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## TEACHING THE EDGES OF EMPIRES

### HONG KONG AND TAIWAN AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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During a flight from Hong Kong to the United States in early January 2020, I noticed a number of staff members and passengers at the Hong Kong International Airport wearing face masks, which was not a common sight in ordinary circumstances. This was just days after the health authorities from Wuhan, the People's Republic of China (PRC), announced a pneumonia outbreak. While the world generally paid scant attention at the moment, one government did: beginning on December 31, 2019, Taiwan, or the Republic of China (ROC), started enforcing fever screenings on flight passengers arriving from Wuhan, followed by other inspection measures in subsequent weeks.

Amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Hong Kong and Taiwan have emerged as two largely “successful” cases of keeping the outbreak under control.<sup>1</sup> When other countries were still debating the merits of wearing face masks in early March, citizens of Hong Kong and Taiwan had already been stocking up. Such alertness can be attributed to two major factors: the experience gleaned from SARS in 2003 and recent geopolitical tensions with the PRC. The former instilled a sense of vigilance among the population regarding public health issues, and the latter demanded a higher level of conscientiousness in response to matters involving China.<sup>2</sup> The protests in Hong Kong since June 2019 further intensified Hongkongers’ tension with their government and led many to question the “one country, two systems” model. The Taiwanese public have certainly been paying attention to developments in Hong Kong as well.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for instructors to pay more attention to Hong Kong and Taiwan in survey courses on China, East Asia, or the modern world. As “fragment of/f empires,” to use the term coined by Wu Rwei-ren, both places, being situated on the edges of different empires, have been shaped by various forces such as colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism over the last few centuries.<sup>3</sup> Such experiences have contributed to the unique development patterns in both places. Drawing attention to them in the curriculum will enhance students’ understanding of modern East Asia, an increasingly volatile region of growing economic and geopolitical significance. Furthermore, this will allow them to transcend the conventional nation-state framework by drawing attention to a special administrative region (Hong Kong) and the challenges it faces, along with a political entity (Taiwan), which is not officially recognized as an independent country by the United Nations and most countries across the globe.<sup>4</sup>

## **Two Societies, Both Alike in Dignity**

Shortly after Hong Kong’s transfer of sovereignty in 1997, a PRC official in Hong Kong famously remarked that Hong Kong was a difficult book to understand.<sup>5</sup> The same could be said for Taiwan. Both are predominantly Chinese-speaking societies influenced by a broadly defined Chinese culture. Yet, as exemplified by contemporary events, both also share complicated relationships with China and comparable notions of Chinese identity shaped by the historical development of both places.

For centuries, Taiwan was under the control of different powers, including the Dutch, the Spanish, the Zheng (Koxinga) regime, the Qing, the Japanese, and the ROC. After the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), Taiwan became a Japanese colony until the end of World War II, when the ROC took over. Yet the ROC had a difficult time winning the support of the local population that resisted its authoritarian rule. The 228 Incident (1947), a civilian uprising against the ruling Nationalist Party (KMT), and the ROC’s retreat from mainland China after the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949), led to the imposition of martial law in 1949. Those critical of the KMT regime and suspected of communist sympathy were arrested, tortured, or even executed. A number of dissidents went into exile and were “blacklisted” from returning to Taiwan after they made “critical” comments abroad.

Since the end of World War II, the ROC represented “China” at the UN and proclaimed itself to be “Free China,” being an important ally of the US against “Red China.” Yet the tide changed in 1971, as the PRC was recognized as the only legitimate representative of “China” in the UN, replacing the ROC. Since then, most countries have severed ties with the ROC and established diplomatic relations with the PRC instead. Domestically, within the ROC, calls for reforms



Figure 1: Map of Modern East Asia. Map by Gabriel Moss.

and democracy grew stronger over time, and martial law was finally lifted in 1987. In 1996, Taiwan had its first free presidential election, and in 2000, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the presidential election, marking the first time the KMT had lost power in Taiwan since 1945.<sup>6</sup>

Hong Kong, as is well-known, used to be a British colony. The British took parts of Hong Kong after the First Opium War (1839–1842) and occupied more territories in 1860 and 1898 respectively. Briefly occupied by the Japanese during World War II, Hong Kong, the “Berlin of the East,” became an important frontier in the Cold War era. Both the CCP and the KMT engaged in ideological battles in the colony, exerting their influences through different channels such as newspapers, labor unions, and selected schools. Meanwhile, many Chinese who were fleeing from the Chinese Civil War or CCP rule escaped to Hong Kong. Hearing their stories about the great famine and political turmoil in mainland China, many Hongkongers became skeptical of CCP rule. Hence, despite a number of social problems in colonial Hong Kong at the time, including crowded housing, police corruption, and poor working conditions, in 1967, the local population largely supported the colonial government’s suppression of the anti-colonial, pro-PRC riots, led by local pro-CCP leftists and inspired by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

