

2003: Hong Kong's Breaking Point

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the pivotal significance of the 2003 Hong Kong demonstration in shaping the region's distinct post-handover identity. It analyses how widespread societal grievances, proposed legal reforms, the SARS epidemic, and opposition to the enactment of Article 23 of the Basic Law coalesced to trigger an unprecedented mobilisation of public dissent. The protest not only exposed profound structural tensions between Hong Kong and Beijing but also inaugurated a new era of civil society activism, fundamentally reshaping the political landscape. In addition, the article assesses Britain's limited engagement in the post-handover period, highlighting the discrepancy between its moral and legal obligations under the Sino-British Joint Declaration and its subsequent diplomatic posture. Ultimately, the 2003 demonstration represented the genesis of an enduring struggle for democratic expression in Hong Kong, with its legacy reverberating through the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 protests, and defining an evolving culture of resistance alongside a deepening distrust toward both mainland China and former colonial powers.

Keywords: Hong Kong, diplomacy, One Country Two Systems, Sino-British relations, British foreign policy, Beijing-Hong Kong relations

INTRODUCTION

Though the 2003 demonstration may not be as well-known as its 2014 or 2019 counterparts, it is as, if not more important, to understand this breaking point in Hong Kong society. It provides a perfect example of how Hong Kong adapted to the many societal changes that greeted it in a post-handover culture, cementing a separate Hong Kong identity that only grew under the guidance of 'One Country, Two Systems'. This can be seen in how several pivotal events that featured and sparked anti-integration, anti-hegemony, and pro-heritage claims, successfully mobilized all facets of society to join collective action.¹¹⁶ This was partly caused by a loosening of the 1967 Public Order Ordinance, which controlled public gatherings and processions and outlawed events involving more than three people without police permission. It became even more liberal in 1995 when the

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¹¹⁶ Tai-Lok Lui, Stephen W.K. Chiu and Ray Yep, ed., *Routledge handbook of contemporary Hong Kong* (London: Routledge, 2018), 210.

United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights served as the model for the Bill of Rights ordinance. This was crucial in the development of the 2003 demonstration because it made it simpler for the public to plan and carry out large-scale protests, ultimately paving the way for the watershed moment.¹¹⁷

I. AN OVERVIEW OF 2003

Overall, the 2003 protest took root as the frustrations of the city reached a breaking point. Hong Kong residents took to the streets as a lack of official channels resulted in public action being viewed as the only viable way to advocate for change.¹¹⁸ This would result in a large-scale demonstration by 500,000 Hong Kong residents on July 1st to express their displeasure with the governance of the region.¹¹⁹ The movement garnered support from all spheres of society, the Christian denominations' support being essential for organizing such a large-scale protest and contributing to its unanticipated reach.¹²⁰ This demonstrated how deeply passionate all facets of Hong Kong society felt on the issue, the massive turnout not being deterred by the various measures the government attempted to use to discourage participation. Ten thousand complimentary passes to matinee films at theatres during the time the protest was planned were given out, it also being announced that all public swimming pools and museums would be free that day.¹²¹ However, a study based primarily on a random-sample survey conducted in June 2003 revealed that 73.5% of respondents indicated either dissatisfaction or strong dissatisfaction with the government's actions, indicating that such tactics could not undo the people's upset. What's even more telling is that in a July 2003 representative-sample survey, 75% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the current government, indicating that Hong Kong's political system was going through a crisis of legitimacy.¹²²

In addition to this, it was no surprise that the epidemic heightened the tense atmosphere that pervaded Hong Kong society at the time, consequently strengthening support for the pro-democracy movement. In total, 299 people had died because of the SARS outbreak, provoking widespread criticism of the top health official

¹¹⁷ Marcelo Duhalde and Han Huang, 'History of Hong Kong protests: riots, rallies and brollies,' *South China Morning Post*, July 4, 2019, [History of Hong Kong protests: riots, rallies and brollies \(scmp.com\)](https://www.scmp.com/history/hong-kong-protests-riots-rallies-and-brollies).

