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Two Decades Later, China Celebrates Takeover While Hong Kong Fears Shrinking Autonomy

Doug Bandow

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HONG KONG—China is celebrating the 20th anniversary of regaining control of Hong Kong. President Xi Jinping visited the former British colony to commemorate the takeover. But many residents of the territory lament rather than praise Beijing's control. Which is inviolable, President Xi told Hong Kong's more than seven million residents, who the People's Republic of China treats as little more than extras on a movie set.

The territory never governed itself. Grabbed by Great Britain from Imperial China, most of Hong Kong (the "New Territories") was on a 99-year lease. When the agreement's expiration approached two very different nations confronted one another. The globe-spanning British Empire had turned into a much more restrained power; the rising People's Republic of China had replaced a feeble, disintegrating monarchy.

London could have held a referendum on its colony's future. The PRC could have demanded immediate return of the territory. Both countries decided not to play an international game of chicken and negotiated over Hong Kong's return. Her majesty's flag was lowered for the last time on July 1, 1997.

The Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong was born. The SAR was to retain "a high degree of autonomy," including its residents' Western-style liberties, through 2047, after which the territory would fully revert to China. Along the way the PRC was to change the political rules to allow election of the territory's chief executive through universal suffrage. As long as the PRC respected the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, Hong Kong would continue to look more like its former ruler than its new master.

Nervous residents understandably doubted Beijing's word. The Cultural Revolution was not forgotten. Those with money and connections sought citizenship abroad. Yet until recently China kept its bargain. One Hong Konger who feared the transition told me he couldn't think of anything that he once could do that the new regime prevented him from doing. He even believed Chinese-backed chief executives probably intervened less in the media than had British governors.

However, this era has ended as President Xi's campaign against liberal freedoms and Western thinking intensifies. Three years ago Beijing announced its new election plan: all residents could vote, but only for nominees chosen by a committee controlled by PRC partisans. It would be democracy with Chinese characteristics, guaranteeing an acceptable result for Beijing.

This ruling triggered the Umbrella Movement or Umbrella Revolution, in which demonstrators, mostly young, demanded free elections. The government finally dispersed the protestors and arrested the leaders after 79 days. However, the Legislative Council, or LegCo, ended up in deadlock, unable to approve Beijing's plan due to opposition from independent, pro-democracy legislators.

In 2015 the PRC apparently kidnapped or detained five Hong Kong publishers who produced books banned in China. Three were arrested in the PRC, but two were taken elsewhere, from Hong Kong and Thailand, respectively. The following year four eventually returned to Hong Kong—Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen, is still being held—but only one discussed his imprisonment and forced “confession.”

Similarly, earlier this year Xiao Jianhua, a Chinese born billionaire with Canadian citizenship, apparently was taken from his Hong Kong apartment by Chinese security agents. Hong Kong authorities made the usual complaints, but the Xi government obviously does not respect the border.

Before last fall's LegCo elections, the government disqualified six “localist” candidates who election officials deemed to harbor pro-independence sentiments. Nevertheless, several pro-democracy candidates, including Yau Wai-ching and (Sixtus “Baggio”) Leung Chung-hang, leaders in the Umbrella Movement, won. The latter two added “Hong Kong nation” to their oaths and Leung used an obscenity against China. Their oaths were rejected, but both planned a redo.

However, the Hong Kong government filed suit to prevent them from taking their seats and the court ruled against them. More ominously, in Beijing the National People's Congress voted to reject any oaths, even if properly recited, that were “insincere.” Never before had the NPC intervened uninvited in a territorial dispute.

The NPC's Li Fei said China “is determined to firmly confront the pro-independence forces without any ambiguity” and that “All traitors and those who sell out their countries will come to no good end.” Similarly, Zhang Xiaoming, head of the PRC's Central Liaison Office, which has taken an increasingly active role in Hong Kong governance, said simply: Beijing “would absolutely not allow pro-independence advocates [to] become lawmakers.”

Then the Hong Kong government challenged, at China's direction, many people suspect, the seating of another four legislators, including democracy activist Nathan Law, the youngest LegCo member. Even though they had properly stated their oaths, they had protested Beijing's control in other ways, causing the authorities to question their “sincerity.” A court ruling is expected soon. The PRC suggested that another 11 legislators failed to meet the new standards, but the government has yet to challenge their status.

