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The Hong Kong Protests and Tianxia: The Ethno-Nationalist and Historical Origins of Modern and Emerging Visions of Chinese Identity and the Struggle for a Different Future

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Abstract

The protests which erupted in Hong Kong in 2019 are indicative of the emerging differences in worldviews and descriptive metaphors as they pertain to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan on the issues of Chinese nationalism and ethnic identity. The people of Hong Kong and Taiwan have come to view themselves as having distinct worldviews and growing divergent futures visions for their homelands and regions which are separate from China's. The 'One China' policy is on the other hand the modern iteration of the ancient concept of 'Tianxia', which serves as the historical, philosophical, and ethno-nationalist basis for attempting to reintegrate all Chinese lands and peoples under one government as the fulfilment of a 'Greater China' vision. The desire for a different future separate from the control of China has become the basis and symbolic driver of the Hong Kong protests of 2019-20. Causal Layered Analysis will be utilized to explore emerging/diverging metaphors of ethno-nationalist futures visions of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Keywords

Tianxia, Hong Kong Protests, Taiwan, Identity, Ethno-nationalism, Futures, One-China Policy, Causal Layered Analysis

Introduction

The protests in Hong Kong beginning in March 2019 and ramping up in intensity in June, appear to about more than another 'wave' in a cycle of protests focused in this important city in recent years. Despite their initial similarities with other recent protests, particularly those which occurred in 2014 referred to as the 'Umbrella Movement', as they were about the demand for democratic process and representation in the city, which Beijing was accused of attempting to undermine (McCarthy, 2014). Despite the use of tear gas and other violent measures, the protests remained mostly peaceful throughout the Umbrella Movement, the umbrella itself a seemingly peace-imbued symbol, contrasted with the image of police batons and riot gear (Aljazeera, March, 2020). Something sets these on-going protests apart from previous ones; their tone, intensity, and length have raised questions which resonate down to the core of China/Hong Kong relations, and more profoundly, to the basic metaphors of Chinese ethno-national identity itself.

This article will begin by exploring deeper meanings embedded within the recent protest movement in Hong Kong in relation to the historical and socio-cultural contexts and deep myths which inform and underpin beliefs about Chinese cultural identity, examining the important splits in the monolithic imaginary of China, as expressed in the concept of 'Tianxia' (天下). Perspectives on Hong Kong identity as a separate and distinct people and emerging nation with dreams of independence from the monolith of China will be the focus of this papers as will the perspective of Taiwan will also be discussed, as the proposed bill, if it had passed, would have included Taiwan.

The Futures method 'Causal Layered Analysis' (CLA) will be utilized to build an outline of the historical and contemporary issues of Chinese cultural identity, allowing for an exploration of possible futures of this topic that

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are finding new forms of expression as the current situation in Hong Kong has revealed. Surface level media representation examines the aspirations and systemic political intentions of the Chinese government as part of their long-term project for their country. These policies are informed by their worldview, which endeavours to ‘reunite’ all Chinese lands and people into ‘One China’ (as is the official policy and the guiding principle). These policies demonstrate that they are informed by the myth/metaphor of ‘Tianxia’, ‘All Under Heaven’ as the guiding metaphor beneath the ‘One China’ policy, and is the epistemological basis for the current political ideology driving the Beijing governments’ policies vis-à-vis Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Conversely, a CLA of the opposing viewpoints of protesters in Hong Kong as well as for Taiwan will be constructed and discussed in order to give voice to an emerging dichotomy between those who envision ‘One China, Two systems’, and those who would see a different, divergent future for Hong Kong and Taiwan. This paper intends to show that the viewpoints and anger being expressed in the Hong Kong protests can be shown to be a manifestation of resistance to Chinese dominance, and represent a turning point in the search for a coherent voice—a voice that dares to dream of independence and the right to guide their own future, even if that future is in contradiction to those of the government in Beijing. The possibility of ‘Many Chinas’ will be discussed, and an outline of the beliefs held by the people of Hong Kong (and Taiwan) in their resistance to the dominance of Beijing and their One China policy and narrative will be presented.

