

Hong Kong Protests



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Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution began on September 28, 2014 when police clashed with pro-democracy protestors (and the latter employed umbrellas to block the tear gas and pepper spray). But the roots of the protests go back much further, to Hong Kong's former status as an economically vibrant, and disenfranchised, British colony; its current "one country, two systems" administration following the 1997 return to Chinese control; and its growing income inequality. The flashpoint for the current protests was the Chinese Parliament's decision in late August to restrict candidates for Hong Kong's highest office – chief executive – to those people first vetted by a pro-Beijing panel. Protesters are calling for a direct election, and for the resignation of the current chief executive Leung Chun-ying, who they see as entirely unwilling to negotiate this reform with Beijing. After a month of protests, the chief executive did concede that the election process could be made "more democratic," but lacking specifics or promises, this concession has not placated the thousands of protestors, many of whom remain encamped on major thoroughfares and in busy downtown areas.

Protestors have boycotted university classes and created an erstwhile community that is striking for its inclusion of minorities (Hong Kong is made up of 6.4% non-Chinese) and for its practical elements – an outdoor study hall made of scrap wood – and its services – a library, art displays, and an art therapy station. Violent clashes have ensued between police trying to clear the roadblocks and protestors standing their ground, prompting fears of a recurrence of something like Tiananmen Square, where, in 1989, nearly 10,000 Chinese troops descended upon pro-democracy protestors, killing many hundreds of student protestors and local residents (the commemoration of which is observed each year in Hong Kong, but forbidden in mainland China). Today's protestors would like to see a system in which Beijing's policies and values concerning democracy, including freedom of speech and press, have less hold over Hong Kong, a city with a distinctly global history.

The British victory over China in the first Opium War enabled the European colonial power to take possession of Hong Kong island in 1842. The British were keen on gaining a secure base for trade in the extremely profitable opium market. By 1857 Hong Kong operated as a key market link between the East and the West, providing great wealth to its indigenous and colonial merchants and traders (though the hierarchical structure of Hong Kong's colonial society meant that even wealthy locals were not welcome in the British clubs, golf courses, and other such social venues). In 1898, the British and Chinese signed the New Territories lease, which granted the British rights over the Kowloon peninsula and surrounding territory for 99 years, in the name of defense.

China's communist turn in 1949 improved trade for Hong Kong, given that its main trading rival – Shanghai – closed to foreign capital. Beginning in the 1940s, and continuing for decades, large numbers of Chinese immigrants arrived in Hong Kong. These new residents helped fuel Hong Kong's industrial growth, and from 1961-1997 Hong Kong's GDP grew on average 7.5% a year. While its income per capita had stood at ¼ of that of the United Kingdom in 1949, by 1997 Hong Kong's economic growth meant that its income per capita was roughly equivalent to its onetime colonial power. Nevertheless, a good deal of inequality continues to exist within Hong Kong, as it did during its colonial days. A pro-business government has long meant little support for social services and welfare, even as the proportion of residents living in poverty has increased, and job opportunities have decreased in recent years. A significant portion of protestors cite inequality as one of their major points of concern. Meanwhile, the number of people living in poverty has caused the chief executive to argue recently that full democracy would give an excess of power to the poor.

In 1997, Hong Kong passed back into Chinese authority under a policy of "one country, two systems" that was to allow for some continuity with former economic and governance structures. China agreed to a Special Administrative Region for Hong Kong, vesting it with executive, legislative and independent judicial power, all under a chief executive appointed by China. Today's protests reflect the fact that some residents of Hong Kong – especially the youth – do not identify with China and its policies, and do not accept the idea that Hong Kong lacks the autonomy to decide its own leaders. Most protestors indicate that they will stay the course for a year or more in an effort to force change.

*-Shelley Brooks, Ph.D., CHSSP Statewide Office**

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1842: The Treaty of Nanking grants the island of Hong Kong, in perpetuity, to the UK after victory over the Chinese in the first Opium War.

