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Hong Kong's Democratic Movement and the Making of China's Offshore Civil Society

ABSTRACT

Hong Kong's civil society has remained vibrant since the sovereignty handover in 1997, thanks to an active defense by the democratic movement against Beijing's attempts to control civil liberties. Hong Kong is becoming mainland China's offshore civil society, serving as a free platform for information circulation and organizing among mainland activists and intellectuals.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong, China, democratic movement, civil society

INTRODUCTION

Since Hong Kong's return to China as a special administrative region (SAR) in 1997, many commentators and journalists have fretted about the territory's declining liberty and autonomy, as well as its stalled or even reversed democratic development. Plentiful examples of self-censorship of the press, repeated delays in implementation of universal suffrage as promised in the Basic Law, and Beijing's open or tacit interventions into Hong Kong politics despite the stated principle of "one country, two systems" suggest that Hong Kong has been passively and gradually subordinated to the authoritarian state in Beijing. "One country, two systems" is now devoid of all substance, and Hong Kong society and politics are being homogenized with those in mainland China.

This pessimistic portrayal of Hong Kong as a "slowly boiled frog"¹ after 1997 cannot be easily dismissed, as evidence attesting to it abounds. One weakness

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1. Many commentators in Hong Kong equate the slow tightening of liberty there under Chinese rule to the process of "slowly boiling a frog" (*wenshui zhuwa*), in which the frog does not notice the slow increase in temperature and does not resist.

Asian Survey, Vol. 52, Number 3, pp. 504–527. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2012 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: AS.2012.52.3.504.

of this perspective, however, is that it neglects the tenacity of Hong Kong's civil society, which germinated in late colonial times and has actively defended its autonomy since the handover. Despite pressure from Beijing, this civil society, which has remained at least as vibrant as before the handover, has even started to resonate with the growing grassroots resistance in mainland China that has emerged in recent years. The former colony's distinct financial infrastructure that originated in colonial times is now enabling Hong Kong to become China's offshore financial center, facilitating the emergent internationalization of the Chinese currency, the renminbi (RMB).² Likewise, Hong Kong's civil society is turning into mainland China's offshore civil society, serving as a clearinghouse for information and ideas, a hub of political organizing and exchanges, and an open, free platform for activists and intellectuals from the mainland.

The persistence and growth of Hong Kong's civil society after 1997 was not an outcome of any stable institutional protection. Instead, it has resulted from active resistance by various social and political actors against Beijing's persistent attempts to constrict such a public space. In what follows, we first outline how Hong Kong's contentious civil society took shape and gained momentum in the 1980s. We then explain how this civil society persisted and grew after 1997, and how Hong Kong's post-handover political economy kept Beijing from openly repressing such a civil society. Its tenacious growth, coupled with the strengthening of the oligarchic political structure that Hong Kong inherited, led to the escalation of contentious mobilizations in 2003 and 2010. These alarmed Beijing and successfully forced officials to make concessions on Hong Kong's political reform and, more significantly, to delay draconian anti-sedition legislation indefinitely. We will discuss the repercussions of these mobilizations among concerned citizens in mainland China. We will then explore how these repercussions, together with intensifying exchanges among scholars, journalists, activists, and other active citizens from Hong Kong and the mainland, have started to create China's offshore civil society in Hong Kong.

THE RISE AND PERSISTENCE OF HONG KONG'S CIVIL SOCIETY

In the decade following the failed 1967 anti-British insurgency, instigated by Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-affiliated organizations in Hong Kong

2. Chen Xiaoli and Cheung Yin-Wong, "Renminbi Going Global," *China and World Economy* 19:2 (March-April 2011), pp. 1–18; and Paola Subacchi, "One Currency, Two Systems," *International Economics* (October 2010, IEBP2010/01), pp. 1–12.

under the influence of the Cultural Revolution, leftist groups maintained a low profile, having alienated many Hong Kong citizens with their terrorist tactics used toward the end of the uprising. At the same time, a new wave of student and social movements constituted by labor organizations, teachers' unions, and community organizations blossomed among the younger generation. Activists in these movements criticized both authoritarian rule in China and colonial British rule in Hong Kong. They gained coverage in local media, increasingly staffed by a younger generation of more critical and independent-minded journalists. These movements were the foundation of an emerging civil society in Hong Kong.³

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the opening of Sino-British negotiations and the countdown to Hong Kong's sovereignty handover created many opportunities for this nascent civil society to grow. The British regime, foreseeing its inevitable departure, started to initiate long-delayed democratic reforms to shore up its legitimacy. It increased the proportion of popularly elected seats in the Legislative Council (LegCo). Through the same period, Beijing was eager to build a broad, united front in support of the sovereignty handover and promised autonomy and democracy in the future Hong Kong SAR (HKSAR). The prospect of political reforms led many social movement groups to coalesce into an alliance in pursuit of broader democratization. Their alliances later developed into pro-democracy political parties; the largest since its inception in 1994 was the Democratic Party. These parties, in partnership with an array of social movement groups, became significant forces in defending and building Hong Kong's civil society in late colonial and postcolonial times.

Amid the 1980s efforts to formulate the Basic Law—the post-handover mini-Constitution of Hong Kong—Beijing tilted heavily toward the local business elite, supporting them in practically all controversial issues. Chinese officials vetoed all proposals advocated by the democrats for social reform (such as workers' rights to bargain collectively) and speedy political reform (e.g., implementation of universal suffrage in 1997) in the completed initial drafts of the Law in late 1988 and early 1989.⁴ The mounting conflict between

3. Lui Tai-lok and Stephen W. K. Chiu, "Social Movements and Public Discourse on Politics," in *Hong Kong's History: State and Society under Colonial Rule*, ed. Ngo Tak-wing (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 101–18.

4. Alvin Y. So, *Hong Kong's Embattled Democracy: A Societal Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

Hong Kong's democrats and Beijing culminated in massive mobilization in support of the student movement in China in 1989. Waves of demonstrations surged in the colony, with up to one million Hong Kong citizens—one-sixth of its population at the time—participating. A number of core democrats and social movement groups founded the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements (HKASPDM). After the Tiananmen crackdown and the full-fledged conservative turn of Chinese politics, Beijing labeled the democrats, who had strongly denounced the crackdown, traitors collaborating with foreign powers to topple the CCP regime. They continue to be so labeled to this day. On the other hand, many Hong Kong citizens see the democrats as trusted defenders of Hong Kong's liberty after 1997, as suggested by the stable majority vote they have obtained in nearly all direct elections.