¹¹⁸ Anthony Dapiran, *City of Protest: A recent History of Dissent in Hong Kong* (Australia: Penguin Random House Australia, 2017), 30.

¹¹⁹ Ming Sing, 'Public Support for Democracy in Hong Kong,' *Democratisation* 12, no. 2 (2005): 244, [Public support for democracy in hong kong: Democratization: Vol 12, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10439860500046111).

¹²⁰ Nancy Ng and Andreas Fulda, *The Religious Dimension of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement*, *Journal of Church and State*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 388.

¹²¹ Keith Bradsher, 'Hundreds of Thousands in Hong Kong Protest Security Laws,' *The New York Times*, July 1, 2003, [Hundreds of Thousands in Hong Kong Protest Security Laws - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/01/asia/01hong.html).

¹²² Sing, 'Public Support for Democracy,' 244.

in charge. Such anger was only exacerbated by the chief executive's demand that the same principal official head an investigation team following the outbreak. This move furthered the perception that the Hong Kong government was unaccountable and insensitive to public sentiment, and it aroused widespread suspicions of a cover-up.¹²³ Even though the outbreak was contained in two months, the government had to deal with a society that had changed. It became evident that following the SARS outbreak, the people of Hong Kong were unable to contain their resentment towards the Tung administration, which resulted in significant public uproar.¹²⁴ This could be seen in how 45-year-old construction worker Paul Chan, who called Tung a traitor, felt compelled to join the protest despite never having attended one before, not even the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest, claiming, 'what he does is not good, and the Chinese government is losing face.'¹²⁵ In addition to this, Tung's effigy was carried through the streets during the demonstration to the sound of jeers by multiple individuals, as tensions continued to soar between the government and the public.¹²⁶

Such staunch backlash had never been anticipated by Beijing, and it became clear after their announcement in 2003 that the Hong Kong government would give national security law establishment top priority, that it was to become the first test of vulnerability the 'One Country, Two Systems' model would face.¹²⁷ Due to Article 23 of the Basic Law, Hong Kong was required to create a national security law of its own, outlawing treason, subversion, secession, and sedition against the Chinese government.¹²⁸ Such necessity was born from the fear that a recurrence of the events following 1989 would occur, resulting in the Chinese government's desire to possess more control over Hong Kong's political protests.¹²⁹ Consequently, following the announcement of the Tung administration's reappointment, it was declared that resolving the affair of Article 23 would be of utmost importance.¹³⁰ In an attempt to soothe any concerns, the Chief

¹²³ Sing, "Public Support for Democracy," 253.

¹²⁴ Stan Hok-Wui Wong, *Electoral Politics in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Protest, Patronage, and the Media* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2015), 66.

¹²⁵ Keith Bradsher, 'Hundreds of Thousands in Hong Kong Protest Security Laws,' *The New York Times*, July 1, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/01/international/asia/hundreds-of-thousands-in-hong-kong-protest-security-laws.html>.

¹²⁶ Keith Bradsher, 'Hundreds of Thousands in Hong Kong Protest Security Laws,' *The New York Times*, July 1, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/01/international/asia/hundreds-of-thousands-in-hong-kong-protest-security-laws.html>.

¹²⁷ Peter van Wingerden, 'The National Security Law, 'One Country Two Systems,' and Hong Kong's National Security Apparatus: The Coup De Grace to Hong Kong's Ideological Independence and Democratic Autonomy,' *The Yale Review of International Studies* (Spring 2022), <http://yris.yira.org/essays/5696>.

¹²⁸ The Foreign Secretary's report on Hong Kong, 'Six-Monthly Report on the Implementation of the Joint Declaration on Hong Kong, January-June 2003,' *Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, 3-4, [874308_Cm5864_HongKong \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874308/Cm5864_HongKong_publishing.service.gov.uk).

