

The Umbrella Revolution and the Future of China-Hong Kong Relations

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A previous version of this article appeared in the [China Brief](#) (Vol. 14, Issue 20) of the Jamestown Foundation, Washington D.C.

The unprecedented civil-disobedience movement in Hong Kong – known as Occupy Central or the “Umbrella Revolution” – has lasted more than five weeks with no inkling of an endgame. The Beijing leadership under conservative President and Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping, however, has given clear-cut signals that there are limits to its tolerance of what it considers a frontal challenge to the Chinese Communist Party’s authority. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the party’s Central Committee, which ended October 23, Xi, who is also Party General Secretary, had this to say about the “turmoil” that has erupted in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR). “Some people [in Hong Kong] want to use seeking democracy as pretext to break away from the jurisdiction and administration of central authorities,” Xi reportedly said. “They want to overturn heaven and earth,” added the President, using a phrase meaning revolution. “But their [conspiracy] will never be realized.”¹

A turning point in China – Hong Kong Relations

Before analyzing Beijing’s possible game plan for reining in the SAR’s centrifugal tendencies, it is instructive to examine the ways in which the pro-democracy crusade being waged on Hong Kong streets has fundamentally changed the relationship between the central government and the SAR. For the first time since Hong Kong’s sovereignty reverted to China in 1997, hundreds of thousands of residents have taken to the streets to voice their opposition against Beijing’s tightened control over the SAR’s political development. Even more significantly, however, is that the unexpectedly vehement demonstration of “people power” has forced Beijing to recognize the limits of “Chinese exceptionalism” – that the CCP administration has the right to ignore universal values and that foreign countries have no business poking their nose into the country’s internal affairs.

¹ Cited in Staff Reporter: “[Xi Jinping: Some people want to subvert the heavens](#),” Ming Pao (Hong Kong), October 31, 2014.

Dozens of well-known mainland-Chinese have expressed support for Hong Kong activists even as foreign media and politicians call on the Xi administration to respect the demands of student demonstrators in the SAR. Whether the Xi-led leadership will crack down hard on dissent in Hong Kong and the mainland will give the world a clear indication of where the fast-rising quasi-superpower is heading.

Beyond the protest, a sign of political awakening ...

The challenge that Hong Kong activists – the bulk of whom are college and high-school students – pose to Beijing can best be understood in light of the changing dynamics of SAR politics. On one level, the students-led Occupy Central campaign is a protest against the hard-line decision late August by the National People’s Congress on the mechanism for the election of Hong Kong’s Chief Executive (CE) in 2017. While it is billed a universal-suffrage election, Beijing has mandated that a Nomination Committee (NC) consisting of 1,200 mostly pro-establishment figures vet and pick the candidates. Politicians who aspire to become CE must first secure more than 50 percent of the support of NC members before he or she can become a legal candidate. According to pro-democracy Legislative Councilor and the former Chairman of the Hong Kong Bar Association Alan Leong, “this is a North Korean-style election” that is totally out of sync with pledges of a high degree of autonomy for Hong Kong.² Indeed, Beijing has since the mid-2000s significantly ratcheted up its direct control over the SAR. The Central Liaison Office – Beijing’s mission in the SAR – has played an increasingly overt role in areas ranging from helping pro-Beijing candidates win in local legislative elections to putting pressure on the Hong Kong media not to support Occupy Central. This is despite the fact that both the Sino-British Joint Declaration of Hong Kong (1984) and the Hong Kong Basic Law (which is the SAR’s mini-constitution approved by Beijing) have spelled out that Hong Kong has full autonomy over areas apart from defense and foreign policy.³

On a deeper level, the Occupy Central movement, whose slogan is “Have faith in the people; Change only comes with confrontation and struggle.” represents a degree of political awakening

² For a discussion of the electoral mechanism passed by the NPC, see, for example, “[China: No open nominations for Hong Kong leader](#),” Associated Press, August 31, 2014. See also “[Pan-democratic legislators stage a protest](#),” *Singtao Daily* (Hong Kong), September 2, 2013.

³ That Beijing is renegeing upon many of the freedoms pledged to Hong Kong was evidenced by the *White Paper on the One Country Two Systems*, which was released by the State Council in June, 2014. The Paper points out that “the central government exercises overall jurisdiction over the HKSAR” and that Hong Kong administrators, including judges, must be “patriotic.” See “[Central government oversees HK's high degree of autonomy](#),” Xinhua News Agency, June 10, 2014. For a discussion of the implications of the White Paper, see, for example, Shannon Tiezzi, “[With the planned Occupy Central movement drawing near, Beijing claims ultimate political control over Hong Kong](#),” *The Diplomat*, June 11, 2014.

