's geological history that used to begin the exhibit along with the globe that invited visitors to locate Hong Kong and China. Instead, the exhibit begins with a preface that emphasizes Hong Kong's "integration into China's pluralist civilization" (融入中华多元文明之中) starting "over six thousand years ago." The preface argues that Hong Kong "became an inseparable part of China's territory" in the Qin dynasty.

The major motifs include that Hong Kong has been part of China since ancient times, the CCP's role in guerilla resistance in Hong Kong during the second Sino-Japanese War, and emotional narratives of national humiliation and pride, all of which are a departure from the pre-2020 version. While there is more of an emphasis on the negative part of British history than the original, it is less one sided than the National Security Exhibit.

A key difference from the National Security Exhibit is a more sophisticated account of Hong Kong's place within a larger Chinese identity, albeit one that echoes themes already in mainland propaganda. This is the idea of China's "pluralistic unity" or unity in diversity (多元一体) (Lyu and Zhou 2023, 775). This allows the exhibit to grant that Hong Kong has "unique historical circumstances" but argue that rather than set Hong Kong apart, these unique features make "Hongkongers indispensable participants, witnesses, and beneficiaries of modern China's development and transformations." The preface argues that "despite being forced to accept more than one hundred fifty years of

colonial rule, Chinese people were the principal part of Hong Kong society, and Hongkongers were in the same boat as their mainland compatriots. . . with whom they share a close and unbroken blood relationship.” The preface positions Hong Kong’s uniqueness as good in so far as benefits the nation, starting, “Hong Kong thanks to its unique status as a link between China and the West acts as an important gateway and forerunner of China’s modernization,” playing an important role on “the road to national rejuvenation.” The 1997 handover is described as “Hong Kong returning to the motherland.” The preface closes by praising One Country, Two Systems, arguing that the “motherland always has been the foundation of Hong Kong’s existence and development,” and calling for readers to “contribute their efforts to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nations and share in the glory of the motherland!”

Despite a noticeable increase in artifacts as compared with the 2025 Multifaceted Hong Kong exhibit, almost all of the artifacts are encased in glass and the museum copies the style of many museums in China’s mainland of including lengthy preface and concluding texts both for the exhibit as a whole and each gallery.

The first gallery is called “Unity in Diversity in Chinese Civilization” (多元一体的中华文明). It explicitly identifies a “theme” (主题) it labels “Same Roots, Same Origin” (同根同源), meaning that Hong Kong has the same roots and origin as the mainland. The gallery argues that Hong Kong adopted culture from China’s central plains starting over 6,000 years ago and that Hong Kong is part of “Chinese civilization’s pluralist unity.”

The second gallery, titled “Historical Origin,” is also part of the Same Roots, Same Origin, theme. It has an exhibit for each of the major dynastic periods in China, starting with the Qin, that emphasizes Hong Kong’s place in that dynasty and under which

commandery its jurisdiction was placed. This is a substantial expansion from the pre-2020 museum that confined this information to a single placard. The introductory text of the gallery says, “Since the Qin Dynasty, Hong Kong was already integrated into Central Plains dynastic jurisdiction, becoming a part of the territory of the motherland.” Artifacts such as tools, religious relics, and coins that the exhibit portrays as linking Hong Kong to economic, cultural, and technological developments in China’s dynastic center are emphasized.

The second theme of the exhibit is “China-Western Exchange” (中西汇流), which includes three galleries (the third through the fifth of the exhibit) that cover the period up to Japanese occupation. The placard that elucidates the theme says that Hong Kong has used its “unique historical experiences” to provide “the motherland a window to the world.” This continues the unity in diversity theme of not denying that Hong Kong has unique characteristics but positioning those characteristics as deriving their value from the service they provide the PRC of which Hong Kong forms a part.

The third gallery, titled “Historical Changes,” covers the British colonialization. The placard introducing the gallery says that because the PRC has never recognized the “three unequal treaties” it never lost “sovereignty” (主权) over Hong Kong. The invocation of the PRC here is an interesting anachronism because, of course, the PRC, did not exist until 1949 and so was not around at the time of these treaties. This embodies an attempt to equate the CCP-controlled PRC with a transhistorical idea of China and attachment to any kind of Chinese identity with attachment to the PRC. The gallery starts with the first Opium War and a phrase that occurs throughout to describe the British taking control of Hong Kong is “forcibly occupied” (强行割占). In addition to empha-

sizing the suffering opium inflicted on the Chinese people—one exhibit is titled “Opium Afflicts the Nation with Great Suffering” (荼毒国人的鸦片)—the gallery also portrays Hongkongers as fighting to resist the British over each expansion of its territory.

