

Tragedy of Errors at Warp Speed

The 2019 Unrest

SAM HO

Abstract

The 2019 unrest in Hong Kong was the result of complex factors simmering over the years, culminating in a tragedy of errors unreeling at warp speed. This paper examines a few of the factors from the personal perspective of a Hong Kong-born Chinese American. Since the 1997 Retrocession, Hong Kong had been engaged in a unique version of post-colonial condition, “one country, two systems” (OCTS), meaning that it must contend with not only ways of a new beginning and ways of the former days but also ways for a future beginning—that of future China when OCTS expires. Hong Kong had also been conditioned to look at itself through the Western gaze and its future through Western imagination, resulting in self-objectification. Many of its people were consumed by misguided idealism that compelled citizens toward a profound mistrust of China while turning a blind eye to the country’s unique accomplishment. A powerful media dedicated to promoting the Western agenda further fanned the fire, turning the former colony into an unwitting proxy of the new Cold War waged by the United States on China. Such was a tragedy of errors that a movement launched against a worrisome rule, resulting in the passing of a law even more worrisome.

Keywords: 2019 Unrest in Hong Kong, post-colonial condition, proxy wars, Western gaze, Western media bias, China

Watching Hong Kong in the past year was like witnessing a tragedy of errors at seventy-two frames per second. The story begins as a comedy of manners on July 1, 1997, making errors of different magnitudes and on various sides. These errors occur slowly at first, then pick up the pace but will sometimes slow down. Repeating at intermittent speeds, the story sometimes accelerates, sometimes decelerates, and gradually turns tragic.

Then comes June 2019.

Developments pick up velocity exponentially; the story projects at warp speed, becoming a tragedy of epic proportions.

The Postcolonial Condition

The 2019 unrest in Hong Kong coalesced many factors into a complex mass of mostly well-meaning errors. Since 1997, parties on all sides, for the most part, intended to make Hong Kong better, but they took measures that clashed with each other. At variable intensities, tensions simmered until things exploded twenty-two years later. Many factors contributed to this conflagration and only a few are considered here.

Most former colonies cannot escape the postcolonial condition in which the conflict between a desire to establish new ways and an inability to discard old ones haunts the people in the developing or underdeveloped world after the departures of former colonizers. One major reason is that despite its evil nature, colonization was often implemented by developed countries with practices desirable, at least partly, in both practical and moral terms even though they were ironically implemented under far-from-moral circumstances. Making matters worse was that despite having a desirable moral dimension, those practices were often incongruous with local cultures. Making matters even worse was that the first decades of the post-colonial era after the end of World War II was dominated by two countries with powers that had been aptly labeled “super,” a scenario characterized by profound ideological and political clashes. The entire world was dragged into the conflict named the Cold War, often against the will of the people who were not citizens of those two countries. The United States and the Soviet Union conducted proxy conflicts in many former colonies, plunging them into suffering of immense magnitude and preventing them from making meaningful attempts to try their own ways for their new beginnings.

Postcolonial Hong Kong is a unique variation of that condition. “One country, two systems” (OCTS) means the special administrative region (SAR) must contend with not only ways of a new beginning and ways of the former days but also ways for a future beginning—that of a future China when OCTS expires, when China will likely play an escalated role in the grand narrative. Balancing between the first two kinds of ways was difficult enough; adding a third kind to the mix made it much harder. Sadly, and obviously, all parties actively involved in trying to establish meaningful ways for postcolonial Hong Kong had not come close to finding a noteworthy balance in the first twenty-two years.

Western Gaze, Western Imagination

China had initially left the SAR pretty much alone, keeping watch but in all likelihood controlling in proxy through the proestablishment faction, which was engaged in an increasingly contentious conflict with the prodemocratic bloc. Neither side had

come up with viable plans to meet the complicated and difficult challenge. Both sides came off as simplistic, lacking political skills and ideological wisdom. The pro-China circle brandished the badge of patriotism to loyally do the bidding of Beijing; the pan-democracy camp hoisted the banner of universal suffrage to assume a posture of moral superiority. The latter's failure to muster any realistic political solution to balance the three kinds of ways mentioned previously was especially disappointing since not much was expected of the loyalists. To ascend the moral high ground by pursuing democracy was easy. To devise consequential ways to pursue democracy and to formulate a political system that can accommodate the complicated past of Hong Kong and China—and the geopolitical contentiousness of the present as well as the taxing, quickly evolving, and likely more contentious future—was hard. The pan-democrats settled for the easy.

Democracy is highly desirable. Yet, in an increasingly globalized era, democracy is proving increasingly lacking. Donald Trump being elected US president on an anti-environmental platform and keeping his campaign promise after winning the presidency is a vivid illustration. For those who believe in global warming, the environmental crisis is an urgent problem for all humanity. It is often argued that democracy gives people the power to vote off unacceptable officials. But when a democratically elected leader of a powerful country with under 5 percent of the world's population withdrew from international treaties to honor campaign promises, causing possibly irreparable damage to all humankind, the rest of the over 95 percent of humanity could do precious nothing about it. This is but one example of humanity's ongoing difficulty in finding balance between the part (in this case, a country) and the whole (all human beings). OCTS is a far-from-perfect system that needs constant adjustments and compromises to be effective; single-mindedly pursuing democracy for one "system" without consideration for how it works with the "country" is at best unwise.

