Hong Kong at 20
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Faced with mounting pressures for political reform, Beijing has prevaricated and stonewalled behind proposals that fail to meet globally accepted definitions of popular democracy. In the face of this intransigence, a new generation of youth activists in the city is demanding self-government and even independence, stretching the 'one country, two systems' compromise to breaking point.

It is time to refocus the debate about Hong Kong’s politics away from constitutional reform towards questions of nationality and identity. In this, the territory is hardly unique – the processes of nation-building currently at work among the crowded alleys of Mong Kok have parallels in Scotland and Catalonia.

For decades, both Westminster and Beijing operated under the assumption that Hong Kong lacked a unifying national identity and so a form of ‘Hong Kong nationalism’ would be unlikely to take root in the city-state. During most of the colonial era the city lacked a strong sense of its own identity. Its population consisted of relatively recent immigrants from disparate parts of mainland China who all spoke mutually unintelligible dialects, and the colony had strong ties to several Western countries.

Perhaps surprisingly, more recent global interconnectedness and growing migration flows have increased the symbolic power of nationalism and have actually led to an upsurge in demands for self-government. Scotland and Catalonia are undergoing similar processes, as are numerous ethno-federal territories in the former Soviet Union, such as Chechnya and Kaliningrad.

Hong Kong’s annual vigil commemorating the Tiananmen protests is the only event of its kind held within Beijing’s jurisdiction

Despite its economic prosperity and internationalist outlook, Hong Kong has not been immune to this trend. Increasingly, demands for political autonomy and the protection of civil liberties are underpinned by national grievances, creating fresh challenges for the city’s administration and the communist government in Beijing.

Since the territory’s first experiments with contested multiparty elections in the last decade of British rule, pro-democracy opposition parties have expressed strong support for mainland China’s ‘beleaguered’ community of human rights activists. Hong Kong’s annual vigil commemorating the Tiananmen protests has attracted prominent regional and international media coverage – it is the only event of its kind held within Beijing’s jurisdiction. The tacit reason in Hong Kong for holding such commemorative events is that the city remains an inalienable part of China. The proper course of action to undertake, in response to political backsliding and human rights abuses on the mainland, is to try to persuade Beijing to act in accordance with internationally accepted norms. As a result, any criticism of communist policies in Hong Kong has traditionally been presented within an explicitly patriotic framework – a ‘loyal opposition’ striving to persuade Beijing that universal suffrage in the territory and political liberalisation on the mainland are in the regime’s own long-term best interests.

This apparent patriotism is not surprising – despite its status as a British colony, Hong Kong played an active role in Chinese politics for most of the twentieth century. Both the Chinese Nationalist and Communist Parties controlled dense networks of civil society groups in Hong Kong that cut across class, regional and linguistic divides. In contrast to Singapore, Hong Kong’s population is overwhelmingly composed of ethnic Chinese. In a part of the world where nationality is usually conceived of and defined in ethnic terms, this alone constituted an emotively powerful argument for the territory’s inclusion within mainland China.

Yet not all of Hong Kong’s population views the city as an inalienable part of China. Even in the
heyday of the ‘moderate’ opposition – during the Patten administration – public support for the colony’s handover was lukewarm, with large sections of the educated Hong Kong middle class actively making plans to settle abroad. Now it seems that Hong Kong’s citizens are distancing themselves further from China. According to the University of Hong Kong’s Public Opinion Programme, the percentage of the city’s citizens who mainly identify as ‘Hong Kongers’ has increased sharply since 2008 – when only 20% of the population identified themselves as such – and now accounts for some 42% of the city’s population. At the same time, the proportion of citizens who mainly identify as ‘Chinese’ is under 20%; in 2008 it was over 35%.

While support for Hong Kong independence remains relatively weak and diffuse, it would be a mistake to dismiss it as a marginal phenomenon. One of the defining features of secessionist movements since the 1970s – including in Scotland – has been their ability to catalyse mass support within relatively short periods of time, even in seemingly unpropitious circumstances.

Historically, political concessions have been of dubious utility in curbing secessionist demands. Within the Soviet Union, it was the advent of perestroika and the opening-up of political space for civil society that fuelled a cascade of nationalist independence movements in outlying Union republics. Some academics have argued that, far from being an instrument for greater ethnic assimilation, the Soviet Union’s nationalities policy in fact strengthened distinct national identities through its programmes of affirmative action and its tolerance of cultural autonomy.

As a member of the communist bloc throughout the Cold War, China’s nationalities policy was heavily influenced by the Soviet example, evidenced most notably by its sponsorship of the development of native cadres in various autonomous regions of China. Beijing has implemented a similar system in Hong Kong: while all key government positions are filled by local officials, their worldviews and interests are nonetheless aligned with that of Beijing. During the 2012 election for Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, the eventual victory of CY Leung was widely attributed to direct Chinese intervention, which steered pliant delegates towards the officially sanctioned candidate at the last minute. The contradiction between de facto political subordination and de jure autonomy has merely aggravated popular resentments, undermining the efficacy of the city’s administration.

