

It's time for Hong Kong to reckon with its far-right

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That the 2019 movement fostered the rise of the far-right requires serious collective examination for all Hongkongers

In the midst of the U.S. election, Hong Kong has found itself again in the international spotlight—this time implicated in the middle of a far-right disinformation campaign. The inner circles of the city's popular newspaper *Apple Daily* have fabricated and promoted false allegations of Hunter Biden being under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a [claim](#) that has made the rounds in East Asian media, helping to turn public sentiment against the Biden campaign beyond Hong Kong. While the xenophobic right-wing element is still unorganized, the influence of its discourse grows day by day in the city. Pro-democracy channels from LIHKG to *Stand News* comment sections went from tolerating right-wing ideas to having to deal with them as the norm. The upgrowth of Trump supporters in both Hong Kong and its diaspora provides the biggest reality check for the city's movement yet: How did a fanatic right-wing pole emerge from a movement seemingly committed to the avoidance of ideological discussions, and up until last year, has shown little interest in global politics?

Waiting for Trump

None of these are new developments. Since the anti-extradition bill protests, a vocal minority of right-wing activists has been [keen](#) to position Trump as Hong Kong's best chance for liberation. Jimmy Lai, the *Apple Daily*'s founder, penned an op-ed endorsing Trump and attacking Biden. *Apple Daily* itself has popularized right-wing, xenophobic discourse, especially against mainland Chinese immigrants, years before the protests last year. And this year, an increasing amount of Hongkongers have loudly promoted pro-Trump disinformation and outlets, and are now peddling the Trump campaign's blatant disinformation about the election results. A recent YouGov [poll](#) shows that Hong Kong has one of the highest rates of support for Trump in the Asia-Pacific region. Another preliminary [survey](#), conducted by researchers Maggie Shum and Victoria Hui, revealed that a majority of surveyed Hong Kong Americans supported Trump. This is all despite the fact that the trade war and sanctions on China—actions touted by Trump supporters as “real action” against China—are benefitting no one, from Hongkongers to US businesses and consumers.

Hong Kong has never had to reckon with a deeply-rooted conservatism at the core of its identity. We can give a plethora of reasons excusing this emergent right-wing agenda such as ignorance due to rampant disinformation or feelings of desperation. But those are merely symptoms of a core problem, that no matter the reason, Hongkongers have loudly and eagerly received and regurgitated this propaganda. Many are happy to [ignore](#) how Trump's claims of voter fraud have been thoroughly debunked and even to acknowledge his crimes. Still, these people conclude, he is “[a necessary evil](#)” that they are willing to support because they are content to throw anyone under the bus for their own salvation.

More incredibly, Trump-supporting Hongkongers are fine with ignoring Trump's own record of cozying up to Xi Jinping against Hong Kong's movement when it fits his political machinations. Trump has condemned Obama for bothering to support the Umbrella protests in 2014. He [repeatedly expressed](#) that Hong Kong's fate should be [left to Xi](#), saying that "China is not our problem, though Hong Kong is not helping," and that he has "zero doubt that if President Xi wants to quickly and humanely solve the Hong Kong problem, he can do it." After the [Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act](#) was passed in the Senate, Trump publicly entertained the idea of [vetoing](#) the bill to preserve his relationship with Xi before finally acquiescing to sign it.

Perhaps Hongkongers' uncritical allegiance to Trump, despite his inconsistent stance toward China, is the symptom of a deeper political connection that links many Hongkongers to the American far-right. Many Hongkongers, just like white racists, have been waiting for a Trump figure. He unabashedly embodies the chauvinist ethos that has been latent in Hong Kong culture and maintains its privilege in this inequitable global system: That we must preserve our culture, especially the aspects appropriated from Western paradigms, against non-white foreigners, that economic stability should be only dependent on one's hard work, regardless of systemic inequality, and that "minority discourse" menaces a city that has long benefited from its place in the capitalist global economy. This goes beyond what [Yao Lin](#) sees as "the beaconist sanitization of Western (especially American) domestic politics as devoid of systematic injustice, and therefore as in no need for 'radical' rectification," a view espoused by some Chinese liberal intellectuals. For many, there is nothing to sanitize.

