The Rise of China and the Fall of Hong Kong
An Interview with Dennis Kwok

Since the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from Great Britain to the People's Republic of China, tensions have arisen between the city's residents and the Chinese government over popular demands for electoral democracy under a “One Country, Two Systems” model. In the wake of major pro-democracy protests in 2014 and 2019, the Chinese government moved swiftly to crack down on Hong Kong’s civil liberties and implement a sweeping national security law that stifled electoral freedoms in the city and led to the arrests or exile of many democratic activists. The Journal sat down with Dennis W.H. Kwok, distinguished scholar in the Asian Studies Program at Georgetown University, to discuss the recent political developments in Hong Kong and their relation to the rise of China as a global power. Mr. Kwok also spoke about his time in the Hong Kong Legislative Council, party dynamics in Taiwanese and American politics, and his views on the United States’ role in East Asia.

Journal: First, many of our readers are young professionals, scholars, and students who are interested in Asia and pursuing careers in Asia. Do you have any advice for them on monitoring and engaging with current events, specifically in Hong Kong?

Kwok: I would say you should follow the news, the developments, and try to get engaged with some of the think tanks here while you're in Washington, D.C. They have a lot of Asian Studies programs that are really good, very good speakers will be invited. And nowadays you can just join by Zoom, it's very easy. I'm currently an advisor to the Heritage Foundation Asian Studies Center, I'm a scholar [at Georgetown] for the Asian Studies Program, and I work with Harvard in a similar China program. And I think it is not hard these days for students to take an active interest in learning about all the different issues. There are so many resources that are available online. And China is such an important issue now for everyone. They are paying attention, they are learning more, and there are more discussions about China and the Asia Pacific region, and you've got really good resources here [at Georgetown], you know, in terms of Dr. Green, he is an expert in Japan and Japanese affairs, and we've got Evan Medeiros and many others who are very well equipped with Asian knowledge. So it is really not hard to follow what's happening.
Journal: What are three words you would use to describe Hong Kong today?

Kwok: Hong Kong has fallen. That is not exactly three words, but you get my point. Hong Kong has fallen, truly, I think.

Journal: We would like to touch on three general topics: first, the rise of China and the fall of Hong Kong; second, party politics; and third, the impact of recent events on normal Hong Kong citizens. The first is on the rise of China and the fall of Hong Kong and Taiwan as the next challenge.

Could you briefly summarize how you have seen China's rise changing Hong Kong over the last two decades, and specifically the last few months and years?

Kwok: With regards to Hong Kong, what we saw was that the Chinese government was unable to restrain itself. It ran out of strategic pragmatism, and that was basically the underlying idea behind One Country, Two Systems, is that there are differences but, “let’s not focus on the differences, but focus on what we can find in common,” and the Extradition Bill exposes that difference, because they have forgotten the Hong Kong people want One Country, Two Systems because they are afraid of the Chinese system, especially the legal system. And that’s just one area of massive difference in mistrust between the two sides, but the government forced it through and then blamed it on the Hong Kong people for causing so much trouble. And that really destroyed any trust and respect that Hong Kong people had for Beijing. Then, the imposition of the National Security Law just completely changed Hong Kong–culturally, socially and politically. So that’s what has happened to Hong Kong, and the bigger picture is driven by the rise of nationalism. That has really changed the political landscape for the whole of China, not just Hong Kong, and the same for Taiwan. So I always say that when you look at Hong Kong, you are looking at a symptom of what is happening overall in [China]. It’s just a symptom, because the same things happen in Xinjiang, the South China Sea, Taiwan, etc.

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Journal: Regarding the democratic movements in Hong Kong, what do you think are the roles and responsibilities of the United States and other world democracies?

Kwok: I think the United States plays a very important balancing role in the Asia Pacific. Not only militarily—you have troops in Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Guam, etc.—and without the American presence, I think, the power play in the Asia Pacific is completely different. Allies really need U.S. presence in order to stand up to China, especially now that China has become this oppressive regime that threatens to completely unbalance
the power play in the Asia-Pacific region. So the United States is very important in that sense, and also the United States should be actively participating in the trade deal [CPTPP] that was originally proposed by Obama. Trump walked out on it, and maybe it is too late now, I don’t know, but you know those deals are important as a counter-balance to the pivot to Asia, advocated by President Obama. [The pivot] was the right move, but it came a little too late.

**Journal:** What do you think is the relationship between the Hong Kong democracy movement and Taiwan, and pro-Taiwan groups? How should Taiwan react to what happened in Hong Kong?

