



ROUNDTABLE: DECOLONIZING CHINESE HISTORY

## Colonialism and Nationalism in Hong Kong: Towards True Decolonization

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In June of 2019, millions of Hong Kongers took to the streets. What began as a protest against an extradition bill quickly evolved into a broader movement to safeguard Hong Kong's autonomy from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Protesters pointed with increasing alarm to the fast disappearance of Hong Kong's distinct legal system, political system, and civic culture as well as the erosion of the borders, both physical and abstract, that separated the territory from the mainland. The 1997 handover was designed to safeguard Hong Kong's local autonomy after the end of British colonialism, these demonstrators claimed, and Beijing's government was threatening that promise.

Beijing responded to the protest movement with little sympathy. PRC media labelled the protests as 'blind worship' of the West that stemmed from an 'incomplete' decolonization from the British.<sup>1</sup> According to their logic, the only reason that Hong Kongers might object to a fuller integration with the PRC, or might reject identifying with Chinese nationalism – meant, here, to include not only the acceptance of a shared national past but also a shared political future with the PRC – was because they lacked the enlightenment necessary to move beyond their colonial history.

This conviction stems from how official histories in the PRC imagine Hong Kong vis-à-vis its colonial past: Hong Kong's 'true' decolonization is defined not by local autonomy, but rather, by the territory's transfer to PRC sovereignty. It is a narrative framing grounded in a black and white understanding of colonialism and decolonization, in which colonialism is a morally reprehensible act done by Western powers, and decolonization, best expressed in anti-Western nationalism, is its moral salve.<sup>2</sup> It also rests on a narrow

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<sup>1</sup> Fan Lingzhi, Wang Wenwen, and Chen Qingqing, 'Hong Kong has not acted enough to detach from colonial past, experts argue', *Global Times*, 4 Sept. 2019, [www.globaltimes.cn/content/1163630.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1163630.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> Arif Dirlik, 'Taiwan: the land colonialisms made', *boundary 2*, 45 (2018), pp. 1–25; Jinba Tenzin, 'Rethinking the rise of China: a postcolonial critique of China and a Chinese critique of the

understanding of sovereignty – all geographic spaces either constitute or belong to a colonial empire or a nation-state, with no other viable option. And finally, it promotes a destined historical teleology in which post-colonial spaces like the PRC triumph over Western empires by reclaiming their ‘rightful’ territories.

Because of how colonialism features in official Chinese history, Hong Kong’s role in that history is strikingly narrow.<sup>3</sup> Normally considered nothing more than an extension of China’s 5,000-year civilization, Hong Kong only bears direct mention in service of nationalist grievance, highlighted as the first Chinese territory to be ‘lost’ to Western imperialism during the ‘Century of Humiliation’ between the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing through the 1949 founding of the People’s Republic of China.<sup>4</sup> Hong Kong’s identity as a ‘lost’ territory not only drives how Hong Kong fits into China’s past; it has also foretold its future. It is a narrative at the centre of the assumption, widespread among global political leaders since at least the 1970s, that Hong Kong was always destined to ‘return’ to the motherland.<sup>5</sup>

In the past decade, however, many Hong Kongers have begun to question their assigned destiny as nothing more than a lost territory returned, instead viewing the PRC version of decolonization as little more than recolonization.<sup>6</sup> This conviction is, in no small part, grounded in material realities. The continued existence of British colonial-era structures after 1997 has granted the Beijing-sympathetic Hong Kong government enormous power to maintain colonial-era power inequities between ruler and ruled, and they have been all too eager to liberally use those structures to stifle critics and aggrandize their own power and, by extension, Beijing’s.<sup>7</sup> Hong Kongers’ fears about Beijing’s rule also stem from questions of identity. The insistence that Hong Kong is nothing more than a lost territory is used to rob Hong Kongers of cultural sovereignty, suppressing their ability to express their own identities,

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postcolonial’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 35 (2022), pp. 83–106; Allen Chun, *Forget Chineseness: on the geopolitics of cultural identification* (New York, NY, 2018), p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Vickers and Flora Kan, ‘The re-education of Hong Kong identity, politics and education in postcolonial Hong Kong’, *American Asian Review*, 21 (2003), pp. 179–228, at p. 198.

