

# Hong Kong histories: converging narratives of struggle

Examining the telling history of British colonial presence, Chinese nationalism, and other internal struggles for autonomy to contextualise the current events in Hong Kong and tell a concurrent story of the demonstrations.

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The ongoing protests in Hong Kong are not just about an extradition bill, civil liberties, or even a constitutional right to democracy—much more is at stake. This is a question of what a modern-day standoff with the Communist Party of China looks like. Activist Joshua Wong, who played a pivotal role in the 2014 pro-democracy Umbrella Movement, said it like this: “(These events) all matter of course. But in the end it is about the future of Hong Kong beyond 2047, a

the movement, and contextualise the demands of the protestors and response of the state. Let’s look at China’s relationship with its borderlands and the variety of state-minority relations to understand why Hong Kong has reached this point of outright dissent, and why struggles for autonomy in Tibet and Xinjiang are not making the same headlines. Placing these histories alongside Hong Kong’s allows for deeper insights into the motivations of

handed back to communist China, still reeling from the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. It was China, but it wasn’t really China. It was detached physically, culturally, and politically.

People were concerned about this sudden shift in power once the British presence was removed, and many had the means to leave, thanks to the island’s thriving trade economy. To quell concerns of human rights abuses and restrictions of civic freedoms in the mainland, Beijing proposed a constitutional principle called “one country, two systems” to preserve their way of life by keeping their capitalist system for 50 years (ending in 2047), promising freedom of the press, and the right to assembly and to elect a leader “in the near future.”

Journalist Javier C. Hernández said in a podcast interview for *The New York Times*, “There was a sense that (the handover in 1997) was going to be a grand political experiment to blend autocracy with these civil liberties but I think what a lot of people are now thinking is, ‘Maybe we were wrong.’” Below the surface, Beijing has been asserting more power over Hong Kong in an effort to reorient it to match China’s values and absorb it into the mainland. Today’s extradition bill is a bolder example of a long line of policies and legislation chipping away at their rule of law and way of life.

With this coercion comes a very clear sense that Hongkongers’ identity is being leached away. A Hong Kong identity is distinct from a Chinese identity—it reflects a history of civic culture and freedom influenced by the British, a pride in the mixture of Eastern and Western values and freedom of thought. As Hernández noted, the protestors want China to abide by “one country, two systems” to prevent the communist party from turning Hong Kong into any Chinese city. They don’t want stability and economic prosperity in exchange for CCP-controlled courts, or a press that has no ability to criticise the government. They want a voice and a seat at the table.

In 2014, the Umbrella Movement halted the daily goings-on of the financial hub, bringing traffic on an eight-lane road to a standstill for miles and closing down businesses in an impassioned struggle for true universal suffrage. The name comes from the protestors’ creative use of umbrellas to protect themselves from Hong Kong police’s pepper spray.

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Police fire teargas during clashes in the Sham Shui Po neighbourhood of Hong Kong in mid-August.

PHOTO: THOMAS PETER, REUTERS

future that belongs to our generation.”

This movement is removed from the Chinese imagination. It remains a movement by and for Hongkongers. But why has this erupted so suddenly? How has the cosmopolitan financial hub known as the “gateway to Asia” disrupted global economic machinery to confront the largest country in the world for greater democratic freedoms?

To understand what’s going on beyond the news updates, let’s turn to the history that’s informing and shaping

the Communist Party of China (CCP) and the people of Hong Kong. It tells a story of how extraordinary these demonstrations are, and the gravity of this moment in China’s history.

## British colonial presence

The handover of Hong Kong in 1997 marked the end of a 99-year lease the British had over Hong Kong territory after concessions from the opium wars. It was a historic moment—after being under British rule for more than 150 years, this Western-bred population was being