

# The Hong Kong protests and imperialism: What the corporate media isn't saying

By **Sheila Xiao** - September 24, 2019



The Hong Kong protests have attracted considerable attention, and also considerable confusion. The goal of this article is to provide context for what is going on in Hong Kong today now that the anti-extradition protests have entered their sixth month. Without providing a basic historical understanding of Hong Kong, the social conditions that led to the protests, the character of the protest leadership, and the relationship between the People's Republic of China and the rest of the world, the mainstream media mischaracterizes the struggle in Hong Kong in the interests of US imperialism. Without this crucial context, people can draw conclusions that have dangerous implications despite their good intentions.

## How did the anti-extradition protests begin?

In February of 2018, a 19-year old man from Hong Kong murdered his pregnant 20-year old girlfriend in a hotel in Taiwan. <sup>[1]</sup> He returned back to Hong Kong, where he confessed to the murder. Hong Kong, however, does not have an extradition treaty with Taiwan, and because Hong Kong is officially governed by China under "One Country, Two Systems," the People's Republic of China does not formally recognize Taiwan as a separate country. Technically the crime committed happened on Chinese territory. But since there is no extradition pact in place, there was no distinguishable way to try the murderer for his crime.

The solution, then, was to establish an extradition agreement between Hong Kong and China.

The protestors saw this as a Chinese encroachment on Hong Kong's sovereignty, and an opening for the PRC to abuse its power over HK. The so-called "pro-democracy," or "pro-independence" camp, that used this extradition bill as a rallying cry

to demand independence and secession from China. Some speculate that the extradition bill would close a loophole that wealthy oligarchs enjoyed who would otherwise be targeted by China's anti-corruption campaign.

For context, the anti-corruption campaign was implemented in 2012 by Xi Jinping to crackdown on high-ranking officials who were accused of bribery, political interference, money laundering or any other form of abuse of power that compromised the legitimacy of the Communist Party.<sup>[2]</sup>

As a result, thousands of officials have been investigated in criminal corruption cases.<sup>[3]</sup> Imagine what an anti-corruption campaign of US officials would look like!

The extradition bill outlined that suspected criminals could only be extradited if the crime falls under a list of 37 types of offenses and offenses carrying a maximum sentence of at least seven years. The maximum sentence of at least seven years was amended from three years as a way to reach a compromise with the protesters. These offenses include rape, murder, kidnapping, exploitation/abuse of children, genocide, those relating to women or girls, and those against laws around firearms or explosives.<sup>[4]</sup> Hong Kong Courts, and not Beijing, would have the final say on any extradition. None of the crimes included in the extradition bill included political dissent, subversion, or organizing against the government.

Since the protests began, Chief Executive Carrie Lam has tried to make concessions to the demands of the protesters by further restricting the extradition bill, without success. The bill was suspended and would've expired by the end of 2019, but in September, Chief Executive Carrie Lam formally withdrew the bill.

It is noteworthy that Hong Kong currently has extradition pacts with over 20 different countries, including its former colonizer, the United Kingdom, as well as the United States, and that the extradition protests never raised these as problems to be addressed.<sup>[5]</sup> In reality, the movement supposedly sparked by the extradition bill has little to do with the actual bill. It is rather an inherently anti-China movement, although it's composed of different groups with different motivations. And now that the bill is officially dead, the family of the woman who was murdered cannot get justice for their daughter, as the man who murdered her is now walking free in the wake of this unrest.

## The history of Hong Kong

The 2019 anti-extradition protests follow a tradition of "pro-democracy" protests, such as the 2014 umbrella revolution and the 2012 anti-national education protests. Both claimed that the PRC was attempting to take over and brainwash the citizens of Hong Kong.

A modern narrative of Hong Kong begins in 1997, when Britain—which had colonized Hong Kong for 150 years—handed the territory back to the PRC. The media portrays this handover one between two so-called colonizers. Yet only one of these countries is the colonizer: Britain.