<sup>4</sup> Wang Zheng, *Never forget national humiliation: historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations* (New York, NY, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> This is perhaps most clearly seen in how the PRC has been asserting Hong Kong’s destiny as part of its geobody in international relations since at least 1972. Au Loong-yu, ‘Foreword’, in Wen Liu, J. N. Chien, Christina Chung, and Ellie Tse, eds., *Reorienting Hong Kong’s resistance: leftism, decoloniality, and internationalism* (Singapore, 2022), p. xvi; Joshua Wong and Jeffrey Ngo, ‘How China stripped Hong Kong of its right to self-determination in 1972 – and distorted history’, *Hong Kong Free Press*, 31 Mar. 2020, <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/11/08/china-stripped-hong-kong-right-self-determination-1972-distorted-history/>.

<sup>6</sup> Rey Chow, ‘Between colonizers: Hong Kong’s postcolonial self-writing in the 1990s’, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 2 (1992), pp. 151–70.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Hui, ‘A law that once outlawed insulting the queen is now being used to stifle speech in Hong Kong’, *Quartz*, 9 Sept. 2020, <https://qz.com/1901125/hong-kong-uses-colonial-era-sedition-law-to-stifle-speech/>; ‘Hong Kong: how colonial-era laws are being used to shut down independent journalism’, *The Conversation*, 20 Jan. 2022, <https://theconversation.com/hong-kong-how-colonial-era-laws-are-being-used-to-shut-down-independent-journalism-174375>.

exercise their own political subjectivities, and decide their own futures. Fearfully looking at the experiences of other PRC-occupied areas like Xinjiang and Tibet, many Hong Kongers adopt the very same black and white morality of colonialism and decolonization but, in this case, frame Beijing as the colonizer.<sup>8</sup>

Hong Kong presents us with a complex portrait of decolonization.<sup>9</sup> Globally, ethnonationalism among the colonized often serves as an antidote for colonialist narratives. But the Hong Kong nationalist movement continues to exist outside the Overton window, with most Hong Kongers having instead developed a rather uneasy relationship with nationalism in general and Chinese nationalism in particular. Certainly, some Hong Kongers embrace a PRC-defined Chinese national identity as their own. Many more usually young Hong Kongers reject Chinese identity in any form, instead identifying only with the post-imperial (and, in some but not all expressions, anti-PRC) civic identity 'Heunggang Yan (香港人, Hong Konger)'. But most Hong Kong residents live in the liminal space in between, embracing both the identity of 'Hong Konger' and a contingent and contested Chinese identity that rejects those elements of Chinese nationalism that encroach on their autonomy.

This complex relationship with Chinese identity brings into sharp relief both the possibilities and limitations of a decolonization framework in Hong Kong. What does decolonization mean if it does not come hand in hand with nationalism? To what extent does nationalism mirror colonialism? And more specifically in the case of Hong Kong, how do we talk about the narrative violence of a state-backed hegemonic Chinese History in a space where parts of that narrative are, occasionally and contextually, meaningful for the people who live there?

## I

Since the early twentieth century, Chinese national identity has been built upon a singular hegemonic historical narrative – a 'History with a capital H'. This History (with a capital H) is comprised of a millennia-long narrative of civilizational continuity, from the first emperors to the PRC's current government. This History also implies territorial integrity. China's geobody was not, in this narrative, the result of colonial enterprise but an ever-existing inherent piece of the national soul. It rests on a manifest destiny logic that, in the words of Tim Oakes, melds 'Chinese identity, culture, and territory...into a seamless spatial and temporal whole...render[ing] any analytical separation of these elements impossible in *a priori* terms'.<sup>10</sup> Today, the PRC state claims both History

<sup>8</sup> Mari Saito, 'Hong Kong protestors rally in support of China's ethnic Uighurs', *Reuters*, 22 Dec. 2019, [www.reuters.com/article/hongkong-protests/hong-kong-protesters-rally-in-support-of-chinas-ethnic-uighurs-idUKL4N28W03S](http://www.reuters.com/article/hongkong-protests/hong-kong-protesters-rally-in-support-of-chinas-ethnic-uighurs-idUKL4N28W03S).

