

BOOK REVIEWS

UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY IN CHINA'S HONG KONG

Democratization in Hong Kong—and China? By LYNN T. WHITE III. Boulder: Lynne Rienner. 274 pp. \$69.95 (hardcover).

Hong Kong in the Shadow of China: Living with the Leviathan. By RICHARD C. BUSH. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. 377 pp. \$30.00 (paperback)

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After two decades of the “One Country, Two Systems” formula in China’s Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), and with its fourth Chief Executive Mrs. Carrie Lam’s maiden Policy Address delivered on 11 October 2017, it is high time for a summary appraisal of postcolonial Hong Kong’s political transformations. The most obvious new development has been the widespread perception among many Hong Kongers of an increasingly powerful and pervasive yet unsettling trend of “mainlandization” engulfing many aspects of Hong Kong’s political life and governance processes, including local elections, public policymaking, and, above all, prosecutorial decisions. On the economic front, Hong Kong benefited substantially from the post-1997 reintegration with the mainland Chinese economy, a process that enabled HKSAR companies in the past 20 years to make significant inroads into the vast China Market (as the world’s number two economy in GDP terms). But this economic dependence on mainland China did not enhance Hong Kong’s global economic competitiveness. Nor did it yield significant breakthroughs in economic upgrading that could advance Hong Kong’s economic development.

The mainlandization effects can be viewed analytically in several layers. First, at the popular level, many shops that catered to residents’ daily necessities have been replaced by jewelry stores and pharmacies that specialize in cosmetics, baby formula, and other fancy commodities favored by mainlanders. It is increasingly common to see garment stores turned into high-end fashion boutiques that almost exclusively serve the tourist traffic, 80 percent of which comes from the mainland. Hong Kongers bitterly complain of the human traffic jam on streets, the shortage of necessities, and especially the personal misconduct of some mainland visitors, the most infamous of which was their alleged willingness to defecate in public. It is ironic that Beijing’s policy of permitting mainland tourists and shoppers to visit Hong Kong to stimulate its depressed economy after the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2003 SARS epidemic ended up provoking tensions between mainlanders and locals.

At the realpolitik level, the PRC’s global ascendancy has led CCP/PRC party-state leaders and the mainland populace to demand deferential respect, including from their HKSAR compatriots, who once looked down upon mainlanders as poor, backward, ignorant, and uncivilized. With the economically impaired Western powers’ apparent decline since the 2008 Wall Street meltdown, China could claim its Beijing Consensus has eclipsed the Washington Consensus to represent the paradigm of the future to which everyone, including HKSAR residents should aspire and subscribe. Hong Kongers still find it hard to accommodate graciously China’s continuous ascendancy, a

geopolitical reality that has made their neighbors, especially those from beyond Guangdong who lack the advantage of a shared Cantonese tongue, appear impolite and offensive aliens from the north.

A major bone of contention between Beijing and many Hong Kongers was the pace of democratization. In 2007, Beijing's Hu-Wen leadership promised direct popular election of the HKSAR chief executive in 2017. Yet, current PRC President/CCP General-Secretary Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2012, has been far more assertive on Hong Kong affairs than his predecessors. Viewing Beijing–HKSAR relations as crucial to PRC national interests, state sovereignty, and party-regime security, Xi does not tolerate any dissent or deviation from the party-state orthodoxy. The new Xi party-state line repeatedly proclaims the absolute supremacy of “one country” over “two systems.” The latter supposedly formed the guaranteed constitutional foundation that sustained and empowered Hong Kong's open, liberal, pluralistic, capitalist, and cosmopolitan society, subscribing to many universal core values. Accordingly, the 2014 Beijing-sponsored constitutional reform proposal allowed universal suffrage in future chief executive elections only among candidates approved by an election committee dominated by pro-Beijing loyalists. It was the belief that Beijing would never allow true universal suffrage in Hong Kong that drove many local youths to participate in the September–December 2014 Umbrella Movement. As distrust toward Beijing officialdom intensified, and as youths who grew up in the post-1997 era mostly possessed limited knowledge of the PRC (an intellectual deficit partially attributed to local school curriculum's lack of emphasis on China), calls for “self-determination” and even outright “independence” from the PRC began to be heard among the younger generation. This development further strained PRC–HKSAR relations. Deepening mutual mistrust turned into open hostility and legal-political repression by regime authorities.

