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China's Crown Jewel or Achilles Heel: The Tale of Hong Kong

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On March 8, 2015 China's third most powerful man and Chief of Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC), Zhang Dejiang, reiterated that China will uphold its August 31, 2014 decision to screen candidates running for Chief Executive's election in 2017¹. Despite the fact that Beijing has permitted Hong Kong to be different from the Mainland, it is a matter of speculation whether its apprehensions towards fostering full democracy exceeds its economic considerations in the internationally vibrant city. While "one person, one vote" was agreed upon to end the mixed system of partial election and selection by geographical districts and functional constituencies; decision of the NPCSC mandated that Hong Kong voters will elect their Chief Executive from two or three candidates selected by a 1200-person "nomination committee." This decision was seen as Beijing's desire to dictate the political discourse in Hong Kong and stifle genuine "universal suffrage", leading to widespread protests, spearheaded by students in late 2014.

Following a September 22, 2014 class boycott campaign by several universities and higher-education institutions, four days later students led by the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism stormed the Civic Square triggering massive protests outside the Central Government offices in Admiralty. Scholarism is a student activist group and the first pressure group against the new Moral and National Education (MNE) in Hong Kong. MNE, a controversial subject promoted by Beijing, praises communist and nationalist ideology, while condemning democracy and republicanism. The protests gained more fire when two days later, Benny Tai, an Associate Professor of Law at University of Hong Kong announced the official start of the ***Occupy Central with Love and***



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Peace civil disobedience campaign (organization- OCLP) to add to the stage set by the student protests.

With police's use of force to disperse protesters (and later Mainland using the triads), the movement spread beyond the united front of the three major groups- OCLP, HKFS and Scholarism- to become a non-centralized, self-supporting political movement that became known as the **Umbrella Movement** (a reference to rain apparel used against police pepper spray and tear gas). The Umbrella Movement began on a passionate start in September but whimpered away in mid-December when the main founding members surrendered to the police to reign in radical protestors who began ransacking government buildings in late November. Even in the last hours, the Umbrella movement was however upbeat as near the Hong Kong headquarters of China's People's Liberation Army, a large orange banner was draped across barricades, emblazoned with the words: "It's just the beginning²." While the movement was hampered by internal divisions and a strong pro-China group in Hong Kong, the movement in the span of its three months, went on to gain tremendous international recognition and witnessed numerous solidarity rallies worldwide.

Hong Kong after its transfer back to the Mainland in 1997 became a symbol of re-emergence of China's grandeur after its century of humiliation. Its fate was sealed long back in 1982, after a defining two-hour meeting on September 24, 1982 between Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher. Deng very bluntly told the Iron Lady that a further extension of lease of Hong Kong to the British was not a matter of discussion. And unless the British failed to produce an agreement acceptable to China within two years, China would announce its own policies for Hong Kong unilaterally. To add to her ire, he casually stated that China could easily take Hong Kong by force, adding that "I could walk in and take the whole lot this afternoon³". Thatcher aware that the United Kingdom could not hold on to Hong Kong, conceded with the anticipation that she could secure more concessions on



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administration from the Communist power then than later during an adversarial negotiation. In 1984, Britain and China signed a treaty wherein all of Hong Kong would be returned to China in 1997.

It was decided that a Special Administrative Region (SAR) status would be allotted to Hong Kong under the *One Country, Two Systems* principle. The socialist system of Mainland China would not be extended to Hong Kong and it would be allowed to maintain its capitalist system and way of life unchanged for a period of 50 years. In 1990, China's NPC passed the **Basic Law** of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of PRC and legalized the "one country, two systems" policy. While China came to exert control on Hong Kong's defence and foreign policy (granting it high degree of autonomy in all other areas), Hong Kong too came to bear strong influence over China. China's tolerance and acceptance of colonial Hong Kong's institutions during sovereignty transition indicated China's eagerness to learn from Hong Kong's governance. British Hong Kong, with its high degree of economic prosperity, entirely changed Chinese perceptions of capitalism by demonstrating the combination of economic growth with civic freedom and the rule of law.

Prior to the transfer, Hong Kong served as a gateway for capital and exports from outside China to reach the mainland. Hong Kong also became an entrepot for information from rest of the world in Chinese language for the Mainland. In many respects, Chinese leaders at that time came to regard Hong Kong as a 'reference society' for China's future development⁴. Even Deng urged, in June 1988, to 'build a few more 'Hong Kongs' on the mainland' as 'now there is one Hong Kong.' In 1992, during his famous tour to south China for revitalizing economic reforms and openness after the backlash against liberalization caused by the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, Deng advocated his plan of 'making several Hong Kong-like cities in the mainland China⁵.' Just post- the 1997 transfer, however there was an economic downturn in Hong Kong following the Asian Financial Crisis. And it was this economic downturn that began to provide the new momentum for Hong Kong's



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stagnant democratization as it highlighted the mismanagement by the Hong Kong government and roused strong desire for popular sovereignty.

In June 2003, to remedy the stagnation of the Hong Kong economy, Mainland and Hong Kong SAR governments jointly announced the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) to strengthen the economic and commercial links between the two economies. The economic integration of Hong Kong with China led to increasing numbers of Hong Kongers travelling northward in search of employment and business opportunities in the fast-growing Chinese market. In a short span of time following that, Hong Kong became the most important trading partner of the mainland and the largest source of its overseas direct investment. However it also remained the city that each year marked the anniversary of the 1989 crackdown in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Ironically, if one looks in retrospect, it was Beijing's own efforts to politically penetrate and economically integrate with Hong Kong, as a reactive response to Hong Kong's democratic demands that gave mainland Chinese citizens greater exposure than previously to the civic freedom and rule of law enjoyed by Hong Kong. However democratic notions were strongly constrained by Beijing in both the Mainland, and Hong Kong.

The present tensions between the Mainland and Hong Kong pro-democracy protestors lie on to the issue of interpretation of Article 45 of the Basic Law. Article 45 stipulates that the "ultimate aim" is the selection of Hong Kong's Chief Executive and the members of its Legislative Council (Legco) by "universal suffrage." However, it does not designate a specific date by which this goal is to be achieved. Hong Kong, more than a frontier territory for Mainland's Communism, has always been the bait for the ultimate prize that has long eluded the Mainland: regaining the control of Taiwan. By making Hong Kong a showcase, Beijing has always hoped to entice people on the self-governing island to voluntarily join the Mainland. However events in Hong Kong have made Taiwan even more wary and suspicious of Beijing authoritarianism. Therefore, though Beijing may have



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won a victory with the end of the Umbrella Movement, it has made the Chinese people all throughout its expanded territories especially youngsters more aware of political issues and diminished their fear of voicing their opinions.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/08/us-china-parliament-hongkong-idUSKBN0M40BB20150308>, accessed on March 08, 2015.

² Gordon C. Chang, "The Hong Kong Moment: Trouble on China's Periphery", *World Affairs Journal*, Jan/Feb 2015, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/hong-kong-moment-trouble-china%E2%80%99s-periphery>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfer_of_sovereignty_over_Hong_Kong, accessed on March 08, 2015.

⁴ Guoguang Wu, "Hong Kong's political influence over China: institutional, informative, and interactive dynamics of sovereignty", *The Pacific Review*, Vol.21, No.3, July2008:279-302.

⁵ Ibid