Unwilling to continue following the chronological organization used thus far, gallery 3 then jumps ahead to discuss Deng Xiaoping's negotiation of the handover. The museum later revisits the handover when it comes up in the chronology in the later galleries. The caption under a photo of Deng and Margret Thatcher sums up the main idea, “Hong Kong is China's sacred territory” (圣地的领土).

Gallery 3 then returns to chronological order, describing British rule in Hong Kong as “absolutely not a democratic system” and favorably contrasting the Basic Law which it portrays as separating executive, legislative, and judicial power. It also criticizes British governing councils for preventing Chinese members from having real power and favorably contrasts the post-handover system, which it says, “perfected the election system” and implemented the principal of “Patriots Govern Hong Kong” (爱国者治港). Discrimination against Chinese during the British period is a major theme, with one exhibit noting that despite the commercial success of some Chinese, they had “second class status” during the period.

Still, the tone is noticeably less stridently anti-British than the National Security Exhibit. For example, gallery 4, “A Modern City” while continuing to emphasize the second-class status of Chinese also notes the modernization of the city and its economic development during the period of British rule. Some British figures, such as James Cantile and Patrick Manson who helped Sun Yat-sen when he was detained at the Qing legation in London are portrayed positively. The British government in Hong Kong is also

given credit for sheltering the reformer Kang Youwei from the Qing government. Still, this willingness to acknowledge positive aspects of the British period has limits. The gallery describes British attempts to incorporate local customs and hold celebrations as “presenting as false picture of peace a prosperity” and emphasizes double standards against Chinese in policing and criminal punishments.

The fifth gallery continues this theme with an interactive touch-screen exhibit labeled “The Omnipresence of Racism” (无处不在的种族歧视) that describes housing segregation and other exhibits that highlight discrimination in wages. The Chinese Communist Party’s role in the Hong Kong labor movement is featured prominently and positively, a contrast from the pre-2020 museum that hardly mentioned the CCP until it discussed the handover at the very end.

The third theme is titled “United to Confront the National Crisis” and includes the sixth gallery titled “United to Fight the Enemy,” which covers the Second Sino-Japanese War. It emphasizes close ties between Hongkongers and mainlanders during the conflict. For example, one placard says that Hongkongers displayed “unprecedented patriotic ardor” in response to “Japan’s invasion of China.” The introductory text says that the Japanese Army’s “iron heel inflicted atrocities” on Hongkongers. The suffering of the Chinese people during the conflict is a motif that runs through this gallery. A large bar graph depicts the number of casualties participating countries faced during the conflict, making it clear that China suffered the most with 35 million. The same screen also highlights the Nanjing Massacre.

It is not only that motifs compatible with mainland narratives of national humiliation, such as national suffering and the unequal treaties are featured in the museum, the

museum also sometimes frames these motifs explicitly according to this narrative. For example, just under the screen described above is a book from the 1930s that covers the Manchurian Incident and the museum's description says that it called the attention of the youth to the "national humiliation" (国耻) of the incident. Another placard that describes life in Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation says that "Hong Kong residents "suffered every kind of humiliating harm (凌辱伤害), even having their families killed and scattered" and that even today the "injury remains" from practices such as the use of conform women. The gallery further features a quote from the actress Hu Die describing the conduct of the Japanese army as a "humiliation" (耻辱) that the Chinese people cannot accept. Paintings from a series of works titled "The Suffering of Hong Kong" are featured. Many other such exhibits go into detail about the torture, killing, human experimentation, and sexual violence during the occupation and discuss acts committed in the mainland in addition to Hong Kong. On placard titled "Brutal Rule" sums it up by saying that Japan turned Hong Kong into a "hell on earth" (人间地狱). This use of national humiliation narratives contrasts with the striking absence of such narratives before 2020. This narrative is associated with strong antipathy towards Japan. In the same hallway as the other exhibits described in this paragraph, a war-era poem is featured on a large wall projection that refers to the Japanese using the slur "Japanese devils" (日本鬼). The museum's official English translation notably omits the word devil.

