

The Masses' Role in China and Hong Kong: Ideology and Conflict

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In 1997, Britain officially transferred sovereignty of Hong Kong to China. While elected representation was not allowed by the British for almost all of Hong Kong's history, the change in sovereignty to an authoritarian power suddenly instituted a willingness by governor Chris Patten and the Hong Kong people to fight for democratic reforms. This paper frames Hong Kong's transfer of sovereignty by analyzing contested narratives in Chinese history, particularly humiliation, power, and the desire for economic growth. By contrasting Mao's mobilization of the masses behind state power with Deng's emphasis of engaging the masses through economic reform, one gains a clearer lens to view China and Hong Kong's unclear future. While some degree of freedom is guaranteed in Hong Kong's constitution, virtually every sentence relating to democracy is riddled with uncertainties. People in Hong Kong don't want to assimilate into China's political order, yet its economy is rapidly losing its competitive advantage and is becoming increasingly dependent on China. The tensions in Hong Kong represent the culmination of these conflicting narratives under the CCP.

Introduction: Two Legacies of Tiananmen

ON the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, I took a subway to Qianmen station in Beijing. I exited the train, walked for five minutes, and arrived at Tiananmen Square. Security was tight; police officers hand-checked tourists and locals alike for contraband. When I finally reached the archetypal gates with the Chairman Mao portrait, I paused to take photos and people watch. Over the next fifteen minutes, I witnessed three people get detained for dissent. The most memorable was an elderly man, likely in his seventies, unbuttoning his jacket and revealing an orange piece of construction paper. The paper likely talked about someone in his family who had been killed or detained in the 1989 massacre. As he yelled, his voice seemed hoarse from the decades of silence. When I returned to my hostel that afternoon, the Washington Post front-page read, "In Tiananmen Square, No Trace of Remembrance on 25th Anniversary of Protests."

The following June fourth, I took a subway to Victoria Park in Hong Kong. Police ushered the crowd along a tight pathway to the basketball courts. Along the way, students handed out free copies of newspapers from the day following the massacre and pamphlets asking for donations to the Tiananmen Mothers' charity. The crowd moved as one; the mood felt both solemn and electric. By the time I arrived at the protest, eight basketball courts were already full. In the center stood a replica Goddess of Democracy statue, and a mural of the original protests in Tiananmen Square stood behind one court. Each person held a candle, and some opened yellow umbrellas for solidarity with the 2014 movement. As the night progressed, I imagined this is what the 1989 protests felt like, although for many the hope for China's democratization now plays second fiddle to aspirations for local representation.

Since then, I have sought the link between these two events. On both days, the feelings of tension and solidarity represented the culmination of the unique cultures that have emerged in China and Hong Kong. The difference struck deeper than mere freedom of speech; the reactions to the student protests of June 1989 serve as a window into the society as a whole. Popular opinion, as well as public aspirations for both regions, are determined by the themes that have emerged in Chinese history and the responses of Hong Kong society.

While it is easy to examine China and Hong Kong's history in isolation, only by looking at China's troubled past does Hong Kong's history obtain a deeper meaning. Even as China has risen as a global power in the late-twentieth century, optimistic statements about how China has enhanced its international position are often qualified with reminders of its humiliation. Humiliation is central in Chinese history. China's elite and general population continue to reference the period from the first Opium War in 1839 through the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 as 百年国耻, the "Century of Humiliation." During this time, China's territory shrank by one-third, its imperial system collapsed, and the country was overcome with invasion, war, and uprisings. Even today, Chinese history textbooks divide its history into two parts – before and after the Opium War.ⁱ

