

Article Title	Following Demosistō's Call: Designing a UK-Based Hong Kong Referendum
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Following Demosistō's Call: Designing a UK-Based Hong Kong Referendum

Ten years ago this year, [Demosistō](#) (from the Greek *demos*, meaning “people,” and *istō*, meaning “to stand”), emerged from the political awakening of Hong Kong youth following the 2014 Umbrella Movement, which mobilised a new generation of activists concerned with democratic representation, the right to determine their own future, and Hong Kong's long-term relationship with China. Founded by Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, Agnes Chow and fellow activists, the party advocated the principle of self-determination and called for Hong Kong's people to have a direct say in their political future through a referendum before the expiry of the “one country, two systems” framework. Under this framework, Hong Kong was guaranteed a high degree of autonomy until 2047, but political controversies surrounding issues such as China's jurisdictional overreaches and electoral reform had fuelled concerns among many residents about the future of that autonomy.

The party's roots lay in Scholarism, the student movement co-founded by [Wong](#) in 2011, which first gained prominence through its successful opposition to the Hong Kong government's proposed [Moral and National Education](#) curriculum, aimed at strengthening students' identification with China but was criticised by opponents as a form of political indoctrination. From the classrooms of secondary schools to the streets of the [Umbrella Movement](#), Wong's activism reflected the youth's growing conviction that Hong Kong's future should not be determined by the government, particularly given the ongoing disputes over democratic representation at the time. The limited public role in the 1982–84 Sino-British negotiations over the future of Hong Kong—shaped by [Deng Xiaoping's distorted conception of sovereignty](#)—excluded meaningful public participation and left questions of popular consent outside the scope of state-to-state bargaining, a legacy that would later inform arguments during the 2014 political crisis over the need for greater democratic legitimacy in Hong Kong's governance. A decade later, Demosistō has been dissolved, and many of its leaders are either imprisoned or living in exile. Yet, one of its central political demands—the question of whether Hongkongers should be allowed to determine their own constitutional future through a referendum—remains unresolved.

The circumstances surrounding that demand have also changed significantly since Demosistō first advanced it. In 2020, China violated the [Sino-British Joint Declaration](#)—the 1984 treaty which set out how China should govern Hong Kong beyond the [1997 transfer of sovereignty](#)—by imposing a broadly defined [National Security Law](#) on the city. To redress this violation, the United Kingdom, as a co-signatory to the Joint Declaration, created a bespoke [BN\(O\) visa pathway](#), allowing up to [5.4 million Hongkongers](#) to settle in Britain over time. British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) is a nationality status connected to the British Dependent Territory of Hong Kong, which is now under political repression following the security law’s imposition. Far from being a purely humanitarian measure, the scheme represents the re-emergence of a constitutional relationship between Britain and Hong Kong that Beijing has [repeatedly attempted to deny](#). Almost 10,000 have now been granted [Indefinite Leave to Remain](#), with an increasing number expected to progress to British citizenship following a year of settled status. For the first time since the handover, a substantial Hong Kong diaspora has returned to British protection beyond the reach of China. While self-determination remains a prohibited topic within Hong Kong itself, the question can now be revisited in a place of relative safety. The emergence of this [stateless nation](#) creates an opportunity to consider how Hongkongers might express their views on their constitutional future through democratic means, not as an act of immediate constitutional change, but as a continuation of a conversation that was never permitted to reach its conclusion.

The idea of a referendum on Hong Kong’s political future did not originate with Demosistō. Long before the emergence of Hong Kong’s contemporary self-determination movement, legal scholars had already questioned whether the transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China complied with the principle of self-determination. Among the earliest and most influential was Nihal Jayawickrama (1991), who [argued](#) that the people of Hong Kong were denied the opportunity to determine their own political future during the transfer of sovereignty process. In his view, the transfer of sovereignty proceeded without any democratic consultation of the population, despite the fact that Hong Kong had developed its own political, economic, and social identity after more than a century under British sovereignty. Jayawickrama challenged the argument that Hong Kong’s removal from the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories in 1972 extinguished the right of self-determination. This decision occurred after the People’s Republic of China unilaterally claimed that Hong Kong was Chinese territory temporarily separated from the mainland through “unequal” treaties rather than a British colony whose people possessed a right to determine their own political future. The reclassification removed Hong Kong from the UN decolonization framework and subsequently became a key reference point for those arguing against the applicability of self-determination to Hong Kong. Similar conclusions were reached by Dagati (1992), who [argued](#) that Hong Kong’s political status could only legitimately be resolved through the free choice of its inhabitants. From this perspective, the Sino-British negotiations that produced the Joint Declaration were conducted between two sovereign governments without obtaining the consent of the people whose future was being decided.

