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The Mouse That Roared: The Democratic Movement in Hong Kong⁺

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Abstract

The popular uprising in recent years in Hong Kong – “Occupy Central” a.k.a. Umbrella Movement – has again brought to the fore the question of the Special Administrative Region’s relationship with Mainland China post-1997 “handover” of the territory by the British colonial government to the People’s Republic of China. This article argues that the protests have their origins in a consciousness born of the anxieties provoked by the prospect of unification in the 1980s and 1990s, further evolved against the background of the unstable “one country, two systems” arrangement openly favoring the corporate and financial ruling class in Hong Kong which is in turn prepared to align its interests with those of the Communist regime in a mutually beneficial relationship. It also posits while the upheaval in Hong Kong bears similarities to other “Occupy” movements elsewhere in the economic issues that inform it, it may be viewed as the latest chapter in a narrative that goes back to the 1980s – the emergence of a neoliberal global capitalism of which the

PRC has been an integral component, and the Tiananmen movement which was one of the earliest expressions of the social and political strains created by shifts in the global economy.

Keywords: *Hong Kong, Beijing, democracy, “Occupy” movement, “one country, two systems”, protest, Tiananmen*

In 1997, the British government handed Hong Kong over to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) after 150 years of colonial rule. Some observers at the time could not but wonder if Hong Kong would be absorbed and remade by the behemoth to the north, or transform with its proverbial dynamism “the motherland” that already was undergoing radical change. The popular uprising under way in recent years in Hong Kong is the most recent indication that the question was not an idle one. The answer is yet to come.

Hong Kong investments and technology played an important part in the 1980s in laying the ground for the PRC’s economic take-off. The “special economic zones” that were set up in Guangdong province at the beginning of “reform and opening” (改革開放) as gateways to global capitalism (while keeping the rest of the country immune to its effects) were intended to take advantage of the dynamic capitalism of neighboring Hong Kong. And they did. To this day, Guangdong leads the rest of the country in industrial production and wealth. It also heavily resembles Hong Kong with which it shares a common language and, despite three decades of separation after 1949, common cultural characteristics. Hong Kong has continued to play a crucial part in the country’s development.

It has been a different matter politically. Since the take-over in 1997 the leadership in Beijing has left no doubt of its enthusiasm for the oligarchic political structure that was already in place before the end of

colonial rule, The many freedoms and rule of law Hong Kong people enjoyed were less appealing to a regime that preferred a population obedient to its strictures and a legal system more pliable at the service of Communist Party power. Already in the 1980s, Hong Kong people's doubts about unification with the "motherland" were obvious in the exodus of those who could afford to leave to places like the United States, Canada and Australia. The exodus speeded up following the Tiananmen 天安門 tragedy in 1989 which put to rest any hopes that reforms might open up a greater space for political freedoms. The colony practically disqualified itself as any kind of political inspiration for the Mainland with the enthusiastic participation of Hong Kongers in the Tiananmen movement leading up to the June Fourth massacre, and annual commemorations thereafter of the suppression of the student movement. In the early 1990s the Party under Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 settled on the example of Singapore as a model more attuned to its own authoritarian practices.

The same reasons that made the regime suspicious of Hong Kong people for their "lack of patriotism" due to the legacies of colonialism have made Hong Kong into an inspiration as well as a base for radical critics of the regime struggling for greater freedom and democracy on the Mainland. The take-over of 1997 was under the shadow of Tiananmen, but even so few would have imagined at the time that within two decades of the celebrations of the end of colonialism and "return" to the motherland, protestors against Beijing "despotism" would be waving British flags. Once the initial enthusiasm for "liberation" was over, Hong Kongers rediscovered as the source of their "difference" the colonial history which in nationalist historiography appeared as a lapse in the nation's history, a period of humiliation remembered most importantly to foster nationalist sentiment. PRC democracy activists such as the jailed Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo 劉曉波 have drawn the ire of the regime

for suggesting that Hong Kong's freedoms and democratic sentiments were legacies of colonial acculturation that Mainlanders had missed out on.¹

