Received: 24 May 2021 | Accepted: 31 August 2021

DOI: 10.1111/nana.12805

ARTICLE

WILEY

Understanding Hong Kong nationalism: A topic network approach

Justin Chun-ting Ho

Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, Sciences Po, Paris, France

Correspondence
Justin Chun-ting Ho, Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, Sciences Po, 27 Rue Saint-Guillaume, Paris 75007, France.
Email: justin.chunting.ho@sciencespo.fr

Abstract

Drawing on data from Facebook, this article examines how elements of nationalism discourse were invoked by political actors to advance their agenda. In this paper, a novel mixed-method approach is introduced. The analysis begins with the quantitative phase, and topic modelling is used to identify the recurring themes in corpus. A topic network is generated based on the semantic association and centrality measures from social network analysis are used to identify the core topics in the discourse. In the qualitative phase, texts from the core topics are analysed discursively. The findings reveal that Hong Kong nationalism discourse includes three frames: the threat frame that constructs the overarching narrative of China Threat, the identity frame that engages with the debate on localism and nationalism and the action frame that discusses the actions to be taken in response to the threats.

KEYWORDS
China, computational text analysis, Hong Kong nationalism, mixed methods, social media

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite Beijing's effort to instil Chinese nationalism in Hong Kong, recent years witnessed the outbreak of a series of protest against China's interventions in Hong Kong affairs, which eventually provoked the rise of Hong Kong nationalism.[1] This work explores how nationalist activist groups in Hong Kong make use of nationalist rhetoric on social media to advance their agenda.

Existing work on Hong Kong nationalism often focuses on the mechanism that gave rise to Hong Kong nationalism. Wu (2016) and Veg (2017), for example, study how Hong Kong nationalism as an ideology has been constructed by public intellectuals and university students, and Fong (2017, 2019) argues that Hong Kong nationalism has been inspired by China's interventionist policy. While these studies offer valuable insights into Hong Kong nationalism as a phenomenon, they fall short of revealing the nuanced relationship between nationalism and nationalist mobilisation and how the former is invoked purposefully by the political actors of the latter. On the other hand, studies that focus on political actors often see Hong Kong nationalism as a branch of the localism movement, the mushrooming of political groups around 2015 with a general commitment of protecting the interest and identity of Hong Kong people (Kaeding, 2017; Kwong, 2016; Lam, 2018; Ng & Kennedy, 2019; Veg, 2017), and they fall short of disentangling the complex relationship between localism, nationalism and Hong Kong identity. Additionally, despite social media being found to be an important medium for political communication and mobilisation in Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2016; Lee & Chan, 2016; Tang & Lee, 2013), few studies on Hong Kong nationalism focus specifically on social media and therefore are unable to reveal how nationalism is communicated online.

To complement existing research, in this article, I draw on the framework of discursive opportunities structure to examine how Hong Kong nationalist groups adapt their discourse to the available political and discursive opportunities. I situate their mobilisation efforts in Hong Kong's political context and examine how they selectively use nationalist rhetoric on social media as discursive resources to advance their agenda. This study introduces a novel mixed-method strategy to analyse social media data using computational text analysis and social network analysis. In this study, I follow an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The analysis begins with the quantitative phase in which computational text analysis and social network analysis are used to discern the overall pattern from the data and select a meaningful subset for subsequent qualitative analysis. In the qualitative phase, I analyse selected texts discursively to identify the major frames presented in the corpus.

The results illustrate that the nationalist groups' discourse includes three predominant frames. First, the threat frame depicts China as an external threat and the Hong Kong government as the extension of China's ruling arm. The frame attributes Hong Kong's stalled democratisation, protest arrests and threats towards Hong Kong's way of life to China's interventionist policy. Second, the identity frame focuses on the identification of Hong Kong people. The early framing revolves around the notion of localism and later transformed to adopt the rhetoric of civic nationalism. The action frame concerns the actions to be taken to promote Hong Kong nationalism. The frame depicts Hong Kong as an aspiring member of the free world as it invites international actors to lend support to Hong Kong's nationalist movement.

In the following sections, I begin by reviewing the literature on Hong Kong nationalism. I then present the analytical framework and methodology. Finally, I present the results and discuss the implications and limitations.

2 | HONG KONG NATIONALISM

Despite the ongoing debate on the definition of Hong Kong nationalism, most scholars study Hong Kong nationalism within a 'Hong Kong vis-à-vis China' framework. It is widely agreed that the origin of the Hong Kong identity dates back to the British colonial era (Carroll, 2007; Fong, 2019; Tsang, 2003, 2004). After the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, both the colonial British government and the Chinese government introduced permanent immigration restrictions at the China–Hong Kong border, which turned the Hong Kong people into a comparatively settled population and provided room for Hongkongers to nurture a public culture and an identity of their own (Tsang, 2003). The sharp contrast between the economic and political development in Hong Kong in the 1970s and the economic stagnation and political chaos in China at that time generated a sense of superiority among Hongkongers, which was further reinforced by the stereotype of a 'backward China' (Lau, 1997; Mathews et al., 2008; Tsang, 2003). In the 1980s and 1990s, Hong Kong developed a distinct identity that rested upon Hong Kong's comparatively liberal, albeit far from democratic, institutions and Hongkongers' exposure to liberal values. This identity

was further consolidated by political controversies in the 1980s, most notably the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, as these events demonstrated vividly the differences in political situation between Hong Kong and China (Bhattacharya, 2005; Carroll, 2007; Tsang, 2003).

The transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997 was followed immediately by Beijing's attempt to instil a sense of Chinese nationalism among Hong Kong people (Mathews et al., 2008; Tse, 2007; Vickers, 2011). Ironically, this led to a series of anti-China protests and eventually provoked a Hong Kong nationalism that features the main theme of 'us' (Hongkongese) resisting the 'invaders' (mainland Chinese). In the early years after the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain to China, Beijing adopted a non-interventionist policy in Hong Kong and allowed the city a high degree of autonomy. However, after 2003, Beijing has gradually adopted a 'new Hong Kong policy', which emphasises increasing central government involvement and intervention in Hong Kong's public affairs (Fong, 2017; Ortmann, 2014). Fong (2017) thus argues that the shift demonstrates that Beijing has embarked on an 'assimilationist state-building nationalism', defined as "an incorporation strategy aimed at subjecting Hong Kong to greater central control on the political, economic, and ideological fronts" (528) and the 'Hongkongese' identity has in response transformed from a sense of socioeconomic superiority over mainland Chinese to a sense of resistance against Chinese 'invaders'; it is considered a counter-mobilisation that "aims at defending Hong Kong's autonomy, core values, lifestyle, and language (Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters) against Beijing's incorporation strategies" (541). The above development coincides with a shift away from Chinese and mixed (both Chinese and Hong Kong) identifications to an exclusive Hong Kong identity as reported in various surveys (Chow et al., 2020; Dupré, 2020; Steinhardt et al., 2018).

Similarly, Wu (2016) argues that China–Hong Kong relations after 1997 can be considered a situation where "a centralising state penetrated into the new peripheral territory and threatened the preexistent identities and interests of the peripheral society" (5). Echoing Fong, Wu also argues that Beijing has adopted an assimilationist official nationalism to dissolve Hong Kong's uniqueness and absorb it into the Chinese state. However, these initiatives exerted a significant impact on the resource allocation, governance and culture of Hong Kong and therefore inevitably triggered resistance from the Hong Kong people. Apart from political factors, several socioeconomic conditions were thought to have contributed to the rise of Hong Kong nationalism. Hong Kong is one of the most unequal societies in the world. Many young people struggle with the lack of career and housing prospects, while democracy and autonomy are considered the only hope for a more equal allocation of resources and opportunities (Dupré, 2020). It is perhaps unsurprising that the idea of nationalism is particularly popular among the younger generations, especially university students (Wu, 2016).

3 | CIVIC/ETHNIC DICHOTOMY OF NATIONALISM

The dichotomy of civic/ethnic nationalism is another idea relevant to the discussion on Hong Kong nationalism. It originates from Kohn's (1945) pioneering work, in which he depicts a 'liberal, civic Western' and an 'illiberal, ethnic Eastern' nationalism. The former arose as a response to the formation of the modern state where the cultural nation coincided with the political territory while the latter presupposed no such correspondence (McCrone, 1998). Hence, nationalism is often used to reinforce state boundaries in the West, while it is used to disrupt and redraw borders in the East.

Early work on Hong Kong nationalism often resorts to the civic/ethnic dichotomy and argues Hong Kong identification is closer to the civic model (Chan & Fung, 2018; Kwan, 2016; Veg, 2017). The argument is also echoed in the nationalists' discussion, despite the fact that the socio-political context of Hong Kong nationalism is indeed closer to ethnic nationalism than civic nationalism, as the intention to separate Hong Kong from the Chinese state is essentially redrawing the Chinese state border to not include Hong Kong. It is also important to note that the distinct between civic and ethnic is often not clear-cut, as Keating (1996) points out that even ethnic nationalists "may use the language of civic nationalism language in order to acquire international legitimacy or establish their liberal democratic credentials" (7–8). Brubaker (1999) also observes that the language of civic nationalism is often used by states

and separatist movements to highlight their 'good' and 'legitimate' nature as well as to distinguish themselves from their 'illegitimate' neighbour. Triandafyllidou (2020) even argues that the civic/ethnic classification offers little analytical value for understanding nationalism developed against the context of the 21st century.

4 | DISCOURSE OPPORTUNITIES AND NATIONALIST MOBILISATION

The term 'discursive opportunity structure' was introduced by Koopmans and Statham (1999) to describe ideas in the broader political culture that are considered 'sensible', 'realistic' and 'legitimate'. Such pre-existing cultural elements will promote and limit the likelihood of a movement's success. Therefore, to increase the chance of success, social movement actors have to offer frames that resonate with the discursive elements in the broader cultural environment (McCammon, 2013). Frames are organising ideas that offer interpretations to particular events or circumstances (Marullo, 1996). They assign meanings to and highlight certain aspects of the issue in question (Gamson, 2004). Frames "function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective" (Snow et al., 1986: 464). Framing matters to social movements since frames that resonate with majority attitudes and opinion can generate a sense of shared purpose around a collective identity and help persuade people to contribute to the cause (Bail, 2016b). It is therefore a strategy to emphasise specific dimensions of the same issue over which social movement actors expect support given available discursive opportunities.

In the case of nationalist movements, Hroch (1993) identifies three preconditions for a successful nation-building project, including the memory of common past, dense linguistic or cultural ties, and a conception of civil society consisted of equal members of the group. He also suggests three processes as decisive for nationalist mobilisation, namely, a crisis of the current political institution, the emergence of popular grievances and a loss of faith in traditional moral systems. He argues that such social conflicts should be articulated as a nationally relevant conflict of interests, for example, dangers to the culture, language or interest of the nation. Reading through the lens of discursive opportunity structure, a successful nationalist movement, therefore, has to offer frames that interpret social issues as conflicts between different national groups while the preconditions constitute the broader cultural environment that determines the scope of reasonable frames.

Against this background, I will examine how Hong Kong nationalists construct frames that interpret Hong Kong's political circumstance as a conflict between Hong Kong and China.

5 | DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

There are two reasons that make Hong Kong particularly beneficial as a case study. First, Hong Kong nationalism is a novel phenomenon that emerged relatively recently. It was not until after the publication of *On the Hong Kong Nation* (Undergrad Editorial Board, 2014) that the term 'Hong Kong nation' became widely used. Examining nationalism at its early stage serves as an excellent opportunity to reflect upon existing theories about the development of nationalism. Hong Kong could serve as a natural laboratory to examine the dynamics of nationalism discourse in the earlier stages of a nascent nationalism. Second, due to the city's unique geopolitical context, Hong Kong situates between many theoretical constructs, and it is this fuzziness that makes Hong Kong an interesting case. Hong Kong is subject to the influence of both Chinese nationalism and British colonialism, the people of Hong Kong embrace not only Chinese culture but also Western values, and it is a hybrid regime consisting of both democratic and authoritarian elements. As a result of the fuzziness, Hong Kong often does not fit comfortably into a single category of typologies; this serves as a valuable opportunity to reflect on the existing theories of nationalism, which are often developed against the background of Western or European states.