The Age of Protests: Hong Kong and Global Protest Movements

The 2019-20 protests in Hong Kong have been compared with other recent protests and socio-political upheavals across the world, as though they are a regionalized manifestation of a wider global phenomenon (McPhee, 2019). Social unrest and political upheaval in other parts of the world have garnered international media attention. Some have been directly inspired by those in Hong Kong (Yang, 2019). Events such as ‘Brexit’, the election of Donald Trump, the overthrown government in Bolivia, protests in Chile, the Yellow Vest protests in France, Catalan separatists in Spain; these and the on-going protests in Hong Kong have been characterized as an expression of a similar, greater, underlying movement or expression of feelings which are taking hold in an increasing connected—yet somehow increasingly divisive—world. The voicing of grievances and social exclusion on a variety of issues, ranging from climate change, political freedoms/independence movements, corruption, cost of living/public services, social and economic inequalities, have been the key topics identified as the basis of these movements (bbc.com, 2019a; bbc.com, 2019a; Hsieh, 2019).

Although also having started as peaceful demonstrations against the proposed Extradition bill between China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Yeung, 2019), the Hong Kong protests quickly morphed into something else; they appear to represent a ‘tidal wave’, a breaking point of anger, resentment, paranoia, and fear of things running deeper than the perceived insidiousness of the proposals written into the bill. At the surface, they have been a venting of frustration against undesirable change represented by the proposed bill, yet simultaneously imbued with the demand and hope for preferred change for Hong Kong, and most poignantly, addressing looming uncertainty about the future of Hong Kong itself. The fact that protests have continued even after the full withdrawal of the bill-- a seemingly total victory of the original demands of the protestors-- presents an interesting question: What are the protests about, now that the extradition bill which kicked off the protests is no longer on the table? And were they inherently about something more than the issue of extradition from the start?

Finding a voice: What are the protests about now?

The struggle for a coherent narrative rests on the emerging question of why the protests continued after the proposed ‘Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill’ between the Beijing government, Hong Kong, and Taiwan had been withdrawn and later suspended in early September, having been declared “dead” by chief executive Carrie Lam (SCMP, 2019). The demands of the protestors having been fully conceded to, with no chance of it becoming official policy; the public outcry and protests seemed, on the surface-level, to have achieved their goals. Despite the withdrawal of the extradition bill, protests have continued. A definitive reason for continuing protests has yet to be clearly articulated, causing speculation and discussion as to what those reasons could be.

This article makes the argument that ‘one China, two systems’ policy maintained by the Beijing Government is the systemic level issue which has seen the extradition bill protests continue after its withdrawal. The protests made

obvious the desire of Hong Kong residents to preserve the distinction between systems, and represented a desire to, at a minimum, to maintain the same degree of self-governance and autonomy which they currently do into the foreseeable future. It could further be speculated that the protests embody the boiling over of a long-simmering desire for full Hong Kong Independence. The proposed extradition bill may have been perceived as the latest and most substantial systemic attempt by Beijing to fulfil its long-sought and openly-stated goal of its worldview, which is a future of a fully unified, singular ‘China Dream’—and perhaps the broader dream of Chinese identity itself (Callahan, 2016). The irony is that the nature in which China tried to ‘sneak through’ the legislation may have inadvertently led to the tipping point which will see a full-fledged independence movement in Hong Kong rise from the chaos-racked streets.

Anxieties expressed in these protests shed light on perceived threats from Mainland China, be they in the form of social, political, or economic dominance, and the implications they hold for the futures of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China itself. Issues surrounding Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong residents’ ethnic identities, self-perceptions, and values as distinct and separate societies are politically and culturally significant factors in relations between the three. Self-identity stands as a unique issue among recent protest movements, and represents a much deeper—and much longer-standing issue—than merely the disagreement over the extradition bill and the socio-political ramifications of its passage. The political ‘fragmentations’ between Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have much more to them than political manifestations; this fragmenting represents significant splits in the historically monolithic ‘rock’ that was and is the imagined past and future of Chinese cultural identity, representing (re)assertions of distinctiveness in Western-influenced values and aspirations of independence (Shangbing, 2019). And perhaps most importantly in the contemporary context, the way that monolithic identity as represented in the concept of Tianxia is being applied in contemporary and possible future contexts.

Tianxia and the ‘Great Wall’—Chinese History and Foundational Metaphors of Empire and Identity

China as a singular nation has been a monolithic presence throughout its long and storied history. After its unification in ancient times, having been forged in the primordial fires of a collection of smaller kingdoms, tribes, and ethnic groups, were finally united under one collective country and empire with the founding of the Qin Dynasty in 221 B.C. at the conclusion of the ‘Warring States Period’ under Qin Shi Huang (Rattini, 2019).

