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Weekend

Little patriots

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Photo by Simon Song

Burning the Chinese national flag, even a computer-generated one, is hardly the behaviour one would expect in a Hong Kong civics class.

Yet that is precisely what happens when secondary-school teacher Yvonne Liu and her Form One and Two students watch a two-minute video called *BurninNation* as part of a class on national identity.

In the video, China's unmistakable red flag with its five golden yellow stars is engulfed in flames. The stars - which represent the people of China united under the Communist Party - begin to contort, then morph into different shapes, characters and colours, including a Hello Kitty on a pink backdrop and five McDonald's golden arches, before finally returning to their original form.

In the background, a choir booms out the Chinese national anthem but midway through the hymn it degenerates into a crass cacophony.

"This is the most exciting part of the class for the children," says Liu, who has been a teacher for 14 years. "Some of the kids say the director is going to be thrown in prison."

The video is designed to make children think critically about what national identity means to them. It is just part of a new teaching kit designed by the Alliance for Civic Education (ACE), a loose group of academics and non-governmental organisations (NGO) that is challenging the government's current policy on civic education, particularly its national identity education component.

They say the scope of civic education under the current curriculum is too narrow and too focused on instilling love of the motherland and they dismiss recent attempts to build Chinese identity as superficial and simplistic.

Instead, they want national identity lessons to be more critical and

political, and to be taught in a broader context that includes human rights, democracy studies and international affairs.

Leung Yan-wing, lecturer in the Hong Kong Institute of Education's department of educational policy and administration, is one of the creators of the potentially controversial national education training kit, already ordered by 100 teachers since its release earlier this year.

Leung is also one of the most vocal critics of the government, which he says is trying to de-politicise civic education. His gripe centres on the difference (which other academics have described as "significant") between current civic education guidelines, issued in 2001, and a previous set released in 1996. Both were developed under the auspices of the government's Curriculum Development Council. Leung was part of the team that drew up the earlier guidelines and he clearly considers them to be superior because they incorporated a wider range of topics, including human rights, democracy, rule of law and global education, as well as a component on national identity.

Of these five areas, he says, only national identity was kept as a core concept in the 2001 guidelines, together with the values of responsibility, commitment, respect and perseverance.

The change in direction was also reflected in a name change for the subject, which became known as "moral and civic education".

"The values of democracy and human rights have been put aside," he says. "The effect is to dilute the political as far as possible, and national identity has been singled out for special attention."

Yet Leung and other critics are quick to point out that they're not against teaching children and young people about China.

"I have no opposition to nationalistic education," he says. "It's natural that, given our local history as a colony", the government would see the need to foster greater allegiance to China.

What bothers him and other experts is the way national identity is being taught.

Leung regards the visit to Hong Kong by Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei and last month's Olympic victory celebrations, when 50 Chinese gold medallists toured the territory and took part in a televised concert, as part of a cynical attempt to manipulate the emotions of Hong Kong children.

Instead, he hopes his training kit will encourage creative thinking among pupils by asking them their opinions on political issues related to China - such as their views on the significance of flag-burning - and forcing them to grapple with what China means to them as citizens of Hong Kong.

While it's hard to gauge the impact of all the recent razzmatazz aimed at developing Hong Kong children's sense of belonging to China, figures show that more local children identify with their mainland brethren than ever before.

In a survey of 3,600 secondary schools released earlier this month and conducted by the Hok Yau Club, a youth organisation, 76.2 per cent of students said they considered themselves to be Chinese, up 3.8

percentage points on the previous year's survey.

The Hok Yau Club is calling for even greater promotion of national identity as part of civic education activities.

"No matter what your political affiliation may be, you can't change the reality that politically and socially we are integrating more with China," club representative Edward Chan says.

"Our aim is to help youth understand modern China. We don't want them to put China aside - that won't work. China is in our daily life."

Not surprisingly, the Hong Kong government shares Chan's views. Two main bodies are responsible for promoting civic education, including building awareness of the bond between the territory and the mainland.

The Committee for the Promotion of Civic Education is a non-statutory committee attached to the Home Affairs Bureau. Set up in 1986, it promotes civic education outside the school system, though some of some of its publications are circulated to schools.

Of its HK\$10 million annual budget, 40 per cent goes to helping NGOs organise civic education projects on selected themes.

The committee, most of whose 27 members come from the business sector, has been criticised by human rights groups for denying them funding. Instead, they say, the committee prefers to fund apolitical activities, including splurging hundreds of thousands of dollars on building social harmony by sending flowers to the territory's different administrative districts.

The remaining 60 per cent of the money is spent on educational materials and publicity campaigns, including the latest television advert "Our Home, Our Country".

Costing HK\$800,000 to produce, the commercial aims to build national identity by using tried and tested techniques - playing the Chinese national anthem and flashing clips of China's victorious Olympic athletes.

But the real responsibility for teaching national identity rests with Cheung Wing-hung, chief curriculum development officer for moral and civic education at the Department of Education and Manpower.

Cheung hasn't yet had a chance to review the new training materials produced by Leung and his colleagues at ACE, but says his department appreciates diverse approaches.

"It's important for schools to collect different materials and judge for themselves," he says.

But he clearly doesn't like the sound of the desecration of the virtual flag that is taking place in teacher Liu's classroom.

"The national flag has a very important role," he adds. "It's not an icon to be played with."

Cheung says his goal is to give students information on China so that they can make their own decisions about their national identity.

If this sounds similar to Leung's critical thinking approach to national identity, it's because it is.

Yet the men are poles apart when it comes to implementing this elusive concept.

Cheung defends his department's decision to introduce the 2001 guidelines, saying that the older ones were too rigid. He dismisses Leung's assertion that the new curriculum has de-politicised civic education, and says the decision to focus on certain values was necessary to better reflect the complex realities faced by Hong Kong's youth.

"Curricula are permanently provisional," he says.

Yet no amendment was made to the national identity component of the curriculum. Instead, Cheung and his team chose to strengthen what he terms the "missing link" in the Hong Kong education system.

One of the areas that has been accentuated in the new curriculum is study tours to China so that students can directly experience life there.

Last January, Cheung led 180 of Hong Kong's brightest students on a study tour to Beijing. There, he explains, students met with leading experts from areas of Chinese society and were free to ask any questions they wanted to.

Cheung acknowledges that no mention of the Tiananmen Square crackdown was made. Students were, however, fully briefed on the economic benefits of the national space exploration programme, he says.

But as the debate on how to build national identity among students becomes more heated, little or no reference is made to the issue of building a Hong Kong identity.

"Hong Kong's own history has also been ignored under colonialism," says Christine Loh, co-founder and chief executive of Civic Exchange, a think tank and former Legislative Council member.

"There would be much merit in teaching about Hong Kong's extraordinary history. Hong Kong's identity is contested territory and I am all in favour of teaching students to understand these complex issues."

While there are many projects in the pipeline that aim to build national identity, strengthening Hong Kong identity seems out of their scope. Yeung Yiu-chung heads up the National Education Centre, yet another recent national education project.

The independently funded NGO, which has the blessing of the Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa and support from the education and manpower bureau, has no plans to incorporate Hong Kong's identity into its activities when it opens its doors to its target audience of primary and secondary students next month.

"We don't need to foster Hong Kong identity," he says, adding that the

Hok Yau Club survey showed there is greater need to focus on building a national, China-focused identity.

"One quarter of students surveyed don't even consider themselves Chinese," he says.

With an annual budget of just HK\$3 million, the National Education Centre will be an efficient and effective way of strengthening their Chinese identity, he says.

"If we want to make one country, two systems a success then we have to strengthen people's sense of one country."

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