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### Big Trouble in Actual China

It's November 15th, 2016. On the steps of the High Court in the Chinese city of Hong Kong stand two young people, surrounded by international press and flashing cameras. One of them is a lanky, square-jawed man in an unbuttoned shirt and navy blue suit. The other is a petite woman with long, straight hair wearing a sleeveless black dress. Both of them are completely stone-faced as the news of what has happened in the building behind them reaches reporters. These two people have just been told by the High Court that despite being democratically elected, they will not be allowed to serve in Hong Kong's Legislative Council. The reason for this disqualification is not because they are ineligible due to their young age or because they have committed any crimes, but because the Chinese government has banned their political party due to its outspoken advocacy in favor of Hong Kong's secession from China. Neither their running for office, nor their being banned from doing so is an isolated incident these days. Independence and Free Speech Movements have been on the rise in Hong Kong for at least ten years now, and have emerged in response to ham-fisted attempts by the central government in Beijing to assert greater direct control over the city. Fundamentally, this crisis on the Pearl River Delta boils down to a simple fact: Hong Kong is simply too different from mainland China for the two to peacefully coexist, and must declare independence in order to avoid a greater crisis in the future.

Examining why Hong Kong is in the unique position of both being part of China and not wanting to be part of China begins by knowing its history over the last two centuries. From 1843 to 1997, the islands that make up what is now Hong Kong were not owned by China, but by Britain, who used the collection of rocky outcroppings and villages as a beachhead in order to trade with China (“History of Hong Kong” par. 21-22). That experience of being owned by another country meant that Hong Kong was largely spared from the drastic economic and political changes of China's communist takeover and Cultural Revolution, instead remaining capitalist and relatively open like its colonial owner. In 1997, the UK formally gave Hong Kong back to China under an agreement that Hong Kong would take fifty years to transition from being a British colony to being just another city in China by 2047. During that time, Hong Kong would operate as something called a Special Administrative Region, or SAR, under the purview of China. Beijing would technically control the city, but it would be allowed to follow its own constitution and have its own separate government. This agreement is known in foreign policy circles as “One Country, Two Systems” (Fredriksson par. 2). This “One Country, Two Systems” doctrine means Hong Kong’s legal, educational, and political systems are much more similar to that of Britain or the US than that of mainland China. It also means that many people in Hong Kong see themselves as distinct from China and having a separate identity influenced by that century and a half of British rule and the systems it left behind. A Hong Kong author named Lewis Lau states: “Every time I see [my nationality listed as Chinese] I feel strange, because I feel that I am not Chinese. I live [in Hong Kong]. I’ve spent my life here, and I don’t really feel like things from China are familiar” (French par. 44). Hong Kong may actually have more in

common with New York or London than it does with Beijing, and that difference in culture leads to a rift between the city and the Central Government.

However, it would be incorrect to say Hong Kong's unique anti-Beijing sentiment is because it is currently being governed as a former colony in a transitional period because it isn't the only region in China currently being governed this way. 65 kilometers (or 40 miles) west, just across the mouth of the Pearl River, is China's only other Special Administrative Region: the city of Macau. Macau is a former Portuguese colony known as the "Vegas of the East" due to its thriving gambling and casino industry (Fredriksson par. 5). It too is a Special Administrative Region, with its own constitution and separate governmental bodies, yet it shows none of the pining for secession which has made Hong Kong famous. The two regions are quite similar on paper, so why does Hong Kong want independence and not Macau? What is the difference? Most of it boils down to who owned each city when they were still European colonies. The British saw it as their mandate to create Britain-esque, Western-style governmental systems in whatever foreign land they set up shop in, whether that was India, Jamaica, Africa, or Hong Kong. The Portuguese had no such desire. Besides introducing China to the Catholic Church, they didn't bother to do much of what people in the 21st century would call "nation building". Britain saw Hong Kong as an extension of themselves, Portugal just saw Macau as a means to make money. The present-day effects of this difference in colonial attitude are put best by Klara Fredriksson at *Perspective Magazine*:

