



Essay

Hong Kong's Unlikely Hope: That Its Future remains Its Past

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Abstract

The thinker Slavoj Žižek (1989, pp. 274-5) tells us that the future is the “supreme object of ideology” and that it is “without form, shape or color: it demands yet exceeds all figuration”. Beijing seems to be privileging a future where Hong Kong is increasingly assimilated into the mainland despite promising a high degree of autonomy as part of the “One Country, Two Systems” framework; Hong Kong however privileges a future that maintains this high degree of autonomy. The Extradition Bill of 2019, which led to massive protests, was seen by a broad section of the community as a “tipping point” in Hong Kong’s full integration into China. In this essay, the discussion revolves around the date of 2047, the end point of “50 years no change” to Hong Kong’s systems as promised in its Basic Law and how the young, the CE, and Xi Jinping see the future. It will be argued that critical elements in Hong Kong see the city as being apart from China, rather than a part of it, a situation that China feels should no longer be the case.

Keywords

Autonomy, One Country, Second System, Worst Case Scenario, Maintenance of the Present, 2047, Change, Extradition

The thinker Slavoj Žižek (1989, pp. 274-5) tells us that the future is the “supreme object of ideology” and that it is “without form, shape or color: it demands yet exceeds all figuration”. Consequently, he sees discourse about the future as a necessary site for conceptualizing and using this “virtual space” for “privileging” certain futures. Beijing seems to be privileging a future where Hong Kong is increasingly assimilated into the mainland despite promising a high degree of autonomy as part of the “One Country, Two Systems” framework; Hong Kong is privileging a future that maintains this high degree of autonomy. The Extradition Bill of 2019, which led to massive protests, was seen by a broad section of the community as a “tipping point” in Hong Kong’s full integration into China. In the essay below, it will be argued that critical elements in Hong Kong see the city as being *apart* from China, rather than a *part* of it (Bajpai, 2019), a situation that China felt should no longer be the case.

The Discourse on Hong Kong’s Future

As noted by Jaworski, Fitzgerald, and Morris, (2003, 2004) and Jaworski, A., Fitzgerald, R., Morris, D., and Galinsky, D. (2003), a significant amount of news items refer to future events. The media tends to construct “reality” for the public and postulates about situations that may never happen. Neiger (2007) examined the “discourse of the future” as used by the Israeli press. He examined headlines in Israeli newspapers over a period of 18 years (1985-2003) and found that approximately 70 percent of the main headlines dealt not only with past events but with future ones as well. A discourse of the future not only gives a framework for how to think about future change, it also impacts on how people deal with it (Neiger, 2007). Neiger found that the “discourse of the future” involved four various possible futures: the predictable future, informed assessment, speculative assessment, and the conjectured future.

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The *conjectured future* has a “very high level of speculation” as such discourse has cultural and political importance because “it provides fertile ground for releasing trial balloons, magnifying threats, creating solidarity, and justifying acts of government” (Neiger, 2007, p. 310), involving “worst-case scenarios”, and “what would have happened if...” which relate to the cultural and political norms of the location. The potential for a “worst-case scenario” is used by various institutional bodies to assess possible risk (Candlin & Crichton, 2011, p. 4) by the presence of a known “deficit”, which has the possibility of worsening.

The “worst-case scenario” is often presented to the Hong Kong people by those in power (be they government figures or business tycoons) if they do not support official policy. This was the case with the Sino-British Joint Declaration (JD). The Hong Kong people were told to “take it or leave it” otherwise the future maintenance of their systems could not be guaranteed (Hong Kong Assessment Office, 1984; Eagleton, 2012). This was a joining of a “discourse of a (potential) future” and a “discourse of fear” – witness the “death of Hong Kong” articles prior to the signing of the JD and afterwards (Kraar & McGowan, 1995; Richburg, 2018; Wu, 2018; Ng, 2020). This predicted “death” refers to the loss of what made Hong Kong different from China, such as freedom of the press, the rule of law, and an independent judiciary.

Hong Kong has always been obsessed by dates, and thus its future. In the 1970s, with Britain’s 99-year lease over most of Hong Kong due to expire in 1997, London worried about the colony’s future as investment was bound to dwindle over time, as would Hong Kong’s legal, economic, and social systems unless an accord was reached with China. Eventually, Beijing agreed in the JD (1984), and later, the Basic Law (1990) that Hong Kong’s systems would remain unchanged for 50 years after its return to Chinese sovereignty on July 1st, 1997, under a policy known as “One Country, Two Systems”.

