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Hong Kong and China: One Country, Two Systems, Two Identities

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Since the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997, there has been underlying tension and many outbreaks of civil disobedience in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong people's hostility towards China was fully visualized in the student-led "Umbrella Revolution" in September 2014. This paper explores the roots of conflicts this social uproar from cultural and political perspectives. It examines the fundamental flaws of "One country, two systems" that provokes fear of re-colonization by assessing the similarities between the British hegemony and Chinese sovereignty in Hong Kong. This paper also analyzes the rhetoric of the Hong Kong Federation of Students and their demands, in order to provide a deeper investigation into why Hong Kong people often alienate themselves from their mainland counterparts. One hypothesis in this paper suggests that over a century of British colonization influenced the political ideals in Hong Kong, while such concepts cause resentment as they deviate from those of the rest of China. Seeing the divergence of Hong Kong's individualism from Chinese Confucianism, this paper proposes that the departure of cultural identities within one national framework creates difficulties for forming a cordial relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China. While Confucianism emphasizes on constructing harmony in the society, the construction itself requires much exclusion, as well as sacrifice of personal interests. This harmony building agenda proves extremely hard in Hong Kong, where multiple languages are spoken and individuality, as opposed to conformity, is celebrated. Despite

the return of sovereignty, conflicts between Hong Kong and China become almost inevitable with these fundamental differences.

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ABSTRACT

Since the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997, there has been underlying tension and many outbreaks of civil disobedience in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong people's hostility towards China was fully visualized in the student-led "Umbrella Revolution" in September 2014. This paper explores the roots of conflicts this social uproar from cultural and political perspectives. It examines the fundamental flaws of "One country, two systems" that provokes fear of re-colonization by assessing the similarities between the British hegemony and Chinese sovereignty in Hong Kong. This paper also analyzes the rhetoric of the Hong Kong Federation of Students and their demands, in order to provide a deeper investigation into why Hong Kong people often alienate themselves from their mainland counterparts. One hypothesis in this paper suggests that over a century of British colonization influenced the political ideals in Hong Kong, while such concepts cause resentment as they deviate from those of the rest of China. Seeing the divergence of Hong Kong's individualism from Chinese Confucianism, this paper proposes that the departure of cultural identities within one national framework creates difficulties for forming a cordial relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China. While Confucianism emphasizes on constructing harmony in the society, the construction itself requires much exclusion, as well as sacrifice of personal interests. This harmony building agenda proves extremely hard in Hong Kong, where multiple languages are spoken and individuality, as opposed to conformity, is celebrated. Despite the return of sovereignty, conflicts between Hong Kong and China become almost inevitable with these fundamental differences.

THE INTEGRATION EXPERIMENT

A mass rally began on September 22, 2014 in Hong Kong, involving at least 13,000 students participating, boycotting classes, and occupying the busiest districts such as Central, Mongkok, and Causeway Bay. They marched through the city in yellow ribbons on their wrists as a symbol of democracy and a response to a decision made by the National People's Congress (NPC). The NPC proposed to impose restrictions on the nomination of candidates for Hong Kong's leader in the Chief Executive election that is due to be held in 2017, despite

how the Basic Law—Hong Kong's constitution—promises "One country, two systems" and that the Chief Executive will eventually be chosen by universal suffrage[1]. The protestors' demands were clear—they wanted democracy and political self-determination. Demands from the main organizer, Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), speak to the long-standing conflicts between people from mainland China and Hong Kong residents, showing that this act of civil disobedience was not a singular movement, but instead the manifestation of a deep-seeded identity crisis. This difference in ideologies and cultures between Hong Kong and mainland China has been fueling conflicts since the Hong Kong's handover from Britain to China in 1997.

When the sovereignty of Hong Kong returned to China after 150 years of British colonial rule, China set up a form of interim administration following the principle of "One country, two systems." It promised that the Chinese socialist system and policies would not be practiced in this special administrative region, and that Hong Kong's previous system and way of life would remain unchanged for 50 years[2]. The success of such transitional institution depends on "on-going consultations, bargaining, and joint decision-making," and its main function is to "provide a framework for continuing cooperation and encourage the development of a constituency that supports such cooperation."[3] In the case of "One country, two systems," China clearly hopes to meld Hong Kong into the national picture and maintain its individual characteristics at the same time. It anticipates a peacefully absorption of Hong Kong under a smooth transition, using it as a model to demonstrate the possibility of reunification with Taiwan.

