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Remarks by Zhengguo Kang at Yale Univ. Council on East Asian Studies  
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### The Chinese Communist Party’s Use and Erosion of Hong Kong’s Freedoms

When I think of Hong Kong, two personality types come to mind: the double-crossing secret agent, and the kept woman with multiple benefactors. The former sells intelligence to multiple bosses, and the latter gives favors to various patrons.

Why do I use this analogy for Hong Kong? Everyone knows this speck of land was ceded to Britain in 1842 after the First Opium War. It is a well-worn truism in China that this was a great national disgrace. But for this speck of land itself, it achieved the freedom that comes from being abandoned and sold out.

After that time, the British established companies, banks, churches, newspapers, courts, police, a great number of institutions that did not exist in the old China, all of which became part of Hong Kong’s unique social and cultural ecology. In this dense urban community’s intermingling of Western and Chinese influences, Chinese traditional folk society and Western “civil society” could gradually move towards an organic synthesis.

Hong Kong people before the handover found themselves neither full citizens of the UK, nor, after the handover, proper citizens of the People’s Republic of China. Hong Kongers’ previous colonial status had earned them an exemption from China’s one-party system, and their particular experience of the oppression of Britain’s imperialism left them aloof from mainland Chinese.

Hong Kongers’ unusual lack of a specific national identity gave their society and territory a unique tolerance and ability to absorb others’ cultures and points of view. In effect, this meant a unique capacity to both shelter disreputable

people, and also play host to those with talent and potential that might have gone unrecognized or unfulfilled elsewhere. People from all walks of life could all find a place for themselves in Hong Kong, and politically, leftist and rightist, and centrist, all found a space to debate and express their opinions. For instance, there were pro-communist papers like *Ta Kung Pao*, *Wen Wei Po*, more rightist papers like *Apple Daily*, and middle-ground papers like, most famously, *Ming Pao*. I should mention that besides the *Ming Pao* daily newspaper's unmatched network of correspondents inside China during major events like the Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, rise of Deng Xiaoping, and the June 4 incident in 1989, the company also provided an important platform for intellectuals in its *Ming Pao Monthly* and its publishing house, which published my own book, *Confessions: An Innocent Life in Communist China*.

Today we are discussing Hong Kong media freedoms, and should first look to the basis on which these freedoms are constructed. It is the legacy of the system constructed by the British, for example judicial independence, the policy of "Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong," free trade, and especially Hong Kongers' rights to authentic freedom of speech, publication, assembly and other civil liberties.

Hong Kong's particular location and situation left it without a "national identity" and possessed of a characteristic neutrality. As a result, many of its freedoms were from the beginning at risk of abuse and exploitation. Not only were multinational companies, investors, opportunist cultural brokers, and gangster societies taking advantage; the Communist Party, too, has always extracted the maximum benefit from this situation.

For the Communist Party, Hong Kong's various freedoms and its qualities of tolerance had different significance during different eras. Before 1949, Hong Kong was a safe haven for the Communist Party, a base for underground operations against the Nationalist Party. It was a place for fundraising and a transfer point for weapons and matériel.

For instance, the China Resources Corporation, recently in the news due to a scandal, was a Communist Party front in Hong Kong before 1949. In summary, the Communist Party's accumulation of power relied extensively on Hong Kong and made ample use of the city's business and media freedoms. The

Party engaged in activities and conspiracies that would only have been possible in the unique atmosphere of Hong Kong among the areas in the Greater China region. Very early on, the Communists established networks of subversive agents, planting the seeds for the future erosion of Hong Kong freedoms even while taking advantage of them.

The “Liberation” in 1949 through the handover in 1997 also was a special stage. It is not that the Communist Party was militarily unable to retake the territory of Hong Kong; rather they temporarily preferred to not reclaim it. In Communist eyes, consolidating the Party’s own power internally was a higher priority than protecting national sovereignty.