Recent years' protests have their origins in a consciousness born of the anxieties provoked by the prospect of unification in the 1980s and 1990s, and even though both the Mainland and Hong Kong have changed radically in the intervening period, the Hong Kong identity that assumed recognizable contours at the time is a fundamental driving force of the protests.² The immediate issue that has provoked the protests – call for universal suffrage in the selection of the chief executive and legislative council (立法會) of the Special Administrative Region – harks back to the Basic Law (基本法) of 1984 agreed upon by the British and the PRC as a condition of unification. The Basic Law stipulated that Hong Kong would be subject internally to its own laws for fifty years after the take-over under a system of “one country, two systems” (一國兩制), with its own chief executive and a legislature elected by an election committee representing various functional constituencies in a corporatist arrangement. The arrangement openly favored the corporate and financial ruling class in Hong Kong which was in turn prepared to align its interests with those of the Communist regime in a mutually beneficial relationship. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) was something of a political counterpart to the “special economic zones” – an exception that was granted not to compromise national sovereignty but as an act of sovereign power. In all matters pertaining to governance and the law, the SAR would be accountable to the National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing. Hong Kong was granted representation in the NPC which, like all representation in that body, has served more to consolidate central control than to allow for the democratic airing of public opinion and grievances.

“One country, two systems” was an unstable structure. It was important to the PRC for patriotic reasons to put an end to the colonialism at its doorstep and retrieve territory lost a century and a half ago. But some compromise with the departing British was unavoidable given the strategic importance to the new project of development of the global corporate and financial hub that was Hong Kong. The autonomy granted to Hong Kong was subject to the good faith of the Beijing government. What might happen if the PRC no longer needed this hub seemed like a remote contingency in the 1980s, but already by the 1990s there was talk of the rise of Shanghai as a competitor. It is not out of the question that the recent unrest which may undermine faith in Hong Kong as a corporate and financial center is not entirely undesirable to the regime now that preparations have been completed to launch a new financial center in Shanghai.

A similar uncertainty attended the issue of governance under the system. The Basic Law held out the possibility of democratic government and universal suffrage in Hong Kong subject to circumstances to be determined by the NPC. It nourished hopes in democracy, but reserved for Beijing final say on when and how democracy was to be exercised. There were no guarantees that full democracy would be granted if Hong Kongers invited the displeasure of the government in Beijing – or circumstances within the country made it undesirable. This is the immediate issue in the recent protests (along with public dissatisfaction with the current chief executive, Leung Chun-ying 梁振英 who, like his two predecessors since 1997, is widely viewed as a Beijing puppet). To Hong Kong democracy advocates, the offer of universal suffrage is a mockery of the promise of full democracy when the choices are limited to candidates carefully selected by an electoral commission packed with Beijing loyalists.

The take-over in 1997, and the circumstances of its negotiation, had one very significant consequence that in likelihood was unanticipated: the politicization of Hong Kong society. Hong Kong long had a reputation as a cultural and political “desert”. The British colonial regime was successful in diverting popular energies to the struggle for everyday existence, and for those who could, the pursuit of wealth. At the height of the Cultural Revolution on the Mainland in 1967, labor disputes erupted into riots against the colonial government led by pro-Beijing leftists. But sustained political activity dates back to the negotiations surrounding the take-over, especially the mobilization instigated by the Tiananmen movement in Beijing. Politics over the last twenty-five-plus years has revolved around the assertion of a Hong Kong identity against dissolution into the PRC. As a new political consciousness has found expression in the efflorescence of a Hong Kong culture in film and literature, the latter has played no little part in stimulating political activity. Ironically, while the goal of “one country, two systems” was to ease Hong Kong into the PRC, the very recognition of the differences of Hong Kong from the rest of the country would seem to have underlined the existence of a Hong Kong identity that differentiated the former colony from the rest of PRC society.

The recent protests have focused attention on issues of governance. Far more important are the social tensions and the economic transformations that lend urgency to protestors’ demand for political recognition and rights. One important indication is the part young people – teenagers – have played in the protests. Joshua Wong 黃之鋒, who has emerged as a leader, is seventeen years old, which means that he was born in 1997, the year of the take-over.

The generation Wong represents has come of age in a society subject to deepening social and economic problems. The wealth gap in Hong Kong is nothing new, but as elsewhere in the world, inequality has

assumed critical proportions with increased concentration of wealth in the hands of the elite allied with Beijing. Since 1997, the experience of marginalization has been intensified with the inundation of the city by Mainlanders with their newfound wealth which has increased prices of commodities, put pressures on public services – including housing, health and education – and introduced new cultural fissures. Some Hong Kong businesses prefer Mainland customers on whose business they have come to be dependent. In the 1990s, Mainlanders living in Hong Kong used to complain about the prejudice they suffered from Hong Kongers with their pretensions to superior cultural sophistication. That has been reversed. Even the most uncouth Mainlanders are likely to look down on Hong Kongers for not being authentically Chinese, which typifies PRC attitudes toward Chinese populations elsewhere. While Hong Kongers complain about “locusts” from the North, a very-unConfucian Peking University professor descended from Confucius refers to Hong Kongers as “bastards” contaminated by their colonial past. The central government in Beijing, sharing the suspicions of southerners of its imperial predecessors, is engaged in efforts to discourage the use of Cantonese while instilling in the local population its version of what it means to be “Chinese”. We may recall that the recent protests were preceded two years earlier by successful protests against Beijing-backed efforts to introduce “patriotic” education to Hong Kong schools. It is not that Hong Kong people are not patriotic. They are very patriotic indeed. But their patriotism is mediated by their Hong Kong identity, a very product of the take-over that Beijing would like to erase.