One large display makes explicit the link between this humiliating past and narratives of pride in China and the CCP with its title "From Suffering to Resistance." The sixth gallery's discussion of resistance places a new emphasis on the Chinese Communist Party's role in guerrilla resistance in Hong Kong. Exhibits discuss the Hong Kong

office of the CCP's Eight Route Army and claim that it made "important contributions" to victory in the conflict against Japan. Another placard describes the CCP-led Hong Kong Battalion of the East River Column as "accelerating the process of victory in the global anti-fascist war," surely an overstatement for a force that numbered around 6,000 soldiers at its height. This is presented as a source of pride as made clear in another exhibit titled, "The Heroic Epic of the Hong Kong Ninth Battalion" that emphasizes its connection to the CCP leadership in the mainland.

In contrast, a placard on the British role in the conflict states that they only offered "limited resistance" against Japan. The phrase battle for Hong Kong does not appear in the exhibit, aside from the mention of a Japanese propaganda film with that title, and it is replaced with the phrase "Eighteen-Day Battle" (十八天战役) to emphasize the relatively short period of British fighting in contrast with the longer period of CCP guerrilla resistance.

The final theme of the exhibit which includes the remaining galleries 7–10 is "International Metropolis" and it emphasizes Hong Kong's modern prosperity, which it attributes to the development that came with Reform and Opening in the mainland and direct mainland support to Hong Kong. Continuing the motif of national pride, one exhibit on National Day celebrations in Hong Kong states that they embody Hong Kong's positive feelings about unification and "feeling of blood link (血脉相连) to Chinese culture." An exhibit titled "Hongkongers National Identity" (香港人的国家认同) claims that from the establishment of the PRC, Hongkongers saw it as their "true home" (真正的家) and had "strong emotional connections" to the "motherland", which the British colonial government tried to dilute. The claims of the superiority of the post-handover system to

the British colonial government are repeated in different form. This time with an emphasis on problems in housing, healthcare, education, corruption, and social conflict in the period between the end of the war and the handover.

The introduction text for the 10th and final gallery, which is called “Traveling Together with the Motherland” says that Hong Kong and the mainland have “joined hands to push forward national rejuvenation” of which Hongkongers are “both benefactors and beneficiaries.” It also returns to the key idea from the beginning of the exhibit that “Hong Kong has been part of China’s territory since ancient times.” The gallery highlights a series of instances in which the mainland aided Hong Kong including with water provision during a drought, supplying pandas for the zoo, natural disaster recovery, and economic recovery following SARS. The handover is described as fulfilling the “shared aspirations of countless Hongkongers and mainland compatriots” and bringing Hong Kong into “a new prosperous period.”

The penultimate room focuses on the handover ceremony itself and features a three-minute video that, unlike the pre-2020 version, now includes audio from speeches by Jiang Zemin and Prince Charles. It depicts the symbolic lowering of the British flag and raising of the PRC and HKSAR flags. A placard sums up the period since the handover as “a huge success” for One Country, Two Systems and praises the 2020 National Security Law and election reforms such as the Patriots Administering Hong Kong principle that allows only those deemed patriotic to serve in the Hong Kong government.

War of Resistance Against Japan and Coastal Defense Museum

I visited the Coastal Defense Museum in June 2024 when renovations were ongoing and again in July 2025 after it reopened under its new name The War of Re-

sistance Against Japan and Coastal Defense Museum. The museum has been totally transformed to give primary credit for fighting Japan to communist-led guerrilla forces while denigrating the British for surrendering after only a short period. Just as at the history museum, the phrase "Battle for Hong Kong" has been removed and replaced with the label "18 Day Battle." In some cases, the new label has literally been affixed on top of the old one. This change appears designed to remove any notion that the British were fighting on behalf of Hong Kong and to emphasize the relatively brief period of full-scale fighting between British forces and Japan in comparison with the longer period of guerrilla struggle. A large sign added to the main hall that summarizes the message of the museum makes this explicit, stating, "after the 18 Day Battle, the British military surrendered, but anti-Japan organizations and guerrilla forces in Hong Kong continued to resist the enemy."

Figure 1 'Battle for Hong Kong' Replaced with 'Eighteen-Day Battle'



In the image, the raised background reveals that in both the Chinese and the official translation, Eighteen-Day Battle (十八天战役) has been pasted over text that previously read The Battle for Hong Kong, which my photos from previous visits confirm.