The result was a 13-year-long discussion (from 1984 to 1st July 1997) of what Hong Kong would be like in the future; the desired future was where the structures and systems of 1984 would be maintained. This desired future was thus the preservation of the (then) present Hong Kong; in other words, a Hong Kong that wanted its present to be its future - one legal expert called it a “snapshot of 1984” (Hoo, 2008). This “maintenance of the present” was the result of the fear of how this “marriage” between two radically different ideologies, and legal and social systems would work, given the relatively recent chaos of the Cultural Revolution and the crackdown in Tiananmen Square. However, even after 1997, despite the guarantees of a “high degree of autonomy” and the “ultimate aim” of universal suffrage, Hong Kong still had another date to consider: 2047, when the 50 years of “no change” was up.

So What Does “50 Years No Change” Actually Mean?

Hong Kong is, in 2020, near the mid-point of this 50-year period. This “50 years” is the period considered by Deng Xiaoping to be the time that China would “catch up” to Western developed countries economically (China Daily, 2019). However, on occasion, this 50-year-timeframe has been taken metaphorically to mean “a long time” or “maybe never”. In a speech at a meeting with the members of the Basic Law Drafting Committee on 16 April 1987, Deng Xiaoping said:

...If the [opening up] policy is successful, yielding the desired results [increase in GDP] in the 50-year period after 1997, we shall have little reason to change it then. That is why I say that after the Motherland is reunified under the “one country, two systems” formula, our policy toward Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan will not change for 50 years and that it will remain unchanged even beyond that period. (Deng, 1987; China Daily, 2019)

The colonial era cliché “borrowed place, borrowed time” (Hughes, 1976) contained an element of truth as Hong Kong was always aware of the clock ticking. Before 1997, nervous citizens counted down to the end of British rule. After 1997, citizens started to live their lives, thinking that 2047 was still far off and optimistically hoped something better might happen in the interim; for example, China, with its open-door policy would somehow lead it to become more democratic (Eagleton, 2012).

1997 to 2018: Hinting Towards a Potential Future?

The “One Country, Two Systems” system has been described as being both a “wedge” and a “bridge” between the two radically different systems (Wesley-Smith, 1996). Hong Kong would have a “high degree of autonomy” and “enjoy executive, legislative and independent judicial power” (Article 2 of the Basic Law) and that the “socialist system and policies shall not be practised in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region” (Article 5 of the Basic Law).¹ After 1997, there was a concerted effort to show that Hong Kong had always been a part of China from the earliest times. For example, the permanent exhibition “The Hong Kong Story” in the Hong Kong Museum of History highlights this connection from a small amount of archaeological evidence (Eagleton, 2004).

While there were early controversies such as the Right of Abode saga and interpretation of the Basic law in 2004 (Huang & Huang, 2016; Key Points, 2000), it was after 2003 and the withdrawal of Article 23 security legislation – a piece of legislation that many considered “undermines the rule of law”, “ruins the ‘One Country, Two Systems’”, and “turns the public into enemies”, that the mainland started to keep closer eyes on Hong Kong.

Certain controversies from 2012 have caused many to think more closely once again about what Hong Kong’s future would look like, making the phrase “50 years no change” seem hollow. The major ones have been the push for “national education” in 2012; the abduction of booksellers critical of Beijing in 2015 (Chou & Siu, 2016); and the snatching of a politically connected tycoon in 2017 (Haas, 2017). Furthermore, the Hong Kong government has intensified pressure on the city’s democracy movement, prosecuting activists, blocking opposition politicians from running for election, and banning an independence-promoting political party in 2018 (Cheng, 2018). The refusal to renew the visa of *Financial Times*’ Victor Mallet, president of the Foreign Correspondent’s Club in 2018 after a representative of a pro-independence party spoke at a club luncheon was seen as a tactic borrowed directly from the mainland, which often uses journalists’ visas as a means of control (Lahiri, 2018). All these particular incidents relate to areas where Hong Kong and the mainland differ: in ideas of what could or could not be said, and who had the right to say it. Why did these situations occur at this time? This can be laid at the door of the growing economic power of China on the world stage.

Hong Kong, once the “rich cousin” benevolently helping its poor relations next door, was no longer seen as such. Both fiscally and physically, the “poor relation” is largely poor no more and thus there is less need for Hong Kong to be used as its “gateway” (Prasad, 2019).

Fiscally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI – the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road) is a development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 involving infrastructure development and investments in nearly 70 countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa (Lo, 2018). In addition, the Pearl River Delta is now “the Greater Bay Area” – the Chinese government’s scheme to link the cities of Hong Kong, Macau, and others within a certain radius into an integrated economic and business hub. This has been likened to “a political manifesto masquerading as a business plan” (Heaver, 2020).