However, not all scholars agreed. Head (1998) [argued](#) that the preservation of international peace and stable relations between states could justify the absence of a referendum. According to this view, the principle of self-determination had to be balanced against broader diplomatic considerations, particularly given the strategic realities facing Britain and China in the 1980s. Yet subsequent developments have cast doubt on whether sacrificing self-determination produced the stability that its advocates anticipated. Disputes surrounding the implementation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, the introduction of the BN(O) pathway, and the deterioration of relations between London and Beijing suggest that the underlying question of Hong Kong's political legitimacy was never fully resolved. Petersen (2019) [offers](#) a more recent legal analysis. She argues that the British government refrained from contesting China's territorial claims for two main reasons. First, there was concern in London that challenging Beijing could provoke a confrontation with a militarily superior power; second, British policymakers remained hopeful that the lease over the New Territories might be extended. Petersen further suggests that had the UK chosen to dispute China's position at the United Nations General Assembly, it could have complicated the PRC's later justification for Hong Kong's transfer as necessary to preserve China's territorial integrity. Building on these legal-historical accounts, Wong (2025) [examines](#) how these sovereignty claims have since been discursively reproduced in both Chinese state discourse and British policy responses, particularly in relation to Hong Kong's post-1997 legal status.

The issue returned to public debate in the 2010s when a new generation of activists began to articulate a distinct Hong Kong political identity. Student publications associated with the University of Hong Kong advanced the concept of a [Hong Kong nation](#) and argued that Hongkongers should possess the right to determine their own future. These ideas gained wider prominence after Beijing's 2014 [decision on electoral reform](#), which convinced many activists that meaningful democratic participation within the existing constitutional framework was increasingly unattainable. That year, China released a [White Paper](#) claiming "comprehensive jurisdiction" over Hong Kong, contravening the spirit of "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" embedded in the Joint Declaration. This demonstrated Beijing's wilful disregard for the limits placed on its authority under the Joint Declaration, which restricted Chinese sovereignty to defence and foreign affairs only. It also revealed China's refusal to recognise the existing legal relationship between Britain and Hong Kong embodied in BN(O) status. Under Xi Jinping's totalitarian regime, the [proposed 2014 electoral reform](#) would have restricted the Chief Executive election to two or three candidates approved by Beijing. This meant that a pro-democracy candidate was unlikely to be permitted to run, which directly violated the promises China made to Britain in the Joint Declaration. It was within this context that Demosistō emerged. Its call for a referendum before the expiry of "one country, two systems" did not represent a radical departure from earlier scholarship, but rather a practical political expression of the argument.

The fundamental demand for a referendum did not disappear with the [dissolution](#) of Demosistō in 2020. Rather, it remains one of the most significant unresolved questions arising from Hong Kong's handover. While political circumstances prevented the implementation of that proposal, the underlying question remains: should Hongkongers be

afforded an opportunity to express their preferences regarding their political future? The restriction of such discussion in Hong Kong's current political environment reinforces the importance of considering how Hongkongers might be able to express their views through [alternative democratic mechanisms](#).

One possibility would be a UK-facilitated non-binding referendum conducted among the [3 million](#) current BN(O) status holders, including those currently residing in the UK under the BN(O) visa pathway. The referendum would also extend to those who, by demonstrating a parental connection to a BN(O) holder, subsequently acquire British citizenship through the same pathway. While this electorate would not represent the entirety of Hong Kong's 7.5 million population, it would nonetheless constitute a politically meaningful proportion of Hongkongers. Participation would remain voluntary; however, turnout could reasonably be expected to far exceed that of a previous [diaspora-led initiative](#), which attracted only 15,702 votes to elect a parliament-in-exile. This expectation rests on the involvement of the UK government, the existence of a clearly defined BN(O) electorate, and the continuing legal relationship between Britain and BN(O) status holders. Such a referendum could be conducted throughout the UK, at British diplomatic facilities in Hong Kong and elsewhere, and through supplementary mechanisms such as postal or online voting. Its purpose would be to measure public opinion regarding Hong Kong's long-term constitutional future in the event of regime overthrow in China and to provide a democratic expression of preferences that has never previously been obtained. While the precise wording would ultimately require public consultation, the following example demonstrates one possible approach:

In the event of an overthrow of the Chinese Communist government, and the consequent restoration of Hong Kong's right to political self-determination, which of the following constitutional futures would you support for Hong Kong?

- ☐ Independence
- ☐ Federal Association with a Democratic China
- ☐ Restoration of a Constitutional Relationship with the United Kingdom
- ☐ Creation or Continuation of a Parallel Hong Kong within the United Kingdom

A referendum on Hong Kong's constitutional future may appear unrealistic under present political circumstances. The hypothetical nature of the question would make the referendum easier to defend as an exercise in opinion-gathering rather than a challenge to China's claimed sovereignty over Hong Kong. Yet, the purpose of such a referendum is not to predict immediate political change, but to address a question that has remained unresolved throughout Hong Kong's modern history and continues to shape debates over the territory's political identity and future. The question of consent was never settled; it was merely postponed. Like Tibetans in exile who continue to prepare for a future in which they may once again determine their political destiny, many Hongkongers remain committed to [preserving the principle of self-determination](#) in the hope that future regime change may one day create the conditions under which Hong Kong's collective will can be realised.

Ka Hang Wong received his PhD in History from the University of Technology Sydney in 2026. His thesis provides a historical analysis of BN(O) status and how it evolved from being a token of British nationality into a tool of political resistance against a totalitarian party-state's assault on Hong Kong.