The final version of the Basic Law, passed in 1990, reinstated the promise of eventual election of the Hong Kong chief executive and all LegCo seats through universal suffrage. But implementation was delayed indefinitely, with the document asserting that the former could not occur earlier than 2007 and the latter only after 2008. In addition, officials inserted a draconian article against subversion, Article 23, requiring the future HKSAR government to outlaw any activities, organizations, and publications deemed threatening to Beijing.

After the handover, election of the chief executive was carried out by the Election Committee. This committee of several hundred members mainly consisted of prominent magnates in the city. These proxies for Beijing fiercely opposed universal suffrage for fear that it would end their privileged access to the policy making process. Direct election for LegCo seats was limited, with Beijing rolling back some of the LegCo democratic reforms instituted during the last years of British rule. The openness of the political system fell far short of Beijing's initial promise of universal suffrage.⁵

Increasingly marginalized by Beijing, the democratic movement resorted to mass mobilization after 1997 to demand faster democratization. The democrats, who participated enthusiastically in direct elections begun by

5. In accordance with the Basic Law's Article 45, the ultimate goal of Hong Kong's political development is universal suffrage. However, the timetable remains open; the electoral law could be amended to achieve it. The Beijing government and pro-Beijing politicians have attempted to delay it by promoting the idea of "gradual reform." On April 26, 2004, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress explicitly denied the possibility of reaching universal suffrage by 2007 (for the chief executive) and by 2008 (for LegCo).

the British, were active in both community organizing and collective action. Besides pressing the quest for formal democracy, they have organized Hong Kong-wide campaigns on particular contentious issues since the 1980s. A case in point was their cooperation with environmental groups in large-scale mobilization against the construction of the Daya Bay nuclear plant near Hong Kong following the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

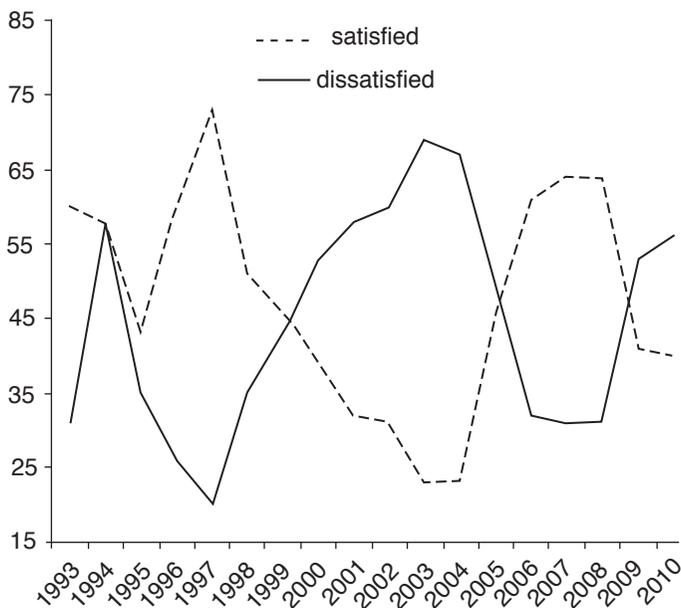
The gap between the promise and reality of Hong Kong's political development after 1997 became the impetus for the continuous growth of the democratic movement. Every year on the July 1 anniversary of the sovereignty handover, pro-democracy parties and social movement groups organized carnival-like demonstrations, creating a broad-based "rainbow coalition" that made diverse demands for minimum-wage legislation, gay rights, housing rights, and universal pensions. These were unified under the demand for universal suffrage.

Beijing's choices in eliminating the opposition in Hong Kong were constricted because outright repression was out of the question. Given the existing vibrant civil society, any open repression would trigger unpredictable turmoil in the territory. This would likely jeopardize Beijing's plan to use Hong Kong as an example for any future unification of China and Taiwan. Civil unrest would also threaten China's stated plan to reshape Hong Kong as an offshore financial center for internationalization of the RMB, requiring a credible legal structure, freedom of the press, and above all political stability.

Popular rage directed at local ruling circles mounted in Hong Kong as the government proved incapable of reviving the economy after the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98. Its failure to contain the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in 2003 only made matters worse. At the peak of discontent (see Figure 1), the government, under pressure from Beijing, initiated the anti-subversion legislation as predicated in the Basic Law in Article 23. Many otherwise non-activist scholars, journalists, and librarians, as well as the Catholic Church and many Protestant congregations, joined the democrats to oppose the legislation; they saw it as a grave threat to existing freedoms of speech and of association enjoyed since late colonial times.

The culmination of popular discontent was the massive demonstration on the sixth anniversary of the handover on July 1, 2003, when more than half a million protesters took to the streets. Spurred by the main theme of opposing the Article 23 legislation, the demonstration drew enthusiastic participation by youngsters who came of age after 1997. The demonstrators expressed a

FIGURE 1. Opinion Poll Survey Showing Percentage of Respondents Satisfied or Dissatisfied with the Hong Kong Government, 1993–2010



SOURCE: Hong Kong Transition Project, *Calm after the Storm? Hong Kong People Respond to Reform*, <www.hktp.org/list>, 2010.

wide range of concerns including the need for universal suffrage by 2007–08; they also issued attacks on business monopolies.

In response, Beijing acquiesced to an indefinite suspension of the Article 23 legislation process. In 2005, Beijing fired its handpicked chief executive, Tung Chee Hwa, partway through his second term. Tung, also head of a prominent business family, had become a primary target for the demonstrators. He was replaced in his government post by Donald Tsang, who had been a senior bureaucrat late in the colonial administration. By these actions Beijing apparently sought to enable the HKSAR government to sidestep popular charges of collusion with big business.

After making these two concessions, Beijing pushed back against the democrats' growing demand for universal suffrage in 2007–08. The Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress ruled in 2004 that universal suffrage would be out of the question for 2007–08. Given the Hong Kong government's repeated failures to revitalize the local economy, Beijing pressed for a Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Hong Kong in

2003 that brought swift economic recovery. The agreement accelerated and deepened Hong Kong's economic and social integration with China, opening the floodgates for mainland-to-Hong Kong flows of capital, visitors, and migrating professionals.

