



Flag of Hong Kong.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/28a8kknu>.

“Hong Kong Is Our Home”

Hong Kongers Twenty-Five Years After the Handover

By Christopher K. Tong

Hong Kong has always existed in between empires, on the margins of historical time. The fishing hamlet on the edge of the Chinese empire became a political entity of importance only in the nineteenth century, when the Qing court ceded the island to Great Britain at the end of the First Opium War in 1842. Hong Kong’s liminal status made it a cosmopolitan space for transcultural exchanges between Chinese and Western worlds throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ Western notions of democracy and science found their way to Chinese intellectuals in part through this colonial outpost. It was at the Hong Kong College of Medicine (now part of the University of Hong Kong), for instance, where Sun Yat-sen and fellow medical students discussed plans to overthrow the Qing dynasty. Later, during World War II, Chinese authors across the political spectrum—from the leftist writer Mao Dun to the modernist poet Dai Wangshu, and to the proto-feminist novelist Eileen Chang—sought refuge in the British colony. In addition to being a hub for transcultural flow, Hong Kong functioned as a buffer zone for political and economic elites from Asia, Europe, and the United States to conduct business and diplomacy. Ironically, Hong Kong thrived precisely because of its liminal position.²

The logic of expiration, however, entered the minds of Hong Kong people toward the end of the twentieth century. The People’s Republic of China (PRC), after gaining a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and normalizing diplomatic relations with the United States, began to assert itself on the international stage. In the early 1980s, Beijing and London engaged in a series of negotiations over the future of Hong Kong: London sought to retain Hong Kong as a colony, while Beijing insisted on its return to Chinese sovereignty. Anxiety over PRC rule spread throughout the city, causing the stock market and the Hong Kong dollar to plunge and triggering an exodus of businesses and professionals. In response, Beijing suggested the framework of “one country, two systems” (*yiguo liangzhi*), in which Hong Kong would become a Special Administrative Region (SAR), a jurisdiction with its own title, flag, and border control that operates independently from mainland China except in the areas of diplomacy and defense.³ The Sino-British Joint Declaration was ultimately signed in December 1984, outlining the Handover of Hong Kong to the PRC, scheduled to take place on July 1, 1997. Under the terms of this Joint Declaration, Hong Kong would be governed according to a mini-constitution called the Basic Law, and PRC policies toward Hong Kong would “remain unchanged for 50 years,” that is, from 1997 to 2047.⁴ Until recently, this policy of “one country, two systems” maintained Hong Kong’s status quo as a global city where people from around the world could enjoy proximity and access to mainland China without sacrificing the freedoms and rights offered by Western liberal democracies.⁵



Sun Yat-sen.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yym45wkp>.



Mao Dun.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/5n8vztc3>.



Dai Wangshu.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/mr2afn4a>.



Eileen Chang.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/273z626h>.



July 1, 1997 front page of *The New York Times*. The photo caption: In a ceremony marked by precision and martial music, Gov. Chris Patten solemnly received the British flag that flew at Government House. Hours later, a Chinese flag was raised inside the Exhibition and Convention Center.

Source: *The New York Times* Twitter feed at <https://tinyurl.com/5n99vr5b>.