The first change I noticed was that the sign labeling the British military vehicles at the entrance to the museum as part of Hong Kong's heritage has been removed. On entering the museum building itself, visitors are greeted with a timeline headed "Hong Kong has been China's territory since Ancient times and is an inseparable part of China." Reinforcing this theme, a new exhibit has been added to the top floor of the museum that features displays about relics of coastal defenses from dynastic China. The conclu-

sion says the message explicitly, “Hong Kong was an integral part of the national coastal defense system for centuries” before the British came.⁴

A large sign added to the main hall titled “The Story of Hong Kong Coastal Defense” brings this narrative to its logical conclusion, stating “On 1 July 1997, Hong Kong was returned to the motherland. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army moved into the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, turning a new page in the coastal defense history of Hong Kong.” This summary also removes any ambiguity over whether the British colonial period is part of Hong Kong’s heritage, characterizing this period as “the large imperialist powers invading China.” The exhibit hall that formerly had the label “The British Period” is now headed “War” (战) and emphasizes that Britain gained control of Hong Kong through the use of force. A display on the early British forces in Hong Kong stresses their foreignness, stating that British soldiers hated going to Hong Kong and would curse each other with the phrase “Go to Hong Kong!” Another display along the same wall states that a high percentage of British soldiers became sick on going to Hong Kong because they were “not suited” (不适应) to its climate.

Any hint of information in tension with the idea that Hong Kong’s identity is totally reducible to being Chinese appears to have removed. For example, the exhibits on “Japanese pirates” during the dynastic period no longer note that many of the people referred to under this label were actually Chinese. A placard has been added to the section on British colonialism that echoes the message from the new version of the Hong Kong Museum of History that the “Unequal Treaties” that ceded Hong Kong had no le-

⁴ Museum official translation used.

gal force due to the use of coercion, meaning that “Hong Kong’s Sovereignty remained with China.”

Depictions of British valor in defending Hong Kong have been almost entirely removed. When I visited in 2024, the Lasting Honour model of British forces making a last stand against Japan had been moved to a dead-end hallway and in 2025 had been removed altogether with only a drawing of the scene remaining. A few other such signs still remain. However, it is not clear if these are still in the process of being phased out. For example, in the video room, some displays of old English-language newspapers still refer to content consistent with the old video about British forces rather than the new one about the Independent Brigade.

Instead of the Battle for Hong Kong, the museum places a much greater emphasis on the role of communist-led guerrilla forces in fighting Japan. A new permanent exhibit on this has been added. The introduction states, “The Hong Kong and Kowloon Independent Brigade of the East River Column fiercely resisted the invaders, ushering in ultimate victory.” Other exhibits focus on the organization and exploits of the East River Column and Independent Brigades, including names and photos of members. One such display contains stories of the “brave resistance” of these forces. A large map depicts the activity of these groups as taking place throughout Hong Kong and Kowloon. Finally, an interactive touch screen labeled “solemn presentation of flowers to martyrs” invites visitors “swipe up to present floral tribute” and shows a figure representing those who has previously done so, which at the time I visited was 73,566.

This exhibit also presents the Japanese occupation as a humiliation in ways that go beyond the original museum. One quote says that the Japanese disposed of dead bodies “like garbage” and next to it another says that Japanese forces would slap those who did not bow to them when passing by. A third quote says that the hardship of the Hong Kong people in the period was “unprecedented in history.”

In a similar vein, the exhibit focusing on the overall war against Japan has now been revised to place a greater emphasis on communist forces and events in the mainland. Relevant additions include a display on the Eighth Route Army’s Hong Kong Office, a display on the Nanjing Massacre, a display on the Xi’an Incident, and a display on guerrilla fighters in Guangdong. These events focusing on mainland China would have been out of place in the previous version of the museum on the coastal defense of Hong Kong but fit under broader umbrella of the new name that includes the entire War of Resistance against Japan, allowing the inclusion of exhibits on mainland events that further strengthen the idea that Hong Kong’s fate is inseparable from the mainland’s.

The room focused on the PLA’s Hong Kong Garrison is still present and has been expanded with a video featuring Xi Jinping. Unlike my 2018 visit, this exhibit no longer feels out of place with the rest of the museum.