In retrospect, the pan-democrats settling for the easy is not difficult to comprehend. Most of the early leaders on the prodemocracy side were colonial elites, many of them lawyers trained in and skilled with the common law observed by the British. They had never received any substantive education or training in political philosophy and practice. Nor were they conversant with the Chinese political and legal systems. That left them proficient in negotiating only one of the two systems and neglectful of the one country in OCTS, dutifully abiding by the West's narration of human history, leading the SAR's quest for democracy down the wrong path from the very beginning. Such was Hong Kong's political tradition that this significant deficiency continued to characterize the next generation of prodemocracy leaders and activists. The result was twenty-two continuous years of impasse, with less and less prospects for fruitful political agreement.

One major reason was that for over a hundred years, the people of Hong Kong had been guided to look at the world through Western eyes and to look at our future

through Western imagination. Asia is not the West, to state the obvious. Yet the West had never stopped trying to turn the East into a replica of itself, and such is the post-colonial condition that many in the East would eagerly go along. It is egotistic of the West and sad of the East—sadder still of humanity. Looking and imagining through the Western gaze, many Hong Kongers regarded ourselves—and Chinese people in general—with self-objectification, longing for political and moral solutions incongruous with the unique continuum of our history.

In films of the West, most pan shots move from left to right, in accordance with the left-to-right orientation of Western-written languages. Not all languages read from left to right. Right-to-left pans, when employed, usually signify something unusual will occur. Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, for example, opens with a leftward pan of the idyllic town where the story is set, subtly hinting that beneath all the peace and quiet lies unnoticed turbulence.

Right-to-left pans are routine in early Chinese and Japanese films, without the suggestiveness of Sirk's opening shot mentioned above and Westerners risk misreading some Asian films when watching with a Western gaze. Imagine if viewers in Hong Kong regarded their own cinema with the same gaze. Moreover, what if the postcolonial norms of gazing extend beyond cinema into how citizens of former colonies look at themselves, their cultures, and their histories?

Conditioned to pursue political orders without considerations for historical continuum and geopolitical reality, Hong Kong's pan-democrats strived to realize a Western ideal as though it was indeed universal. Their efforts were also driven by a conviction that in the practice of OCTS, China will become more like Hong Kong. Such a belief was well-intentioned but misguided, for China has its own idea for the future, an idea bolstered by forty years of progress and the development of an ecopolitical system alternative to that of the West. Its economic system, for example, is now often described as a free-market system with socialist and Chinese characteristics. After killing each other by the millions in the civil war arguing which Western system to adopt, the Chinese people finally figured out a way to help themselves—a system that blends capitalism and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Such a feat was consistent with East Asian culture, less inclined toward polarization like the West but more likely to find middle ways. "Cross the river touching one stone at a time," proposed Deng Xiaoping at the start of Reform and Opening (R&O). Instead of subscribing to any one established ideology, China would change course according to circumstances, dealing with the rapidly evolving world with flexibility. So significant was China developing an alternative system that the West's monopoly on writing humanity's narrative was meaningfully challenged.

The following short history of Hong Kong cinema demonstrates how a self-imposed Western gaze results in distorted views.

Misguided Idealism

In hindsight, it appears that the tragedy of errors started with the pan-democrats settling for the easy, mounting a moral high ground that was not difficult to scale. It was a failure in finding a balance between idealism and pragmatism. We wear our pragmatism like a badge of honor to complement our self-deprecating humor. From the folksy comedies of Yee Chau-shui and Sun Ma Sze Tsang in the 1950s to Michael Hui's urban clown fest and Jackie Chan's kung-fu slapstick in the 1970s to the *mo-lay-tau* masterpieces of Stephen Chow in the 1990s, celebrating the silly charm of pragmatism generated much laughter in Hong Kong theaters.¹

Given China's long history of suffering and deprivation, audiences could relate with the dire necessity of pragmatism but take pleasure in deprecating it. A viewer using a Western gaze would never understand what makes pragmatism funny and relatable. The vast majority of Hongkongers simply focus on survival and life improvement. To pragmatic Hong Kong audiences, idealism is either a luxury for those who can afford it or an honor for the very few.

For a time, Hong Kong cinema most often celebrated idealism as a function of patriotism. Early and postwar films portray idealists fighting for a better China through physical prowess, intellectual endeavor, or selfless sacrifice. However, the tendency of Hong Kong cinema to portray idealism as driven by patriotism slowly began to change. Informed by social awareness and a sympathy toward the underprivileged, occasional films like Patrick Lung Kong's *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967) portrayed stories firmly rooted in Hong Kong, informed by sympathy toward the underprivileged.

Upon enjoying social and financial stability, Hong Kong audiences began to care about the marginalized and the unfortunate. These portrayals emanate an idealism not readily found in earlier films. During the booming 1980s of Hong Kong cinema, films like *Silent Love* (1986) and *The Lunatics* (1986) portrayed the physically and intellectually disabled. The compassion for the unfortunate in *Silent Love* and *The Lunatics* represents a collective awakening of the Hong Kong people that I term *fanrong lipin*: "doing good after becoming prosperous."