**Kwok:** I think Taiwan needs to find a collective democratic stream—and they will—to counter authoritarianism. Right now, Taiwanese politics is a mess—so partisan, so divisive. They don’t come together with the two sides and say, “We have our differences on many other things but on this we agree, we must fight together to resist authoritarianism.” Where surprisingly, in the United States there is consensus. There is no consensus on any other issue except on China between Democrats and Republicans. If they can do it then I think the Taiwanese people can. The political leaders should be able to find a way to find a consensus, but right now there’s not.

**Journal:** We’d also love our readers to get a chance to hear some related content from your talk [at Georgetown] today. You discussed Xi’s quest for an enduring legacy. Mao built the party, and Deng made China rich, and now Xi’s big focus has been on rejuvenation. And a lot of the rejuvenation he’s spoken about includes reunification with Taiwan. What kind of “rejuvenation” do you think Xi has in mind for China?

**Kwok:** My talk wanted to bring out the reason why Taiwan will be the next crisis issue—it’s because Xi really needs to have a political legacy that could propel him to the same status as Mao. So far he’s got nothing to show, and he has amassed so much power, at some point people will expect him to do something on Taiwan because he’s driven the rhetoric, basically putting everything in the basket and upping the rhetoric to a point of driving nationalism to a point where he has to do something. So my concern is using the Hong Kong experience to tell the Taiwanese people how they should be fighting back.

**Journal:** Are you following any political events in mainland China, or any future decisions by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that could have a major impact on Hong Kong in the near-term?

**Kwok:** Yes, every day. I mean every day there’s new stuff coming out of Beijing that could have a potential upheaval effect for not only Hong Kong, but the whole of China. All the policy decisions that are coming up, including the crackdown on technology companies, private education, the entertainment industry, the changing of the rules on data security, anti-sanctions laws, etc. All those policies have an effect on Hong Kong, directly or indirectly. Also, the sixth Plenum of the Central Committee is going to take place in November, and we expect something negative [may come out of that].
Interviews

Journal: Second, we want to discuss party politics. That’s the theme of our journal volume this year. So we want to talk a little bit about how the Chinese Communist Party, as a political party, really impacts decisions [in the mainland], Hong Kong, and Taiwan as well.

How effective has the One Country, Two Systems framework been since 1997? Building on your statement that Hong Kong is dead, is the system also dead? Is there a future for the system, both in Hong Kong and in Taiwan?

Kwok: I think One Country, Two Systems has been completely discredited by the CCP’s own actions in Hong Kong. No one could credibly say that the model, as originally anticipated by Deng Xiaoping, is really one country with two systems. We know that all major decisions are directly dictated by Beijing, and human rights are basically not being protected. If the same model is applied to Taiwan, then we could see the destruction of their democracy.

Journal: You discussed this a little during your talk [earlier today], but given that the Legislative Council in Hong Kong is now almost exclusively populated by pro-Beijing lawmakers who have already been vetted heavily by the government, what kind of CCP-directed changes do you anticipate in the Legislative Council process over the next several years?

Kwok: I think they will [pass legislation] that will further integrate Hong Kong into part of southern China. I would expect the border between Shenzhen and Hong Kong will be gone in five years, so it will become a kind of porous border where people will just go in and out. Also, all major decisions will now be driven by Beijing openly and directly, and the government in Hong Kong [will do whatever] Xi tells them to do. Maybe we’ll have a little bit of pushback from time to time, but basically they have to do whatever they’re told. So I think, for them to try to convince people that this election actually matters, it’s very hard, because most often people just don’t pay attention, and will not vote.

Journal: Do you think there’s any chance in the near future that the Legislative Council will be completely dissolved by Beijing?

Kwok: They will put on a show, because they want to pretend that everything is in place and everything’s hunky dory. So they will put on the show, but most people would say “what is the point? We don’t care.”

Journal: There are a lot of ex-Legislative Council members and ex-politicians from Hong Kong –yourself, Nathan Law, and Sunny Cheung, for example–who are now overseas and advocating for Hong Kong. What do you see as your role in Hong Kong politics, now that you’re no longer in Hong Kong?

Kwok: I think we need to break into mainstream society in the West in order to spread our experience and share our knowledge about China, and about political and legal
developments in China. And we are all doing it in different roles, right? There are people who join the Hong Kong Democracy Council or lobby groups on the hill. I think I’m more effective teaching in universities and working with researchers to come out with papers discussing political and legal developments. So everyone has a different role, and it really depends on what your strengths are.