Social media is an important medium for political communication and mobilisation in Hong Kong. Among all the platforms, Facebook is the most popular with a penetration rate of 60% (Chan et al., 2017). It was ranked as the third

major source of political news, following TVB (a major television station) and Apple Daily (a major newspaper), and its importance is particularly clear among younger generations, as a survey shows that 47.9% of the respondents aged between 15 and 29 use Facebook to obtain political news (Lee et al., 2015). Facebook is an important platform for mobilisation (Chan et al., 2017; Lee & Chan, 2016; Tang & Lee, 2013). It also serves as a major site for anti-establishment views to circulate, as such views are usually censored in mainstream media which tend to maintain a pro-government stance (Chan et al., 2017; Yung & Leung, 2014). Due to its importance in political communication and mobilisation in Hong Kong, Facebook has been selected as a data source. It is worthwhile to note that this article focuses on the communication on Facebook, rather than how the platform affects the development of nationalism.

I harvested all posts on the major nationalist organisations' Facebook page between its creation date and 31 January 2018.[2] The data collection stopped in 2018 as the nationalist movement went into a period of abeyance after government suppression. A total of seven Facebook pages were selected, including Hong Kong Indigenous and its then spokesman Edward Tin-kei Leung, Youngspiration and its then convener Leung Chung-hang and election candidate Yau Wai-ching, and Hong Kong National Party and its then convener Chan Ho-tin. The selected organisations were the most influential and active nationalist groups in Hong Kong (cf. Yuen & Chung, 2018). They were the leading groups of the nationalist camp in the 2016 Hong Kong legislature election as well as protests and other forms of political mobilisation. While there are numerous Facebook pages devoted to Hong Kong politics and public affairs, I focus on these seven pages since they are the most relevant to the study of the discourse of Hong Kong nationalism. It is important to note that this study focuses on the textual dimension, and as a result, visual and other digital elements are not included in the analysis. Table 1 summarises the descriptive statistics of the corpus.

To offer a quick glimpse into the corpus, I generated a word cloud of the most frequent terms (Figure 1a). The font size is determined by the frequency of the term; the higher the frequency, the larger the word. I also translated all the 17,224 terms in the corpus into English using Google Cloud Translation API and generated a corresponding word cloud (Figure 1b).[3]

In this article, I employ a mixed-method strategy. The analysis begins with the quantitative phase. While the top term table and word cloud allow us to gauge the overall frequency of each word's occurrence, they are limited in revealing the context of how a term is used. Therefore, topic modelling is used to reveal the major themes within the texts. Topic modelling draws on the notion of distributional semantics and learns meaning from the co-occurrence of terms within documents (Turney & Pantel, 2010). It can be used to reveal the 'hidden' thematic structure of a text corpus (Blei, 2012; Maier et al., 2018). Simply put, topic modelling clusters words around topics, and by analysing what those clusters of words represent, we can reveal the themes within the texts. Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) is one of the most popular algorithms for topic modelling. It models a comprehensive representation of the corpus by inferring latent content variables, referred to as topics. Topics in this sense can be imagined as latent categories of the content. It is important to note that the topics do not necessarily carry sociological meaning or align with any theoretically relevant themes. The key advantage of LDA is that topics are inferred from a given collection of documents without the need for any prior knowledge about their content. Since topics are latent, no information about

TABLE 1 Description of Facebook pages

Page	Post count	Avg. char.	First post	Last post
Hong Kong Indigenous	4,135	42.3	2015-01-21	2018-01-30
Leung Tin-kei	118	32	2016-07-23	2017-07-08
Youngspiration	2,013	61.4	2015-02-07	2018-01-30
Leung Chung-hang	289	43.2	2016-08-10	2017-08-25
Yau Wai-ching	307	71.8	2016-05-16	2018-01-17
Hong Kong National Party	343	89.9	2016-03-16	2018-01-29
Chan Ho-tin	60	31.6	2016-07-24	2018-01-24

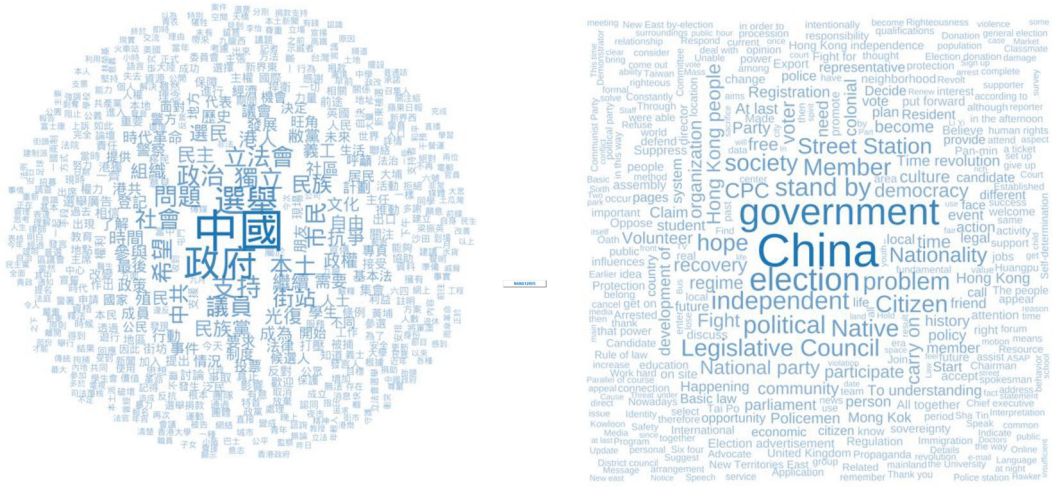

FIGURE 1 Word cloud of most frequent terms on Facebook pages [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

them is directly observable in the data. The LDA algorithm overcomes this problem by inferring topics from recurring patterns of word occurrence in documents. In LDA, a document can be conceptualised as a random mixture of latent topics, while a topic is defined by the words that co-occur with high probability (Blei et al., 2003). The detailed process of model estimation and validation as well as the description of all validated topics are documented in the Online Appendix (accessible at https://osf.io/uczrs/).

