

FACTS ABOUT ASIA

Vigil: Hong Kong in Crisis***An Interview with Jeffrey Wasserstrom***

*Jeffrey Wasserstrom is Chancellor's Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of five previous books, including *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know* (coauthored by Maura Elizabeth Cunningham) and *Eight Juxtapositions: China through Imperfect Analogies from Mark Twain to Manchukuo*. In his latest book, *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink*, Professor Wasserstrom combines his extensive knowledge of Hong Kong from the ground up with a broader understanding of the history of political repression and resistance to help readers better understand the deep roots and major significance of what has been occurring recently in Hong Kong. In the interview that follows, Professor Wasserstrom both gives readers a preview of his book and provides other useful references for those readers with a special interest in this topic. For these updated references, please see the end of this interview.*



Lucien Ellington: *In 1997, the United Kingdom (UK) returned its colony Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC), who in turn agreed to make Hong Kong a special administrative region (SAR) largely free of PRC governance. Nevertheless, it took the two nations until late 1984 to formally agree on the details of the transfer with the PRC, again guaranteeing the retention of most aspects of Hong Kong's legal status until 2047. In democratic nations, citizens largely enjoy two types of freedom; a high level of popular sovereignty and civil rights, including—especially—freedom of expression. Regarding the first type of freedom, please elaborate on whether the PRC has ever granted high levels of popular sovereignty to Hong Kong residents since the establishment of the SAR.*

Jeffrey Wasserstrom: Hong Kong's residents have never gotten to play a direct role in choosing the head of the city's government—though it has not been for want of trying! Under the British, the head of Hong Kong's government was a governor appointed in and sent over by London, who had to answer to Whitehall. Since the 1997 handover, it has been a chief executive, who has always been a local man or, most recently, a local woman, but never one who has been chosen via a genuinely democratic process, and never one who is a truly free agent. There is an "election" for chief executive, but fewer than 2,000 local residents in a metropolis of millions get to vote in it—and then only for candidates who have been vetted. The chief executive is supposed to prioritize doing what is best for Hong Kongers, but, in reality, each of them has been concerned in large part with staying in Beijing's good graces and also tried to look out for the interests of the local financial elite, the sector of society from which most of them have come. I liken their position to that of heads of some Eastern European states during the Cold War, who often had to be as concerned about Moscow's view of their actions as about those of the local population. They have no exact analogue, but in an East Asian context, I also see some similarities between their position and that of some titular leaders of places the Japanese claimed during the days of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere to have "liberated" but took directives from Tokyo.

Carrie Lam, the current chief executive, is unusual not just because of her gender but in that she is a longtime civil servant rather than a member of the business community. There was nothing unusual, though, about how she came to power in 2017, via a far from democratic election, or about how she has taken her cues from Beijing. Some hoped she would be a dif-

ferent kind of leader than her hated predecessor, C. Y. Leung, but she has not been. She is now reviled for many of the same reasons he was. She seems out of touch with the needs of ordinary residents, often makes tone-deaf statements, and shows little interest in listening to or looking out for the interests of those she supposedly represents. If anything, she seems even more eager than her predecessors to do Beijing's bidding.

All this said, there was some democracy in Hong Kong before it stopped being a British colony, and there has been some since then. There is a legislature, albeit one set up so that only some members of it are chosen via open elections—elections that were just canceled by Lam this year, using the pandemic as a pretext. There have also been times when public pressure, expressed via mass demonstrations, has succeeded in getting the chief executive to reverse course and abandon disliked policies—even ones that Beijing clearly wanted to see go through. In *Vigil*, three examples of this are discussed: 2003 efforts to keep an antisedition law from going into effect, 2012 efforts to block the importation of mainland-style patriotic education, and 2019 efforts to get an extradition bill withdrawn.

Hong Kong was supposed to enjoy a "high degree of autonomy" for fifty years after the 1997 handover took place, and the constitution-like 1990 Basic Law also promised that over time local people would get to choose the chief executive. Moments when protests succeeded, along with the existence of independent courts and newspapers able to take the local government to task for its shortcomings and even criticize the national authorities in ways that mainland ones cannot, kept alive the idea that the city was a very specially run sort of part of the People's Republic of China and that the "high degree of 'autonomy'" idea had something to it. Popular sovereignty seemed something that could potentially be attained in the future.

