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HONG KONG, A DEMOCRATIC VOICE IN CHINA

Philippe LE CORRE

For several months, there have been ongoing protests in Hong Kong against the Chinese government. The democratic pressure does not seem to be diminishing and could have political consequences in the elections later this year. To understand the evolution of the situation, we must also take into account the economic transformation of the region as a whole, of which Hong Kong is no longer necessarily at the forefront.

Hong Kong is unique. While the writer Han Suyin’s description—“a borrowed place, on borrowed time”¹—seemed redundant upon the return of the territory to China on July 1, 1997, the former British colony appears to be perpetually exposed to uncertainty over its future.² Despite long months of sociopolitical crisis and violence, Hong Kong has once again shown that it has lost none of its personality. Amidst the climate of upheaval and faced with a Chinese regime determined to obstruct any hopes of democracy, the people of Hong Kong have managed to attract international and media attention, marking them out from any other Chinese territory—including those that enjoy special status: Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Macao, and even Xinjiang, where nearly a million people from the minority Uyghur ethnic group are confined to “re-education” camps. No other Chinese region has been able to attract such attention.

1. The expression had been adopted by Richard Hughes, a journalist based in Hong Kong.

2. Philippe Le Corre, *Après Hong Kong, chinois et cosmopolite, un pays, deux systèmes?* Autrement: 1997.

A turbulent territory

Hong Kong has been making newspaper headlines since spring 2019, raising concern in the US Congress, the UK House of Commons, and the European Parliament in Strasbourg. It has raised interest at *think tanks* and sparked alarm in the financial sector. The Communist Party of China and Xi Jinping, its all-powerful General Secretary since 2012, could have done without this kind of publicity: more than 1,000 demonstrations, 6,200 arrests (a third of which involve youngsters under 18 years of age), numerous casualties, and government buildings damaged. And the image of the financial center of Hong Kong—claiming to be disinclined to play politics, but a proud defender of its rights—has been lastingly affected by a widespread movement inspired by a philosophy firmly rooted in the desire to defend the territory’s high degree of autonomy. The movement uses original tactics, epitomized by the Kung Fu expression “be water,”³ that have enabled protests to multiply in numerous different locations.

The protests were triggered by an incident: the murder of a young Hong Kong citizen by his companion while on a trip to Taiwan in 2018. The murderer returned to Hong Kong and spent eleven months in prison after handing himself over to the authorities. But, in the absence of an extradition treaty between Hong Kong, a Chinese Special Administrative Region (SAR), and the island of Taiwan, which has been virtually independent from China since 1949, he could not be extradited to face trial in Taipei. This prompted Carrie Lam, the Beijing-appointed local chief executive, to launch an extradition bill. It was this bill to amend Hong Kong’s legislation that provoked the wrath of the Hong Kong people, who suspected Carrie Lam and her administration of wishing to put in place a procedure allowing extradition to mainland China. This would constitute a clean break with the “autonomous” legal system that Hong Kong is supposed to benefit from until 2047, in compliance with the 1984 Sino-British declaration and the “mini-constitution” (Basic Law) resulting from it. In principle, the new status is supposed to remain in place for 50 years.

3. Phrase attributed to Bruce Lee, Kung Fu icon: “Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless, like water, my friend.”

In reality, several investigative reports⁴ have shown that it was China's central government that had encouraged Hong Kong to put in place the extradition legislation in order to strengthen the Chinese hold over the territory, which has long been one of Beijing's goals. As early as 2003, the Chinese authorities had sought to implement article 23 of the Basic Law, which would have allowed them to send any person suspected of a crime to be judged by a Chinese court. At the time, the SAR chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, was forced to resign.

But that was before Xi Jinping. The central authorities have been less tolerant of criticism since 2012 and have cracked down on intellectuals and dissidents both in Hong Kong and the rest of the country. In 2015, the disappearance of five booksellers from Hong Kong, kidnapped and sent to mainland China, caused uproar.⁵ Following the media outcry over the mysterious abduction of Xiao Jianhua, a Chinese-Canadian businessman, from Hong Kong in 2017, senior officials of the Chinese Communist Party started to put pressure on the SAR to implement a system that would allow extradition to China.

“The central authorities have been less tolerant of criticism since 2012”

As the government prepared to bulldozer the bill through the Legislative Council two years later, the people of Hong Kong were not slow to react with vociferous expressions of their opposition. In June 2019, a time of year when the inhabitants of the territory traditionally commemorate the bloody events of Tiananmen Square,⁶ the demonstrations focused on a concern close to home: on June 9, over a million people marched to demand the withdrawal of the bill; this was followed by two million people on June 16. In response to the government's refusal to back down, peaceful demonstrations proliferated in summer 2019, before leading to more violent action against government buildings and Chinese institutions, including shops and travel agencies for trips to mainline China.

