

THE INFLUENCE OF THE “ONE COUNTRY, TWO
SYSTEMS” PRINCIPLE ON LATE 20TH CENTURY
HONG KONG SOCIETY

HIS385: THE HISTORY OF HONG KONG

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To exert a more significant influence over the territory, the "one country, two systems" principle was formulated in the early 1980s by then-Primer Deng Xiaoping, during negotiations with the United Kingdom over Hong Kong. The negotiations ended with an agreement that this region could retain its own economic and administrative system, similar to the neighbouring region of Taiwan¹. At the same time, the rest of Mainland China shared a more socialist infrastructure. Hong Kong was promised both a "high degree of autonomy in running its economic, political and cultural affairs"² and its police and armed forces' sole ownership. Under the principle, the government of Hong Kong would be solely elected by its people, without inference from Beijing. Finally, the "one country, two systems" principle would be unchanged for 50 years after 1997³. Since its inception, the "One Country, Two Systems" policy has been dramatically contested during the various crises over the past three decades. Initially, Deng's system was put forward to unify the PRC with Taiwan and Hong Kong by peaceful means. However, the Joint Declaration and its effect on the evolution of Hong Kong would affect China's international reputation within the Asia-Pacific region and in the global economic community⁴. This paper will argue that Deng's policy and subsequent implementation had significant political and social impacts on Hong Kong society and its citizens during the late 20th century, including widespread social unrest, distrust towards their government, and the subsequent rise and push towards a more democratic administrative structure.

¹ Agnes J. Bundy. "The Reunification and China with Hong Kong and Its Implications for Taiwan: An Analysis of the One Country, Two System Model." *California Western International Law Journal* 19, no. 2.(1989). pp. 271-286.

² Bundy. "The Reunification and China with Hong Kong".

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael Yahuda. "Deng Xiaoping: The Statesmen." *The China Quarterly*, No. 135, Special Issue: Deng Xiaoping: An Assessment. (1993). pp. 551-572.

Firstly, the "one country, two systems" principle excluded Hong Kong citizens in discussions regarding their territory's future, foreshadowing both political and social disapproval. A subtextual analysis of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration reveals discrepancies between China's "three-legged stool" principle and subsequent policies that excluded Hong Kong citizens' voice. For instance, as a former British colony, the Joint Declaration promised to give Hong Kong a far greater self-government capacity than it ever had. Nevertheless, the Joint Declaration does not clarify how the rights and freedoms enumerated in the Joint Declaration will be protected by the future HKSAR Government⁵. Not only is it stated that China has the power to appoint the Chief Executive, but most critically, the agreement makes China the sole body responsible for implementing into domestic law the promises contained in the bilateral treaty. Thus, under the Declaration's terms, the two systems will not independently define their powers; instead, China will be responsible for writing into law precisely what the powers of each system would be and what the relationship would be between the two systems.

Secondly, scholar Thomas Boasberg's arguments detail the discrepancies between the initial 1984 treaty's detailed provisions stipulated in the Basic Law and the final version of the law promulgated by the People's Republic of China. Specifically, Although Britain and China agreed in the Joint Declaration that the 1984 treaty's detailed provisions would be stipulated in the Basic Law, the final version of the law promulgated by NPC does not accord with several core promises of the Joint Declaration⁶. Furthermore, author Lorenz Langer writes how the lack of adherence

⁵ "Official Publication: Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong." *Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School*. (1984). <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1071&context=ilr>

⁶ Thomas Boasberg, "One Country, One-and-a-Half Systems: The Hong Kong Basic Law and Its Breaches of the Sino-British Joint Declaration." *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 10, no. 2 (1992). pp. 282-347.

to the Joint Declaration principles began since Hong Kong's sovereignty was passed to China⁷. Despite the five years spent on the drafting process and the inclusion of twenty-three persons from Hong Kong on the drafting committee, Hong Kong people had no opportunity to either ratify or amend the PRC Government-promulgated Basic Law⁸.