This hopeful sense, though, has been shattered by the events of recent years, especially those of summer 2020. I try to convey in *Vigil* both the reasons for hope and the reasons for despair in the push and pull of the last few years in particular. As I write this in early August, a very hard week for the city has just passed, which included not just the canceling of elections but the firing of tenured law professor Benny Tai of Hong Kong University. In 2014, he spearheaded the Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement, which morphed into the Umbrella Movement. A devoted proponent of nonviolent civil disobedience, and often seen as a

relatively moderate figure in the prodemocracy camp, Tai's main mission in 2014 was to create a movement that would bring about universal suffrage, and free and open elections for the chief executive. The struggle failed to achieve that goal six years ago, and now, with a tough new National Security Law (NSL) imposed on the city by Beijing, even to push for that kind of fulfillment of democratic promises in Hong Kong can, as Tai found out, cost you a job. In the new environment, activism can also, even when it is nonviolent and of a sort that used to be allowed in the city, cost you your freedom, as arrests linked to the NSL are showing.

Lucien: *Educators and academics who read this interview and, we trust, many of their students, are well-aware of the protests of 2019 because of their magnitude (an estimated two million people in one June 16, 2019, protest) and their longevity. Many readers perhaps don't remember or are vaguely aware of the 2014 Umbrella Movement protests that lasted seventy-nine days and, as you write, "... brought Hong Kong to a standstill, at times metaphorically and at times literally." Please briefly compare the Umbrella Movement's organizers and participants' objectives, and demographic profiles with those of recent protesters and participants.*

Jeffrey: In 2014, as just noted, the protests began as an effort to secure something new, a change in how the chief executive was elected, rather than as in 2003 and 2012, when it was to block something seen as an infringement on local freedoms. The goal was universal suffrage, and the initial method was an occupation of strategically important zones, especially the financial district. Its original name was partly a nod to those of Occupy Wall Street and other occupation drives of the time. The main leaders were Tai and another senior academic, Chinese University of Hong Kong sociologist Chan Kin-man, and Reverend Chu Yiu-ming, a cleric a generation older than the two academics, who were then both in their fifties, with a long history of involvement in social movements. In addition to setting up an occupy zone in the central business district, protesters established encampments in another part of Hong Kong Island and the Mongkok neighborhood of Kowloon Peninsula across the harbor, a working-class district. I made brief visits to both the Central and Mongkok occupy zones, which allowed me in *Vigil* and also in some personal essays for periodicals to do some writing that mixes first-person reportage with more conventional sorts of historical work.

The struggle became known as the Umbrella Movement (sometimes the Umbrella Revolution) a couple of weeks after it started, at a time when leadership of it had shifted to younger activists, including both heads of university student associations and people such as Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow, who had been key figures as teenagers in the 2012 protests against patriotic education. As they took on larger roles and introduced some still-nonviolent but more confrontational protest tactics, inspired in part by the occupying of government buildings across the straits by participants in Taiwan's Sunflower Movement of early 2014, and as the police took stronger steps against the activists, the struggle became one that was as much a defense of the right to protest and speak out freely as it was about elections. The term "umbrella" has special connotations in Cantonese that local analysts have parsed well and that I deal with in passing in *Vigil*, but it became a symbol for the movement mostly for a pragmatic reason: activists used umbrellas, so ubiquitous in rainy Hong Kong, to block pepper spray and tear gas volleys by the police.

Lucien: *It was impossible, at least for me, to read your book without developing a strong sense of poignancy, as well as great respect for the courage of protest organizers and participants, perhaps epitomized through your profile of Joshua Wong. Your comments regarding the mindsets of many teenagers and young people in their twenties in contemporary Hong Kong would be appreciated.*

Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink

By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020

120 pages, ISBN: 978-1733623742, Paperback

From the publisher:

The rise of Hong Kong is the story of a miraculous post-War boom, when Chinese refugees flocked to a small British colony, and, in less than fifty years, transformed it into one of the great financial centers of the world. The unraveling of Hong Kong, on the other hand, shatters the grand illusion of China ever having the intention of allowing democratic norms to take root inside its borders. Hong Kong's people were subjects of the British Empire for more than a hundred years, and now seem destined to remain the subordinates of today's greatest rising power.