Hong Kong Palace Museum

The Hong Kong Palace Museum is a massive complex with about 30 thousand square meters of floor space that opened in 2022 (Hong Kong Palace Museum Website 2025). It focuses on ancient Chinese history and is designed to parallel the Palace Museum in Beijing. Some of the galleries, such as gallery 4 on the Qing military, explicitly state that they were organized in concert with the Beijing Palace Museum. Such a large

museum about Chinese history in Hong Kong has the clear implication that this is Hong Kong's history too. While construction of the museum began in 2019, an official Hong Kong government press release places the museum alongside others, including the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Museum of the War of Resistance and Coastal Defense, as one of Hong Kong's "patriotic education resources" that displays "a wealth of patriotic educational materials on Chinese history" and "national achievements" (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2024).

The security presence at the entrance to this new museum was greater than at any other museum I visited in Hong Kong and seemed more like airport security than the entrance to a museum. In addition to the Xray machine for bags also present at the history museum, the guards required me to put my phone through the machine (which the history museum did not) and swabbed my water bottle to run a test. Moreover, in a first in my visits to Hong Kong Museums, I had to select a timeslot for my visit when purchasing a ticket. This is similar to the systems implemented after Covid in the mainland that limit the number of visitors who can be present in a museum at a particular time. Now that the threat of the pandemic has passed, this control has been maintained, possibly because limiting the number of visitors present at a time reduces the burden on security officials who must watch each visitor. Such measures require sacrificing exposure to the material inside the museum, as fewer visitors can come at once, in exchange for control. However, it may also enable a reduced security presence in the exhibits themselves as, once I passed through the security checkpoint at the entrance, I noticed the amount of security guards per room seemed significantly fewer than at the National Security Exhibit in the history museum.

When I visited on July 28, 2025, the first exhibition hall, with the title “Entering the Forbidden City,” was not opened but the second focused on Qing Dynasty rulers. It explained that Qing leaders worked and studied hard and ruled for a long time. This invites a comparison with Xi who has led China since 2012 and overseen the abolition of presidential term limits. Seeming to encourage this kind of comparison, a display on the Qianlong Emperor notes that he “compared himself with long-living rulers in previous dynasties and affirmed his decades of effective rulership.” It also says that he “motivated himself even at an advanced age to work diligently every day.”⁵

Exhibitions hall 3 similarly focuses on the Ming Dynasty. Hall 4 focuses on the military during the Qing Dynasty. It features a description of the Opium War that concludes that the Qing ultimately failed to defend China, a goal that “only began to be realized after the People’s Republic of China was established.”

Exhibition Hall 5 “The Quest for Originality,” which focuses on art, is the only to discuss Hong Kong itself. The most striking display is a theater that shows four videos of Hong Kong artists who discuss the importance of Chinese identity to their work. Summing up this theme, the Hong Kong artist Wong Ping Pui comments “Chinese people in this era, use our subjective angle, bringing forth our roots” (根源). He goes on to say, “we should be clearly aware of where we came from.” In another video, the speaker calls for Chinese history to be taught in schools. These videos allow the museum to make explicit its claims about Hong Kong’s Chineseness in the voices of Hong Kong artists. The sixth gallery honors various donors to the museum.

⁵ Museum’s official translation quoted.

The seventh gallery is the most visually striking. It shows impressive digital projections more like Disneyland than an ancient culture museum. Each projection is about the Palace Museum in Beijing, enabling guests in Hong Kong to feel as though they are visiting it. This memetically unifies the museums and, indirectly, the mainland and Hong Kong.

Hong Kong Heritage Museum

The Hong Kong Heritage Museum focuses on popular culture. It represents an interesting case because the government sought to close it as part of its post-2020 patriotic education revamp of the territory's museums but eventually scrapped this proposal (Parkes 2024; K. Ho 2023). In a sign that popular resistance may have played a role in the government's decision to back down, Hong Kong's culture minister said, "the public got a little too sensitive about it" (Wong 2023). This indicates that citizens can still successfully contest the way the government portrays their history in museums, at least in cultural contexts that lack explicit political elements.