In the aftermath of the unrest of 1967, the colonial government reckoned that reforms were necessary. Social and economic conditions were greatly improved in the 1970s, and this helped strengthen a sense of Hong Kong identity that distinguished Hong Kong as “home,” contrasting its relative stability and freedom with the turmoil and suppression in the PRC. Later, Britain and the PRC negotiated the Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984), determining the transfer of sovereignty would take place in 1997. The Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989) in Beijing led to widespread fear and uncertainty over the city’s future, yet ultimately, on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong became a special administrative region of the PRC under the “one country, two systems” model, which is also intended for Taiwan should the PRC incorporate it in the future.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Trauma of SARS and Public Sentiment**

In 2003, both Hong Kong and Taiwan suffered from the outbreak of SARS.<sup>8</sup> Then an unknown disease, it caught health officials off guard, adversely affecting everyday life and the economy. Certain governmental decisions were controversial and drew much public criticism, such as the Taipei City Government’s decision to lock down the Taipei Municipal Heping Hospital, which led to the worsening of conditions within it and the Hong Kong government’s initial denial of an outbreak until doctors proclaimed otherwise.

The SARS experience proved to be a grave lesson for both places. Institutional reforms became necessary. In 2004, Taiwan established the Central Epidemic Command Center, responsible for coordinating with local authorities and implementing relevant measures in the event of a serious disease outbreak. Similarly, the SARS epidemic exposed a number of problems with the public health system in Hong Kong, including its deficient communication with the public (or even between officials) and risks posed to health care workers during a pandemic.<sup>9</sup> In 2004, Hong Kong set up the Centre for Health Protection, being primarily responsible for disease prevention and playing an important role in handling disease outbreak.

On a societal level, the SARS experience taught Taiwanese and Hongkongers much about public health precautions. Learning from the experience, the populations became vigilant and cautious in their everyday life and would react quickly upon a (potential) disease outbreak. One notable example is wearing face masks, especially when feeling unwell, to avoid spreading germs to others. Hence, while the outbreak of COVID-19 was yet to be taken seriously elsewhere, Hongkongers were already taking the initiative in wearing face masks, just as I observed in early January. The Taiwanese government also reacted promptly, restricting the export of face masks in late January and adopting a rationing system in early February to ensure citizens would have enough face masks for themselves.

Contemporary politics and activism in Hong Kong and Taiwan also help explain the response to the current pandemic. Hong Kong captured the world's attention in 2019 with the protests against a controversial extradition amendment bill and accusations of police brutality. Accompanied by years of debate over democratic reforms and government accountability, Hong Kong society has become extremely divided, especially concerning matters involving China. The public response to the COVID-19 pandemic reflected this dynamic, notably when medical workers led a five-day strike in early February to pressure the government into closing its border with China to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the city.<sup>10</sup> The government later enacted a series of strict measures, but critics suggested they were less about public health safety and more about suppressing protest activities. The annual Tiananmen vigil, for instance, was banned for the first time, and dozens of pro-democracy activists were later charged for their participation.<sup>11</sup> With Beijing's imposition of a controversial national security law in Hong Kong in July 2020, the city enters a new stage of uncertainty with increasing degrees of governmental control and (self-)censorship.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the public in Taiwan held a favorable view of the government during the pandemic in the first half of 2020. As Taiwan followed Hong Kong's massive protests closely, President Tsai Ing-wen, who explicitly rejected applying the "one country, two systems" model to Taiwan, won reelection in the presidential race in January 2020 with a record number of votes, and the DPP also retained a majority in the legislature. This was a dramatic turn from two years ago, when the DPP lost tremendously in the local elections and Tsai's chances for reelection looked bleak. With such a strong mandate, the Tsai administration was able to swiftly implement precautionary and protective measures, working with private industry in the production of medical supplies. It also benefited from the coincidence that then Vice President Chen Chien-jen (who stepped down in May 2020 as he did not seek reelection) was an epidemiologist and served as Minister of Health during the SARS outbreak in 2003. The current Minister of Health, Chen Shih-chung, was widely praised for his informative daily briefings and bolstering of public confidence.<sup>13</sup> The level of trust in experts contributes to Taiwan's "success" in handling the pandemic, which is particularly significant considering Taiwan's exclusion from major international organizations such as the World Health organization (WHO). This presents an opportunity for the Taiwanese government to promote itself on the international stage.<sup>14</sup>

## **Contextualizing Hong Kong and Taiwan**

In the twenty-first century, resistance against "mainlandization" in Hong Kong has grown stronger over time, and resistance against "Hongkongization" in Taiwan has increasingly rallied support.<sup>15</sup> As previously demonstrated, because

of their unique developmental patterns, both Hong Kong and Taiwan share an uneasy relationship with China. Yet, such resistance has not always been the norm. Instead, instructors could draw on different examples to show the nuance of terms like “China” and “Chinese identity,” and how people in both locales approach them in various ways.