Also disappearing are physical borders with the placement of a mainland customs station within the high-speed train terminus at West Kowloon, in which a portion of Hong Kong land was ceded back to become part of the Mainland – and where technically a person can now be charged with crime from the Mainland’s jurisdiction (Feng, 2017; Li, 2018). In addition, the newly constructed Zhuhai-Macau-Hong Kong mega bridge was largely seen as a “white elephant” integration project since its current and projected use vis-à-vis the cost of its construction do not match up (Yip, 2018).

All these can be seen as erosions of freedoms on one hand, and integration and erasure of the physical border on the other – the width and length of both the metaphorical/physical bridge has widened, while the metaphorical wedge continues to be gradually chipped away. Why has there been this speeding up of integration in the 2010s? Previously, the distinct political systems, and even their occasional antagonisms, could not overcome the complementary economic profiles, comparative advantages, and relative access to capital and technology that China needed from Hong Kong. Hong Kong in the 1970s, traded up into the value chain into financial services that the Mainland still did not have. This meant that social and political contradictions could be put on hold (Eagleton, 2015), until some mainland cities could bypass Hong Kong to a certain extent.² However these inherent social/political contradictions have become more apparent, and alongside the delayed universal suffrage, and the seeming lack of warmth for their ancestral land, became increasingly obvious.

The Extradition Bill of 2019

The Extradition Bill of 2019 could be seen as a “tipping” point towards further integration with the ideology of the “one country” and an implied future as one country rather than one with two systems.

The Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill (Legislative Council, 2019) was a proposed bill regarding extradition so that arrangements for mutual legal assistance could be made between Hong Kong and any place outside Hong Kong. It was to establish a mechanism for transfers of fugitives not only for Taiwan, but also for mainland China and Macau, which are currently excluded in the existing laws. The introduction of the bill caused widespread criticism from the legal profession, journalist organizations, business groups, and foreign governments fearing the erosion of Hong Kong’s legal system and its built-in safeguards. It was feared that China would, through this bill, be able to entrap and stifle voices of political dissent in Hong Kong, despite reassurances from Chief Executive Carrie Lam that the final decision-making about rendition would rely on her (Dapiran, 2020).

This Bill was seen as an affront to the rule of law, as the latter was designated the “bedrock” and “foundation” of Hong Kong society (Eagleton, 2012; Cheng & Eagleton, 2019), because once the people were on the other side of the border nothing could be guaranteed. (Davis, 2019). The government said that protesters were threatening the rule of law, while the protesters said the opposite, that it was actually the government that was threatening the rule of law (Duhalde, 2019; Hamlett, 2019).

Talking of 2047 and Beyond

Nearly every protest in Hong Kong to date has been over government policies which render Hong Kong subservient to the mainland. With the Extradition Bill came talk of 2047, and the three major “voices” discussing the future of Hong Kong were the young people of the city, the Chief Executive Carrie Lam, and Xi Jinping, the president of China. The young protested because they *were* the future, but the chief executive and President Xi Jinping hinted that the future would not be a good one. The “hint” was contained in Article 18 of the Basic Law and implied in the speeches of the chief executive and President Xi Jinping.³

The young

Many of the young, who were the main drivers of the protests—and who would be middle-aged in 2047—saw the freedoms they currently enjoy as being incompatible with China’s political system. “In 2047, our freedom will become nothing in Hong Kong,” one such youth said, and “That’s why we need to go out to the street and tell the government what we’re thinking” (Marlow, 2020).

The young people of Hong Kong could be called the “transitional generation” (Wong & Ng, 2020) born on the cusp of 1997 or slightly later. They were “the first generation to grow up after the end of British rule, but before Chinese rule had really taken hold” (Wong & Ng, 2020). Despite the early transitional years of the SAR going relatively smoothly, the city was trying to work out its new identity as part of China, rather than a British colony, and these young people were caught in between, so they also had no “fixed” identity as either “British” or as “Chinese”. Over time that identity seems to have solidified into something more distinctly different from the idea that China would have wanted. For, as one 20-something Hongkonger stated, “I am from a city owned by a country that I don’t belong to”; this is despite attempts to foster more national pride in the young, such as national education. For as she said:

I grew up learning that my city’s core values were rooted in the freedoms granted by the Basic Law, including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of press and publication. Myself and many people from Hong Kong take pride in being somewhat politically separated from China, which is governed by the Chinese Communist Party that notoriously censors the internet and imprisons dissident people in China. Many citizens even call themselves “Hongkonger,” which the *Oxford Dictionary* later adopted in 2014. (Hui, 2019)

The Hong Kong government and others kept reiterating their adherence to the rule of law, an independent judiciary and free speech. However, the young saw that the events mentioned earlier in this essay seemed to favour

Beijing's point of view and that only lip service was being paid to these aspects touted as Hong Kong's "core values" and what they desired for the future.