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and empowerment that is unprecedented in Hong Kong history.⁴ While SAR residents are often said to be economic animals who care only about their living standards, hundreds of thousands of residents have defied tear gas and other tough police tactics to occupy areas round the Central Government Office as well as several busy streets. Hong Kong's first generation of politicians have since the 1980s largely abided by parameters set by the colonial administration – and after 1997, the Chinese leadership – in fighting for electoral rights and other democratic ideals. According to political commentator Joseph Lian, the on-going crusade, which for the first time is led by the students, represents “a new generation which dares challenge the rule of the game imposed by the CCP leadership.” “Since many student leaders are expected to play an active role in the coming two to three decades, Beijing is up against potent adversaries,” added Lian, a former chief editor of the Hong Kong Economic Journal.⁵ For Johns Hopkins University sociologist Ho-Fung Hung, the Umbrella Revolution represented “a rite of passage for an autonomous civil society.” Hung is impressed by the fact that the leaders of the movement are “young, autonomous new citizens who have organized themselves through the social media.”⁶

... under the world's scrutiny ...

Compounding Beijing's problems is the fact that the Umbrella Revolution has riveted the attention of the global media as well as politicians in the Western world. Since the 1997 handover, only the United States government has consistently commented on whether Beijing has honored its commitment to give the 7 million SAR residents “a high degree of autonomy.” Perhaps due to China's growing international clout – and its huge market – even Britain has largely refrained from negative assessments on the adulteration of the “one country, two systems” pledge, which underpinned the handover of the former British colony back to the motherland. After the Hong Kong police fired 87 rounds of tear gas at protestors on September 28, however, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement urging “all stakeholders to resolve any differences in a manner that is peaceful and safeguards democratic principles.” This is the first time in recent memory that the head of the UN has made remarks about Hong Kong politics.⁷ The same goes for countries that have become increasingly close economic partners of China. On the eve of Premier Li Keqiang's early October visit to Germany, German President Joachim Gauck compared the Umbrella Revolution to the anti-Soviet protests that took place in East Germany in late 1989. Gauck

⁴ Cited in “[Federation of Hong Kong Students stages rally to gain support of residents](#),” Radio Free Asia, September 24, 2014.

⁵ Cited in Joseph Lian, “[Civil nomination is also being held in mainland China](#),” Hong Kong Economic Journal, October 9, 2014.

⁶ See Ho-Fung Hung, “[The occupation movement is the rite of passage to an autonomous civil society \[in Hong Kong\]](#),” Ming Pao, October 13, 2014.

⁷ See J.C. Finley, “[UN's Ban Ki Moon calls for peaceful resolution to Hong Kong protests](#),” UPI, September 30, 2014,

said the experience of East Germany showed “how important it was to defend democracy even today,” adding that “the young protesters in Hong Kong have understood this very well.”⁸

... and with the support of mainland activists

The Umbrella Revolution is also unique because it has struck a chord of resonance among mainland intellectuals. Since taking power at the Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2012, Xi has emphasized that Chinese must have “self-confidence in the road, theories and institutions of socialism with Chinese characteristics.” China, the president warns, must never go down the “deviant path” of Western political values and institutions.⁹ The Xi leadership has to contend with the fact that Hong Kong students have not only challenged his orthodox views but also won plaudits from intellectuals and NGO activists in China. In fact, the Umbrella Revolution has forged a kind of united front between activists in the mainland and Hong Kong. Since the 1980s, pro-democracy legislators and civil-society groups in Hong Kong have provided moral, and occasionally, financial help to dissidents ranging from Liu Xiaobo and Hu Jia to the Tiananmen Mothers. Immediately after the Occupy Central movement was launched in the last days of September, Beijing has imposed a news blockade on events in Hong Kong. Related broadcasts by CNN and BBC have also been blacked out. CCP censors, however, have failed to prevent scores of well-known intellectuals from rooting for Occupy Central.¹⁰

State-security personnel have detained up to 100 dissidents who have indicated their support for the Hong Kong democracy movement by means ranging from shaving their heads to holding private discussion groups. For example, well-known poet Wang Zang and seven other intellectuals were picked up by Beijing police when they were about to start a poetry reading night in honor of Hong Kong’s protestors. Wang and several other dissidents are expected to be charged with the nebulous offense of “provoking trouble,” which normally carries a jail term of three years. The number of intellectuals who have been harassed or arrested has exceeded those detained for taking part in the short-lived “Jasmine Movement” in several Chinese cities in 2011.¹¹

⁸ Cited in “[German president honors peaceful protests of 1989](#),” Associated Press, October 9, 2014.