But although we are witnessing the death of Hong Kong as we know it, this is also the story of the biggest challenge to China's authoritarianism in thirty years. Activists who are passionately committed to defending the special qualities of a home they love are fighting against Beijing's crafty efforts to bring the city into its fold—of making it a centerpiece of its "Greater Bay Area" megalopolis.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom, one of America's leading China specialists, draws on his many visits to the city, and knowledge of the history of repression and resistance, to help us understand the deep roots and the broad significance of the events we see unfolding day by day in Hong Kong. The result is a riveting tale of tragedy but also heroism—one of the great David-versus-Goliath battles of our time, pitting determined street protesters against the intransigence of Xi Jinping, the most ambitious leader of China since the days of Mao.

Source: Columbia Global Reports at

<https://globalreports.columbia.edu/books/vigil/>



Jeffrey: I share your feelings about many of the young activists, who have accomplished a great deal in their short lives and taken extraordinary risks. Their commitment to a city that they care passionately about is compelling, as was the creativity they showed throughout the 2010s in finding new ways to generate support for their protests and keep them interesting, which is crucial both to attract attention from outsiders and keep participants engaged. I wish now that I had found a way to bring in more about some of them other than Joshua Wong, such as Jeffrey Ngo, a DC-based activist and history graduate student I learned a lot from in our conversations while I researched and wrote the book; and Nathan Law, who is now in exile in London and has had, to protect their safety, cut off ties with his family back in Hong Kong.

One thing I wrestled with in *Vigil*, as a writer, was conveying the admirable qualities of some individuals and referring to my encounters with them (a memorable one with Joshua Wong, in particular) without being too hagiographic or making myself too much of a character in the story I was telling of a city. I was aided in this by having a great editor to work with in Jimmy So, who is originally from Hong Kong, and by collaborating with Amy

Hawkins. Hawkins, a talented journalist belonging to the same generation as Wong, gets a well-earned “with contributions by” credit on *Vigil*'s title page for help she gave me in researching, doing interviews for, and plotting out the book. I trimmed back some vignettes of personal encounters, but I did leave in one involving Wong that still haunts me. This involved seeing him after a 2018 protest that had had a disappointingly small turnout, and when I introduced myself to him, not sure if he'd remember me on the basis of the two times we'd met before, his downcast look vanished and he brightened up and said, “You remember me!” This moved me, as it suggested that, despite being on the cover of *Time* as the face of the Umbrella Movement, he felt that the world had forgotten about him—and, more importantly by extension, the struggle for Hong Kong's future.

Lucien: *In my opinion, your book is a superb tool in helping readers understand and think more clearly about Hong Kong and Beijing. On June 30, 2020, the PRC enacted what appears to be a sweeping Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL). Please provide our readers with an initial sense of the law's impact on Hong Kong's retention of any level of autonomy from Beijing.*

Jeffrey: I've already answered this a bit earlier. I'd also like to point readers to an essay on the NSL that I recently wrote with Jessie Lau, a talented young Hong Konger, that ran as the cover story for *The Diplomat* magazine in August. Overall, the way the NSL came into being struck a devastating blow to what little was left earlier this year of Hong Kong's “high degree of autonomy,” as the Basic Law explicitly states that regulations on issues such as subversion will be created by the local government, not the national one, yet Beijing imposed this on the territory. In addition, while official spokespeople defend it as a reaction to the 2019 violence (and there was definitely some crowd violence, including a couple of very ugly incidents, even though the preponderance of violence against people was carried out by the police), this is disingenuous. It followed on the heels of moves to curtail Hong Kong's freedoms underway well before 2019, and there were

already laws in place to punish those responsible for acts of violence. Official spokespeople have also insisted that the NSL will only affect a small number of extremists. That, too, is false, as it has become clear that many people will be vulnerable to persecution under its terms. It has begun to have a chilling impact on a city that seems to have entered, as I write at the beginning of August, a period of steadily tightening controls that bring to mind (as always with differences, as no analogy is exact) the period when martial law was imposed on Poland by the Communist government in the early 1980s after the first flourishing of the Solidarity Movement.