To interpret the results from the LDA model, I follow the assumption that political discourse can be understood as a network of interconnected concepts (Sutherland, 2005); the concepts within a discourse do not exist in isolation but are dependent on each other in various ways. Seeing discourse as a network allows us to gain an understanding of political discourse using techniques from social network analysis (Leifeld, 2016). Social network analysis concerns a set of nodes and the relation among them, referred to as edges. For discourse networks, nodes can be defined at various levels including actors (Bail, 2016a; Hurka & Nebel, 2013; Leifeld, 2016; Wagner & Payne, 2017), frames (Hurka & Nebel, 2013; Wagner & Payne, 2017), concepts (Leifeld & Haunss, 2012) and terms (Rule et al., 2015) while edges denote the discursive similarity between them. There are various ways to measure discursive similarity, including co-occurrence of frames, concepts, and terms as well as common statements between two actors.

Next, I construct a topic network by combining topic modelling and social network analysis. The topics identified by the topic model are represented as nodes and the discursive similarity between the topics are represented as edges. I then estimate the Pearson's correlation coefficients between the *beta* values, namely, the probability of a word occurring in a topic, of all topics and generated a correlation matrix. Statistically, if two topics are likely to use the same set of words, the *beta* values of these words will be high in both topics, resulting in a higher correlation coefficient between these topics. So understood, the values in the correlation matrix can be regarded as the semantic distance between the topics.

The approach overcomes the difficulties in analysing large datasets by offering a meaningful way to select a manageable subset for qualitative analysis. The qualitative analysis also compensates for the difficulties of computational methods in distinguishing subtle differences in language use, which is essential for understanding the nuances of discourses. The approach is also applicable to a wide range of research that utilise text data in addition to studying nationalism online.

6 | TOPIC NETWORK

Figure 2 displays the topic network. Each node represents one topic, and the edges between them denote their semantic association. The strength of the edges is determined by the value of the correlation coefficient. Since the correlation matrix will only yield a complete graph, in which all nodes are connected with every other node, a cut-off point was specified so that weak edges (weak correlation coefficients) can be removed. There is no established rule to select the optimal value. I have adopted the value at the 80th percentile since it provides the best interpretability for identifying the core concepts within the discourse; the graph produced with a higher cut-off value will be too sparse to discern any pattern while that with a lower value will be too dense to interpret. Due to the nature of the cut-off point, only the strongest 20% of the edges will remain. The size of the nodes was determined by degree centrality, namely, the number of nodes a node is connected to (Scott, 2000). The position of the nodes was determined by the Fruchterman–Reingold algorithm (Fruchterman & Reingold, 1991): Two nodes with a stronger edge between them will be closer together while a densely connected group of nodes will cluster around the same area. The edges are coloured in accordance with the strengths of the association between topics (refer to the electronic version of this article for coloured illustration).

In a discourse analysis sense, the network can be seen as a visual representation of the Hong Kong nationalism discourse constructed. The nodes can be seen as different elements in the discursive construction, and the edges between them can be interpreted as their associations. Elements with higher degree centrality, therefore presented by a larger node, are more central in the discourse in the sense that these themes have strong relationships with more themes. In other words, they are the key concepts that connect all other concepts into a coherent picture.

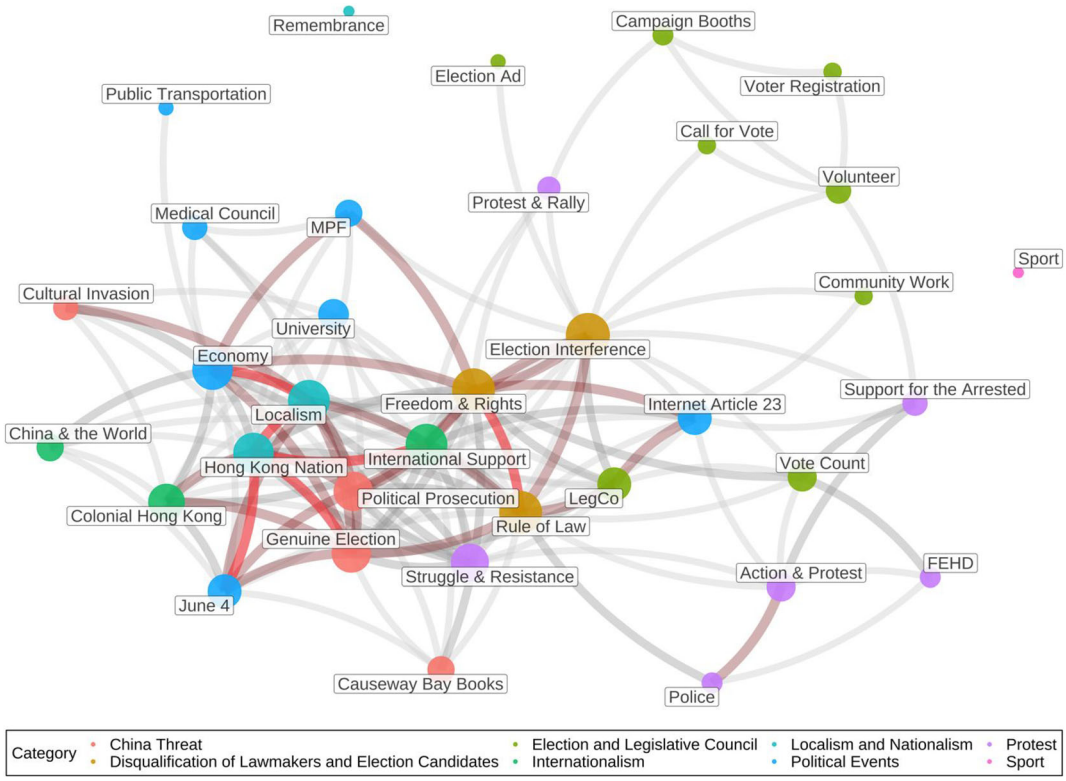

FIGURE 2 Topic network of Hong Kong nationalism [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The network exhibits a core–periphery structure in which the topics within the core are closely connected, while the connections between those at the periphery are sparse. To identify the core topics, Table 2 lists the top 10 topics based on degree centrality. The measure of degree centrality is in line with the observation from the network visualisation, as these topics all occupy a core location in the network. Table 3 lists the strongest edges in the whole network.