Especially during the Cold War, the Communist Party’s ideological work against the West and Nationalist Party on Taiwan benefited from preserving Hong Kong as a gangplank to the free world; it was a place to connect with or purchase every kind of influence. And so in order to extract every bit of advantage from Hong Kong, the Communist Party felt it better to temporarily mortgage this piece of land to the British authorities.

For instance, the New China News Agency (Xinhua) Hong Kong Branch, just near the Happy Valley equestrian racetrack, always operated under speech protections in Hong Kong as an outpost promoting the Communist Party and opposing the West and Nationalist Taiwan. Hong Kong became the Party’s best propaganda window to the outside world.

After 1949 the Party not only exploited Hong Kong’s own freedoms to engage in undermining and subversion, it also used its own newly established mechanisms of authoritarianism on the mainland in order to target Hong Kong media workers. As early as the beginning of the 1950s, there was an incident in which six Hong Kong editors and reporters were arrested in the nearby mainland city of Guangzhou, quickly charged and convicted as “cultural spies,” and shot.

From 1949 to 1997, the Communist Party’s major threat to Hong Kongers’ freedoms was its ability to stir up patriotic sentiment into resentment against Western and democratic values. Seizing on the legitimate grievances of the laboring classes, it would promote Communist ideology. Cultural Revolution violence also buffeted Hong Kong, with some hot-headed Red Guards even

advocating “liberating” the colony. There was also an incident involving Lam Bun, a Commercial Radio Host. Because Lam had criticized the violence committed by local Communist activists, he was burned to death by pro-Communist thugs while driving to work. The Chief Editor of *Ming Pao* at that time, Louis Cha, was number two on the hit list due to his editorials criticizing the Beijing authorities.

As the struggle between leftist and rightists intensified, Hong Kongers’ own legitimate struggles against the unjust aspects of British colonial rule became infiltrated and by the Communist Party, which had seen an ideal opportunity to undermine the territory’s freedoms and fish in troubled waters.

If it can be said that Hong Kongers before the 1997 handover had a “Love Hong Kong and Love the Country” attitude that left room for affection towards mainland China, then after 1997, certainly, “loving Hong Kong” and “loving the Country” began to diverge.

Hong Kongers’ previous patriotic feelings were in fact more of a rejection of the British, while after the handover, Hong Kongers began to feel that their freedom and welfare was under ever-increasing threat from the Chinese Communist Party-State. The Liaison Office of the Central People's Government constitutes a manipulative arm of Beijing inside Hong Kong’s society. The Liaison Office has been a divisive presence in Hong Kong, exercising informal influence over Special Administrative Region’s government. From the mafia underworld to the Legislative Council, Beijing uses preferential business advantages, the bestowing of political honors like appointments People’s Political Consultative Conference, access to power and other special incentives to cultivate pro-Beijing sentiment among sympathizers. It has also allowed the “Princelings” (children of highest-ranking Party leaders) and the “Red Descendants” (wealthy children of veteran Party members) to occupy strategic sectors of Hong Kong’s economy, making the territory a strategic springboard for “globalization with Chinese characteristics.”

At the same time, the Communist Party encirclement of Hong Kong’s free media is gradually suffocating it. The Party’s greatest asset presently is its enormous financial muscle all over the world. Towards Hong Kong media, they first applied the method of offering financial and reputational incentives,

softening up media bosses, and implicitly encouraging them to self-censor. For those that cannot be bought, other types of pressure include intimidation and even violence. The recent stabbing of Kevin Lau looks like a classic instance of this type of attack.

Hong Kong's media freedom truly has reached its most perilous moment! What is to become of Hong Kongers? Of course, we cannot believe any of the Party's promises, nor should we have any illusions about the Party. The recent Sunflower Movement undertaken by Taiwanese students is the best model for Hong Kongers.

After all, the power of free media itself does have its limits. Hong Kong's people should take advantage of their media in mobilizing popular protest, and action in the streets like Occupy Central must be united with action inside the Legislative Council to expand the voice and reach of democracy. Only then will Hong Kong's government finally turn from one manipulated by Beijing into one that truly represents Hong Kong people through universal suffrage: one person, one vote.