<sup>9</sup> Wide-ranging scholarship on the topic can be found in Liu, Chien, Chung, and Tse, eds., *Reorienting Hong Kong's resistance*.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Oakes, 'Looking out to look in: the use of the periphery in China's geopolitical narratives', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 53 (2012), pp. 315–26, at p. 316; Zheng Hao and Hua-Yu Sebastian

with a capital H and the territory that History supports as central to both their citizens' national identity and the legitimacy of their rule.

The PRC geobody, like all national geobodies, is defended by historical myth-making. As James Millward's essay in this roundtable explains in detail, the PRC's current borders are hardly ahistorical; to the extent they have precedent at all, they are vaguely, though not exactly, based upon the last imperial dynasty, the Qing. By simply presuming these borders were preordained PRC territory, the state has effectively erased the process by which such borders were created and defended, smuggling into silence their violent construction by successive Chinese governments. These borders are also presently aspirational and contested. Taiwan serves as the most obvious flashpoint in Beijing's current quest to project its imagined geobody as established fact, as Catherine Chou shows, though recent disputes on the Sino-Indian border and in the South China Sea show that these contestations are wide-reaching. In the process of disconnecting their imagined geobody from imperial conquest, the PRC state relies upon History with a capital H. By emphasizing its imagined geobody as national destiny, that History cloaks colonial enterprises with anti-imperialist nationalism, stretching, in the words of Benedict Anderson, 'the short, tight skin of the nation' over a colonial empire.<sup>11</sup>

Hong Kong's role within History with a capital H is a convenient one for the PRC state. The Century of Humiliation – a period that begins with the indignity of Hong Kong's 'loss' – serves a dual contemporary purpose of fuelling PRC grievances against 'the West' and glorifying the Chinese Communist Party for bringing that humiliation to an end. It also empowers the PRC to deny Hong Kong an independent history. In History with a capital H, the PRC is, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, the 'silent referent for historical knowledge',<sup>12</sup> while Hong Kong becomes 'China's indispensable "other" – to be recovered as well as to be recolonized'.<sup>13</sup> The result is a warped history for Hong Kong full of misrepresentations and silences. For instance, many Han Hong Kongers began their lives in Hong Kong as refugees who fled the Chinese Communist Party, and they resent how the PRC has tethered Chinese identity to political loyalty; History with a capital H offers little space for their stories. It also effectively erases the existence of the territory's ethn racial minorities. As essays by James Millward, Catherine Chou, and Taomo Zhou in this roundtable show, the hegemonic view of Chinese history begins with the civilizational origins of the Han ethn racial group; today, this narrative has fed the widespread presumption that Taiwan and Hong Kong are 'Chinese' because they were and are primarily populated by Han Chinese people. But Hong Kong is not and was never solely a Han ethn state,

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Cherng, 'State-led Chinese nationalism: an analysis of primary school textbooks', *China: An International Journal*, 18 (2020), pp. 27–48; Bill Hayton, *The invention of China* (New Haven, CT, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London, 1991), p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Provincializing Europe: postcoloniality and the critique of history', *Cultural Studies*, 6 (1992), pp. 337–57, at p. 337.

<sup>13</sup> Wing Sang Law, *Collaborative colonial power: the making of the Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong, 2009), p. 174.

with migrants from Southeast Asia and South Asia in particular constituting an important part of the city's population. To treat Hong Kong as not only simply *Chinese*, but also Chinese in a way that glorifies an ethnoracialized myth of Han-centred civilization, is to once again relegate non-Han peoples to the same second-class status they suffered under British colonialism.