While the topic network allows us to discern the overall structure of the discourse and identify the main issues mentioned by the nationalist, computational methods are limited in showing how these issues were framed (cf. Nicholls & Culpepper, 2020). Therefore, as a subsequent step, I analyse all posts of all the core topics qualitatively to identify the predominant frames.

7 | FRAMING HONG KONG NATIONALISM

The core topics can be roughly divided into four groups. To understand the evolution of the discourse, Figure 3 shows the relative prevalence of the core topics across time. For visualisation purposes, quarterly data are shown.

The top-left panel (a) shows the topics belonging to the group of China Threat. They are recurring themes in the discourse and accountable for around one fifth of the core posts throughout the study period. These topics discuss

TABLE 2 Centrality

Node	Deg.
Election interference	18
Rule of law	17
Freedom and rights	17
Localism	16
International support	16
Hong Kong nation	15
Economy	15
Genuine election	14
Political prosecution	14
Struggle and resistance	13

TABLE 3 Edge strength

Edge	Deg.
Localism—Hong Kong nation	0.155
Localism—Economy	0.120
Hong Kong nation—International support	0.118
June 4—Hong Kong nation	0.114
Rule of law—Freedom and rights	0.107
Genuine election—Hong Kong nation	0.102
Internet article 23—LegCo	0.101
Election interference—International support	0.101
Genuine election—Localism	0.099
Rule of law—Localism	0.099

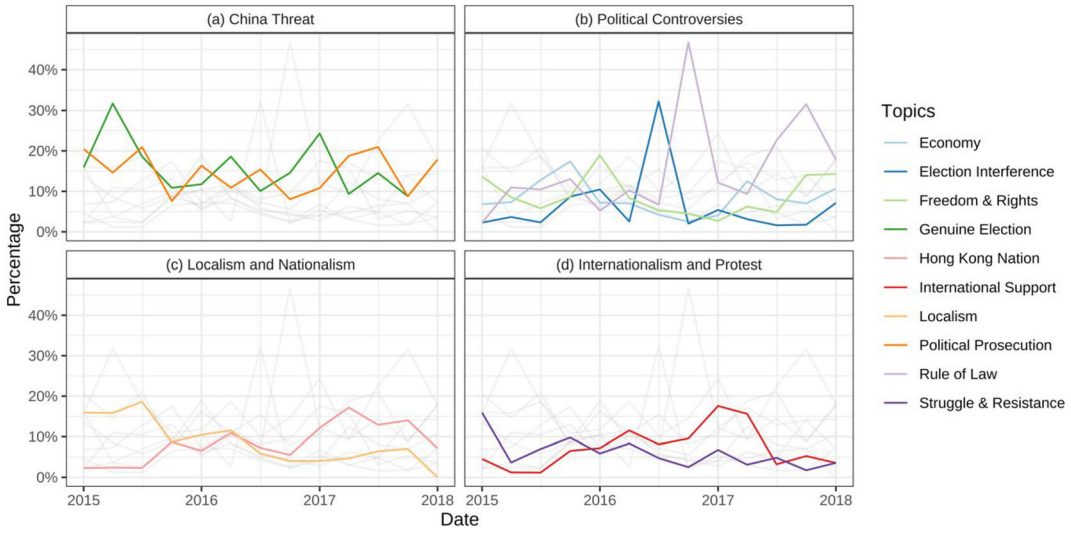

FIGURE 3 Relative frequency of core topics [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

issues that are conceived as the root of the recurring problems facing Hong Kong and also lay the background of the discussion on Hong Kong nationalism. The top-right panel (b) contains discussions about controversial political incidents in recent years. The texts in this group extend the discussion on China Threat. Unlike the issues in the previous panel which have a recurring nature, the issues in this panel are one-time events (although their effect can be long-lasting). The framing in this group often invokes liberal values that are allegedly violated during the incidents, such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. The overlapping pattern denotes the changing focus of discussion over time.

The bottom-left panel (c) concerns the discussion on Hong Kong nationalism and its relationship with the idea of localism. As we can observe in the figure, there is a decreasing trend for the localism topic and an increasing trend of Hong Kong nation. The opposite direction denotes the gradual transformation of the discourse from localism to nationalism.

The bottom-right panel (d) shows the posts related to internationalism and protest. They can be regarded as the actions the nationalist suggested to take to resist the threats from China. We can once again observe a gradual transition, as the focus on street protests gradually shifted towards seeking international support.

The qualitative analysis of the Facebook posts these core topics reveals three overarching frames: the threat frame, the identity frame and the action frame. The frames were generated inductively through the analysis and subframes were grouped together based on their theoretical relevance.

7.1 | Threat frame

The threat frame includes three subframes: Hong Kong's democratisation, political prosecutions and the violation of Hong Kong's way of life.

The first dimension of the threat frame is exhibited in the texts of the Genuine Election topic. The discussion was set against a protracted debate over Hong Kong's electoral reform. The National People's Congress (NPC), the highest organ of state power of the People's Republic of China, ruled in 2007 that universal suffrage may be introduced in the 2017 Chief Executive election. However, in 2014, NPC issued a 'decision' that imposed a nominating committee, comparable to the current election committee, to vet all the candidates of the election. However, the election committee has long been criticised for over-representing Beijing's interests and the business sector. The

decision also requires the candidate to secure support from more than half of the nominating committee members. The decision was widely criticised by pro-democracy supporters as 'fake universal suffrage' (*jia puxuan*) and a blatant denial of 'genuine universal suffrage' (*zhen puxuan*) (Yuen, 2015). The debate about genuine election remains central to Hong Kong's discussion on democratisation.

Against this background, the subframe depicts the lack of democratisation as interference from China on Hong Kong's autonomy and a violation of political rights, the Basic Law and international covenants.[4,5] The subframe also stresses the undemocratic nature of the current Chief Executive election as well as the irrelevance of public opinion.[6] It argues that, unless China begins to share its ruling power over Hong Kong, gaining independence is the only way to achieve genuine democracy.