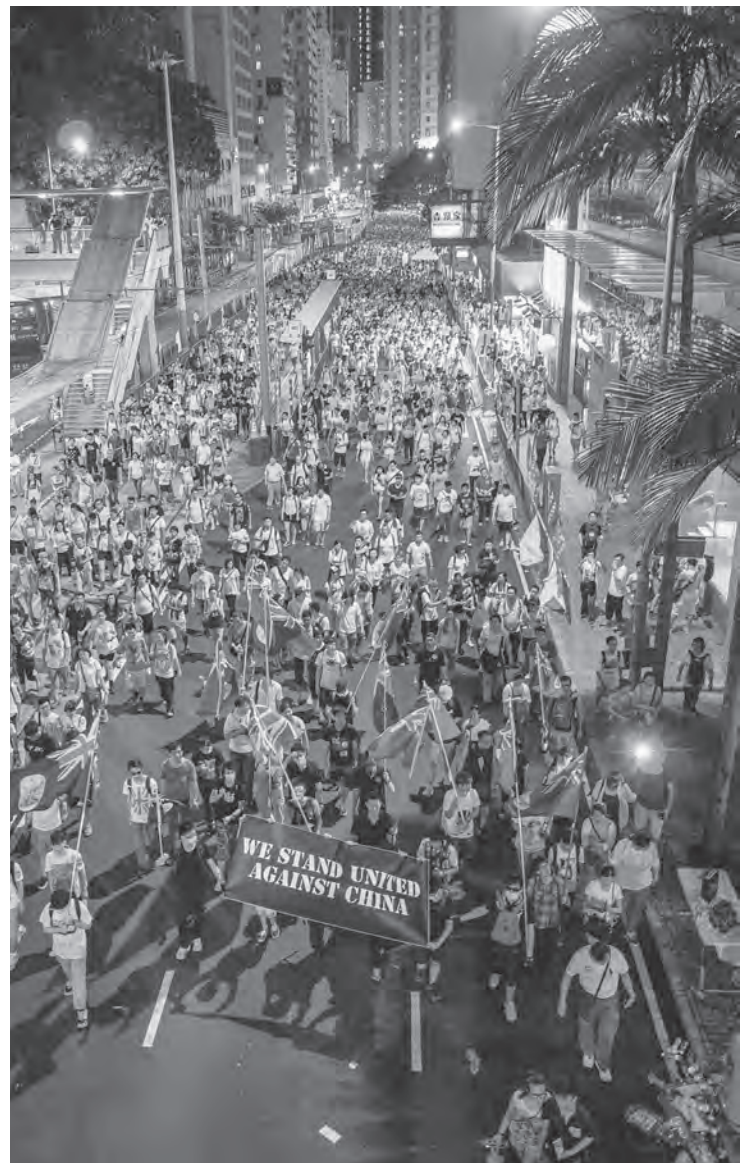
In retrospect, the uncertainties of 1997 overwhelmed the people of Hong Kong. Hong Kongers worried that their culture, way of life, and economic competitiveness would come to an end with the Handover. As Mabel Cheung's celebrated 1998 film *City of Glass (Boli zhi cheng)* suggests, Hong Kongers lived on borrowed time, as though their world would shatter on its expiration date.⁶ Ackbar Abbas calls the perennial nature of Hong Kong's transience a "culture of disappearance," a culture that finds expression only in the form of its imminent expiration.⁷ On June 4, 1989, the stakes increased dramatically for Hong Kongers, as they watched news reports of PRC troops in Beijing murdering thousands of peaceful demonstrators and injuring tens of thousands more. Known as the Tiananmen Massacre, or simply June Fourth, the PRC's violent crackdown fueled Hong Kongers' fears of Communist China, hastening the exodus that had already begun in the early 1980s. More than half a million Hong Kongers, or roughly 10 percent of the population, would eventually leave the city before the Handover.

In any case, what the Handover meant to the PRC in the most pragmatic sense was the infusion of Hong Kong's economic, technical, and cultural capital. As a world-class finance hub and port city with a trusted court system, Hong Kong claimed nearly one-fifth of China's gross domestic product (GDP) at the time of the Handover. During the PRC's boom years in the 1990s and 2000s, professionals and firms based in Hong Kong provided expertise to PRC banks, factories, and land developers as well as local governments interested in building urban centers, subways, and bridges. The abundance of economic opportunities lured many Hong Kongers who had emigrated before the Handover back to the city. Admittedly, Hong Kongers' views of the PRC have spanned the spectrum. While some embraced the Chinese motherland with a new sense of opportunism or even nationalism, others saw the influx of PRC money, tourists, and policies as a type of "recolonization."⁸ While Hong Kong acted as a catalyst for China's rapid growth, its own economic competitiveness waned in the process. Before the Handover, Hong Kong was viewed by mainlanders as the "paradigm of Chinese urban life."⁹ Today, most major Chinese cities resemble or even surpass Hong Kong, at least in terms of economic output. By the early 2020s, Hong Kong would represent merely two percent of China's GDP. The push to integrate Hong Kong, Macau, and the Pearl River Delta into an economic region called the Greater Bay Area (*Dawanqu*) is arguably the PRC government's next step in further rebalancing the Special Administrative Regions. Only with the benefit of historical hindsight does the Handover of 1997 seem less ambiguous.