"Macau has a much weaker civil society than Hong Kong. As a former British colony, Hong Kong has a strong civil society with institutions supporting free press, organizations fighting for the interests of groups of residents, and many universities with strong political traditions.... Macau on the other hand does not have a civil society to this scale; the few universities are less 'political' and organizations representing the interests of citizens are much weaker. In Hong

Kong, dozens of already existing organizations accomplished the unification of groups of angry citizens, whereas in Macau this was much harder as the social infrastructure is simply not there.” (Fredriksson par. 7)

Another part of the difference between Hong Kong and Macau, and a source of Hong Kongers' dissatisfaction and pessimism, is how the wealth is distributed in each city-state. Hong Kong is a capitalist enclave in an ostensibly communist country, and that capitalism is both for better and for worse. So while, on a macro scale, the free market economy there is thriving, “There’s not much economic growth [wage growth, pay raises, home ownership, etc.] outside of a small minority in banking and finance” (French par. 20). Upward mobility is much less likely there now, and it's hard for those who aren't already ahead to get ahead. Much of this is due to an influx of people from the mainland moving there and putting a strain on Hong Kong's job and housing markets because China-born offspring of Hong Kong citizens were granted citizenship through a declaration in 1999 (“History of Hong Kong” par. 66). Were Hong Kong independent and able to control its own border with China, this problem wouldn't be as acute. This Dickensian society in the making is in sharp contrast to Macau, which is so unbelievably wealthy from all of its gambling revenue that it can literally afford to pay people the equivalent of \$1,200 per year just to live there (Keegan par. 5). Macau's citizens are (metaphorically) fat and happy from their stipend of casino cash, while most people in Hong Kong have to struggle just to climb the ladder due to a problem China created. That difference in means goes a long way to further explain the difference. Not all of Hong Kong's plights are financial or economic, though. Many are political, which segues nicely into the main reason people in Hong Kong say they want independence, as well as one of the main reasons they should get it: ham-fisted, arguably illegal interference by Beijing.

When the British gave Hong Kong back to China in 1997, it was “with the promise that it could maintain for 50 years its own political and economic systems, including civil liberties... But many in the city believe that its freedoms and relative autonomy are already eroding” (Chan par 2). A disconcerting piece of information is that while Hong Kong’s chief executive is technically “elected”, they are done so “...by a 1,200-person "election committee" stacked with pro-China and pro-establishment loyalists” (“Carrie Lam Sworn in as Hong Kong's New Leader.” par. 12). This means Hong Kong’s citizens don't directly elect their Chief Executive because that isn't what China wants. It would be roughly analogous to if the governor of a US state was chosen by a cabal of random people in Washington D.C. who are loyal to the current President, which would hardly be a free and democratic system. Hong Kong’s politics since 1997, particularly in the last ten years, have been a story of meddling by Beijing in an attempt to rein in the city’s desire for autonomy, followed by Hong Kong forcefully resisting. The most recent round of protests and demonstrations began nine years ago in 2010 when Beijing attempted to introduce highly nationalistic textbooks to use in Hong Kong’s schools in order to prevent feelings of separatism there. Needless to say, this plan backfired spectacularly. Two years later nearly 100,000 people showed up outside the governmental building in Hong Kong to protest the books, forcing Beijing to abandon the plan under the intense scrutiny and pressure (French par. 37-39). Those protests were lead by a 17-year-old student named Joshua Wong. He’ll become important a little later. These attempts to control Hong Kong have led China to prevent people from taking office or even arresting them for protesting in favor of independence. One of the more recent examples of this meddling is the cases of Yau Wai-Ching and Baggio Leung, the pair of disqualified legislative candidates mentioned earlier in an article by Erin Hale

at *Voice of America*, but they are by no means the only pro-independence activists who have fallen victim to Beijing's influence. Just a year later in 2017, Joshua Wong, the same young activist who had led the protests against the textbooks, was sentenced to half a year in prison for organizing a protest against Beijing's interference in Hong Kong's elections (Solomon and Chen par. 10). Wong, along with many outside observers in both Hong Kong and abroad, view his prosecution as political; a way to imprison him for just long enough that he will be barred from running for office.

