



## Introduction

# The China-Hong-Kong Crisis: Problems, Opportunities and Alternative Futures

## Special Symposium for the Journal of Futures Studies

Marcus T. Anthony<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of Futures Studies at the College of Global Talents, and, Coordinator Global Talent 2050, Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai, China

The possible futures of China are crucial to the futures of the world. Currently the second-largest economy on the planet, China is soon likely to pass the USA as the world's biggest financial hub. It is logical to assume that its growing influence will continue to expand beyond the economic and political into multiple fields and domains. Already the People's Republic is making a notable impact in regard to education and research; AI; space flight; quantum communications; bio-technologies, renewable energies and environmental protection; and much more. There are other areas of influence which might be deemed more problematic, including influence on news and media, internet surveillance, citizen control (social credit), and impact on foreign universities.

China is also a country (or civilization) with significant historical instability. Most recently, widespread protests in Hong Kong have created great anxiety in that Special Administrative Region and in mainland China. The impact of this dispute has extended offshore, as seen with further clashes between the two sides in public spaces and universities in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. The escalation of the US-China trade war and arrival of COVID-19 situates the crisis in an already unstable broader dynamic.

The key focus of this special symposium is to reevaluate the futures of mainland China, Hong Kong and the globe in light of the current crisis in Hong Kong. This includes all or any of political, economic, social, educational and psycho-spiritual futures.

The situation in China and its southern territory is complicated by an effective crisis in democratic systems in western countries and elsewhere, and this is one domain in which the Hong Kong instability may have great impact. For example, in the USA there has been the recent unrest and protests surrounding the murder of George Floyd. More than a few political protesters have burned the US flag as a symbol of oppression; while some of those in Hong Kong bear it as a symbol of hope and freedom. Many protesters in Hong Kong have also adopted Pepe the Frog as a symbolic mascot of freedom and rebellion, an image ironically condemned as racist and oppressive by some mainstream media in western countries. Further, there are no official leaders in the Hong Kong movement, making the situation highly problematic.

Symbols and their meanings are thus both being appropriated and manipulated for political gain, by a wide variety of stakeholders. Agreed meaning appears to be disintegrating. How is meaning and value to be made amidst such confusion?

There are certain parallels with the Hong Kong protests to be noted in the yellow vest protests in France, as well as populist, anti-globalist revolts such as Brexit and populist election results in the USA, Australia, Europe, Brazil the Philippines and other countries. The inequitable distribution of the fruits of globalism may be a commonality here. Yet there are also notable differences amongst all these movements. One further commonality is that the spirit of rebellion appears to be becoming more widespread across the globe. The aforementioned crisis of symbol and meaning is occurring alongside a breakdown of an agreed-upon recipe for social and political "progress" both amongst intellectuals and the broader public. This has parallels within China, where the strong conservatism of Xi Jinping appears to be in conflict with the need to build a "smart" China with innovative schools and universities, corporations, and entrepreneurs.

Given this broad problematique, there are several key questions which are addressed by contributors to this

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [marcus.anthony@cgt.bitzh.edu.cn](mailto:marcus.anthony@cgt.bitzh.edu.cn) (M. T. Anthony).

symposium.

- What are the possible, probable and preferred futures which might emerge for China and Hong Kong from this crisis: political, economic, social, educational etc.?
- What are the causes, overt and subtle, of the unrest in Hong Kong?
- How can affected countries, regions and the global community bring people together, promote peace and resolve the Hong Kong crisis at this time of unrest?
- What are the implications of this dispute for the future of democracy (including freedom of expression, media freedom, internet freedom, rule of law etc.) in China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and across the globe?
- How can the ideals of democracy, social justice, individual autonomy, responsibility, creativity and critical thinking (seeming requirements for developed economies in the twenty-first century) be balanced with China's and other regions' needs for social and political stability?

This special symposium features two articles and three critical essays.

Ed Niedbalski has written an article entitled, "The Hong Kong protests and Tianxia: the origins of modern conceptions of Chinese identity and the struggle for a different future." He finds that the protests in Hong Kong emerge from differences in worldviews and descriptive metaphors regarding mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, in particular on the issues of Chinese nationalism and ethnic identity. Various parties in Hong Kong and Taiwan have now developed distinct worldviews, with increasingly divergent futures visions for their regions, and distinct from that found in mainland China. Niedbalski argues that the One China policy reiterates the ancient concept of 'Tianxia', which attempts to reintegrate all Chinese lands and peoples under a 'Greater China' vision. The author then employs Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis to explore the emerging/diverging metaphors of ethno-nationalist futures visions found in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

I also contribute an article which attempts to reframe the concept of power and empowerment, examining the Hong Kong situation from the protestors' perspectives. In this article "Embodied presence, cognitive responsibility and dissent in Hong Kong," I argue that a sense of empowerment can be framed internally, as the ability to control thoughts, feelings, and reframe one's relationship to the world. The paper introduces the concept of responsible active citizenship, founded upon embodied presence and cognitive responsibility. The argument posited is that the enhancement of a sense of personal agency could potentially form part of a long-term response amongst Hong Kong dissenters, as an underlying cognitive structure.