The return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 represented more to China than territorial gains. It symbolized the 150-year conclusion to the disgrace of the unequal treaties imposed upon them in the mid-nineteenth century. The transfer of sovereignty was peaceful, yet questions remain with regard to Hong Kong's political freedoms. While eager to maintain the status quo economically, China has been routinely humiliated by

allowing Hong Kong residents to openly criticize and protest their freedoms and larger concerns regarding mainland China. The limited 50-year duration of Hong Kong's constitution has residents eager to fight for

increased democratic reforms and universal suffrage, but China walks a tight line between allowing universal suffrage and giving up some degree of control, and between not listening to popular demands and being shamed by protesters and the international community. In the face of adversity, Hong Kong has transformed into one of the most politically active societies with an average of 1000 demonstrations per year.ⁱⁱ Hong Kong encapsulates the atmosphere of recent Chinese history – a fear of humiliation, a struggle for power, and a confused future. While looking at China and Hong Kong separately has its merits, only by connecting the two can we better understand the themes shaping the mentalities that influence the people's struggle for a voice.

Part I: Origins of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

The CCP's rise to power began in the 1920's and was interwoven with rejecting the culture of national embarrassment and making appeals for nationalism. During the 'Century of Humiliation,' China lost every war it fought and often was forced to give major concessions to the dominant powers of the time. The Chinese people saw their government as unstable and incapable of defending its rights. The political cartoon seen in Figure 1 illustrates the rulers of Britain, Germany, Russia, France, and Japan, each with a knife in hand. The term 瓜分 ("carved up like a melon") originated at this time to describe the way in which foreign imperial rulers of the time took turns dividing up Chinese territory. The Qing era official in the background is represented as both angry and barbaric.



Figure 1. French Political Cartoonⁱⁱⁱ

The "Century of Humiliation" originated during the 17th and 18th century when the demand for Chinese goods in Britain - porcelain, silk, and tea - vastly outpaced the desire for western goods in China. Britain solved the trade deficit by exporting large amounts of opium to China. For centuries, opium had been used medicinally in China, but after Britain flooded the Chinese market with large quantities of it, over 10% of Chinese citizens became addicted to the drug. After the Qing dynasty outlawed the opium trade in 1839, Britain responded forcefully with what came to be known as 'gunboat diplomacy.' 18,000 vastly outnumbered Chinese troops were injured or killed during the first Opium War at the expense of only 69 British lives.^{iv} The humiliated Qing Dynasty had no option but to agree to the terms of the Treaty of Nanking. This unequal treaty formally ended the Canton system, opened up five new ports for foreign trade, and ceded Hong Kong to the British.

Contributing to this sense of embarrassment was Japan's rise to power and the inability of China to assert itself in the Pacific. Chinese intellectuals had long considered China as Japan's superior and as the origin point for Japanese culture.^v In the Sino-Japanese war of 1895, Japan's modernized military defeated China in only eight months. This was a clear indication of regional dominance shifting to Japan, as Japan proved itself to be better at adapting to the modern world. China lost control of Korea and Taiwan in the peace treaty, but more importantly, it lost its prestige. Japan continued its aggressions in World War I, issuing a set of Twenty-One Demands to the weak Chinese National government. These demands eroded many aspects of Chinese sovereignty and expanded the Japanese sphere of influence by giving Japan control of Manchuria, the Shandong province, exclusive mining rights, and guaranteed exclusive concessions. Anti-Japanese sentiment gripped the nation, and the public held a large-scale boycott of all Japanese goods. The Chinese government did not have the power to again go to war with Japan, but delayed acceptance of the demands to save face, if only for another day.

The Treaty of Versailles was the turning point for the masses to join together and finally speak out against the injustices imposed upon China. The Allied Powers backstabbed China despite its support during the war. The treaty acquiesced to many of Japan's demands, the most egregious was awarding Shandong province to Japan. The resulting student marches gave rise to the May Fourth Movement, which promoted modernization through intellectual and social reforms. The movement spread domestically as Beijing, Shanghai, and many other cities went on strike.^{vi} In 1922, the United States finally mediated the return of sovereignty of Shandong to China.

The tensions and concerns of the masses culminated in the May Fourth Movement, which was instrumental in the people finally taking a stand against the humiliations of the bygone imperialist era. While Chinese nationalists called

for 'Mr. Democracy' and 'Mr. Science' to modernize China, radical intellectuals began studying Marxism. Mao Zedong later attributed this movement as the first step towards the CCP's communist revolution. Chinese citizens finally took a stand and showed their eagerness to move forward to create a new China, one expunged of humiliation and weakness.