More generally, Hong Kong was supposed to be governed by a “One Country, Two Systems” framework from 1997 until 2047, with Beijing overseeing defense and diplomacy, while other aspects of life were left under local control, allowing the city to remain very different from its mainland neighbors. Now, it seems that only the “One Country” part of that formulation matters and that efforts to maintain Hong Kong's distinctiveness can leave one open to being persecuted as a separatist. Trends that are now reaching their apogee began before Xi Jinping took power, but they have accelerated under his watch and fit in with moves he has made to exert greater control over other parts of the country, including Xinjiang, which has seen brutal forms of repression that are crucially important and deserve full and continual discussion on their own. As for Hong Kong, historian James Carter and I put it this way at the end of “The Fall of Hong Kong,” an op-ed we cowrote for *The Hindu* recently:

Mr. Xi does not seem to feel beholden to protect a true “One Country, Two Systems” framework—the kind in which Hong Kong would enjoy “a high degree of autonomy,” retain “executive, legislative, and independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication,” and be nothing like a colony. By contrast, a colonial city is what it is again, or resembles, just with Beijing rather than London calling the shots.

Lucien: *Jeffrey, thanks for the interview! ■*

Film and Print Resources on Hong Kong by Jeffrey Wasserstrom

There are many excellent articles and books on the Umbrella Movement of 2014. Among those I think stand out are Ching Kwan Lee and Ming Sing's edited volume *Taking Back Our Future: An Eventful Sociology of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement* (Cornell University Press, 2019) and Sebastian Veg's “Creating a Textual Public Space: Slogans and Texts from Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 3 (2016): 673–702.

Two of the best films on the Umbrella Movement and its aftermath are Evans Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas* (Columbia Pictures, 2016) and Matthew Torme's *Last Exit to Kai Tak* (Universal Pictures, 2018).

For more suggestions for readings and viewings relating to the 2014 events and their immediate aftermath, as well as earlier periods in Hong Kong history, and a guide to journalists to follow—which remains largely up to date, though some of those listed have left the city and some other good ones have arrived there to report—see *Vigil*, 91–101.

On the events of 2019 itself and of the first eight months of 2020, one place to turn for many different kinds of valuable writing, from book reviews and book excerpts to reportage and interviews, is *Mekong Review* (www.mekongreview.com, and note that while some material is paywalled, PDFs of individual issues of this elegantly formatted periodical can be purchased).

Some works that stand out as valuable on specific events and individuals:

Antony Dapiran's *City on Fire: The Fight for Hong Kong* (Melbourne, Australia: Scribe Publications, 2020); Timothy McLaughlin's “The Leader Who Killed Her City,” on Carrie Lam, *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y9jv8x2r>.

And on the canceling of the Legislative Council election and related summer events, see Suzanne Pepper, “Gone in a Flash: Hong Kong Dreams of a Democratic Majority, Candidates, Even an Election,” in *Hong Kong Free Press*, August 9, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yyzot83l>.

See also Jessie Lau and my essay on the National Security Law and its implications: “Hong Kong: Law Making and Law Breaking,” *The Diplomat*, August 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y4ndj9w4>; the Holmes Chan edited volume *Aftershock: Essays from Hong Kong* (Small Tune Press, 2020), which features work by some of the best young journalists in the city; and the documentary “Denise Ho: Becoming the Song” (Kino Lorber, 2020), which was directed by Sue Williams, with anthropologist Helen Siu providing crucial input as a producer and valuable on-screen commentary by, among others, activist and history PhD student Jeffrey Ngo.

To keep up with events in Hong Kong now, journalists particularly worth following include Mary Hui of *Quartz*; Natasha Khan of the *The Wall Street Journal*; Austin Ramzy of *The New York Times*; many of the contributors to *Aftershock*; Ilaria Maria Sala; and, though she is now writing about the city from Melbourne rather than Hong Kong itself, Louisa Lim.