The dramatized story of China’s unification in the 2002 film ‘Hero’ (英雄), tells the story of the character called ‘Nameless’ (無名) (depicted by Jet Li), who is sent to assassinate Qin Shi Huang, then King of Qin. He instead allows himself to be killed, knowing that his own death and foregoing of vengeance would end the wars and allow the warring states to become one, unified nation. An interesting element presented in the film was the use of the term and concept ‘Tianxia’, which the character from the film, ‘Broken Sword’ (殘劍) showed to ‘Nameless’ right before setting off towards the capital to assassinate the king. ‘Tianxia’, which was translated as ‘our land’ in the English language translation of the film, but more directly translates to the more commonly accepted iteration of the term as discussed by scholars on the topic, ‘All under heaven’ (Babones, 2017, 2018a,b; Wang, 2019). Qin Shi Huang brought standardizations and uniformity to the newly forged China, creating a uniform Chinese writing system, standardizing weights and measures, created a centralized administration of civil and military affairs, and the building of roads, canals, and castles (Müller, n.d.; Rattini, 2019; Katz, 2017). These actions, in essence, created ‘China’.

Whatever its current face and veneer, government or governing philosophy, China as a nation, concept, and identity has remained relevant to billions, regardless of the external changes and whims of history and modernity have wrought. There has always been a vision of ‘China’ as a singular if abstract entity, for more than 2,000 years. The concept of Tianxia, discussed through the lens of CLA, is key for exploring conceptions of China since the founding of the first empire, and images of its possible futures. This is the foundation stone upon which the myths and metaphors of Chinese identity have been built, and are still being envisioned now by the current government in Beijing.

However, the desires of the peoples of Hong Kong and Taiwan have diverged from this monolithic vision. The people and societies which represent these ‘broken pieces’ of the wall, which China seeks to ‘put back’ as part of their vision of ‘greater China’ and a future based on unity and singularity, have their own conceptions of a future without the forced imposition of political and economic domination. While acknowledging themselves as people

descended from a great Chinese tradition, they already are—or are becoming—a distinct and separate people, nation, and hopefully, states. They seek a plurality and recognition of their distinct identities, the validation of their evolution as a unique and distinct people, who envision a distinct future for themselves.

Symbols of Unity, Identity, and Oppression: Forming Useful Metaphors About Tianxia

Symbolically, the unified segments which constitute the Great Wall stand as an ancient, monolithic ‘rock’ against which all historical conceptions and understandings of Chinese identity has been envisioned, measured, understood, compared, and projected into the future, a symbol of enduring unity and vision of China (thegreatwallofchina2015). From another perspective, the Wall can be seen as a great ‘Separator’, a symbol of Chinese isolationism and oppression, the embodiment of a desire for internal unity, and externalized singularity (McGregor, 2006). The joining of the various sections being combined into one, contiguous wall by the first emperor who presided over the unification of the Warring States could not have been more appropriate symbol for the unifying of the once divided states and Chinese peoples. It is the primordial moment when the molten lava of conflict and division rapidly cooled into a basalt monolith. This forged one from many, new from the shards of the old; this concept which is captured and embodied by ‘Tianxia’, and it is the continuation of this metaphor which underpins and informs the guiding principles and policy decisions of the government in Beijing regarding domestic and international issues. The forging of the Chinese empire in this way is a creation myth par-excellence, the metaphor of stability, steadfastness, durability, and strength; but also of isolationism, repression, and fear of the outside world.

Although its ‘face’ may change, weathered by the endless rains and sands of time, manifesting as social decay, wars, and political change, each thin outer layered washed away represents the changing of eras, dynasties, governments, and policies. They come and go, wearing away only the thinnest of outer layers; but the rock, the structure, the foundation, the monolithic strength and presence that is China, remains. Hong Kong and Taiwan, conversely, represent ‘broken-off pieces’ of that Wall, pieces that Beijing seeks to ‘put back’ as a matter of policy, worldview, and mythic Chinese destiny for an eternal future. The modern Government of The People’s Republic is merely the current ‘layer’ of that great monolith that is China; but their leadership would see a Greater ‘Chinese Dream’ emerge from the turbulence of its past, and propel China onto the world stage, and into a future where it can transcend its limitations and become the leading global superpower (Callahan, 2017). The central question being raised in the protests is: do the people of Hong Kong have a different vision for their own preferred future, which does not include Hong Kong as an integrated piece in the Chinese Dream of Beijing?

