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Transnational Repression: The Case of Hong Kong

Ka Hang Wong, PhD Candidate

School of Communication, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

University of Technology Sydney

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Agenda

- Lead-in: Prohibited overseas political groups.
- Brief historical background of repression.
- Forms of resistance against transnational repression.
- Overarching root cause of political repression.
- Examples of transnational repression post-NSL.
- Resistance in the diaspora.
- Framework and recommendation for political resistance.

Prohibited overseas political groups (2 Dec 2025)

Prohibited overseas political groups

- Banned under *Safeguarding National Security Ordinance* (Article 23).
- Gov't claims these groups promote “self-determination”.
- Subversion of state power.
- Challenge to the constitutional order of PRC.

Dictionary definition

Brief historical background

- All peoples had a right to self-determination (United Nations Charter, 1945, Article 1(2); Article 55).
- UN General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV) (1960):

Brief historical background

- 1972: China requested the UN to remove HK from list.
- Claimed HK was a part of China “occupied” by Britain.
- (Historically HK a British Crown Colony).
- UK did not object.
- So HK people no longer “a peoples group”.
- Not eligible for decolonization according to the UN definition of self-government.

Brief historical background

- Compromise: “Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong” (the dictionary definition).
- Underpinned Sino-British negotiations (1982-84).

Sino-British Joint Declaration states (Annex I):

- “The chief executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be **selected by election...**”
- “The legislature of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be **constituted by elections...**”

Brief historical background

- China's strategic deception.
- JD did not specify the method of election of the self-gov't.
- Likely expected: Westminster parliamentary democracy? (HK a part of Britain).
- Nevertheless, UK agreed to China's terms of JD.
- Sovereignty transferred on 1 July 1997.

Forms of resistance against political repression

2014 under Xi Jinping

- White Paper: claims “**comprehensive** jurisdiction???”.
- 31 August Decision: 2-3 candidates “nominated” for public to vote for office of CE.
- Led to 79-day Umbrella Movement.

2015

- HK’s legislature rejected Beijing’s electoral model.
- Widely seen as “fake democracy”.
- No chance a pro-democracy candidate would ever be elected.

Forms of resistance

2016

- Nathan Law of **Demosistō** elected to the legislature.
- Advocated for self-determination of HK (UN definition).

2017

- Beijing decided to disqualify him due to insincere oath.
- Xi Jinping came to HK, declared a “red line”.

2019 protests

- Hongkongers crossed the “red line” by throwing black paint at the PRC emblem (Wong, 2024).

2020

- NSL.

Forms of resistance

2020 UK announced the BN(O) scheme.

- BN(O) status connected to permanent residency in the British dependent territory of Hong Kong.
- Territory now under China's political repression.
- 2.9 million people currently possess this status.
- UK opens the door to repatriate BN(O)s and family (totalling 5.4 million Hongkongers) over time.
- 166,300 Hongkongers arrived in UK.

Forms of resistance

2021 –

Many diaspora organisations (DO) established:
e.g., Hongkongers in Britain

2022

- Planning for a parliament-in-exile.

2025

- HK Parliament globally elected.

Forms of resistance

Hongkongers resist China's assault through:

- Street protests.
- Legal means (legislature).
- Moving to the metropole (repatriation under BN(O) pathway).
- Exiting HK through other lifeboat schemes (Australia / Canada).
- Set up diaspora organisations.
- Established umbrella representative body in exile.

Overarching root cause of political repression

- Resistance to China's distortion of Hong Kong's sovereignty status.

Esp. in 2014

- Claim of “**comprehensive** jurisdiction???”.
- Rewriting/ Reinterpretation of “One Country, Two Systems” (China **limited sovereignty**: defence and foreign affairs).
- Direct contradiction of self-gov't autonomy promised to HK under “Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong”.

Overarching root cause of political repression

To prevent alternative sovereignty:

- Maintains control of narrative of “internal affairs” (Wong, under review).
- Hypothetical: If UK suddenly granted **full British citizenship** to 5.4 million Hongkongers.
- China: difficult to justify its claim.
- Exposes to the world falsehood of claim China perpetuated for decades.

Send a message to activists:

- Leaving HK not mean escaping China’s reach.
- China claims these British people are actually “Chinese”.

Example hegemonic claim

Context of UK repatriation of Hongkongers:

- China's Ambassador to UK (Liu Xiaoming) (刘晓明) made a statement "Regard Hong Kong as a part of China, **not as a part of the UK**" ("Hong Kong protests: UK should not interfere, says Chinese ambassador", 2019).
- Shows 刘晓明's ignorance of history? or intentional deception? of HK's sovereignty status.
- Served the CCP's purpose to claim HK as an "inalienable part" of China.
- Constantly repeat same theme → naturalise myth (Flowerdew, 2004).

Examples of transnational repression related to “red line”

- Banned overseas political groups from operating in HK.
- Bounties placed on those involved in the HK parliament.
- Super embassy to be built in UK.
- Intimidation tactics—letters sent to neighbours of HK activists.
- Chinese students (小粉红) complained about listing Hong Kong as separate country (“Why Australian universities have upset Chinese students”, 2017).
- UNSW removed article from its website about Hong Kong (“UNSW faces backlash after deleting Twitter post critical of China's crackdown in Hong Kong”, 2020).