The Chinese government also said it would punish pro-independence activities “according to law.” Although Hong Kong always has protected freedom of speech, both the previous and new chief executive—the latter inaugurated by President Xi during his visit—promised to implement the PRC decree. So far the government has not allowed a pro-independence party to register or hold a rally.

These attacks on Hong Kong's autonomy triggered renewed public protests. Sophie Richardson of Human Rights Watch observed: "Fears of a militarized Chinese encroachment on Hong Kong have not materialized, but that doesn't mean key human rights aren't at serious risk."

Indeed, democracy activists point to a pattern of Chinese misbehavior. Wrote Martin Lee and Joshua Wong, democracy activists old and young: "The past several years have delivered an acceleration of worrying encroachments, including Beijing's extrajudicial abductions of five publishers and a businessman from Hong Kong, threats to journalists and media freedom, the removal of elected legislators, a surge in arrests of student activists, and attacks on our independent judiciary."

However, after the LegCo fiasco activists found greater resistance to their message. Not everyone dedicated to political and civil liberties support independence. Moreover, Yao and Leung were seen by some as juvenile publicity-seekers who inadvertently drew the PRC into territorial affairs and triggered a potential legislative purge of democracy supporters. The imperiled legislators drew less support than had the Umbrella Movement.

Still, while Beijing has establishment backers, the PRC holds little allure for many of the young. Only three percent of 18-to-29-year-olds view themselves as Chinese, down from 32 percent during the changeover (94 percent now say they are Hong Kongers). A recent poll found nearly four of ten young people backed independence. Few of the others wanted to be ruled by Beijing.

Wong explained that he and others like him "have consolidated our strong identity as Hong Kongers—rather than embracing a Chinese identity—not because of the city's British colonial past, but because of Beijing's continuing assault on our way of life." It is the PRC's abusive behavior, he argued, that has radicalized SAR residents.

Nineteen-year-old Matthew Chan told the *New York Times* that he originally viewed himself as Chinese, "but when I grew up, I learned more and more about China and the Communist Party, and I felt ashamed to be Chinese." He now says he is a Hong Konger. Twenty-year-old Chau Ho-oi watched the 2008 Olympics and "thought China was great," she told Reuters. But now "I don't want to say I am Chinese." She joined the Umbrella Movement protests. No wonder Chief Executive Carrie Lam wants children taught that they are Chinese.

But that might not help. Since the changeover, nearly a million mainlanders have moved to Hong Kong. Many of them are Chinese students studying in Hong Kong who stay after they graduate. Contrary to the fears of some, migrants have not brought Communist orthodoxy to the territory. Rather, most immigrants enjoy their new liberties. So far Hong Kong appears to have changed them more than they have changed it. Reported the *Wall Street Journal*: "Many Mandarin-speaking newcomers say they relish the freedoms of their new home and are embracing its ways."

In the midst of these larger political struggles, government is failing to solve more practical problems. Poor employment opportunities for the young and the high cost of housing have generated popular discontent. Yet, reported the *New York Times*: "Never-ending disputes between the city's Beijing-backed leadership and the pro-democracy opposition have crippled the government's ability to make difficult decisions and complete important construction

projects.” Hong Kong still gets much right—it tops annual international ratings of economic openness, such as the Fraser Institute’s Economic Freedom of the World and Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom. However, political discontent will grow if people are increasingly dissatisfied with their daily lives.

Thus, for China the SAR has become a source of dissent, even treason, and potential disorder. At the same time, Hong Kong matters far less commercially since Beijing fully engaged the world. When China took back Hong Kong, the latter accounted for a quarter of the PRC’s GDP. The share today is three percent. Observed Keith Richburg of the University of Hong Kong, “Two decades ago, it seemed that China needed Hong Kong as its gateway to the world. But China today sees that gateway as a threat, a potential beachhead for subversion and a problem to be contained before it infects the mainland.”