Following this series of concessions and offensives, and coupled with the strong economic rebound under CEPA, political confrontation cooled down. But under the surface, social cleavages that had spawned the 2003 mobilization continued to deepen. Public resentment against big business-government collusion erupted under Donald Tsang, and social polarization accelerated under CEPA. The integration of Hong Kong and mainland China hastened the relocation of businesses to China, jeopardizing both working class and middle class jobs in Hong Kong. The huge inflow of Chinese capital inflated the cost of living and created asset bubbles.⁶ The post-2003 economic boom, therefore, mostly benefited the business elite and members of the older, propertied middle class. At the same time, the boom impaired the living standards of the lower classes and younger middle class.⁷

Beijing's hardening stance on Hong Kong's transition to full democracy in 2007–08 was paralleled by a growing political consciousness among the younger generation following the mobilization against Article 23. This trend facilitated the rise of new and more-radical democratic groups, including the League of Social Democrats (LSD) and the Civic Party (CP), which stiffened efforts to defend Hong Kong's existing civil society and to demand universal suffrage. Both groups performed impressively in the 2008 LegCo election as brand new political organizations. In the meantime, a spate of community movements organized by diverse groups of students and young intellectuals arose in an effort to resist efforts by government and big corporations to destroy historic buildings, traditional neighborhoods, and natural wildlife habitats to make way for profitable redevelopment projects.⁸

6. Chan Man Hong, "CEPA yu Xianggang Chanye Jingji Kongdonghua" [CEPA and the hollowing out of Hong Kong industry and economy], *Taiwan Guojia Zhengce Xuekan* [Journal of Taiwan National Policy] 3:7 (July 2009), pp. 39–44. See also Poon Che Cheong and Joe Wong Fuk Kin, "Chong jianmi anpai kan Xianggang yu neidi de jingji jiegui" [On the economic integration between Hong Kong and mainland from the perspective of CEPA], unpublished paper, Economics Department, Hong Kong Shue Yan College, 2005, pp. 11–16.

7. Hong Kong Transition Project, "Protest and Post-80s Youth: Sources of Social Instability in Hong Kong," 2010, <<http://www.hktp.org/list/>>; see also Hung Ho-fung, "Uncertainties in the Enclave," *New Left Review*, series 2, no. 66 (November–December 2010), pp. 55–77.

8. Choi Dong Ho and Yan Kim Ho, *Qixia Siyi: Dalangxiwan Baoweizhan* [Seven warriors: Battle for Tai Long Sai Wan] (Hong Kong: Up Publications, 2010); Agnes S. Ku, "Re-Making Places

Together with this continuous mobilization of Hong Kong society, formal freedom of speech has been more or less maintained throughout the postcolonial period, thanks to the successful resistance to the Article 23 legislation. But many surveys do suggest that self-censorship among journalists and editors has been rising, and the media has become more reluctant to criticize the governments of Hong Kong and China.⁹ This may be related to the mainstream media's reliance on investment from local business magnates, who serve as Beijing's proxies in ruling Hong Kong.

At the same time, however, the popularization of high speed Internet access has facilitated the explosive growth of social movement activists' independent and alternative media. These media platforms, which openly scrutinize and criticize the Hong Kong and Beijing governments, were instrumental to the growth of the new radical wing of the democratic movement as well as the spate of community mobilizations against redevelopment projects. Some of these media outlets rival the most popular mainstream media. For instance, *hkreporter.com* and *MyRadio*, both financed and run by Stephen Shiu, a pro-democracy businessman and charismatic talk show host, became a hugely popular online discussion platform and the city's second largest online radio station, respectively.¹⁰ The traffic of the former is ranked 22nd in Hong Kong, as surveyed by *Alexa.com*.

THE ESCALATION OF CONTENTIOUS MOBILIZATION AND BEIJING'S DILEMMA

The radicalization of the democratic movement and the rise of community movements fighting redevelopment culminated in late 2009 and 2010. The latter movements developed into a large-scale campaign against the construction of the Hong Kong-Guangzhou section of the national High Speed Rail

and Fashioning an Opposition Discourse: Struggle over the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier in Hong Kong," *Environment and Planning D: Space and Society* 30:1 (2012), pp. 5–22; and Hung, "Uncertainties in the Enclave."

9. Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA), *Shrinking Margins: Freedom of Expression in Hong Kong since 1997* (Hong Kong: HKJA, 2007); idem, *Survey on Press Freedom in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: HKJA, 2007); and Francis L. F. Lee and Joseph M. Chan, "Professionalism, Political Orientation, and Perceived Self-Censorship: A Survey Study of Hong Kong Journalists," *Issues and Studies* 44:1 (March 2008), pp. 205–38.

10. Ip lam-chong, "Hong Kong: The Rise of a New Political Force," *Info-Rhizome: Report on Independent Media in the Chinese-speaking World (2008/09)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong In-media, 2009), pp. 48–68.

(HSR) system. Movement participants contended that the new railway would destroy rural and urban communities within Hong Kong and that its unit cost exceeded that of all other segments in the national system.

Since early 2009, small-scale protests by Choi Yuen villagers, whose village would be demolished to make room for the Guangzhou-Hong Kong Express Rail Link (XRL) construction announced in 2007, have escalated into recurrent demonstrations by thousands of people. Besides drawing villagers and residents in urban neighborhoods also facing disruption, these demonstrations attracted many citizens outraged by the astronomical costs of the hastily planned project (estimated at US\$8.6 billion for a section of just 26 kilometers)¹¹ as well as its extensive potential destruction of community life and the natural environment. Some professional groups and pro-democratic politicians argued that the XRL would only benefit vested real estate interests, while overloading the local transportation system. Still, LegCo members indirectly elected from professional and vested interests groups known as functional constituencies (FCs) and usually allied with Beijing almost unanimously supported the government's plan. Protesters in turn developed their collective dissent into a quest for full democratization of LegCo through abolishing all FC seats.

The legislative sessions designated for debating and voting on the government budget for the project in January 2010 drew almost 10,000 protesters. They encircled and blockaded the LegCo building, nearly succeeding in detaining government officials and pro-project legislators inside overnight. Although the movement did not forestall the project in the end, its mobilizing capacity and potential to paralyze the government alarmed Beijing. Officials in the Chinese capital had already been perturbed by the New Year's Eve actions of a group of young protesters, somewhat overlapping the anti-XRL activists, who broke through a police cordon to briefly occupy the back entrance to the Liaison Office, the de facto CCP headquarters in Hong Kong. These young protesters demanded universal suffrage and release of the jailed Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo. What apparently worried Beijing most was that through the spring of 2010, this emerging group joined hands with the rising new democratic parties to precipitate a referendum movement, even as the government debated political reforms centered on election methods for the chief executive and for LegCo in 2012.

