



Protesters are demanding democratic elections for Hong Kong. But China's leaders have other ideas.

BY PATRICIA SMITH

Joshua Wong, a skinny 18-year-old with black glasses, doesn't fit the typical profile of a revolutionary. But to the thousands of young people who've clogged the streets of Hong Kong this fall to protest for democracy, Wong has achieved rock-star status. He's whipped up crowds with fiery speeches and demanded that China's leaders allow Hong Kong to hold democratic elections.



"If students don't stand in the front line, who will?" he says.

The protests started in September, when about 200 people led by Wong blocked a Hong Kong government building. The police responded by arresting Wong and attacking protesters with tear gas and pepper spray.

But the crackdown had the opposite of its intended effect: As word got out on social media, thousands of people joined

the demonstrations. Normal activity in the bustling city came to a halt. Police used chain saws to dismantle the barricades protesters had built to block roads. Dozens of protesters were arrested. Others were beaten by gangs linked to the Chinese Mafia.

Authorities hinted at worse to come: "The best way to avoid having all of Hong Kong's residents pay a steeper price," one Hong Kong official said ominously, is to end the protests "as soon as possible."

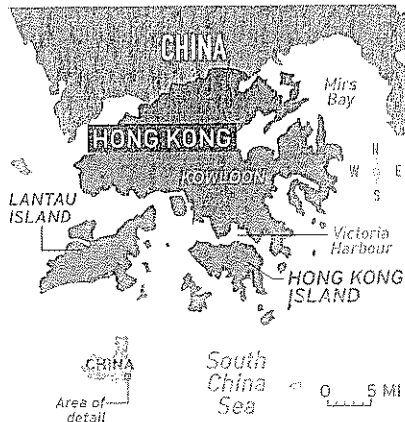
But the protesters have held their ground. To shield themselves from the pepper spray, they've used umbrellas, which have given the movement a symbol and a name: the Umbrella Revolution.

The Hong Kong protests have

 To learn more about Joshua Wong and China's relations with the U.S., watch videos at www.upfrontmagazine.com



Joshua Wong (with microphone, and in circle below) addressing pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong in September



presented China with one of its biggest and most unexpected challenges in years. If President Xi Jinping (*SHEE jin-PING*) gives in to protesters' demands, it could be seen as a sign of weakness,

which China's leaders avoid at all costs.

"If there is a sense that a population can stand up to Beijing and win, it may well contribute to other protests in China," says Elizabeth Economy, a China expert at the Council on Foreign Relations.

One Country, Two Systems

Hong Kong is a complicated place. It consists of some 240 islands off the coast of southeastern China and the Kowloon Peninsula, which is attached to the mainland (*see map*). And while Hong Kong is part of China, it's treated differently because of its unique history.

For more than 150 years, Hong Kong was a British colony (*see Timeline, p. 14*). Under Britain, it became a major international trading port and evolved into a Westernized society with a tradi-

tion of free speech and a vibrant press. The rest of China has been a one-party Communist state since 1949.

In 1984, Britain and China signed a treaty agreeing that Hong Kong would return to Chinese rule in 1997. But Hong Kongers worried that the transfer would threaten the freedoms that they'd long taken for granted.

As part of the handoff, China agreed to a compromise known as "one country, two systems." Under this arrangement, Hong Kong would operate under different rules from the Chinese mainland for 50 years*: The city's free-wheeling capitalist financial system would remain in place and freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and a free press would be guaranteed.

There are no such protections in the

*It's not clear what will happen in 2047, when the 50 years are up.

TIMELINE CHINA & HONG KONG



1842 British Colony

China cedes Hong Kong island to Britain after losing the First Opium War. The colony becomes a thriving economic hub with a vibrant free press.

1898 99-Year Lease

China leases additional territory to Britain for 99 years. The agreement brings Hong Kong to its current size of 424 square miles.

1949 Mao Wins

Mao Zedong's Communists win China's civil war and establish the People's Republic of China. Chiang Kai-shek's American-backed forces flee to Taiwan.

