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END OF AUTONOMY IN HONG KONG AND MACAU

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Introduction

China's international policies and the way of their execution have caused concerns and sparked controversies in the global sphere, especially in a fast-changing world order. In the late 90s, Hong Kong and Macau came under the Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of China, under its "One country, two systems" policy. According to Deng Xiaoping, "one country, two systems" means there is only one China and under this premise, the mainland adheres to the socialist system while Hong Kong and Macau may retain their capitalist systems over a long time to come¹. Special administrative regions are technically relatively autonomous regions within the People's Republic of China that maintain separate legal, administrative, and judicial systems from the rest of the country².

The Chinese Communist Party, which rules China, oversees 22 provinces, five autonomous regions, four directly managed municipalities, and both the Special Administrative Regions (SAR) of Hong Kong and Macau³. Both the countries were former European colonies, Macau was colonized by the Portuguese from 1557 to 1999 and Hong Kong by the British between 1841 and 1997. Located in the estuary of the Pearl River delta, with access to the south China sea, the two countries have had a very significant role in the mainland's activities, economically, strategically, politically, and culturally over the years.

In the recent past, repressive policies and an imposing Chinese regime have made their way into the societies of Hong Kong and Macau. But the responses and the reactions to such interventions in their affairs have differed between the two.

¹ www.mfa.gov.cn. Accessed July 22, 2022. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cesa/eng/xwdt/P020140611517913608802>.

² Investopedia. "What Is Hong Kong SAR, China?" www.investopedia.com, July 25, 2021. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/h/hong-kong-sar-china.asp>.

³ Investopedia. "Hong Kong vs. Mainland China: Understanding the Economic and Financial Differences." www.investopedia.com, July 3, 2022. <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/121814/hong-kong-vs-china-understand-differences.asp>.

Even after Hong Kong's sovereignty was transferred to China, the idea of a liberal society with western influences persists. The British signed to return Hong Kong to China after a lease of 99 years, an agreement that was concluded during the Second convention of Peking. The conditions of transfer also meant that China respects the free economic and social system they had in place for 50 years post transfer, until 2047.

Growing protests and sentiments on anti-Chinese rule convey the very fact that China has not stuck to the agreement, nor are majority of the people openly willing to welcome them. In the contrary, however, Macau has not witnessed any such protests or upheaval against China, rather has been open to the idea of an integration with the mainland, although with growing but minimal opposition to the same.

Are the people of Hong Kong and Macau accepting of a Chinese identity?

According to the Hong Kong public opinion research institute, people who identify themselves as Hong Kongers were at an all-time high in 2019, and those who identified themselves as Chinese at an all-time low of about 11%. A nationalistic identity towards Hong Kong is witnessed with the tightening grip of China, amidst their imposing ways and disregard for peoples' rights and opinions.

On the contrary, the case of Macau is completely different. Not only do the majority of the people pride themselves in identifying as Chinese but also have more affiliation and trust towards the mainland's government.

China claims that the open acceptance and willingness of Macau is an indication of the success of their one country, two systems policy and the failure of it in Hong Kong as the work of other western players. The moves that China had made to ensure a close connection between the SAR islands and the mainland is made physically visible, especially through the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge (HKZMB), a bridge-tunnel system that crosses the Lingdingyang waterway, which connects Macau, Zhuhai, and Hong Kong—three important cities on the Pearl River Delta and the mainland.

Hong Kong, Macau, and China, from the 1960s

Extending from the late 60s to the late 70s, China went through a difficult phase, with respect to its political, economic, and social conditions. Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, started the Cultural Revolution in an effort to revive the spirit of the Chinese Revolution during his final years in office (1966–1976). The main reason was the fear that China would develop according to the Soviet model, which Mao disapproved of. The campaign swiftly became violent, and many intellectuals and elderly people suffered both verbal and physical violence. Numerous people lost their lives.

The Red Guards split into two fervently opposing factions, each of which claimed to be the genuine representative of Maoism. The anarchy, horror, and paralysis that followed profoundly derailed the urban economy. In 1968, industrial production fell 12 percent short of 1966 levels. According to some academics, the tragedy of the time helped China's willingness to embrace economic changes. The Chinese were ready to accept market-oriented reforms in the decades that followed to promote growth and lift people out of poverty⁴. The aftermath of the events of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” of 1966 left China with a sabotaged economy, a decade of unrest, bloodshed, famine and stagnation and threatened and damaged lives of millions.