**Journal:** How much has the drive against Hong Kong grassroots movements and NGOs been driven by Beijing compared to conservative forces within Hong Kong? Do you think Carrie Lam (Hong Kong’s Chief Executive) has a level of autonomy enacting policy? Or is it all being driven by Beijing?

Kwok: It is all driven by Beijing, and carried out with complicity by the pro-Beijing forces in Hong Kong. So the pro-Beijing forces are now trying to compete with each other in terms of how patriotic they can be. So one day you will have a politician saying “we should get rid of all Ai Weiwei collections in our museums,” and the next guy has to think of something even more patriotic to [outdo] the other. You’re seeing that every day.

**Journal:** Finally, we want to discuss impacts on Hong Kong citizens, not just from an elite level, but how everyday citizens in Hong Kong are being impacted by what’s going on. How do you think the lives of normal citizens in Hong Kong—who might not be very engaged in politics—have changed as a consequence of recent events like the National Security Law, the disqualification of Legislative Council members, the arrest of book-sellers, and the shutdown of *Apple Daily*?

Kwok: There’s so much to cover. But, basically, Hong Kong used to have one of the most vibrant civil societies in all of Asia. That has been completely dismantled to a point where they even have to get rid of the statue commemorating the Tiananmen Square Massacre, which is a symbol of freedom for Hong Kong. You will no longer see the June 4 Candle vision in Victoria Park, which was attended by hundreds of thousands of people every year. You’ll no longer see the first of July mark, again, which was attended by hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong people and showcased all of civil society. You will no longer have credible opposition, in a nutshell. And every major directive will be driven directly by the regime [in Beijing]. So that’s completely changed the Hong Kong dynamics.

**Journal:** As one of its key figures, how would you assess the success and failures of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong? Given the challenges for pro-democracy voices in politics and removal of Legislative Council members, how do you think democracy advocates and NGOs can find space to possibly make change?

Kwok: You can’t without putting yourself in physical danger of being arrested. Specifically for any kinds of work that [have to do with] human rights and democracy. What I think Hong Kong did well was the Hong Kong people showed the world the true face of this regime, and what it means to stand up to it. I think the two events of Hong Kong and Xinjiang really forced a lot of people to wake up to what’s happening in China. The Hong Kong democratic movement was of course a complete failure. That’s just a fact.
Journal: In light of the immigration programs for Hong Kong citizens like those set up by the United Kingdom or the equivalent program set up by Canada, or even the immigration policy in Taiwan, what do you think are the benefits of staying versus leaving for a lot of people in Hong Kong, including for those who might not be as politically engaged?

Kwok: I think if you’re not politically engaged in Hong Kong you probably won’t be affected in the short term. But everyone will be affected because all the talent is leaving Hong Kong, the middle class is leaving Hong Kong in droves and Hong Kong doesn’t have natural resources or industry, our economy was formed by the professionals, the middle class—teachers and medical workers—they’re all leaving. So, they will be replaced by Mainlanders, making Hong Kong into a very different city, I think, going forward, as I said there won’t be a border between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, and Hong Kong will be completely subsumed into the greater Bay Area, which is the plan. So, if you want to go back to Hong Kong to live and work, just expect to live in a mainland city, like you would in Shanghai or some other place.

Journal: How serious do you think the threat to academic freedom is in Hong Kong today? Should Hong Kong scholars seriously consider leaving the city? Should high schoolers and younger students consider pursuing studies overseas?

Kwok: A lot of people I know who have kids are leaving because they don’t want the kids to receive a national security and patriotic education. And if you’re an academic at a university, a lot of them are thinking about moving away. Because the way universities are structured is that you really have to show your political image. And if you are not openly pro-Beijing, then you’ll be sidelined, and you won’t be promoted. You might not be selected for tenure professorship. The whole of educational institutions have completely changed. And I don’t think there’s academic freedom to speak of.

Dennis W. H. Kwok is a distinguished scholar in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service’s Asian Studies Program at Georgetown University. His current research focuses on the legal and political risks emerging from China from the perspectives of international business and NGOs. In his private legal practice, Mr. Kwok specializes in cross-border commercial disputes and international arbitration. He is the recipient of multiple awards including the 2021 Commonwealth Law Conference Rule of Law Award bestowed by the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, and the Distinction in International Law and Affairs Award bestowed by the New York State Bar Association. Mr. Kwok is currently also a resident Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation.

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