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# How Do People in China Really Feel About Hong Kong? It's Complicated.

*Not everyone in China believes the state-run media.*

By [Shen Lu](#)

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A Chinese soldier salutes the flag in “First Lesson of the Year,” a required back-to-school special that was broadcast to every primary and secondary school in the country on September 1. (CCTV 1)

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annual back-to-school special, “First Lesson of the Year.” Its theme: patriotism, and every primary and secondary student in the country had to watch and write about it.

On that same day, September 1, thousands of young people in Hong Kong boycotted school as the pro-democracy movement entered its fourth month. Videos showed students singing the *Les Misérables* song “Do You Hear the People Sing?” over the Chinese national anthem during an assembly. Outside another school, pupils kneeled, held hands, and chanted their demands in the rain.

The contrasting scenes sum up how the massive demonstrations in the semi-autonomous city have played to different audiences this summer. Nearly 2 million Hong Kongers—more than a quarter of the city’s population—peacefully took to the streets in June to oppose a bill that would allow suspects to face trial on the mainland. This week Hong Kong’s embattled leader, Carrie Lam, said she would formally withdraw the extradition bill, but the rallies continue. Protesters now have four additional demands, including the expansion of democracy, and they often face off against riot police or even armed thugs.

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Non-Chinese media has largely portrayed the demonstrators as fighting for their right to self-determination, driven to escalating tactics by increasingly violent security forces. For many in mainland China, the blame is reversed: The protesters are rioters, stoking a separatist movement, and, perhaps, trying to launch a color revolution backed by foreign agents.

Carefully crafted by the Chinese government, the narrative of the pro-democracy protest as a dangerous affront to China is fed to residents through a tightly controlled media. Still, while many in the mainland believe this distorted story, divergent opinions exist. You can hear them in private, see them in coded language on social media, and catch them online before the censors take them down. Some analysis paints mainland Chinese as a nationalist mass toeing an official line, but such generalization loses sight of the dissenting voices and the majority of Chinese who are either oblivious to what's happening in Hong Kong or are too afraid to speak out. Fomenting nationalism is a classic tactic of authoritarian powers to manipulate people, but how the people really feel, and why they feel it, is more complex than the accusation that Chinese people have been “brainwashed” by the state.

For the first two months of protests, mainland residents

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and videos that showed the most extreme protesters attacking mainlanders and police officers. Today, the news regularly calls demonstrators “extremists” and “terrorists.” In mid-August, after demonstrators seized and assaulted a reporter for the Communist Party–controlled tabloid *Global Times* at the Hong Kong International Airport, the media hailed him as a national hero. Antagonistic press coverage and heated rhetoric has activated nationalist and chauvinist sentiment among some Chinese nationals.

There’s barely anything available in state media about the violence police committed against the protesters or about Hong Kongers’ demands for autonomy. Of the handful of my acquaintances in mainland China who bring up Hong Kong in conversation, none seem to have even heard of the extradition bill that sparked the protests. They know vaguely that political unrest is roiling Hong Kong, and then concluded that the city is unsafe.

For many Chinese residents, the country’s economic might has become a major source of pride, and boycotting businesses that they consider anti-China is one of the few ways of political engagement. The same day of the school strikes, 14 of the Spanish retailer Zara’s shops were closed in Hong Kong. Thousands of Chinese social media accounts called for a boycott, assuming they were closed in solidarity with the pro-democracy students, and Zara’s parent company had to issue a statement distancing itself from the strikes.

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and yelled expletives at pro-Hong Kong protesters. In the United Kingdom, national-flag-waving Chinese students sang the Chinese national anthem and songs that extolled the love and unselfishness of mothers—referring to their motherland, China. And in Canada, Chinese nationalists revved their Ferrari and McLaren supercars in a show of patriotism. It's worth noting that the media spotlights a few dozen vocal nationalists, ignoring the views of the vast majority of Chinese internationals who didn't show up at the rallies.

The loud and global displays of chauvinism are not emerging just because of recent misinformation. The sentiment is built on years of Beijing telling its citizens that the West is biased against China and that after a century of humiliation, China should rise up and discipline Hong Kong. One popular narrative portrays China as a gracious parent, and Hong Kong as an ungrateful child. It's also a result of Hong Kong's isolation from the mainland during the Cold War and the decades of sparse communication between mainlanders and Hong Kongers.

By exhibiting disdain for the pro-democracy movement, some mainland Chinese are also expressing bitterness over the mistreatment they encountered as tourists in Hong Kong. The influx of mainland Chinese tourists and shoppers to Hong Kong in the past decade, combined with frustration over political reform, has generated resentment among some Hong Kongers, who believe mainlanders exploit local resources and overwhelm their city. This anger led to a group

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Largely because of fear of retribution, many mainlanders won't openly express their views on Hong Kong. In the past few weeks, Internet users have been reporting to authorities liberal-leaning users who expressed sympathy toward the Hong Kong protesters—action reminiscent of Cultural Revolution–style purges. Censors have since deleted those sympathizers' accounts, which is another common strategy of silencing dissenting voices on social media. In one case, authorities detained an influential public intellectual, Chen Chun, after Weibo users accused him of being a “Hong Kong independence element.”

Pervasive censorship makes gauging Chinese public opinion tricky. It's easy to say the state has hijacked patriotism and manipulated nationalism, but it's harder to look beyond propaganda and discover what mainlanders actually feel and think. Some of the people I talked to support the cause of the Hong Kong protesters but are genuinely frustrated by what they see as one-sided coverage of the protest by both the Chinese and the English media, which essentially read like two separate movements.

Though hostility against Hong Kong seems overwhelming, overlooking the sensible discussion around it is a disservice. Quite a few members of the Chinese diaspora have diligently battled Beijing's disinformation by writing lengthy posts about the politics and history of Hong Kong that explain the motivations of the protesters. After news reports surfaced that Chinese students overseas hurled curse words at Hong

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experience of explaining what's happening in Hong Kong to their confused children. In a widely shared WeChat post, one Chinese mother said she encouraged her teenage son to read up on different media reports of the protest, respect different views, and not to jump any hardened position before understanding the context of the protest. Some parents who were required to ensure that their children watched the CCTV special called for an end to the show.

Many nationalist young people in the Chinese diaspora, some born after the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997, have little memory or understanding of Hong Kong's past—let alone how its political situation could drive millions to protest. The education they received in an authoritarian state might have taught them little about freedom of expression or respect for different ideas. But it's important to know that ridiculing their clumsy displays of patriotism or reducing them all to props of the Communist Party will hardly change their minds. Some counterprotest participants truly believe the state propaganda. Others might well be lonely international students engulfed in alienation, longing for a temporary sense of belonging.

We should still engage with them and keep lines of communication open. Not only because doing so would be faithful to democratic values, but because if any Chinese nationalists might be open to changing their perceptions of Hong Kong, it's most likely going to be the expatriate Chinese living in countries that protect freedom of speech.

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