This prosperity idealism is a variation of the traditional Chinese idiom *facai lipin*, "doing good after becoming rich," that refers to those who perform good deeds to elevate their social status or self-image after making a fortune. Prosperous-but-not-rich

1. Chinese names in this essay will be cited in English according to translations or transliterations of how personalities are known. Instead of the commonly-used "surname last" mode. This writer considers it a preferred way to capture the complicated transitions in history as China and its people adapt to the modern, increasingly globalized world. In certain instances, the use of surnames cannot be appropriately applied, such as "Sun Ma Sze Tsang," which means "New Ma Sze Tsang," an accepted stage name for the actor, who the public and the entertainment industry alike considered as a new version of the renowned opera and film star Ma Sze Tsang. In other words, there is no surname in the name "Sun Ma Sze Tsang." To insist on referring to him with a surname is actually imposing a Western notion on Hong Kong history.

audiences manifested a newfound idealism, whose focus shifted away from Chinese patriotism to Hong Kong concerns.²

Such an evolution of Hong Kong cinema illustrates how sustained prosperity further augments that tendency. The rise of what can be termed *simple realism* (*pingshi zhuyi*) evidences a narrative shift toward less patriotic but more altruistic idealism. Films like *Big Blue Lake* (2011), *Dot 2 Dot* (2014), and *Still Human* (2018) eschew the dramatic and the visceral, celebrating the restrained and the contemplative instead. Unlike the works of 1950s social realism, these low-budget films are less concerned with class injustice or wealth inequalities than with personal struggles and family dynamics. Informed by a humanistic longing for the natural and the basic, they aim not at escapist entertainment but at everyday authenticity. They are also anchored in local flavors, focusing not on metropolitan glamor but on the rhythms of humble neighborhoods.

Genuine idealism for the local infuses these otherwise apolitical films. Perhaps subconsciously they project a desire to reject burdens of China's past, refuse connections with the Mainland present, and ignore the looming Chinese future. This localized idealism is a fixation on the immediate, in both spatial and temporal terms. The idealism is also an attempt to establish a distinct identity, separate from the Chinese one but modeled after a Western one coalesced mostly from ways of the colonial past and values of the superpower present, that of the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. This postcolonial identity of localism materialized into an idealism prevalent among youths and millennials that magnifies Western values as though they are truly universal. Funneled into the former colony's political uniqueness, this idealism resulted in a single-minded quest for electoral democracy, imparted with a profound mistrust or even hatred of China. Colored by the self-loathing and white envy typical of the postcolonial psyche, the Hong Kong SAR's democratic movement came to be defined by a self-righteous pursuit of Western tenets, simplistic interpretations of Chinese history, and an unwitting prejudice toward present-day China.

This complex mix of emotions is in turn colored by increasingly intense social problems such as the housing crunch and diminishing career prospects due to the changing economic environment, resulting in misguided but passionate idealism that saw young protesters wielding signs saying, "President Trump, Please Liberate Hong Kong," waving flags of the United States and the United Kingdom, and, worst of all, the colonial flag. Colonialism is an enterprise of evil proportions. For idealistic youths raised in a postcolonial climate who had never experienced the injustice of colonization not to recognize it is at least understandable. For veteran political activists who regard themselves

2. Sam Ho, "An A for D & B for Its Cs: Middle-Class Sensibilities in the Studio's Early Years," in *A Different Brilliance: The D & B Story*, ed. Ching-ling Kwok, trans. Roberta Chow (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020), 170, https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/7439981/ebook_eng_03.pdf.

as democracy fighters not to denounce it is inexcusable. For seasoned Western journalists not to highlight it is disgraceful.

An Afghan Trap for China?

Part of the Hong Kong complexity is the United States. It is well documented that the United States has always interfered in other countries' internal affairs, both openly and covertly, the latter revealed only by delayed release of classified documents or occasional unsanctioned leaks like those by Michael Snowden. Here in Hong Kong, an important ideological battleground of the Cold War, the United States had been aggressive in efforts to win hearts and minds. Our film industry, for example, was divided into camps of left and right during that conflict, with right-wing companies receiving American backing, such as Asia Pictures, funded at least partly by the CIA-backed Committee for Free Asia.³ The SAR remained a contested space after the Cold War, as tension between the United States and China slowly rose. The US Congress-funded National Endowment for Democracy, a CIA offshoot, is on record for financially supporting local democracy organizations; other activist groups had also received funds from US institution such as the labor organization Solidarity Center. Last year, former legislator Leung Chung-hang was captured on a leaked Skype conversation with regime-change activist Guo Wengui, who promised financial support and protection from the US government; Guo had partnered with former White House strategist and far-right hard-liner Steve Bannon to form the Rule of Law Fund to challenge the People's Republic of China, later announcing plans to overthrow the Communist Party of China (CPC) to form the Federal State of New China.

