

A New Age of Hong Kong Nationalism

How has nationalistic elements expressed in the 2019 Hong Kong protests ordered international relations?

Name: Derron Yu

What does it mean for a country to be nationalistic? How can nationalism order international relations? By examining the historical case study of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, and utilizing Benedict Anderson's arguments, I will attempt to answer these questions. I contend that nationalistic sentiments expressed in the demonstrations directly impacted the state of international diplomacy through the context of the US-China trade deal. More specifically, the crisis in Hong Kong is also a crisis of International Relations because it directly involves one of the most pressing economic issues in the world, and disruption of any kind undoubtedly has an impact on world trade everywhere. In addition to drawing from Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities," this essay will link the protests' sentiments through the dimensions of localism and identity.

In attempting to explain the situation in Hong Kong and how it can be expanded onto a global, international dimension, I will first provide a background to Anderson's arguments, context to the protests, and a historiographic analysis into the relationship between nationalism and international relations. My central argument will then demonstrate how the actions and expressions of the 2019 Hong Kong protestors contained nationalistic elements (through the use of primary sources) and directly reflects Anderson's concept of the imagined community. By proving that these protests reveal a sense of nationalism, I will then showcase the direct effect of this Hong Kong nationalism on US/China Relations, and thus the protests' economic impact on international relations.

To contextualize the protests, until the handover in 1997, Hong Kong was ruled by Britain. Yet under the "one country, two systems" arrangement, citizens were granted rights that

reflected Hong Kong's ability to maintain its governmental system as well as independent financial and economic affairs, separate from Britain or China. In 2019, a "Fugitive Offenders amendment bill" was initially proposed to allow extradition into Mainland China. Fearing that the bill would undermine the region's "autonomy and people's civil liberties,"¹ protestors took to the streets and demanded five key demands. These demands not only included a complete withdrawal of the bill but the immediate resignation of Chief Executive Carrie Lam as well as a proposal for universal suffrage². In a more general sense, the current situation surrounding Hong Kong is extremely applicable to a broader, international context. Not only does Hong Kong serve as a significant cultural hub in South-east Asia, but the rise of nationalistic sentiments has also brought forth extreme changes in the global economy, which will be explained further in the essay.

Firstly, understanding how scholars have attempted to understand the relationship between nationalism and international relations can also help us answer the research question. Historically, the international order has been influenced by the developments of nationalism. For instance, as J.G. Kellas writes in "The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity," "international relations and the structure of international society have an important impact on nationalism, for they

¹ Holmes Chan, "Ex-governor Chris Patten says extradition bill worst thing for Hong Kong," *Hong Kong Free Press*, May 22, 2019, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2019/05/22/ex-governor-chris-patten-says-extradition-bill-worst-thing-hong-kong-since-1997-carrie-lam-faces-grilling/>

² Holmes Chan, "Hong Kong to officially withdraw extradition bill," *Hong Kong Free Press*, September 4, 2019, accessed April 4, 2020, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/09/04/breaking-hong-kong-officially-withdraw-extradition-bill-legislature-still-no-independent-commission-inquiry/>

often determine its success or failure."³ Nationalism has been was one of the most significant causes of World War I, a series of events that dramatically shifted the playing field of International Relations⁴. And as Erin McDonald writes in the McGill Journal of Political studies, a majority of nationalist regimes are initially born from populist regimes that attempt to meet the needs of the people, but end in distrust and dismantling efforts of the ruling government⁵. Historians have generally cited nationalism as a contributor to the shifting dynamics of international relations. Yet, there do exist two major schools of thought, realism, and liberalism, that seek to explain these dynamics. In the context of the Hong Kong protests, for instance, a realist perspective would depict the struggle between Hong Kong protestors demands' and the government's inability to meet those demands as a classic power struggle between the Hong Kong government and its people. In this example, the Hong Kong government (backed by the Chinese Communist Party) would view increasing power and national security as critical elements of their foreign policy agenda, and thus see force suppression as the optimal solution to quelling the protests. Theoretically, one could argue that the actions undertaken by the Hong Kong government are realist in nature, their primary concern being that of preserving power regardless of the ethical considerations of the protestors. This argument could then be supported by evidence citing physical and psychological damage inflicted on the protesting citizens.

