1 Hong Kong as Puzzle

The 2019 protests in Hong Kong marked a pivotal moment for Asia’s financial hub, China, and the world. Massive peaceful demonstrations initially opposing the extradition of criminals to China grew into a society-wide uprising demanding full democracy, even independence, from China. For six months, the world was transfixed by real-time spectacles of a global city on the brink: first came several million-strong marches featuring the city’s hallmark orderliness and civility, then weekly violent skirmishes between black-clad youngsters and riot police in full gear. As makeshift barricades rezoned the world’s most expensive real estates into quasi-war zones, tear gas and flames of petrol bombs shrouded the city’s famous neon-lit streets. A new sense of time and space emerged, denoted now by the dates of political suicides, police atrocities in blood-stained subway stations, mass occupations of the airport, a Dunkirk-style civilian rescue of protesters, territory-wide “Baltic Way” human chains, the erection of Lennon Walls built from memo-sized protest messages in every neighborhood, and waves of solidarity protests by the Hong Kong diaspora in different countries.

The ubiquitous sight and sound of “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of our Times,” the movement’s signature slogan, embodied the euphoric sense of people’s empowerment unprecedented in Hong Kong’s history. Beijing, consumed by its trade war with the United States, watched on, assailing foreign forces for subversive intentions while outsourcing the dirty work of brutal repression to the Hong Kong police. An improbable revolution was gathering steam, only to be halted in 2020 first by a deadly coronavirus and then more fatally by a full-throttled crackdown. In the name of a new National Security Law, Beijing terrorized and demolished the city’s liberal institutions—the media, education, legislature, election, the common law court, and more. Months of mass arrests and political persecutions roundly uprooted several generations of democratic political leadership. By 2022, Hong Kong’s status as a free and liberal haven has all but unraveled. But as Hong Kong fell, the West geared up for staunch condemnations and sanctions against China’s violation of human rights. A so-called new Cold War has begun.

How did Hong Kong transform itself from a shoppers’ and capitalists’ paradise into a city of protests at the frontline of a global backlash against China? Most analysts frame the struggle between Hong Kong and Mainland China as an ideological and political one, pitting liberal capitalist democracy against Communist authoritarianism. Some China observers and Beijing officials alike pointed to Hong Kong protesters’ rebellious provocation as the culprit for bringing about the National Security Law and its aftermath.
Others spotlighted Xi Jinping’s outsized personal political ambition and intolerance for dissent. Yet, this Element adopts a global China perspective and argues that what happened to Hong Kong in the past two decades is part of China’s interventionist and repressive turn toward the world at large, a turn driven by systemic political economic imperatives, and augmented by incidental and individual factors. The global China project has subsequently triggered a range of locally shaped modalities of countermovements, including popular rebellions such as those in Hong Kong. Simply put, to understand Hong Kong’s rise as a city of protest is to hold in the same plane of analysis two parallel but contradictory trajectories of development coming to a fateful face-off at a time of rising international tension.

The first trajectory is China’s global rise and its outbound deployment of power in three major modes: economic statecraft, patron clientelism, and symbolic domination. Their application to Hong Kong explains why Beijing veered from a five-decade-long policy of preserving Hong Kong’s autonomy and difference toward ever more autocratic control. The second trajectory developing in tandem and in contradiction to the first is a two-decade-long process of decolonization from below. Manifested as the radicalization and politicization of a city, especially its younger generations coming of age in an era of digitized transnationalism, a politics of belonging energized waves of protest movements targeting Chinese domination. As the Hong Kong citizenry leveraged the city’s global capacity for resistance, taking historicity into their own hands in a place-making project, they also ran afoul of the Chinese Communist project of enhanced domestic securitization in anticipation of external international challenges.

Like a double helix, global China and global Hong Kong are two spiraling structures that intersect and entangle, yet each has its own generative dynamics. The Sections 2 and 3 delve into each of these dynamics. But the Hong Kong story, stunning and singular in its many peculiarities, also offers general lessons about a global force and its uneven consequences, as the conclusion will discuss.