So Beijing is setting red lines. As the anniversary of the Chinese takeover approached, Foreign Minister Lu Kang bluntly responded to British concerns over encroachments on Hong Kong’s autonomy: “the arrangements during the transitional period prescribed in the Sino-British Joint Declaration are now history and of no practical significance, and it is not at all binding for the central government’s management over Hong Kong.” Specifically, “The British side has no sovereignty, no power to rule and supervise Hong Kong after the handover.” President Xi also seemed to speak to the issue, announcing: “Now that Hong Kong has returned to China, it is all the more important for us to firmly uphold China’s sovereignty, security and development interests.” In short, Hong Kong’s future is up to the PRC, no one else.

Moreover, despite the Basic Law, President Xi made clear that freedom in Hong Kong is not absolute. He said “The concept of one country, two systems was advanced first and foremost to realize and uphold national sovereignty,” that is, the PRC. He also announced: “Any attempt to endanger China’s sovereignty and security, challenge the power of the central government and the authority of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, or use Hong Kong for infiltration or sabotage activities against the mainland, is an act that crosses the red line and is absolutely impermissible.”

This is the first time that the PRC has officially set a “red line.” And President Xi left no doubt as to the basis of his government’s authority when he visited the local People’s Liberation Army garrison. My friend Liu Kin-ming, a journalist turned consultant, observed: “The significance of the visit is to further show who is boss, show who is in control.” And local elites got the message. Democracy activist Eddie Chu marveled at the “unprecedented boot-licking” as the prosperous and influential displayed Chinese

A few hours after Xi flew home tens of thousands of Hong Kong residents marched for democracy. Despite his concerns, Chris Patten admitted that “Hong Kong remains one of the freest cities in Asia.” The reason? Its residents “are patriots, who believe not in Communist authoritarianism, but in pluralism and the close connection between personal freedom and prosperity.” In fact, a half million people turned out in protests against a 2003 proposal to pass an oppressive “anti-subversion” law. In 2012 people staged similar demonstrations against plans to impose a system of “patriotic education.” The government backed down both times.

But Hong Kongers must remain vigilant. Chief Executive Lam wants to revive the education proposal, which essentially would allow Beijing to define patriotism. People again will have to organize to protect their liberty.

However, activists must exercise wisdom. In principle there's nothing wrong with supporting independence or democracy. But these objectives are not attainable. The issues of Hong Kong's political system and independence are decided in China, not Hong Kong. Wong said "It's a hard time for us but we will continue until the day we get democracy." However, that day likely will come only if democracy comes to Beijing.

Unfortunately, pursuing radical but unattainable ends risks the survival of today's freedoms. First, while Hong Kongers seem largely united in support of their basic liberties, they are not similarly behind the campaigns for democracy and independence. Especially when advanced with tactics that seem irresponsible, the result is division among people who can succeed only by working together.

Second, as the LegCo campaign demonstrated, challenging the PRC over the issue which matters most, its sovereign authority, has encouraged a crackdown well beyond any particular protest movement. Provoking Beijing without purpose was counter-productive. Beijing legal representative Wang Zhenmin warned that if the "One Country, Two Systems" approach fails, "the country will only lose face, while Hong Kong will lose everything." Unfortunately, he's probably right.

And Hong Kong fights alone. Anson Chan, who served as the territory's number two official at the time of the changeover, said "We have this enormous giant at our doorstep, and the rest of the world does not seem to question whatever the enormous giant does." That's true. The West was horrified by the slaughter in Tiananmen Square in 1989, but proved impotent even though China then was far weaker than today. Even in the U.S. there is little support for confronting the PRC over its treatment of Hong Kong. And there is no chance that China, an aggressive, nationalistic, and rising power, would yield to outsiders.

The struggle for Hong Kong's future will continue. Student activist Agnes Chow said "our message to Xi is simple: we are not going to give up the fight for democracy and basic dignity, even if the Chinese government is trying to suppress our movement." She and her fellow activists shouldn't give up. But they should thoughtfully choose their battles and forge advantageous compromises. In Hong Kong as elsewhere politics remains the art of the possible.

Much depends on China's forbearance, based on the recognition that Hong Kong still matters. But even more the future depends on the people of Hong Kong. They must actively defend their basic freedoms while tempering their passion with prudence.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.