Tianxia and The Origins of the One China Policy—Fulfilling Historical Destiny and Restoring of ‘Divine/Natural Order’

Babones (2017) argues that modern iterations of Chinese political philosophy and international relations within Chinese scholarship make specific use of Tianxia to serve as a philosophical basis to formulate China-centric worldviews and construct metaphors which are relevant to and are consistent with representations of how China views itself in historic, contemporary, and futures contexts. Relationality deals with systemic level governing methods, and how they compare and contrast with each other. This is an important point for discussing Hong Kong and Taiwan in relation to China, as they have had long been under Western influence in their systems of governance, a point which has become a key contention in the recent protests. It is important to take account of the emerging differences in worldviews as they pertain to Hong Kong and Taiwan on the issue of Chinese nationalism. The people of Hong Kong and Taiwan have come to view themselves as having a distinct worldview and futures vision for their country and region which are separate from China’s. The ‘One China’ policy has become the exact thing against which a call to action has been issued. This is the basis and the symbolic driver of the Hong Kong protests of 2019-20.

Others scholars have linked Tianxia with Chinese Nationalism in both historical and contemporary contexts. William Callahan (2016, 2017) has produced work on futures visions of China which utilize the Tianxia concept, and has also commented critically yet supportively on various aspects of Tingyang Zhao’s (2018) understanding of the historical and modern vision and applications of Tianxia. The concept and its philosophical interpretation mutually reinforces itself with tenets derived from Daoism and Confucianism—specifically, their elements of

ancestor worship/veneration (Callahan, 2016, 2017). The People's Government appears intent on promoting and perpetuating this belief in a greater destiny and future of unified China, intent on ending and rectifying what Tucker (2008) calls "China's century of humiliation at the hands of Westerners", as it pertains to continued Western influences on Hong Kong's, Taiwan's, and China's places on the global stage. The Beijing government has employed long-term strategies in the form of social, political, and economic tactics in order to realize these goals, and new long-term plans, as evidenced by President Xi's 'New Grand Strategy' for the future. President Xi's speech at the 19th Party Congress (Chen, 2017), indicates the trajectory China perceives itself to be on would see many aspects of Tianxia's modern iteration fulfilled. These long-term visions have profound implications for Hong Kong, and are issues many of the protesters have long been aware of. The move to quietly implement the extradition bill was seen by many as a stealth attack on Hong Kong's regional autonomy, de-facto constitution, and independent judiciary (Aljazeera, 2019), which would undermine the very nature of Hong Kong society itself, and in essence, undermine its unique and distinct differences from the mainland.

There are several iterations and possible understandings of the resurgence (or modern reimagining) of Tianxia, and many interpretations by scholars as to the ultimate scale, scope, and goals of its implementation. Some scholars assume, based on the openness and adaptability of Tianxia in modern contexts and the international/global reach of modern China, that the intentions behind their use of Tianxia is similarly global in scale. Aspirations for a Chinese-led global, or at least the international recognition of Chinese thought, philosophy, and influence, to be on-par with other worldviews. Other interpretations of the People's Governments actions posit that the Tianxia philosophy is best applied internally, or, if not, as a means to justify a new global hegemony led by China. Andrew Erikson (2019) has described President Xi's Grand Strategy, to "Make China Great Again". The openness implied by Tianxia functions as a guiding principle for improving understanding and international relations with other peoples and nation-states in a globalized community. China has taken the strategy of playing 'the long game', and has developed and is implementing plans for the long-term, seeking to assure its regional and global influence into the future (Chen, 2017).

Challenging Beijing's Tianxia Narrative and 'One China, Two Systems' Policy: Alternative and Emerging Futures Visions for Taiwan and Its Relevance to Hong Kong

The One-China Policy envisioned by Beijing can be argued to represent the current manifestation of the ancient myth/metaphor concept of Tianxia, perceived and presented as the on-going, continuous historical context of the one 'legitimate' vision of China and the 'destiny' of all Chinese peoples. This belief informs the epistemological foundations of the modern 'One China' policy. In his speech in late December 2018, Xi said both sides were part of the same Chinese family and that Taiwanese independence was "an adverse current from history and a dead end", and that Taiwanese people "must understand that independence will only bring hardship," Mr Xi said, adding Beijing would never tolerate any form of activity promoting Taiwanese independence. He further claimed that unification was "an inevitable requirement for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people", also claiming relations with Taiwan were "part of China's domestic politics" and that "foreign interference is intolerable", and that Beijing "reserves the option of taking all necessary measures" against outside forces interfering with peaceful reunification and Taiwanese separatist activities (bbc.com, 2019c).

Taiwan has long rejected the 'One China, Two Systems' approach, ever since the official recognition of which government was internationally recognized as the 'legitimate' government of 'China' was switched to the Mainland PRC government in 1979. The agreement reached with the United States was made with the express understanding that there would not be a "2 Chinas", nor a "One China, One Taiwan" policy stance on the part of the U.S. (Glaser & Green, 2017). Instead, Taiwan has since existed as a de-facto independent nation, although it is not recognized by the U.N. as such.