The upheaval in Hong Kong bears similarities to “Occupy” movements elsewhere in the economic issues that inform it. It also has its roots in the special circumstances of Hong Kong society, and its relationship to Beijing. The movement may be viewed as the latest

chapter in a narrative that goes back to the 1980s, the emergence of a neoliberal global capitalism of which the PRC has been an integral component, and the Tiananmen movement which was one of the earliest expressions of the social and political strains created by shifts in the global economy. The demands for democracy in the protests are clearly not merely “political”. Democracy is important to the protestors not only as a means to retrieving some control over their lives, but also to overcome inequality. The authorities in Beijing are quite aware of this link. A Law professor from Tsinghua University in Beijing who also serves as an advisor on Hong Kong affairs has announced that democracy would jeopardize the wealthy who are crucial to the welfare of Hong Kong’s capitalist economy. It may seem ironic that a Communist Party should be devoted to the protection of wealthy capitalists, but that is the reality of contemporary PRC society that the protestors are struggling against.³

The protests are also the latest chapter in the formation of a Hong Kong identity which assumed urgency with the prospect of return to the “motherland” in the 1980s. This, too, is a threat to a regime in flux that finds itself threatened by identity claims among the populations it rules over. It seems superfluous to say that allowing to the people of Hong Kong the self-rule they demand would have adverse consequences in encouraging separatism among the various ethnic groups already in rebellion against the regime, and further stimulate democracy activists among the Han population. Hitherto pro-Beijing Kuomintang leader in Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九, has voiced his opposition to unification under the “one country, two-systems” formula.⁴

It would probably take something of a miracle for the protest movement in Hong Kong to achieve its stated goals. Rather than risk a Tiananmen-style confrontation, the authorities had taken a wait-and-see attitude, waiting for the movement to spend its force, or opponents to

force it to retreat. There were signs then that the movement had run its course in clashes between the protestors and members of the general public weary of the disruption of life and business. It is suspected that the attackers included members of Triad gangs. Whom they might be serving is, for the moment, anybody's guess.

What the next chapter might bring is uncertain, to say the least. It is unlikely that a movement that has been in the making for two decades will simply fade away into oblivion. The problems it set out to resolve are very real, and offer little sign of resolution, and the movement has proven its resilience through the years. The distinguished scholar of Hong Kong-Mainland relations at the City University of Hong Kong, Joseph Cheng Yu-shek 鄭宇碩, who is also an advocate of democracy, stated in an interview that: "All the protesters here and Hong Kong people know it is extremely unlikely the Chinese leaders will respond to our demands ... We are here to say we are not going to give up, we will continue to fight on. We are here because as long as we fight on, at least we haven't lost."⁵ The fight goes on even as Beijing and pro-Beijing forces in Hong Kong further deepen their control over crucial aspects of Hong Kong society – in addition to the economy, the legacies of judicial, educational, press and cultural freedoms inherited from British colonial rule.

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Struggles for autonomy in Hong Kong raise significant theoretical and political questions about issues of "Chineseness" as well as the relationship between colonialism and historical identity-formation. The struggle for autonomy in Hong Kong, similarly to the struggles in Taiwan for independence, challenges both popular and scholarly usage in which "Chineseness" appears as a transparent category, if only in the

suggestion that there are different ways to be Chinese. Declarations that “we are not Chinese, we are Hong Kongers” or “we are not Chinese, we are Taiwanese” are at one level protests against political homogenization that presupposes a homogeneous political identity centered in Beijing. In a deeper sense, they raise questions about a racialized ethnic and national identity in the name of local identities that nourish off the experience of diverse historical identities that challenge de-historicized and de-socialized notions of “Chineseness”.⁶