Furthermore, we can look at the diminished role of Hong Kong citizens and the importance of their opinions during the formation of this new territory. As scholars, James T.H. Tang and Frank Chiang note, the Hong Kong people were largely denied a direct role in the negotiations about their future⁹. The three-legged stool was most unstable during the protracted negotiations, as the third leg, Hong Kong's public, was suspicious of both China and Britain and at the same time was experiencing a keen sense of its importance¹⁰. The Beijing government derailed the Hong Kong government's plans to introduce a more representative government, even though it was Hong Kong's continued viability of a prosperous capitalist system that led the Chinese government to initially engage in favourable Hong Kong relations¹¹. The people of Hong Kong were again denied the opportunity to express their will. As for the Basic Law, initially, China would not allow any Hong Kong representation on the drafting committee, significantly disrupting the promises of the three-legged stool concept. However, legitimacy was increased after the inclusion of both an all-Hong Kong Consultative Committee, and Hong Kong members. None-

⁷ Lorenz Langer. "Out of Joint? – Hong Kong's International Status from the Sino-British Joint Declaration to the Present." *Archiv Des Völkerrechts* 46, no. 3. (2008). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40800219>. pp. 309-344.

⁸ Langer. "Out of Joint?"

⁹ James T.H. Tang, Frank Ching. "The Maclehoose and Youde Years: Balancing the 'three-legged stool', 1971-86". (2020). https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soas_research/2235/. pp. 41-46.

¹⁰ Tang, Ching. "The Maclehoose and Youde Years".

¹¹ David M. Corwin. "China's Choices: The 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and Its Aftermath". *Law and Policy in International Business* 19, no. 3. (1987). pp. 505-536.

theless, the Beijing government still dominated the drafting process, allowing a limited scope for Hong Kong opinion.

In addition, events after the 1984 Joint Declaration increasingly demonstrated the limitations of the three-legged stool as a concept in aiding political developments in Hong Kong. For instance, the Daya Bay controversy over a nuclear power plant proposed to be built in 1985, 48 kilometres away from the region in Guangzhou, China, caused significant disagreement between the government and people. Despite strong opposition from the public, the Daya Bay nuclear power plant proceeded according to plan. The Daya Bay controversy led to public apathy when the people realized their views were not adequately taken into account, and resulted in the rapid mobilization of public opinion. As a decision by the Chinese government that ran counter to public opinion in Hong Kong, the decision behind the implementation of the power plant severely polarized the community,¹².

Political confidence in Hong Kong suffered from the difficulties Hong Kong encountered in developing representative government and the Daya Bay incident. Both issues demonstrated the undeniable fact that the Hong Kong leg of the three-legged stool concept was removed from decisions that would benefit their own people¹³. The Joint Declaration can be described as the formal enshrining of the three-legged stool concept since it joined Britain and China in an agreement whose ratification required accepting the people of Hong Kong. Nonetheless, from the examples above, it is clear that Hong Kong was reduced to a bargaining chip in Britain and China's bilateral maneuvering. The Daya Bay incident indeed showed that Hong Kong public opin-

¹² Tang, Ching. "The Maclehorse and Youde Years".

¹³ Ibid.

ion, while constituting one of the three legs, is not sufficient in itself to veto decisions made by China¹⁴. Overall, because Hong Kong citizens were never given an equal voice at the negotiation table, it is not surprising that public opinion would sour from documents drafted according to the "one country, two systems" principle that China fought so adamantly implement.

Due to the exclusion of Hong Kong citizens in regards to the "one country, two systems" principle, a negative shift in public opinion within Hong Kong citizens began to arise towards their government and that of the PRC, resulting in public unrest, mass emigration and distrust towards both administrations. Firstly, the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, which led to social unrest both in China and in Hong Kong, was the catalyst in increased protests and distrust towards the "one country, two systems" principle. Still one of the most censored topics in China, thousands of students held firm throughout Tiananmen Square of the capital city, calling for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and democratic constitutional processes¹⁵. Though peaceful, Deng and other party leaders deemed the protests a political threat and enabled martial law, leading to the deaths of around 300 people, as reported by the Chinese Communist Party¹⁶. Yet Amnesty International estimated the number between several hundred and 1,000¹⁷. Though a foreign event, the technological developments in communication and television enabled Hong Kong citizens to witness the event's horrors in real-time, sending shockwaves throughout Hong Kong society.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tony Saich. "The Chinese People's Movement: Perspectives on Spring 1989". (1990). pp. 51-53.