⁹ Cited in “[Go down our own road, and firm up self-confidence in our system](#),” *People’s Daily*, February 21, 2014.

¹⁰ See Didi Tang, “[China’s media blackout: No reports or images of Hong Kong protests](#),” Associated Press, September 30, 2014. See also “[Mainland China slaps censorship on Hong Kong’s ‘Occupy Central’ movement](#),” Inmediahk.net (Hong Kong), September 30, 2014.

¹¹ Cited in William Wan, “[As Hong Kong protests challenge Beijing, authorities extend backlash to books](#),” *Washington Post*, October 13, 2014; Staff Reporter, “[Beijing has arrested more than 100 dissidents](#),” *Apple Daily* (Hong Kong), October 13, 2014.

Beijing's multifaceted response

Blaming it on the West

Beijing has so far refrained from using strong-armed tactics against Hong Kong activists. However, various leaders and state media have pointed out that the protests were an effort to subvert not only the Hong Kong but the central government. Vice-Premier and Politburo member Wang Yang noted that “Western countries are trying to fabricate a color revolution by providing aid to the opposition in Hong Kong.”¹² A People’s Daily commentary asserted that the “real goal” of the protestors to “challenge the highest authority” of China – and that it was “doomed to fail.” The party mouthpiece has accused the U.S. government and American NGOs of directly aiding the protestors. “The U.S. purports to be promoting the ‘universal values of democracy, freedom and human rights,’ but in reality the U.S. is simply defending its own strategic interests and undermining governments it considers to be ‘insubordinate,’” the People’s Daily said. An article in the Overseas Edition of the People’s Daily even called the Hong Kong demonstrations an instance of dongluan (“turmoil”), which was the same term used by Deng Xiaoping and then-premier Li Peng to characterize the student movement of mid-1989.¹³

Using the financial and economic cards

According to commentator Deng Yuwen, a former editor at the Central Party School, President Xi and his top-level colleagues have reached a decision not to make any concessions to the protestors. “There is a possibility that after the APEC conference [in November], Beijing would adopt more stringent tactics against the Occupy Central movement,” Deng said. “And even if drastic steps such as deploying the Hong Kong Garrison of the People’s Liberation Army are not taken, Beijing might tighten control over Hong Kong politics to ward off the possibility of a color revolution.”¹⁴ One method is to cut off funds made available to pro-democracy legislators as well as Occupy Central organizers. A focus of attack is maverick tycoon Jimmy Lai, who runs the popular pro-democracy paper Apple Daily. Earlier this year, hackers from unknown units in the mainland broke into the personal computers of Lai; immediately afterwards, documents showing that Lai has

¹² See “[Wang Yang fingers foreign countries’ bid to stir up a ‘color revolution’ in Hong Kong.](#)” *Wen Wei Po* (Hong Kong), October 14, 2014.

¹³ Cited in “[People’s Daily: it is an idle dream to wish to accomplish color revolution in the mainland via Hong Kong.](#)” *Global Times* (Beijing), October 11, 2014; See also Mei Xinyu, “[How much is left of Hong Kong’s assets and capacities for wanton wastage?](#)” *People’s Daily* (Overseas Edition), October 11, 2014.

¹⁴ Author’s interview with Deng Yuwen in Beijing, October 15.

donated HK\$40 million to pro-democracy politicians and the Occupy Central movement were exposed.¹⁵

An even more potent weapon is the “economics card,” a reference to the fact that the Hong Kong economy cannot survive with support from the mainland. Beijing in late September summoned a few dozen Hong Kong tycoons to the capital with a view to asking them to denounce the Occupy Central movement. The Xi administration’s overall message is that the entire SAR would suffer economic losses if they did not support the Central Government.¹⁶ This was graphically demonstrated by Beijing’s sudden decision last February not to hold the Conference of APEC Finance Ministers in Hong Kong. Late last year, senior cadres told the SAR administration that the prestigious function would take place in Hong Kong so as to showcase the latter’s status as Asia’s financial center. The rescheduled event was subsequently moved to Beijing.¹⁷