1.1 Conceptual Tool Kits: Hong Kong Studies and Global China Studies

“Why and how did Hong Kong become the restive frontier of global China?” is puzzling because neither Hong Kong studies nor Global China studies offer ready answers. Seminal works on Hong Kong have mostly adopted structural and institutional perspectives that explain its political apathy and weak capacity for civil society activism, both under British colonialism and Chinese
sovereignty. These key texts are not wrong but partial, as they fail to appreciate the role of “events,” “global city politics,” and “political generations” in transcending and transforming political and economic structures. A similar bias toward structural power characterizes the literature on global China, obscuring how different forms of resistance and negotiations (i.e. what Karl Polanyi termed “countermovements”), have all along been constitutive of China’s expansion overseas. These theoretical categories should be in the tool kits for both fields of inquiry.

1.1.1 Hong Kong Studies

Throughout its history as a trading entrepôt, manufacturing base, regional transport hub, and global financial center, Hong Kong’s economy looms larger than its politics and social development in the global and local imagination, as well as in popular and academic writings of the city. The cliché went that Hong Kong – as a borrowed time and borrowed place under British colonial rule, perched on the southeastern border of Communist China – had nurtured a materialistic society allergic and apathetic to politics or ideology. The most influential theorization of the absence of politics in the colonial era is Lau Siu Kai’s (1982) concept of a “minimally integrated social political system.”

Offering a structural explanation for Hong Kong’s political stability, he argues that, under British rule, an autonomous bureaucratic polity and a materialist, pragmatic, apolitical, family-centered Chinese society were compartmentalized and depoliticized. Between the polity and society were a consensus on the primacy of political stability and economic prosperity, mechanisms of co-optation of a Chinese elite into the political establishment dominated by a British generalist-administrative elite, and “boundary politics” involving minor adjustments of public policy or redistribution of resources without popular demands for the restructuring of the system. A key condition for the perpetuation of this minimally integrated sociopolitical system was China’s endorsement and its interests in maintaining Hong Kong’s status quo as an open economy under British rule.

The rise of a new generation of scholars and the sea change in Hong Kong’s sociopolitical development have led to revisions and rejections of Lau’s interpretation of Hong Kong’s past and present. Instead of non- or minimal intervention by the colonial bureaucracy, scholars argued that, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the colonial regime’s interventions took many forms. Hidden state subsidies such as public housing, provision of education and medical care, rent control, and price negotiations for foodstuffs imported from China, amounted to social wages that contributed significantly to capitalist
accumulation and Hong Kong’s economic takeoff as a low-cost manufacturing center (Schiffer 1991). Such state intervention in the economy shatters the myth of Hong Kong as a text-book case of a laissez-faire economy. Elsewhere, Chiu and Hung (1999) showed active government interventions in the New Territories in the 1950s and ’60s in order to secure support of rural interests to its rule.

Lam Wai-man’s Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong (2004) mounts an effective critique of Lau’s claim of political indifference. She shows that Lau uses a narrow definition of political participation, as acts seeking to influence government policies through formal channels. Excluding practices such as participation in social movements, demonstrations, and strikes, Lau fails to note and account for significant incidents of collective mobilization, protests, and riots in the post–World War II period up to the 1970s. Instead of mundane boundary politics, Beijing, Taipei, and the Hong Kong government, each with their own networks, activists, and organizations, were the instigators and targets of Hong Kong people’s political activism. Yet, even Lam concedes the existence of a “culture of depoliticization” underpinning the political apathy among the majority of Hong Kong citizens.

