

The Democracy Question: Hong Kong's Relationship with an Idea

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Hong Kong is the troubled spawn of power relationships. It was obtained in an act of colonial rapacity fuelled by opium, leased like a financially viable whore, and then returned to its wounded mother. Such relationships of appropriation leave their mark. The mark of the wounded, in Hong Kong's case, is that of a legal system that aspires to constitutionalism and a democratic sense.

But looks, masked by makeup, can be deceiving. Beijing did accept the idea of one country and two systems, a wise and propitiating gesture. In Deng Xiaoping's words, "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" would be a governing rationale, but there, he was cleverly applying a certain form of cosmetic. He knew that Hong Kong's governing history had been one of Oxbridge appointments rather than stomping democrats.

The current dispute around the Occupy Central protesters is not about a term that has become rather weighty in recent years – that of secession – but one of disagreement about how an internal political system functions. The language here is peculiar to Hong Kong's history of various masters and appropriators. Much of this is a matter of degree – what constitutes a "high degree of autonomy" in the language of the 1984 Sino-British treaty returning Hong Kong to China? (Similar language is used in the Basic Law enacted under that treaty.) What of the committee pulling the levers behind the candidates?

Occupy Central with Love and Peace was already proposing in January 2013 that, in the event Hong Kong was not granted universal suffrage, protesters would hit the city where it hurt most, notably in the financial sense. No money, no love. It even held an unofficial referendum in June, receiving 800,000 votes out of the 7.2 million residents casting their ballots. The movement is marked by a distinct religiosity, with two of the three leaders openly practising Christians.[1]

Others have decided to muck in the democratic love-in, be it the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), an assortment of church ministers, sociologists such as Chan Kin-man, and the Scholarism movement started by Joshua Wong, a precociously industrious 17-year-old high school student who took issue with Hong Kong's efforts in 2012 to introduce a "patriotic education" program through the curriculum.

Charles Mok, a member of Hong Kong's Legislative Council, offers one interpretation.

"For most Hong Kong people, 'one country, two systems' and 'high degree' of autonomy, both before and right after the handover in 1997, meant we could decide locally on all matters except military and foreign affairs." [2] The National People's Congress (NPC), like a stern mother, had other ideas, restriction the options for the 2017 election of the chief executive through a

committee sympathetic to Beijing. After all, President Hu Jintao always made it clear that “one country” came first.

The noisy contention between democracy activists and Beijing lies in the term “universal suffrage” behind the issue of electing the chief executive, though the protesters cannot get past the other side of the arrangement, which is the necessary involvement of the pro-Beijing committee that vets candidates. No election without nomination, the nomination which invariably has the ear of the NPC. Much like arranged marriages, the parent gets first go.

The universal suffrage provision (Hong Kong Basic Law Article 45), states that, “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 practices.” Prior to the sentence, it is also made clear that, “The method for selecting the Chief Executive shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress.”

What Beijing has done in insisting on the committee process is that any candidate that seeks the post of chief executive also be “patriotic” for reasons of “national security” – mother’s cautious wishes. This has certainly jarred with some of the local activists and politicians. “For those of us against this mandate,” insists Mok, “it’s proof that communists support democracy, as long as they can tell the election results in advance.”

Another concern expressed during the protests has been whether the Occupy Central movement will be invariably tarnished with the negative brush of Western influence, the sort of meddling that may well find its way to certain coffers in Washington. Convincing Beijing to change its mind may be less of a task than convincing the current Chief Executive to bolt.

Official Russian press outlets have been suggesting that dirty tricks are at work, though such concerns do come in light of Western backing for the Ukrainian Maidan movement that led to a coup. The culprit here is the cashed-up National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the poster child of “democratic” infiltration which has been feeding the “capacity of citizens – particularly university students – to more effectively participate in the public debate on political reform.”[3]

Hong Kong’s own pro-Beijing publication *Wen Wei Po* spread the word that the plucky Wong might be deep in the US pocket, be it through his family’s flirtation with the American Chamber of Commerce, or Wong’s own meetings with US consulate personnel.[4] The same paper is also claiming that Hong Kong schools have become something of an infiltrated playground for the CIA.

Any democracy-promotion outfit stemming from Washington is bound to come with the most mixed of blessings, being not so much winning hearts and minds as currency and a destabilising sense of worth. While such agendas are at work, they should not ignore the indigenous influences that have shaped Hong Kong, which remains its own curious legal creation.

The more sagacious heads in Beijing will be aware of that. “The Hong Kong special administrative region,” advises Daniel A. Bell of Tsinghua University, “is the most important experiment in political reform.” This form of “experimentation under hierarchy” allows governing flexibility at a price, and Hong Kong’s existence is vital in that sense. The issue

will be how far Beijing will go in permitting the disputes within the region to be resolved within the limits of "order". It remains to be seen whether the parent will spare the rod and spoil an increasingly troublesome child.

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Notes

- [1] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/30/people_behind_hong_kong_protests
- [2] <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/09/29/is-autonomy-possible-for-hong-kong/this-clash-with-beijings-outmoded-thinking-was-inevitable>
- [3] <http://www.ned.org/publications/annual-reports/2012-annual-report/asia/china-hong-kong>
- [4] <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/09/25/pro-beijing-media-accuses-hong-kong-student-leader-of-u-s-government-ties/>

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