Taiwan continues to rebuke Chinese political and economic domination, despite the difficulties China imposes on Taiwan. China has long been in a position to threaten economic sanctions and trade embargoes against any country that seeks to improve relations with Taiwan or formally recognized its legitimacy as an independent nation (Lee, 2019). While acknowledging their Chinese ancestry, young people in Taiwan overwhelmingly view themselves as 'Taiwanese', not 'Chinese'(Su, 2019). This is an important point for generating sympathy and solidarity with the protesters in Hong Kong among Taiwanese, as memories of repression and authoritarianism are held in common

from before Taiwan democratized (Hsieh, 2019). Taiwan seeks peaceful relations and recognition as an independent nation from China, and its de-facto independence is something that President Tsai has already proclaimed, stating that "We (Taiwan) are an independent country already. We have a separate identity and we're a country of our own. We deserve respect from China." (Funnell, 2020). Taiwanese have publicly rallied in support of the Hong Kong protests (Wang, 2019), while envy of Taiwan's democratic process and free elections have drawn from Hong Kong a delegation of activists and observers to witness the recent elections (Pomfret & Shen, 2020).

Taiwan's influence as an independent nation implies the future possibilities that Hong Kong could also have the same, if it could free itself of Beijing's incrementally closing grip. This awareness rests in both Hong Kong and Beijing, with obviously diverging positions on the issue. What is driving the recent protests in Hong Kong in the absence of the extradition treaty are their divergent visions and aspirations of independence, as well as assertions of no longer being a part of the monolith, and to gain recognition by The People's Government as an independent region. Can Beijing ever accept that Hong Kong and/or Taiwan have divergent visions for their futures which do not include themselves as a part of the historical and futures vision of 'One China'? Or is the threat of different visions for the future of one city and one break-away island nation too much for the Beijing's vision of a Great Wall to hold? Would the 'missing pieces' represented by Hong Kong and Taiwan not being a part of the futures vision of a 'Greater China' be enough to collapse the wall? Can all Chinese peoples' truly be 'under heaven' if some would choose a different metaphor and identity for themselves?

A brief history of Hong Kong: British Colonial Era on Values and Law to Reunification

The threat Hong Kong and Taiwan represent for the Beijing government resides in their demonstration that there are other possible futures for them, differing from the singular vision of a 'Greater China'. For Hong Kong, the possibility of imagining a different future for itself is embedded in its colonial history as a British 'city-state', which was unto itself the seat of the former British colony after being ceded to the British as a result of the Opium Wars in 1842, followed by the Kowloon region in 1860 (bbc.com, 2019b). Hong Kong has served as the de-facto entry point for foreign influence on Chinese culture and society since that time, both symbolically and literally. The Opium Wars had been fought over Britain's illegal importation of opium into China and the ceding of Chinese territory, ending the policy of isolationism which had been in place since the time of the Ming dynasty. China was essentially 'chipped open'—or perhaps more aptly, had a hole blown into it with cannon fire-- by Western imperialist ambitions, characterized by the imposition of Western concepts and the creation of blatant and exploitatively one-sided trade agreements forced upon it by British and other Western powers (Pletcher, n.d.).

While the forced opening of China by Western colonial and economic endeavours via the takeover of Hong Kong had ended the long history and policy of isolationism, many of the adapted Western values, codes, and laws which had been in place during the colonial governing of Hong Kong were enshrined into the 'Basic Law' of the transition-era Hong Kong, reflecting much of the democratic principles which are characteristic of the modern British system of governance (basiclaw.gov.hk).

Despite reunification in 1997, the city has retained its diversity, openness, and accessibility to the outside world. This offers a degree of protection from the encroachment of Beijing, as the regional government has retained purview over these matters, at least at the moment. It is these added benefits of being a Hong Kong resident which many fear could be taken if the proposed extradition treaty passed. Fears of encroachment upon the freedoms are not rooted in mere speculation, but arise from policy statements specifically set out by Chinese government officials (Li-Hua, Maxon, & Hetherington, 2019). Since the transition period of Hong Kong going back to China begun, the city and its residents have enjoyed/expected/been granted a degree of autonomy and self-rule which the Chinese mainland lacks, and the gradual erosion of those rights weighs heavily on many younger Hong Kong residents, who have only known a Hong Kong with its rights and freedoms intact.