However, this integration experiment defeats its own purpose, because it has provided the foundation for hostility towards China. The promise of a largely unaffected system and an unchanged lifestyle legitimizes the inherent distinction between Hong Kong and the mainland, which constructs a new cultural identity that is unique to Hong Kong and at odds with the rest of China. As Beijing's interference increases over the years without solving this problematic identity, Hong Kong students resort to using civil disobedience to show their discontent and fear of future union with China. The commotion in September 2014 showcases the young generation's preparedness to defend Hong Kong's self-determination, demonstrating that the tension rooted in "One country, two systems" has already reached the boiling point in merely 20 years. China's attempt to implement the Confucian harmony agenda into this city, where most believe in the rule of law and individual rights, and its failure to remove the top-down colonial political system introduces China as an outsider—another colonial power—to the Hong Kong population.

Before the handover, the scholar Overholt pointed out, "Present Hong Kong is not a democracy. It is a consultative colony… Hong Kong is ruled from London through a governor."[4] In other words, maintaining the political system created under British rule confines Hong Kong to a colonial hegemony. Seeing how the Basic Law has failed to end the

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[1] The Economist, "Democracy in China: Political City," *The Long Game*, September 6, 2014, http://www.economist.com/printedition/2014-09-06.

[2] The Basic Law of the HKSAR of the People's Republic of China, art. 5.

[3] Lyons, Terrence and Kelman, H.C. "Peacebuilding, Democratization, and Transforming the Institutions of War," in *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Darren Zook (San Diego: Cognella Inc, 2009), 262.

[4] William Overholt, "Hong Kong and China after 1997: The Real Issues," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 38, no. 2 (1991): 34.

structural violence caused by the top-down hierarchy passed on from the colonial period for the past 17 years, Hong Kong people desire a more radical change and criticize the basics of the "One country, two systems" principle: "the Beijing Government set a very conservative framework of the Basic Law… and kept the British colonial election system, benefit in the tycoons and in effect, recolonized Hong Kong for the second time."[5] Just as how an electoral administration after demilitarization that does not address the fears and mistrust of key parties may reignite conflict[6], the continuation of the British colonial-style election system creates mistrust among Hong Kong people who have been expecting a higher degree of autonomy once freed from colonial rule. It is difficult for Hong Kong to develop a sense of unity with China when the system itself remains almost the same.

The untouched political skeleton creates an identity crisis that is similar to the central problem of other post-colonial areas. For instance, "the sense of national identity remains the least developed of all the levels of political identity in Africa…because of the policies of some African leaders who, instead of correcting the legacies of colonialism, have adopted the same stratagem of divide-and-rule that manipulates ethnic loyalties and diverse identities in order to gain or retain power."[7] Like the African leaders who "have adopted the same stratagem of divide-and-rule," China restricts representation of the people in the Hong Kong government by only allowing them to choose from a list of candidates approved by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This refreshes the memories of colonial oppression, as shown in the protestors' words, "Our future and prosperity have been appropriated through collusion between the Chinese government and tycoons, to be divided amongst themselves."[8] Here, the vigorous reaction against the 2017 electoral proposal exemplifies how the fear of re-colonization prevents Hong Kong people from being ready for a genuine integration China had hoped for when enacting the Basic Law.

DESIRE FOR DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION

Ironically, even though Hong Kong people had limited freedom under the colonial rule, individual rights and freedom established in the common law system endure as Hong Kong's people central political value. This ideology, however, is strikingly different from the Chinese government's, where Confucian harmony lies at the core and national interests supersede private interests in its policies. This ideological difference alienates Hong Kong people from China. In the early stage of drafting the Basic Law, "Tung (the Chief Executive of Hong Kong from 1997-2005) and his senior officials liked to point to their record of allowing public demonstrations after Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule in 1997. However, the provisional legislature amended the Public Order Ordinance shortly before the handover. They converged to more dominative conception of governance by drawing on the old

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[5] The Hong Kong Federation of Students. "HKFS Declaration For Students' Strike," September 10, 2014. http://www.hkfs.org.hk/students-strike-declaration/?lang=en
[6] Lyons, "Peacebuilding," 262.
[7] Francis Deng, "The Politics of Identity and the Challenge of Unity," in *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Darren Zook (San Diego: Cognella Inc, 2008), 56.
[8] Hong Kong Federation of Students, "Declaration."

