

# ▶ FEATURE

by **FAIGY GRUNFELD**

# THE MASKED and THE MUZZLED

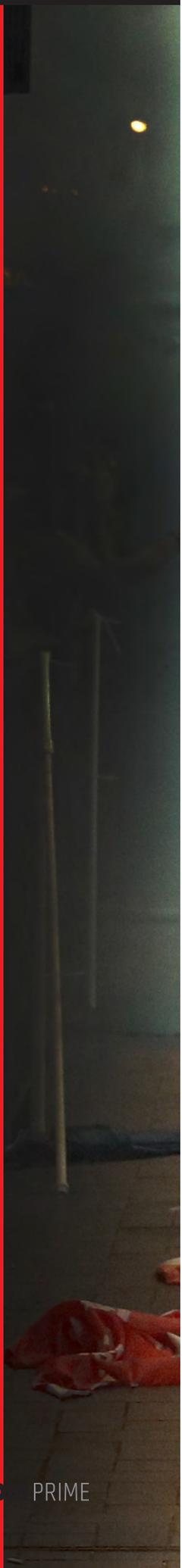
*Will they “liberate” Hong Kong?*

If Edward Leung is a source of inspiration to the Hong Kong protests, he’s a pretty silent source.

While protests have been raging, all has been relatively quiet from Leung’s prison cell.

Leung has long claimed that he is a “nobody,” just a lacrosse enthusiast, a philosophy major, and a self-described “loser.” However, to his large following, he is anything but.

He may have failed to graduate college or get a job, but after becoming politically active in 2014, and now serving a six-year prison sentence for assaulting an officer in 2016, he has become a theoretical leader of sorts for Hong Kong’s leaderless movement.





**AP Photo/Vincent Thian**  
Riot police take cover as tear gas shells were fired without warning in Hong Kong, Oct. 1.

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hile running for office in 2016 against more seasoned, senior candidates, Leung stated ominously, “If you want to restrict our freedom of assembly, go do it. Let’s see what Hong Kongers, what all of us, will do to you,” a warning which now seems uncannily prophetic.

While documentaries and articles on Leung explore the self-doubt this young activist experienced and continues to experience, his conflicted feelings as to whether his somewhat radical agenda has done harm or good, his slogan, “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times,” has become the fuel of the movement, the line that arrested protesters mouth into news cameras, the line spray-painted onto government walls, the line repeated and retweeted by countless followers.

What some have called his extremist views back in 2016 — those of complete separation from mainland China and the preservation of the Hong Kong identity — have now become mainstream among Hong Kong protesters.

Leung may have provided a compass for the movement, but it is the hundreds of thousands of protesters who are doing the navigating, through the turbulent seas of Hong Kong authorities, with the shadowy presence of the Chinese government always lurking in the background.

## POLITICAL STATUS AND BACKGROUND

Many of us have the vague sense that although Hong Kong is in China, it’s got its own unique history and political status, so let’s unknot that one first.

“Hong Kong is a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China [PRC],” says Dr. Leo Shin, Professor of Chinese history at the University of British Columbia, in an

AP Photo/Kin Cheung

Hong Kong localist leader Edward Leung Tin-kei walks past a group of pro-China supporters outside a court after being charged with rioting in Hong Kong, Friday, Aug. 5, 2016.





Billy H.C. Kwok/Getty Images  
A street protest,  
Oct. 31, Hong Kong.



Anthony Kwan/Getty Images  
Riot police stand guard in  
front of a damaged door  
outside a shopping mall  
during a rally, Nov. 3, Hong  
Kong.

*“There’s  
no rioters,  
there’s only  
tyranny” is  
a rallying  
cry of the  
movement.*

interview with *Hamodia*. “In 1997, Hong Kong was reverted back to Chinese sovereignty after having been a British colony for more than 150 years.”

China officially granted Hong Kong certain freedoms once it was reunited with the larger country, allowing it limited independence.

“The PRC is responsible for [Hong Kong’s] defense and foreign policy, but has supposedly granted it autonomy in its internal political/social/economic policies for 50 years,” says Dr. Lawrence Reardon, a Professor of Political Science at the University of New

Hampshire. Which means this arrangement would expire in 2047. Hong Kong has its own judiciary and a separate legal system from mainland China, all of which sounds like a reasonable arrangement, except it seems that Hong Kong's liberty is anything but certain. "That autonomy is on paper, as the PRC has always had a strong influence over Hong Kong domestic, political, and economic structures," Dr. Reardon adds.