Illusions of democracy

America's limited democracy, whether Hong Kong Trump supporters admit it or not, is precisely the ideal—and Trumpism, for the most part, is merely its logical extreme, packaged in a rhetoric already familiar to Hongkongers thanks to *Apple Daily* columnists and other right-wing localist pundits. This is the "freedom" many in Hong Kong have always wanted: Reserved for the few and privileged, a system that one needs to game in order to thrive in, and joyously content with the mere illusions of democracy. In other words, Hong Kong has never reckoned with its own privileged sense of exceptionalism, gained from the fruits of its particular position within and proximity to Western imperialism, even as many within also suffer from its [ills](#).

In fact, Hongkongers' acceptance and tolerance of Trump discourse reveals the darkest and greatest limitation of its fight for freedom. Mainstream pro-democracy discourse has never been genuinely concerned with true freedom for all in the city, nor would it want what that entails. And the willingness of Hong Kong liberals and "progressives" to [accommodate](#) these far-right extremist views in their ranks is not simply ideological weakness, but a feature built into the movement's principle of "no big platform" (無大綱). Right-wing xenophobia is excusable and tolerated, because their central tenets are shared in many ways. This is why [nativism is not limited](#) to Hong Kong's extremist right-wing; it is present in liberals' respectable adoption of "[civic nationalism](#)", or civil society's conspicuous silence around the conditions of the city's [migrant workers](#). Many Hongkongers, whether they explicitly know it or not, have always imagined the ideal of democracy as one with many barriers of entry.

On one hand, this is the result of the limitation of political imagination induced by the legacy of colonialism, which the CCP has been keen to preserve. On the other, colonialism functions differently across regional milieux, and some colonial subjects can take on their master's characteristics. As scholar Law Wing-sang (羅永祥) writes, colonial power is not just "an instrument for the willful domination of the colonizers over the colonized," but is something that can "exist and operate as an impersonal force through a multiplicity of sites and channels, through which the impersonal forces may still linger in the absence of a discernible colonizer." What Law calls

“collaborative colonial power” has always structured Hong Kong politics, wherein colonial developments have operated as a hybrid network of relations that implicate both local Hongkongers, especially the bourgeois class, and their British overlords. These locals’ success in finessing the British system, so to speak, is not frowned upon, but a sign that assimilation into the colonial identity is still desirable—as long as a respectable facade of freedom can be maintained. This complex legacy enables a [central paradox](#) in post-handover Hong Kong: its citizens are able to re-imagine most of the exploitative legacy of colonialism as simply *Chinese* colonialism, whereas Western colonialism becomes delinked as a phantasmal system of signifiers that [retroactively constructs](#) a better past or promises a democratic future to the city’s current plight. But why and how have we come to desire the poison itself as our antidote?

A colonial structure of feeling

One common affect that I remember growing up in Hong Kong is the knee-jerk reaction against mainlanders, ethnic minorities, and Black people—the latter with whom many Hongkongers have never interacted. I saw it in my family, in the small gestures and glares on the minibus, in people’s uncomfortable expressions of disgust upon hearing someone speak Mandarin, and even in myself. It is an overdetermined feeling, filled with xenophobia, fear, superiority, and defensiveness. Many often excuse this “structure of feeling” by attributing it mainly to a critique of Chinese capitalists and other nouveau riche displacing working-class people, businesses, and neighborhoods, or at least consider it as a perfectly legitimate response to the encroaching erasure of one’s local culture. But the uncomfortable truth, one that proud right-wingers would admit more openly than most other mainstream protestors, is the core, ingrained belief that Hongkongers are better than others, because of our proximity to Western culture and values. This is reinforced by a set of myths that we want to imagine to be true, that the legacy of British colonialism is really not all so bad. It is easy to cling onto superficial symbols of enlightenment, enshrined in Western democracies, but difficult to accept the fact that our oppression is rooted in the CCP’s perpetuation and strengthening of the capitalist infrastructure *first constructed by our Western colonizers*.