'One China, two systems' policy in Hong Kong

In the years leading to return of political control from Britain to China, a long process of negotiations began. The people of Hong Kong, long accustomed to autonomy and self-governance, were placed in an essentially untenable situation. As Prof. Steve Tsang states, "What choice did they have? If they said, 'No negotiations,' the Chinese would take over without a deal. If they declare independence, the PLA (People's Liberation Army) would invade.

So neither of those are actually options—independence was not an option, refusing or rejecting integration was not an option” (Little, 2019). This was the birth of the ‘One China, Two Systems’ policy in Hong Kong. The negotiated handover implemented a fifty-year transition period, where integration of Hong Kong back into the Mainland Chinese governing authority and full integration by 2047. This represents a significant step towards the realization of a ‘Greater China’ for Beijing government, ending more than two-hundred-years of incursion into China from a foreign power, the broken ‘brick’ finally reconstituted and reshaped, ready to be put back into the Great Wall that is Beijing’s vision for China’s future.

For many in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which has lived under the frequent reminders that an invading force could cross the Straight at any time—a threat often re-issued any time Taiwan hold elections (Sudworth, 2020). Taiwan already considers itself an independent nation, as Taiwan’s President Tsai stated in a recent interview (Taipei Times, 2020). New visions for Hong Kong and Taiwan are emerging, and a basis for consideration of the wishes, interests, and dreams of both lands must be explored and recognized internationally, particularly by the Beijing government, as these worldviews and visions for the future appear to directly clash with their own.

The attempts by the Chinese government informed by their conception of Tianxia as it pertains to the strategy for reintegration of Hong Kong is a long, slow process of gradual and nearly imperceptible change, unfolding within the established timeline of reintegration up to 2047. The government has endeavoured to avoid violence and clashes—although this has failed, as made evident by the recent protests. This tactic to make the reintegration with the Mainland Chinese government, and the ‘peace and stability’ that being a part of ‘Greater China’ represents, as a viable, preferable alternative to the instability and violence which Hong Kong is currently plagued with. But attention must be paid to the wishes of the peoples of both Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the differing emerging visions which they have about themselves and their own futures.

CLA of H.K. Protests and Futures Visions of Chinese National and Cultural Identity

The continuing protests in Hong Kong present a unique possibility for research and investigation. The protests have undoubtedly tapped into something deeply resonant than simply being a spontaneous manifestation of resistance to the extradition bill. What lies beneath the headlines, the machinations of possible outside influences and actors, foreign governments and protestors on the ground? Here a CLA of the protests and the layers which constitute its parts, in the hopes of understanding the deeper visions of the diverging futures each side advocates for.

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), developed by Prof. Sohail Inayatullah, is a key method in exploring possible futures. Prof Inayatullah has described CLA as a method which “seeks to create new futures by creating new narratives and systems that support these stories and new measurements that ensure the stories are grounded in empirical reality” (Inayatullah, 2020). He has also stated that CLA “as a theory it seeks to integrate empiricist, interpretive, critical, and action learning modes of knowing. As a method, its utility is not in predicting the future but in creating transformative spaces for the creation of alternative futures. It is also likely to be useful in developing more effective— deeper, inclusive, longer term — policy” (Inayatullah, 2004, p. 8).

Other futurists have used CLA for examining issues pertaining to China, notably Jeanne Hoffman’s use of CLA contrast the “China threat” vs. “Peaceful Rise” dichotomy of China’s functioning in the world system through the lens of International Relations theories (Hoffman, 2012), as well as developing scenarios through CLA for different visions of Taiwan in its relationship with China (Hoffman, 2017).

CLA is best understood and applied as a method which attempts to dive into deeper, more meaningful and relatable analysis of the lived experiences, feelings, and desires people hold close to their hearts and are the basis of their understanding of themselves. Most futures methods function at surface level of trends for cursory analysis and investigation, while CLA offers a way to pull out the formative, foundational beliefs which form the primary drivers of a culture or people. CLA focuses on narratives, offering qualitative insights on possible futures, allowing the deeply embedded imagination that is the essence of self-identity, to find creative space to conceive of desirable change for their future.

Applying CLA to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan futures

The unique aspects and implications of the Hong Kong protests make CLA an ideal method for exploring possible futures for Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China. Starting from the founding concepts which underpin the past

and future of China rooted in the Tianxia concept discussed above, a CLA can be designed. Tianxia is a powerful foundational ‘Myth/Metaphor’ which informs the worldviews and policy decisions of the Mainland government regarding Hong Kong and Taiwan. It also allows for the creation of a ‘counter myth/metaphor’ for the opposition, representing viewpoints of the Hong Kong protesters and for Taiwan as a ‘transformed metaphor’; essentially, as the exact opposite viewpoint of the Beijing government. It is noted that while a simple dichotomy in desired futures between the Beijing Government and the residents and governments of Hong Kong and Taiwan may seem overly-simplistic, it is also apt, and supported by evidence that each side seems to hold diametrically opposing viewpoints, strategies, and policies for achieving its desired futures.