Impact for academic freedom

- Academics in HK (“ ‘We Can’t Write the Truth Anymore’ Academic Freedom in Hong Kong Under the National Security Law”, 2024).
- Academic Rowena He banned from teaching in HK (“Hong Kong's universities shrivel in Beijing's grip”, 2023).
- Matter of time before academics in UK/ democratic countries feel this pressure.

Personal example

Australian Journal of Applied Linguistics.

Scopus-indexed journal, peer-reviewed (declined submission).

Article about a “seditious” children’s book *Sheep Village*:

According to the author, this study provides a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the children’s trilogy Sheep Village and explores its pedagogical implications. Generally, this paper is written in nice English with good organization. But there are several weaknesses as follows: (1) a multimodal method is adopted, but only two modals can be found in the paper; (2) themes here might be full of biases against others; (3) still worse, these themes full of biases may be taught to children of Hongkongers, which may be deemed inappropriate.

Personal example

- Review *not* a critique of methodology but political/moral judgement about the Hong Kong diaspora community.
- Illustrates how research on Hong Kong's sovereignty can trigger heightened ideological sensitivity.
- Shows a narrowing space for academic freedom when dealing with politically charged topics.
- Interestingly, Global South journals (e.g., Indonesian universities) more accepting of topics related to HK.

Impact for the diaspora in Western societies

Chris Patten (HK's Governor, now in UK):

Here is an example of freedom, and the sort of freedom we take for granted in most Western societies, being under assault. If we allow it to go under, if we allow it to be buried in Hong Kong, then sooner or later it would threaten everyone (BBC News, 2023).

Resistance in the diaspora

- “We” aligns HK with Western democracies, esp. UK (moral and legal responsibility towards HK).
- Should not allow China to assault the democratic free world.
- Vocal support of G7 Rapid Response Mechanism suggests growing sympathy for exile parliament.
- Growing talks among academic and policy spaces of a “Hong Kong 2.0” on British soil (e.g., Ebner & Peck, 2022; Wong, 2025b, 2025c).

Take aways

- Transnational repression originates from China's hegemonic claim/ distortion over HK's sovereignty status (so-called “red line”).
- Control sovereignty narrative (e.g., the “internal affairs” narrative).
- Prevent alternative sovereignty.
- Send a message.

Take aways

- Self-determination a commonly accepted principle under “Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong”.
- Evidenced by election of **Demosistō** to HK’s legislature in 2016.
- Only after disqualification of sitting legislators did HK decide to ban any discussion of self-determination.
- Post-NSL transnational repression threatens civic and academic spaces in Western societies.

Making sense of the situation

“The Case for Colonialism” (Gilley, 2018).

Failed states can:

Invite former colonisers to recolonise some regions.

Replicate colonial systems.

Former colonisers create new colonies from scratch.

Making sense of the situation

“The Case for Colonialism” (Gilley, 2018).

Failed states can:

Invite former colonisers to recolonise some regions.

✓ (In a reverse way). Open door to the people of the SAR over time.

Replicate colonial systems.

✓ (Partly). Virtual parliament elected (democratic system gifted by UK).

Former colonisers create new colonies from scratch. X Not yet.

Making sense of the situation

China = failed state, violated its agreements with the UK.

- Chinese gov't failed to govern Hong Kong according to JD.
- Rule of law has collapsed.
- Hegemonic claim: HK is an “inalienable part” of China.
- Result: China = seen as illegitimate state.
- Disagree with China's territorial claim (e.g. HK Parliament, HK DIU) risks political repression (a consequence of challenging the failed state).

Making sense of the situation

UK = benevolent colonial power; beacon of democracy; personal jurisdiction over Hongkongers through British nationality.

Intervened by inviting BN(O)s and families to live in metropole.

Making sense of the situation

However:

- BN(O)s still “second-class” colonial citizens (no access to public funds).
- Recent Indefinite Leave to Remain debate harder: need B2 English + an annual income of £12,570 for three to five years.
- Half of BN(O) arrivals not working (Welcoming Committee, 2023).
- Some become perpetual “second-class” colonial citizens within metropole.
- Reminds people of unequal tiers of British citizenship within HK during colonial period.
- Elites: selected for full British citizenship; ordinary people: BN(O) status.

Making sense of the situation

Hongkongers = caught b/w two oppressive systems.

- Not willing to live under totalitarian rule, invaded the homeland.
- While UK benevolent, BN(O)s living in UK as “second-class” colonial citizens.
- Chosen “the least worse option”.
- Not all can meet the ILR requirement to apply for settled status.

The Real Hong Kong

- Stateless nation (Fong, 2020; Lu, 2025).
- Distinct identity inherited from British Empire.
- Majority of Hongkongers cannot access state benefits normally afforded to British citizens.
- Vulnerable to political repression like other stateless nations (e.g., Tibet, Uyghurs).

Recommendation

Political solution?

- Possible next step: seek recognition of the Hong Kong Parliament from UK gov't → Hong Kong Government-in-Exile?
- UK to provide land to build a “parallel Hong Kong” on British soil.
- Transform Hongkongers from “second class” colonial citizens to full members of a self-governing Crown Dependency under British Crown.
- Allow Hongkongers some agency to build new political entity according to JD.

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Vision for a new Hong Kong under the British

Contact me

Ka Hang Wong

kahang.a.wong@student.uts.edu.au