³ J.G. Kellas, "The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity", *Paddison, R. Journal of Historical Geography; London Vol. 18, Iss. 4*, October 1, 1992, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://search.proquest.com/openview/c4fdeaf-7811e0ea00e0992d26064cc2b/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1819604>

⁴ John Horne, "A Companion to World War 1", *Blackwell Companions to World History*, 2012, accessed April 3, 2020, https://books.google.ca/books?id=EjZHLXRKjtEC&pg=PA21&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁵ Erin MacDonald, "International Relations on the Rise of Nationalism: Domestic Politics", February 9, 2018, accessed April 3, 2020: <https://mjps.ssmu.ca/2018/02/09/international-relations-on-the-rise-of-nationalism/>

By answering the research question, it is imperative to understand nationalism as an ideology that promotes the interest of a particular nation, explicitly with the purpose of maintaining state sovereignty.⁶ Benedict Anderson offers a unique perspective of what constitutes nationalism, citing that nationalism has led to the creation of nation-states through the concept of "imagined communities." In essence, Anderson believes that even though a nation can be so large that its members do not know each other, they can "imagine" a collective community and rally together utilizing that sense of "deep, horizontal comradeship."⁷ Regardless of any inequalities and differences, the bond of this imagined alliance was theorized by Anderson to be so strong that it would "drive men to heroic deaths in nationalistic sacrifice."⁸ Anderson's thoughts on nationalism can help us infer how nationalism orders international relations; for instance, through national movements; movements and protests that unite people of all backgrounds to a united, common cause, and through the idea of an "imagined community" to strive for a collective national identity. The process to form a common national identity, I will argue, served as a primary reason behind the 2019 Hong Kong protests.

The first argument of this essay claims that elements of the protests supported and strengthened a sense of nationalism. More specifically, we can infer nationalistic elements from the pro-democratic, localist sentiments expressed during the demonstrations. Localism in Hong Kong focusses on protecting the region's local culture and autonomy. Despite their different

⁶ Lexico, "Nationalism", 2020, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/nationalism>

⁷ Elaine Lo, "A Biography of Benedict Anderson", October 2017, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/19/anderson-benedict/>

⁸ *ibid.*

goals, all localist groups aim to oppose the growing influence of the Chinese government on their region's economic, social and political activities⁹. In effect, I argue that Hong Kong localism *is* Hong Kong nationalism; this need to advocate for an independent governing body, and free autonomy from China only reinforces the people's desire for a radical call to complete independence as a sovereign state. The need to advocate democratic platforms also reflects a sense of nationalism, given that democratic development in Hong Kong begun since the transfer of sovereignty to China in 1997, and was recently re-ignited in the 2014 Umbrella Revolution. A similar series of protests occurred after the National People's Congress made reforms to the Hong Kong electoral system that were seen widely as restrictive and beneficial to the Chinese Communist Party¹⁰.

Evidence of participation by pro-democratic and localist groups in Hong Kong can be seen during the earliest days and weeks of the protests; for instance, the first evidence of protests against the extradition bill was organized and held by the student activist group "Demosisto" on the 15th of March¹¹. The group also protested for a referendum aimed at a complete autonomy of Hong Kong's legislative system, to which the region's police force immediately sought to quell via the use of rubber bullets and pepper spray¹². Likewise, the group's prioritization for Hong

⁹ Vaudine England, "Hong Kong suffers identity crisis as China's influence grows", *The Guardian*, 23 March, 2012, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/23/china-hong-kong-identity-crisis>

¹⁰ Tony Cheung, "Hong Kong's candidate nominating system out of balance", *South China Morning Post*, 31 August, 2014, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1582079/beijing-scholar-says-hong-kongs-candidate-nominating-system-out>

¹¹ News Now, "Ambitions rushed into the sit-in of the political chief to urge the withdrawal of fugitive offenders", March 15, 2019, accessed March 16, 2020, <https://news.now.com/home/local/player?newsId=340955>

¹² "Our Manifesto", *Demosisto*, 2020, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.demosisto.hk/about?lang=en>

Kong's "democratic self-determination"¹³ also led to a complete election ban for the leaders Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow's local district council campaigns. As one of the five fundamental principles of nationalism¹⁴, self-determination, and the need to be free from outside interference was an essential point of advocacy for "Demosisto."

Another of the five fundamental principles of nationalism, the need for national, independent identity, was also conveyed in the protests. Sentiments of such an identity were evident through various television interviews, newspapers, and other traditional and non-traditional forms of media. For instance, several protestors interviewed in June of 2019 expressed the protests as both a platform for the expression of identity and culture, as well as a political tool for independence and autonomy. Antony Dapiran, a long-time resident of Hong Kong who authored "City of Protest" (a book on the history of dissent in the region), explained that while the initial cause behind the demonstrations was "to protest for democracy in China,"¹⁵ it had shifted to allow "an expression of Hong Kong identity."¹⁶ This collective shift in identity is also evident in recent Hong Kong polls, which indicate a decline in people that identify as "Chinese", and an increase in those that identify as coming from Hong Kong¹⁷. Given Hong Kong's overwhelming