1978 Economic Reforms

China introduces free-market reforms that open up the economy and lead to three decades of explosive economic growth.

rest of China. Though economic reforms have led to three decades of explosive growth and made China's economy the second largest in the world after the U.S., the government keeps a tight lid on dissent and denies basic freedoms to its 1.3 billion people. Political opponents are routinely imprisoned, and tens of thousands of government censors—part of “the Great Firewall”—monitor chat rooms and block websites critical of the government.

Some fear the protesters in Hong Kong will meet the same fate as those massacred by the Chinese military 25 years ago after demonstrating for democracy in Tiananmen Square in Beijing (*see box*). But others say China wants to avoid bloodshed in Hong Kong; they know that a crackdown would take place under the spotlight of the international media and damage both China's reputation and Hong Kong's booming economy.

The ongoing protests have put the United States in a tough spot: The U.S. wants to support pro-democracy protesters, but it doesn't want to offend Chinese leaders in Beijing. President

Obama has stayed silent, which has frustrated some democracy leaders in Hong Kong.

The protesters want the Chinese government to live up to its promise to let Hong Kong voters choose the city's leader starting in 2017. But rather than allow open nominations, the government announced in August that candidates will have to be screened by a committee dominated by people loyal to China's leaders.

Young & Alienated

Many Hong Kong residents see China's rejection of full democracy for their city as an insult to their values and a threat to Hong Kong's special status.

“I came here because I don't want to lose my Hong Kong,” says Bo Au-yeung, 20, explaining why she joined the demonstrations. “I don't want Hong Kong to be the next China.”

The fact that many Hong Kong residents don't feel like they belong to the rest of China is a big problem for leaders in Beijing. In recent years, the Communist

‘If students don't stand in the front line, who will?’

—Joshua Wong, 18

government has sought to reunite with Taiwan, the democratic island nation that split from the mainland after the Communist takeover

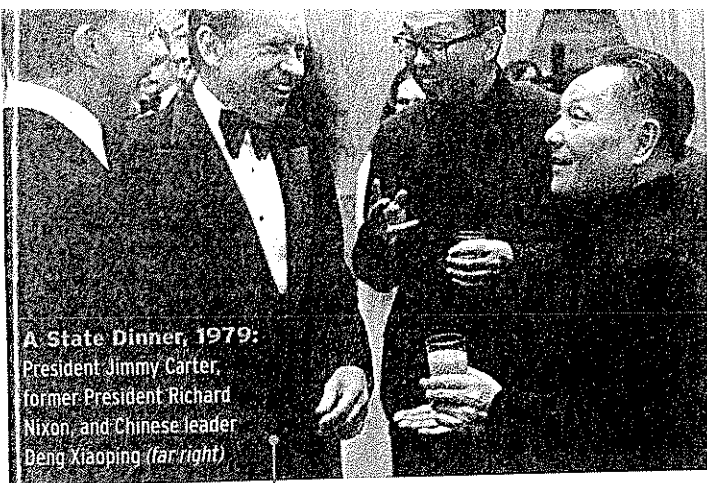
in 1949. At the same time, Beijing faces increasing unrest in areas like Tibet, a formerly independent kingdom that China seized in 1950.

The Hong Kong protesters are mostly young, which indicates that the first generation in Hong Kong to grow up under Chinese rule feels alienated from China—despite attempts to win young people over and mold them into patriotic Chinese citizens.

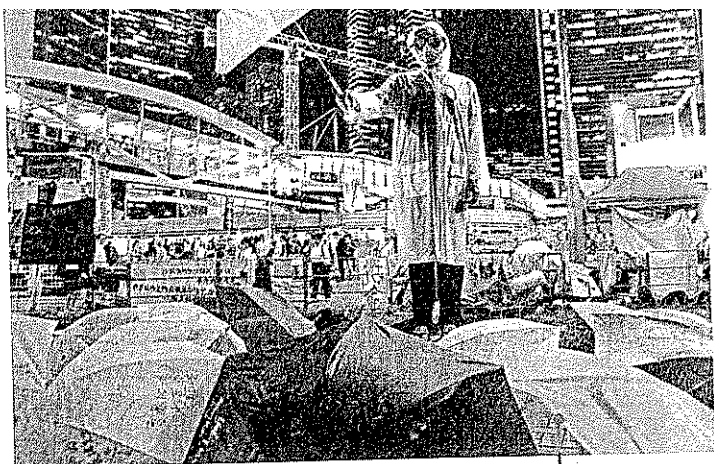
Joshua Wong first gained fame two years ago when he led a student protest against a government plan to introduce “patriotic education” in Hong Kong's schools. Wong called it Communist indoctrination. Massive protests led the government to shelve the plan, which gave young people like Wong the idea that they could stand up to the government.