framework of control."[9] Because Hong Kong people are accustomed to British legal concepts, their idea of an effective government largely resembles Kant's ideals, where "a sovereign state ought to protect basic human rights such as freedom, equality and independence of the individual,"[10] meaning that they long for the freedom of speech and press after colonialism ends. They eventually discover that this future cannot be realized under Chinese sovereignty, since the freedom of public opinion is incongruous with the "dominative conception of governance," and more importantly, the harmony agenda that is introduced "explicitly as a device to legitimize and sustain the CCP leadership."[11]

A case in 2003 exemplifies how these two values inevitably clash and cause unrest. When the Chinese government proposed adding Article 23 to Hong Kong's constitution, which requires laws to prohibit treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the central government, theft of state secrets and foreign political bodies from conducting political activities in Hong Kong, 500,000 to 700,000 people participated in a pro-democratic public rally as a reaction to the bill they considered a threat to their treasured freedom and way of life[12]. Here, the desire for political participation and freedom to express their opinion in public is apparent. The Chinese government, however, is equally obstinate in its firm Confucian policy. According to Xihua News Agency, the state press of People's Republic of China, "In March 2005 the National People's Congress publicly declared [the] increase in public protests as a primary reason for the renewed emphasis on the Confucian virtue of 'harmony'."[13] In addition, Hu Jintao, the former Communist Party General Secretary, President, and Commander in Chief, placed the interests of the state above anything else in his speech of reinvigorating Confucian virtues in China[14]. The Article 23 exhibits the Chinese government's unwillingness to include Hong Kong's political beliefs into its agenda, while the protest against it shows Hong Kong people's dissatisfaction. When the 2017 electoral proposal further aggravated this difference, Hong Kong again refused to back down and advanced to boycotts and occupy movements. Because identity discrepancies are shown in "the degree to which exclusive individual or group identities are reflected or represented in the definition of the collective national identity framework,"[15] it is clear that such conflicts and their increasing scale are the result of a fracturing national identity stemming from incompatible political values of Hong Kong and the mainland.

In addition, the Basic Law itself possesses qualities that contradict the notion of Hong Kong's self-governing. Although Hong Kong's economic, legal, and judicial systems remain separate from China's, "The NPC reviews Hong Kong legislation and has the power of veto over laws… It has also the power to interpret the Basic Law, overriding decisions made by

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[9] Joseph Cheng, *New Trends of Political Participation in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2014), 260.

[10] Gabriella Slomp, "On Sovereignty," in *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Darren Zook (San Diego: Cognella Inc, 2006), 39.

[11] Michael Barr, "Confucianism, from Above and Below," in *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Darren Zook (San Diego: Cognella Inc, 2008), 145-146.

[12] Christine Loh, "Hong Kong's Relations with China: The Future of "One Country, Two Systems,"" *Social Research* 73, no. 1 (2006): 296.

[13] Barr, "Confucianism," 145.

[14] Ibid. , 145-146.

[15] Francis Deng, "The Politics of Identity and the Challenge of Unity," in *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Darren Zook (San Diego: Cognella Inc, 2008), 56.

Hong Kong's highest court."[16] Treating the Basic Law as a transitional constitution that will eventually be replaced, it embodies the "processes through which such policies are made will shape the expectations of the major actors and may either inspire confidence or ignite fears."[17] In other words, the Basic Law can significantly alter Hong Kong people's acceptance of their ultimate assimilation into the Chinese political structure. This power to overrule Hong Kong legislation backfires, as many consider it an example of the Chinese central government breaking its promise of self-determination. Under the principle of "One country, two systems," the Chinese and Hong Kong governments are separate political units, but this policy enables the pro-China NPC to infringe on the legislative and judiciary rights of Hong Kong government. It threatens Hong Kong external sovereignty, which is then naturally "fiercely defended as the right of peoples to define their own identity and to shape their own future free form external interference."[18]

This infringement came into full effect when the NPC proposed a restricted election of Chief Executive despite people's demand for universal suffrage. The antagonism towards the Chinese government's intrusion unavoidably exploded into the massive civil disobedience movements when it touched the core value celebrated in Hong Kong. HKFS remarks in its declaration, "As university students, we share the responsibility to live up to the expectations of society, guarding our precious social values."[19] The "precious social values" here demonstrates their confidence in the power of universal suffrage, in which "people do know when they are being badly ruled and will, given the chance, use the ballot to get rid of corrupt and ineffective leaders."[20] Elections matter in Hong Kong because people believe their power over the government and their entitlement to representation. They possess a strong belief in democracy, which assures, "If officials know that they must periodically submit to an election, chances are they will govern with some notion of the public interest in mind. Thus, dictatorship and incompetence will eventually result in public alienation, if free elections are held."[21] Hence, when China did not share this ideal, the student protestors accused it of being a "tyranny" and called for social movements that "strive for a twist of the currently gloomy future of Hong Kong."[22]