As Hong Kong entered the transition (1984 to 1997) and then the postcolonial periods, politics emerged as a central focus of Hong Kong studies. Multiple governance crises after 1997 had rocked a political system still in flux, and Beijing had frozen the democratization timetable promised in the Basic Law, the city’s mini-constitution. Ma Ngok (2007) explains the slow process of democratization after 1997 using an institutional perspective:

A fragmented state elite and fragmented state institutions after 1997 failed to provide effective governance and leadership. The underdevelopment of political society made it difficult to bridge the gap between state and civil society, channel public opinion, aggregate interests or mediate conflicts. The gap between the political society and the civil society also disabled a strong democratic or social movement to push social and political reforms. (2007: 7)

According to Ma, these institutional weaknesses and contradictions have multiple sources. One is Beijing’s institutional design for Hong Kong which, while executive-centered, prohibits the formation of a governing party. The governing elites are co-opted from different sectors with little unified vision, social support, or mobilization power. The arrested development of political parties is also due to the institutional setup structurally designed to give legislators, most of whom are not directly elected, limited policy influence. Even with a high level of civil liberty and freedom of association, civil society is alienated
from but vocally critical of the government and political parties, and lacks internal solidarity to constitute a sustainable political force.

These structural, cultural, and institutional perspectives together portray Hong Kong as a bustling global commercial and financial metropolis, with politics a second thought and secondary concern. Yet, these studies have ignored an important fact: in Hong Kong’s otherwise calm ocean of routinized, rule-binding political (in)activity and apathy, Hong Kong citizens had time and again joined sudden outbursts of mass political action. In extraordinary, eventful moments such as the 1966–7 riots, the 1989 pro-Tiananmen rallies, the July 1, 2003 rally, the 2014 Umbrella Movement, and the 2019 anti-extradition protests, Hong Kong citizens have demonstrated their impressive capacity for passionate and daring expressions of political activism that caught the world by surprise. Some of the recent protests have inspired an academic cottage industry applying the concepts of social movement theories to Hong Kong (e.g. Lee and Chan 2011, 2018; Cheng and Yuen 2018; Ma and Cheng 2019). But in departing from earlier deterministic structural and institutional analyses, these social movement studies go to the other extreme of narrowly focusing on the process of mobilization itself, leaving unanswered important questions such as the sources of changing political orientations among citizens or how social structure and political economy shape the aims and contents of the movements (cf. Walder 2009). In using a universal set of concepts to all movements without regard to their nature, goals, and historical contexts, these Hong Kong social movement studies fail to explain the totality and historicity of Hong Kong as a city of protests.

In this Element, I seek to reinstate in a nondeterministic way the political economic forces (i.e. the advance of global China, the politics of global cities) that transform Hong Kong society and its politics, with due attention to the capacity of collective agency (i.e. political generations) to seize political spaces within or break out of structural and institutional constraints (i.e. eventful protests), to build a broadening countermovement that, over time, grew into a decolonization struggle against China. First, some brief notes on “events,” “global city politics,” and “political generations” – analytical categories that have hitherto been downplayed in Hong Kong Studies.

“Events” are concentrated moments of political and cultural creativity when the constraints imposed by history and structure are reconfigured by human action but by no means abolished (McAdam and Sewell 2001: 102). The concept of event is particularly illuminating for understanding Hong Kong politics and society. Despite being under the sovereign control of the world’s most formidable authoritarian regime, citizens have managed to pull off one energetic mass protest after another. More than just allowing for contingency in

Hong Kong

5
“Events” as a theoretical category points to mechanisms that bring about change. “Events transform structures largely by constituting and empowering new groups of actors or by re-empowering existing groups in new ways,” putting in motion social processes that are “inherently contingent, discontinuous and open ended” (Sewell 2005: 110). The transformative capacity of events lies in the mechanisms of social change they fuel: organizational networks expand, frames are bridged, new cultural categories and narratives are formulated, and interpersonal trust is consolidated (della Porta 2012). Section 3 recounts how, during eventful political protests, Hong Kong citizens break loose the constraints of structure and institutions to build new networks, narratives, and subjectivities.

