

Saying Hong Kong Is Dead Does a Disservice to Its People

The gutting of the city's civil society by Beijing has at times moved very slowly, and still meets with resistance

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When it comes to comedy, business and elections, it's said that timing is everything. It's also crucial when it comes to repression. The tragic transformation of Hong Kong, once defined by public spectacle, diversity of opinion and a cacophony of voices, into a place where only certain views and statements are allowed is a searing reminder of this.

Some journalists and human rights organizations have described Hong Kong's downward spiral as happening at lightning speed. But this does a disservice to its civil society, the gutting of which has, at times, actually moved very slowly.

The stop-and-go pace of repression is characteristic of a city long associated with both chaotic speed and considered slowness, as seen in domestically produced action comedies and languorous Wong Kar-wai classics like "In the Mood for Love." Every time a crackdown is ordered from Beijing, those with only a passing interest in the city assume that the struggle for its future is over. But beneath the surface of mass arrests and police repression, there is another story unfolding — that of the resistance by local and diasporic Hong Kongers, striving to make the most of whatever space they have left. This story is routinely reduced and obscured in order to tell a tale of Hong Kong as a city that has already died.

Hong Kong has never been fully democratic. People who live in the former British colony, which turned into a supposedly semiautonomous part of the People's Republic of China in 1997, have never been given the freedom to elect their political leaders. While the London-appointed colonial government gave Hong Kongers a taste of electoral democracy close to the end of its rule, the city is yet to enjoy universal suffrage.

For the world at large, however, the abrupt end to Hong Kong's freedom came four years ago, with Beijing's passage of the draconian 2020 national security law that criminalized almost all forms of dissent and allowed the government to tighten its grip on journalism, social media and education. Its passing came, chillingly, the day before the 23rd anniversary of the region's handover from London to Beijing, on June 30.

With high-profile pro-democracy campaigners like Joshua Wong, Benny Tai and Jimmy Lai now behind bars, and others like Agnes Chow in exile, the protest anthem "Glory to Hong Kong" banned and the streets cleared of the remnants of grassroots resistance, political commentators in major international news outlets have periodically declared, as the popular Japanese daily newspaper Sankei did in 2020, that Hong Kong is dead.

But in reality there has not been a single eye-catching moment when everything suddenly changed. Attacks on civil liberties and individual actors have been carried out at a dizzyingly fast speed,

followed by periods of seeming quietude that have made it hard for global audiences to easily follow events. This also throws locals off balance. When the red line of repression remains elusive, and the grip tightens and loosens at unpredictable times, citizens are more likely to self-censor and activists are less able to orchestrate and sustain long-term plans.

When the handover neared in the mid-1990s, pundits predicted that the death of Hong Kong was at hand. Since then, a slow throttling has led to newspapers being shut down, civil society groups disbanded and activists driven into cells or out to foreign cities.

Predictions of the city's demise kept coming, even after those early warnings proved premature. In 2014 and again in 2019, announcements of impending mortality for the city were combined with visions of fallen protesters lying in the streets at the end of a wave of protests. This grisly picture was conjured up by talk of a possible second Tiananmen tragedy, and suggestions that Hong Kong might see something similar to what happened in Beijing in 1989, when the boulevards full of unarmed marchers gave way to lines of tanks and the sound of automatic weapons.

At various points over the last 20 years, Hong Kong's struggle has gripped the attention of the world. Legislation to implement the tough security provisions in Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law was first introduced in 2003, but was then tabled after the move triggered a march of half a million people. In 2020, Beijing instead imposed the Law on Safeguarding National Security in Hong Kong, which criminalized any activities that the state deems seditious. Article 23 legislation was then reintroduced, being passed and put into effect in March of this year. While the two laws differ in that the implementation of Article 23 is homegrown legislation, enacted by the Hong Kong government, both repress dissenting voices with harsh sentencing and extrajudicial processing. Since the law implementing Article 23 was rammed through the opposition-free legislature in Hong Kong, several people have been arrested for sedition under its provisions.

A lot went on between the 2003 failed attempt to pass Article 23 legislation and 2024 — and not just during the 2014 Umbrella Movement and its 2019 sequel. After the huge demonstration of 2003, Hong Kongers staged annual Tiananmen commemorative vigils each June 4. They also staged marches on July 1 each year to demand universal suffrage and political autonomy. Tensions between pro-democracy activists and the government came to a head in 2012, two years before the Umbrella Movement, when the Hong Kong government attempted to impose a curriculum for moral and national education classes in schools. Tens of thousands of people protested the proposals. Led by secondary school student activists such as Wong and Chow, Hong Kongers also participated in sit-in protests and occupied the central government complex that year, succeeding in getting the curriculum plan tabled.

