

Reflections on Hong Kong’s 2019 Pro-Democracy Protests

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Introduction

Hong Kong’s “One Country, Two Systems” framework, once lauded for fostering a financial hub and set to expire in 2047, is now widely considered defunct. The imposition of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020 marked an end to the territory’s legal autonomy and signaled Beijing’s direct assertion of political control amid intensifying Sino-American rivalries (Lee 2020b). As Michael C. Davis (2020) observes, “[t]he intrusion of the new national security law is not so much a new behavior as it is a progression of a long pattern of intervention and distrust that dates back to before the handover.” The draconian measures have fundamentally turned the territory’s “promised liberal constitution” into a repressive “national security constitution” (Davis 2020, 8). The Basic Law’s original commitment to a liberal, open society has been dismantled. Perspectives on these measures vary: some see them as necessary responses to perceived existential threats, while others view them as authoritarian tactics to restructure a once-vibrant civil society (Lee 2020c).

This article begins by situating the current governance crisis in its broader historical and political context, arguing that Beijing may have overplayed its hand by enforcing a rigid security regime. By abandoning the “politics of selective co-optation”—a colonial strategy of incorporating some interest groups while excluding others—the central government and local authorities have prioritized authoritarian control over political reform (Lo 2018, 255). The resulting “mainlandization” without democratization risks triggering a legitimacy crisis and further alienating civil society (Lo 2007). These developments not only undermine human rights and the rule of law but also expose the Chinese state’s fixation on internal threats to its rule. The article concludes by assessing the implications for the future of state-society relations in the territory.

Hong Kong’s Governance Challenges

Since the 2019 anti-extradition protests, the deteriorating situation on the ground has exacerbated three interrelated challenges. First, the territory has become a geopolitical flashpoint, where global frustrations with China’s handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan converged with local power struggles. Competing ruling factions seek favors from Beijing while pursuing their agendas, magnifying divisions between elites and masses. The emergence of “One Hong Kong, Two Societies” highlights the growing chasm: political elites and their allies remain shielded from accountability, while peaceful protesters are criminalized (Lee 2017). Through a combination of legal, political, and symbolic violence, the state has created a climate of fear that discourages collective action and erodes civil solidarity (Kolluri and Lee 2018).

The role of law enforcement has become central to this institutional change. Once politically neutral, the Hong Kong Police Force has aligned ideologically and operationally with autocratic rule (Lee 2016). Economic precarity among working-class recruits and intensive political indoctrination have further entrenched loyalty to the state. These dynamics echo George

Browder's (1996) study of policing in Nazi Germany, where the heavily politicized environment shaped violent behavior. The Hong Kong police now exhibit anti-liberal, nationalist sentiments and often act with impunity. Their transformations into a paramilitary force were most evident during the 2019 protests when police brutality escalated following directives from Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam. With rights suspended and legal safeguards removed, the police have been weaponized as an instrument of the state's crackdown on dissent (Lee 2019a).

The second governance challenge concerns the pervasive influence of Chinese ideological propaganda. State-controlled media glorifies Xi Jinping's thought, vilifies pro-democracy movements, and promotes narratives of national resilience against the West. Repetition of these messages shapes public perceptions and normalizes deception. Propaganda is vital for masking the regime's legitimacy deficit and maintaining control. While effective in the short term, this mode of top-down governance undermines trust in public institutions and replaces the rule of law with a rule of fear (Lee 2020b). Loyalists have replaced professional civil servants, and judges are chosen for ideological compliance. Public discourse has narrowed, and self-censorship pervades everyday life. Former protest slogans and songs are now taboo, and citizens frequently erase social media content to avoid political repercussions. Artistic and cultural expressions, once hallmarks of Hong Kong's identity, have been stifled by growing pressure to conform (Kane and Lee 2022).

The third challenge lies in Hong Kong's eroding autonomy as a non-sovereign subnational entity. Under the original "One Country, Two Systems" model, Hong Kong maintained distinct legal, economic, and political arrangements, enabling it to enjoy favorable trade, aviation, and consular privileges. However, with the imposition of the National Security Law, Hong Kong became indistinguishable from mainland cities (Kane and Lee 2022). This legal convergence prompts questions about the continued validity of international agreements and the appropriateness of preferential

treatment by countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Sanctions against the Hong Kong Police Force and reassessments by global businesses and NGOs are emerging responses to this new reality (Lee 2021a).

Strategically, Hong Kong's shifting role is significant amid intensifying global rivalries. Historically, it served as China's economic gateway, circumventing Cold War restrictions, attracting foreign capital, and supporting reform. Its legal and financial systems facilitated China's integration into global markets following its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. As John M. Carroll notes, the Hong Kong-China nexus has been mutually beneficial from the anti-imperialist campaigns of the Republican and Communist eras to the early twenty-first century (Carroll 2022). However, the new security regime compels Hong Kong to align with Beijing, jeopardizing its neutrality as a global hub. In response, the United States and its allies have imposed restrictions on technology transfers and capital flows. With autonomy undermined, the international community reevaluates its bilateral engagements with the territory (Lee 2021a).