And in a way, it’s true. Many of us in Hong Kong have benefitted from the legacy of colonialism. Even as some of those privileges slip away, we cling onto the ones that benefit us, modeling our liberation on the iconography and myths of white saviors. The relative inaccessibility of on-the-ground American politics to many Hongkongers does not account for the deeper issue, pushed to its logical extreme by pro-Trump Hongkongers, that many Hongkongers simply do not want to learn, to confront the reality that the grass is indeed not greener on the other side. The prevalence of *Breitbart* and *Fox News*-type narratives in Hong Kong provides an easy solution for people who do not want to fully address the contradictions and privileges in Hong Kong society. And the reaction of most liberal Hongkongers, a paralysis and shock, forces us to confront the question that many have avoided asking: What kind of liberation do we really want as Hongkongers?

The movement for Black lives

The protests in the U.S. this summer, in many ways, forced Hongkongers to come to terms with this question of liberation. Raging against not just the far-right Trump regime, but also the longstanding liberal establishment, the movement for Black lives has created a rare moment of ideological reflection for Hongkongers. For the first time, liberals and centrists had to confront the fact that the country and the democratic system they have often idealized contain deep systemic issues that American protestors should resist with the same might and tactics as they have in Hong Kong, and that we should all stand in solidarity. But this reckoning was accompanied by the latent anti-Blackness of many parts of Hong Kong society. The similarity, not the difference, between the protests was actually the trigger: Some Hongkongers, despite their own messy, chaotic struggle for democracy, aggressively tried to distance themselves from a movement that they saw as

fundamentally more illegitimate and uncivil.

The U.S. protests expose the anti-capitalist possibilities in the Hong Kong movement, forcing it into an ultimatum to either embrace transformative systemic change or to retreat from it in the last instance. The Black struggle has always violently laid bare capitalism's contradictions. I believe that many Hongkongers can sense this, even without the history, political education, and language to articulate why. Hongkongers' anxiety about Black lives is precisely because the latter's movement embodies a radicalism against a global system of inequality that many Hongkongers know, deep down, they are unwilling to actually challenge. Confronting it would require grappling with a recognition that the system around them is deeply unjust, in ways that focusing on the narrow struggle against Chinese authoritarianism can only begin to unravel. To simply focus on the "Five Demands" is not just because CCP repression gives us no space to think deeper about ideological distinctions, it's because those demands represent the farthest step, the actual concrete vision, that many Hongkongers are willing to take. It is only a formal democracy, not a real one.

Nativism and the colonial legacy

Ventus Lau (劉國輝), a localist organizer, said the quiet part loud for many Hongkongers when he proclaimed that "on the second day of Hong Kong independence, all the lifestyles and customs of the Hong Kong people will remain unchanged." For a year, the protest movement has expressed its disinterest in addressing a concrete political vision because it has often stated that, with the increasing repression from authoritarian China, there's no room to think about it. Revolution must precede any concrete imagining of the future after.

There is some truth in this, but I suspect it's more because many sympathize with Lau's deeply conservative vision. There is no room to reimagine the foundations of how Hong Kong is run because for many there is no need to do so. Lau's sentiment suggests that some would admit that the CCP's governance of Hong Kong isn't all that bad either—just that Hongkongers, not the Chinese, need to be steering this oppressive system instead. The city is fine the way it has been, if only people can cast ballots and voice dissenting opinions, even though we can see from the U.S. that such conditions, without a proper reckoning with our core systemic issues, would just serve as another [tool of oppression](#). They believe that people's fundamental inability to truly determine their own material conditions is an unavoidable part of human society, and only a certain brand of authoritarianism should be resisted.