Chen Yun-chung, a professor of cultural studies at Lingnan University in

AP IMAGES (MAO); ZHANG GUORONG/IMAGINECHINA (ECONOMIC REFORMS)



A State Dinner, 1979:
President Jimmy Carter,
former President Richard
Nixon, and Chinese leader
Deng Xiaoping (far right)



1979 American Recognition

The U.S. recognizes Communist China; the move requires the U.S. to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

1984 Treaty With Britain

Britain agrees to return Hong Kong to China in 1997. Hong Kong will operate under different rules for 50 years after the handover.

1989 Tiananmen Protests

Democracy protests in Beijing end in a violent crackdown (see box, below).

1997 Handover

Hong Kong is handed back to China after more than 150 years of British control.

2014 Umbrella Revolution

With student-led democracy protests in Hong Kong continuing for weeks, China faces a major challenge.

Hong Kong, says Wong and his generation of high school activists are both idealistic and determined.

"They know that they might not get what they want, but most of them are prepared to fight on," Chen says.

Recycling & Homework

So far, their fight has been orderly. Students have been careful to clean up their trash, including separating paper

and plastic for recycling. They've been keeping up with their homework. And protesters are using their smartphones and social media to respond to rumors and update the public—and to organize food, supplies, and first-aid stations. With cellphone service overloaded by so many users, thousands of protesters have downloaded an app called FireChat that lets them communicate with each other directly via Bluetooth.

Despite some efforts by the Hong Kong government to negotiate with protesters, neither side seems to expect a quick resolution.

"Don't think that this will be over soon," Wong tweeted. "This is fundamentally a war of patience and a test of our endurance." ☉

With reporting by Chris Buckley, Austin Ramzy, and Alan Wong of The New York Times.

1989: Tiananmen Square Massacre

Twenty-five years ago, China's rulers sent the army to break up pro-democracy demonstrations. The result was a bloodbath.

In June 1989, thousands of protesters filled Tiananmen Square in Beijing demanding democratic reforms.

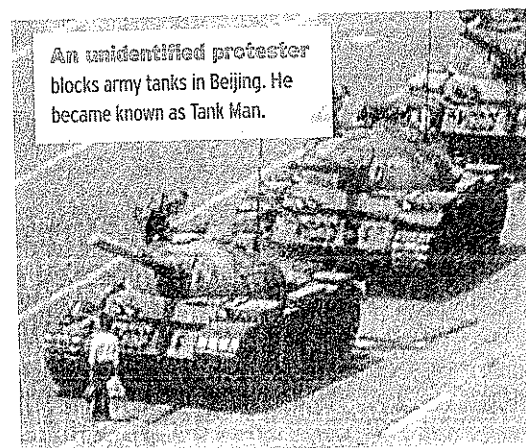
When police were unable to break up the protests, the Communist government called in the army. Soldiers armed with live ammunition and tear gas stormed the square.

Live coverage of the attack—broadcast around the world despite government attempts to block it—were shocking: people on bicycles falling over after being shot by

soldiers; old women holding their bloodied heads; people crying out as soldiers struck them with batons.

The army reclaimed the square within 24 hours, killing hundreds—maybe thousands—of protesters. Hundreds more were arrested and jailed.

The crackdown ended any hopes for democratic reforms in China. Instead, China's leaders continued focusing on promoting economic growth. Twenty-five years later,



An unidentified protester blocks army tanks in Beijing. He became known as Tank Man.

China's people are a lot better off economically than in 1989. But in terms of political freedom, nothing has changed.