The final question in this whole saga is whether or not the current SAR should be its own independent nation. The ideal solution would be if Beijing started to actually honor the autonomy Hong Kong was legally given until the 2047 assimilation date. However, based on past experience and the examples cited previously, it is extremely unlikely that China will do that. The more likely scenario is that China will continue to try to assert greater control, Hong Kong will continue to try to defy them, causing China to try to assert yet more control, and the whole cycle will repeat until something violent happens and other countries or the UN will have to be called in to mediate the dispute. Chinese President Xi Jinping traveled personally to Hong Kong in 2017 as essentially a show of force to try to frighten the city into submission. "Mr. Xi, the Chinese president, used his visit to the city last year to warn that any challenge to China's sovereignty [over Hong Kong] would cross 'a red line'" (Chan par. 16). Seceding from China may not be a perfect solution, but it is (to use a colloquialism) the "least worst" solution. Hong Kong's citizens may be ethnically Chinese, but they are so different in their culture (because of things like protests), institutions (Western/British style courts vs. Eastern courts of law), and economics (capitalist city in a communist country) that they might as well be a different country

already. Seceding would free Hong Kong from the meddling by Beijing that it so hates and while the prospect of one of China's cities breaking off from it certainly isn't a win-win for all parties involved, it is far less of a loss to China than many would think. Reporting from the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain states that losing the territory now wouldn't be the crippling financial blow it would have been in years past, because for Mainland Chinese people "[Hong Kong] increasingly looks like the places they've come from" (French par. 22). This isn't because Hong Kong is a small, economically unimportant city objectively, but because it is relatively economically unimportant with regards to all of the other truly massive cities in China. Hong Kong has the eighth largest GDP of all Chinese cities according to Jeff Desjardins at *Visual Capitalist*. China losing Hong Kong would be a noticeable but not existentially threatening blow to an already massive economy. Additionally, Hong Kong has an economy which, by itself, is larger than the entire nation of Peru (Desjardins par. 1). In a purely practical sense, Hong Kong could stand on its own if it wanted to and it would be following a precedent in the region set by another former British port: the independent city-state of Singapore. The possible downside is that China may try to conquer Hong Kong by force if it secedes (a truly terrifying prospect which brings to mind Tiananmen Square), or will simply refuse to recognize it and see it the same way that they currently see the island of Taiwan: as a province in revolt (Kang, et. al. par. 3). That situation may be averted by the other democratic, capitalist countries in the region (namely Japan, India, Singapore, and South Korea) putting their support behind the fledgling nation, giving Hong Kong legitimacy and acting as a counterweight to China.

Clearly, while no outcome to this situation is perfect, and every solution will leave someone unhappy, the “least worst” and arguably necessary outcome due to how different Hong Kong is from China is for Hong Kong to declare independence.

Of course, there is still the question in the background of this whole argument: “Why should Americans care about this, or for that matter anyone outside of China or Hong Kong?” It matters because China is big, powerful, and influential. The running joke about everything being made in China is a sign of how much economic power and influence they wield. China is a worthy rival for the US on the world stage and although losing Hong Kong (as stated before) wouldn't be a grievous blow to their economy, it would be a grievous blow to their reputation. If a country can't even keep its own territory from breaking off, how seriously will other nations take that country? Secondly, Americans should care because it's their values which are under attack in Hong Kong. Representative government, democratically elected leaders, freedom of speech and protest, and education without indoctrination are all values that Americans of every race, color, creed, and political stripe should believe are important. Those are some of the values the United States was founded on, and they are the very principles being attacked and eroded in Hong Kong by the central government in Beijing. In all the ways that matter, this city built on rocky outcroppings halfway across the world is just like America, and that should make Americans care.



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