## THE TRIGGER

Protests have been rocking Hong Kong for months.

All of this was triggered by a proposal in April that would allow extradition of alleged criminals to China.

Critics of the bill believed this would expose Hong Kongers to potential abuses, injustice and violent treatment by law enforcement; another concern was the targeting of activists and journalists in order to have them extradited and handled by China.

This summer witnessed a slew of demonstrations in the region, earning it the title: "Summer of Protest." These ranged from massive peaceful marches to widespread strikes across industries, to smaller violent clashes and vandalism. "There's no rioters, there's only tyranny" has become one of the rallying cries of the protesters, who draped a sign with the slogan in one of the government chambers.

In July, protesters stormed the parliamentary building, defacing part of it.

In August, one protester who had been injured in the eye sparked a new method of protest — wearing a red eye patch in solidarity. Protesting at the airport caused hundreds of flights to be canceled.

The incidents have been piling up.

After a series of dramatic events, Hong Kong authorities agreed to suspend the bill indefinitely, but that, apparently, is only the beginning.

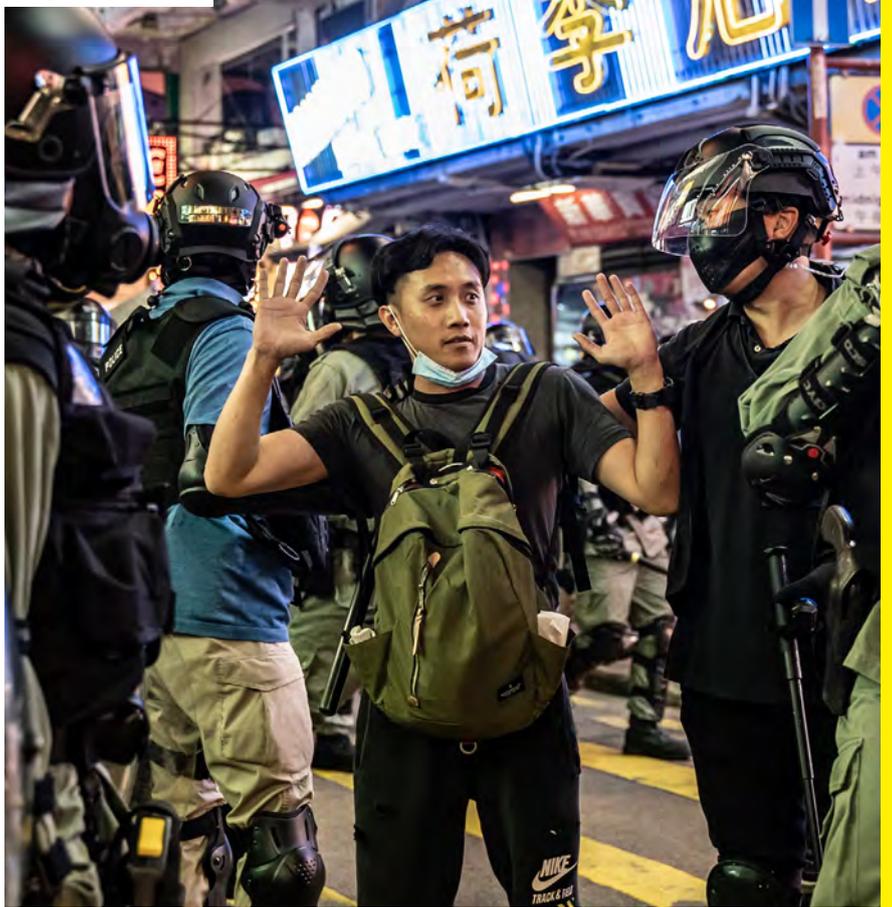
## ESCALATION

But this is not just about the extradition bill. As is often the case with political protests, one specific issue may become the central point around which various people can coalesce. In this case, the extradition was the rallying cry, but hardly the end goal.

This is evident in the fact that once the government agreed to withdraw the bill, protests have continued.

So what, exactly, do the protesters want?