One student, who had interned at the Palace Museum in Beijing in 2017, stated why an individual can love the culture but not its politics:

On the surface, the government might think I'm an easy target to be moulded into a patriotic youth – that is by their standard – because of my interest in Chinese culture...But I see my interest and my political position as separate. My love for Chinese culture doesn't make me trust or like the Chinese legal and political system more. (Lo, 2019)

Since the umbrella movement of 2014 when central Hong Kong Island was partially blocked for 79 days, the local governments have tried to make the youth optimistic about Hong Kong's future. But the evidence presented here suggests that the youth are not convinced that the future is rosy, nor that they need to love their country unconditionally.

The film *10 Years*, a 2015 independent film, garnered attention for its dystopian critique of Hong Kong's future, in particular "mainlandization", and perhaps drew on the fears of many of the youth (Fang, 2017). The film, which was a series of vignettes, offered a vision of the semi-autonomous territory in the year 2025, with human rights and freedoms gradually diminishing. One vignette illustrated the increasing dominance of Mandarin; in another, a young hardliner supporter for Hong Kong independence becomes the first to be convicted under the National Security Law and dies during a hunger strike in prison. The third vignette has an unknown person self-immolate in front of the British Consulate-General in Admiralty. In the last vignette, Sam's grocery shop is targeted by Youth Guards, a Red Guards-like group, since he labels his Hong Kong eggs as "local eggs," while the word "local" is censored in Hong Kong.

Produced on a shoestring budget, the film struck a nerve. It encapsulated the many sensitivities in Hong Kong about the dilution of its culture and the seeming favouritism towards all things Mainland. Regular cinemas did not want to show the film because of its political nature, but free street screenings were held all over the city.

A popular slogan during the 2019 protests was "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of our Times." First used in 2016 for a local land issue, it drew attention to the wishes of many protesters for "Hong Kong to become a Hong Kong for Hongkongers". In contrast, former Chief Executive of Hong Kong Tung Chee-hwa, Pro-Beijing camp political parties, editor of *Global Times* Hu Xijin, and the Xinhua News Agency, all considered these slogans to involve Hong Kong independence. This tested the principle of "One Country, Two Systems" and reminded China of its past when it was "carved up" by imperialist powers. Talk of independence reminded Beijing of the humiliating past when they had to give up a portion of their land to the British. The past could not be their future.

The chief executive

Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, like other chief executives before her, emphasized the importance of "One Country, Two Systems" for Hong Kong's prosperity. Like the young, Lam also stressed the maintenance of this framework in post-2047 Hong Kong, something she thinks the young did not respect (Sum & Lam, 2020) as shown in the following:

My view is this: as long as we persist with the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, push forward the implementation of "One Country, Two Systems" and have a full understanding and implementation of the principle... then we have adequate reason to believe that "One Country, Two Systems" will be implemented smoothly and in the long term, and it will not change after 2047. (Cheng, 2020)

The trouble is this "understanding" of the "One Country, Two Systems" is not elaborated. The "maintenance" of the framework is said to be a given goal, but what does this "smooth implementation" mean? Implied is a future envisaged from the central government's view (i.e., the "correct understanding").

Despite promises of continuance of the One Country, Two Systems, many consider there has already been "change" and that more change was likely to come in the future. The young were blamed their "lack of understanding" of the principle and the Basic Law, so they "may cause the situation that they are worried about" (Cheng, 2020). Thus, there have been frequent education campaigns about the correct meaning of the "rule of law"

since 1997 (Marlow, 2020). It seems there is a battle over what “rule of law” should mean, and since many of the city’s lawyers have taken part or have been sympathetic to the 2019 protests for just the same reason, the implication is that legal professionals are also “misunderstanding” what the rule of law entails. It is the Hong Kong and the Beijing governments who define what Hong Kong’s future should be.

It is hard to find direct commentary on the issue of 2047 and Hong Kong’s future, but government policy focuses on “development” of the economy and thus closer cooperation and integration with the Mainland (see the annual policy addresses). Rather than political reform, the Hong Kong government wants Hong Kong to be: an “economic” rather than a “political” city (Eagleton, 2012).