The extent to which activist groups are supported by US and Western organizations remains unclear. Yet there is no denying that the United States had launched campaigns of various shades all over the world against foreign governments, often with declared altruism. Tension between respecting national sovereignty and promoting regime change in the name of so-called universal but mostly Western values is a contentious moral issue, with often-simpleminded arguments from both sides. Even intelligent views can be equally divergent. Scholar Gene Sharp, who championed nonviolent action to overthrow governments, for example, had inspired rebellions like those in the Arab Spring. Hailed by some as a defender of freedom and democracy,⁴ he was criticized by others

3. Priscilla Roberts, "Cold War Hong Kong: Juggling Opposing Forces and Identities," in *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, eds. Priscilla Roberts and John M. Carroll (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 43.

4. Howard Zinn, et al., "Open Letter in Support of Gene Sharp and Strategic Nonviolent Action," Stephen Zunes, September 16, 2013, http://stephenzunes.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Open-Letter_Academics_Zunes.pdf; John-Paul Flintoff, "Gene Sharp: The Machiavelli of Nonviolence," *New Statesman*, January 3, 2013, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/your-democracy/2013/01/gene-sharp-machiavelli-non-violence>.

as a “Cold War intellectual.”⁵ Though without concrete evidence, but given the United States’ long history of foreign interventions both overt and covert, it is only responsible to be suspicious of the United States for having played a role in Hong Kong’s unrest.

And this writer lives in mortal dread that Hong Kong is a latter-day Afghan trap, the 1970s ruse by then US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, supporting and arming a tribal-Islamist rebellion against the pro-Soviet government, creating unease in the Soviet Union and eventually provoking the Soviets into an invasion in December 1979. “Dedicated to weakening the Soviet Union by inflaming ethnic tensions” at its southern border, the design was “to give Moscow its own Vietnam.”⁶ Successfully goading the Soviets into invading its neighbor, the US plan came off with flying colors, the Afghan people’s suffering be damned. This geopolitical ploy was informed by racism. Retired CIA analyst Rod McGovern remembers that Brzezinski would say, “Who cares what happens to these brown Afghans . . . when the prize is in Europe and the Soviet Union is going to fall?”⁷ Would the United States care about what happens to Hong Kong when the prize is elsewhere and China is going to be weakened?

Despite the Afghan trap and other well-known precedents of interference, the possibility of an American role in Hong Kong’s protest movement was either haughtily neglected or derisively dismissed by the Western media. The *New York Times* called it “shopworn canard” when the Chinese government asserted that foreign forces were behind the unrest.⁸ Not surprising, therefore, that the media watchdog FAIR.org would find the *Times*, along with CNN, biased in their coverage. While violent protests also took place last year in Ecuador, Haiti, and Chile, some of them more violent than those in Hong Kong, these influential news outlets devoted excessively more attention to the SAR. Why? Because “the target of Hong Kong’s protesting is an official enemy of the US.”⁹

Yes, the United States had launched a new Cold War, and China is the enemy. It cannot be emphasized enough that, by all indications, it is not a war China wants to fight. The racism that informed the Afghan trap of the 1970s is also at play. “It’s the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian,” said Kiron Skinner, director of policy planning at the US State Department, at a 2019 conference. She made the comment while discussing Trump’s China policy and how

5. Marcie Smith, “Gene Sharp, the Cold War Intellectual Whose Ideas Seduced the Left,” *Jacobin*, September 4, 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/06/gene-sharp-cold-war-intellectual-marcie-smith>.

6. Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould, “Brzezinski Vision to Lure Soviets into ‘Afghan Trap’ Now Orlando’s Nightmare,” *Huffpost*, June 21, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brzezinski-vision-to-lure_b_10511358.

7. Rod McGovern, “The Afghan Trap,” YouTube, interview by Paul Jay, Real News Network, February 21, 2009, 4:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKRS2A_2BCM.

8. Editorial Board, “The Hong Kong Protests Are about More Than an Extradition Law,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/opinion/hong-kong-protests.html>.

9. Alan Macleod, “With People in the Streets Worldwide, Media Focus Uniquely on Hong Kong,” FAIR, December 6, 2019, <https://fair.org/home/with-people-in-the-streets-worldwide-media-focus-uniquely-on-hong-kong/>.

it differs from America's Cold War strategy. Skinner, who is black, was criticized for being racist. The criticism was unfair, because she went on to explain that "the foreign policy establishment is so narrowly defined, it's more homogenous than probably it should be, given our own demographics."¹⁰ American foreign policy had always been dominated by Caucasian sensibilities, and the rise of a non-Caucasian power inevitably prompted racist reactions. Such reactions are manifestations of institutional racism of the United States, its domestic capacity exploding occasionally, as in the Black Lives Matter protests, while its global dimension was almost never addressed. Hence the periodical proxy wars in Asia, sponsored coups in Latin America, and invasions in the Middle East. Most of America's proxy conflicts, though launched with righteous declarations, involved non-Caucasian people.¹¹ The *New York Times* should think about that next time it doles out its own shopworn canard.

All the News That's Fit to Print?

The mainstream US media is in fact another part of the Hong Kong complexity. The media's role in the ideologically contested era since World War II had been a contentious issue. Historian Robert E. Herzstein, for example, maintains in his book *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* that *Time* magazine publisher Henry R. Luce had used his influential publication to advance an interventionist agenda in Asia. Herzstein cites journalist and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Theodore White, that "the history of the world would've changed" had *Time* covered China with more objectivity: "There would've been no Korean War; there would've been no Vietnam War."¹² Likely the most resourceful and influential journalistic enterprise in the history of humanity, the mainstream Western press yields a lot of power. But power corrupts. *Time* magazine's part in helping realize the proxy wars of Asia is a vivid example of Western journalism promoting the Western agenda, the suffering of the Korean people, the Vietnamese people, the Cambodian, and other Asian peoples be damned.