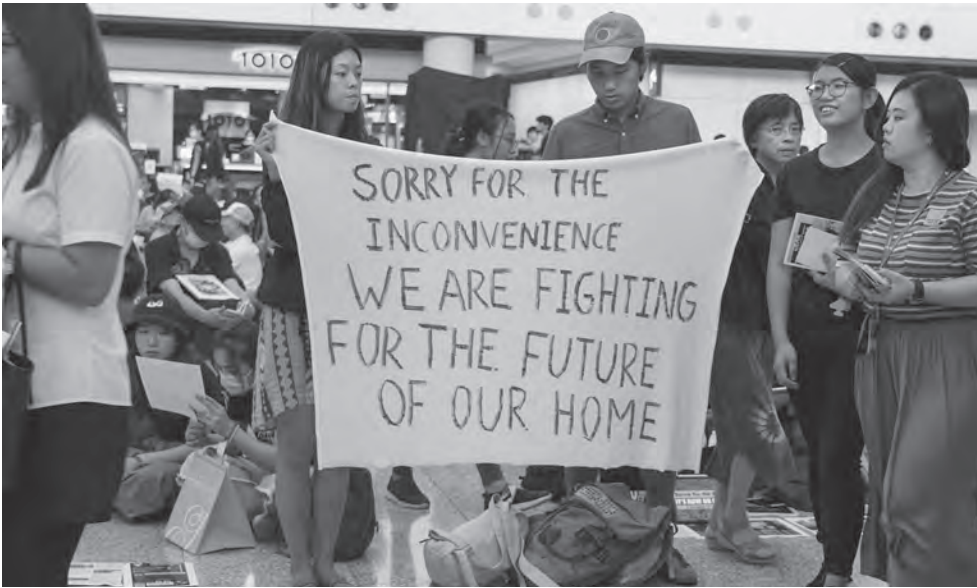
Interestingly, Hong Kongers became more civically and politically engaged over this period. Since the Handover, Hong Kong has become increasingly recognizable to Hong Kongers, mainlanders, and the international community as a geopolitical and sociocultural entity distinct from the rest of the People's Republic. As the Chinese mainland was modeling its own economic success after Hong Kong's, on the one hand, and placing limits on Hong Kong's democratic trajectory, on the other, Hong Kongers' consciousness as a people became more and more salient. The hopes and fears of Hong Kongers, first experienced in the prelude to 1997, returned in waves of civic activism against PRC hegemony and intervention. From the anti-Article 23 demonstrations in 2003 to the Umbrella Movement in 2014, and to the broad-based, pro-democracy activities of 2019–2020, Hong Kongers showed that they had not been assimilated by the Chinese motherland, but were rather "handed over" by one empire to another. Hong Kong, long dismissed as a place lacking historical and cultural gravitas, saw a surge of protest art, as its residents unleashed their creativity, yearning



October 7, 2014. The "Umbrella Man" stands in defiance as the police disperse tear gas at the peaceful demonstrators. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/5586bxnh>. Photo by Pasu Au Yeung.



July 1, 2014. Demonstrators in the streets of Hong Kong. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/4wnxdwks>. Photo by Studio Incendo - Hong Kong, CC BY 2.0.



August 9, 2019. Demonstrators occupy the Hong Kong International Airport. Source: Source: Shutterstock. Photo by Natchar Lai.



Carrie Lam (center) at the press conference with Secretary for Justice Teresa Cheng and Secretary for Security John Lee one day after the massive protest on June 10, 2019. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/42xhh8fy>.



On November 23, 2020, (left to right) Joshua Wong, Ivan Lam, and Agnes Chow appeared in the West Kowloon District Court where they faced charges, including organizing an unauthorized assembly and incitement to knowingly take part in an unauthorized assembly, they had decided to plead guilty. Source: Shutterstock. Photo by Neo Siu.

for an echelon of freedom and autonomy never before reached.¹⁰ The persistent sense of Hong Kong's imminent expiration gave way to a new era of Hong Kong consciousness.

