Hong Kong’s War Against Authoritarianism

How Did It Start and What Is at Stake for the World?

By Kaxton Siu

Hong Kong, ‘Asia’s World City,’ is in the grip of its worst political crisis since the British handover to China in 1997. Violent street demonstrations have wracked the city for three months running, with no signs of abating. Protesters, fearful of Beijing’s growing influence over the city, are demanding greater freedom and more accountability for the local government and police.

There are worries Beijing could even intervene directly to end the protests. The roots of the crisis go back decades and the situation now is a test of the world’s commitment to supporting the aspirations of Hong Kong’s people, Kaxton Siu writes.
AFTER THREE MONTHS of increasingly violent conflict between police and protesters, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam finally announced on Sept. 4 that she would formally withdraw a controversial bill that would have enabled the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China — it is not hard to discover that almost all of these movements are tightly connected with Hong Kong as a “city of freedom” from their predecessors, but compared to their parents, they identified themselves strongly with a distinctive local identity (Hongkonger). To a great extent, this Hongkonger identity was constructed in relation to the “Mainland Chinese” identity. Understanding these historical details is crucial to understanding Hong Kong’s current situation, especially how the protest movement could bring out onto the streets different generations, mobilizing between one and two million people in successive protests early on. Based on the city’s tradition of aspiring to and exercising individual freedom, as well as the construction of a Hongkonger identity, Hong Kong’s civil society and social movements started to develop in the 1960s and 1970s. The Sino-British negotiations on the handover of Hong Kong in 1997 began in the early 1980s and resulted in the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, five years before the disastrous Tiananmen Square movement in 1989. There was then a period of rapid political reforms in Hong Kong in the final transition period leading up to 1997 that not only turned democracy into one of the key social-development indicators in Hong Kong, but also consolidated the city-wide movement for the world in the context of an increasingly powerful and authoritarian China?

THE IDEA OF FREEDOM AS A FUNDAMENTAL SOCIAL VALUE
If we carefully examine the successive waves of mass movements in Hong Kong since 1997 — the year of the British handover of Hong Kong to China — it is not hard to discover that almost all of these movements are tightly connected with one of the most fundamental social values in Hong Kong — freedom. That connection has its origins in Hong Kong’s postwar history and the development of a Hong Kong identity.

Hong Kong is a society of migrants. Since the end of the Second World War, Hong Kong had been a place that received and settled various types of refugees from war and political disturbances in Mainland China. For these refugees, Hong Kong was a place where they could be shielded from political turmoil and preserve their individual freedoms. To the older generation of Hong Kong people today, these individual freedoms usually mean economic freedom (the ability to choose one’s own job and seek to make a decent living), not political freedom. However, the aspiration to exercise individual freedom and to be protected from political constraints has been rooted in Hong Kong society since colonial times.

Should the current city-wide movement in Hong Kong fail and should Hong Kong become another Xinjiang or just another Chinese city, the world will not simply lose one of its great, cosmopolitan urban centers. It will lose a city that has a strong tradition of upholding and aspiring to freedom.

It can be said that Hong Kong society had to wait until the 1960s to experience fundamental change. Demographically, a generation of locally born postwar baby boomers grew up and became the middle class of Hong Kong society. This generation not only inherited the vision of Hong Kong as a “city of freedom” from their predecessors, but compared to their parents, they identified themselves strongly with a distinctive local identity (Hongkonger). To the older generation of Hong Kong people today, these individual freedoms should be penalized if their actions violate human rights in Hong Kong.

The rapid deterioration of the situation in the city over the past three months has not only stunned the people of Hong Kong, it has also puzzled the international community (the mainland Chinese government included). Why would a proposed extradition bill set off a massive social moment in Hong Kong? What do the protesters’ various demands reveal about Hong Kong’s current state-market-civil society relations? More important, what are the implications of the city-wide movement for the world in the context of an increasingly powerful and authoritarian China?

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that their individual rights and freedoms were being severely threatened. Large protests over the bill at the time eventually led the government to back down. In 2012, the Hong Kong government initiated another controversial move, the patriotic curriculum (the so-called civic and national education curriculum) in secondary schools. As a result, it turned secondary schools into an avenue of politics, and caused students, teachers and parents to squarely face the possibility that freedom of speech would be repressed. At the same time, since 2004, a new subject, liberal studies, was introduced into the secondary education curriculum to back down. In 2012, the Hong Kong government as well as challenged the image of Hong Kong police, once dubbed “Asia’s finest,” as uncorrupted civil servants and law enforcers upholding the principle of the rule of law.

Second, the representative politics that developed in Hong Kong since the 1980s has been severely challenged in the past three months. Since July 21, when local gangsters brutally beat protestors and conducting widespread arrests of activists and protestors, Hong Kong citizens have repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of the Hong Kong government as well as challenged the image of Hong Kong police, once dubbed “Asia’s finest,” as uncorrupted civil servants and law enforcers upholding the principle of the rule of law.

On the one hand, since the 1980s, Hong Kong’s economy has started integrating with China’s economy. Since 2003, Hong Kong’s economy has been largely dependent on China, especially the tourist and retail sectors, which have experienced severe negative effects from the protest movement. On the other hand, precisely because Hong Kong’s representational politics and institutional channels have been preserved, many civil society organizations (especially professional groups) have started using its important role in the international economy to demand that the international community take a greater interest in what is happening to Hong Kong. That explains why many Hong Kong professional groups are demanding that the US Congress pass the “Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act” and to reassess Hong Kong’s status as a separate customs territory. As such, Hong Kong’s “market” is actually playing a key role in altering the city’s future political development.

RAPIDLY CHANGING RELATIONS AMONG STATE, MARKET AND SOCIETY

What does the state of Hong Kong today reveal about the city’s state-market-civil society relations?

First, regarding state-society relations, several “pillars” of Hong Kong society (freedom of speech, the rule of law and clean government) that developed in the colonial era have been seriously challenged in the past three months. Since July 21, when local gangsters brutally beat protestors and ordinary passengers in the Yuen Long subway station, the Hong Kong police force has been widely blamed for colluding with the gangsters and ignoring their brutality. After that, with the police escalating their own violence toward protestors and conducting widespread arrests of activists and protestors, Hong Kong citizens have repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of the Hong Kong government as well as challenged the image of Hong Kong police, once dubbed “Asia’s finest,” as uncorrupted civil servants and law enforcers upholding the principle of the rule of law.

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LITMUS TEST FOR THE FREE WORLD

Finally, what are the implications of Hong Kong’s current social movement for the rest of the world? Admittedly, we here in Hong Kong are facing a situation where China is increasingly powerful politically and economically, and a set of universal values widely held in the West (such as freedom, democracy and human rights) are under threat. In the 1980s, many China observers in Hong Kong and in the West naively thought that with China opening up its economy, the country would lose a city that has a strong tradition of upholding and aspiring to freedom. If that were to happen, another “clash of civilizations” would ensue between East and West. Sadly, it is the people of Hong Kong who will have paid the highest price.

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