Even more significant is the fact that two of the most promising developments in the Hong Kong economy depend on blessings from Beijing. One consists of plans to expand the SAR’s role as an offshore Renminbi trading center. The other is the “Shanghai-Hong Kong Stock Connect,” or beishuindiao (literally “transferring water from the north to the south”), a reference to the policy— originally set to begin in late October —of allowing Chinese citizens to buy stocks listed on the Hong Kong Stock Market.¹⁸ On October 25, however, regulatory authorities abruptly announced that the “stock connect” would be postponed until further notice. The Chinese-run Hong Kong paper, the Commercial Daily, cited Chinese sources as saying that the Occupy Central movement was to blame for the “possibly indefinite postponement” of the project.¹⁹

Tougher tactics to be expected

Will Beijing deploy the PLA Hong Kong garrison to quash the protestors? Tung Chee-hwa, Hong Kong’s first Chief Executive who is now Vice-Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) – a position which renders Tung a “state leader” in Chinese protocol – flatly

¹⁵ For a discussion of apparent efforts taken by the SAR administration to silence Jimmy Lai, see, for example, John Bethelson, “[Hong Kong graftbusters raid influential China critic](#),” *Asiasentinel.com* (Hong Kong), August 29, 2014; see also Tania Branigan, “[Anti-graft officers search Hong Kong home of media tycoon Jimmy Lai](#),” *The Guardian* (London), August 28, 2014.

¹⁶ See Te-ping Chen, “[Hong Kong tycoons visit Beijing as students boycott classes](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 2014.

¹⁷ Cited in “[Demonstrators’ threats put SAR’s reputation at risk](#),” *Global Times*, March 5, 2014.

¹⁸ See Neil Gough, “[China sets Hong Kong-Shanghai trading deal](#),” *New York Times*, April 10, 2014.

¹⁹ Cited in “[Sources say the Shanghai-Hong Kong Stock Connect may be postponed indefinitely](#),” *Commercial Daily* (Hong Kong), October 25, 2014. For a discussion of whether political uncertainties might hurt Hong Kong’s status as a financial center, see, for example, Linda Yueh, “[Is Hong Kong’s future as a financial center threatened?](#)” *BBC News*, September 29, 2014.

denied that the PLA would be mobilized. Relevant legislations indicate, however, that the SAR administration is fully authorized to declare a state of emergency – and to seek the help of the PLA garrison to restore order. Since early October, at least a couple of thousands of officers from mainland-Chinese units including the Ministry of State Security, the police, and military intelligence have been deployed in Shenzhen and Hong Kong for the purpose of helping the SAR police to clear up occupation zones.²⁰

Over the long haul, Beijing is expected to take more draconian steps to prevent “bourgeois liberal” values from infiltrating the mainland. In mid-October, the Propaganda Department gave orders to the nation’s bookstores to remove publications written by a host of prominent Taiwan and Hong Kong authors. They include the Chinese-American historian Yu Ying-shih, Taiwan writer and artist Giddens Ko, and Hong Kong writer and broadcaster Leung Man-To. Publishing houses have also been instructed not to put out books by mainland-Chinese intellectuals including economist Mao Yushi, the just-deceased politics scholar Chen Ziming, novelist Ye Fu (aka Zheng Guoping), and legal scholars Zhang Qianfan and He Weifang. The CCP Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Education have given instructions to universities to prevent Chinese college students from emulating their counterparts in Hong Kong.²¹

In conclusion

Since the 1900s, when Dr Sun Yat-sen – who spearheaded the October 10, 1911 Revolution that toppled the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) – took shelter in Hong Kong, China’s most cosmopolitan and open-minded city has been a generator of new ideas for the motherland. While late patriarch Deng Xiaoping insisted that the territory be returned to China by 1997, he expressed the wish that “several Hong Kongs” be created along China’s rich coast so as to speed up the modernization of the entire country.²² However, President Xi’s paranoia about the SAR degenerating into a “base of subversion” against the socialist motherland might spell the end to the role of the dynamic Pearl of the Orient as a catalyst for economic and political changes in the nation of 1.35 billion people.

²⁰ For a discussion of Beijing’s strategies toward crushing the Umbrella Revolution, see, for example, Keith Bradsher and Chris Buckley, “[Beijing Is Directing Hong Kong Strategy. Government Insiders Say.](#)” *New York Times*, October 17, 2014. See also “[Beijing has dispatched several thousand officers from the State Security and Public Security Ministries -- and their headquarters are based in Shenzhen.](#)” *Apple Daily*, November 1, 2014.

²¹ Cited in “[Chinese Communist authorities have come out with a publishing blacklist that includes Yu Ying-shih and Leung Man-to.](#)” Radio Free Asia, October 12, 2014.

²² Cited in Yuan Weishi, “[Remember Deng Xiaoping’s edict about creating several Hong Kongs.](#)” *Chinavalue.net* (Beijing), July 7, 2007.