4. David Lague, James Pomfret, and Greg Torode, “How murder, kidnappings and miscalculation set off Hong Kong's revolt,” *Reuters Special Report*, 20 December 2019.

5. This case is commonly known as “The Causeway Bay Books Disappearances” in reference to the address of the dissident bookshop specializing in works on the private lives of senior Chinese leaders.

6. During the night of June 3 to 4, 1989, more than a thousand people were killed on or near Tiananmen Square in Beijing, after long weeks of anti-government protests in the capital and elsewhere. From the outset, Hong Kong had lent its support to the pro-democracy movement.

On July 1, a group broke into the premises of Hong Kong's Legislative Council, decrying symbols of the Chinese state; on July 21, demonstrators were attacked by men in white believed to be members of organized crime syndicates (or triads), while police did nothing to intervene. The Hong Kong international airport was also occupied on two separate occasions. In autumn 2019, despite the definitive withdrawal of Carrie Lam's bill, the number of clashes continued to grow, notably on the fringes of university campuses. There were violent clashes between hundreds of thousands of protesters, often very young (but often supported by their elders) and a police force that was particularly brutal and well-equipped, benefiting from the reinforcements coming from the other side of the border. Rarely has Hong Kong youth been so determined, ready to confront the police despite obvious danger and numerous arrests.⁷ Moreover, threats rained down on anyone showing support for the movement, including adolescents. Thirty years after the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, mobile police units were charged with restoring order, despite speculation over whether there might be military intervention. The leaders of the Communist Party of China, old enough to remember the boycott faced by China in 1989, have opted for a more subtle approach that is designed to last.

Beijing's strategy

On a political level, Beijing's strategy⁸ has mainly been to support the SAR government (to question it would be to back down, unheard of in the Communist Party's recent history). Protesters were described as "terrorists" or "rioters" and were accused of collusion with "foreign powers" ("black hands") who were said to be financing them (though this was never proved). The United States exposed itself to Chinese criticism by welcoming spokespersons from Hong Kong on several occasions, including the barrister Martin Lee, an iconic figure of the democratic movement since the 1980s, the trade union leader Lee Cheuk-yang, and Nathan Law, a 26-year-old veteran of the 2014 Umbrella

7. Alec Ash, "Hong Kong's tears of anger: How a democracy movement radicalized," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 20, 2019, available at <https://lareviewofbooks.org>

8. "Xi Focus: Xi meets HKSAR chief executive," *Xinhuanet*, November 5, 2019, available at www.xinhuanet.com

Movement, who in 2016 was dismissed from his hard-won directly-elected seat on the Legislative Council.⁹ To top it all, on November 27, 2019, President Donald Trump ratified the *Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019* (HKHRDA), a law passed unanimously in Congress enabling the application of commercial sanctions to Hong Kong authorities in cases of human rights violation.¹⁰ The decision stoked the ire of Beijing, who accused Washington of “supporting criminals.” That said, it doesn’t appear to have affected trade negotiations ongoing between China and America.

“Hong Kong has almost exclusively become a service center in competition with Shenzhen”

The crux of the matter for Hong Kong is the economy. Businesses have invested in China for years. In 1997, 70 percent of the former colony’s “foreign” investment went to China, which also brought in 70 percent of tourist revenue. In addition to certain tycoons present in Guangdong since the 1980s, over four thousand Hong Kong companies, employing more than five million Chinese workers,¹¹ had relocated their activities there. Numerous cities in the nearby Pearl River delta acted as manufacturing support for Hong Kong businesses, which had no complaints about the situation.

Yet in recent years, Hong Kong seems to be taking after South China and not vice versa.¹² Compared to the sixty million inhabitants of the region, what is the weight of the 7.5 million inhabitants of Hong Kong, of whom a million are, in fact, “immigrants” who have crossed the border legally since 1997, under the encouragement of the Chinese government? Economically, Hong Kong has almost exclusively become a service center, still dynamic, but in competition with Shenzhen, the former special economic zone (SEZ), on the other side of the border. Created from scratch by Beijing in 1979, Shenzhen’s population has grown from fifty thousand to fifteen million. Shenzhen is home to major Chinese companies, such as ZTE, Huawei, Tencent, and the China Merchants Group, and is believed to have as many

9. In 2016, six pro-democracy deputies were dismissed by the Hong Kong government, mainly for having “failed to show respect” to the Chinese regime.