This mentality is the foundation of Hong Kong's nativist philosophy, which is predicated on feelings of superiority, exceptionalism, exclusionism, and other inheritances of Western colonialism. This sentiment has enjoyed popularity even before the Umbrella Movement. Horace Chin Wan (陳冠中)'s early [right-wing discourse](#) on Hong Kong city-state theory was a best-seller across Hong Kong bookstores for years. His frameworks continue to be promoted by other right-wing localists like Lewis Lound (梁文道) and Chip Tsao (蕭若瑟), among other Apple Daily columnists, LIHKG forum posters, and other [KOLs](#) (key opinion leaders). From Ray Wong Toi-yeung (黃庭鋒) to Andy Chan Ho-tin (陳浩天), they have helped to [sabotage](#) the Hong Kong Student Union from within after Umbrella, and many have repackaged their rhetoric as "non-ideological" to gain ground in last year's movement. These people regularly traffic in discriminatory rhetoric toward women and minorities, espousing a witty and controversial tone to make deeply reactionary politics palatable to a Hong Kong audience.

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Right-wing forces are fairly unorganized, but this problem of organization is endemic to Hong Kong

society. That is to say, they are not unorganized because they are right-wing but they have proven to be dangerous *precisely because they are unorganized*. In reality, their ideas have gotten mainstream traction, attracting a devoted following. Their exclusionary politics of rage, in many ways, has fueled the spontaneous reactions of discrimination toward mainlanders in recent years, pushing localists to aimlessly adopt increasingly militant tactics without a clear political direction. This is the logic behind [laamchau](#) (梁朝): a populist nihilism in the worst sense, in which the obsession to define the Hong Kong identity *through division* is fetishized as the main praxis and ideological vision, rather than thinking through the concrete terms of liberation for Hong Kong.

This valorization of “Hong Kong identity” even allows for liberal interpretations that are [functionally indistinct](#) from nativist, xenophobic frameworks. The “civic nationalism” of Hong Kong activist Brian Leung (梁建邦) in Hong Kong’s context relies directly on Western notions of citizenship, praising the American system of requiring new immigrants to “understand the local language, history, and political values.” The easy way in which Leung can apply this exclusionary notion of citizenship to Hong Kong reveals the continuity between the privileged role of Hong Kong identity and that of Western ones. At best, mainlanders, Southeast Asians, and others can only be considered Hongkongers if they “understand” our culture. This racial liberalism is represented by the mainstream reception of people like Vivek Mahbubani, a [comedian](#) of Indian descent whose fluent Cantonese and familiarity with local culture earned him respect and applause at a rally at the ethnically diverse Chungking Mansions last year. At worst, Hong Kong’s struggle for “democracy” manifests only an impulse to gatekeep and define the city’s identity against the unassimilated Chinese or Southeast Asian worker.

While Hong Kong MAGA supporters and their white counterparts are not reducible to one another, I dare say that their similarity has been understated. Hongkongers can both suffer from the oppressive effects of white coloniality, while also benefiting and taking on its characteristics by virtue of their place in the colonial apparatus. These excuses hold no water, especially when the movement spent a year mobilizing to gather support from both the U.S. state and society. Hong Kong’s turbulent year of oppression and current colonial condition does not miraculously excuse those in the city who peddle far-right disinformation, or those who claim ignorance of U.S. domestic affairs, that is, those who “don’t know any better.” Ignorance, simply put, is a privilege.

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For Hongkongers in the diaspora who share space with millions of Americans, especially non-white ones, suffering from the Trump administration’s years of abuse and oppression, it is beyond inexcusable to remain ignorant. But I want to emphasize that such ignorance is itself an organic manifestation of the ugly, racist privilege at the heart of Hong Kong’s civil society, even before it can even be identified as such. It stems from the British colonial period and the handover, to that initial feeling of confusion and distaste of having to be delinked from the West, at least in a superficial sense, and reconciled to a Han identity that we have been trained to look down on (an identity that has since taken on its own colonial and chauvinistic traits). That the CCP has violently maintained the city’s neoliberal and colonial framework from the British, including the infrastructure of the Hong Kong police, at least up until last year, has been generally accepted by mainstream society. But this new sense of disidentification with the West, despite always having been alienated as colonial subjects, has not.