Frantz Fanon explained that colonialism is a total project that 'culturally alienates' the colonized population, precluding the creation of a national culture and consciousness. Such a definition is clearly true of British rule in Hong Kong, which established a racially segregated and hierarchical society that only empowered Hong Kongers to create their own identity insofar as it did not threaten British control. Yet Fanon also warned that nationalism did not always solve this problem. Rather, 'narrow-minded' post-colonial nationalism in which new elites reproduce the 'techniques and language borrowed from the occupier' ensures that a post-colonial society is never able to create its own culture, its own consciousness, and its own history.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the nation-state only has radical, revolutionary potential if the new national culture that defines it is co-constructed with and emanates from the people. And as the PRC asserts itself as the creator of a national culture for Hong Kong, it has done little to ensure that national culture is co-constructed with Hong Kong citizens.

## II

The last section highlighted the ways Chinese History with a capital H has fuelled an unequal power dynamic between Hong Kong citizens and the PRC government that echoes the power dynamics that existed under British colonialism. Yet, what remains sharply distinct between pre- and post-handover Hong Kong is that, in the former, the identity of the ruling power – British identity – was always alien to Hong Kongers, whereas Chinese identity was, and is, not. Public opinion polls in Hong Kong, while they wax and wane, consistently show that a plurality of Hong Kong residents identify as either 'Chinese' or 'Hong Kong Chinese'.<sup>15</sup> From the bottom up, it is impossible to extricate the idea of 'China' from the ways Hong Kongers understand their history.

In part, this was because since the Second World War, Chinese History with a capital H was the only 'local' history Hong Kong residents formally learned. The Han-centred civilizational Chinese History taught in Hong Kong secondary schools avoided overtly political topics at the insistence of the British, instead focusing on ancient heroes, moral exemplars, and cultural innovation.<sup>16</sup> But this did not mean that this Chinese History was simply imposed by colonial

<sup>14</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* (New York, NY, 1968), p. 160.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Mathews, Eric Ma, and Tai-lok Lui, *Hong Kong, China: learning to belong to a nation* (London, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Vickers and Kan, 'The re-education of Hong Kong'; Flora Kan, *Hong Kong's Chinese history curriculum from 1945: politics and identity* (Hong Kong, 2007); Edward Vickers, Flora Kan, and Paul Morris, 'Colonialism and the politics of "Chinese History" in Hong Kong's schools', *Oxford Review of Education*, 29 (2003), pp. 95–111.

rulers. The subject was taught in Chinese languages (usually Cantonese), and was thus subject to little oversight by the British government, and the curriculum included input by Han elites. The effect was that Chinese History with a capital H became a narrative of being through which Hong Kongers could see themselves – not simply as colonial subjects, but as part of a 5,000-year-old civilization.

Chinese History with a capital H also had grassroots appeal outside formal education. It was commonly featured in popular culture – television dramas glorifying Chinese imperial history, novels featuring historical figures as martial arts heroes, and even video games based on literary epochs.<sup>17</sup> And despite attempts by the British to depoliticize Chinese History, it was also a mainstay in anti-colonial social movements. This became particularly clear in the 1960s, when the city was swept up in a series of anti-colonial protests. Donning Maoist uniforms and waving Little Red Books, activists found inspiration in the PRC's recent history in their quest to combat the violence and hegemony of Western colonialism – not unlike many diasporic victims of colonial violence around the globe, as essays by Taomo Zhou and James Gethyn Evans show in this roundtable.