Hong Kong’s political trajectory in the past two decades has demonstrated that a robust civil society, independent media and individual liberties are incompatible in the long-run with a fundamentally authoritarian model of statecraft. Local cadres who are blatantly subservient to Beijing and lack domestic legitimacy cannot hope to win free and fair elections, creating strong incentives for them to perpetuate the status quo at all costs. In doing so, they feed the sense of political exclusion and alienation that drives Hong Kong nationalism, further contributing to political polarisation.

If China wants to avoid incidents similar to the ‘Umbrella Revolution’ in Hong Kong in 2014, it must learn to tolerate local pride and identity. Courtesy of Vincent Yu/AP/Press Association Images.

Younger citizens in Hong Kong are more likely to highlight linguistic differences between the city and mainland China

For a growing constituency of youth leaders, Chinese politics can and should be marginalised as tangential to domestic developments. Instead of phrasing their demands in terms of Chinese patriotism, younger citizens are more likely to highlight cultural
and linguistic differences between the city and the mainland. This has manifested itself in recent protests aimed at defending Cantonese's official status and the continued use of traditional (as opposed to simplified) Chinese characters within a broader ‘localist’ movement. If, as the influential academic Benedict Anderson suggested, nations are primarily ‘imagined communities’, a distinctive ‘Hong Kong nation’ is currently being constructed before our very eyes. What might appear as parochial battles over Chinese script or the medium of instruction within the educational system have become imbued with much greater significance.

China’s current approach towards Hong Kong is unlikely to reverse the tide of Hong Kong nationalism. Even if full universal suffrage were to be granted in the immediate future, it would do little to stem the development of local nationalist support among millennials. According to the Hong Kong University Public Opinion Programme, since 2011 over 55% of Hong Kong’s citizens have denied that they are ‘proud’ of being Chinese citizens. While constitutional gridlock certainly has some role to play in this, widespread resentment at Beijing’s apparent unwillingness to recognise the distinctiveness of the city’s culture has also been a prominent factor.

Most Hong Kong residents find it hard to ignore the gradual crackdown on human rights activists and freedom of speech on the mainland, especially when Chinese security forces appear to act with impunity, even in Hong Kong. If it is to contain this potentially volatile situation, Beijing needs to reassess its strategic priorities with regards to Hong Kong. The city’s importance as a financial and transport hub means that continued Chinese jurisdiction and control is essentially non-negotiable.

The Communist Party of China is no doubt concerned that any move towards greater self-determination in Hong Kong might inflame similar demands in its troubled western regions and undermine its own nationalist credentials – a key prop of regime legitimacy in contemporary China. Yet in order to avert these outcomes, it needs to recognise that its current approach is deeply counterproductive in the long term. Instead of pursuing a policy of direct control that ultimately undermines the legitimacy of local agents, Hong Kong’s ‘establishment’ forces need to be given much greater autonomy to deviate from the official line on domestic issues.

The Chinese leadership must recognise that its unrealistically broad definition of ‘national security’ is hindering its ability to constructively shape political developments on its periphery. Denouncing each and every manifestation of ‘localism’ in apocalyptic terms merely allows its adherents to gain public sympathy and legitimacy; they can cast themselves as heroic dissidents battling against a totalitarian monolith.

**Only by reclaiming the centre ground of popular opinion can Beijing avert the development of a broad-based, indigenous independence movement in Hong Kong**

In recent months, influential political forces in the city appear to have learnt this lesson, including Financial Secretary John Tsang, whose popularity appears to be founded on his ability to present himself as a defender of local interests. Likewise, the ardently free-market Liberal Party, long-derided as a mouthpiece of the city’s oligarchs, has enjoyed a groundswell of public support due to its willingness to publicly defy both the Leung administration and Beijing.

While these political phenomena may represent blips within a broader trend of public disillusionment with politics in general and pro-Chinese forces in particular, they nonetheless point towards a potential alternative model for Beijing to consider. Only by reclaiming the centre ground of popular opinion through astute tactical manoeuvring and careful diplomacy can the Chinese government avert a nightmare scenario of witnessing the development of a broad-based, indigenous independence movement.

Nearly two decades after the handover to Chinese rule, Hong Kong stands at a crossroads in its political development. Initially heralded as an innovative experiment in combining two seemingly incompatible political, legal and economic systems within one state, the ‘one country, two systems’ model appears increasingly incapable of dealing with structural tensions. This has fuelled Hong Kong nationalism and confounded many observers and political actors, including the Chinese government.

In view of these changing realities, there is an urgent need for Beijing to pursue a new model for the city based on tolerating expressions of pride in local identity while simultaneously upholding national integrity and sovereignty. Such a model would require Beijing to demonstrate a degree of tactical flexibility and self-restraint that it has hitherto failed to display, both in its dealings with Hong Kong and also with other troubled regions on the periphery of the Chinese state.

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