In the face of Beijing’s repression, Trump has given an expression to this repressed anxiety: The imperialist U.S. becomes not just a last-ditch attempt at gathering foreign support, but precisely the answer to Hong Kong’s woes that some want. The expression of an open desire to reinforce our privilege, and to willfully turn away from how mainland Chinese workers, Southeast Asian ethnic minorities, Black people, have been systematically oppressed by a shared global system of

inequality. It is a desire to hold onto the part of the Hong Kong identity that selfishly sees itself better than others—a direct appropriation of how whiteness operates. While there is much that can be changed with political education and organizing, Hongkongers must grapple with the fact that many of us are unwilling to deal with a reality that challenges our own sense of superiority and exceptionalism. With the rise of pro-Trump Hongkongers, what Hong Kong anarchist Ahkok Chun-kwok Wong [describes](#) as “the racial hatred that is hidden in Hong Kong’s social movement” has not been assuaged by the city’s year of struggle—but only blatantly uncovered and deepened.

Hard truths

The story we want to tell ourselves is that what happened in this election cycle is merely a product of disinformation and guiltless ignorance; or that Trump supporters are in the minority; or that supporting Trump is acceptable, despite his faults, because it benefits our city. I insist that not only are these elements inexcusable, but that their appearance, and our movement’s toleration of them, reveal a deeper problem in how we imagine our road to liberation. No, it is not a privilege to linger on this issue in the face of ever-pressing repression from Beijing: The legitimization of MAGA elements in the protest movement means that we are helping the CCP dig our own graves. By appealing to a hated far-right buffoon, despised by a [majority](#) of the world’s citizens, pro-Trump Hongkongers are actively delegitimizing the protest movement on a global stage for a figurehead whose support for the city is inconsistent at best, and ineffectual at worst. By enabling widespread voter [disenfranchisement](#) in an already [racist electoral system](#), [defunding](#) core public services, and promoting [racist rhetoric](#), Trump threatens even the limited kind of formal democracy that liberals and even some conservatives hold to heart.

But the larger problem is this: that our so-called “leaderless” and “non-ideological” movement has in fact *fostered* the growth of this far-right ecosystem. The dogmatic refusal to [discuss ideology](#) breeds and lays the conditions for the rise of a far-right discourse among the localists that specializes in disinformation and intolerance—not unlike the CCP’s own tactics. It is no coincidence that the belief that one can stage politics above the complex particularities of ideology—attending to systemic injustice, our communities’ margins, and our own complicity—is the bread and butter of whiteness, which the Hong Kong right-wing embodies in its extreme form.

The counter-argument that “not all Hongkongers support Trump” is beside the point: The reality is that one Trump supporter is one too many, let alone 36% of those interviewed in the aforementioned YouGov poll and 55% of surveyed Hong Kong Americans, and that their loud antics have since become hegemonic in mainstream political discourse. The truth is that we have allowed these views to be normalized as a mere difference of opinion, and that alone is an indictment of the movement as a whole. It is one thing to avoid discussing systemic issues and real ideological differences in Hong Kong to strategically focus on fighting for what we can realistically achieve first; it is another thing to actually see this avoidance as an end goal, content with the mere facade of democracy without actual democracy itself. If a year of “no big stage” has in fact led to the amplification of the far-right’s platform, we must seriously ask ourselves how the movement’s vision of democratic process has gone wrong. This does not legitimize our oppression by Beijing’s hands, but it delegitimizes our movement for democracy.

With the national security laws and the defeat of the Trump campaign, Hongkongers are left with a moment of reckoning. Are we finally going to critically examine the myth of exceptionalism that limits us and continues to play into our oppressors’ hands? The choice is between a practical movement toward true democracy, one that can interrogate the limits of liberal democracy and stand in solidarity with other mass struggles against a connected system of oppression, or an endless cycle of bondage, only painfully maneuvering ourselves between different modes of entrapment.

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