10. Emily Cochrane, “Trump signs Hong Kong Democracy Legislation that has angered China,” *The New York Times*, November 27, 2019.

11. Philippe Le Corre, “Hong Kong, rétrocession à la Chine,” *Études*, 3866, (1997): 728.

12. Philippe Le Corre, “Hong Kong sinks into a ‘greater bay’”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, June 29, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Hong-Kong-sinks-into-a-greater-bay>

Fortune 500 corporate offices (including multinationals) as Hong Kong itself. In a study by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and the China Development Research Foundation (CDRF) entitled “Chinese Cities of Opportunities 2017,”¹³ the cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen occupied the two first places both in the overall ranking and in eight out of the ten categories, including those for ease of doing business, intellectual capital and innovation, technology, and economic clout. Hong Kong was not included in the study.

Is life better in Hong Kong?

One of the weak links in Beijing’s fraught relationship with Hong Kong lies in the question of how the economy of the territory that returned to the bosom of the motherland in 1997 is not progressing twenty-two years later, with a mere 3.8 percent growth in 2016, while China’s GNP grew by 6.5 percent. Moreover, social problems have continued to grow, despite the high educational qualifications of the Hong Kong people, who are often bi- or trilingual. The Gini coefficient measuring inequality in income distribution reached a new high of 0.539 in 2016, and real estate prices—long controlled by around ten of the richest families or by corporations from mainland China—have continued to rise. It has become increasingly difficult for a middle-class family to buy an apartment: the average cost of a 430 square feet apartment in Kowloon, for example, is about 4.34 million Hong Kong dollars (some 516,000 euros), while the average income is around two thousand euros per month.

But if one is to believe Chinese news outlets, it is “local policies” that are “preventing Hong Kong’s economic development,” as the *China Daily*, an official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, appeared to lament.¹⁴ Despite Hong Kong’s attempts to become a logistics and finance center for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹⁵ since 2015, the demands of the pro-democracy camp are blamed

13. PricewaterhouseCoopers and China Development Research Foundation, “Chinese Cities of Opportunities 2017,” PwC China, March 17, 2017, available at www.pwccn.com/en.html

14. Xinhua, “Behind Hong Kong’s chaos lie deep-seated social problems,” *China Daily*, September 8, 2019, available at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/08/WS5d743a94a310cf3e3556a50f.html>

15. Also known as “New Silk Road.” Mammoth infrastructure designed to link China to Europe and the other continents. See Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “Les nouvelles routes de la soie”, *Études*, 4266, (2019): 19–30.

for having “hampered” the government’s desire for economic and social reform and the integration of the territory within Xi Jinping’s mammoth project. Yet, as all the major BRI institutions are based in Beijing or Shanghai, it is difficult to see how Hong Kong could play a role.¹⁶ The former British colony is meanwhile directly affected by another megaproject, the Greater Bay Area, which includes railways, bridges, ports, airports, and highways linking Hong Kong to Guangzhou (provincial capital of Guangdong), the former Portuguese colony of Macao (now another Chinese SAR), and several large cities in Southern China. The aim of the project, however, is quite simply to dilute Hong Kong within an immense region and to bring about the integration dear to the heart of the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) well before the fateful deadline of 2047.

“Beijing hopes to reduce the importance of Hong Kong”

Seen from Beijing, even though Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) have used the financial center for all kinds of international transactions (mergers and acquisitions, stock market launches, capital-raising) for decades, Hong Kong is a hotbed of discontent that needs to be brought under control. But the rise of Shenzhen and, above all, of Shanghai, further to the north, is not exactly encouraging for Hong Kong, whose long-held position as a regional hub is finding itself threatened. Beijing hopes to reduce the importance of Hong Kong, rather than to preserve its unique characteristics. In this respect, the creation of new free trade zones illustrates the wish of the Chinese to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) throughout mainland China, not only in the south. Shanghai, needless to say, was the first city to obtain the right to open its own free trade area in 2013, a huge blow for Hong Kong. Today, China has no less than eleven of these areas.

What is likely to happen?

In the midst of the turmoil, Beijing has not sacrificed Carrie Lam, the highly unpopular chief executive who has triggered the largest pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong since the 1960s. Even though the divorce between her administration and the population is absolute,

16. In particular, the Asian Development Bank for infrastructures, Fund for the Silk Road, China Development Bank, and the China EximBank.

abandoning her would have been an unacceptable loss of face for the Chinese government. It is unlikely, however, that she will complete her term, particularly as the legislative elections due in September 2020 are bound to be challenging, to say the least.