The social movement brought together Hong Kongers in ways never witnessed before. In Spring 2019, legislators, activists, and residents began to push back against the Hong Kong government's proposal to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance. The amendment, citing a cross-border murder case as the pretext, would allow for transferring suspects between Hong Kong and other jurisdictions such as Taiwan, China, and Macau, which had no formal extradition agreements with the city. The bill was not perceived as improving Hong Kong's legal infrastructure, but rather as allowing Beijing to enforce PRC laws on Hong Kong soil. By mid-2019, the anti-extradition law amendment bill movement (anti-ELAB) grew into calls for universal suffrage and other

political rights. Protesters took to the streets on a daily basis, occupying public spaces, shutting down transportation, and clashing with the police. Slogans such as "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" (*gwong fuk heung gong si doi gaak ming*) and "Five Demands, Not One Less" (*ng daai sou kau kyut yat bat ho*) were chanted at demonstrations, spray-painted onto walls, and amplified on social media. Two camps of protesters coalesced and worked collaboratively: the *wo lei fei* ("peaceful, rational, non-violent") and the *yung mou* ("courageous, martial"). Hong Kong protesters, most notably, developed techniques for confronting riot police that have since circulated among protest movements around the world, from Black Lives Matter in the United States to pro-democracy demonstrations in Myanmar.¹¹ Meanwhile, residents from all walks of life—from seniors to families with young children, civil servants to animal advocates, nurses to religious leaders—joined in the demonstrations. A notable episode of demonstrators occupying the Hong Kong International Airport and belting the *Les Misérables* song "Do You Hear the People Sing?" made international headlines, while the Cantonese song "Glory to Hong Kong" ("Yun wing gwong gwai heung gong") was composed as the movement's anthem.¹² In September 2019, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, withdrew the extradition bill, declaring it "dead."

For a moment, public opinion was turning against the Hong Kong administration. The disproportionate use of force by Hong Kong police was criticized by local residents and the international community. Tear gas was deployed against protesters as well as bystanders, medics, journalists, seniors, children, and animals. Riot police wielded batons and fired tear gas canisters, rubber bullets, and live rounds directly at protesters. In one high-profile case, Hong Kong police chased a university student until he fell to his death, but refrained from intervening in another case when a pro-government mob attacked unarmed demonstrators with batons in a subway station.¹³ In light of these events, Hong Kongers took a stance in the District Council elections of November 2019. With pro-democracy parties winning control in seventeen of Hong Kong's eighteen districts, the election was perceived as giving broad-based legitimacy to the social movement. In a city with seven million residents, nearly three million voters turned out, representing practically half of the adult population and more than 70 per cent of registered voters. The will of the Hong Kong people was thereby made clear to Beijing and the world.

However, Hong Kong's future now seems uncertain—yet again. The coronavirus pandemic would intensify in the following months. Physical distancing protocols protected the Hong Kong public, but also blunted the momentum of the pro-democracy movement. By mid-2020, PRC

authorities were apparently prepared to crush Hong Kong's democratic aspirations by force and law. The passage of the Hong Kong National Security Law in June 2020 established the legal basis for China's draconian control over the Special Administrative Region. Under Beijing's orders, the Carrie Lam administration prosecuted thousands of protesters, expelled pro-democracy members from the Legislative and District Councils, and altered election procedures to keep out dissent. Political figures from the earlier generation such as Martin Lee, Lee Cheuk-yan, and Margaret Ng to the youngest cohort of elected officials and political activists such as Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Ivan Lam were charged or imprisoned. Meanwhile, others such as Nathan Law resigned from office, went into exile, or both. Political exile—once an abstract concept associated with the likes of the Dalai Lama, June Fourth dissidents, and the peoples of Tibet and Xinjiang—has become a reality in Hong Kong society.

Hong Kong's expiration is an eternal return of the same. Whereas Great Britain once sought to mold Hong Kongers into obedient and grateful subjects of the Crown, the PRC government is determined to forge a new Hong Kong, but in its own image. The slogans that once assured Hong Kongers, expats, and businesses are now replaced by a new slogan: "only patriots of the Chinese nation can govern Hong Kong" (*aiguo zhe zhi gang*). During this article's writing in 2021, the leaders of multiple pro-democracy parties and civic organizations in Hong Kong have been charged or imprisoned, leaving the remaining pro-democracy politicians, activists, and staff more susceptible to targeting by the Chinese state. As Lam's term as Chief Executive came to an end in June 2022, John Lee, an official in law enforcement and security services, was elected unopposed by a committee of electors vetted by Lee himself the year before.¹⁴ This process of dismantling political opposition, civil society, and electoral mechanisms is not merely to reverse Hong Kong's democratic trajectory, but also to isolate the next generation of Hong Kongers and remake their political consciousness to Beijing's will.