There is a false presumption underlying all the corporate media reports that Hong Kong is and has always been separate from China. This isn't true.

In 1839, after a series of trade negotiations between China (then ruled by the Qing dynasty) and the British where China refused to import British Opium, the British waged what was known as the first Opium War against China. China was a resource rich country that did not need to trade for survival. To the British, this meant that a fifth of the world's population was an untapped market. In an era of Western imperialism, the British and other European countries would do anything in their power to open China so they could loot and ravage the country, its resources, and its people for the accumulation of profit.

China's defeat in the Opium Wars was a significant turn in the country's history. It plunged China into a semi-colonial status, with key ports controlled by seven different European powers, invasions and disputes by other nations such as Japan and Russia, and ultimately led to a deterioration and overthrow of the Qing Government. One of the concessions was ceding the Chinese territory of Hong Kong to the United Kingdom.

This marked the beginning of the *century of humiliation*, the memory of which runs deep in Chinese narratives and discourse. It was the humiliation of being reduced from an independent society that produced 30 percent of the world's GDP (seven times that of Britain) to severe underdevelopment and colonialism.

The land that makes up Hong Kong falls within the Guangdong Province of China.

Under British rule, Hong Kong was effectively a white-ruled, settler city that functioned under an apartheid-like system. Chinese people made up 98 percent of Hong Kong's population, and were subjected to severe poverty. The Chinese were expected to abide by curfew laws and if any Chinese person violated any law or ordinance, they would be subjected to public beatings and flogging.

The official language of Hong Kong was English until the 1970s. Because Chinese people did not speak, read, or write English, they could neither understand any of the laws or regulations imposed on them nor could they participate in the political system. The Governor of Hong Kong was appointed by the British government until 1992. There were white-only enclaves all throughout Hong Kong, which are still very visible today. Meanwhile Chinese people lived in illegally subdivided, unsanitary, and dense conditions.

During colonial times, the anti-imperialist movement in Hong Kong against the British sought inspiration from their Communist brothers and sisters in China. They were waging the same fight, on both sides of the border, to end colonialism in China and to reunify the country.

As such, to begin any discussion on Hong Kong in 1997 when the handover happened is not only ahistorical, but is disingenuous and misleading. Yet beginning the discussion here and omitting the context of colonialism is crucial for the propagation of imperialist lies about China's oppression and authoritarianism. Modern history begins when the people of Hong Kong were subjected to racist British colonialism and 1997 signaled an end to those 150 years.

## Western media distorts the situation and the composition of the protesters

Western media have depicted a surface level, one-sided understanding of the situation in Hong Kong. We've seen countless headlines conveying the inspirational outpouring of young people into the streets to stand up for their beliefs, and the idea that there is broad consensus around these issues concerning independence that continues to be ignored. But what are the protest's demands? What forces do the protests represent?

A study recently conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong that surveyed over 6,000 protesters in the "pro-democracy" camp found that the majority of the protesters range between the ages of 20 to 30.<sup>[6]</sup> This is significant, because many of the people protesting were either born after the return of Hong Kong to China, or were very young when it happened. The majority are college educated and self-identified as middle class (as opposed to lower class). Many were still concerned about the general public's attitude towards the movement, which directly contradicts the mainstream narrative that there is broad unity around the issue.

Many also politically identified as moderate democrats, localists, or centrists. Localism is a political ideology that centers around defining and preserving a distinct Hong Kong culture and identity. Because there is no clear definition of this culture and identity, localism takes form in a very right-wing, libertarian trajectory and is hyper-reactionary against people who threaten that. It is not about self-determination for Hong Kong, and has transcended into a xenophobic movement directed especially against mainlanders (mainlanders are used to describe Chinese people from the mainland).