Part II: National Security in Hong Kong and the 2003 Protests

When the Basic Law (Hong Kong's constitution) finally came to fruition in April 1990, the ambiguities interspersed throughout the document muddied its promises, degrading many of its high ideals and aspirations, particularly on the topic of voting reform and democratic initiatives. This left citizens skeptical whether the Chinese government would truly back the legal document and defend Hong Kong's rights, especially since the power to interpret the Basic Law was vested in China's NPC.^{vii} In particular, the lack of a concrete timeline meant that no one was held accountable for the inevitable delay in implementing electoral change. Article 45 reads, "The ultimate aim is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures."^{viii} This amendment is indefinite and lacks even a basic timetable. In essence, the Basic Law continued the theme of the CCP making promises that, due to vague legal language, offered no real guarantees and could be twisted depending on the situation in Hong Kong.

The Basic Law drafting committee delayed potential controversy in 1990 by effectively leaving national security as an unresolved, gray area. That's not to say the Basic Law did not mention national security. Article 23 of the Basic Law required national security legislation to be passed dealing with seven different categories of crimes, including treason, sedition, and subversion. The legislation was not explicitly defined and was to be passed at a later date. By delaying a potential controversy, the CCP successively shifted the narrative to divert negative attention as a means of ensuring Hong Kong's smooth transition back to China. The Basic Law was released one year after fear derived from the Tiananmen Square massacre swept Hong Kong. Spelling out scenarios in which the Chinese government would take away citizens' personal liberties clearly would not have been great for public relations. This deferment method was successful in smoothing tensions, as just before the handover, a CNN poll concluded that six out of every ten residents believed that reunification with China would be a positive end-result for Hong Kong society.^{ix}

When the long-awaited legislation came to fruition in late 2002, the fear over rights crackdowns once again ignited debate over Chinese power in Hong Kong. It was a tale of two points of view. While Chief Executive Tung called the plans "liberal and reasonable," rights activists and

journalists called it a violation of civil liberties.^x Under the legislation, any speech deemed "instigative" could be regarded as illegal. Even hearing instigative speech and not reporting it would be a crime. In addition, any organization banned by the PRC for state security reasons could be banned at any time in Hong Kong without due investigation. A wide range of reactions greeted the legislation; many legal experts welcomed that treason, sedition, and subversion would be narrowly confined to acts of violence and overthrowing the government, but many wondered if controversial rights groups, including the Alliance, would be banned under such rules.

During the annual June 4 protests of 2003, the Tiananmen Square massacre's vindication was subordinate to the more pressing, local concern of fighting Article 23. The Alliance's annual march had a new theme: "Don't forget June 4, oppose Article 23."^{xi} By linking the Beijing massacre to the proposed security law, activists voiced their distrust of Regina Ip and the Executive Council. This allowed Article 23 to be seen in a new light, not as an isolated event, but rather as one of the stepping stones on the pathway to losing freedom of speech and assimilating into authoritarian China.

In Figure 2, the political cartoon represents Chief Executive Tung as a two-faced matryoshka doll. As Tung defended Article 23 legislation to the Executive Council, he put on the image of a defender of liberty. He told the council, "Human rights and civil liberties are the pillars of our success. I will protect them."^{xii} His promises didn't stop the Democratic Party from seeing Tung as a wolf in sheep's clothing, an angry man bent on taking away the rights of those seen as controversial in the Mainland, including the Alliance and those who practiced Falun Gong. The implication of the cartoon is that once Article 23 was enacted, Hong Kong would lose its exceptionality to the degree that even the right to remember June fourth would be taken away.



沒有六四，就沒有二十三；
有了二十三，還有沒有六四？

Translation: If it weren't for June 4th, we wouldn't have Article 23.
If we have Article 23, will we still have June 4th?