10. Tara Francis Chan, "State Department Official on China Threat: For First Time U.S. Has 'Great Power Competitor That Is Not Caucasian,'" *Newsweek*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-threat-state-department-race-caucasian-1413202>.

11. This racism can be readily seen in the United States' 2020 election cycle. "Attack China," instructs a memo distributed by the National Republican Senatorial Committee to party candidates. According to Politico, the fifty-seven-page document tells candidates to "address the coronavirus crisis by aggressively attacking China." This strategy is consistent with the party's racist practice of "dog-whistle politics," dating back at least to Ronald Reagan's notorious "welfare queen" tactic of 1976, demonizing black Americans with coded racial references but without direct mention of race. See Alex Isenstadt, "GOP Memo Urges Anti-China Assault over Coronavirus," Politico, April 24, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/24/gop-memo-anti-china-coronavirus-207244>.

12. Robert E. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 250.

This writer likes to think that the West and its media meant well, that they at least partly believed in the values they champion and that the political modes to realize those values were good for the rest of the world. Problem was, such belief ignored—conveniently, simply-mindedly, condescendingly, irresponsibly, and even prejudicially—the unique continuums of history of different countries and cultures. The result was an imposition of misguided idealism by the powerful on the less powerful. And, when that idealism was promoted with ulterior motives like national interest, material profit, and racial superiority, the altruistic intentions were further corrupted.

Much of the non-Western world had, for the past few hundred years, been struggling to come to terms with the West. While the West had contributed greatly to humanity with its many benevolent developments,¹³ it had also taken advantage of the non-Western world under the guise of promoting that benevolence. Colonialism could be practiced in the name of enlightening the backward, toppling of governments for gains in resources could be executed with declarations of liberation, violating the dignity of peoples and sovereignty of nations could be done with righteous proclamations. Such atrocities were often committed with quiet approval, at most mild criticism, and sometimes-enthusiastic backing by the Western media.

A new Cold War is upon us—or at least fast in the making. China's rise is a threat to the West, not only because of its supposed communism but also because it is a confluence of race and ideological innovation. A developing country coming up with an ecpolitical system not conforming to Western dictates is threatening enough. That it was realized by a non-Caucasian people is deeply disturbing. The mainstream media, which had been actively engaged in the writing of the grand narrative formulated by the West, faithfully followed the party line in its reporting on China, highlighting the negatives and downplaying or even ignoring the positives.

Granted, it is journalism's central duty to expose the wrongs and missteps of governments. The Chinese government had done lots of wrongs and made lots of missteps, and the media's vigilance exposing them should be applauded. Yet the Chinese government had also done lots of right and the ways they were done were not only exceptional but in fact important developments in human history. Informing the public of important human developments should also be one of journalism's primary duties, and the Western media had failed miserably on that count. Almost all the Americans this writer had talked to about China were very aware of China's offenses but utterly uninformed about what the country had done right; and these were Americans who diligently kept up with the news, many of them proud and avid readers of the *New York Times*. A free

13. Kishore Mahbubani calls it “the gift of western wisdom” in a recent book that examines the relationship between Asia and the West. An ethnic Indian from a Southeast Asian country where East Asian values played an important role in its stability and prosperity, the prolific Singaporean writer had provided unique insights that often challenge established Western views. Kishore Mahbubani, *Has the West Lost It? A Provocation* (London: Penguin UK, 2018).

press is one of the most cherished introductions to humanity by the West. Yet, as in most human endeavors of change, lofty intentions of unbiased journalism had been tempered by ideological stances, geopolitical considerations, and latent biases. American journalism's one-sided coverage of China distorts the truth, helping to create and continuing to reinforce the prejudice that the Chinese people are incapable of governing themselves without guidance from the West.

US media's vigilance in criticizing the US government had often been contrasted with the Chinese press's laudatory coverage of the Chinese government as illustrations of Western journalism's superiority and, by implication, the superiority of the West in general. Such comparisons are valid, maybe even necessary. Yet, they often ignore a key factor: the existential threat China had historically faced and still faces today. The United States had never faced the kind of security threat confronting China. While the United States is protected on both sides by oceans and enjoys dominance over its immediate neighbors, Canada and Mexico, China shares borders with fourteen countries, most with complicated historical disputes that date back centuries. Some of those conflicts flared up periodically, such as the recent skirmish with India near the Johnson Line and the Macartney-MacDonald Line, drawn forcefully and unilaterally by a western colonial power more than a century ago without the consent of China. Since gaining independence, the United States had never experienced anything close to the invasion, plundering, and exploitation forced upon China in the recent past. Perhaps even more importantly, the United States does not have to contend with a superpower that had proven to interfere actively or aggressively and sometimes covertly in other country's internal affairs; namely, the United States itself. Not remotely close to having such exceptionalism, China has legitimate needs for internal stability and legitimate concerns over potentially fragmenting dissents. Its stringent, heavy-handed control of media expression is therefore understandable, though certainly not desirable. To state the otherwise obvious, the United States can well afford to allow a negative press but China hardly can.