Local and Global Solidarity for Hong Kong

The abrupt expansion of Beijing's control over Hong Kong has sparked a robust response at home and abroad. Faced with deepening repression, many Hong Kongers have embraced democratic localism as both a political ideal and a survival strategy. Disillusioned by China's official rhetoric of national rejuvenation and economic triumph, they see a society with shrinking prospects and choose to act (Lee 2020a). Their protests in 2019 were driven as much by fear of losing freedoms than by a conviction that democratic change would still be possible (Ip 2020, 104). As sociologist Ho Ming-Sho (2019) observed in Taiwan's Sunflower Movement, shared cultural values, networking ties, and grassroots trust sustained youth protests. In Hong Kong, that same emotional fuel has powered one of the most resilient popular uprisings in recent memory (Lee 2021b, 99).

What began as a local resistance has also gone global. With strong transnational ties forged through decades of migration, Hong Kongers abroad became vital to the movement. Horrified by the police violence they saw on their screens, many overseas supporters joined a growing network of solidarity (Lee 2020c). Echoing what Brecher, Costello, and Smith (2000, 10) call “globalization from below,” they used social media, advocacy campaigns, and diaspora organizing to bypass China’s censorship and surveillance.

For many Hong Kong students, the summer of 2019 was a life-changing political awakening. Instead of internships or vacations, they spent their days in protests, clashing with riot police and forming new bonds across generational and social lines (Lee 2019b). These were not just symbolic gestures—they were a formative experience in democratic activism. The movement created “a sense of fraternity” built on shared struggle and lived resistance (Ip 2020, 136). It also exposed the brutal lengths authorities would go to maintain control. When peaceful protests failed to secure a response from former Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the state reportedly turned to shadowy actors—organized gangs, village thugs, and retired officers—to brutalize protesters. The most shocking example came on 21 July 2019, when a mob attacked passengers at Yuen Long train station while police stood by. For many, this incident symbolized the collapse of law and order and the collusion between Beijing’s Liaison Office, local officials, and extrajudicial forces. Yet amid the violence, Hong Kongers resisted with creativity and courage. Activists, filmmakers, and ordinary people began sharing their stories, documenting abuses, and reclaiming public space. These acts of storytelling and resistance led to a new civic culture where mutual trust and empowerment could take root even under repression. Whatever lies ahead, the 2019 movement left a lasting mark. It planted the seeds of democratic populism on Chinese soil (Lee 2019b).

Conclusion

In an age of resurgent nationalism in China and the United States under the second Trump administration, Hong Kong's democratic localism is a defiant expression of local identity, civic unity, and collective survival. The 2019 pro-democracy movement may now seem like a distant past, but its moral and emotional resonance endures. The protests led to new cosmopolitan forms of Hong Kong identity—locally rooted yet globally engaged—emerging from the contest between state power and popular resistance.

Trump's second term is likely to complicate this struggle. On the one hand, Washington's support for Hong Kong democracy activists has brought much-needed global attention. On the other hand, Trump's tariff war with China, transactional diplomacy, and tolerance of authoritarian tendencies have undermined American advocacy for freedom abroad. Thus, the internationalization of the Hong Kong crisis has turned into a stage for ideological conflicts and geopolitical maneuvering. Authoritarian rule cannot establish genuine legitimacy. Although Hong Kong's ruling elites may retain power, their tactics have undermined public confidence. If the territory is ever to heal, it must confront its recent past and restore rules-based governance. That means acknowledging state violence, re-engaging with civil society, and institutionalizing mechanisms for truth and accountability (Lee 2019a). For now, Hong Kong's future remains uncertain. Yet, what happened in 2019—a city of millions standing up for democratic rights—is not easily erased. In a time of democratic backsliding, Hong Kong's struggle is both local and global. The sustained international pressure, combined with grassroots determination, could still turn this moment of crisis into an opportunity for transformative change (Lee 2020c).

About the Author

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee is a Professor of History at Pace University in New York City, USA. His research focuses on faith and politics in modern China. His most recent publications include *From Missionary Education to Confucius Institutes* (with Jeff Kyong-McClain, published by Routledge in 2024), *RESIST! Democracy and Youth Activism in Myanmar, Hong Kong, and Singapore* (with Amy Freedman, published by Pace University Press in 2024), *Empire Competition: Southeast Asia as a Site of Imperial Contestation* (with Amy Freedman, published by Pace University Press in 2021), and *The Church as Safe Haven: Christian Governance in Modern China* (with Lars Peter Laamann, by Brill in 2019).

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