Figure 2. Article 23 Political Cartoon^{xiii}

The CCP was surely aware of opposition to the Article 23 legislation, but severely underestimated the extent to which narratives of fear and deception swept Hong Kong society.

The Tung administration as well as China's Hong Kong Affairs Office both informed Chinese leadership to expect a maximum turnout of 40,000 for the CHRF's July 1 rally against Article 23.^{xiv} Contrary to their belief, over 500,000 people took to the streets to march from Victoria Park to the government's offices in central Hong Kong. This two-mile rally was scheduled to begin in the afternoon at 2:30 p.m., but due to the huge number of participants, people were still starting the walk at 10:00 p.m. Not every protester rallied for identical reasons, but 80.7% joined the protest specifically to oppose the Article 23 security legislation.^{xv}

Significantly, this was the first mass rally in which Hong Kong residents marched over a local issue. There was an element of fear for Hong Kong's future during the Tiananmen Square protests, but the mass rally was spurred primarily by mainland politics. The nature of the Hong Kong protests changed from anger towards Beijing for not respecting its domestic rights to marching against infringements to their own, domestic rights. The difference is a collective willingness to fight for the future of Hong Kong. People genuinely believed they would make a difference, otherwise they would have stayed home that afternoon. March organizer Richard Tsoi Yiu-Cheong described the feeling after the march, saying, "This is definitely a historic moment, as it is the first time Hong Kong people have fought for their freedom and rights. It is a day to be proud of."^{xvi}

Conclusion: The Uncertain Future

On September 28, 2014, 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace' began a civil disobedience campaign in three popular districts of Hong Kong. Protesters set up tents, effectively blockading part of the city's central business district and two major shopping neighborhoods. The number of protesters reached 100,000 at any given time over the next 79 days. Despite police clearance attempts and gang intimidation, protesters stood their ground. The yellow umbrella, the instrument used to protect demonstrators from tear gas, quickly became the symbol of the so-called 'Umbrella Revolution.'

Despite Hong Kong's concrete steps towards becoming a politically engaged society, a clear pathway to increasing the level of democracy remains out of reach. The NPC's proposal for chief executive election reform was defeated in June 2015 and reforms have not been proposed since. In the Legislative Council, the impact of popularly elected geographic constituencies is essentially nullified by functional constituencies. With power in the hands of the chief executive and no timetable for reform, hopes for a more democratic Hong Kong appear dim. Protests have successfully mobilized the Hong Kong people and garnered media attention, yet the only efficacious movement, in 2003, defended existing rights rather than obtained new ones.

Central to Hong Kong's democratic hopes and aspirations is China's sense of humiliation and power. Until 1997, Hong Kong represented shame and weakness for China. Now that sovereignty has returned, Hong Kong represents a balancing act. On one hand, China does not want to hand over more power and embolden the society to protest for more autonomy or independence. On the other hand, by neglecting the masses, as was the case with the 2003 national security legislation, China risks facing international humiliation. As a result, leaders maintain unique give-and-take relationship as a means to follow the middle road. However, the growing divide in Hong Kong indicates that appeasing both sides is becoming increasingly difficult.

Both China and Hong Kong face an uncertain political future. The CCP no longer gives its leader absolute power as was practiced in the era of Mao, but its stances are unyielding when it comes to freedom of speech and democracy. During the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, the CCP closed the door to democratic reform in China. While the door is not fully open in Hong Kong, it is at least left ajar. The Basic Law is imperfect, but it is undeniable that Hong Kong residents possess more privileges, and even more means to fight for rights, than mainland Chinese citizens. The tensions in Hong Kong represent the culmination of the conflicting narratives under the CCP including power, humiliation, and tension between the masses and the state. Both China and Hong Kong face a fear of the unknown, as meaningful reform appears unlikely in either location. By looking at conflicting narratives, we can better understand the situation as a struggle between China's desire to save face and end humiliation, as well as Hong Kong's motivation for stability with gradual democratization.

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