During those moments, international audiences appreciated that Hong Kong, a place associated with bright lights and urban noise, was now the site of visually arresting and boisterous political spectacle — from the brightly-colored camps and umbrellas that surrounded the government headquarters in 2014 to the kaleidoscopic local Lennon Wall set up that year, festooned with post-it notes — messages of support for the protesters.

By the time of the massive anti-government protests of June 2019 — when at least a million people marched through Hong Kong, mostly peacefully, a sea of yellow helmets, goggles and gas masks against a proposed law allowing extraditions to mainland China — Lennon walls had been set up throughout Hong Kong, documenting anger and hope with clever puns in Cantonese. The protests were the largest in Hong Kong's history.

While fast-paced overt crackdowns through police violence, mass arrests and national security legislation are effective in demoralizing and deterring activists, they are also politically costly: These

repressive spectacles draw the attention and ire of Western states, international news media and human rights organizations, which, to the Chinese government's annoyance, have rendered Hong Kong protesters in a more sympathetic and heroic light.

Periods of apparent calm, on the other hand, can lull global media outlets into apathy, or prompt foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations to move Hong Kong down on their lists of which human rights issues to prioritize. When there is no longer something spectacular to generate strong emotions and grab the attention of those whose lives aren't directly threatened by the erosion of civil liberties, other places and events can seem more worthy of concern and energy: the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Israel's attack on Gaza.

The changing pace of repression makes for a harder story to narrativize when there is no single turning point that seems to change everything — and no iconic photograph to galvanize outrage the way the Tank Man photo did at the time of 1989's June 4 Massacre. All of this minimizes international pushback and censure. It also makes it harder for those without a strong interest in Hong Kong to appreciate the risks people are taking — of imprisonment or of being cut off from loved ones and the diaspora — whether they are quietly resisting or loudly decrying the tightening.

The importance of timing was just brought into stark relief by the implementation of Article 23. This intensified existing repression against political dissenters by expanding the definitions of treason, sedition and subversion; further limited the rights of detainees; allowed for closed-door trials; and imposed even stiffer punishments.

This second attempt to enact a homegrown security law, separated by more than two decades from the 2003 effort, was certainly a long time coming, but it was passed swiftly. When he proposed putting it through earlier this year, John Lee, a former police officer who has been chief executive of Hong Kong for nearly all of the 2020s, called for the process to move at "full speed," and he meant it.

After just a month of public consultation, on Feb. 29 the government announced that 99% of the "consulted" Hong Kong public supported the law. It is important to contextualize this number: Only 13,145 Hong Kongers submitted their opinions, a fraction of the number of people who weighed in during a similar consultation in 2002. A week later, the bill was introduced to a Legislative Council now filled entirely with pro-establishment lawmakers. Just days later, all 89 legislators voted in favor of its passage.

After its passage, Lee opined to lawmakers: "Today is a historical moment in Hong Kong ... for which we have waited 26 years, eight months and 19 days." When Article 23 was ushered through the Legislative Council in 2024, there was no spectacular display of dissent and opposition. There was, as the Hong Kong police like to say when trying to disperse protesters, "nothing to see" on the streets. The local Legislative Council, once a place of lively and loud debate, was the site for mere solemn acclamation, which corresponded to a relatively muted international response. The same was true after the abrupt passage of the 2020 law, which stifled whatever energy was left of the citywide 2019 protests.

But if we widen our lens, Article 23 did not go into effect completely without protest. Diasporic Hong Kong organizations organized marches against it. These won't change the political reality of the legislation, but they are not futile. They testify to the continued determination of Hong Kongers to voice their dissent and participate in collective action to demonstrate their vision for a democratic Hong Kong.

One of the many shifts that has happened is that now no one predicts a massacre or a sudden end to

all sorts of features of Hong Kong life at a single pivotal turning point. There has been a break from an earlier tendency to imagine a sudden death knell, though that imagery sometimes reappears (as in a 2020 comment by President Joe Biden, when he described that year's national security law as a "death blow"). The murderous metaphor that is now more often used by a wide spectrum of people, from political commentators to scholars critical of Beijing's policies, is that of a steady minimizing of the oxygen available to breathe.

Some treasured sites of debate and civil society in the city have even literally relocated to diasporic settings. After Bleak House Books, one of Hong Kong's last independent English-language bookstores, closed in 2021, it reopened in upstate New York and its phoenix-like rebirth was marked with a launch event celebrating a book about protest and repression. Causeway Bay Books, which made headlines when five people linked to it were spirited into mainland jails in 2015, is now open in Taipei, where one of the kidnapped booksellers plays a key role.

The Article 23 stage of this sad story reminds us that the Hong Kong that was did not end with a bang. Nor, though, did it end with a whimper.

Saying the city is dead is an injustice to local Hong Kongers living through repression, and to those in the diaspora who are actively reimagining and cultivating a collective identity, in the hope of a different future.

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