



Lessons from the (Post)colonial Hong Kong Protests

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The documentary film *Blue Island* (2022) by Chan Tze Woon also tells a story of protesters in Hong Kong. More specifically, it showcases several people who participated in the 1967 riots in Hong Kong, 1989 Tiananmen protests in Beijing, and the 2019 protest movement in Hong Kong. After watching *Blue Island*, I felt the urge to write an essay about protest movements in Hong Kong. The way in which the film depicts the three events alongside each other is very interesting and triggers a discussion on how to interpret these protests. In this essay I will reflect on the comparison of the 1967 riots and 2019 protests specifically, as they both took place in Hong Kong. The analysis of these two events will reveal that, while they emerged in different periods under different political and ruling regimes, there are indeed similarities between them. This provides a context to better understand the motives of protesters to participate in either one of the movements in Hong Kong.

Colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong

To put these events into context, a brief overview of the colonial and post-colonial development of Hong Kong is necessary. The British colonised Hong Kong in 1841 after the Second Opium War, and they officially withdrew from the territory in 1997. However, formally speaking, Hong Kong (together with Macao), already lost its colonial status in 1972. China argued that Hong Kong and Macao belong to China, and on its request, the General Assembly of the United Nations decided to remove Hong Kong and Macao from the list of territories to which the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples was applicable. Consequently, not only did these areas lose colonial status, but also their right to self-determination. However, Hong Kong was often still referred to as a colony, despite the absence of this formal status, because the British remained in this territory.¹

It was not until 1984 that the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed by the United Kingdom and China to regulate the actual handover of Hong Kong from the British to

the Chinese in 1997. The Basic Law and One Country Two Systems Principle would be implemented for 50 years to develop Hong Kong, including democratic developments, while the economic and political interests of both the United Kingdom and China were also considered. A salient detail is that Hong Kong itself was not involved as a negotiating partner in the plans for its future. Hong Kong society has often been referred to as an apolitical society.² However, the masses did not always keep silent, as the 1967 and 2019 protests show.

The 1967 riots and 2019 protests

In 1967, there was an industrial dispute at an artificial flower factory. Workers demanded immediate release of their arrested colleagues, punishment of lawbreakers, guarantee of the safety of the workers, and no interferences of the police force in labour disputes. However, the Chinese government intervened in this affair, and spurred by the Cultural Revolution in mainland China, the pro-communist leftists in colonial Hong Kong saw their chance to also challenge the British ruling power in this territory.³ The industrial dispute evolved into wider anti-colonial riots with violent incidents, shaking the territory's politics. Protesters were arrested while acting against the British ruling power. However, the unrest in society did not remain for a long time, as the colonial government had the ability to respond properly to the unsatisfied Chinese masses. For example, housing solutions were offered for social improvement. Eventually, the Chinese people had no reason to fight against the government. Stability in Hong Kong society was restored, and the British colonisers remained the ruling power.⁴

In 2019, Hong Kong shook the world with a series of protests that emerged from the introduction of an Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill by the Hong Kong government. This amendment follows a criminal offence committed by a Hong Konger in Taiwan, who fled to Hong Kong and could not be extradited because of the absence of such an agreement. The Hong Kong government proposed to establish a mechanism whereby people in Hong Kong could be extradited to Taiwan, but also to Macau and Mainland China. The fear about this amendment was that no fair trial could be guaranteed for people extradited to China, considering its different legal system and practice. Eventually, the Hong Kong government withdrew the proposition of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill. However, the 2019 protests took a lot of people to the streets, voicing their dissatisfaction towards the Beijing-favoured Hong Kong government, thereby jeopardising the power and position of the government in society. It started out as a peaceful protest, but violent incidents also appeared later. To counter the unrest, the National Security Law was passed and implemented in Hong Kong by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on 30 June 2020. Secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign parties is considered a crime under this law, which has a very vague and broad scope. While the law is not only restricted to the area and/or the people of Hong Kong, currently mainly people in Hong Kong are being arrested, prosecuted, and convicted. Judicial cases are handled by judges who are appointed by the Hong Kong government. Jury trials, a practice that was implemented by the British colonisers in Hong Kong following their judicial common law system, are put aside. Since the enactment

of the National Security Law, in combination with the strict COVID-19 measures in Hong Kong, mass protests were not organised in Hong Kong anymore, and unrest in society seems to have faded away. But the question is whether stability in Hong Kong society is actually restored.

Legitimacy of the ruling power

Some may find it difficult to compare the 1967 riots and 2019 protests, as there are many differences between them. Both are generally addressed differently as riots and protests, respectively. The former emerged from an industrial dispute, while the latter emerged from a proposed law amendment by the government. The protesters in the colonial period were leftist-communists, while the protesters in contemporary Hong Kong are pro-democracy supporters. The event in 1967 was directed against the British colonial regime, and the events of 2019 were directed towards the Hong Kong and Chinese regime. As the 1967 riots emerged under the British, rights and freedoms were restricted due to the colonial context. Under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is implemented, meaning that during the 2019 protests, people in Hong Kong enjoy rights such as freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of speech, and rights to due process and a fair trial.

The similarity between the 1967 riots and the 2019 protests is that eventually, both events challenged the ruling power in Hong Kong, both equally striving for their own interests and rights. They reveal the complicated power relations in society, which change in time due to different situations and because of sociopolitical and cultural developments.

The 1967 riots and the 2019 protests in Hong Kong show the situation and developments of this society during the British colonial ruling period and the post-colonial period, in which Hong Kong operates as a Special Administrative Region. The events also reflect how the change of ruling power impacted the relationship between the government and society in Hong Kong. Despite the dissatisfaction of the Chinese masses in colonial Hong Kong towards the British ruling power, the legitimacy of the latter was not put at risk because the administration could deal with the social demands of the public. However, in contemporary Hong Kong, there seems to be a crisis of legitimacy. The question now is whether the ruling government is actually meeting the social demands of society by implementing the National Security Law, or whether this Law is rather a measure to repress social unrest. One may wonder if and how long Hong Kong will remain stable. This challenges both the Hong Kong government and the public to think about their interests. What are the aims and political directions for Hong Kong's future? (How) can the democratic development in Hong Kong evolve? This specific situation may also serve as an important case study for the international order on government-public relationships in their search for peace and stability in the midst of a changing society.

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Notes

- 1 Chow, Rey. "King Kong in Hong Kong Watching the 'Handover' From the U.S.A." *Social Text* 55, (1998): 93–108.
- 2 Lau, Sui Kai. *Society and Politics in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1982.
- 3 Yap, Ray. "The 1967 Riots in Hong Kong: The Diplomatic and Domestic Fronts of the Colonial Governor." *The China Quarterly* 193, (2008): 122–39.
- 4 Buckley, Roger. *Hong Kong: The Road to 1997*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.