As such, America's mainstream media had been playing a dual role promoting the US agenda. Its dutiful criticisms of its own government projected an image of freedom and openness, helping the United States win hearts and minds all over the world. By a different token, its persistent fixation on the negatives of nonaligned nations served to demonize the US's foes, alienating—sometimes even separating—them from those whose hearts and minds had been won. Such fixations also dehumanized the people of nonaligned nations, providing justifications for America's many wars—hot, cold, or proxy. Whether by design or default, the United States' mainstream media functions as both soft power and hard power.

This dual role dovetailed into the sentiments prevalent in postcolonial Hong Kong concerning the West and China. The freedom and openness afforded by the United States appealed to white envy and the stringent heavy-handedness of China to

self-hatred, reinforcing the self-objectification of Hongkongers who looked at themselves through the Western gaze and imagination. It was a cyclical situation that fed on itself. Protests earned praises by the Western press, inviting protesters hungry for international approval to step up their action to earn more praises. By the same token, accolades by the Western media was craved and criticisms by the Chinese government savored, intensifying emotions and escalating opposition, in turn providing fodder for the press to continue or even heighten its portrayals of China with prejudiced morality. Furthermore, the very complicated cultural, economic, and geopolitical context of the protest movement was conveniently downplayed or ignored, instilling in many protesters and the worldwide public alike a narrative of simplified morality. Plausible evidence of the role played by right-wing US political forces in the Hong Kong movement, for example, had been provided by progressive press outlets,¹⁴ but the mainstream press had either ignored or downplayed the evidence and its ramifications, insisting instead to view the Hong Kong complexity through simplistic Western eyes. Much of the world followed that guided gaze, perpetuating it. The spirit of Henry R. Luce lives on.

History Repeating Itself?

Five years ago, in a column for the *International Examiner*, the Asian American newspaper of Seattle, Washington, this writer warned that China-bashing by US politicians was “fanning the fire under an already highly volatile global pot, with a New Cold War simmering under the surface. . . . The Cold War had been extremely devastating to humankind. The Vietnam War, for example, was escalated by America on a dominoes theory proven to be utterly wrong, causing destructions of tragic proportions that Asian Americans knew only too well.”¹⁵ The Vietnam War was one of many proxy conflicts of the Cold War, evil undertakings in which the West dragged the people of developing countries into their power struggle, exacting great damages and suffering. Is Hong Kong a proxy conflict of the new Cold War?

So it was that Hong Kong, bathing in a postcolonial condition and conditioned into looking at itself through a Western gaze and its future through Western imagination, was consumed by a misguided idealism that compelled citizens toward a profound mistrust of China while turning a blind eye to its unique accomplishment, likely becoming an unwitting proxy of the new Cold War waged by the United States—a

14. See, for example, Julianne Tveten, “For US Corporate Media, Not Intervening in Chinese Politics Is Journalistically Suspect,” FAIR, July 15, 2020, <https://fair.org/home/for-us-corporate-media-not-intervening-in-chinese-politics-is-journalistically-suspect/>, or, <https://thegrayzone.com/category/hong-kong/>.

15. Sam Ho, “China-Bashing Wrong: We Can Play a Part in Preventing Cold War 2.0,” *International Examiner*, October 7–20, 2015, 3, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0BwOOea3vcRIBfk95Z2xBQmpJOUm1MVM0OVhyVkZVFVRjQX-dlZGZkV2Y3Z0k2SjRXRWdkYUE>.

tragedy of errors that started in 1997, playing out in twenty-two years, reaching warped speed in 2019.

Postscript: A Law Even More Worrisome¹⁶

Much of the above was written in June 2020, shortly before the National Security Law was announced. The new law warrants discussion as an extension of the 2019 unrest.

China's bottom line was finally crossed. Twenty-three years had passed since the 1997 retrocession and Hong Kong was still unable to pass the mandated national security law, Article 23. Meanwhile, the political situation had evolved. From fixating on only one "system" while neglecting the "one country," the opposition had developed into cries for outright "two countries, two systems," a separatist movement that became more and more vocal and virulent. The opposition had painted itself into a corner, with no wiggle room for political solutions. Beijing was likewise cornered, left with no choice but to step in.

It is worthwhile at this juncture to address how the 1997 retrocession had been termed. The return of sovereignty to China is commonly called *handover*, a term informed by Western-centric bias. Why not *take back*? Considering Hong Kong as something to be handed over objectified its people. Yet the British and many in the West, including news outlets, persisted in using the term. Denying Hong Kong people of humanity, the term is a contradiction of the very universal values the West supposedly cherish and aggressively advocate. That many in Hong Kong routinely use the term today is a vivid example of the people being guided to negotiate the world through Western perspectives, regarding ourselves with self-objectification. In an age when English has become the universal language largely because of the power yielded by English-speaking countries, Western-centric biases are routinely and subtly perpetuated by the language.