Two leading American experts on China have now reviewed these developments. Richard C. Bush, a renowned specialist on Sino–US relations and cross-Taiwan Straits dynamics, spent his formative years attending high school in Hong Kong (where his missionary parents were stationed) and has made frequent visits to the city ever since. He has also invited several Hong Kong academics to conduct research at the Brookings Institute as Northeast Asia program visiting fellows. Lynn White, who built his reputation as an expert of PRC politics, including case studies of Shanghai, has been a regular and frequent academic visitor to Hong Kong where he served as visiting research professor at local universities in recent years. His wife, Barbara Sue White, is also a Hong Kong specialist who has authored a well-received monograph on non-Chinese minorities in the city.

The academic backgrounds and research repertoires of Bush and White have endowed their recent volumes on Hong Kong with an essential dimension that at times has been insufficiently emphasized in scholarly publications by HKSAR-based scholars. The titles of both volumes under review here include the term “China,” thus openly acknowledging the “China Factor” has always been part and parcel of the Hong Kong story. One of the authors of the present review (Ming Chan) has long advocated the incorporation of the “Hong Kong element” into the local curricula of modern Chinese history from high school to postgraduate level. This would seem necessary given that the cession of Hong Kong to the British Crown was a direct result of the Qing Dynasty's defeat in the First Opium War, which constituted the start of China's “century of humiliation” under foreign imperialism, a period that Beijing patriots now assert is being redeemed by the PRC's rise as a global power. At the same time, there should be a concurrent approach to add the China Factor as a paramount dynamic in the study of Hong Kong history.

These two volumes are exemplary in their examination of the Hong Kong–China symbiotic linkages. They confirm that the China Factor is an inescapable fact of Hong Kong's postcolonial transformation and the city's constitutional reconfiguration after 1997. It is a self-evident truth that the future course of Hong Kong would be articulated in the Hong Kong–Beijing dynamics, rather than simply in terms of Hong Kong local sentiments.

In his book, Bush emphasizes the passage of the 2014 Beijing-sponsored constitutional reform (279). To him, had the 2014 proposal been passed by the HKSAR legislature, it is conceivable that the election committee would have allowed a moderate candidate from the democratic camp to contest the election of 2017, thereby enabling a chief executive possessing a degree of legitimacy to emerge out of a semi-democratic electoral process (113). Even if constitutional reforms like the 2014 proposal are passed in the future, however, there is almost no chance that reform-minded candidates would be given the opportunity to contest the chief executive elections, as the tycoons, the 'de-facto governors' of Hong Kong, would almost certainly remain important players in the election committee (White 119). A pro-democracy candidate with the blessing of Beijing would likely have to make compromises with the pro-establishment camp and dilute his or her campaign promises, so that policy proposals offensive to the tycoons, such as initiatives to create affordable housing, would not see the light of day. Essentially, reform plans like the 2014 proposal are designed to give a false sense of legitimacy to a political system that is losing popular support, especially if voters are asked to pick between candidates who would be either unwilling or unable to pursue meaningful reforms. Elections among candidates approved by both Beijing and the tycoons would create the worst-case scenario for semi-democratic societies as described by White, in which the leadership class assumes that it possesses a high degree of legitimacy and therefore is entitled to act in a high-handed manner after problematic electoral campaigns. The Hong Kong population would feel even more cynical about the political process and contemptuous of its leaders (White 203). Tensions between rulers and the ruled will further escalate, especially if "autocratic rule" is justified "by democratic means" (White 203).

