

The Fight for HONG

Led by young activists, protesters fill the streets of Hong Kong in June.

KONG

Mass protests in Hong Kong reveal a clash between the territory's open way of life and an increasingly authoritarian Chinese government

BY PATRICIA SMITH

As far as the eye could see, a vast ocean of people overflowed the wide skyscraper-lined avenues of central Hong Kong. Young and old people carried signs. Parents pushed strollers, and students carried phones to film the spectacle. The massive protest drew 1 million people. That's about one in every seven residents of the territory.

It was part of a series of protests that continued throughout the summer. In all of them, Hong Kong's youth were front and center. They say they're taking a stand for Hong Kong's autonomy.

"We cannot give up," says So Hiu-ching, 16, "because we won't win without even trying."

The protests began in June over a proposed law. The law would have made it easier to transfer criminal suspects from Hong Kong to mainland China. While Hong Kong is known for its independent courts, things aren't the same in China. The Communist Party controls China's judicial system, which is plagued by corruption. Critics worried that the law would force political opponents in Hong Kong to face trial in China.

More important, people saw the bill as a symbol of China's growing power over everyday life in Hong Kong. They see that as a threat upon this semiautonomous region within the Communist country.

"There will be a moment that mainland China will completely take over Hong Kong," says Danny Chan, 25, who joined a recent protest. "As a Hong Kong citizen, the best we can do is postpone it."

In response to the huge demonstrations, Hong Kong's chief executive shelved the proposed extradition law in mid-June. But the protests continued and were still going strong in August.

'One Country, Two Systems'

Hong Kong is a complicated place. Although it's part of China, it's treated differently because of its unique history. For more than 150 years, Hong Kong was a British colony (see *Key Dates*, p. 16). Under Britain, it became a major international trading port and evolved into a Westernized society with a



China vs. Hong Kong



INTERNET

Many websites blocked; Google and Instagram banned

No internet censorship; all apps available



COURT SYSTEM

Controlled by the Communist Party; lots of corruption

Free and independent



PER CAPITA GDP

\$16,700 | \$61,500



FREEDOM OF SPEECH

No protections; criticizing the government can mean jail

No restrictions on the press or protesting



Henry Fung wears goggles and a gas mask to protect himself at a protest in July.

“If I don’t do something to protect freedoms I ought to have, I may never recover them again. We want to be peaceful, but under oppression, we need to resist.”

— Henry Fung, 17

tradition of free speech and a vibrant press. The rest of China has been a one-party Communist state since 1949.

In 1984, Britain and China signed a treaty to return Hong Kong to Chinese rule in 1997. But Hong Kongers worried that the transfer would threaten the freedoms they’d long enjoyed.

As part of the handover, China agreed to a compromise known as “one country, two systems.” Under this arrangement, Hong Kong would operate under different rules from the rest of China for 50 years. The city’s capitalist financial system would remain in place. In addition, freedom of speech, assembly, and religion, as well as a free press would be guaranteed.

There are no such protections in mainland China. Economic reforms have led to three decades of explosive growth. That’s led to China’s economy becoming the second largest in the world after the U.S. Still, the Chinese government denies basic freedoms to its 1.4 billion people. Political opponents are routinely imprisoned. And there’s “the Great Firewall.” Part of this system consists of tens of thousands of censors who monitor chat rooms and block websites critical of the government.

Some fear the protesters in Hong Kong will meet the same fate as those massacred by the Chinese military 30 years ago while demonstrating for

democracy in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. But others say China wants to avoid bloodshed in Hong Kong. Chinese leaders know that a crackdown would damage both China’s reputation and Hong Kong’s booming economy.

Some of the protests have turned violent. In some cases, police have used tear gas on demonstrators. At times, a small minority of protesters have thrown bricks at the windows of government buildings. In August, protesters effectively shut down Hong Kong’s busy international airport.

‘Tightening Its Grip’

Five years ago, Hong Kong experienced another series of mass democracy demonstrations. These protests

became known as the Umbrella Movement. This name came from the umbrellas the protesters used to shield themselves from the tear gas the police fired at them. Those protests paralyzed the city’s commercial center but failed to win any reforms.

Since then, China’s Communist Party has been gradually exerting more influence over Hong Kong. The pressure reflects a broader crackdown against dissent in China under the rule of President Xi Jinping since 2012.