Hong Kong has been rightly recognized and analyzed as a textbook case of a “global city,” a vibrant node offering connectivity and intermediary producer services to multinational capital with ever expansive networks of operations. Hong Kong’s development as a central nodal point in Asia with a concentration of international trading, banking, financial, insurance, legal, and information expertise is a long process dating back to its colonial beginning in mid-nineteenth century as a British trading port but more importantly as a hub for inter-Asia and then China trade (Chiu and Lui 2009). Yet, the theoretical impetus of the global city literature (e.g. Sassen 2001) is capitalist accumulation and the resulting socioeconomic polarization, ignoring the transformation in civic and political culture as concomitants of the making of a global city. In Section 3, we will see how the government’s attempts to make Hong Kong into Asia’s global city inadvertently stimulate citizens’ cosmopolitan political imagination and protest strategies, even a brand of global city diplomacy.

Other than “event” and “global city politics,” Hong Kong studies should take seriously Karl Mannheim’s notion of “political generations.” To Mannheim (1952: 291), “generation” is not a passive demographic location, but “generation as actuality,” whereby members have a concrete bond through their exposure to and participation in the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization, such as in times of war (Pilcher 1994: 490). Within a generation there are likely to be different units defined by different, even opposing, forms of response to a particular historical situation. The sociologist Tai-lok Lui (2007) has proposed a four-generation framework to explain Hong Kongers’ satisfaction or discontents with the status quo. Yet, his conception of generational agency is too narrowly predicated on mobility opportunities and materialistic incentives. Section 3 will show that the post-1997 generations are much more motivated by politics, rights, and civic values in the face of Chinese interference than previous generations. The logic of their responses to these historical contexts has to be apprehended on their own terms.
Turning to the scholarship on global China, one can note a similar bias privileging China’s imperatives and domination practices, leaving analyses of resistance to a footnote. The two-decade-long march of global China (i.e. outward flows of investment, loans, infrastructure, migrants, media, cultural programs, and civil society engagement from China) has left sweeping but variegated footprints in many parts of the world. International reactions to the increasingly ubiquitous presence of China and the Chinese people in almost every corner of the world have evolved from a mixture of anxiety and hope, to a more explicitly critical backlash and resistance. Yet, both academic and journalistic accounts have harped on the sweeping scope and enormous size of China’s global presence and grand strategy, interpreting these through the lens of imperialism or neo-colonialism (for a review see Lumumba-Kasongo 2011). Chinese domination has been assumed, rather than demonstrated, and the politics of negotiation, appropriation, adaptation, and resistance to global China has been ignored.

I conceptualize global China as a Chinese state project, entailing a bundle of power mechanisms – economic statecraft, patron-clientelism, and symbolic domination – that Beijing applies unevenly around the world, triggering a variety of responses. These generic modalities of power are deployed by other countries as well but the Chinese way is marked by the visible and heavy hands of the state (e.g. state-owned enterprises, policy banks, united-front bureaucracy, and state-controlled media). Section 2 examines global China in Hong Kong by supplementing extant structural explanations of why (i.e. motivation) China wants to go global with processual and political analysis of how (i.e. power mechanisms) China has pursued its global agenda, and with what (i.e. varieties of responses) consequences. In doing so, I adopt Karl Polanyi’s (1944) famous formulation of “double movement” as a heuristic lens to track global China. For Polanyi, the spread of the market in nineteenth-century Europe was a double movement – on the one hand, the advance of the market to commodify resources meant for life itself, and, on the other, society’s self-protection movements to subordinate and regulate the market. Global China is a specific kind of state-sponsored marketization, and we should expect a concomitant countermovement. The case of China in Hong Kong and its discontents opens a dramatic vista for grappling with global China as a double movement.

1.2 Arguments

When China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong from British hands in 1997, the Communist regime used the framework of “One Country, Two Systems” to
leverage Hong Kong’s difference for national development and integration with
the global capitalist economy. Yet, soon after the handover, as Section 2
explains, global unrest against autocracies, followed by the global financial
crisis, occasioned Beijing’s policy shift toward national securitization and
global expansion. Its interventionist and repressive turn toward Hong Kong
was part of this grand strategic reorientation. This section details the major
power mechanism of global Chinese expansion and how they have been applied
to Hong Kong: (1) economic statecraft (using investment in infrastructure and
key economic sectors to exercise political influence); (2) patron-clientelism (co-
opting local political elites, mobilizing the Chinese diasporic community and
social networks to build grassroots power); (3) symbolic violence (using edu-
cation, media, and public discourses to shape perception and identity).