It seems increasingly clear that Beijing's bottom line is not to reform Hong Kong, but to depolitize it as much as possible while eradicating any "separatist" sentiments or "independence" advocacy. Even figures like former Legislative Council President Jasper Tsang, a politician recognized by all as resolutely loyal to Beijing and widely respected for his integrity, did not run as a candidate in the March 2017 chief executive election. A politician, no matter how loyal, would be able to bargain and negotiate with Beijing only if given sufficient popular backing. It is likely that as Xi Jinping consolidates power further following the 19th Party Congress, he does not want to have to deal with HKSAR politicians challenging Beijing's authority. Therefore, Carrie Lam, the former chief secretary with almost no independent power base, was essentially anointed to succeed C.Y. Leung. After all, can anyone imagine a colorless former civil servant who owes her political rise to Beijing questioning party-state supremacy? Carrie Lam's inaugural policy speech reveals that her administration would concentrate singularly on livelihood issues, as she did not make any references to democratization or electoral reforms. After the Umbrella Movement, Beijing officialdom would dictate the pace of HKSAR democratization, if it would advance further at all.

The HKSAR government and Beijing's lack of popular backing has forced Hong Kong officials to depend upon tycoons as their source of support. The reliance on the tycoons as the bedrock of political support has meant the consolidation of a "liberal oligarchy," one in which seats were reserved for members of the economic elites on functional constituencies of the Legislative Council, Executive Council, and election committee for the selection of the chief executive, therefore ensuring that policies are formulated in their favor. In this way, it should surprise no one that "Hong Kong is the world's least-equal large economy about asset distribution" (Bush 84; see also White 16, 29, 118). There are no incentives for the tycoons to transform the Hong Kong government into a more democratic regime, as constitutional reforms would likely remove institutional means that have allowed powerful businessmen to veto redistributive economic policies. If living conditions in Hong Kong are dreadful due to exorbitant rents and housing prices that are kept artificially high by tycoons in positions of political authority, and there is no possibility of improving local living standards using democratic means, then protests represent the only useful political tools available to reform-minded HKSAR youth. If the CCP-PRC party-state is

responsible for the appointment of officials who appear to be interested in neither promoting democracy nor improving the welfare of Hong Kong citizens, then it is only logical for China to become the target of popular mobilization.

While there exists a disconcerting level of animosity between the populations on both sides of the PRC–HKSAR divide, given that Hong Kong has retained numerous socio-economic ties with the mainland and particularly the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region, the city's position as a role model for openness is largely intact. Hong Kong was already an engine for economic changes in the PRC during the last decades of the previous century. Guangdong's rapid development during the 1980s would not have been possible in the absence of Hong Kong as a role model to emulate, a partner in economic as well as infrastructure development, and a financial center from which potential investors and capital could be obtained. Even escalating tensions between mainland and local students on HKSAR university campuses could have a positive effect. Criticizing pro-independence student activists' assumption that they have the mandate to speak for the entire student body, mainland students are discovering that leaders' decisions are only legitimate if it is consistent with the will of the democratic majority, a lesson that is unavailable in any other Chinese city.

It is also important to consider that, so far, the Democratic Party is the only political party that could obtain a concrete political concession from the CCP, since the party-state's inception, when the Liaison Office agreed in 2010 that legislative councilors of the District Council (Second) functional constituency be chosen by three million voters instead of by district councilors. Given the city's liberal climate and the fact that its universities continue to attract talented students from the mainland, Hong Kong should be able to produce graduates and future leaders holding key positions in various mainland China sectors who are at least willing to consider political reforms within the party-state (Bush 42, 69–70). Therefore, while White is of course correct to point out that Taiwan's democratization has had limited impact on the PRC populace, considering the numerous ties between the city and the mainland, it is conceivable for the HKSAR to be a liberalizing influence within China (204). Ultimately, the fate of Hong Kong is in the hands of China; therefore, it is in the collective interest of Hong Kongers to create a society able to convince their visiting Chinese compatriots of the benefits of democratic rule.