Meanwhile, the worrisome National Security Law kicked immediately into action in July. The law enabled the prosecution of opposition figures, banned candidates from running, and the dismissal of a primary school teacher. The people of Hong Kong were nervous. Fears about erosion of freedoms and judicial independence abounded. Our future looked even gloomier. Such was the tragedy of errors that a movement launched against the worrisome Extradition Law resulted in an even more worrisome law.

Yet, it was also politics as usual. Rhetoric heated up, politicians bickered, lawyers argued, commentators debated, government officials assured, and social media exploded

16. This additional section was written upon request by the editors after the National Security Law was passed.

with shouting matches. None of the involved parties offered a viable plan to make things better. All the while, the people of Hong Kong wearily dealt with another devastating crisis: COVID-19. For this, we did not have to suffer alone. Nature haunted all of humanity, serving as a reminder that we are but part of a bigger whole.

Humanity was also haunted by another malaise: geopolitical posturing. Western politicians and media ignored the reminder from nature, politicizing COVID-19 instead. The Trump administration and the Republican Party in the United States ratcheted up anti-China rhetoric, trying to win elections by demonizing a nonaligned, non-Caucasian nation, complete with “dog-whistle politics” that shamelessly appealed to latent racism against the Chinese people. The president and his officials wore their racism on their sleeves, calling the illness “kung flu” or the “China virus,” spiting the World Health Organization’s advice not to name diseases after places. Much of the developed West dutifully circled their wagons with the superpower, following Washington’s lead to project, in various degrees, fear of the virus onto the ancient savage waking up in the East. The mainstream press launched into its usual orbit, covering the disease’s early outbreak with sneering condescendence, ill preparing the world for the coming catastrophe. “To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Control Blankets China” screams a *New York Times* headline in February. When the epidemic later escalated to a pandemic, the media would not have the decency to acknowledge its earlier mistakes, playing along with the Trump administration’s Cold War politics instead.¹⁷ The spirit of Henry R. Luce lives on.

The *New York Times* headline helps to illustrate the Hong Kong complexity. The very dog-whistle locution “Mao-Style Social Control” conjures notions of Communism and Chinese otherness. The coded prejudice is elucidated by another headline, in the media-watchdog site FAIR.org, for a report exposing the mainstream media’s bias: “Coronavirus Alarm Blends Yellow Peril and Red Scare.”¹⁸ The *Times* and the rest of the mainstream media complemented the Trump administration’s blatant racism, coupling portrayals of non-Caucasian China with references to Communism, stacking racist sentiments onto Cold War fear of Soviet-style threat, distorting the truth that the Communist Party of China is fundamentally different from America’s former foe. Coverage like that by powerful Western journalistic institutions, readily exemplified by that sensational headline, fed into the white envy and self-hatred typical of the postcolonial condition as well as the fear of Communism in Hong Kong, further alienating

17. Again, FAIR.org had been diligent in exposing the mainstream media’s misdeeds. See, for example, Joshua Cho, “No, China Didn’t ‘Stall’ Critical Covid Information at Outbreak’s Start,” October 14, 2020, <https://fair.org/home/no-china-didnt-stall-critical-covid-information-at-outbreaks-start/>, or, Ari Paul, “Covid-19 Speculation Goes from Margin to Center,” April 17, 2020, <https://fair.org/home/covid-19-speculation-goes-from-margin-to-center/>.

18. Joshua Cho, “Coronavirus Alarm Blends Yellow Peril and Red Scare,” FAIR, March 6, 2020, <https://fair.org/home/coronavirus-alarm-blends-yellow-peril-and-red-scare/>.

the people from the “One Country.” An effective hard-power move by the media, by design or default.¹⁹

And when the National Security Law was announced, one can easily predict the West’s reaction. On cue, it cried foul. Politicians voiced indignance, the press sounded alarm, official sanctions were imposed, international alliances of denouncement were formed, amnesty for the persecuted was offered by governments. The Trump administration dialed up its “dog-whistle politics” against China, complemented by a chorus of Western states, harmonizing a silent but orchestrated symphony of Yellow Peril geopolitics. The media sang its corresponding tune alongside. China’s concerns for security were ignored or downplayed, its oppressive threat emphasized, when both the concerns and the threat were legitimate issues. Western politicians and media outlets that did not seem bothered by earlier calls for “two countries, two systems” suddenly and vociferously mourned the death of “one country, two systems.”

That Hong Kong is a proxy battleground of the new Cold War became obvious. The United States aggressively linked the troubles of Hong Kong to its ideological agenda, expanding the scope of its aggressive campaign against China to include the SAR. Sanctions were imposed; officials blacklisted. Britain—the SAR’s former colonizer, the United States’ closest ally, and a dedicated promoter of the Western agenda—joined ranks. United Kingdom officials, current and former, condemned the National Security Law’s passing, making clever end runs around the law’s mandate by the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s regional constitution, and conveniently ignoring the facts that, according to former court of final appeal judge Henry Litton, “Every country on earth has national security laws” and that “Hong Kong had (and still has) in its statute book national security laws left over from the colonial era.”²⁰

The United Kingdom then came up with a maneuver, announcing that a special pathway for citizenship would be granted for holders of British National Overseas (BNO) passports. While other countries like Australia and Japan had also adjusted immigration quotas for Hong Kong, the United Kingdom promise was especially striking, with potential eligibility for up to three million. This generosity by London was in sharp contrast to its treatment of Rohingya refugees. The genocide of ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar was a glaring atrocity resulting from century-long conflicts greatly exacerbated by colonization, when mass migration was engineered to serve the British Empire’s economic scheme. The British did little to undo the harm at the end of

19. The different measures taken by the Chinese and Western governments to contain COVID-19 help illustrate the misguidedness of promoting Western values in non-Western countries. China’s rigorous, even severe, approach to locking down cities had proven more effective than most of the Western government’s comparatively restrained measures, which were nonetheless consistent with the latter nations’ unique historical continuums. Imagine the reactions if China, in the name of saving Western lives, starts lecturing Western countries about adopting more stringent measures.