In the field of education, the PRC's approach to hegemony is not merely to eradicate dissent and subversion, but to fill textbooks and school activities with pro-PRC narratives. After the failed introduction of Moral and National Education (MNE) to school curricula in the early 2010s, the Hong Kong National Security Law has paved the way for mandating pro-PRC "patriotic education." Schools



Joshua Wong (left) and Nathan Law (right) freed on bail outside the Court of Final Appeal on October 24, 2017. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/2wwy9p62>.





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Lennon Wall in Admiralty, Hong Kong on October 5, 2014. Sticky notes turn public spaces into open forums during the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement.
Source: Shutterstock. Photo by Gary Yim.



August 2019. Supporters of the pro-democracy movement tape notes, posters, and handicrafts on a Lennon Wall in Tai Po, including one saying "Why we stay here? Because we love Hong Kong! Hong Kong is our home!!!" Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

and libraries in Hong Kong, fearing non-compliance with unclear guidelines on national security, have resorted to self-censorship.¹⁵ Laws also require all kindergartens and schools in Hong Kong—including international schools offering independent curricula—to display the PRC flag and play the PRC anthem during flag-raising ceremonies.¹⁶ To control the education system, the Hong Kong administration has taken a range of severe measures from dismantling the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, the largest of its kind in the city, to arresting five speech therapists who wrote children's books about sheep fighting off wolf attacks, stories labeled "seditious" by the authorities.¹⁷ Although Hong Kong universities have long recruited and welcomed foreign academics, Carrie Lam in her honorary role as the Chancellor of publicly funded universities in Hong Kong alleged infiltration by "foreign forces."¹⁸ Meanwhile, on a politically complex topic such as Hong Kong—now deemed "sensitive" by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—scholars in Hong Kong, the PRC, and even the West are increasingly subject to

self-censorship, peer censorship, and direct interference by PRC authorities and supporters.¹⁹ In this new academic environment, how will Hong Kong history and culture be discussed and taught? And in which languages: English, Cantonese, or Mandarin? In what ways will Hong Kong history be assimilated by PRC narratives or remain the cosmopolitan genre that it has always been? What are some strategies for countering PRC censorship and intervention in the study of Hong Kong? What are the responsibilities of the international community, including Western scholars of China? Given the impact of the Hong Kong National Security Law on Hong Kong's political climate, such conversations will be difficult to have and are therefore more important than ever. ♦



August 2019. A banner reading “Go Hong Kongers” was installed above an exit at the Tai Po subway station. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