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Rick Wilford, Vincent Geoghegan, "Political Ideologies: An Introduction", 2014, accessed April 7, 2020, https://books.google.ca/books?id=4PsjAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA99&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

¹⁵ Lily Kuo, Emma Graham-Harrison, "Taking to the Streets: How Protests Have Shaped Hong Kong's History", *The Guardian*, 13 June, 2019, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/13/mass-street-protests-are-an-expression-of-hong-kongs-identity>

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Yew Chiew Ping, Kwong Kin-ming, "Hong Kong Identity on the Rise", December 2014, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://as.ucpress.edu/content/54/6/1088.abstract>

ethnic population of Han Chinese¹⁸, this shift is also significant in revealing the rise in nationalist sentiments.

The actions demonstrated by Hong Kong protestors are substantially similar to ideas echoed by Anderson's "Imagined Communities"; specifically, the power of language and communication in forming a tight-knit imagined political community. In particular, the song "Glory to Hong Kong" was used as a rallying cry by mass pro-democracy protests featuring lines such as "May people reign, proud and free, now and evermore."¹⁹ The March's Cantonese lyrics, in particular, asserts a notion of a collective cultural identity, evoking a sense of national pride to residents, and a re-confirmation of Hong Kong's localist elements²⁰.

Given the overwhelming evidence of nationalism expressed in the Hong Kong protests, I argue that this new nationalism is supported by the concept of Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities." In an area with such a young, recent history such as Hong Kong, and given its ineligibility as a nation-state, the people's self-identification and sense of nationalism can be explained by the concept of an "imagined political community."²¹ Despite the protesters not personally knowing each other, they were able to bond together and occupy the streets of Hong Kong to advocate for a cause higher than their own individualistic goals.

¹⁸ "The Demographics: Ethnic Groups", *Hong Kong Information Centre*, 2020, accessed April 7, 2020, https://www.had.gov.hk/tru/english/info/info_dem.html

¹⁹ Daniel Victor, "Hong Kong Protesters, Without an Anthem to Sing", *New York Times*, September 12, 2019, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/12/world/asia/glory-to-hong-kong-anthem.html>

²⁰ Brian C Thompson, "What's in a song? For the people of Hong Kong, the idea of nationhood", *The Globe and Mail*, September 18, 2019, accessed April 4, 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-whats-in-a-song-for-the-people-of-hong-kong-the-idea-of-nationhood/>

²¹ Scott Sherman, "Benedict Anderson's View of Nationalism", May 19, 2016, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/benedict-andersons-view-of-nationalism/>

However, it is also essential to recognize the other underlying causes of the protests. Nationalism and nationalistic support towards the democratic, independent values imbedded within Hong Kong's roots was nonetheless only one reason as to why the protests eventually escalated and developed into violence and chaos. For instance, years of rising housing prices had been an increasing source of anger among residents²², and the power of the business elite meant that legislation of affordable/public housing was still undeveloped and not yet passed²³. As the protest escalated in June of 2019, multiple accusations of police violence and allegations of collusion with local triad militia groups formed that angered protesters even more²⁴. In short, acknowledging that there were other causes can help us understand that the protests were not primarily nationalistic, but rather that they contained nationalistic *elements*.

Nonetheless, these elements still served to greatly influence international relations through the effect on various US-China trade deals. Specifically, through the United States Federal Law "Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019"²⁵, the US government was required to impose sanctions against both HK and Chinese officials if there were to be human rights abuses occurring in Hong Kong. In addition, the United States Department of State would

²² Marco Jakubec, Britt Clennett, "A lack of affordable housing feeds Hong Kong's discontent", *Aljazeera*, 11 August, 2019, accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/lack-affordable-housing-feeds-hong-kong-discontent-190801151538867.html>

²³ Philip Bowring, "How Hong Kong's business elite have thwarted democracy for 150 years", *South China Morning Post*, 19 October, 2014, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1618427/how-hong-kongs-business-elite-have-thwarted-democracy-150>

²⁴ Kris Cheng, "Hong Kong police made no arrests after mob assaulted commuters, protesters, journalists in Yuen Long", *Hong Kong Free Press*, 22 July, 2019, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2019/07/22/hong-kong-police-made-no-arrests-mob-assaulted-commuters-protesters-journalists-yuen-long/>

²⁵ H.R.3289 - Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, *United States Congress*, October 15, 2019, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/3289>

be required to conduct an annual review to review the territory's political status concerning China, to justify a potential change in trade relations between Hong Kong and the United States²⁶.