20. Henry Litton, “Ignorance or Malice on New Security Laws for Hong Kong?” John Menadue, July 27, 2020. <https://johnmenadue.com/how-long-can-hong-kong-last/>.

colonization, leaving behind a heated cauldron of racial tension that exploded in 2017 with the genocide. About a million displaced Rohingya now live in dismal conditions in refugee camps. Short of the ideal scenario of their moving back to their homeland and living in peace with the majority population, the United Kingdom granting them residency would be a responsible and humane solution. While London had contributed financially to benefit the refugees, only a small percentage of the displaced had been resettled in Britain. Yet, after Hong Kong's National Security Law was announced, citizenship was promptly offered to three million.²¹ Not by coincidence, shortly before China announced the National Security Law, it was embroiled in the aforementioned conflict with India near the Johnson Line and the Macartney-MacDonald Line, drawn forcibly and unilaterally by the colonial British Empire.

Colonialism is an enterprise of evil proportions. In its imperialist era, the West had exacted great damages on the non-Western world. Reforming itself in the twentieth century, the West finally doing the right thing and withdrawing from the abominable enterprise was a welcome step for humanity. But the reformation was far from complete. Former colonial governments leaving behind unresolved conflicts was bad enough; not doing much to help during the difficult period of postcolonial transition was worse. Even worse was exploiting the very troubles they left behind for ideological gain, continuing to wreak havoc in the lands on which they had trampled. The British opening up political representation in Hong Kong mostly in the last decade of its one hundred and fifty-year rule was bad enough. Doing so without adequately preparing the colony with political education and practice could only mean combative chaos and partisan stalemate would follow.

Hong Kong's democratic leaders, seriously malnourished in political knowledge and wisdom, were reduced to mostly self-righteous grandstanding and obstructionist partisanship, copying parliamentary tactics like filibusters from the West without learning or adopting statesmanship, squandering precious opportunities to pursue their idealism, denying Hong Kong from meaningful implementation of "one country, two systems" in the process. Refusing to cross the river one stone at a time, they insisted on a single, unbending path and ended up putting themselves and Hong Kong in dire straits. The SAR government, inheriting from the former rulers a bureaucratic structure marked by an unimaginative efficiency, predictably failed in rising to the occasion, unable to foster any semblance of effective solutions to the political quagmire. China, by the same measure, was also unskilled in dealing with the unique politics of "one country,

21. The number of refugees differs in different accounts. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, over a million Rohingya had fled Myanmar since the 1990s. See UNHCR, "Rohingya Emergency," UNHCR, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/rohingya-emergency.html>; the BBC maintains that over six hundred thousand refugees are in Bangladesh as of January 2020. See BBC, "Myanmar Rohingya: What You Need to Know About the Crisis," January 23, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>.

two systems.” Beijing initially tried to balance the two systems through proxy, but the proestablishment faction was even more malnourished in political skills than the opposition, conversant in neither Western political thought or the unique blend of capitalism and socialism formulated by the Chinese authoritarian meritocracy. The result? Combative chaos and partisan stalemate.

The United Kingdom and other Western governments’ immigration offers might mean well and certainly sounded noble, but they also continued to stir up dissent. Activists with anti-China sentiments, assured that they will be granted safe haven, would be emboldened. Again, China’s legitimate concerns about stability and security will likely be heightened, potentially leading to more stringent measures. Divide and weaken, by design or default.

The 2019 unrest was a powerful, compelling event, driven by genuine pursuit of ideals. The National Security Law passed a year later was imposed over genuine concerns for national unity and security. The chain of events was the result of all involved parties bringing out the worst of each other, the East and the West alike. From the mostly youthful protesters who saw and imagined our historical continuum through the Western gaze, to prodemocracy politicians and activists who simplemindedly pursued Western values, to a government run with leftover efficiency and political inadequacy, to proestablishment flag wavers who had no choice but to follow instructions and were left with no room for alternative solutions, to a central government that had fostered progress but still failed to ease the mistrust of its reunified citizens, to a former colonial government that had ill prepared its former subjects to face their new reality while continuing to fan the fire after ceding power, to a powerful media dedicated to promoting the western agenda, to a superpower addicted to maintaining its own version of world order by staging proxy conflicts. To paraphrase Octave in Jean Renoir’s *La Règle du jeu* (1939), every party had its reasons.²²

Hong Kong was doomed to a continual tragedy of errors.

22. This writer considers Jean Renoir one of the West’s gifts to humanity. It was his humanism that inspired this writer to recognize the flaws and perils of the Western gaze.