While young people didn't directly experience the racist colonialism of Britain, they have inherited a society defined in many ways by the legacies of that colonialism. In Hong Kong, one in six people live below the poverty line. The housing crisis is one of the worst in the entire world—even worse than San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York.<sup>[7]</sup> Many young people cannot find decent jobs despite being highly educated. Hong Kong's infrastructure, including its water and food supply, as well as its general economy depend on China.<sup>[8]</sup> Chinese tourism from Mainland China now accounts for 5 percent of the economy.<sup>[9]</sup> These are the realities facing every day working people and, even though they have not been at the forefront

of the pro-democracy protests, they feed into the localist sentiment of increasing distrust in the PRC, culminating in misdirected animosity towards Mainlanders. They feel that the increased presence of Mainlanders in Hong Kong is a threat to the already limited resources available to them. This is not so different from the anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States.

One of the popular slogans of the protests are "Hong Kong is not China," which drives home that this is a deliberately political identity, as around 92 percent of people in Hong Kong are of the Han ethnic majority.<sup>[10]</sup>

If economic instability is a widespread issue in Hong Kong, then why is it not one of the major demands of the protests? Why is the primary issue in Hong Kong's civic life framed around democracy (which the protests fail to define in a meaningful way) and not about the very real and tangible living conditions that working and poor people face?

In 2007, the Commission on Poverty, appointed by the Chief Executive at the time, was established, and for the first time in 2009, Hong Kong measured poverty to inform policy decisions.<sup>[11]</sup> The initial reports found that 20 percent of the population is impoverished, with the elderly population at a 30 percent poverty rate. Recognizing the economic situation, the Hong Kong government implemented social programs such as Comprehensive Social Security Assistance, Old Age Living Allowance, and the Low-Income Working Family Allowance. Since these policy interventions, the overall poverty rate dropped to 14.7 percent. While this gain is relatively small and the absolute number of impoverished people remains high, the poverty gap has narrowed, lifting 370,000 people officially above the poverty line.<sup>[12]</sup>

Under the one-country, two systems framework, Hong Kong has been able to pursue policy changes that endeavor to lift people out of poverty, something that never happened under British colonialism. Those who have the worst living conditions are the elderly, who largely haven't participated in the protests (again, most of the protesters identify as middle class, not lower class). This speaks to the class character of the protests, as reflected in their demands and composition.

## US intervention and the protests

While there is officially no singular organization playing a leading role in the protests, localist groups like Demosisto and its leaders Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, have been vocally supportive of these protests. Prominent figures of the broader "pro-democracy" movement, such as Nathan Law, have worked very closely with the CIA-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and Joshua Wong has been close allies with notorious right-winger Marco Rubio (who nominated Wong for the Nobel Peace Prize).<sup>[13]</sup>

Wong has embarked on a very interesting international tour. A 22-year-old activist who was one of the lead organizers of the Umbrella Revolution back in 2014, Wong has openly called for support from the US, Taiwan, and Germany. In September, Wong visited Germany and met with German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Heiko Maas, to discuss the situation in Hong Kong.<sup>[14]</sup> Although he did not meet directly with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Wong wrote a letter to her where he specifically cites the movement to overthrow the Communist government in East Germany as a model for the Hong Kong protests.<sup>[15]</sup> He specifically states "If we are now in a new cold war, Hong Kong is the new Berlin."