The demonstrations of the 1960s were polarizing, and Maoism never gained widespread popularity in Hong Kong. But the local movement found some sympathy among a wide cross-section of Hong Kongers who were persuaded by its anti-colonial message and its contention that Chinese national identity, broadly defined, was an attractive alternative to that of colonial subject. As a result, Chinese History with a capital H sat at the foundation of many anti-colonial social movements of the 1970s and 80s. Take, for example, the Baodiao movement of 1971–2. Part of a large, international social movement sparked by the United States' recognition of Japan's claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, the Hong Kong protests focused on what they saw as Western violation of Chinese territory and sovereignty. The Baodiao movement enjoyed general support in Hong Kong, but the underlying motivations among participants were splintered: while many were driven by transnational leftist beliefs and solidarity with anti-Western colonial movements around the world, others were motivated explicitly by pro-PRC nationalism.<sup>18</sup> A similar pattern can be seen in the movement to make Chinese an official language equal to English. While some activists pushed for Hong Kong to recognize the national languages of both the PRC and the Republic of China, Mandarin, so as to further align Hong Kong with nationalist narratives coming from both 'Chinas', others rebuffed. They, instead, advocated for the official language to simply be 'Chinese', a purposefully flexible term that could include

<sup>17</sup> Vickers and Kan, 'The re-education of Hong Kong', p. 190.

<sup>18</sup> Promise Li, 'The radical '70s magazine that shaped the Hong Kong left', *The Nation*, 17 Apr. 2020, [www.thenation.com/article/world/hong-kong-leftists-1970s/](http://www.thenation.com/article/world/hong-kong-leftists-1970s/); Au Loong-Yu, Law Wing-sang, Mok Chiu-yu, and Promise Li, '50 years after Baodiao: how Hong Kong struggled against all nationalisms: an interview with Baodiao's frontliners, activists, and historians', *International Viewpoint*, 12 Jan 2022, <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7459>.

both Mandarin and other Chinese languages, including Hong Kong's *lingua franca* Cantonese.

These examples are not only notable because they highlight how Hong Kongers drew upon Chinese nationalism to negotiate their relationship with both the PRC and the United Kingdom. They are also notable because each of these negotiations was undergirded by Chinese History with a capital H. For those that actively promoted the CCP's party line wholesale, this much is obvious. But even among those who rejected blatant PRC nationalism or directly opposed the idea of PRC rule, Chinese History still impacted the ways in which Hong Kongers articulated anti-British colonialism. Opposition to Japan's claims to the Diaoyu islands were driven by a belief in the inherent integrity of the Chinese geobody and the need to protect its sovereignty from Western imperialism. Arguments for making Chinese an official language relied upon narratives of linguistic continuity from the origin of Chinese civilization to the present to prove both the glory of and connections among diverse Chinese languages.<sup>19</sup> In both cases, Chinese History with a capital H refuted the main premises at the foundation of British colonialism – Western hegemony and white supremacy – by upholding China as a civilization whose greatness stands on par with, or even surpasses, that of the West.

Certainly, these examples do not disprove the cultural and political violence of Beijing's post-colonial rule. But it is important that we recognize that many Hong Kongers do not necessarily presume their identities or histories are wholly distinct from the country that rules them. We cannot deny the significance of a 'Chinese' identity nor the purchase of the civilizational historical narrative the PRC actively promotes on how Hong Kongers define their post-colonial subjectivities.

### III

Decolonization, at its heart, concerns the return and maintenance of political sovereignty. But in the case of Hong Kong, whose sovereignty is being maintained, and from whom is it being returned? Structurally, much of the political power the British monopolized is now held by leadership in Beijing and their Hong Kong allies. So, too, have the narratives that could form the basis of a post-colonial identity for Hong Kongers been largely subsumed into a Chinese identity grounded in History with a capital H. This imposition has forced Hong Kongers to make a choice: that they either accept all of the PRC's History wholesale, or they are labelled as both not truly 'Chinese' and, often, subversive or traitorous. Through these actions, Beijing has made it difficult, if not impossible, for Hong Kongers to feel empowered within a Chinese identity.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For an explanation of these narratives, see Gina Anne Tam, "'Our roots are the same': hegemony and power in narratives of Chinese linguistic antiquity, 1900–1949", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 65 (2023), pp. 27–52.

