

The Hong Kong Reckoning in the China Reckoning¹
Victoria Tin-bor Hui
University of Notre Dame

China watchers have recently raised the specter of “China reckoning” in U.S.-China relations.² Analysts have pointed to Beijing’s “sharp power” infiltration into the domestic politics of the U.S. and other countries,³ its use of economic coercion to force international firms to toe the party line, and its gray-zone operations in the Western Pacific.⁴ Beijing’s foreign policy parallels its Hong Kong policy. The “China reckoning” could have come earlier if pundits had paid more attention to Beijing’s encroachment on Hong Kong’s promised autonomy over the years.

IR scholars have had a hard time reckoning with China. Thomas Christensen observes China’s “caustic” turn from 2009 on, but grants that Beijing was merely reacting to others’ provocations.⁵ Iain Johnston contends that China shows “no across-the-board new assertiveness” “on balance.”⁶ Gowa and Ramsay suggest that “Beijing’s offshore claims are not a reliable indicator of its foreign policy as a whole” because a state can “be newly assertive on some limited range of issues while leaving other major policies unchanged.”⁷ Solingen acknowledges Beijing’s “risky” “provocations” in the South China Sea but still extols China’s “peaceful internationalization.”⁸ T. V. Pau laments China’s “near-abandonment” of “peaceful rise” and the “‘salami slicing’ of the South China Sea,” but still salutes it as “one of the rare rising powers in history that crafted an explicit strategy for peaceful rise” -- from “peaceful market-driven strategies for economic and social progress” to “peaceful institutional bargaining.”⁹

¹ I first developed this argument in my congressional testimony. “The Hong Kong Reckoning,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission “U.S.-China Relations in 2019: A Year in Review,” September 4, 2019 (<https://www.uscc.gov/Hearings/us-china-relations-2019-year-review>)

² Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (March/April 2018), pp. 60-70.

³ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “From ‘Soft Power’ to ‘Sharp Power’: Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World,” National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017 (<https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>)

⁴ Andrew S. Erickson, Ryan D. Martinson, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, Naval Institute Press, 2019.

⁵ Thomas J. Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing’s Abrasive Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No.2 (2011), pp. 54-67 at p.61.

⁶ Iain A. Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 7–48, at pp. 32-33.

⁷ Joanne Gowa and Kristopher W. Ramsay, “Gulliver Untied: Entry Deterrence Under Unipolarity,” *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (2017), pp. 495-409 at p. 467.

⁸ Elie Solingen, “Domestic Coalitions, Internationalization, and War Then and Now,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No.1(2014),pp. 44–70, at pp. 45, 59, 61.

⁹ T.V. Paul, “Recasting Statecraft: International Relations and Strategies of Peaceful Change,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1-13, at pp. 9-11.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong people have been resisting Beijing's erosion of the city's freedoms. Beijing has fundamentally broken the promise of "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" with a "high degree of autonomy" under the "one country, two systems" model as laid out in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration filed with the United Nations and the 1990 Basic Law. Long before the latest wave of protests in 2019, half a million demonstrated against the imposition of a national security bill in 2003. Tens of thousands stopped the introduction of national education in 2012. An estimated 1.2 million participated at different moments in various capacities in the Umbrella Movement calling for "genuine universal suffrage" in 2014.¹⁰

International scholars and policy-makers used to argue that all was well in Hong Kong so long as Beijing did not roll out tanks into the streets of Hong Kong in Tiananmen-like fashion. It was thus shocking news when the Chinese military garrison in Hong Kong released a video on July 31, 2019 showing Chinese troops practicing anti-riot drills.¹¹ In one scene, the troops shouted in Cantonese that "all consequences are at your own risk!" In subsequent weeks, international analysts debated if Beijing would send out the People's Liberation Army to end the protests in Hong Kong.¹²

Yet, this focus on military repression is misguided. Since 1989, Beijing has perfected "stability maintenance" to repress dissent by police forces and thugs without deploying the military. In its foreign policy, China has pursued non-military economic leverage to exert political influence in both international organizations and the domestic politics of other countries. While Beijing has shown off its latest weapons systems in annual parades, it has kept to gray-zone operations short of war in asserting its territorial claims in the South China Sea.¹³

Toward Hong Kong, non-military coercion has long been Beijing's weapon of choice. Beijing has chipped away at Hong Kong's autonomy with less visible, whole-of-society repression akin to the "sharp power" deployed elsewhere. In the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement, Chen Zuoyi, the president of Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macao Studies and the former deputy director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, vowed to rein in "Hong Kong's governance." He declared an all-out struggle against all the societal forces behind the protests, "from the street to the law courts, to the Legislative Council, to inside the government, and to universities and secondary schools, etc."¹⁴ By 2019, the government, the police, the Legislative Council, the

¹⁰ Victoria Hui, "Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement: The Protest and Beyond," *Journal of Democracy*, April 2015, Volume 26, Issue 2, pp. 111-121

¹¹ "Chinese army's Hong Kong garrison releases video showing anti-riot drills, featuring tanks," *South China Morning Post*, August 1, 2019 (<https://www.scmp.com/video/hong-kong/3020985/chinese-armys-hong-kong-garrison-releases-video-showing-anti-riot-drills>)

¹² Michael C. Davis and Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Will China Crush the Protests in Hong Kong? Why Beijing Doesn't Need to Send in the Troops," *Foreign Affairs*, August 5, 2019 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-08-05/will-china-crush-protests-hong-kong>)

¹³ Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Summer 2019), pp. 117-159.