¹²⁹ Christine Loh, 'Hong Kong's Relations with China: The Future of 'One Country, Two Systems,' *Social Research* 73, no. 1 (2006): 296, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971821>. Accessed 8 Jun. 2022.

¹³⁰ Wingerden, 'The National Security Law'.

Executive was quoted as saying ‘I have full confidence that after the law is enacted, the public will find that their freedoms, including the freedom of speech, press, procession and assembly, and so on which they currently enjoy, will remain fully protected.’¹³¹ Indeed, the Hong Kong government claimed that the majority of the public supported the proposal when it submitted the first draft of the aforementioned legislation to the legislature in February 2003.

Independent academics, however, refuted this assertion, citing data from Hong Kong University’s Public Opinion Programme, which indicated that most people were opposed to the proposed national security laws.¹³² A second study, which was released by academics on May 26th, further refuted the government’s assertion that the proposal has the support of the public. Moreover, they stated that although the people agreed that Article 23, as required by the Basic Law, had to be put into effect, they disagreed with each of the specific recommendations included in the consultation document.¹³³ Among other things, this included ‘providing no public interest defence to protect press freedom in cases related to state secrets’ and ‘granting police power to enter private premises to search without a court warrant.’¹³⁴ The security secretary, Regina Ip, rejected the public’s request for additional time to review the draft bill and instead scheduled the final debate and passage for July 9th. This was due to the false belief that the legislature could disregard popular demands for more time and amendments simply because it had a pro-government majority.¹³⁵ In addition, the ambiguity of Article 23 was another significant issue that further heightened public concern. This was due to the bill making no clear definition of what exactly qualifies as treason, subversion, sedition, or secession; instead, it was delegated to the Hong Kong government to define and punish such offenses.¹³⁶

II. THE LEGACY OF 2003

Thus, the 2003 demonstration turned out to be a turning point in Hong Kong’s history. In the years that followed, Hong Kong CSO activism increased as they attempted to be involved in the policy-making process, resulting in a sharp increase in the number of recorded ‘public order events,’ which went from 1,975 in 2004 to 6,029 in 2015. It appeared that the 2003 protest was a watershed moment for Hong Kong

¹³¹ The Foreign Secretary, ‘Six-monthly Report on Hong Kong, January-June 2003,’ 5.

¹³² Wingerden, ‘The National Security Law’.

¹³³ The Foreign Secretary, ‘Six-monthly Report on Hong Kong, January-June 2003,’ 5.

¹³⁴ Wingerden, ‘The National Security Law’.

¹³⁵ Loh, ‘Hong Kong’s Relations with China,’ 297.

¹³⁶ Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Gilles Guiheux, ed., *Social movements in China and Hong Kong: the expansion of protest space* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 83-84.

residents in realizing that, in the wake of the handover, public demonstration was the most effective way to express their political beliefs.¹³⁷ It is not surprising that the pro-Beijing media bemoaned the growing phenomenon and referred to Hong Kong as ‘the capital of protest,’ indicating that the conservative population of the city was unhappy with the regular demonstrations.¹³⁸ Indeed, Ambrose Lee Siu-kwong, the Secretary for Security, criticized young activists for their increasing inclination toward street politics and for ‘seriously undermining’ the rule of law.¹³⁹ In fact, since 2003, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of young people participating in these types of protests. This was due to widespread internet usage which facilitated political discourse and decreased the expense of planning such large-scale demonstrations. As a result, street politics came to be seen by youth activism as the most effective means of opposing what many saw as an authoritarian government.¹⁴⁰ Consequently, following the July 1st demonstration, Beijing would demonstrate a fresh level of interest in issues pertaining to the territory.