One example that demonstrates the complicated relationship with “China” was the Baodiao Movement, or the “movement to protect the Diaoyu Islands.” In the early 1970s, a territorial dispute between the PRC, the ROC, and Japan emerged concerning the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.<sup>16</sup> Across the globe, and most prominently in the US, thousands of Hong Kong and Taiwanese students took to the streets to protest Japanese claims to the islands, chanting that they belonged to “China.” Since the 1990s, some activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and also those from mainland China, have even tried to approach the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, demanding Japan recognize the sovereignty of “China” over these uninhabited islands. Whether this “China” meant the PRC, the ROC, or a broadly defined and depoliticized “China” depended on individual participants, but this case demonstrates that there have been moments when Hongkongers and Taiwanese actively declared their Chinese patriotism.

Even common classroom topics could be expanded to bring Hong Kong and Taiwan into discussion. During the Tiananmen Square Protests (1989), for instance, Hongkongers offered much support for protesters in Beijing. After the crackdown on June 4, there emerged a rescue mission called Operation Yellowbird, in which Hong Kong activists (with help from various sectors including politicians, celebrities, and even triad members) helped Tiananmen dissidents escape from China. The Tiananmen Protests became a collective moment for Hongkongers who grew incredibly concerned about the city’s post-1997 future. In 1990, a year after Tiananmen, the Wild Lily Movement broke out in Taiwan, where student protesters demanded democratization after decades of authoritarian rule. Having paid attention to the movement in Beijing, protesters in Taiwan adapted their tactics, striving to avoid the same outcome.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the movement ended with a promise of full democracy, leading to Taiwan’s first free presidential election in 1996.

These two examples demonstrate how instructors can integrate Hong Kong and Taiwan in their teaching. The legacy of Tiananmen 1989, for example, did not only impact China, but it significantly influenced the subsequent development of Hong Kong and Taiwanese society as well. In other words, drawing on these examples allows instructors to transcend the conventional nation-state unit of analysis, demonstrating the broader impact of events beyond the nation-state and encouraging students to consider interactions between different political entities in the region. Similarly, Hong Kong and Taiwan’s response to the COVID-19

pandemic should be considered in the context of their respective development but also in light of their relations with neighboring political entities, particularly the PRC. This approach would better explain why these two locales have emerged as “successful” cases in handling the pandemic.

## Teaching the Edges of Empires

As scholars increasingly emphasize the importance of global connections, challenging students to “think globally” is essential. Drawing on different political entities, students can learn to conduct comparative analysis, situating historical events and figures in their respective contexts and assessing how the global circulation of various forces, including political ideas and rhetoric, shape historical development.<sup>18</sup> As educators, we can and should encourage our students to address and rethink the power dynamics of different political entities, including those that are not considered “nation-states” in the modern world.

In Hong Kong and Taiwan, we have two cases of different historical trajectories shaping their development and also their response to the current pandemic. These “fragments of/f empires” broaden our understanding of the dynamics within modern East Asia. They transcend the conceptualizations of nation-state boundaries, providing alternative frameworks within which to analyze intersocietal *modi operandi*, thereby complicating national narratives. Of course, this is not limited to Hong Kong and Taiwan; places like Okinawa and Macau, with their own unique histories, also have much to offer that could better students’ understanding of contemporary history and geopolitics. Other political entities outside of East Asia, such as Palestine in the Middle East, Somaliland in Africa, or eastern Ukraine and Belarus in Europe, also offer similar lessons in understanding the complexity of regional and global histories and why they remain contentious today.