Reflecting upon a January 2020 pilot workshop in Hong Kong, Anna Simpson proposes in her essay "Futures for dialogue in Hong Kong's protests: exploring participatory futures to support civil engagement," that futures thinking can help initiate constructive dialogue within parties before mediation and negotiation between parties is initiated. She finds that trust is crucial, helping to support the discussion of personal values, and that having a diversity of participants helps facilitate a wider range of scenarios and strategies. The potential to reframe perspectives and the importance of a participatory process are two important synergies Simpson identifies which can help futures processes and conflict resolution techniques work together.

In the essay, "Hong Kong's hope: that its future remains its (unlikely) present," Jennifer Anne Eagleton argues that Beijing appears to be orchestrating a future where Hong Kong will be assimilated into the mainland, in contradiction to the promised high degree of autonomy outlined in the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. Yet resistant elements in Hong Kong seem to prefer a future that maintains that greater autonomy. Eagleton finds that such dissenters in Hong Kong see the city as being "apart" from China, rather than "a part" of it, which underpins the inherent conflict with Beijing.

In his essay, "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away: the Hong Kong/China crisis in the nation-state system context," Timothy E. Dolan argues that before the development of the nation-state system, China had already developed Confucianism, which provided a collective sense of being Chinese. Today, China still has to contend with longstanding and modern ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions, as well as the challenge of Western influence. Dolan inverts Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis to examine the current situation in Hong Kong, while also considering the tension between globalization and tribalization. The author invites consideration of a resolution in which Hong Kong is integrated into the mainland amidst a greater transformational global consciousness.

This symposium on the Hong Kong-mainland China dynamic has brought to the fore several salient points.

One distinction which can arguably be better clarified is that between governments and populations. While both the Communist Party of China and Hong Kong SAR government tend to put forward policies with evolving but consistent structure, the populations of both regions cannot be spoken of with such certainty. In Hong Kong for example, while there appears to be the development of a strong local identity and worldview divergent from the mainland, it remains a city divided, with a sizable pro-Beijing minority - perhaps twenty percent, if representation in the District Councils can be taken as a guide (Pro-Beijing camp, 2020). Referring to something akin to “Hong Kong’s intention” is thus an over-simplification, one typically lost in much of the reporting from foreign media.

While all of our contributors have a strong interest in the region, and several live in either the mainland or the SAR, none is of Chinese ancestry. Missing therefore is an ethnic Chinese and/or Hong Kong perspective on the issue. We could only speculate how these perspectives might be presented if such voices had contributed. Western-centric perspectives are thus over-represented in this symposium.

Having said this, several contributors have attempted to present a broader historical perspective on the conflict, most notably Niedbalski and Dolan. Both have referred to the idea of a broader Chinese ethno-nationalist identity which has emerged from several thousand of years of cultural, historical and political development, including the roles that internal disturbances and foreign interference - including colonization - have played.

All contributors are in agreement that the immediate cause of the unrest is the fear of many Hong Kongers that their freedoms and rights are being rapidly eroded, as well as the sense that the One Country, Two Systems agreement is not being adequately implemented, including the promised half century of effective autonomy. Others have referred to economic and social factors, foreign influence/interference and the anti-globalization movement.

The broader evolution of human civilization towards a more integral or evolved consciousness has also been alluded to in Dolan’s article as well as mine, as being a long-term driver of change. Further, Simpson and I both acknowledge the need for introspection, with Simpson outlining a specific dialogic process which could potentially be employed by opposing parties.

All contributors refer to or imply a preferred future where Hong Kong can retain its effective high level of autonomy, and where the needs of the apparent majority to retain its unique identity can be met. Yet it must be noted that the overall tone is not an optimistic one in terms of this outcome, with the disparity in the power of the Hong Kong protesters versus the CCP leviathan seemingly the main concern, along with recent hardline policy moves by the Beijing authorities. The future development of a more open dialogue by Beijing or the SAR government with dissenters in Hong Kong might create more optimism. Perhaps protestors in Hong can bring attention to creating that outcome.

I give thanks to the authors, peer reviewers and the *Journal of Futures Studies* for the opportunity to present this special symposium. Though at the time of writing the COVID-19 issue has overshadowed the issue of unrest in Hong Kong, it is an issue that will likely quickly re-emerge and continue to impact the region and the globe for years to come.

## References

Pro-Beijing camp (Hong Kong), (2020). Retrieved August 10, 2020 from [https://www.en.m.wikipedia..org/wiki/Pro-Beijing\\_camp\\_\(Hong\\_Kong\)](https://www.en.m.wikipedia..org/wiki/Pro-Beijing_camp_(Hong_Kong)).