However, despite this, Chinese officials did not completely realize the magnitude of the shift in Hong Kong society brought about by the 2003 protest. Beijing therefore initially focused on finding an economic solution to the upheaval, thinking that everything would work itself out if they made sure Hong Kong's economy bounced back. Thus, the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was accelerated at the end of June 2003 because of this economic viewpoint on Hong Kong's frustrations. The Chinese government saw CEPA as a boon for Hong Kong that would arrive just in time to quell the public's growing anti-Tung fervour.¹⁴¹ Regretfully, although the main complaints of the July 1st demonstration were economic hardship and rising unemployment, Beijing failed to see the bigger picture. Thus, contrary to Beijing's expectations, the democratic spirit of the city grew even stronger after July 1st, with calls for reform continuing as Hong Kongers grew more and more disenchanted with China's economic determinism argument.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Dapiran, *City of Protest*, 30.

¹³⁸ Joseph Yu-shek Cheng, ‘The Emergence of Radical Politics in Hong Kong: Causes and Impact,’ *China Review* 14:1 (2014): 217, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23723007>. Accessed 8 Jun. 2024.

¹³⁹ Joseph Yu-shek Cheng, ‘The Emergence of Radical Politics in Hong Kong: Causes and Impact,’ *China Review* 14:1 (2014): 217, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23723007>. Accessed 8 Jun. 2024.

¹⁴⁰ Vitrierat Ng and Kin-man Chan, ‘Emotion Politics: Joyous Resistance in Hong Kong,’ *China Review* 17:1 (2017): 85, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44160410>. Accessed 8 Jun. 2024.

¹⁴¹ Zheng Yongnian and Tok Sow Keat, ‘Beijing Responds to Hong Kong's Democratization Movement: From Bureaucratic Control to Political Leadership,’ *Asian Affairs* 33: 4 (2007): 243, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30172656>. Accessed 8 Jun. 2024.

¹⁴² Zheng Yongnian and Tok Sow Keat, ‘Beijing Responds to Hong Kong's Democratization Movement: From Bureaucratic Control to Political Leadership,’ *Asian Affairs* 33, no. 4 (2007): 243, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30172656>. Accessed 8 Jun. 2024, 243-244.

Indeed, the Chinese government would come to see just how much they had underestimated the effects of the protest. In the aftermath, many of the Hong Kong public were convinced that the large-scale march was a successful means of achieving political objectives due to the national security legislation being later withdrawn and prominent government figures resigned.¹⁴³ If anything, its triumph gave Hong Kong society a fresh boost of determination; four representative-sample surveys carried out between March 2003 and January 2004 revealed that between 70 and 80 percent of Hong Kong residents desired complete democracy by 2008.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, the incident increased public mistrust of the Hong Kong government, political trust hitting a record low not seen since the handover of 19.4% in October 2003. Such distrust would lead to an unprecedented turnout for the municipal elections in November 2003, leading to the pro-democracy camp's resounding victory, and the subsequent remarkable pro-democracy demonstration that would follow the year after on July 1st, 2004. These events amply demonstrated how Hong Kong's populace desired a democratic future for the region, and their willingness to employ collective action to achieve such ambitions.¹⁴⁵

III. BEIJING'S RESPONSE

Beijing made some major changes in response to these developments as fear became increasingly instilled in the Chinese government over the potential of the Hong Kong people. First, they increased the People's Liberation Army and Liaison Office's capacity and presence in Hong Kong. After that, Beijing formed the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Work Coordination Group, which provided the way for the Chinese government to give up on its 'non-interventionist' strategy for handling Hong Kong's legislative and political issues. The fact that Beijing intervened in Hong Kong's political development because of these actions resulted in a hastening of Tung's retirement. When comparing Macao's return to China with Hong Kong, Chinese President Hu Jintao stated in a meeting held in Macau in December 2004 that 'the officials must turn back and look over the past seven years and find out what has gone wrong.'¹⁴⁶ Given that Beijing saw Tung as a political liability, he would ultimately resign in March 2005 citing poor health.¹⁴⁷ Since then,

¹⁴³ Ng and Chan, 'Emotion Politics,' 109.

¹⁴⁴ Sing, 'Public Support for Democracy,' 244.