I visited the Hong Kong Heritage Museum on July 19, 2024, about a month after the government publicly withdrew its proposal to eliminate it. The museum featured exhibits on the martial arts novelist Jin Yong, Bruce Lee, and the singer and actor Anita Mui as well as more general exhibits on film and popular culture in Hong Kong. I could not find any display that appeared politically contentious, which suggests that the reason the government proposed closing the museum was because it opposes the idea that Hong Kong has a heritage, aside from one that is strictly reducible to being Chinese. That the culture museum that would have been built under the proposal to remove the Heritage Museum was to be called the "Museum of National Development" and to focus

on “Chinese traditional culture,” suggesting a focus on China generally rather than Hong Kong specifically, seems consistent with this interpretation (K. Ho 2023).

Conclusion

Prior to 2020, Hong Kong Museums and historical sites demonstrated a remarkable independence from mainland narratives. They focused on people and events within the geographical area of Hong Kong, making possible the conception of a Hong Kong identity that was not entirely reducible to being Chinese. The portrayal of the British period included both its positive and negative aspects while often suggesting that this period was part of Hong Kong’s identity and heritage. Exhibits rarely referred to the CCP, its slogans, or its emotional narratives.

After the 2020 passage of the national security law and the closure of the Hong Kong Museum of History for renovations, this began to change. The change accelerated and took shape following the launch of patriotic education in Hong Kong in 2023. After this point, control over museums increased, reducing the space for contestation and alternative interpretations. I theorized based on these changes that when they fear alternative interpretations on sensitive issues, states are willing to decrease the attractiveness of their exhibits in ways that increase their control over their message and its interpretations, such as increasing the amount of text relative to artifacts.

The national narratives museums displayed also changed. Exhibits depicted Hong Kong as culturally and historically reducible to its Chinese heritage. Museums removed positive references to the British period and suggestions that it formed a part of Hong Kong’s heritage and replaced them with negative portrayals consistent with mainland century of national humiliation narratives. Motifs of national pride and loyalty to the

CCP coincided with this narrative, crediting the CCP with taking China out of the century of national humiliation. These changes that seek to unify Hong Kong and mainland narratives reveal not only the narrative the CCP wishes to promote in Hong Kong but also further insights about mainland narratives by comparison. For example, while increased references to victory and pride have led some to conclude that narratives of national humiliation are on their way out in the mainland, the relative absence of these narratives in Hong Kong museums prior to 2020 reveals that compared with other national narratives that cover many of the same events, national humiliation is still more present in mainland narratives. Finally, transformations in Hong Kong also provide a potential preview of how the PRC might seek to reshape narratives of national identity in Taiwan should it gain control. Afterall, the same PRC 2023 Patriotic Education Law that called for “education to increase patriotic feeling, autonomous defense of national sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity among compatriots in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region” also called for “including Taiwan compatriots” in education efforts to promote national unity (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress 2023).

References

- Babińska, Maria, Laurent Licata, and Université Libre de Bruxelles. 2025. "Mnemonic Asymmetries: How Collective Memory Shapes and Reflects Intergroup Relations." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 102150.
- Balcells, Laia, Valeria Palanza, and Elsa Voytas. 2022. "Do Transitional Justice Museums Persuade Visitors? Evidence from a Field Experiment." *The Journal of Politics* 84 (1): 496–510.
- Balcells, Laia, and Elsa Voytas. 2025. "The Troubles and Beyond: The Impact of a Museum Exhibit on a Post-Conflict Society." *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Bennett, Tony. 2002. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. Culture. Routledge.
- Callahan, William A. 2010. *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*. Oxford University Press.
- Chang, Vincent KL. 2021. "Recalling Victory, Recounting Greatness: Second World War Remembrance in Xi Jinping's China." *The China Quarterly* 248 (1): 1152–73.
- Chang, Vincent KL. 2022. "Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums: Chongqing and the New Paradigm of World War II Memory in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 31 (138): 977–92.
- Denton, Kirk A. 2014. *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Geddes, Barbara, and John Zaller. 1989. "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes." *American Journal of Political Science*, 319–47.
- Gerber, Alan S., Gregory A. Huber, Albert H. Fang, and Catlan E. Reardon. 2017. "The Effect on Turnout of Campaign Mobilization Messages Addressing Ballot Secrecy Concerns: A Replication Experiment." *Plos One* 12 (8): e0182199.