The bill was complemented with companion legislation restricting the amount of US export crowd control devices to Hong Kong police forces and was signed by President Donald Trump in November of 2019²⁷. The Act states the continued support for democratization explicitly as a "fundamental principle of United States foreign policy²⁸, and that the human rights of Hong Kong citizens would serve as a key factor for continued economic propensity in the region. These series of developments were supported by Demosisto co-founder, activist Joshua Wong and other student activists' participation in the "Congressional-Executive Commission on China" hearing in the United States Capitol on the 17th of September²⁹.

However, the implementation of the Act and the support from Hong Kong activists resulted in a backlash by the Chinese government, and harsh, drastic measures. US national security adviser Robert O'Brien's insistence on the 23rd of November, 2019 that a trade agreement with China would be possible at the year's end³⁰. However, less than a month after the President had

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Emily Cochrane, Edward Wong, Keith Bradsher, "Trump Signs Hong Kong Democracy Legislation, Angering China", *The New York Times*, November 27, 2019, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/us/politics/trump-hong-kong.html>

²⁸ H.R.3289 - Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, *United States Congress*, October 15, 2019, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/3289>

²⁹ Alastair Pike, "Plea for democracy': Hong Kong activists lobby US Congress", *Aljazeera*, 18 September, 2019, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/democracy-hong-kong-activists-lobby-congress-190918033800686.html>

³⁰ "US official says China trade deal possible but Trump won't ignore Hong Kong", *The Guardian*, 23 November, 2019, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/23/us-china-trade-deal-trump-hong-kong>

signed the initial Act, the trade deal was reported to be "stalled because of Hong Kong legislation,"³¹ according to a source close to the President's negotiating team. In addition to banning sanctions on several United States non-governmental organizations and US navy visits to Hong Kong³², the source stated that time was needed for President Xi Jinping's "domestic politics to calm."³³ These interruptions in trade and commerce only served to disrupt and deteriorate existing relations between countries.

In addition to worsening trade relations, the national struggle in Hong Kong brought forth international implications to the global economy. These implications are primarily a result of Hong Kong's status as a financial and economic powerhouse. Given its importance as a hub for trade and finance, Hong Kong is integral to the global economy. As the world's third-leading global financial center³⁴, and during a timeframe where both global trade and manufacturing has diminished, the protests directly resulted in a variety of economic effects that disrupted Hong Kong's role as a worldwide financial intermediary. For instance, capital flight was triggered, forcing individuals to move assets abroad, and resulting in investors (domestic and international) removing money to avoid a more substantial Chinese presence. In a region in which the total

³¹ Se Young Lee, Alexandra Alpher, "Trump says new U.S. law on Hong Kong doesn't help China trade talks", December 2, 2019, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-trade/trump-says-signing-hong-kong-bill-doesnt-make-china-talks-better-idUSKBN1Y61PA?il=0>

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ "The Global Financial Centres Index 20", *Financial Centre Futures*, September 2016, accessed April 9, 2020, https://www.finance-montreal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/gfci20_26sep2016.pdf

value of goods traded exceeded 5.2% of the world's overall 18.8 trillion dollars³⁵, the expected predicted decrease of 1.4% in trade in 2019 and by 3% in 2020³⁶ only serves to damage international relations between countries even further.

The nationalistic sentiments behind the 2019 Hong Kong protests reflect a growing sense of community. This imagined community reinforced the idea of sovereignty, giving the region a sense of identity that allowed it to disrupt international relations at the global level. Within the grander subset of international relations history, the protests are especially significant, from reiterating age-old concepts surrounding state sovereignty to creating discussion regarding democracy, freedom, and the role of nationalism in the modern-day. In examining various forms of expression (including localist, pro-democratic discourse, as well as the usage of music and song as a means of protest), these protesters exhibited signs of nationalism. In turn, the protests indirectly led to the implementation of the "Hong Kong Democracy Act," which worsened and halted trade relations between the world's greatest two superpowers. In conclusion, this essay has argued that nationalism can order international relations through different socioeconomic dimensions. The future of Hong Kong remains uncertain, yet the impact of the 2019 protests on society today has already been undeniable.

³⁵ Jason Karaian, Heather Timmons, "Why Hong Kong's protests matter to the global economy", September 29, 2014, accessed March 29, 2020, <https://qz.com/272657/why-hong-kongs-protests-matter-to-the-global-economy/>

³⁶ Martin Farrer, Kalyeena Makortoff, "As Hong Kong suffers, China risks losing its financial window on the world", *The Guardian*, 27 November, 2019, accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/27/as-hong-kongs-suffers-china-risks-losing-its-financial-window-on-the-world>

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