Anthony Kwan/Getty Images  
A pro-democracy protester is detained by police in Mongkok district, Oct. 27, Hong Kong.



ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP via Getty Images  
Riot police detain a pro-democracy demonstrator in Yuen Long district of Hong Kong, Oct. 21.





Anthony Kwan/Getty Images  
Riot police fire tear gas  
as they charge on a Hong  
Kong street on Nov. 2.

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“The grievances have evolved over time,” says Dr. Shin. “At this moment, the main grievances seem to have to do with police brutality and the lack of accountability of the Hong Kong government. More broadly, many people are fearful and resentful of the perceived intrusion of the Chinese government and the perceived disappearance of the Hong Kong way of life. One of the main demands has been the implementation of genuine democracy in Hong Kong, especially as it applies to the elections of the Chief Executive and of members of the Legislative Council.”

Protesters have laid out five basic demands:

- For protests not to be depicted as riots
- Amnesty for arrested protesters
- An inquiry into alleged police brutality
- Universal suffrage
- The withdrawal of the extradition bill (which has already occurred)

Some are also calling for the resignation of Carrie Lam, chief executive of Hong Kong (the highest post in the city), whom many see as a puppet of Xi Jinping.

(In 2014, China ruled against allowing Hong Kongers to nominate their own candidates for office. Rather, a committee of 1,200, many of whom are loyal to Beijing, first screens and votes for candidates before the election is opened up to the public. This ruling sparked the so-called “Umbrella” movement in 2014, where tens of thousands took to the streets to protest the decision.)

“In my mind, the key one is their demand for the establishment of a more democratic system,” says Dr. Reardon.

Is that at all likely to happen?



AP Photo/Dita Alangkara  
 Burning cardboard in the street during a protest in Hong Kong, Nov. 2.

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Not in the near future. “It seems unlikely that Beijing would allow major surprises in Hong Kong’s elections,” says Dr. Shin.

And with President Xi Jinping’s assertion that efforts to separate China would end with “bodies smashed and bones ground to powder,” that conclusion is quite likely correct.

Dr. Reardon echoes Dr. Shin. “[It’s] doubtful that they will achieve these goals, as Hong Kong has never been a democracy. But the young people and others realize that they need to push the system, as the PRC will take control in 2047.”

With that ticking time bomb, Hong Kongers don’t seem to be letting go of their protest anytime soon.

**‘ONE COUNTRY,  
 TWO SYSTEMS’**

This has been the motto, the central tenet, of the Hong Kong-China relationship.

Hong Kong has its own currency, its own legal system, its own cultural identity, and a number of British influences, like government transparency and due process.

They’ve got a constitution, called the Hong Kong Basic Law, which enshrines certain freedoms that are unavailable to Chinese mainlanders, like speech, press, and protest.

Yet these freedoms seem somewhat tentative, with Beijing’s assertion in 2014 that it has “comprehensive jurisdiction” over Hong Kong, and that the city’s “high degree of autonomy ... comes solely from the authorization by the central leadership.”

With that declaration, things sound tenuous at best.

Is it realistic for China and Hong Kong to maintain the “one country, two systems” approach?

“The framework of ‘one country, two systems’ was and remains a compromise,” says Dr. Shin. “It is realistic insofar as each side is willing to understand and accept the bottom, or red, line drawn by the other side.” With that cryptic response, the answer seems to be a definitive “maybe.”

Dr. Reardon’s answer is no more certain. “Well, their economies are integrated in many ways,” he says, implying that this should provide ample reason for a peaceful, collaborative approach. “But the mainland continues to interfere in domestic, political, and economic policies, as they have extraordinary influence over the choice and policies of the legislative process and the chief executive.” And with that dangling observation, peaceful collaboration is seeming less likely.

If Hong Kong only reverted back to China in 1997, and if it’s got its own cultural, political and social fabric, why not cut it loose and stitch up the seams?

What’s China’s perspective on this, and why is it keen to hang onto Hong Kong, which already operates somewhat independently?

“There is not a single Chinese perspective,” says Dr. Shin. “In general, however, the Chinese Communist Party is weary of any hints of separation or independence on the part of any entity within China, as ‘national-

ism' or maintaining 'national integrity' — not communism or socialism — has become the Party's *raison d'être*."