- Gibson, James J. 2015. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception: Classic Edition*. Psychology Press Classic Editions. Psychology Press.
- Greeno, James G. 1994. "Gibson's Affordances." *Psychological Review* 101 (2): 336–42.
- Ho, Denise Y. 2017. *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China*. Cambridge Studies in the History of the People's Republic of China.
- Ho, Kelly. 2023. "New Museum Celebrating China's Achievements Planned for Hong Kong Science Museum Site, Heritage Museum Faces Axe." *Hong Kong Free Press*, December 7. <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/12/07/new-museum-celebrating-chinas-achievements-planned-for-hong-kong-science-museum-site-heritage-museum-faces-axe/>.
- Hong Kong Free Press. 2026. *HKFP Visual Archive: The History Museum's 'Hong Kong Story.'* <https://hongkongfp.com/hkfp-visual-archive-the-history-museums-hong-kong-story/>.
- Hong Kong Palace Museum Website. 2025. December 18. <https://www.hkpm.org.hk/en/about/the-building>.
- Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. 2024. "LCQ1: Taking Forward Patriotic Education." *Press Release*, December 11. <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202412/11/P2024121100277.htm>.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015. "Propaganda as Signaling." *Comparative Politics* 47 (4): 419–44.
- Hung, Ho-fung. 2022. *City on the Edge: Hong Kong under Chinese Rule*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ko, Jiyoung. 2023. *Popular Nationalism and War*. Oxford University Press.

- Lam, Kyle. 2026. "In Pictures: Museum of History Opens Revamped 'Hong Kong Story' Exhibition with New Focus on China 'Roots.'" *Hong Kong Free Press*, April 2.
<https://hongkongfp.com/2026/04/02/hkfp-lens-museum-of-history-opens-revamped-hong-kong-story-exhibition-with-new-focus-on-china-roots/>.
- Lee, John Ka-chiu. 2023. "The Chief Executive's 2023 Policy Address." *The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China*.
<https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2023/en/p27.html>.
- Lyu, Zhaojin, and Haiyan Zhou. 2023. "Contesting Master Narratives: Renderings of National History by Mainland China and Taiwan." *The China Quarterly*, no. 255: 768–84. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102300019X>.
- Masterson, Michael. 2024. "Catching Fire: How National Humiliation Spreads Hostile Foreign Policy Preferences on Chinese Social Media." *International Studies Quarterly* 68 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae033>.
- McLuhan, Marshall, and Lewis H. Lapham. 1995. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. 2nd printing. The MIT press.
- Page, Jude, Timothy Broady, Sujith Kumar, and Evelyne de Leeuw. 2022. "Exploratory Visuals and Text in Qualitative Research Interviews: How Do We Respond?" *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21: 16094069221110302.
- Parkes, Rod. 2024. "The Past Has a Future Again: Hong Kong's Heritage Museum Will Continue 'Telling Good Stories' about the City." *Hong Kong Free Press*, May 15.
<https://hongkongfp.com/2024/05/15/the-past-has-a-future-again-hong-kongs-heritage-museum-will-continue-telling-good-stories-about-the-city/>.

- Powers, Kathleen E. 2022. *Nationalisms in International Politics*. Princeton University Press.
- Qian, Licheng, and Haoran Liang. 2026. “Remembering the Nanjing Massacre in China: From Representation to Organization.” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 1–18.
- Shr, Yau-Huo Jimmy, Richard Ready, Brian Orland, and Stuart Echols. 2019. “How Do Visual Representations Influence Survey Responses? Evidence from a Choice Experiment on Landscape Attributes of Green Infrastructure.” *Ecological Economics* 156: 375–86.
- Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress. 2023. “People’s Republic of China Patriotic Education Law (2023 年 10 月 24 日第十四届全国人民代表大会常务委员会第六次会议通过).” *People’s Daily*.
http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2023-10/25/nw.D110000renmrb_20231025_1-05.htm.
- Stanley, Jason. 2017. *How Propaganda Works*. First paperback printing. Princeton University Press.
- Wang, Zheng. 2012. *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. Contemporary Asia in the World. Columbia University Press.
- Wong, Wynna. 2023. “Some Hongkongers Overreacting to Proposed Science Museum Relocation, Culture Chief Says.” *South China Morning Post*.
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3244484/hongkongers-overreacting-proposed-science-museum-relocation-culture-chief-says>.

Zhao, Suisheng. 1998. "A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31 (3): 287–302.