“In particular, over the past six, seven, or eight years, we have seen Beijing tightening its grip over Hong Kong,” says Anson Chan, a former official in Hong Kong’s government.

Hong Kong’s free press is already

“I want to fight for a Hong Kong that we want, and not have to tell generation after generation that we haven’t done enough.”

— So Hiu-ching, 16



So Hiu-ching at a public wall papered with messages of support for the protesters

HONG KONG KEY DATES

1898 Fifty-six years after China cedes Hong Kong Island to the victorious British in the First Opium War, China **leases additional territory** to Britain for 99 years. The agreement brings Hong Kong to its current size of 428 square miles.

1949 Mao Zedong’s Communists win China’s civil war and establish the People’s Republic of China.

1984 Britain agrees to return Hong Kong to China in 1997. The agreement says Hong Kong will operate under **different rules for 50 years** after the handover.



feeling the pinch. *Apple Daily* is the most vocal pro-democracy newspaper in the region. Its executives say the Chinese government has told large companies to pull advertising. Independent book publishers say they have run into roadblocks printing and selling books on politics and history in Hong Kong. They attribute these difficulties to pressure from the mainland.

“Hong Kong is still very different from the rest of China,” says Scott Kennedy of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. “It’s got an open civil society and a diverse, cosmopolitan culture. But China’s been chipping away at Hong Kong’s way of life, and folks in Hong Kong are quite anxious about this.”

Long Hours & High Rents

Fear over China chipping away at Hong Kong’s independence is one of the factors behind the ongoing protests. The other is widespread economic frustration connected to how deeply unequal Hong Kong has become (see “*Life in 60 Square Feet*,” right).

Hong Kong’s gap between rich and poor is among the largest in the world. In a city famous for its flashy millionaires, nearly one in five people live in poverty. It boasts the world’s longest working hours. Rents are also higher than in New York or San Francisco for apartments half the size.

Housing is so expensive that it’s unusual to meet young people who live on their own. Philip Chan, a 27-year-old protester and a nurse at a public hospital, still lives with his parents. He shares a bunk bed with his 30-year-old sister. That situation is part of what motivated him to protest.

“Many Hong Kong people face serious financial problems like the

Life in 60 Square Feet

The high cost of housing is one of the underlying frustrations fueling the protests

A living space for three in Hong Kong



Not pictured: shared toilet and kitchen

Kenneth Leung joined the recent protests over Hong Kong’s plan to allow extraditions of criminal suspects to mainland China. But he’s also angry about his own situation: He works 12 hours a day, six days a week, making \$5.75 an hour.

He is one of 210,000 Hong Kong residents who live in the city’s thousands of illegally subdivided apartments. Some are so small they’re called cages or coffins. Leung’s room is a relatively spacious 100 square feet to sleep, cook, and live. Even so, he struggles to make his \$512 a month rent after paying for food and other living costs.

Leung captures many people’s frustrations when he says: “We thought maybe if you get a better education, you can have a better income. But in Hong Kong over the last two decades, people may be able to get a college education, but they are not making more money.”

How Hong Kong Living Space Compares



A typical New York City parking space is **153 square feet**.



The average living space per person in a Hong Kong subdivided apartment is **48 square feet**.

high price of housing,” Chan says. “They try to work hard, but they cannot earn enough money to have a better living condition. They cannot see their future, so they are frustrated.”

Orville Schell, a China expert at Asia Society in New York, understands that frustration. But it’s the larger conflict with Chinese rule that has him deeply worried about Hong Kong’s future.

“The idea of ‘one country, two

systems’ has lost its ability to cohere,” Schell says. “It’s quite ominous, because you see here a collision between a fundamental human instinct not to be bullied and a very powerful, authoritarian government that is becoming even more so. And I don’t see how that works out peacefully.” •

With reporting by Austin Ramzy, Alexandra Stevenson, Jin Wu, Tiffany May, Lam Yik Fei, and Ezra Cheung of *The New York Times*.

1997 Hong Kong is officially returned to China after more than 150 years of British control.



2014 A student-led democracy protest that becomes known as the **Umbrella Movement** continues for weeks in Hong Kong.



TODAY Massive protests continue all summer long in Hong Kong. Young people see the rallies as a last stand against China’s encroaching power.