In 1966, Macau witnessed widespread protests against their Portuguese colonizers. Most of the protestors were supporters or sympathizers of the CCP and were inspired by Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. Pressured by both the Chinese government and business tycoons in Macau, the Portuguese were forced to meet the demands of the protestors. This incident made the grip of Portuguese government on Macau diminish while the mainland's control and influence increased. Macau went from a Portuguese colony to a Chinese territory under Portuguese administration well before its handover in 1999.

⁴ China's Cultural Revolution, Explained (Published 2016). “China's Cultural Revolution, Explained (Published 2016).” [www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution-explainer.html), May 14, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution-explainer.html>.

During the same time, Hong Kong was an emerging and flourishing economy with an increasingly globalized socio-economic culture. Its GDP was almost a quarter of China's. At this point, China found liberal markets and rapid industrialization in Hong Kong necessary for their revival and as a plausible path out of its turmoil. The mainland used the business connections and financial expertise Hong Kong had to offer, to overcome its own hurdles. But in the long run, China opened up its markets and promoted foreign investment and trade to stabilize its economy and regained an inevitable role in the international sphere. The mainland made sure major cities like Chongqing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Beijing, Chengdu, and Harbin rose to prominence, thereby driving the GDP of the nation to \$13.6 trillion. Although Hong Kong continues to be a significant economic force in Asia, its GDP is presently only \$364 billion, or barely 2.7% of China's. The downfall of economic contributions by Hong Kong suggested falling incentives for the mainland to respect the conditions of handover.

Pro-democracy; movements, protests and revolutions in China and Hong Kong over the years

The first pro-democracy and anti-authoritarian demonstration in People's Republic of China took place on June 4, 1989. Chinese youth, especially students took to the streets of Beijing protesting the one-party rule and demanded political and economic reform. Although the decade witnessed considerable economic growth and relaxation, Chinese university students felt the need for more individual rights and freedom as well as political liberalization. In Tiananmen Square, between the end of April and the Mid of May, tens of thousands of students gathered to call for democratic and other reforms. For the next few weeks, students congregated in the square in masses, later joined by a wide range of people seeking political, social, and economic reforms.

However, negotiations were never on the table for China's CCP. By the time the government issued orders strict warnings and exercised martial law to suppress "bourgeois liberalism", the protests had spread to other cities and were all over the Western media as well. The government was prepared to act once more at the beginning of June. Tanks and highly armed soldiers surged toward Tiananmen Square on the nights of June 3 and 4, opening fire. Trampling and killing anyone who attempted to stand in their path. The media and western countries condemned

the actions of the Chinese government and blamed their ill decisions for the Tiananmen square massacre. The United States slapped diplomatic and economic sanctions on China.

Today, the act of remembering the occurrence in public is forbidden in the mainland. On the interesting side, even after Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule, locals have conducted an annual vigil on the anniversary of the crackdown commending and paying respects to those who died fighting for democracy and individual rights. The very fact that Hong Kongers stand in solidarity with those who fought for democratic reforms in Tiananmen square shows that they are not ready to accept the imposing regime of the Chinese government.

Since 2012, after Xi Jinping took over as the president, there has been an increased focus on the communist party's core values and a tightening grasp on power and position both by the party on the nation as well as China in the global arena.

To extend such a control over Hong Kong, China decided to interfere with the internal politics of the island, something they had agreed not to for the next couple of decades. In 2014, China tried to interfere with who could run for elections in Hong Kong, to secure a pro-Beijing candidate. This sparked widespread protests and a movement called the "Umbrella movement" as a form of resistance to the seeping Chinese influence and ideals into the society. The 2014 protests were in support of achieving the universal suffrage that Hong Kong was promised in the Basic Law, the city's constitution following its transfer to Chinese rule in 1997 from British rule. Many people in the city were already anticipating that the topic of candidate nominations would be contentious, and they had planned frequent demonstrations around it in the months before to Beijing's announcement.

People were also seen banging pots and pans on the night of August 31, 2014. Democracy activist and legal professor Benny Tai issued a warning, stating that "Hong Kong is now entering a new age—a new era of resistance."⁵ From September 28 to December 15, 2014, Hong Kong's Umbrella

⁵ "Hong Kong Umbrella Movement." qz.com. Accessed July 27, 2022. <https://qz.com/1714897/what-was-hong-kongs-umbrella-movement-about/>.

