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Multifaceted Mainlandisation in Hong
Kong During the Pandemic

ABSTRACT

As a conscious director of mainlandising Hong Kong for internal security and economic outreach, the central government enigmatically manipulates the reciprocation of different classes regardless of certain constitutional constraints. The progress of mainlandisation was intensified during and after the increasingly radical anti-extradition bill protests in 2019, and did not cease during the pandemic. This article expounds that the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis and the crowd control hence enforced assisted the subterranean and opportunistic works of the Chinese government to pacify Hong Kong and promote patriotism. The Hong Kong government and pro-government locals, as stakeholders, also practically helped actualise the central wish for unification correspondingly.

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Multifaceted Mainlandisation in Hong Kong During the Pandemic

By

Gabriel F. Y. Tsang

Mathew Y. H. Wong's (2020) most recent research paper raised the issue of how socioeconomic factors ideologically shifted the public statements that Hong Kong politicians shared with the opposite camp despite their identifiable left/right preference. His data analysis, based on the local elections held between 1998 and 2016, reveals that the 'integration with mainland China' has become an emerging concern in place of the 'traditional focus on democracy and freedom' (Wong 2020: 208). Local prosperity and stability, as a critical reason for the integration, is a usual ace that the pro-establishment / pro-government camp used to triumph over the parliament minority, holding controversial power to resist liberal and righteous discourses during and after the increasingly radical anti-extradition bill protests in 2019. This resistance corresponds to the Chinese leaders' belief in Marxist economic determinism and their ongoing strategy of steadily incorporating Hong Kong into the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. Despite the pandemic, the Chinese government's plan for mainlandising Hong Kong (referring to 'rapid integration, the large influx of Mainlanders, and Beijing's interventionist approach toward Hong Kong's affairs since 2003' (Yew & Kwong 2014: 1095)) has not ceased, but accelerated instead. Not from a perspective of political rivalry, the following parts will briefly puzzle out how various stakeholders are taking advantage of this public health crisis to move forward an aggressive implementation of overall jurisdiction especially in response to the year-long social unrests caused by the controversial extradition law amendment. The central government (nominally under collective leadership) is deemed a conscious director of mainlandisation that enigmatically manipulates the reciprocation of different classes regardless of certain constitutional constraints.

The subterranean and opportunistic sides of the Chinese government

The Third Bureau of the United Front Work Department, which reports directly to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, takes charge of coordinating various parties to keep Hong Kong on the track of the central government's political agenda. It confidentially connects the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO), the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government, the Hong Kong SAR government, the Hong Kong police, the pro-establishment camp, local entrepreneurs, pro-China media, and so on for collaborative actions towards a patriotic discourse and against democratic voices at precise moments (Loh 2018). While the Hong Kong government banned gatherings of more than four people (Chiu 2020), on 21st April, 2020, the

HKMAO used strong words to comment on the independently operated legislature of Hong Kong, especially singling out Dennis Kwok, legal sector lawmaker, for ‘paralysing’ the Legislative Council with ‘malicious’ filibustering (Wong, Cheung & Sum 2020). This high-profile intervention prepared legitimacy for passing a tailor-made security law for Hong Kong (to prevent, stop and punish acts in Hong Kong related to subversion, secession, terrorism and foreign interference) at the National People’s Congress on 27th May, 2020 (Tsoi & Lam 2020). Constitutionally violating the principle of Basic Law, which authorises the Hong Kong government, not Beijing, to advance Article 23.¹ The new law drew public attention not simply to the width and depth of its harm to the ‘one country two systems’ operation of Hong Kong, but also to how discursive politics overrides legal autonomy, mass willingness and professional opinions. It forms ideological intimidation from the source of top-down manipulation and secretive communication oriented by the Central Committee (Buckley, Bradsher & May 2020) to superficially resolve social unrests through new legal norms and meanwhile to consolidate the paternal power of mainland China.

The response of the Hong Kong SAR government

The 12th June 2019 Hong Kong protest, which ended with tear gas, rubber bullets and bean bag rounds, did not change the Chief Executive’s decision of modifying the controversial extradition law; its failure turned some of the yellow-ribbon (pro-democratic) public’s mind to recognise the uselessness of peaceful actions. The 2019 Yuen Long attack on 21st July and the Prince Edward station attack on 31st August furthered a disbelief in the righteousness of the police, regarded as colluding with the administrative side of the government, the aboriginal power of the New Territories, and triad organisations, and resulted in mass destruction of MTR stations, shops with a pro-government stance (such as Maxim’s), shopping malls (such as Festival Walk), public facilities (especially traffic lights), banks (including HSBC and Chinese banks), most of the universities, and so on (Cheung, Lam & Leung 2020). The government had attempted to practise the *Prohibition on Face Covering Regulation* but failed to stop the unceasing valiant reactions to the government’s repressive and structural violence (Ives & Wong 2019).