President Xi Jinping

Praise has been constantly heaped on Macau, the other Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong’s sister, SAR by President Xi Jinping. On the 20th anniversary of the Macau SAR’s founding in late December 2019, Xi expressed faith in the “One Country, Two Systems principle as practiced in Macau in four ways:

1. Macau has worked to safeguard the sovereignty and security of the country;
2. Macau always strives in the right direction; its citizens recognize that “one country” are the premise and precondition of the “two systems”;
3. Macau people had always kept the country’s overall interests in mind, and;
4. Macau residents had the “tradition of loving the Mainland as well as a strong sense of national identity, belonging and pride” (based on Siu & Cheung, 2019a, 2019b).

While he made no mention of Hong Kong, these words were widely seen as a rebuke of Hong Kong in the light of previous remarks made during the protests (Zhou, 2019). It seemed obvious that Xi was deliberately contrasting his strong approval of Macau with his “silent disapproval” of Hong Kong’s relationship with the motherland since its 1997 return to Chinese sovereignty. The following relates to the points made in Xi’s speech:

1. The call for “self-determination” and for “independence” by some in Hong Kong touched a sensitive nerve as this was seen as a threat to “sovereignty”, always a sore point with the Chinese Communist Party (Point 1 above). Protesters seem to focus on the “second system”:
2. You cannot have a “second system” without the “one country”, and the latter should take priority (Point 2);
3. Hong Kong seemed to be more focused on their own affairs rather than Beijing’ (Point 3); calling themselves “Hongkongers” rather than “Chinese”; and saying the oath of office wrongly, meant that potential legislators would not uphold the “One Country, Two Systems”;
4. Macau did not seem to have this kind of conflict (Point 4); furthermore, Macau was largely protest-free.

Basically, Macau presented to Hong Kong, the future scenario envisaged it by Beijing – a model future so to speak.

President Xi Jinping said that Hong Kong’s chief executive has stood firm on the principle of “one country, two systems”, and has Beijing’s backing, but warns she must tackle “deep-rooted conflicts and problems” to make the situation more to Beijing’s liking, and so that the “One Country, Two Systems” would continue to be followed in Hong Kong in the future (Cheung, Wong, & Lam, 2019). There is an inherent threat that the system may be downgraded if political chaos continues.

Furthermore, the recent replacement of Liaison staff and the appointment of Xi-friendly hardliners to staff the Liaison Office, is again an indication that Beijing would likely “get tough” on Hong Kong in the future. This means “reducing of the direct influence of younger specialized career bureaucrats trained to work in the ‘Two Systems’ bureaucratic environment created by Beijing’s original promises about a ‘high degree’ of post-colonial autonomy” (Pepper, 2020).

Xi Jinping said that China “sincerely hopes for the best” for Hong Kong, urging the city to strive for stability, and in his New Year’s Eve speech on 29th December 2019, Xi said the city could only thrive if the unrest ended (Hu, 2019). The problems, he implied, lie in contradictions with the people rather than the system itself which was always seen as “Hong Kong’s guiding light” (Siu & Cheung, 2019b; Eagleton, 2012). Therefore, Xi argues that the people need to change to secure a prosperous future.

Conclusion

So nearly halfway through its 50-year countdown, Hong Kong is at an existential crossroads. Come 2047, the city will likely continue to be more closely assimilated with the rest of China in a limited “One Country, Two System” scenario. Although the potential “surrender arrangements” of the Extradition Bill are now off the table, based on the current trajectory, the popular lament “that Hong Kong will become just another Chinese city” is not out of the question. It seems the future conceptualized for Hong Kong does not lie with the average person on the street. The “virtual space” for contesting the future seems to be narrowing down to one dictated to by Beijing (the “one country”). The future of the “second system” as a real “second system” with a promised “high degree of autonomy” is delegitimized. Thus the discourse of Hong Kong’s future is a clash of diametrically opposite futures. And to paraphrase Zizek’s concept of the future cited at the start of this essay, Hong Kong’s future seems to have a certain “form, shape or colour”. And that “form, shape or colour” seems to lie in Beijing’s hands rather than Hong Kong’s. And with the introduction of the National Security Law on July 1st this year, Hong Kong’s fears for its future were well-founded.

Notes

- 1- In the Basic Law, what “socialist system” means is never spelled out. The quote above is the exact wording in Article 5.
- 2- Some disagree; see Sin, 2019; Patterson, 2020).
- 3- The following is a portion of Article 18 (italics added for emphasis): “In the event that the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress decides to declare a state of war or, by *reason of turmoil within the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region which endangers national unity or security and is beyond the control of the government of the Region*, decides that the Region is in a state of emergency, the Central People’s Government may issue an order applying the relevant national laws in the Region.

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