The political prosecutions subframe began as early as 2015. The subframe surged in the wake of arrests and conviction of nationalist activists. It depicts the Hong Kong government and police as the puppets of the Chinese Communist Party while the judiciary system is considered a tool for the Chinese government to make arbitrary arrests and suppress social movements.[7,8,9]

The violation of Hong Kong's way of life subframe was exhibited in the topics of economy, freedom and rights, election interference and rule of law. In this subframe, political incidents were framed as the infringement of different liberal values by the Hong Kong and Chinese government. The early discussion of the subframe took an economic focus as it criticised the allegedly excessively uniform economic structure in Hong Kong. It argues that, as a result of the influx of Chinese tourists, Hong Kong's economic structure has shifted towards catering for the Chinese tourists and losing its local uniqueness.[10] The subframe is subsequently expanded to include the discussion on economic inequality. It identifies four sources of inequality: the functional constituency, uniform economic structure, oppression of the employers and taxation system,[11,12] which allowed the large business to block policies that would reduce income disparity, exploit employees and avoid wealth redistribution.

Even though the neoliberalist policies and taxation system are the legacies of British colonialism (cf. Goodstadt, 2009), the nationalists framed the economic issues as the result of the post-handover Hong Kong government's 'lack of sincerity' in addressing inequality, instead of directing the criticism to the British who established the colony and its neoliberalist economic structure.[13] In the nationalists' diagnosis of the situation, the problem of economic inequality is not itself economic; it is framed as a part of the grand plan of the Chinese government to subjugate Hong Kong people.

The latest discussion of the subframe turned to controversies around Legislative Council elections. These included, first, the 2016 by-election when the Registration and Electoral Office censored the campaign materials of a nationalist candidate as it claimed that he had 'fundamentally breached' the Basic Law for mentioning 'autonomy' and 'self-rule' in the materials; second, the nomination period of the 2016 Legislative Council election, during which the Hong Kong government required all candidates to sign a new 'confirmation form' and declare that they understand "Hong Kong is an inalienable part of China as stipulated in the Basic Law". Chan Ho-tin, the convener of the Hong Kong National Party, and Edward Tin-kei Leung, candidate of Hong Kong Indigenous, were eventually barred from running in the election. And, lastly, the oath-taking saga: in the same election, Yau Wai-ching and Leung Chung-hang, members of Youngspiration, managed to secure nomination and win two seats. However, during their oath-taking session, they displayed a banner bearing the words "Hong Kong is not China" and pronounced China as 'Cheena' (Zhao, 2017).[14] In response, the Hong Kong government filed a lawsuit, and they were disqualified by Hong Kong's High Court following an interpretation issued by the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) (Ng et al., 2016). The above incidents were framed as a violation of the freedom of speech, the right to vote and the right to stand for election and the demise of the rule of law.[15,16,17,18]

In the nationalists' framing, a consistent pattern can be observed: First, the nationalists often reference a *status quo ante* in which the various liberal values were embraced. For example, Youngspiration suggests in a post that:

> When we were a student, we learned that we are equal before the law. But in Hong Kong without a democratic system, the law will probably only protect the regime, but not human rights.[19]

The reference to a 'better' past is often followed by attributing the corruption of the *status quo* to the arrival of the Chinese regime. The idea is best demonstrated in the following post by the Hong Kong National Party:

> The colonial Chinese government has recklessly made an interpretation of the Basic Law in an attempt to restrict the court's power in ruling on relevant cases. This is the first time since the establishment of Hong Kong in the 1840s that the judiciary faces a case of [the] decision before trial evidencing the fact that under illegitimate Chinese sovereignty even judicial independence cannot be maintained in Hong Kong.[20]

In this subframe, we can observe the depiction of China as a threat to Hong Kong's way of life and the liberal values that Hong Kong people hold dear, which have eventually led to the corruption of the 'good old days'.

In summary, the threat frame depicts China as an outside invader and the Hong Kong government was seen as a mere extension of China's ruling arm. The frame attributes Hong Kong's stalled democratisation, protest arrests and threats towards Hong Kong's way of life to China's interventionist policy. These observations echo the theory of peripheral nationalism and the role of direct rule in inciting nationalism (Hechter, 2000) as well as the observations of Fong (2017) and Wu (2016), in which they see Hong Kong nationalism as a resistance of a peripheral territory to a centralising state.

7.2 | Identity frame

The second frame resonates with the idea of China Threat with a focus on the identification of Hong Kong people. The frame consists of the localism subframe and the nationalism subframe. The former prevails in the early discussion, while the latter gradually takes precedence in response to the criticism directed at the idea of localism. In nationalism theory's sense, the materials of this frame deal with the thematic area of the construction of the *homo nationalis*, in particular the key features that make Hongkongese Hongkongese (Wodak et al., 1999).

Localism (*bentu*) is a political movement started in 2012 which gained significant support after the dissipation of the Umbrella Movement, a pro-democracy movement in 2014. Although the term is used loosely to refer to a group of political organisations with the broad aim to protect Hong Kong's interests and identity (the localist camp, *bentupai*), there has been a heated debate concerning the actual meaning of localism, even among the localists themselves (Kaeding, 2017).[21]

The identity frame echoes the narrative of threats from China, and it depicts the idea of localism as a response to such threats.[22,23] On top of the threat to liberal values and threat to economic life, the nationalists added another dimension to the overarching discourse of China Threat: the threats to Hong Kong's culture. The frame attributes the threat to Hong Kong's culture to the so-called one-way permit system. Under the current system, the Chinese government can issue entry permits, at a quota of 150 each day, for Chinese immigrants to permanently reside in Hong Kong while the Hong Kong government has no power to screen the applications or alter the quota (So, 2016). The frame suggests that since the holders of the permits are guaranteed to become Hong Kong permanent resident after living in Hong Kong for 7 years, there is no motivation for them to integrate into the local society of Hong Kong.[24]