NOTES

- Lau Kit-ching Chan, *China, Britain and Hong Kong, 1895–1945* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1990); Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong 1841–1997* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003); Michael Ingham, *Hong Kong: A Cultural History* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Rey Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Prasenjit Duara, “Hong Kong and the New Imperialism in East Asia, 1941–1966,” in *Twentieth-Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday and the World*, ed. Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2012), 197–211; Yiu-Wai Chu, *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013); Yiu-Wai Chu, *Found in Transition: Hong Kong Studies in the Age of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).
- Ho-fung Hung, *City on the Edge: Hong Kong under Chinese Rule* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 122–147. The same SAR status was given to Macau, a Portuguese colony handed over to the PRC in 1999.
- The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, “The Joint Declaration,” *Topical Issues*, July 1, 2007, <https://tinyurl.com/3wv735k7>. It would be historically inaccurate to say that Hong Kong was “returned to PRC sovereignty,” because the PRC did not yet exist when Hong Kong was first ceded as a colony. In fact, the British colony of Hong Kong predated both the PRC (founded in 1949) and the Republic of China (officially established in 1912).
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- Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 7.
- Chi-hung Luk, *From a British to a Chinese Colony? Hong Kong Before and After the 1997 Handover* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2017).
- Chow, *Ethics after Idealism*, 157.
- For example, see “Art of the 2019–2020 Hong Kong Protests,” *Wikipedia*, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/324a9e8y>, and “Art of the Umbrella Movement,” *Wikipedia*, accessed June 4, 2021 <https://tinyurl.com/2u4ke93z>. Given the Hong Kong government’s censorship of local websites on the pro-democracy protests, *Wikipedia* is a comparatively free and reliable source of information, in spite of “edit wars” between supporters and critics of the protests. See Jessie Pang, “Hong Kong Censorship Debate Grows as Internet Firm Says Can Block ‘Illegal Acts,’” *Reuters*, January 15, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/bdhdnbnwe>; Selina Cheng, “Wikipedia Wars: How Hong Kongers and Mainland Chinese Are Battling to Set the Narrative,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 11, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/bdhd7nc>; and Selina Cheng, “Wikipedia Bans Seven Mainland Chinese Power Users over ‘Infiltration and Exploitation’ in Unprecedented Clampdown,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, September 14, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5n99wy9x>.
- Hong Kong protesters first popularized the use of umbrellas and umbrella formations on the frontlines to counter police tear gas and pepper spray, inspiring the name of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. As Hong Kong police deployed a record number of tear gas canisters in 2019–2020, Hong Kong protesters were seen readily disarming the canisters with traffic cones, bottles of water, and leaf blowers, and sometimes lobbing them back at the police with tennis rackets. As US media outlets observed, these creative techniques were later used by Black Lives Matter protesters in 2020 in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. Hong Kong protesters also frequently wore hard hats and gas masks for protection and anonymity and used laser pointers to confuse surveillance cameras and police’s line of sight. Other logistical strategies from organizing communication, supply lines, blockades, and flash mobs are documented in a manual later translated into Burmese and circulated among Myanmar’s pro-democracy protestors in early 2021. See Marco Hernandez and Simon Scarr, “The Tactics Hong Kong Protesters Use to Fortify the Front Lines,” *Reuters Graphics*, July 12, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/5keyjmja>; Tracy Ma et al., “Why Protest Tactics Spread Like Memes,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/bdzhhs7b>; and Mary Hui, “Hong Kongers Crowdsourced a Protest Manual—and Myanmar’s Already Using It,” *Quartz*, February 25, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2zbzxf2r>. On a reassessment of Hong Kong’s social movements after the passing of the Hong Kong National Security Law, see Shui-yin Sharon Yam, ed., *Being Water: Streams of Hong Kong Futures* 6, issue 3 (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021).
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- Lily Kuo, “Hong Kong Protests: Student Who Fell from Parking Lot during Demonstrations Dies,” *The Guardian*, November 8, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yruddy8e5>; Lily Kuo and Verna Yu, “Where Were the Police? Hong Kong Outcry after Masked Thugs Launch Attack,” *The Guardian*, July 22, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/42btz2su>.
- On Beijing’s overhaul of Hong Kong’s electoral system, see Lilian Cheng, “What You Need to Know about Hong Kong’s Election Committee, with Key Polls on the Horizon and Nominations Opening,” *South China Morning Post*, August 6, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/3xw84sen>; Jenni Marsh, “How China Has Stacked the Deck in Hong Kong Elections,” *Bloomberg*, September 7, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/s6kayne9>; and Oliver Young, “New HK Chief Executive John Lee Wins Unopposed Election by Vetted Electors,” *China Digital Times*, May 9, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/33u6wz9d>.
- Theodora Yu, “Under Pressure from Beijing, Hong Kong’s Schools Become More Patriotic,” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9xj8zs>.
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- Kelly Ho, “Hong Kong Universities ‘Penetrated by Foreign Forces’ Intent on ‘Indoctrinating’ Students, Claims Chief Exec. Carrie Lam,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, June 8, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4dnkssh9>.
- Faculty and students at Hong Kong universities and NYU Shanghai, for example, did not feel comfortable discussing the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong freely. See Jon Levine, “NYU Shanghai Campus ‘Self-Censoring, Politically Neutral’ on Hong Kong,” *The New York Post*, October 19, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/mpr23xsf>; and Timothy McLaughlin, “How Academic Freedom Ends,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yb7auzkc>. Meanwhile, PRC authorities have censored Western publications on topics related to Xinjiang and Hong Kong. See Maeve Kennedy and Tom Phillips, “Cambridge University Press Backs down over China Censorship,” *The Guardian*, August 21, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/3pw3pebh>; and Mathew Y. H. Wong and Ying-ho Kwong, “Academic Censorship in China: The Case of *The China Quarterly*,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52, no. 2 (April 2019): 287–292. In addition to direct censorship and self-censorship, there has been evidence of peer censorship during the review and editorial process. See Elizabeth Redden, “Censorship in a China Studies Journal,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 19, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/4zvanv6k>.

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