In both cases, moreover, the local identity is entangled in colonial histories, in one case British and, in the other, Japanese colonialism. Hong Kong and Taiwan as historical formations throw up questions about colonialism and identity-formation that have not received the attention their importance demands. This may sound strange, as the relationship between colonialism and identity has been at the center of much postcolonial scholarship. The obsessive preoccupation of this scholarship with Euro/American colonialism has limited its historical and theoretical scope, however, and channeled inquiry into the impact of colonization on the colonizer, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the appropriation of the colonial by native subjects in strategies of resistance that mocked the anticipations of the colonizers. These emphases are understandable given the anti-hegemonic goal of postcolonial criticism to counter Euro/American colonialist assumptions that have shaped modern forms of knowledge, including knowledge of the colonized. What has been lost sight of in the process, however, are the ways in which the colonizer’s culture did indeed transform the colonized, setting them in new historical directions, even if the directions taken were not what the colonizers had expected them to be. The postcolonial critique of cultural and epistemological Eurocentrism owes much of its inspiration and language to these very forms of knowledge. Resistance to colonialism is a powerful source of identity

formation, but only if we recognize that it already presupposes the colonial as an integral moment.⁷

The suggestion that colonialism is a source of historical identity does not sit well with nationalist historiography in which colonial episodes appear as black boxes lost to national history, whose consequences are best erased in the recovery of national integrity and belonging. Colonial episodes appear in this perspective as deviations from the evolution of national identity rather than constituents of its formation. Their cultural effects are deemed undesirable, if not illegitimate, and need to be erased in order for national consciousness to take root.⁸

I think it may be observed fairly that such thinking dominates views of Hong Kong and Taiwan in Chinese nationalist historiography, most fervently presently in the PRC. When the PRC government decided to describe the end of British rule in Hong Kong as “*huigui*” (回歸), with its connotations of “returning home”, the implication was that Hong Kong had been in involuntary exile for a hundred and fifty years, and was now returning to its proper historical path by joining the “motherland”. The same kind of de-historicized thinking characterizes views toward Taiwan as well: that it is time for Taiwan to return to the Motherland after a century of separation first under Japanese colonialism, and then as the stronghold for the renegade Kuomintang which, ironically, long held to the view of “one China” and still seems to. It is also taken for granted, I may add, by many foreigners, among them many students of “China”.

Subsequent developments in Hong Kong have shown the fallacy of any such assumption. The colonial legacy has proven to be more deep-seated than the regime had wished. It would be simplistic to attribute Hong Kong demands for democracy and independence to lingering nostalgia for colonial rule, or even the political and legal norms

established under it.⁹ Though the legal system it put in place is superior by far to anything that might be expected of the Beijing government, colonial rule did not allow democracy either. The dissatisfaction with Mainland rule involves many other factors, from increasing inequality and popular frustration at being unable to do anything about it, to the virtual invasion of newfound wealth from the Mainland which has introduced new social and cultural tensions into Hong Kong society at all levels. The openly acknowledged alliance between the Beijing government and the Hong Kong economic elite adds a class dimension to the struggle for local autonomy against central control. The greedy and crass behavior of many Mainland tourists with their arrogant, proprietary attitude toward Hong Kong has material consequences for the population at large in putting pressure on public resources such as education and medical care, not to speak of pressure on everyday commodities, as well as on cultural orientation, pitting the cultural attributes of “real Chinese” against colonialism-infected locals, who in turn claim cultural superiority by dint of the colonial past. These conflicts have led to the racialization of relations between Hong Kongers and Mainlanders.¹⁰ Emergent voices in Hong Kong, following the earlier example of Taiwan independence advocates, openly proclaim that “Hong Kong is not Chinese”.¹¹

While of the utmost significance, the question here is not merely that their colonial pasts produced institutional and cultural structures that differentiate Hong Kong and Taiwan from the Mainland. Neither is it merely a matter of memories of colonialism, which hardly applies to the young generations that have led the recent struggles against Mainland claims. What is equally significant is that the colonial pasts offer alternative historical narratives that are invoked against the nationalist narrative of a single history based upon common ethnicity and imagined cultural homogeneity that justifies Beijing’s claims. It is easily

concluded from the perspective of these alternative narratives, that unification with the Mainland adds up to little more than a new round of colonialism.¹²