The frame also claims that the Hong Kong government has not helped the immigrants to integrate into Hong Kong's culture, but instead fuelled the problem by pushing forward a range of 'cultural invasion' initiatives, such as Mandarin education and replacing traditional Chinese characters with simplified Chinese characters.[25] It depicts traditional Chinese characters as a symbol of Hong Kong's distinctiveness from China and the measures that threatened its survival are therefore seen as a threat to Hong Kong's culture. The frame depicts the promotion of Mandarin education and simplified Chinese characters by the Hong Kong government as a part of the great plan to destroy

Hong Kong's culture. The discussion thus added a cultural dimension to the discourse of China Threat. It is not surprising that the anti-Chinese rhetoric in the discussion on localism has attracted criticism for being racist and discriminating against immigrants (Lee, 2020). In response, we can observe a shift of rhetoric in the identity frame as it incorporates the rhetoric of civic nationalism. The frame advocates the construction of the Hong Kong nation with civic nationalism and seeks to distinguish the concept of nationalism from race and ethnicity.[26,27] The nationalist also openly acknowledged the influence of *On the Hong Kong Nation*, the publication that first brought the idea of civic nationalism into Hong Kong's public discussion (cf. Wu, 2016).[28,29]

We can also observe how the nationalists made use of the opportunities created by political events to alter their discourse. In March 2016, Edward Leung Tin-kei, the spokesperson of Hong Kong Indigenous, was found out to be born in China despite the organisation's anti-Chinese stance. The incident was used to support the supposed non-exclusiveness of Hong Kong nationalism, as they suggest that even though Leung was originally born in China, he has successfully integrated into Hong Kong due to his willingness to defend Hong Kong's rights and national dignity.[30] The Hong Kong nation is posited as open in the sense that immigrants can become Hong Kong people as long as they are willing to understand Hong Kong culture, speak Cantonese and identify with liberal values such as freedom and the rule of law.[31]

In its essence, the 'civic nationalism' proposed in the nationalism subframe can be reduced to a single tenet: Everyone can become a Hongkongese as long as he or she accepts Hong Kong's 'core values'. It is non-exclusive in the sense that the acceptance of the values is a voluntary choice that can be made regardless of ethnicity and birthplace. However, such usage of the term deviates from, or overly simplified, the common understanding of civic nationalism in the field of nationalism studies as discussed in Section 3.

Furthermore, the strong assimilationist assumption employed by the subframe is also at odds with the philosophical underpinnings of civic nationalism. According to Stilz (2009), civic nationalism is meant to be a political identity based on shared citizenship in a liberal-democratic state. Hence, it requires citizens to uphold their political institutions and accept the underlying political principles, but it does not presuppose the protection of a particular national culture. In a version of civic nationalism defended by Barry (2001), he also argues that the state should provide people with equal opportunity to make free choices but not privilege one national culture over another.[32] Instead of civic nationalism, the views of the Hong Kong nationalists are closer to liberal culturalism, which argues that the state ought to privilege particular national cultures that have historical ties with a given territory (Kymlicka, 2001). Although the nationalists stress civic values such as democracy and freedom in their framing, they share a clear intention to privilege the culture of Hong Kong over others.

The usage of civic nationalism rhetoric by the Hong Kong nationalists is more political than analytical: Civic nationalism in Hong Kong is used as a rhetorical device to distinguish Hong Kong nationalism from Chinese nationalism which puts heavy emphasis on lineage and ethnicity, even though many 'values' proposed by the Hong Kong nationalists, such as culture and language, are often considered more 'ethnic' than 'civic' by the literature (Kymlicka, 2001; McCrone, 1998; Stilz, 2009). Civic nationalism rhetoric is used to highlight the 'good' nature of Hong Kong nationalism vis-a-vis the 'bad' features of Chinese nationalism.[33]

7.3 | Action frame

The action frame concerns the actions to be taken against the China Threat. In frame analysis' sense, the action frame deals with the *prognosis* of the framing process, defined as "a proposal of strategies and targets of action aimed at resolving the problem" (Marullo, 1996: 2).

The traditional pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong have long insisted on the peaceful and non-violent nature of protests and demonstrations (*wohleihfei* in the Cantonese shorthand). However, the non-responsive attitude of the government towards peaceful protests led many activists to criticise the approach as too conciliatory (Ramzy, 2019). Against this background, the early discourse of the nationalist put a heavy focus on the so-called

valiant struggle (*jungmoukongzang*). However, this has not been well received by the traditional pro-democracy activists and received heavy criticism.

The discussion on protest gradually shifted to the adoption of the idea of internationalism. It has long been a tradition for the pro-democracy activists and politicians to reach out to the international community to seek support for Hong Kong's democratisation, including sending delegates to lobby foreign politicians, testifying in international hearings, publishing open letters in overseas newspapers and launching world-wide petitions (Chong & Lau, 2014; Merrill, 2015; Victor et al., 2019). Against this background, the action frame depicts Hong Kong as an aspiring member of the free world as it invites international cooperation among substate nations and urges international actors to intervene in local affairs. For instance, one organisation argues that nationalists "shall establish diplomatic links with the various pro-independence democratic leaders, spread the word of Hong Kong's dire situation, and work out any possible cooperation."[34] The nationalists also argue that Hong Kong and Taiwan, along with other countries subject to China's influence, can become 'formidable allies' in their resistance against China.[35] The frame therefore demonstrates the relevance of the wider political cultural context on social movement framing.

8 | CONCLUSION

The findings of this article reveal that Hong Kong nationalism discourse includes three frames: the threat frame which concerns Hong Kong's stalled democratisation, government suppression, and the breakdown of Hong Kong's way of life; the identity frame that focuses on the identification of Hong Kong people; and the action frame that discusses the actions to be taken.

By looking at the evolution of frames over time, this paper reveals the dynamics of the framing process. The analysis of the threat frame shows how the nationalists took advantage of the discursive opportunities created by various political events, including the controversies around the Chief Executive election, Legislative Council election and by-election, and the disqualification of lawmakers saga. Echoing Koopmans and Olzak (2004), my analysis of the identity frame illustrates how the nationalists responded to the public reactions and adjusted their framing, as they adopted the rhetoric of civic nationalism to counter the criticism of being racist and discriminating.