¹⁶ Saich. "The Chinese People's Movement".

¹⁷ "China: 15 years after Tiananmen, calls for justice continue and the arrests go on". Amnesty International. (June 2, 2004), <https://web.archive.org/web/20190131093456/https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/020/2004/en/>.

Following the crackdown, rallies supporting Tiananmen Square protesters erupted throughout the world. In the days following the initial crackdown, Hong Kong's largest-ever protest (at the time) of over 1.5 million march erupted as people protested in support of the student movement and against the Chinese government's brutality, organized by the newly created Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China¹⁸. Though the largest protest against the crackdown outside Beijing, these protests were also tinged with fear as the spectre of reunification with China hung over their heads. The Tiananmen Incident created an atmosphere of fear regarding their region's return of sovereignty to China and triggered another safety crisis¹⁹. If the Communist Party showed no respect for laws and citizens' protests, Hong Kongers feared the Joint Declaration's written statement and in the Basic Law was worthless and could not be used to protect Hong Kong. In short, the Tiananmen Incident significantly deteriorated any trust that the Hong Kong people had in Beijing's "One Country, Two Systems" policy.

In addition, statistics regarding emigration from Hong Kong to regions in Asia, Europe, and North America highlighted Hong Kong citizens' distrust and fear towards their governmental system. Doubts about the colony's political future contributed to increased emigration from Hong Kong to Western destinations, particularly Canada, the United States, and Australia. For instance, a study by Ronald Skeldon, a Professorial Fellow in the Department of Geography at the University of Sussex, identified the year 1986 as the watershed with regards to Hong Kong's emigration problem²⁰. According to official estimates, emigration between 1980 and 1986 fluctuated but

¹⁸ Amy Gunia. "A Brief History of Protest in Post-Handover Hong Kong". June 20, 2019. <https://time.com/5606212/hong-kong-history-mass-demonstrations-protest/>.

¹⁹ Gunia. "A Brief History of Protest".

²⁰ Ronald Skeldon. "Reluctant Exiles? Migration from Hong Kong and the New Overseas Chinese". *Hong Kong Becoming China: The Transition to 1997*. (1994). <https://hkupress.hku.hk/pro/815.php>. pp. 42-44.

amounted to about twenty thousand people per year²¹. Though Skeldon argued that this migration should not be analyzed in simplistic terms (i.e. nonpolitical factors were causing the "brain drain"), nevertheless, the accelerating rate of emigration since 1986 could arguably be regarded as a case of "voting by feet."²² The perceived problems created by the brain drain had a significant impact on the stability of Hong Kong. A survey conducted in 1991 found that 13% of respondents would "probably" or "definitely" emigrate²³. Emigration peaked at 66,000 in 1992, although the figure was thought to be an under-estimation²⁴.

Nonetheless, the catalyst for the greatest mass migration source from Hong Kong during the late 20th century was The Tiananmen Square massacre. The reunification, even under the "one country, two systems" doctrine, sent countless Hong Kongers scrambling for a chance to immigrate to another country. The outflow of people ultimately reached 1% of the population, or 66,000 by 1990²⁵. The emigration rate would increase in 1992 with 66,000 people, followed by 53,000 in 1993, and 62,000 in 1994²⁶.

Finally, due to the high sense of mistrust of both the Hong Kong SAR (HKSAR) government and the Central government in Beijing, the effects of the "one country, two systems" principle encouraged Hong Kong citizens to advocate for increased democratic political process-

²¹ Skeldon. "Reluctant Exiles".