Dr. Reardon raises another point of concern for China. "The PRC is aware that the world community is watching and that its actions will have a significant impact on the attempts to reunify with the ROC [Republic of China — also known as Taiwan, a separate political entity from the PRC]. Should Hong Kong continue to take a more independent stance, other areas besides Taiwan will insist on greater autonomy. The party under Xi Jinping realizes that its control has been lessening, and so it will use all means possible to 'subdue' Hong Kong's 'rebellious attitude.'"

In other words, giving Hong Kong an inch may mean giving other regions a foot. And then China loses a mile. The ROC is officially independent, but a wary kind of independent, with 1,500 PRC missiles pointed at it, and a very jaunty assertion by President Xi that Taiwan's unification with the PRC is "the great trend of history." As of now, Taiwanese are thumbing their noses at history.

All of which offers a bit more context as to why China may want to keep Hong Kong on a short leash.

## CHINA'S MEDIA COVERAGE

While chaos was unfolding in Hong Kong, China's stance was to say nothing. At first.

Even when assembled protesters may have numbered as high as 2 million during a June 16 demonstration, China's media and social media were silent. The latter was most likely due to actual censorship of all posts relating to the protests, and the former due to the government's instructions to avoid all reference to the events.

One Chinese publication, *Xinhua*, went as far to report that the extradition bill was "supported by mainstream public opinion."

The apparent approach, of allowing Hong Kong to tantrum itself out while the motherland ignored it, didn't quite achieve the desired endgame — namely, a remorseful, apologetic Hong Kong tiptoeing back into good grace. So China's authorities pursued another avenue.

This is not a new strategy. Chinese authorities have used it before, accusing Western forces of using protesters as "tools of subversion" and the like. This time, they are claiming the Hong Kong protests are

## THE FACE MASK BAN

In early October, Hong Kong invoked emergency powers to put in place a ruling of up to one year of prison for wearing a face mask — the accessory of choice for many protesters.

Hong Kong Leader Carrie Lam argued that this would prevent more radical protesters from defacing parts of the city, and it would deter violence and risky behavior.

For Hong Kong authorities, this move is a balanced approach compared to more extreme options pushed by pro-Beijing hard-liners, like more punitive sentencing for wearing a mask, operating a 24-hour courthouse to expedite sentencing, and imposing a curfew.

However, to protesters, this ban is an indication of the corrosion of freedom ("the Hong Kong way of life"), and exemplifies exactly what's gone wrong with Hong Kong authorities. Summoning up emergency powers is in and of itself a sign of Beijing interference, in their minds. Furthermore, protesters see the mask as a form of protection from China's far-reaching surveillance methods and use of facial recognition technology.

Despite the ban, tens of thousands of protesters assembled days after, defiantly wearing their headgear, to which police officers responded with rounds of teargas while urging protesters to disperse.

"The most disastrous thing is that you invoke an archaic, draconian, colonial piece of legislation made at a time, 1922, when Hong Kong did not have a mini-constitution," Alan Leong, chairman of the pro-democracy Civic Party, told *The New York Times*. "It is no longer rule of law; it is now rule by one woman [Carrie Lam]."

While face mask bans may sound draconian, in reality a number of western countries employ them. A number of U.S. states have mask bans for people who are trying to intimidate or obstruct others, many of which were specifically enacted during the height of the KKK, and in Canada, bill C-309 which passed in 2013 banned the wearing of a mask during riots or unlawful protests, with a prison sentence of up to 10 years.

Many European nations go further, banning face coverings in all public places except for under certain circumstances, laws which have come in conflict with religious groups like Muslims where some women wear the niqab or the burka.



AP Photo/Vincent Thian

a U.S. intelligence plot to spark a "color revolution" (a term used to describe movements that developed in former Soviet republics), and to destabilize China.

Shortly after the extradition bill was suspended, officials put out a statement "to urge U.S. politicians to not interfere with [Hong Kong's] extradition bill and its internal affairs," a June 17 statement which was largely ignored by Congress but dutifully observed by the executive branch (see next section).

The next step in the campaign

against the protests was to unify support for "One China," the idea that there is, well, just one China, and that "breakoffs" like ROC (Taiwan) and quasi-independents, like Hong Kong, are really part of the central nation-state. Thus the hashtag: The Central Authority Will Not Be Challenged, which was quickly disseminated by China's media machine.