In an interview with DW News – a German English language news source, Wong discussed the recent march that took place on the US consulate.<sup>[16]</sup> The purpose of this march was to call for Washington's support to pass the bi-partisan Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which states that the US will conduct annual assessments about whether or not Hong Kong is sufficiently autonomous from the People's Republic of China.<sup>[17]</sup> This act would also freeze assets and bar the entry of any official that is found to be complicit in suppressing basic freedoms in Hong Kong. It also ensures that Hong Kong is abiding by US export regulations, including sanctions. Among the sponsors of this bill is, of course, Marco Rubio. Rubio said that the bill would mandate sanctions against Chinese and Hong Kong officials who have committed "serious human-rights abuses."<sup>[18]</sup> The language is vague in defining "freedom" and "human rights abuses," which, in turn, could be manipulated for the use of political silencing (something that the pro-democracy camp so fervently opposes). Rubio is, of course, *not* a defender of human rights or democracy. Not only has he vocally advocated for military intervention in Venezuela but, in doing so, he posted a horrific picture on Twitter of the lynching and killing of Libya's former leader Gadhafi, threatening that this would be Maduro's fate if he did not comply with US demands. The US sanctions against Venezuela, which blocked key necessities for survival such as insulin, have a direct death count of upwards of 40,000.<sup>[19]</sup> The murder of Gadafi and

the overthrow of the popular government there led to tremendous suffering and instability in Libya, which now has a slave market. These are just two of the many examples of US-sponsored regime change efforts in the name of "freedom," "human rights," and "democracy."

In this same interview, Wong claims that Chief Executive Carrie Lam has repeatedly refused to meet with opposition leaders, but deflects when the interviewer mentions that in declaring the extradition bill dead, Lam stated that if protesters are willing to move forward with peace in Hong Kong, she is willing to engage with them directly. Wong also says that despite the outcome of the bill, the protesters now seek universal suffrage and to directly elect the Chief Executive. He claims that Lam is hand picked by Beijing to serve as a puppet. He of course doesn't mention that Hong Kong did not even have an electoral system until the 1980s.

Their Chief Executive is elected by an elections committee of 1200 people, representing over 38 sectors.<sup>[20]</sup> Each candidate up for election must first be voted at 50 percent or more by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, a legislative body of the PRC, prior to the elections. This is what Wong means when he says they are hand picked by the PRC.

The PRC wants to vet potential candidates on the basis of whether or not they will deliberately subvert the government. After more than a century of colonialism in both Hong Kong and China, it is not strange or unreasonable that the PRC would want to protect its sovereignty from a potential candidate that will seek to overthrow it.

Wong is appealing to the US for help with this quest for universal suffrage. When we consider our electoral system here in the US, one would question why Wong would look here as a model, where presidential candidates can win the majority of votes but still lose the election. This isn't even to mention the regular voter suppression of Black people. Is this call for universal suffrage by the pro-democracy camp, or just a red herring for a larger agenda to destabilize the People's Republic of China?

Several other leaders of the Pro-Democracy movement, like Nathan Law and Martin Lee, have worked closely with the NED. Created under the Reagan administration, the NED is a bi-partisan, taxpayer-funded CIA front organization that employs students and activists from all around the world to conduct regime change efforts. One of the cofounders, Allen Weinstein states that, "what we [the NED] do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA."<sup>[21]</sup>

## Clashes with the police

Something else that Wong continues to cite as a reason for continued protest is that there is rampant police brutality. There have been numerous accounts of violence perpetrated by a radical faction of the opposition, including throwing of molotov cocktails, damaging property, disrupting MTR (metro) stations, and even the public beatings of journalists, Mainland Chinese people, and other Hong Kong people who are sympathetic to the PRC or merely against the protests. Most recently, they set fire to the Central MTR station, which is in the heart of Hong Kong Island. They proceeded to dig up the pavement on the main road, lay down cardboard, and create a fire barricade.<sup>[22]</sup> This all happened without police interference. These are regular occurrences that have taken place as early as July, for almost every week, for the past 2.5 months.

Rioters have also severely beaten policemen on several occasions, without violent retaliation by the police. In all instances of intense confrontation, especially while the cops attempt to disperse rioters from beating civilians, they've had objects thrown at them by the protesters. Despite being armed and injured, the police have not resorted to using lethal weapons. In fact, there was one incident where an armed cop was cornered by a group of rioters. After he finally pulled out his gun, his colleague ordered him to stop. He said, "put the gun away, these are our own people."<sup>[23]</sup>

While corporate headlines preach that the people of Hong Kong are being brutally oppressed by the cops, all accounts show that this is a gross exaggeration. In fact, the Hong Kong police have shown considerable, disciplined restraint amidst all of the chaos. Why would the mainstream media all of a sudden be sympathetic to victims of police brutality? We know all too well that corporate media treats all victims of police brutality as criminals.