¹⁴⁵ Sing, 'Public Support for Democracy,' 257.

¹⁴⁶ Peter van Wingerden, 'The National Security Law, 'One Country Two Systems,' and Hong Kong's National Security Apparatus: The Coup De Grace to Hong Kong's Ideological Independence and Democratic Autonomy,' *Keck Summer Fellowship*, 2022, 12.

¹⁴⁷ Peter van Wingerden, 'The National Security Law, 'One Country Two Systems,' and Hong Kong's National Security Apparatus: The Coup De Grace to Hong Kong's Ideological Independence and Democratic Autonomy,' *Keck Summer Fellowship*, 2022, 18.

and until recently, July 1st has become an annual occasion for the people of Hong Kong to express their discontent and make demands for greater democracy, among other political causes, with large-scale protests held on the anniversary of the handover. In essence, it has evolved into a tradition.¹⁴⁸

The yearly demonstration's core principles are still anti-Hong Kong government sentiments and democratic demands, but it now covers a wider range of political and social issues. All things considered, the July 1st, 2003 protest signalled a significant turning point in Hong Kong's protest culture and the beginning of a wave of political dissent that would only deepen the divide between Hong Kong and mainland China.¹⁴⁹ This could be seen in how the Chinese government viewed such a tradition as a sign of disloyalty and 'that Hong Kong people's hearts haven't returned to the motherland.'¹⁵⁰ Indeed, except for the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre protest, the majority of protests held before 2003 were small-scale, with attendance only amounting to a few hundred. Due to its effectiveness and large turnout of 500,000 people, the 2003 protest was a turning point that inspired more people who would not have otherwise joined such movements to participate in future protests.¹⁵¹

Beijing would take note of this, and as a result, China's top decision-makers were once again given authority to decide on matters pertaining to the city, replacing its bureaucracy.¹⁵² It became evident to the Chinese government that a more intimate approach to handling the region was needed. Beijing would therefore start implementing a new plan for Hong Kong. This new strategy would emphasise several topics, including the constitutional authority of the central government and its guiding of Hong Kong's political reform. It also highlighted how the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region had a duty to promote national education and patriotism, as well as the adoption of a pragmatic approach to dealing with the pro-democracy forces over constitutional reform.¹⁵³ However, contrary to China's hopes that such constraints would help restrain the democratic movement, the rate of successful riots and protests organized by the people of Hong Kong remained equal to those that failed. This proved that the effects of the 2003

¹⁴⁸ Duhalde and Huang 'History of Hong Kong protests: riots, rallies and brollies'.

¹⁴⁹ Dapiran, *City of Protest*, 37.

¹⁵⁰ Wingerden, 'The National Security Law'.

¹⁵¹ Ng and Chan, 'Emotion Politics,' 92.

¹⁵² Yongnian and Keat, 'Beijing Responds,' 236.

¹⁵³ Brian C.H. Fong and Tai-Lok Lui, ed., *Hong Kong 20 years after the handover: emerging social and institutional fractures after 1997* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 256.

demonstration could not be contained, even with tighter control. As a result, the people of Hong Kong became even more vocal in their demands for democracy and freedom of speech.¹⁵⁴

Overall, the Democrats would remain more disposed to perpetuating their ideas and beliefs on the populace as the territory's politics developed after 2003, the hope for democracy in the face of rejection only growing stronger as time passed.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, the rise in Hong Kong emigration was indicative of as much. The Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Specific Studies conducted a telephone survey from December 11th to December 17th, 2018, to collect information on the subject. They conducted successful interviews with 708 respondents, of whom 33% stated they would emigrate if given the opportunity, with 16% having prepared to do so in advance. 'Too much political dispute / social cleavage' (25.7%), 'overcrowded living conditions' (25.7%), and 'dissatisfied with the political institutions' (17.4%) were the top three reasons cited by respondents for wanting to leave.¹⁵⁶ It was obvious that Hong Kong's political situation would not go away quietly. Rather, it would continue to be a source of conflict between the city and its future with the mainland for many years, despite Beijing's best efforts to prove otherwise.