Another angle was to demonize protesters as radical extremists, tools of foreign governments and violent aggressors. China's state media reported: "Radical protesters

# THE MAKINGS OF A MOVEMENT

*Q & A with Dr. Randy Lake, Professor of Communication at the University of Southern California*

**How do political movements form? How do they move beyond initial anger/protest to something more concrete and effective?**

The overly simple answer to the first one is: organization. This doesn't need to be bureaucratic or top-down; the internet, for example, enables new and diffuse forms. But the basic idea is that movements need to provide ongoing, structural opportunities for action.

**What are the necessary ingredients for a political movement to succeed? Can you give some examples of successful vs. non-successful political movements?**

Success is extremely hard to define. Some movements have comparatively immediate, tangible effects; many of the "successes" of the civil rights movement (e.g., the Montgomery bus boycott; passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, etc.) are of this kind. But others have only more long-term, less tangible effects, such as setting or redefining the terms of public debate. Into this category I might place the various strands of the conservative movement from the 1970s to the turn of the century. Finally, some movements succeed simply by existing, apart from any effects on the dominant society. In this cat-

egory I might place indigenous movements, whose principal success (notwithstanding some impact on oil pipelines, sports mascots, and Columbus Day) is in sustaining Native communities.

**What do you make of the Hong Kong protests? Do they have the makings of an effectual political movement? (As a side point, does a political movement need a leader? In Hong Kong's case, there isn't one. Will that be problematic?)**

The fact that success is tricky to define also makes your question about the Hong Kong protests hard to address. I can say that leaderless movements are not unusual; they pose certain challenges but also opportunities. Particularly when the movement's goal is democratization, enabling members to practice democracy can be very valuable. I think that the Hong Kong protests may have several effects that we may never see. Movements always are vulnerable to being crushed by authoritarian power, of course, provided that this power is sufficiently ruthless. But, particularly in a globalized world, doing so poses significant political risks; sometimes the better part of valor is to compromise or acquiesce without acknowledging that one is doing so.

... destroying facilities, defacing the national anthem, and painting graffiti that insulted the country and the nation."

Rallies in the U.K., Germany, Canada and Australia by foreigners who support China, many of whom are native to China, have received glowing coverage as well.

## U.S. REACTION

While this may seem like a fairly straightforward question for global leaders — which team do you support, the Communist scary guys or the democratic hopeful guys? — it's anything but simple, as is often the case with all things diplomacy-related.

President Trump has made clear efforts to avoid the controversy, responding to reporters' questions about the protests in August: "That's between Hong Kong and that's between China, because Hong Kong is a part of China. They'll have to deal with that themselves. They don't need advice."

President Trump also promised President Xi Jinping, during a private phone conversation in June, that the U.S. would remain silent on the Hong Kong protests. This was likely done in an effort to reach a trade deal.

However, Congress wasn't having it. In a letter to President Trump in August, a quartet of bipartisan legislators criticized "Beijing's efforts to undermine Hong Kong's autonomy." They pushed back against the idea that Hong Kong's governance is somehow China's internal affair, and stated that failure to respond to Chinese threats would "only encourage Chinese leaders to

act with impunity."

The House of Representatives also passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which, like its name probably reveals, was not well received by China's government. In fact, it inspired the following statement from Geng Shuang, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, in a statement to CNBC: "Regarding the wrong decision of the U.S., the Chinese side will have to enact effective countermeasures, firmly safeguard[ing] Chinese sovereignty, security and development interests."

Passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in the House, in all likelihood, helps to perpetuate China's narrative that the U.S. is at the heart of the "subversion" in Hong Kong.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights put out a standard, vanilla statement, urging Hong Kong to investigate allegations of police brutality, and encouraging nonviolence among protesters. Other nations have chimed in along these lines.

This story is far from over. Hong Kong's future is far from secure. And whether these protests will turn into actual political change is far from certain.

As for Edward Leung, hundreds gathered outside Hong Kong's court for a glimpse of him as he exited his appeal hearing this October.

Hundreds blocked the van transporting him back to prison.

And then thousands continued to protest for his vision of an independent Hong Kong: "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times." ■