Movement was executed in various districts. The protests were identified as Umbrella Movement as people used umbrellas to protect themselves from tear gas and pepper spray used by the police. Although the protests were one of the first of their kind Hong Kong had witnessed and was also hard to disperse, China did not seem to budge to the will of the people. Carrie Lam, as the candidate preferred by Beijing, received 777 votes from the 1,194-member Election Committee during the 2017 Chief Executive selection process.

As a sequel to the 2014 protests, the extradition bill that was proposed by Carrie Lam in 2019 enraged the people and paved the way for the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The extradition bill that led to the initial demonstration was introduced in April. Under some conditions, it would have permitted the extradition of criminal suspects to be tried in Chinese mainland. If passed, the bill could have subjected Hongkongers to unjust trials and brutal treatment. They asserted that the measure used will target activists and journalists and would eventually increase China's grip over Hong Kong. Even with the withdrawal of the measure in September 2019, protests have been taking place till date, in favor of complete democracy and an investigation into police misconduct. Fears that such brutality and imposition would lead to another Tiananmen Square massacre in Hong Kong have raised severe concerns for the citizens regarding their future under China.

But has China slowed down, sat down and introspected? No.

On June 30, 2020, just a few months into the pandemic, China introduced the National Security Law in Hong Kong. This law bans secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with a foreign country or external elements to endanger national security.⁶ It assumes extensive authority to censor sources of resistance, including those who support democracy, journalistic organizations, and foreign dissidents. Without a vote by Hong Kong's elected legislature or a public debate, the legislation was approved by China's top legislative body, the National People's Congress Standing Committee, in 2020 and approved by Xi Jinping. With the lack of definitions and clarity on the

⁶ South China Morning Post. "Hong Kong National Security Law: Read the Full Text." [www.scmp.com](https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3091595/hong-kong-national-security-law-read-full-text?module=inline&pgtype=article), July 2, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3091595/hong-kong-national-security-law-read-full-text?module=inline&pgtype=article>.

terms of the law, it becomes easier for China to take actions against all that go against their repressive ways. The law blatantly undermines Hong Kong's autonomy and devolves even the existing rights and freedoms. Journalists and prominent activists have been imprisoned, teachers have been arrested, or disciplined and their school syllabus have been revamped in accordance with China's ideas. Since the law's implementation, hundreds of demonstrators, activists, and former opposition MPs have been detained.

Beijing has said that the law is essential to bringing stability to the city, but in reality, it is meant to quell opposition. The freedom and democracy in Hong Kong have been steadily eroding. In addition to limiting free expression, the regulations have fostered a climate of fear. Over the past few months, a number of pro-democracy media publications in Hong Kong have closed, notably Apple Daily, which was known for being critical of the leadership in mainland China. The national security law has had significantly worse effects on liberties and way of life than many people anticipated in 2019.

Conclusion

These advancements also raise many pertinent questions: Is the extension of an authoritarian regime in Hong Kong and Macau islands just the start of China's desire for expansion? Will China's influence increase in the south China sea? How will countries deal with an increasingly powerful and repressive China? And will China follow a Russian path against Taiwan?

Countries like US and UK have responded to the new law by providing "safe haven" for people who wish to move out of Honk Kong. The UN also warned, "The Committee was deeply concerned about the overly broad interpretation of Hong Kong National Security Law, the NSL, which was

passed by the National People's Congress of China without consultation with the Hong Kong's public".⁷

The question however, is; Who is stopping China?

UK with its own political turmoil and the rest of the world still dealing with the war in Europe, there is no one stopping China from violating the fundamental rights promised to Hong Kong and its people. These events are a testimony to the very fact that Hong Kong is losing its autonomy and freedom long before it should, and its future looks nothing but darker under China.

With no one stopping China, Taiwan may endure the same fate as Hong Kong in the near future. As the present conflict in Ukraine demonstrates, it is nearly hard to accurately foresee the goals of authoritarian governments and how they will achieve them. It is also to be noted that Xi Jinping is transforming China with a centralization drive because he thinks it will help the Chinese party-state system survive longer and stronger. The outcome of Hong Kong demonstrates how far the CCP is willing to go to establish its rule. Additionally, there is a push for entire Chinese state apparatus to think and act along its leader's nationalistic line by purging the Chinese political system of competing viewpoints and encouraging only the so called "patriots", who support the vision of Xi Jinping. This is an ominous indication for Hong Kong and potentially Taiwan as more sensible opinions within the Chinese bureaucracy may soon disappear.

⁷ UN News. "Top Rights Experts Urge Repeal of Hong Kong's National Security Law | UN News." news.un.org, July 27, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1123432>.

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