IV: WHERE DOES BRITAIN FIT?

Examining the aftermath of the 2003 protest, it is evident that tensions between China and Hong Kong were rising, a direct result of the Chinese government seriously underestimating the regions desire for democratic rule. However, since Britain is no longer as involved in the region as it was prior to 1997, how does it fit into this relationship? According to various reports and accounts, the nation's answer was to simply not. When Britain's involvement in Hong Kong came to an end, many criticized the 1984 Joint Declaration for not giving the people of Hong Kong enough control over their own future. In fact, the expression 'Britain had sold Hong Kong down the river' gained popularity after 1989.¹⁵⁷ This disregard for accountability has continued into Britain's relationship with Hong Kong following the handover, as it ignores the ongoing unrest and demonstrations. Whether it likes it or not, Britain, as the former colonial leader of Hong Kong, has legal and moral responsibilities to the city. The moral obligations originate from the fact that Hong Kong was returned to China in its entirety by Britain in 1997. This return of land also meant the return of its people who had

¹⁵⁴ Duhalde and Huang 'History of Hong Kong protests: riots, rallies and brollies,'.

¹⁵⁵ Yongnian and Keat, 'Beijing Responds,' 243.

¹⁵⁶ Communications and Public Relations Office 'Survey Findings on Views on Emigration from Hong Kong Released by Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at CUHK.' CUHK News Centre, October 6, 2020, <https://www.cpr.cuhk.edu.hk/en/press/survey-findings-on-views-about-emigration-from-hong-kong-released-by-the-hong-kong-institute-of-asia-pacific-studies-at-cuhk/>.

¹⁵⁷ Dapiran, *City of Protest*, 22.

become subjects of the Queen and thereby were under Britain's jurisdiction. In fact, a number of these individuals were refugees who had risked everything to come to live in Hong Kong and leave Communist China behind. This placed a special responsibility on Britain to support democracy in the region, or at the very least, the rights of the people who call it home.¹⁵⁸ With regards to legal responsibilities, those stemmed from the fact that the United Kingdom is one of the two signatories of the Joint Declaration, an international agreement registered at the United Nations that guarantees human rights, freedom of expression, and that the rule of law in Hong Kong will all remain unchanged until 2047 under the concept of 'One Country, Two Systems.'¹⁵⁹

However, it would be inaccurate to state that Britain has said nothing at all about Hong Kong's predicament; rather, it has only re-entered the story to refute China's assertions. Having a dedicated page to counter claims made by Chinese media about the British Government's stance towards Hong Kong, the UK Government's website maintains a precarious balance between wanting to support the territory and not draw the ire of Beijing. This includes assertions such as that Britain supports Hong Kong's desire for self-determination, an allegation that was immediately denied as the UK government stated that, in accordance with the 'One Country, Two Systems' framework, Hong Kong is a part of China.¹⁶⁰ The assertion originated from the Chinese newspaper *The Paper*, which discussed the controversial topic of the British governments offer to permit Hong Kong citizens who possessed British passports to relocate permanently to the UK, as a result of China's increasing influence in the city.¹⁶¹ The article stated that 'British politicians are keen on the words of 'human rights' and 'freedom' and direct themselves to play the drama of 'political asylum', which is nothing more than to package themselves as 'saviours'...'¹⁶² Unsurprisingly, Britain and China's relationship remained one of backhanded comments and finger pointing; characterized by a never-ending dispute over who is responsible for what in terms of Hong Kong's future.

Such contentiousness was only heightened by Britain's need to take somewhat of a stance against Beijing to maintain this precarious balance, one instance being the *China News Agency's* claim that the Sino-British Joint

¹⁵⁸ Milia Hau, 'Britain Failed Hong Kong,' *Foreign Policy*, June 12, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/12/britain-failed-hong-kong/>.