¹⁴ Victoria Hui, "Beijing Reins In Hong Kong," *East Asia Forum*, 9/1/2017 (<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/01/beijing-reins-in-hong-kong/>)

Department of Justice, some of the law courts, university councils and so on are stacked with loyalists. Most media are owned by pro-regime businesses. It was due to the widespread conviction that there was little left of Hong Kong's freedoms that the proposed extradition bill would spark such a massive movement in June 2019.

Beijing's Hong Kong policy offers a template for its money diplomacy as well. There has been much talk of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing's acquisition of a 99-year lease of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka sparked a global awakening to China's infrastructural investments as "debt traps" rather than "opportunities."¹⁵ China's "first civilian, later military approach" in Djibouti – with Chinese companies initially building a new container terminal but then expanding it as China's first overseas military base – has also generated much attention. Such measures have echoes in Hong Kong. Hong Kong features two key BRI projects: the high-speed railway and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge. Both were sold as opportunities. Before their construction, dissenters had protested that the near erasure of physical boundaries with mainland China would further undermine Hong Kong's autonomy. Such doubts were dismissed as "politicization" of strictly economic projects. As the projects proceeded, mainland construction companies won the contracts and Hong Kong shouldered the bulk of financial burden. Now that the constructions are complete, parts of the high-speed railway station situated at the heart of the city have been ceded to mainland jurisdiction. It is a much smarter strategy to bring Hong Kong to its knees with bullet trains rather than live bullets.

Most importantly, Beijing's erosion of the Hong Kong system does not bode well for the liberal world order. Hong Kong had inherited from colonial rule a well-functioning liberal order which included a politically-neutral civil service, an impartial police force, an independent judiciary and an unfettered free press. After the handover in 1997, Beijing began to slowly erode these pillars of freedom. In its efforts to quell the massive protests of 2019, Beijing has dramatically stepped up harsh measures to stifle the remaining pockets of freedom. The most alarming is the rapid dismantling of the police force's neutrality, turning it from "Asia's finest" into "just another mainland force" that now arbitrarily beats up and arrests protestors.¹⁶ It is no less troubling that the city's flagship airlines, Cathay Pacific, has been reined in after the original management had allowed staff to participate in a general strike on August 5. The simultaneous bloody crackdown of protestors by local police and the whole-of-society white terror against free-wheeling institutions and businesses have fully exposed how incompatible China is with liberal values.

In its international relations, China has caught up with the U.S. and has been constructing alternative international institutions such as the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank along with the BRI. This has effectively created "one world, two orders" akin to the "one country, two systems" framework for Hong Kong. If China's authoritarian order cannot help but swallow up

¹⁵ Richard Heydarian, "China's Silk Road Project: A Trap Or An Opportunity?" Al Jazeera, May 16, 2017.

¹⁶ Suzanne Sataline, "From Asia's Finest to Hong Kong's Most Hated," The Atlantic, September 1, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/09/hong-kong-police-lost-trust/597205/>); Chris Yeung, "HK Police Now Just Another Mainland Force," Voice of Hong Kong, August 13, 2019 (<http://www.vohk.hk/2019/08/13/hk-police-now-just-another-mainland-force/>)

Hong Kong's liberal order, what would Beijing do to the international liberal order? How credible are China's commitment to the World Trade Organizations and other international treaties if it has not honored the Sino-British Joint Declaration?¹⁷

Elizabeth Warren argues that "getting China right" means that the U.S. should hold "Beijing to live up to its commitments" and "stand up to China in Hong Kong."¹⁸ China's spat with the NBA over Daryl Morey's tweet to "stand with Hong Kong" further illustrates "China's corrosive influence on Western practices and norms" and "the frailty of the liberal order."¹⁹

However belated it is, the "Hong Kong reckoning" has entered center-stage in the "China reckoning." Hong Kong's determined protests against Beijing have intensified "China's soft-power failure"²⁰ and created "an obstacle to Xi Jinping's vision of a 'great rejuvenation' of China."²¹ How Beijing resolves the Hong Kong crisis will have ramifications for how the world "gets China right."

It may be objected that Hong Kong is a domestic issue unrelated to China's foreign policy. Structural realist analyses presume a sharp distinction between domestic politics and international politics. However, liberal and constructivist studies have long integrated the two arenas. The democratic peace theory, in particular, takes for granted that foreign policy is an extension of domestic politics. Likewise, the recent wave of historical Asian IR has taken as unproblematic that domestic Confucian ideals should provide the guiding principle for foreign policy.

¹⁷ Annie Boyajian and Sarah Cook, "Democratic Crisis in Hong Kong," Freedom House, 2019 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/democratic-crisis-hong-kong>); Donald Greenlees, "Why the West can't avoid a clash with China over Hong Kong," The Strategist, July 26, 2019 (<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-the-west-cant-avoid-a-clash-with-china-over-hong-kong/>)

¹⁸ Elizabeth Warren, "It Is Time for the United States to Stand Up to China in Hong Kong," Foreign Policy, October 3, 2019 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/03/it-is-time-for-the-united-states-to-stand-up-to-china-in-hong-kong>)

¹⁹ Ishaan Tharoor, "China's war with the NBA and the frailty of the liberal order," Washington Post, Oct. 9, 2019 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/09/chinas-war-with-nba-frailty-liberal-order/>)

²⁰ Li Yuan, "China's Soft-Power Failure: Condemning Hong Kong's Protests," New York Times, August 20, 2019 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/business/china-hong-kong-social-media-soft-power.html>)

²¹ Jamil Anderlini, "Hong Kong's future hangs by a thread," Financial Times, August 13, 2019 (<https://www.ft.com/content/3fd44d40-bced-11e9-89e2-41e555e96722>)