Table 1: CLA of China: perspectives and approaches to Hong Kong and Taiwan

Litany	“Pro-Democracy, anti-Beijing protests erupt in H.K. after extradition bill proposed”
System	The governments of China and Hong Kong are violating the ‘One China, Two Systems’ policy; Extradition Bill seen as a tactic to undermine Hong Kong special administrative status and undermine Taiwanese independence.
Worldview	China is destined to be both Great and Reunited as one nation, as ‘One China’
Metaphor/Metaphor	Tianxia-- ‘All Under Heaven’, ‘Our Land’; One, United China, as the guiding force for the Future as a continuation of the past “Make China GREAT Again”; ‘Chinese Renaissance’

CLA of Chinese Government Perspective

Litany

At the Litany level, the recent Hong Kong protests have drawn comparisons to other protest movements. International news coverage of the protests focus on the ‘headline-generating’ aspects; documenting damage to public property, capturing the sensationalist aspects of the protests, and searching for and seeing similarities to other protest movements where none may exist. Reports of crowd numbers, the demands being made on the government(s), the resurrection, use, and appropriation of symbolically loaded characters such as Pepe the Frog and the utilization of the American flag during many events on the streets of Hong Kong only catch the surface of the events at play or the things they symbolize. It is window dressing for 30 second news clips until the news cycle shifts to another story.

System

The governing policies of Hong Kong implemented after years of comprehensive negotiations to ensure a smooth, long-term transition back into administrative control under the Chinese Mainland government between 1997 and 2047 are cracking. Generations who have known only freedom, that have benefitted and grew accustomed to the liberties afforded them under the British colonial administration, fear the growing spectre of eventual take-over by Beijing and their totalitarian regime and social controls. Their proposed ‘social ranking’ system nearing implementation and the proposed extradition bill represent reminders of the coming undesirable changes which will be a reality after Hong Kong is fully integrated into modern China. The protests are to hasten their full independence, or to reinforce their continued assurance of their valued freedoms. The consideration of Taiwan as a ‘rogue province’, characterized as a territory ‘in dispute’ or ‘in rebellion’, is deemed a necessary label, and is again emphasized by the Mainland government in order to keep consistency with the ‘One China’ policy.

Worldview

The Beijing government believes that China and all Chinese people and lands should be together as one united country and people. The legacy established by the founding of China by the first emperor is a deeply embedded belief in conceiving China as a great nation, the concept of the ‘Middle Kingdom’ implying its own central position in the world. This is seen as the natural course and destiny of China to be one, united people and country. Returning

administrative and governing control of Hong Kong is the long-awaited opportunity to take back ‘stolen’ land. Taiwan also must be reconciled with the mainland, as it at first represented the last vestiges of the ‘old order’ from the end of the Chinese Civil War, a final battle which must be won, to ‘complete’ Mao’s Revolution. In recent times, Taiwan now represents something far more dangerous: the splintering-off of ethnic and cultural identity. The viability of Taiwan as an independent nation and the overwhelming numbers of young Taiwanese viewing themselves as a separate, distinct people from the Chinese, and the open society and fully democratic system Taiwan has represents an existential threat to the One-China worldview.

Myth/Metaphor

Tianxia is a foundational metaphor which has been a guiding principle for Chinese leadership since before the first empire was founded. Much like the Great Wall itself, the concept of Tianxia has undergone revisions, repairs, losses and gains in popularity, new interpretations and new applications throughout its history, but has remained as a key metaphor which centres China as the ‘Middle Kingdom’. China stands not only ‘Under Heaven’, but central, first, and favoured of all Kingdoms under heaven. The continuity of China through its extensive, sometimes turbulent history, only serves to reinforce the importance of Tianxia and the belief that China must be ‘Made GREAT again’. This guides the modern policies of China in their pursuit to see all Chinese lands and peoples united together under one flag.