<sup>20</sup> Ng Kang Chung, '76 percent of young people polled identify as Hong Kongers while only 2 percent think of themselves as Chinese', *South China Morning Post*, 21 June 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/>

Yet, simultaneously, there are problems with thinking of the PRC as nothing more than another colonizer. Chinese History has often been a wellspring of bottom-up identity-construction within the colony, and to cleave Hong Kong's history from that of China, or even the PRC, is to project onto that space a sharp division with which many Hong Kongers, in particular older generations, do not identify.

So what might be a better way of untangling this complex relationship Hong Kongers have with the PRC and the history it supports? One answer may be found in Chan Koon-chung's *My generation of Hong Kongers* and what he calls 'Hong Kong as method'.<sup>21</sup> Resembling Chen Kuan-Hsing's prescription for regional decolonization, 'Asia as method',<sup>22</sup> Chan calls upon Hong Kongers to consider what Hong Kong's history, culture, and values might look like absent the histories, cultures, and values imposed upon them. It is a reorientation of Hong Kong studies that narrates Hong Kong's relationship with colonialism and nationalism not according to what those concepts mean to the nation or the colonizer, but according to Hong Kongers' unique lived histories.

Hong Kong as method first requires us to appreciate Hong Kongers' unsettled relationship with nationalism. Hong Kongers rarely embrace all aspects of the Chinese nationalism normalized across the border, instead cautiously and unevenly integrating contingent expressions of Chinese nationalism with calls for local autonomy and power. I have argued elsewhere that Chinese nationalism ought to be thought of as multivalent.<sup>23</sup> By allowing Hong Kongers to choose what Chineseness means to them and recognizing how Chinese identity co-exists with other modes of being, Hong Kongers can become empowered to, in Frantz Fanon's words, 'take history into their own hands'.<sup>24</sup>

Hong Kong as method also requires us to recognize the specifically local reasons that Chinese History with a capital H finds purchase in Hong Kong. A civilizational narrative of Chinese History can be, and often is, easily positioned to challenge Western hegemony. Narratives of Chinese civilizational achievement and longevity, for instance, directly contradict the global normalization of Western exceptionalism. The Century of Humiliation, as another example, highlights the moral and legal injustices of Western colonialism. Given that Hong Kongers have clearly been victimized by both Western exceptionalism and Western colonialism, it makes sense that they would willingly find solace within a History that directly challenges those constructs.

Reckoning with these complex realities is not only important for empowering Hong Kongers as they negotiate their relationship with China – it is also necessary for true decolonization from British rule.<sup>25</sup> In the wake of the

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[news/hong-kong/society/article/3182541/76-cent-young-people-poll-identify-hongkongers-while-only-2](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X2300033X).

<sup>21</sup> Chan Koon-Chung (Chen Guanzhong), *Wo zhe yi dai de Xianggangren* (My generation of Hong Kongers) (Oxford, 2005), p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as method: toward deimperialization* (Durham, NC, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Gina Anne Tam, *Dialect and nationalism in China, 1860–1960* (Cambridge, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Fanon, *The wretched of the earth*, p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Chen, *Asia as method*.



2019 protests, a kind of British colonial nostalgia has emerged among a small contingent of Hong Kong citizens, a phenomenon that implies that Hong Kongers do not yet have the kind of empowerment decolonization promises.<sup>26</sup> Beijing's actions have also allowed the United Kingdom to tout the imagined benevolence of their rule while washing their hands of the structural inequalities they built, a kind of 'move to innocence', in Tuck and Yang's words, that beneficiaries of colonialism frequently employ to distance themselves from imperialism's violence.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, British moves to innocence are their own responsibility to face. Nonetheless, these realities make plain how much Hong Kongers' current struggles are grounded in London's incomplete deimperialization.

Ultimately, decolonization requires that Hong Kongers have the space to create new histories that reflect how the city's people actually understand their own relationship with both their colonizers and the Chinese nation, if they choose to be a part of it. Only then does Chinese nationalism not have to reinforce the same power inequities created by British colonialism.

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<sup>26</sup> Au Loong-yu, 'Foreword'.

<sup>27</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1 (2012), pp. 1–40.

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