Under the umbrella of the COVID-19 pandemic (especially due to the SARS experience in 2003) and the crowd control hence enforced, the Hong Kong government promptly took a series of actions to pacify the public up to the central government’s standard. On 18th April, 2020, the police arrested barrister Martin Lee Chu-Ming, media tycoon Jimmy Lai Chee-Ying and 13 other

¹ However, as Tsoi and Lam explain, “The Basic Law says Chinese laws can’t be applied in Hong Kong unless they are listed in a section called Annex III.” (2020) It was only through Annex III that the central government could obtain the legitimacy to bypass Hong Kong’s parliament and introduce the security law.

supporters of the opposition camp (Lee & Oanh Ha 2020). On 15th May, 2020, the Independent Police Complaints Council published an unpersuasive report instead of a truly independent one that most of the public requested, and, on the same day, the first protester to plead guilty to the charge of rioting was sentenced to four years of imprisonment (Pao 2020). On 22nd May, 2020, Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority cancelled a controversial question about whether Japan did more good than harm to China in the period 1900-1945, in response to the criticism from the Chief Executive, the Secretary for Education and the state-run presses, despite opposition of 97% interviewed History teachers (RTHK 2020). This kind of eventual coincidence exposes an ironic contrast between the slow response of the Hong Kong government to the COVID-19 crisis (such as tardily blocking immigration and purchasing medical materials) (Barron 2020) and its quick, rigid, precise and suppressive decisions made to control mass behaviours and speech. Its political mysophobia had effectively turned down professional arguments, reminiscent of Dr. Li Wenliang being reprimanded for warning about the new virus (AFP 2020). Relevant political rhetoric, side-tracking strategy (which means distracting the public from urgent and significant but intractable issues) and bureaucratic administration under internal institutional pressure have been duplicating those of the Chinese government, turning the official ideology of Hong Kong to be socialistic and Sinocentric.

The cooperation of the patriotic public

Apart from the yellow ribbon, there are blue-ribbon Hong Kong citizens, mainly composed of policemen and their relatives, businessmen, new immigrants from mainland China and older-generation locals, who support the Hong Kong and Chinese governments with a wish for the return of social security and stability. Regardless of general dissatisfaction with the government's performance, such as the failure in guaranteeing the local supplies of surgical masks during the pandemic (Cheung & Wong 2020), they counteract anti-governmental opinions and partially sustain the public validity of the Hong Kong government through their daily speech and actions, and also through their establishment and maintenance of pro-government media (such as Silent Majority and Speak Out Hong Kong) and supportive organizations (such as Hong Kong Coalition, Defend Hong Kong Campaign, Politihk Social Strategic, Caring Hong Kong Power, and Hong Kong Youth Care Association Limited.)

When 150 mainland China-born people are issued with a People's Republic of China Permit to come to Hong Kong every day, and mainland Chinese entrepreneurs are taking over the Hong Kong enterprises financially affected by the social movements and the virus, such as Sincere and

Bossini respectively acquired by Realord Group Holdings Limited and Viva China both on 15th May, 2020 (Yu & Poon 2020), the influx of new citizens and investors with different values not simply moves forward a demographic and commercial mainlandisation, but also assists the United Front tasks that two governments and pro-establishment parties are dedicated to completing. It will continue after the pandemic, constantly validating a new definition of Hong Kong with Sinocentric understanding of ‘one country, two systems’, ‘Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong’, ‘a high degree of autonomy’, ‘remaining unchanged for 50 years’, and so on, such as Beijing’s interpretive focus on ‘one country’ as the prerequisite for Hong Kong people’s autonomy since 2014 as Central News Agency observed (2019). The merge of the older-generation Hongkongers and the newer-generation Hongkongers (from polarised background, either impoverished grassroots or social elites) with different belonging and recognition is still challenging but, under a dominant wish for redefinition, irreversible. Surrounded by popular anxiety about Hong Kong becoming a mainland city, local individuals, especially those with power, shall reflect on how to effectively negotiate with a penetrative and authoritarian system, which functions beyond its governmental origin.²

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² This probably cannot take an easy form, such as Jack Ma’s speech that satirised Chinese regulators and hence resulted in the suspension of Ant Group’s record-breaking US\$34.5 billion IPO, and definitely requires subterranean wisdom.

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