As more interventions and repressive controls are imposed by Beijing and its
local agents, a process of decolonization from below has emerged in
Hong Kong under Chinese sovereignty. Section 3 traces how Hong Kong’s
postcolonial generations seized the semi-democratic political space and civil
liberty essential to the city’s global financial activities to stage eventful protests
in response to China’s interventions. The result was the flourishing of “local-
ism,” a broad amalgam of political ideas, demands, groups, and tactics advocat-
ning Hong Kongers’ right to democracy and self-determination. It is the story of
a city and its younger generations coming to realize their own political subject-
ivity through reflexive accumulation of collective capacity in an age of global
imagination and action.

Section 4 concludes this Element by locating Hong Kong in a spectrum of
resistance and adaptation to global China in Asia, Africa and Latin America.
What can we learn about the limits and effectiveness of global Chinese power
from the case of Hong Kong?

2 Global China’s Playbook in Hong Kong

A key piece to resolving the Hong Kong puzzle as “the restive frontier of global
China” is Beijing’s interventionist turn toward Hong Kong, spurring popular
resentment and resistance. Before 1997, successive leaderships in China toler-
ated, even exploited, Hong Kong’s unique status as a global borderland. In the
nineteenth century, this rocky island with a deep-water harbor located at the
mouth of the Pearl River Delta in southern China, not far from the transnational
trading port of Canton, attracted the attention of British merchants fighting the
monopoly of the East India Company. Eager to have a free port for European
free trades in China and Southeast Asia, merchant interests began lobbying
London to put down the lion’s paw in Hong Kong, which eventually became
Hong Kong

a British possession at the end of the Opium War in 1842. Commerce, not Christianity or civilization, was the raison d’être of Hong Kong as a crown colony. Tumultuous political upheaval in Mainland China, Japanese occupation, and Korean War notwithstanding, the transnationality of Hong Kong’s “middleman capitalism” (Hui 1999) remained a constant till this day. Its role as a regional center amidst vast, centuries-old trading networks for both intra-Asian and Asian–Western commerce during war and peace served the interests of many stakeholders and was the material foundation for its unique political and social formation.

It was a major historical irony that pragmatism, not ideology, drove the development of this frontier city between British colonialism and Chinese communism after World War II. Historians concur that Hong Kong remained a British colony for as long as it did largely at Beijing’s desire. At several critical junctures, Chinese Communist leaders could have easily recovered Hong Kong by force with little British resistance. But they did not. Whatever nationalistic impulse might have existed eventually yielded to pragmatic concerns for the paramount and unique advantages Hong Kong’s colonial status would bring to the Mainland. Mao and his top officials in Hong Kong on the eve of their victory in 1949 declared China’s intention not to retake Hong Kong by force or to destabilize the colony by agitating for its return (Roberts 2016: 21–22). A glaring contradiction to their revolutionary rhetoric of anti-colonialism, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adhered to a policy of peaceful coexistence when it came to Hong Kong (and Macao), preferring to make “holistic and long term use” of the colony (Carroll 2021). Tellingly, at the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1967, when militant Red Guards and some factions in the People’s Liberation Army agitated a military take-over of Hong Kong, Premier Zhou Enlai issued directives to prohibit escalation of clashes at the Sino–British border. Even in peaceful times, China could have wreaked havoc in Hong Kong’s socioeconomic life by flooding the territory with refugees or blocking the supply of foodstuff and water across the border.

Britain shared the same pragmatic calculations as China did in retaining Hong Kong as a formal crown colony, even at a time when the British Empire was rapidly shrinking and ex-colonies gained independence in the wake of World War II:

Losing Hong Kong would hurt British prestige in Southeast Asia, especially after the independence of India, Burma, and Ceylon. Keeping it could be a good way to get support from the United States. With an insurgency in Malaya and the impending Communist victory in China, holding on to Hong Kong became of great psychological importance.” (Carroll 2021: 47)