11. Cheng Wing-Gar Cheng and Wendy Leung, "Hong Kong Accepts \$8.6 Billion China Rail Link Budget," *Bloomberg*, January 16, 2010.

After Beijing denied any possibility of universal suffrage in 2007–08, the democratic movement turned to demand universal suffrage in 2012. Then in fall 2009, the HKSAR government put forward a political reform proposal for the 2012 elections that ruled out universal suffrage. In reaction, the LSD, later joined by the CP, facilitated a de facto 2010 referendum to mobilize, galvanize, and manifest the will of the Hong Kong people for democracy, pressuring Beijing to implement universal suffrage in 2012.¹²

The plan of the LSD and CP was that the referendum would be initiated by the resignation of their five directly elected legislative councilors, each representing one of the five geographical constituencies covering all of Hong Kong. Those legislators would then campaign to regain their seats in the by-election, on the platform of universal suffrage. Each vote for any of the five candidates would then be seen as equivalent to a vote in support of the demand, turning the by-election into a referendum. Such a de facto referendum would set a precedent for Hong Kong citizens to express their collective will on significant issues in the future even though the SAR lacks a formal referendum law such as Taiwan's. Ultimately, the referendum materialized when the five legislators resigned in January 2010, and the by-election for their seats was scheduled for May.

Beijing charged that the referendum movement was a road toward Hong Kong independence. The Democratic Party, fearful of angering Beijing, refused to participate and opted for secret negotiations with central Chinese officials on modifying the SAR government's political reform proposal. But activists from community movements and alternative online media organizations participated to help get out the vote.

In the end, all five of the Democrats who resigned were reelected with nearly 90% of the cast votes, and half a million citizens turned out to vote despite an organized boycott of the by-election by the political establishment and the moderate Democratic Party. In the aftermath of the referendum, the young activists became ever more militant in their attempts to sabotage the government public relations campaign that advertised the political reform proposal. Public opinion polls showed that popular support for the government proposal eroded after the referendum, though it was not high to start with.¹³

12. Hung, "Uncertainties in the Enclave."

13. "Mindiao: Zhenggai zhichi diepo yiban" [Opinion poll: Support of government political reform proposal dropped below 50%], *Mingpao*, June 15, 2011.

Such escalation of popular mobilization, like the 2003 actions that halted the Article 23 legislation, forced Beijing to retreat. Officials finally accepted the Democratic Party's proposal for a piecemeal modification of the 2012 LegCo election method that would increase the proportion of seats for directly elected legislators. This again demonstrates how Beijing has had to retreat (albeit reluctantly) to ensure stability in Hong Kong, in the face of large-scale popular mobilization. Later in the year there was a political rumor that Beijing was pushing the Hong Kong government to relaunch the stalled Article 23 legislation before Donald Tsang finished his term as chief executive in 2012. But after vociferous opposition by journalists, scholars, and opposition groups, Tsang said the legislation would not appear on the agenda during the remainder of his term.¹⁴ It is possible that Beijing started the rumor to test Hong Kong's reaction, only to delay the effort again after further mobilization loomed.

The waves of mobilization from the anti-Article 23 protest in 2003 to the anti-XRL protest, as well as the referendum movement in 2010, show that Hong Kong's contentious civil society simply cannot be repressed. When Hong Kong citizens began defending their civil society under Chinese sovereignty, their dissent started to resonate with rights activists and liberal intellectuals in mainland China. Chinese leaders repeatedly warned that Hong Kong people should stay away from sensitive mainland affairs just like "well water should not disturb river water" (*jingshui bufan heshui*). This resonance is difficult to observe most of the time, but it became more visible at the height of mobilization in 2010.

THE RESONANCE OF HONG KONG'S DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT IN MAINLAND CHINA

Given recent intensifying currents between Hong Kong and the mainland—flow of visitors, circulation of information through high-speed Internet, and exchanges among scholars, journalists, and activists—it is inconceivable that Hong Kong's vibrant civil society has lacked impact on the mainland. Still, any such impact from mobilization upon China's heavily constricted civil society, where media and voluntary organizations are gripped tightly by the party-state,¹⁵ was often presumed, and hard to observe. What is significant

14. Tsang Yum-kuen, *The 2010–11 Policy Address: Sharing Prosperity for a Caring Society* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government, 2010), p. 48.

15. Nara Dillon, "Governing Civil Society: Adapting Revolutionary Methods to Serve Post-Communist Goals," in *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in*

about the confrontational mobilization in 2010 is that its repercussions in the mainland were overt, through both official media and the rising social media there. For example, the discontent expressed in Hong Kong's anti-XRL movement helped arouse mainlanders' interest in critical views on the national HSR project. A representative of such views was Zhao Jian, a professor at Beijing Jiaotong University, who denounced the whole HSR project on technological, financial, and safety grounds.¹⁶ When interviewed by Hong Kong media, he openly expressed support for the anti-XRL movement in Hong Kong, urging the activists to make use of the limited democratic system to stop the project.¹⁷ Zhao's view was widely circulated among mainland netizens, although he refused to comment further on the movement in Hong Kong, probably because of pressure from the authorities.

The anti-XRL campaign was also highlighted in *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (Nanfang dushi bao) and *New Weekly* (Xin zhoukan), the most popular and liberal official newspapers and magazines in China, based in Guangzhou. In late 2010, *Southern Metropolitan Daily* even granted the Annual Award of Citizens to Choi Yuen villagers, the backbone of Hong Kong's anti-XRL mobilization. *New Weekly* selected the movement as one of the 2010 top 10 "spectated (*weiguan*) events." This is a term coined by Chinese netizens to refer to a disguised form of political participation using commentary, discussion, or reporting in cyberspace on controversial public events as a means to evade state censorship. Such official media endorsement of Hong Kong's anti-XRL movement is intriguing because the movement's actions recall many cases of "rightful resistance" in the mainland against forced eviction and land grabs by corrupt officials.¹⁸ Even though mainland media could hardly express direct support for any type of rightful resistance within mainland China, its sympathetic coverage of Hong Kong's anti-XRL campaign can be seen as a tacit endorsement of similar protests in the mainland.