Despite the formal withdrawal of the controversial extradition bill, demonstrators continued their protests throughout 2019, even on the Chinese national holiday, October 1, and over Christmas. The protesters' original demand—the withdrawal of the bill—has now grown to “five demands, not one less”: the withdrawal of the extradition bill (the only demand acceded to); the creation of a committee to investigate police violence; an end to the use of the word “rioters”; amnesty for people arrested; and universal suffrage in chief executive and legislative council (LegCo) elections.

Like her three predecessors, Carrie Lam was designated by a committee of twelve hundred persons, mainly selected by Beijing, while the LegCo is currently composed as follows: thirty members designated by functional constituencies and forty by universal suffrage (the pro-Beijing members holding a majority of seats since 2016). Yet the 1997 Chinese-British agreement stipulated entirely democratic elections by universal suffrage for these roles, a condition that the Chinese authorities have always refused to meet. In 2014, China tried—unsuccessfully—to propose the election of a chief executive from among three candidates hand-picked by a pro-government committee. This last-resort offer led to the October “Umbrella movement” demanding full direct elections . . . demands with little chance of being accepted.

But a recent turn of events has stunned Beijing. In local Hong Kong elections on November 24, 2019, the democrats won seventeen out of eighteen district councils, with a record 71 percent turnout. Pro-Beijing parties, headed by the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), suffered crushing defeats. And these district councils, normally of little strategic importance, have recently obtained the power to designate five members of the LegCo. This may have major consequences for the September 2020 legislative elections.

The coming year is poised to see the continuation of the pro-democracy movement, doubtless encouraged by the international impact it has caused. Nevertheless, Hong Kong society is also profoundly shocked by the violence of 2019. Catholic bishops

have not hesitated to defy Beijing, which does not recognize the Vatican, although the Holy See itself has taken some steps toward rapprochement with China. Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, the former Archbishop of Hong Kong, has always fought to support Chinese Catholics (many obliged to meet in secret) and has not hesitated to criticize Rome's position. Although he has not received the support of Rome, which wishes to avoid any controversy, Joseph Ha Chi-shing, the Auxiliary Bishop of Hong Kong, has also openly given his support to the protesters. In this respect, the situation in Hong Kong, with its around 400,000 Catholics (including Carrie Lam herself), could act as a litmus test. And in Taiwan, the island that Beijing is also seeking to bring back to the fold, the population remains opposed to any rapprochement that could lead to it being placed under the yoke of the Chinese Communist Party.

☾ *In 2019, storm clouds gathered over Xi Jinping's regime* ☽

It is evident that the Communist Party is engaged in a fight for its survival. This includes the central authority's policy of repression against minorities and autonomous regions. Following the speech delivered by Xi Jinping to the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017, it was only logical to discipline those disloyal to the supreme authority. But Hong Kong presents numerous difficulties, as the territory still enjoys certain media, judicial, and administrative freedoms that allow its population to make its voice heard. This is quite different to the Uyghurs and Tibetans, not to mention the Chinese dissidents who dare to defy the regime from within.

With the presidential election in Taiwan now completed, there is no doubt that the Beijing regime will seek to bring Hong Kong back under control and to unite all the region's pro-government forces in a bid to win the upcoming local elections. In 2019, storm clouds gathered over Xi Jinping's regime, whose ambitions had hitherto seemed insuperable, both in China and abroad. His grand projects have suffered setbacks, growth in the domestic economy has slowed, and, if one is to believe the last study led by the excellent Pew Research Center,¹⁷ the perception of China in developed countries has also suffered a steep decline, despite new "Silk Road" projects. Between 2017 and 2018, negative opinions of China rose from 54 percent to

17. Kat Devlin, Christine Huang, and Laura Silver, "How people view China" in *Attitudes toward China*, Pew Research Center, December 5, 2019, available at www.pewresearch.org

62 percent in France and from 35 percent to 55 percent in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong's former colonial ruler, while German negative opinions remained stable at around 54 percent. This is proof that the rise of the former Middle Kingdom is causing concern and fear from Canada to Japan, as well as in Australia and Europe. Without demanding the impossible (its independence, for example, which it has in fact never demanded), Hong Kong has played an astonishing role—as in 1997—as a catalyst and driving force in a region where democracy, with the exceptions of India and a handful of Eastern Asian countries, has not thrived. But while the financial center did not seem to suffer overly violent shocks in 2019, international investors have kept a weather eye on developments in Hong Kong and have sought other, less risky locations. This is inconvenient for the business of a triumphant China that is attempting to offer its political model to countries that are willing to follow it.

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