²² *ibid.*

²³ Ian Scott. "'One country, two systems': the end of a legitimating ideology?". *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration, Volume 39, Issue 2.* (2017). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23276665.2017.1325619?src=recsys>. pp. 83-84.

²⁴ Scott, "One Country, two systems".

²⁵ Melanie Manion. "Corruption by Design: Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong." *Harvard University Press.* (n.d). pp. 12-14.

²⁶ Manion. "Corruption by Design".

es. Specifically, Hong Kong's democracy movement was revitalized following the Tiananmen Incident. Many Hong Kong denizens continued to protest the PRC's crackdown, calling for unity with the Chinese people in fighting for democracy. Whereas local democratic movement could only attract hundreds, the aftermath of the Massacre resulted in an estimated 50,000-100,000 protestors on the streets of Hong Kong²⁷. Democracy and democratic development invited more and more discussion from people in Hong Kong society, from an increasing number of pro-democracy literature and books, to front page articles depicting the democratic events in Hong Kong, mainland China and overseas²⁸. The Hong Kong legislature held many lengthy debates on speeding up democratization in the territory, and from this emotional climate a new Democratic Party was born²⁹. Adopting an anti-Beijing line and reaffirming that only democracy could save their home from the imposing authoritarian rule of the CCP, the new Democratic Party was extremely popular. For instance, In September 1991, more democratically inclined candidates that also advocated for a fundamental amendment to the Basic Law captured seventeen of the available eighteen election seats³⁰. The defeat of those who urged acceptance of the Basic Law, but more importantly the victory of the pro-democracy candidates highlighted the degree to which many people in Hong Kong were opposed to the status quo, and the outdated nature of the Basic Law.

²⁷ Scott. "One Country, Two Systems".

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Thomas Boasberg. "One Country, One-and-a-Half Systems: The Hong Kong Basic Law and Its Breaches of the Sino-British Joint Declaration." *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 10, no. 2 (1992). pp. 282-347.

Furthermore, the new governor's arrival, Chris Patten, immediately sought to unilaterally democratize the territory by allowing half of the Legislative Council to be elected via universal suffrage. As a result of Patten's policies, the Legislative Council became a fully elected legislature for the first time since 1995³¹. It extensively expanded its functions and organizations for the years leading up to the handover. Despite being strongly criticized by pro-CCP political parties in Hong Kong, Patten's view that "People in Hong Kong are perfectly capable of taking a greater share in managing their affairs in a way that is responsible, mature, restrained, sensible"³² resonated with citizens, making him a positive figure within the general public and generating a revitalized democratic movement.

In conclusion, through the absence of Hong Kong citizens in discussion over their territory's future, a significant souring in public opinion towards their government and that of the People's Republic of China ensued over the 1980s and 1990s, leading up to the handover in 1997. Through increased support towards democratic processes, as well as increased emigration from Hong Kong towards more developed regions around the world, and significant protests/social unrest following the 1989 Tiananmen incident, it is apparent that the "one country, two systems" policy had an unprecedented and unforeseen social impact on Hong Kong citizens and their society.

Hong Kong currently stands as a highly developed territory, a culturally diverse city and a global economic powerhouse. Nonetheless, protests and the voice of citizens has continued to hold immense weight in its society, even after the handover (such as the annual July 1 Marches,

³¹ Jonathan Dimpleby. "The last governor: Chris Patten & the handover of Hong Kong" (Little, Brown and Company: 1997). pp. 15-26.

³² Andrew Jacobs. "Hong Kong Democracy Standoff". (October 27, 2014). <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/28/world/asia/china-began-push-against-hong-kong-elections-in-50s.html>.

continuing to demand for democracy and universal suffrage³³). Given the 2019-2020 mass protests that have attracted more than one million Hong Kong residents, it is crucial to understand how its people's voices have impacted Hong Kong's ever-evolving history, and how this impact will continue even after the “one country, two systems” principle ends.

³³ Brian C.H Fong. "One Country, Two Nationalisms: Center-Periphery Relations between Mainland China and Hong Kong, 1997–2016". (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700417691470>.

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