China, ed. Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Asia Center, 2011); Zhao Yuezhi, "Sustaining and Contesting Revolutionary Legacies in Media and Ideology," in *ibid.*

16. Zhao Jian, "Blind Pursuit Fails to Meet Needs," *China Daily*, April 9, 2010, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2010-04/19/content_9745174_2.htm>.

17. "Beijing Academic Urges Hong Kong Lawmakers to Block Costly Express Rail Link," *South China Morning Post*, October 4, 2009.

18. For discussion of "rightful resistance" in China, see Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Apart from mainstream media, nascent social media such as Twitter and Sina Weibo¹⁹ provided vast new platforms for Chinese citizens to exchange views and information about variegated public affairs. The scope and speed of information flow over the Internet made censorship more difficult.²⁰ During the anti-XRL campaign, *Southern Metropolitan Daily* even sent a correspondent to Hong Kong to follow developments. These concerned mainlanders and their Hong Kong counterparts established the common hashtag “#stopxrl” to live-tweet rallies against the XRL, allowing mainland netizens to follow the mobilization in real time and express solidarity. Many well-known liberal bloggers openly supported the anti-XRL campaign. One of them, Li Puman, equated the anger of the anti-HSR campaigners to the fury of mainland citizens whose lives were uprooted by reckless development. Li expanded his support of the anti-XRL movement to the level of supporting universal suffrage in Hong Kong in his blog: “Usually, the government would tell the masses about an apparently bright future, and then let the people pay for the bill [of development]. It doesn’t matter whether such a bright future will ever come; by the time of disillusion, ordinary people can do nothing. . . . In a Hong Kong that has no universal suffrage, what can the people do?”²¹

Mainlanders’ attention to Hong Kong’s mobilization is not confined to non-political issues like the anti-XRL movement; it extends to highly sensitive and political problems as well, such as the campaign demanding the release of China’s political prisoners. In the New Year rally of 2010 mentioned above that ended in the storming of Hong Kong’s CCP headquarters, thousands of Hong Kong citizens demanded the release of internationally known political prisoner Liu Xiaobo. Tweepers from Hong Kong, mainland China, and Taiwan reported the whole event live on the Internet and pushed the hashtag “#0101hk” into one of the top spots of items discussed on Twitter that day. This is probably the most conspicuous cooperation in the past 20 years between citizens of Hong Kong and mainland China on political issues. In general, liberal mainland Internet

19. The micro-blogging market in China is dominated by Sina and Tencent, which have provided *weibo* (microblog) services after Twitter was blocked in June 2009. Yet, mainland Chinese people reach Twitter through proxies, VPNs (virtual private networks), and other tools to get around the Great Firewall.

20. Yang Guobin, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

21. Author’s own translation. Cited in Xin Yu, “Xianggang Fan Gaotie Xingdong Xiaoying Chixu Dalu Wangmin Wangluo Shengyun” [Impact of Hong Kong anti-HSR actions continues and mainland netizens offered their support online]. Radio Free Asia, January 19, 2010, <<http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/gaotie-0119201010101249.html>>.

users became increasingly interested in political activism in Hong Kong and supported its democratic movement. For example, Ran Yunfei, a nationally renowned blogger based in Sichuan Province, once noted that “Free Hong Kong is also ours” (*Ziyoude Xianggang yeshi womende*).²²

Apart from communication via the Internet, the geographical and cultural proximity of Hong Kong to South China also helped spread dissident views, political idioms, and protest repertoires to the mainland. This was illustrated in the “Pro-Cantonese Campaign” (*Cheng Yueyu Yundong*) in the summer of 2010 that invoked the shared vernacular culture and local identity across the Pearl River Delta. In July, the deputy director of the Guangzhou Political Consultation Committee suggested that local television channels should switch from using Cantonese to Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) in their prime-time shows during the coming Asian Games. This suggestion was taken by local people in Guangzhou as a culmination of the government project over the past 15 years to promote official Mandarin in place of local Cantonese dialects.

In response, Guangzhou netizens organized a “Defending Cantonese” rally on July 11 at the People’s Park of Guangzhou. They mobilized through the Internet; hundreds of citizens showed up, an impressive turnout in Guangzhou. Because Hong Kong has been the powerhouse of media and popular culture, nurturing several generations of Cantonese-based culture in the Pearl River Delta region, it is no surprise that the young Guangzhou protesters, mostly in their teens and twenties, sang Cantopop songs from Hong Kong throughout the rally. What is remarkable is that many of them even chanted in Cantonese modified political slogans that originated in the referendum movement in Hong Kong. During the referendum movement, the government advertised its conservative proposal for political reform through a public relations slogan, “Set Sail Political Reform!” (*Zhenggai Qimao*), while the radical democrats used the slogan “Go Bust Political Reform!” (*Zhenggai Shoupi*) against the government proposal. In the Defending Cantonese rally, the most visible slogan was “Set Sail Cantonese, Go Bust Mandarin!” (*Guangdonghua Qimao, Putonghua Shoupi*). After the July 11 rally, the netizens organized another on July 25; close to 10,000 citizens showed up, manifesting more intense passion than at the preceding one.

After several Hong Kong activists and citizen reporters joined the July 25 protests in Guangzhou, netizens in both cities co-organized a concurrent demonstration on August 1. The Guangzhou government was on high alert and

22. Ran Yunfei, “Ziyoude Xianggang Yeshe Womende” <<https://ranyunfei.com/2010/01/1010.htm>>.

warned of a crackdown. Despite the warning, more than 1,000 Guangzhou citizens appeared and demonstrated along Beijing Road in downtown. In Hong Kong, about 500 protesters marched to the government headquarters in support of their compatriots in Guangzhou. Guangzhou police did not crack down on the campaigners, only detaining a few organizers for questioning. After provincial officials in Guangdong guaranteed that Cantonese would continue to be respected and there was no plan to eliminate its use in local official media, the movement in Guangzhou subsided. This episode is remarkable: it was the first time since 1989 that mainland and Hong Kong activists took to the streets for the same cause. The spread of political slogans from Hong Kong to Guangzhou indicates that contentious mobilization in Hong Kong's civil society has been closely watched, admired, and appropriated by citizens in the mainland.