TWO CULTURES

The discrepancy between Hong Kong and China also goes beyond political ideals. Its colonial legacy and exposure to foreign countries even during China's isolation period turn Hong Kong not only politically, but also culturally, into the "other." HKFS's Declaration says, "We will never compromise, because we vow to reclaim our future and determine our destiny!"[23] Here, the student protestors address Hong Kong people as "we," a unit that is

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[16] Yash Ghai, *Autonomy and Ethnicity: Negotiating Competing Claims in Multi-Ethnic States*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 94.
[17] Lyons, "Peacebuilding," 261.
[18] Slomp, "Sovereignty," 41.
[19] Hong Kong Federation of Students, "Declaration."
[20] William Quandt, "The Urge for Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 4 (1994): 5.
[21] Ibid. , 5.
[22] Hong Kong Federation of Students, "Declaration."
[23] Ibid.

detached the rest of China. Apart from simple identification of oneself, language barriers also complicate Hong Kong's cultural identity. "As Beijing uses Mandarin and Hong Kong Cantonese, the main linguistic difficulties facing the post-1997 administration will be the relationship between Cantonese and Mandarin." In addition, "English is also the most widely used lingua franca among the international business community in Hong Kong."[24] The linguistic problem created by Mandarin and Cantonese gradually extends from administration to the society, as more mainland Chinese tourists and workers come in contact with Hong Kong residents. The struggle for a collective cultural identity is also thickened by the prominent use of English in the community when more Chinese investors participate in Hong Kong's financial scene. Increasing contact visualizes difficulties in verbal communication that eventually magnify the striking contrast between the two cultures, setting Hong Kong against the mainland.

As Hong Kong people try to remove themselves from the Chinese national identity, China's stance also helps consolidate the Hong Kong character as the "other." While the purpose of "One country, two systems" aims to incorporate Hong Kong into the national cultural framework, how the Chinese government perceives this city as inherently different from the rest of China contradicts its original intention. In Hu's policies, he emphasizes the harmony agenda on "relations between political parties, nationalities, religions, social strata, and compatriots at home and abroad."[25] As Barr suggests, "Each of these items has such an immediate political implication" and "[the] concern about harmony between political parties, for instance, can only refer to relations between the CCP and the political parties of Hong Kong and Taiwan, since there are no other parties in the country."[26] Referring Hong Kong people as "compatriots at home" and focusing on building harmony with "other" political parties, Hu identifies China in two segments—the mainland and Hong Kong. This partition is important, since in the formation of a collective identity, "it is not how individuals and groups perceive themselves that is in question, but how the state recognizes those self-perceptions in its common framework and what status is given the groups concerned."[27] Because China fails to recognize and include the ideals in Hong Kong as part of China culturally, it amplifies the distinctive quality of the Hong Kong identity.

CONCLUSION

This complex cultural and political situation shows how "One country, two systems" ultimately undermines the unification of identities in Hong Kong and China. As shown in a comment in the Hong Kong based South China Morning Post, "[on] one side is the need for our little city to find its place in vast China—integration. On the other side is the counterclaim that we must preserve and protect what is unique and different about us against mainland contamination—exceptionalism. 'One country, two systems' under the Basic Law

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[24] Wright, Sue and Kelly-Holmes, Helen, "One Country, Two Systems, Three Languages: A Survey of Changing Language Use in Hong Kong," *Current Issues in Language and Society* 3:2 (1997): 3-4.
[25] Barr, "Confucianism," 146.
[26] Ibid., 146.
[27] Deng, "Politics of Identity," 59.

allows and encourages both conflicting tendencies—hence it is the constitutional root of our current malaise."[28] Because this interim administration fails to remove the colonial legacy structurally and separates Hong Kong's central cultural and political ideals from the Chinese national framework, the process of integration is more difficult than China imagined. The large-scale civil disobedience in September 2014 will only be the beginning to further antagonism, if China continues to ignore the deep-rooted identity problems in Hong Kong under the name of "One country, two systems."

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[28] Alex Lo, "Integration and exceptionalism both at play in Hong Kong conflict." *South China Morning Post*, October 7, 2014, http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/.

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