The findings have important implications for understanding nationalist mobilisation. First, moving beyond seeing nationalism as a coherent ideology, this article regards the online manifestation of Hong Kong nationalism as the result of a discursive practice. I have illustrated how elements of nationalism discourse were invoked selectively and purposefully by political actors in response to the available discursive opportunities. The relationship between the construction of nationalism discourse and the manifestation of nationalism in nationalist movement may be less linear than many researchers seem to suggest (cf. Hroch, 1993).

Next, I will discuss the limitations and future work. First, this study focused only on the content of the frames offered by nationalist organisations; therefore, it cannot tell how the frames are received by the population. One corresponding possibility for future research is to research how the frames are received and replicated across social networks. Similarly, due to the focus on social media data, this work is not able to show the degree to which the frames guide offline action. Future research might want to investigate the effects of frames in social movement participation or voting behaviour. Furthermore, future work will need to explore how the digital dimension transforms nationalism discourses and the role digital platforms play in generating digital nationalism in Hong Kong. Likewise, the analysis of this article is entirely textual, and I invite future work to examine the visual dimension as well as other digital elements of Hong Kong nationalism.

Despite the Hong Kong nationalist movement coming to a period of abeyance since 2016, it has arguably exerted profound influence on subsequent social movements in Hong Kong, most notably the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, during which a key slogan of the nationalist was even adopted as the main slogan of the protests. Looking forward, with the hard-line approach adopted by the Chinese and Hong Kong governments,

it is unclear if Hong Kong nationalism, at least its explicit expression, will proliferate, transform or recede. However, this paper will help provide the context to understand the current situation and also the future development of social movement in Hong Kong.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Ross Bond and Michael Rosie (The University of Edinburgh) and Caterina Froio (Sciences Po) for comments on an earlier version of the manuscript. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for their very thoughtful and constructive feedback. The author would also like to thank Chung-hong Chan (The University of Mannheim) and King-wa Fu (The University of Hong Kong) for sharing the data of Youngspiration in light of Facebook's restriction on the Graph API. The analysis was conducted with the help of the following R packages: quanteda, topicmodels, igraph and tidyverse. The author thanks the package authors and contributors for making this work possible.

ORCID

Justin Chun-ting Ho https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7884-1059

ENDNOTES

[1] In this article, I use the terms 'Beijing' and 'China' interchangeably to refer 'the central authorities' of the People's Republic of China, unless noted otherwise. I also use the term 'Hongkongese' to refer to Hong Kong people as a nation and 'Hongkongers' to refer to the people in Hong Kong.

[2] The data collection for Youngspiration was supplemented with data collected by Chung-hong Chan and King-wa Fu due to Facebook's restriction on the Graph API (cf. Ho, 2020)

[3] While the translations were not perfect, it is the best available solution deal to the vast quantity. All the analysis was conducted with original Chinese text, and therefore the error in the translation will not affect the estimations below.

[4] Youngspiration (2015) 9 June. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_824922510932719 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[5] Youngspiration (2015) 16 June. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_827617077329929 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[6] Hong Kong indigenous (2017) 29 March. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/1546925482228025_18720332563 (Accessed: 20 November 2020)

[7] Hong Kong indigenous (2015) 31 July. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/1546925482228025_1629179387335 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[8] Youngspiration (2017) 26 April. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_1309947179096914 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[9] Youngspiration (2016) 11 February. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_941716125920023 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[10] Youngspiration (2015) 26 October. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_890305311061105 (Accessed: 20 July 2020).

[11] Hong Kong Indigenous (2017) 26 June. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/1546925482228025_1923607324559 (Accessed: 20 July 2020).

[12] Functional constituencies are seats in Hong Kong's legislature that are elected mainly by business owners and professional elites.

[13] Hong Kong Indigenous (2017) 26 June. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/1546925482228025_1923607324559 (Accessed: 20 July 2020).

[14] The term was used derogatorily by Japanese imperialist forces during World War II to refer to China.

[15] Hong Kong Indigenous (2016) 16 February. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/1546925482228025_168824959 (Accessed: 20 July 2020).

[16] Youngspiration (2016) 16 February. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_944449885646647 (Accessed: 20 July 2020).

[17] Youngspiration (2016) 27 July. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_1048931825198452 (Accessed: 20 July 2020).

[18] Youngspiration (2016) 17 November. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_115481772460986 (Accessed: 20 July 2020).

[19] Youngspiration (2017) 25 August. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_1424179134340384 (Accessed: 20 July 2020); all quotes are translated by the author unless stated otherwise.

[20] Hong Kong National Party (2016) 7 November. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/468882569977369_5633686 (Accessed: 20 July 2020); originally English.

[21] The nationalists selected in this work are commonly considered a subset of localists who invoked the concepts of nationalism in their discourse.

[22] Youngspiration (2015) 18 May. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_813508698740767 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[23] Hong Kong indigenous (2015) 2 April. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/1546925482228025_1582659481987 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[24] Hong Kong indigenous (2015) 18 May. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_813508698740767 6 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[25] Youngspiration (2015) 7 September. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_868640083227628 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[26] Youngspiration (2016) 10 April. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_981860175238951 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[27] Youngspiration (2016) 26 July. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_1048177888607179 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[28] Youngspiration (2016) 2 August. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_1053166641441637 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[29] Youngspiration (2016) 26 July. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/754643994627238_1048177888607179 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[30] Hong Kong indigenous (2016) 26 March. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/1546925482228025_17032983899 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

[31] ibid.

[32] Stilz and Barry's account of civic nationalism is also arguable. In Brubaker's (1992) famous study, the French tradition is posited as both civic and assimilationist.

[33] Although I pointed out the limited civic-ness of the activist's online discourse, I do not mean that the discourse of Hong Kong nationalism is necessarily xenophobic or exclusionary as some observers might argue.

[34] Hong Kong National Party (2016) 12 November. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/468882569977369_565629 (Accessed: 2 June 2020).

[35] Hong Kong Indigenous (2016) 29 October. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/468882569977369_17939924208 (Accessed: 23 May 2020).

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How to cite this article: Ho, J. C. (2022). Understanding Hong Kong nationalism: A topic network approach. *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12805