¹⁵⁹ Milia Hau, 'Britain Failed Hong Kong,' *Foreign Policy*, June 12, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/12/britain-failed-hong-kong/>.

¹⁶⁰ British Embassy Beijing ‘UK and Hong Kong: refuting disinformation,’ GOV.UK, June 23, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hong-kong-hong-kong-myth-busting-article>.

¹⁶¹ Established on July 22nd, 2014, *The Paper* has, as of June 2022, 200 million download users on their news app, more than 30 million Weibo fans, more than 3 million WeChat public account users, 437 million daily users across their entire network, and an English language sister publication called ‘Sixth Tone’ which was published in 2016. It is a pro-Chinese Communist Party online newspaper that speaks on topics such as China’s current politics, finance, culture and thought, receiving approximately \$14,500,000 in funding from the Cyberspace Administration of China.

¹⁶² Liu Siqu, 'Britain opens its doors to welcome 'Hong Kong independence'? Leung's response lit up,' *The Paper*, June 6, 2020. [Britain opens its doors to welcome "Hong Kong independence"? Leung's response lit up with The Paper.](#)

Declaration had become irrelevant. The article stated that ‘The (Chinese) Foreign Office stressed that the Sino-British Joint Declaration did not give Britain the right to assume any responsibility for Hong Kong and intervene in Hong Kong's affairs after Hong Kong's return to the motherland. The British side has no sovereignty, no right of governance or no right of supervision over Hong Kong after the reversion.’¹⁶³ In response, the British government declared that the Sino-British Joint Declaration remained a legally binding international agreement. It was unwaveringly declared that no changes to these matters should be made before 2047 as promised, the agreement guaranteeing Hong Kong's right to a high degree of autonomy, rights, and freedoms for that period.¹⁶⁴ This shows that Britain can defend its ongoing obligations to Hong Kong. Still, regrettably, many Hong Kong residents remained dissatisfied with the lack of concrete steps from the UK to accompany such statements. Indeed, Britain made its stance clear in the Third Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, ‘For our part, we can only restate what we said in earlier evidence to the Committee. We hope that Hong Kong will move as rapidly as possible towards the goal of universal suffrage provided for in the Basic Law.’¹⁶⁵ In other words, the Hong Kong people could and should expect no physical intervention from Britain in their future.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the 2003 demonstration was one of extreme importance to the development of Hong Kong as a society that relied on public action to facilitate substantial change. It highlighted the divide that existed between the region and Beijing in terms of ideology and culture and how there was a true disconnect between the wants of the city's people and that which the Chinese government felt was in their best interest. Though unknown at the time, this event was to be only the beginning of Hong Kong's struggle to adapt to the ‘One country, Two systems’ model, its culture and society continuously being caught between East and West. This would eventually lead to the 2014 Yellow Umbrella Movement and the more violent 2019 protests as collective action became more popularised as the only way for the Hong Kong people to have their voices heard. Without the precedence set by the 2003 demonstration, such developments would not have transpired in Hong Kong society and the position of China and Britain on the developments in Hong Kong would not have been cemented so early on. For China, it was that the city could expect more interventions from Beijing, and for Britain, it was that they could expect nothing at all. As a result, the Hong Kong people were left with a feeling of abandonment

¹⁶³ Huang Yuhan, ‘Foreign Ministry: The Chinese government's legal basis for governing Hong Kong has nothing to do with the Sino-British Joint Declaration,’ *China News Agency*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2020/06-10/9208845.shtml>.

¹⁶⁴ British Embassy Beijing, ‘Refuting Disinformation.’

¹⁶⁵ *Third report from the Foreign Affairs Committee. Hong Kong. Further response of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*, 4, [Cm 4331], H.C. 1998-9, 4.

come the end of 2003. The demonstration had been successful but only due to their own efforts, Hong Kong looking out upon the faint afterglow of a long-gone imperial sunset, one that would never rise on the city again.

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