The campaign in support of Ai Weiwei, an internationally renowned Chinese artist and activist arrested by the Chinese government at the height of its crackdown on an incipient homegrown "Jasmine Revolution" in April 2011, also illustrates the new dynamic of cross-border activism between Hong Kong and the mainland. Openly requesting Ai's release in the mainland is politically impossible, but in Hong Kong, beyond the routine protests by human rights activists and democrats, many young activists and artists initiated a street art campaign that spread to the mainland. These activists, calling themselves "art citizens" (*yishu gongmin*) created graffiti drawings of Ai accompanied by slogans such as "Free Ai Weiwei" and "Who's Afraid of Ai Weiwei?" in public areas all over the city. Very soon, similar graffiti appeared in a number of mainland cities.²³

The influence on the mainland of the new political culture emerging among younger generations of Hong Kong activists is unmistakable. We will see in the next section that blossoming alongside this occasional interaction is a more-institutionalized dynamic between Hong Kong and mainland civil societies.

MAINLAND CHINA'S OFFSHORE CIVIL SOCIETY IN HONG KONG

As we showed earlier, following the sovereignty handover Beijing clamped down on Hong Kong's civil society, calling it a "subversive base"—to no avail. Beijing's failed effort to eliminate Hong Kong's civil liberties was marked

23. "Beijing Jingxian Ting Ai, Manyan Chüanguo" [Graffiti supporting Ai appeared in Beijing and spread to the whole country], *Apple Daily* (Hong Kong), April 25, 2011.

by the successful mobilization against the Article 23 legislation in 2003 and its indefinite delay after 2010. The vibrant civil society of Hong Kong, despite its inability to push forward significant policy changes, has been effective so far in defending the liberty of the SAR.²⁴ This liberal political space stands poised to facilitate the development of civil society in mainland China through variegated channels. These include participation of mainland visitors in Hong Kong's political activities, facilitation of mainland-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Hong Kong, exposure of more and more mainland students to Hong Kong's civic debate about China, and the operation of relatively liberal mainland media organization in Hong Kong.

As protests, rallies, and assemblies have continued to be part of the daily routine in Hong Kong post-1997, they have also become "tourist attractions" for mainland Chinese visitors, whose numbers soared after Beijing loosened control over mainlanders' visits under CEPA. The annual count of mainlanders' visits to Hong Kong jumped from 12.25 million in 2003 to 22.47 million in 2010.²⁵ Some of these tourists are susceptible to the influences of the culture of Hong Kong's civil society. Increasing participation of mainland visitors in the annual June 4 candlelight vigil in Hong Kong commemorating Tiananmen is a case in point.

Since the first anniversary of the crackdown in 1990, the candlelight vigil rally at Victoria Park in the Causeway Bay District has become a regular venue at which organizations concerned about human rights in China hold forums and distribute publications. A noteworthy trend, as noted by local media, is the increasing presence of mainland tourists joining the vigil. Time and again, the SAR government has tried to discourage citizens' participation, denouncing the 1989 student movement as subversive or repressing part of the commemoration, for example, in 2010 when police moved to confiscate a re-creation of the Goddess of Democracy statue.²⁶ But these moves by officials have backfired, only driving up the number of vigil attendees (see Table 1).

At the same time, a wide variety of rights groups and other NGOs dedicated to progressive change in mainland China have been settling in

24. Ma Ngok, "Social Movement and State-Society Relationship in Hong Kong," in *Social Movements in China and Hong Kong: The Expansion of Protest Space*, ed. Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Gilles Guiheux (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), pp. 45–64.

25. Hong Kong Tourism Board, *Annual Report 2004/2005* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2005), p. 31; and idem, "Release of Provisional Visitor Arrivals for 2010," press release, January 7, 2011.

26. The police returned the statue to protesters a few days after confiscation.

TABLE I. Number of Attendees of the Candlelight Vigil on June 4, 1990–2011

<i>Year</i>	<i>Police's Figure</i>	<i>HKASPDM's Figure</i>
2011	77,000	150,000
2010	113,000	150,000
2009	62,000	150,000
2008	15,000	48,000
2007	27,000	55,000
2006	19,000	44,000
2005	22,000	45,000
2004	48,000	82,000
2003	Not available	50,000
2002	18,000	45,000
2001	Not available	48,000
2000	Not available	45,000
1999	Not available	70,000
1998	Not available	40,000
1997	Not available	55,000
1996	16,000	45,000
1995	16,000	35,000
1994	12,000	45,000
1993	10,000	40,000
1992	28,000	80,000
1991	60,000	100,000
1990	80,000	150,000

SOURCE: Joseph M. Chan and Francis L. F. Lee, "Why Can't Hong Kong Forget the June 4th Incident? Media, Social Organization, Nation-State, and Collective Memory," *Mass Communication Research* 103 (April 2010), pp. 215–59, p. 218; *Ming Pao*, June 5, 2010, and June 5, 2011.

Hong Kong since late colonial times. This trend was not interrupted by the sovereignty handover. Groups including Human Rights Monitor and Amnesty International (Hong Kong) have been active in public education, disseminating reports on Chinese human rights conditions. Labor groups emerging from within Hong Kong, such as Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM), have organized campaigns to investigate working conditions and advocate labor rights in mainland factories.

Chinese political exiles have also set up their own groups in the city. Han Dongfang, a well-known labor union organizer during the Tiananmen protests of 1989, was arrested, imprisoned, and expelled to Hong Kong in 1993. He founded *China Labor Bulletin* to collect and disseminate information about Chinese labor activism. Han has maintained and expanded contacts with labor activists, lawyers, and intellectuals in the mainland and

worked closely with international labor organizations. His operation in Hong Kong remains intact thus far. The Center for Human Rights and Democracy, set up by Lu Siqing, another 1989 activist, is a news agency in Hong Kong specializing in Chinese human rights. Other repressed voices from mainland China, such as the banned religious organization Falun Gong as well as various victims of forced eviction and official corruption, are often heard in Hong Kong. The above-mentioned groups and individuals can freely produce and circulate their publications, many of which are deliberately distributed to visiting mainland tourists. The continued existence of these people, groups, and outlets in Hong Kong, made possible by the people's struggles against the legal and political restrictions on civil rights and freedom such as Article 23 legislation, has created an offshore civil society for China.

Besides providing a platform for civic participation in China, Hong Kong is also becoming a support center for China's nascent NGO sector. Since the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, the Chinese government has allowed a homegrown NGO sector to develop as a response to the demands of the international community. But this sector is still subject to strict governmental surveillance, restriction, and occasional crackdowns. Many NGOs also confront difficulties in registration, fund-raising, recruitment, and institutional development. Some prefer to register as associations or corporations in Hong Kong and look for local and international funding sources. At the same time, many international NGOs, such as Greenpeace and Oxfam, have used Hong Kong as a base and springboard for their development in mainland China since the 1990s.