When teaching courses on China, East Asia, or the modern world, I find that students express much curiosity about Hong Kong and Taiwan. They frequently hear about these places in the news, most recently with the protests in Hong Kong and the controversy over Taiwan’s WHO membership. Such contemporary events intrigue them, and these issues are worth exploring more in classrooms. The histories of Hong Kong and Taiwan force students to reconsider the conditions of the modern world, be it the different forms of colonialism, economic progress after World War II, the complex question of identity formation, or the divergent trajectories in pursuit of democracy. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a valuable opportunity for these types of discussions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As of August 14, 2020, Hong Kong has 4,361 cases of COVID-19 and sixty-seven deaths, while Taiwan has 481 cases and seven deaths. Since July, Hong Kong has witnessed a significant increase in reported cases; for comparison, by July 13, it had 1,522 reported cases and eight deaths.

<sup>2</sup> Kin-man Wan, Lawrence Ka-ki Ho, Natalie W. M. Wong, and Andy Chiu, “Fighting COVID-19 in Hong Kong: The Effects of Community and Social Mobilization,” *World Development* 134 (October 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105055> (accessed July 2, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Wu Rwei-ren, *Shoukunde xisiang: Taiwan chongfanshijie [Prometheus Unbound: When Formosa Reclaims the World]* (New Taipei: AcroPolis, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> As of August 2020, the ROC has full diplomatic relations with only fifteen countries in the world, including the Vatican.

<sup>5</sup> “Xianggangshiben nandongdeshu’: duoshizhiqiuchongwen Jiang Enzhu jiu hua [“Hong Kong Is a Difficult Book to Understand’: Revisiting Jiang Enzhu’s Words in a Turbulent Time;”] *Hong Kong Economic Times*, October 7, 2019, <https://china.hket.com/article/2445177/%E3%80%90%E4%BF%AE%E4%BE%8B%E9%A2%A8%E6%B3%A2%E3%80%91%E3%80%8C%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E6%98%AF%E6%9C%AC%E9%9B%A3%E6%87%82%E7%9A%84%E6%9B%B8%E3%80%8D%20%E5%A4%9A%E4%BA%8B%E4%B9%8B%E7%A7%8B%E9%87%8D%E6%BA%AB%E5%A7%9C%E6%81%A9%E6%9F%B1%E8%88%8A%E8%A9%B1> (accessed August 9, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> For more on modern Taiwanese history, see Shelley Rigger, *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> For more on modern Hong Kong history, see John Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Hong Kong had 1,755 cases of SARS and 299 deaths, while Taiwan had 346 cases and seventy-three deaths.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Shiu-hung, “The SARS Epidemic in Hong Kong: What Lessons Have We Learned?” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 96, no. 8 (2003): 374–378.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Wu, “Coronavirus Widens Hong Kong Anger at Government, China,” *Reuters*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-hongkong-protests-insigh/coronavirus-widens-hong-kong-anger-at-government-china-idUSKBN20F0E3> (accessed June 18, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Elson Tong, “Explainer: After Months of Protests, Is Hong Kong Selectively Enforcing Covid-19 Laws?” *Hong Kong Free Press*, April 17, 2020, <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/04/17/explainer-after-months-of-protests-is-hong-kong-selectively-enforcing-covid-19-laws/> (accessed May 8, 2020); Elaine Yu, “Dozens Charged in Hong Kong for Taking Part in Tiananmen Protest,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/world/asia/hong-kong-tiananmen-protest.html> (accessed August 8, 2020).



<sup>12</sup> Gina Anne Tam and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “The Future of Hong Kong,” *Dissent*, June 30, 2020, [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/the-future-of-hong-kong](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-future-of-hong-kong) (accessed June 30, 2020). The AAS released a statement expressing deep concern over the national security law, especially on its possible infringement on academic freedom. “AAS Statement on the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law,” Association of Asian Studies, July 10, 2020, <https://www.asianstudies.org/aas-statement-on-the-2020-hong-kong-national-security-law/> (accessed July 11, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Brian Hioe, “Asia’s Orphan’ During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 18, issue 14, no. 8, July 15, 2020, <https://apjif.org/2020/14/Hioe.html> (accessed August 9, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Sung Wen-ti, “Taiwan’s COVID-19 Diplomacy and WHO Participation: Losing the Battle but Winning the War?” *The Diplomat*, June 2, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/taiwans-covid-19-diplomacy-and-who-participation-losing-the-battle-but-winning-the-war/> (accessed June 23, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Ho Ming-sho, *Challenging Beijing’s Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the territorial dispute, see Kimie Hara, “Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in United States-Japan-China Relations,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, issue 28, no. 2, July 13, 2015, <https://apjif.org/2015/13/28/Kimie-Hara/4341.html> (accessed July 8, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Mark Wenyi Lai, “Two Student Movements, One Learning from the Other,” *Taiwan Insight*, June 5, 2019, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2019/06/05/two-student-movements-one-learning-from-the-other/> (accessed June 21, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).