Notes

- + This article is a revised and updated version of an article that was first published in Turkish and English in the newspaper *Agos*, October 6, 2014. The original is also available on *boundary 2*, online <<http://boundary2.org/2014/10/29/the-mouse-that-roared-the-democratic-movement-in-hong-kong-2/>>.
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critique that respond to the situation of a newly hegemonic global capitalism and the demise of the socialist states. Dirlik's other books include *Places and politics in the age of global capital* (ed. with Roxann Prazniak, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), *Postmodernity's histories: The past as legacy and project* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), *What is in a rim? Critical perspectives on the Pacific region idea* (Westview, 1993), and *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (University of California, 1991). His works have been translated into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, Bulgarian, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish. In Fall 2010, Dirlik served as the first Liang Qichao Memorial Distinguished Visiting Professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing. In Fall 2011, he held the Rajni Kothari Chair in Democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, India. Dirlik serves on the editorial boards of over ten periodicals in Chinese, Asian and cultural studies, and is the editor of two book series, "Studies in global modernity", with the State University of New York Press, and "Asian modernities" with the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press. His various recent book-length publications include *Selected works of Arif Dirlik* (2010, in Turkish), *Snapshots of intellectual life in contemporary China* (2008, special issue of *boundary 2*), *Pedagogies of the global* (2007), *Global modernity: Modernity in the age of global capitalism*, and two edited volumes, *The formation and indigenization of the disciplines in China: Sociology and anthropology* and *The end of the peasant? Global capitalism and the future of agrarian society*. His other publications in English include *Revolution and history: Origins of Marxist historiography in China, 1991-1937*, *Origins of Chinese Communism; Marxism in the Chinese Revolution*, *Schools into fields and factories: Anarchists, the Guomindang and the Labor University in Shanghai, 1927-1932*, and recently, *Culture and history in postrevolutionary China: The perspective of global modernity*. Dirlik was born in Mersin, Turkey, in 1940. He has a B.S. in Electrical Engineering from Robert College (now

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1. For a discussion, see, Lois Weiner, “Liu Xiaobo and the Nobel Peace Prize – Debate within China”, *New Politics*, December 12, 2010 <<http://newpol.org/content/liu-xiaobo-and-nobel-peace-prize-debate-within-china>> (consulted, 2 November 2014).
2. For a critically informed discussion of the Umbrella Movement in historical and contemporary perspective, see, Sebastian Veg, “Legalistic and Utopian: Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement”, *New Left Review*, Issue 92 (March-April 2015), pp. 55-73.
3. “Hong Kong told to strive for a ‘less perfect’ democracy” (by Michael Forsythe, Keith Bradsher and Alan Wong), *The New York Times*, August 28, 2014 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/29/world/asia/hong-kong-told-to-strive-for-a-less-perfect-democracy.html>>.
4. The case of Taiwan is discussed in greater detail in Arif Dirlik, “Taiwan: The land that colonialisms made”, *boundary 2* (forthcoming).
5. “Hong Kong leader refuses to resign, but deputy to meet with protestors” (by Austin Ramzy and Keith Bradsher), *The New York Times*, October 2, 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/03/world/asia/hong-kong-protests.html?_r=0>.
6. For further discussion, see, Arif Dirlik, “Born in translation: ‘China’ in the making of ‘Zhongguo’”, *boundary 2*, Online, July 2015, and Alan Chun, “Fuck Chineseness: On the ambiguities of ethnicity as culture as identity”, *boundary 2*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 111-138. The issue of “Chineseness” is relevant for Chinese Overseas in general. For that dimension, see, Arif Dirlik, “Literary identity/cultural identity: Being Chinese in the contemporary world”, Modern Chinese Literature and Culture (MCLC) Resource Center Publications (September 2013).
7. Similar points have been made, with reference to Japanese colonialism, in Liao Ping-hui and David Der-wei Wang (eds), *Taiwan under Japanese*

- colonial rule, 1895-1945: History, culture, memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). See, especially, Liao Ping-hui, "Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule, 1895-1940: History, culture, memory", pp. 1-15.
8. Huang Ying-che, "Were Taiwanese being 'enslaved'? The entanglement of Sinicization, Japanization, and Westernization", in Liao and Wang, *Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule*, pp. 312-326.
 9. For a recent discussion of complexities in images of Hong Kong, see, Ho-fung Hung, "Three views of local consciousness in Hong Kong", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 43, No. 1 (November 3, 2014) <http://japanfocus.org/-Ho_fung-Hung/4207> (consulted, 10 November 2014).
 10. For a theoretically informed discussion, see, Ruth Y.Y. Hung, "What melts in the 'melting pot' of Hong Kong?", *Asiatic*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (December 2014), pp. 57-87.
 11. "Hong Kong is not China: Artist's illustrations go viral", *Shanghaiist*, July 2, 2015 <<http://shanghaiist.com/2015/07/01/hong-kong-not-china-illustrations.php>>.
 12. This question was raised early on by the US scholar of Hong Kong origin, Rey Chow. See, "Between colonizers: Hong Kong's postcolonial self-writing in the 1990s", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 1992), pp. 151-170.

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