Hong Kong is not merely a meeting place for local, international, and mainland NGOs. It also functions as a learning center for mainland activists. Hong Kong academics and NGO professionals organize capacity-building programs for Chinese NGO campaigners, administrators, and volunteers to help them develop tactical and organizational skills for their engagement with the Chinese government. For instance, the Center for Civil Society Studies, affiliated with the Chinese University of Hong Kong, has been working closely with mainland NGOs, universities, and local governments on NGO-related training, research, and consultancy. The actual outcome is yet to be seen, but in the long run these cross-border NGO networks will certainly contribute to the development of Chinese civil society.

In the meantime, as illustrated by Table 2, the soaring number of mainland students and scholars in Hong Kong universities in recent years has spawned

TABLE 2. Share of Mainland Students in Total Enrollment in Hong Kong Universities, 1996–2001

Year	Mainland Undergraduate Student as % of Total	Mainland Postgraduate Student as % of Total	All Mainland Students as % of Total
1996/97	0	5.5	1.3
1997/98	0	6.3	1.5
1998/99	0.1	6.4	1.6
1999/00	0.4	7.1	2.0
2000/01	0.7	7.4	2.3
2001/02	1.1	9.2	3.0
2002/03	1.3	10.4	3.5
2003/04	1.7	12.6	4.3
2004/05	2.5	15.6	5.2
2005/06	3.9	21.3	7.0
2006/07	5.7	26.8	9.2
2007/08	6.9	29.8	10.6
2008/09	7.9	33.9	11.9
2009/10	8.1	38.9	12.7
2010/11	8.1	40.7	13.0

SOURCE: Hong Kong Transition Project, *Calm after the Storm?* p. 90.

a new dynamic in local and mainland intellectual circles. Many of these mainland students, trained to be very cautious in expressing their political views, are exposed to the culture of free political discussion in Hong Kong. In 2009, Chan Yi-Ngor, president of the Student Union of Hong Kong University, denounced the 1989 Beijing student movement and accused its leaders of causing chaos in Tiananmen Square. He said that they should be responsible for the resulting bloody confrontation. He expressed support for the government crackdown and denigrated the student leaders as “runaway student leaders.” Some local students and alumni from the university found Chan’s remarks disrespectful to the victims of 1989 and launched a campaign to recall him. The ensuing heated debates and recall referendum involved many mainland students who had learned little about the Tiananmen Square incident during their previous political education. No matter which side they supported, it was their first opportunity to engage freely in public discussion through open forums and “democracy walls,” an established institution for public discussions among university students in Hong Kong since the 1970s. Historically speaking, these walls also continue the legacy of the “Democracy Wall Movement” and the “Beijing Spring” phenomena in China.

Some mainland students have even transformed themselves into active participants in Hong Kong's democratic culture. For example, following the July 2011 HSR accident in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, that killed at least 40 passengers, Hong Kong media vociferously expressed skepticism about the official explanation for the accident and questioned the government's rescue effort as well as the handling of the train wreck. Mainland media were equally critical initially, only to be muted later while Hong Kong's coverage and debate continued. Apparently influenced by this persistently critical concern, 10 mainland students in Hong Kong issued an online petition letter requesting Beijing to fully investigate the accident.²⁷

In another example, the visit of Vice Premier Li Keqiang to Hong Kong University on August 18, 2011, instigated a heated debate in Hong Kong because of the exceptionally high level of security during the visit. The local police took over campus security, preemptively detained would-be student protesters, and restricted media access to the venue during Li's visit. Comparing this heavy-handed approach to more relaxed security during earlier visits to Hong Kong universities by Chinese leaders, many local commentators and politicians lamented the increasing disrespect for civil liberties and the law by the police. Alumni and students meanwhile expressed resentment over the university's loss of dignity, autonomy, and freedom stemming from the police takeover of campus security and aggressiveness toward student protestors. During a rally that denounced the police action attended by thousands of Hong Kong University alumni, faculty, and students, at least two mainland students stepped forward to address the participants. They spoke about how they valued Hong Kong as the last bastion of liberty and freedom of speech in China, how they appreciated the feeling of "liberation" once they arrived in Hong Kong, and how important the defense of such public space is.²⁸

Despite persistent worries in Hong Kong about the erosion of civil liberties in general, and the loss of freedom of speech through manipulation of local media by pro-Beijing elites in particular,²⁹ Hong Kong is becoming an alternative Chinese media hub where relatively liberal Chinese media organizations can target a mainland audience. The Chinese media industry, which

27. "Liugang Neidi Sheng Lianshu Cucha Dongche Canju" [Mainland students in Hong Kong petition for investigation of high speed rail tragedy], *Apple Daily*, August 3, 2011.

28. "Shouhu Zhongguo Zuihou Ziyoudi" [To protect that last land of freedom in China], *Mingpao*, August 28, 2011.

29. HKJA, *Shrinking Margins*.

has rapidly marketized since the 1990s, is still subject to official censorship and ownership control. Some Chinese media workers and investors with connections to official media and the Chinese government have moved to Hong Kong seeking more room to maneuver, being unable to operate freely in the mainland.

Phoenix Television, founded in 1996, is a Hong Kong-based Putonghua satellite television broadcaster serving the Greater China market. Its shareholders include media and telecommunications companies from China, and well-connected elites such as its chief executive officer (CEO) and founder Liu Changle, who reportedly has a background with the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Phoenix Television's 24-hour news channel, established in 2001, covers news from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, including events not covered by mainland media such as elections and protests in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In 2003, the firm was granted landing rights (i.e., permission to have its satellite signals received) by the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Films, and Television (SARFT). Many of Phoenix TV's anchors and talk show hosts such as Dou Wentao, Xu Zhidong, and Leung Mantao (Liang Wendao) are not shy about commenting on sensitive topics. Among them, Leung is an exemplar of the new Hong Kong-China cultural dynamic. Having grown up in Hong Kong and Taiwan, he has been active in cultural criticism and social activism since the 1990s. Late in that decade, he began to work as host and guest speaker for public affairs programs reaching millions of mainland viewers including *Behind the Headlines with Wentao* on Phoenix TV. With his knowledge, eloquence, and humor, he has established himself as a prominent critic of China's government, social malaises, and cultural phenomena. He has contributed to major official newspapers, and his books have ranked high on the best-seller charts in the mainland.