In a very real sense, Hong Kong since 1997 has been changing much too fast as an unfolding story with breaking headlines for any very careful scholarly study to catch up easily. While both reviewed volumes, published in late 2016, are able to offer insightful analytical delineation of the post-2014 Umbrella Movement era, they could hardly anticipate the unexpectedly sudden twists and sharp turns in the HKSAR realpolitik landscape in late 2016 and 2017—(a) the victory of candidates with “localist” sympathies in the September 4, 2016 legislative elections, which many regarded as a post-Umbrella Movement populist rebound; (b) C.Y. Leung regime's counter-attack via legal means to “disqualify” two newly elected “pro-independent” legislators, and later, four pro-democratic legislators, which was buttressed by the NPC's pre-emptive Basic Law interpretation that was to become retroactively valid, contrary to common law practice; (c) C.Y. Leung's surprising December 9, 2016 public announcement that he would not seek a second five-year term in the March 2017 CE election, citing “family concerns” as his reason; (d) Carrie Lam's becoming Beijing's hand-picked successor to Leung as Chief Executive (with 777 of the 1200 electoral committee votes) but inheriting many of Leung's cabinet appointees. These included especially Justice secretary Rimsky Yuen, who successfully appealed earlier court sentences on Umbrella Movement leaders to put them in jail, thus poisoning the air for Lam's avowed “political reconciliation.”

With the imprisonment of youth activists like Joshua Wong and legislators popular among young voters being disqualified for their alleged disloyalty to the PRC state, undoubtedly at Beijing's urging, such regime actions fuel popular perceptions that Hong Kong's famous judicial impartiality is slowly giving way to jurisprudence as a regime instrument to crush dissent and

opposition. This in turn undermines Hong Kong's cherished status as "an interface between China and the international economy" (Bush 172).

If there is one prime lesson that could be learned from the Bush and White monographs, it is that even if the Hong Kong people could not reform their government or even defend their city's rule of law, mass mobilization is still a highly potent method in their defense of the HKSAR's status as the freest domain in the PRC, the remaining rights and freedoms of which could still be a source of inspiration for Chinese who long for political reforms in mainland China. For better or worse, it is difficult to imagine the severing of the linkages between Hong Kong and mainland China, a geopolitical reality that ultimately represents Hong Kong's uniqueness as a global city, for when the CCP/PRC leadership decides to change its political system, the HKSAR would likely be the first city to attain genuine democratic governance, thereby making it a laboratory for democratic reforms, just like the Crown Colony was a model for market economic transformations in the 1980s.

In this light, one can only hope that the carefully delineated "comparative democratization theory" in Lynn While's volume (chapter 1) might one day be applicable to the study of China's mainland cities, even if the prospects for democratic reforms in the HKSAR remain "pessimistic" in the immediate future (236). Likewise, Richard Bush, relates the HKSAR experience in a Greater China context for Taiwan, another off-shore domain living under Beijing's shadow with global strategic implications for the USA (292–294). Both authors have done much in their volumes to integrate Hong Kong research with the study of mainstream China and comparative politics. For such contributions, the entire Hong Kong study field should be deeply appreciative.

By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia-Pacific since 1783.

By MICHAEL J. GREEN. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 725 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

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By More than Providence is a gold mine of richly documented historical detail, informed by international relations theory, and enlivened by the hands-on policymaker's nose for bureaucratic turf battles, clashing personalities, and Washington intrigue. Green's overall message is singular: for nearly 250 years the United States has advanced its interests and influence across the Pacific, sometimes fitfully, often timidly, but with an ever-deepening commitment aimed at denying any other country hegemonic control over the Asia-Pacific. As a result, the US has itself emerged as the pre-eminent power in the region. The resulting message for today's American policymakers is the importance of sustaining that position in the face of China's rise.

American engagement, Green argues, began initially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as little more than "strategic impulses" driven by merchants, explorers and missionaries. But over time a succession of national governments kneaded these impulses together to forge a sequence of grand strategies that could serve as the lodestars around which specific foreign policies would be developed. Grand strategy for Green demands a great deal: "the deliberate assessment of threats and opportunities, and the measured application of ways and means to achieve national objectives in reference to those threats and opportunities." It necessitates more than military muscle; to be effective it "must incorporate diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools in a comprehensive approach in time of both peace and war" (p. 2).