Table 2: CLA of Hong Kong and Taiwan

Litany	Pro-Democracy, anti-Beijing protests erupt in H.K. and gain international support after extradition bill proposed; Hong Kong special administrative status and freedoms secured for the future, Taiwanese Independence gains full international recognition
System	The End of ‘One China, Two Systems’-- Permanent/extended autonomy or independence for Hong Kong will allow them to be the masters of their own system of governance, and sovereignty and full recognition of Taiwan allow it to become a fully recognized sovereign and independent country
Worldview	There can be more than one vision of ‘China’; Hong Kong and Taiwan can find their own visions for their own independent futures
Myth/Metaphor	Many Chinas, many paths, all are All Under Heaven

CLA of Hong Kong and Taiwan

Litany

In a transformed world, we might read of Hong Kong being granted a permanent status as a specially administered region, with its current freedoms of press, speech, and democratic representation it current enjoys being secured into the future. The 2047 transition period deadline has either been extended or lifted indefinitely. Or even more optimistically, it could achieve full independence, becoming an independent city-state, essentially becoming like Singapore when it achieved independence from Malaysia. The releasing of Hong Kong from a future of direct rule from Beijing will lead the way to the withdrawal of threats against Taiwan by the Chinese Government. This paved the way for an eventual full international recognition of the sovereignty and independence of Taiwan of the global stage.

System

The End of ‘One China, Two Systems’. The permanent/extended autonomy or full independence for Hong Kong allows them to be the masters of their own system of governance. Sovereignty and full recognition of Taiwan allow it to become a fully recognized sovereign country. A free Hong Kong, with reassured and continued personal freedoms as they are now, could be implemented by an extended agreement beyond 2047, with the agreement ensuring no encroachments or undermining of Hong Kong’s citizens or territorial rights. Or, Hong Kong could gain

full and complete independence from China, becoming its own independent nation/city-state, allowing it to have complete control over its own governing policies, borders, and destiny. Recognition of Hong Kong as its own independent entity would reinforce the view of Taiwan as an independent, sovereign nation, or vice-versa. The formal recognition or rights and/or sovereignty of one would necessarily need to imply the same for the other.

Worldview

China must find a way to reconcile itself to the ‘loss’ of Hong Kong and Taiwan. China must find a way to be complete without the need and desire to control other lands, who prefer to be self-governing and determining their own destinies. ‘One China’ must give way to a new conception of identity which does not demand the forceful incorporation of Hong Kong and Taiwan under its influence. A space for the possibility of ‘Many Chinas’ could allow for other nations, particularly Hong Kong and Taiwan, and perhaps also be applied to Tibet and other lands in dispute which are under Chinese control, to also determine their own futures.

Myth/Metaphor

The possibility that there are many ‘Tianxias’ becomes accepted and realized. China’s past allows for the possibility of countless ways to imagine its futures. If Tianxia could be recognized for the open and adaptable philosophical concept that it is, it can be reimagined as a way which would allow for numerous ‘Chinas’, or Chinese-descended lands and peoples, which could stand separately from the ‘One’. All would still be ‘Under Heaven’, and all would be able to continue to hold on to that same glorious past, and to simultaneously embrace their own separate futures.

Conclusion

The Hong Kong protests represent a reminder to the Beijing government that their dreams of ‘One China’ may be further from being realized than they hope. Knowing this is perhaps the reason they adopted the rhetoric of ‘One China, two systems’ in the first place. The questions of Taiwanese independence and Hong Kong’s struggles to retain its democratic systems inherently stand as challenges, by their very existence, to the presumed destiny of their ‘One China’ vision. Although neither Taiwan nor Hong Kong present direct military threats (Hille & Shepherd, 2020), their greatest threats are symbolic ones: that a different future is possible for the Chinese people. The government of Taiwan (the ‘Republic of China’) is/was the former government of the Mainland. To the Communist regime and the ideological descendants of Mao’s Revolution, the Hong Kong protests and Taiwanese independence represent a ‘final victory’ yet to be had. If The People’s Revolution remains incomplete, it could signal the beginning of a Humpty Dumpty-like fragmenting of China that simply cannot be put together again. The desire to fully reintegrate Hong Kong into the fold, thus ‘righting’ a 200+ year-old ‘wrong’, and the continued existence of Nationalist Taiwan, raise unique questions about the complete washing away of the past, and indeed, the ‘completeness’ of Mao’s Revolution and the final victory in the Chinese Civil War. It has been the openly stated goal that the government in Beijing intentions for Taiwanese “reunification with the motherland”, as recently stated by Liu Jieyi, the director of the Chinese State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office (Chan, 2020). While the Beijing government utilizes every opportunity it can to reiterate its stance on the ‘One China, two systems’ policy, and to make specific efforts to restate that position during Taiwan’s elections (Steger, 2020), it stands as evidence that the democratic and open government and society Taiwan has is the truest threat to the totalitarian People’s Government and its desire to bring all outliers under its control.

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