Sun Television, founded in 2000, is another Hong Kong-based satellite television company targeting a mainland Chinese audience. In 2005, Chen Ping, a businessman who was a liberal think-tank intellectual in the 1980s and left his position in the Chinese government after 1989, acquired the company from the couple Wu Zheng and Yang Lan, a pro-Beijing businessman and an ex-CCTV (China Central Television) anchor, respectively. Chen recruited a number of Chinese liberal intellectuals as talk show hosts and released independent documentaries, some of which were produced by social and cultural activists such as Ai Weiwei and Ai Xiaoming. After Sun Television's landing rights were revoked by SARFT in November 2010, likely because

its programs often conveyed dissident views, it moved its headquarters from Shanghai to Hong Kong. As Chen has noted, his company is attempting to take advantage of Hong Kong's freedom and rule of law to establish independent media for exchange and propagation of cultural ideas and political views.³⁰ Although Sun cannot legally broadcast in the mainland, mainland residents can still freely receive its satellite signal, watch its programs online, and read its online magazine.

Another new contribution of Hong Kong to Chinese media is book publishing. Hong Kong, not subject to any political censorship in publication, is fertile ground for publishing houses targeting mainland readers; publishers offer popular titles ranging from exposés of mainland corruption and collections of confidential official documents such as *The Tiananmen Papers* to controversial memoirs such as *Mao: The Untold Story* and Zhao Ziyang's memoirs. Many local bookstores, particularly those in the airport, and souvenir shops in tourist hotspots are filled with mainland visitors perusing their stocks of politically sensitive books banned in the mainland. Mainland visitors now account for more than half of the sales of many titles. Attendance of mainlanders at Hong Kong's annual book fair has grown so rapidly that since 2009 the organizer has promoted the event in mainland China as a tourist attraction.³¹

In sum, we see that the persistence of civil society and general political freedom in Hong Kong, despite stagnation and setbacks in the city's democratization, is turning Hong Kong into the only place in China where the CCP government can be criticized overtly. Sensitive political histories like the 1989 democratic movement can be freely discussed, and reports about dissidents and conflicts in China can be openly circulated. With the intensifying economic and social integration between Hong Kong and mainland China and the mounting inflow of mainland visitors, including scholars, students, NGO activists, and journalists, the existence of such civil society will not only shape the political development of Hong Kong but also that of China. Indeed, it is not only a civil society of Hong Kong but also an emerging civil society for mainland China.

30. Zhang Jieping, "Yangguang Weishi Nianju Ganyan Liliang" [Sun Television consolidates the power of courage to speak], *Yazhou Zhoukan* [Asia Weekly] 24:40, October 10, 2010, <http://www.yzzk.com/cfm/Content_Archive.cfm?Channel=br&Path=2235488802/40br1a.cfm>.

31. Jonathan Cheng, "China's Bookstore: Why the Chinese-reading World Still Flocks to Hong Kong," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2009, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124770567529348929.html>>.

CONCLUSION

According to the Sino-British Joint Declaration and later the Basic Law, the status quo of Hong Kong, including its civil liberties and political freedom established since the 1970s and 1980s, should remain “unchanged” after retrocession in 1997 for at least 50 years. The same documents also promised continuous democratization of Hong Kong’s government until the realization of universal suffrage. These promises, together with the fear that Hong Kong would be politically and culturally assimilated into the mainland, became the impetus for the democratic movement. This movement, built upon the vibrant civil society that sprang up in the form of variegated social movements and critical journalism in the 1970s, has been striving to defend preexisting political freedom in Hong Kong and since late colonial times has demanded genuine universal suffrage.

Under Beijing’s constraint that it could not resort to open repression in dealing with the democratic movement, together with Hong Kong’s role as China’s offshore financial center and its utility as a showcase of “one country, two systems” to Taiwan, Hong Kong’s democratic movement and civil society have proven to be tenacious. Still, with the entrenched alliance between Beijing and the Hong Kong business elite against democratization, progress toward universal suffrage has been disappointing. Many activists now believe that genuine universal suffrage in Hong Kong will never come unless China democratizes. On the other hand, the democratic movement so far has succeeded in defending Hong Kong’s established civil society against Beijing’s attempt to tighten its control. This success was possible because Beijing yielded to popular pressure, and the repressive Article 23 legislation was delayed, once in 2003 and again in 2010. Such legislation, if implemented, would destroy the foundation of Hong Kong’s civil society, including freedom of speech and freedom of association.

Hong Kong’s growing civil society under Chinese rule is becoming mainland China’s offshore civil society. The case of Hong Kong complicates the conventional definition of the term “civil society,” which usually refers to an ethical-political community of citizens under a system of rule and bounded by its territory.³² On the contrary, Hong Kong’s civil society, as an

32. Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 84–87.

offshore space, resides simultaneously inside and outside China's sovereign power. It not only inspires rights activists, bloggers, and liberal intellectuals in the mainland but serves them as a clearinghouse for information and ideas. Hong Kong is also a hub of NGOs and media organizations from the mainland and for the mainland. Rights activists and liberal intellectuals from there are shrewdly taking advantage of this unique space to connect with one another, with the outside world, and with their audiences. It is still too early to tell how much this offshore civil society can contribute to social and political change in the mainland, but its potential should not be underestimated. The accelerating social and economic integration between Hong Kong and mainland China that sends hundreds of thousands of mainland scholars, students, and other visitors to Hong Kong every year is exposing them to opportunities for political participation and civic exchange unimaginable at home.

Historically, Hong Kong played a similar role as an offshore civil society in Chinese politics at the turn of the twentieth century. The border was wide open, and modern China's founder Sun Yat-sen, together with many other Chinese reformists and revolutionaries, used the British colony's relatively free political space to advocate and struggle for change in China.

The continuous survival and growth of Hong Kong's civil society today, however, is not guaranteed by any stable institutional arrangement. It is contingent upon the ability of local citizens to defeat repeated attempts by Beijing to wrap Hong Kong in an authoritarian straitjacket. It is nearly certain that Beijing will try again to rein in this space by reenacting the Article 23 legislation, which will again trigger resistance and contentious mobilization among Hong Kong citizens. Given the increasing significance of Hong Kong's civil society to the mainland, the stakes of any prospective conflict will be much higher than the political development of Hong Kong alone. This will be an organic part of the battle over the long run for political reform in China.

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