Many of us in the room have been to enough protests in the US to know that if the documented violence perpetrated on the streets of Hong Kong were to happen here, we'd be publicly harassed, pepper sprayed, beaten, jailed, or shot.

## Pro-China rallies

There is an entirely opposite side of the protests that have been massively ignored by mainstream news sources: protests by those who are pro-China and support the Hong Kong government. A poll from 2017 shows that more than 60 percent of Hong Kong citizens do not support the idea for independence, and only 11 percent supported independence.<sup>[24]</sup>

The pro-China, pro-HK government protests, have been able to mobilize upwards of 400,000 people.<sup>[25]</sup> While there haven't been surveys conducted among these gatherings, from the photos, the composition looks rather multi-generational, although noticeably more older people than the pro-democracy camp.

There is a variability in the general sentiments among the pro-China, Pro-Hong Kong government camp. Many are protesting because they want an end to the escalating violence among the extreme right-wing elements of the pro-democracy camp. They view the police force as maintaining discipline while trying to keep things orderly. Many also oppose the idea of independence from China, because they know that the Hong Kong economy cannot survive without China, and that if independence were achieved, Hong Kong would still need to do so in a way that would not tarnish diplomatic relations with China.

Many also feel that the path towards reunification since 1997 is a step towards rejoining with its rightful motherland of China and reconciling the damage done by colonialism. Finally, many feel that the issue about independence vs. reunification is a justified debate, as Hong Kong has developed in a path that is so uniquely different from China, but that issue is a national matter, one between Hong Kong and China.

The problem some see with the pro-democracy protests is not so much that they disagree with their views or sentiments, but that they are capable of taking the bait of western imperialist aid at the expense of any instances of Hong Kong's actual self-determination.

## Conclusion: A flashpoint in growing US aggression against China

There is a vested interest for the United States and its allies to destabilize China. A primary motivation, for example, is China's One Belt One Road Initiative, which would be able to connect 71 countries by land and sea, covering 50 percent of the world's population.<sup>[26]</sup> This project would allow for economic cooperation and diplomacy across these countries, with China in the center. This is a major threat to US hegemony.

When we see politicians like Hilary Clinton, Marco Rubio, Mike Pence, and Donald Trump publicly speaking in support of or in solidarity with these movements, we have to question their motives. We should take very seriously that any time a country other than the US is being attacked in the mainstream media, this means that there is a foreign policy interest behind it. Evidence from recent US-China relations shows that if China does not give into US interests, then the US will intensify aggression against China. As the Pentagon prepares for "great power rivalry," the possibility of a catastrophic world war isn't unthinkable. Even the most progressive figures of the Democratic Party, like Ilham Omar and Bernie Sanders, have pledged support for the protests. Whether they realize it or not, they are giving credibility to a campaign that validates US meddling and possible intervention in the region.

The aim of the US is to defeat China as a major global competitor, return it back to a colonial state, and ultimately overthrow the Chinese Communist Party. The consequences of this would be devastating for the Chinese population and the world.

The overthrow of the Communist Party in China would mean a reversal of the 800 million people who were lifted out of poverty, the vast social programs, and all of the major historic achievements China has been able to make over the past 70 years.<sup>[27]</sup> Whatever flaws exist in China today, who would lose if the government were overthrown? The answer is clear: the 1.4 billion people who inhabit China, and the poor and working classes of Hong Kong.

The protests in Hong Kong are part of this struggle. Our role in the US is to vehemently oppose and organize against all US intervention in the region. Providing the historical and political context that the mainstream media and politicians obscure is

part of that duty.

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