1898: New Territories agreement – the Kowloon peninsula and surrounding territory leased to Britain for 99 years so that Britain could protect Hong Kong harbor and trade investments.

1925-26: Imbued with nationalist sentiment, college students, restaurant/club staff, shopkeepers, and laborers strike for improved working conditions and equal treatment alongside the British (the strike also takes place on mainland China). Britain invests 3 million pounds to keep Hong Kong's economy afloat during the 16-month strike.

1984: Sino-British Joint Declaration declares a Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, under the authority of China but with a "high degree of autonomy;" a chief executive "appointed" by China "on the basis of the results of elections or consultations to be held locally." In addition, "Rights and freedoms, including those of the person, of speech, of the press, of assembly...of strike...will be ensured by law in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region."

July 1, 1997: UK transfers Hong Kong back to China. Technically, according to the treaties, it was only the New Territories that were to return to China at the end of the 99-year lease, but changed power dynamics by the late twentieth century meant that Britain was not to hold onto Hong Kong.

2004: China says it must approve any changes to Hong Kong's election laws.

March 27, 2013: Occupy Central – organizers of the pro-democracy protests – say they will promote protests if China fails to agree to universal suffrage.

June 2014: Unofficial referendum held by pro-democracy activists – hundreds of thousands vote to indicate their opinions on election policy.

July 1, 2014: on the anniversary of Hong Kong's transfer from British to Chinese control, close to 500,000 people march in downtown Hong Kong, with a student-led sit-in in the business district. The march and sit-in are considered a sign of growing dissatisfaction with Beijing.

August 31, 2014: China announces that a committee with clear loyalties to Beijing will first vet candidates for the office of chief executive for the 2017 election – which is set to be a direct election.

September 22, 2014: Student activist groups boycott classes to call for greater democracy.

September 28, 2014: Police use tear gas and pepper spray on pro-democracy groups who protest in downtown Hong Kong, jumpstarting a large-scale protest that continues to this day.

October 3, 2014: Anti-Occupy protestors attack the pro-democracy groups in the Mong Kok district, calling for an end to the protests. Police protect the pro-democracy protestors, and raise question of whether these attacks were part of an organized crime endeavor.

October 14-15, 2014: Violent clashes between protestors and police. Pepper spray, batons used against protestors in an effort to remove traffic barricades erected for the protests.

October 21, 2014: Hong Kong government officials hold talks with protest leaders (which are televised) to discuss grievances. One student leader remarks after the talk that the government "didn't give us material response or direction. We're disappointed, and we must continue to stay here."

October 28, 2014: The one-month mark of the Hong Kong protests. Thousands of pro-democracy activists rally outside Hong Kong's government headquarters.

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Hong Kong and Vicinity



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Map courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin:
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/hong_kong_pol98.jpg

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Additional Resources**

Teaching Tools:

- CHSSP blog: http://chssp.ucdavis.edu/copy_of_blog/roots-of-the-hong-kong-protests

Background Materials:

- Reuters: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/28/us-hongkong-china-idUSKBN0IH1JA20141028>
- BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29413349>
- CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/07/world/asia/hong-kong-protest-explainer/>

Primary Source Documents:

- 1842 Treaty of Nanking: <http://nanking.com/>
- 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~cngai/jointdeclaration.htm>

Images:

- Wall Street Journal: <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/10/28/30-days-later-a-month-of-hong-kong-pro-democracy-protests-in-photos/>

Timeline:

- Wall Street Journal: <http://graphics.wsj.com/timelines/occupyhk>

Video:

- Yahoo News: https://news.yahoo.com/katie-couric-now-i-get-it-umbrella-revolution-175949877.html?mktg=ykatie-sem-goog-brand&chan=sem&ptrn=goog&prop=ykatie&cmp=brand&sid=sr3_14352879_go

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**The resources listed above are provided for further research and do not imply an endorsement by the California History-Social Science Project or the University of California.