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Murder Suspect Whose Case Led to Hong Kong Unrest Walks Out of Prison

Chan Tong-kai, accused of killing his pregnant girlfriend in Taiwan then returning to Hong Kong, was the reason for the now-scrapped extradition bill that sparked the recent protests



Chan Tong-kai outside Pik Uk prison in Hong Kong on Wednesday. He was released from prison after being convicted of money laundering in April. PHOTO: PHILIP FONG/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Mike Cherney, Natasha Khan and Rachel Yeo

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HONG KONG—A murder suspect whose alleged flight from justice in Taiwan eventually led to months of antigovernment protests in Hong Kong was freed from a jail in the city Wednesday, issuing an apology and offering to surrender himself to authorities in Taiwan.

The fate of Chan Tong-kai—who is accused of killing his pregnant girlfriend in Taiwan and stuffing her body in a suitcase before returning to Hong Kong in February 2018—is still uncertain as officials in the city and Taipei squabble over the legal technicalities of how to get him to Taiwan to face charges. But the drama around his case appears closer to a resolution than the divisions that opened up in Hong Kong following the biggest and most violent unrest in decades.

Hong Kong's government took a step Wednesday to attempt to calm the unrest: it formally withdrew a proposed extradition bill that prompted millions of people to take to the streets

starting in June. The government argued the bill was required so Mr. Chan could be extradited to Taiwan. But the proposed bill also covered mainland China, sparking fears that it would allow for the transfer of suspects to China for trial in its more opaque judicial system.

The dispute between Hong Kong, which is a special administrative region of China, and Taiwan, a self-governed island that Beijing regards as a renegade province, is particularly delicate. In Taiwan, getting Hong Kong to use a formal legal mechanism for Mr. Chan's transfer could bolster the argument that Taiwan is a separate country from the mainland. For Hong Kong officials, such a mechanism could undermine their argument that the extradition bill was necessary.

Any agreement could also be at odds with Beijing's strategy to undermine Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, whose party favors formal independence. Last month, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati severed ties with Taipei in favor of the mainland, underscoring Beijing's recent efforts to isolate the island. In a speech weeks later, Ms. Tsai, who is up for re-election in January, said Hong Kong's protests were an ominous lesson in Chinese rule and pledged to defend Taiwan's sovereignty.

In Hong Kong, protests have continued even though city leader Carrie Lam announced in September that she would withdraw the bill when the legislature was back in session. Demonstrators have broadened their demands and are now calling for democratic reform and an independent inquiry into the handling of the protests by police.

Mr. Chan, who returned to Hong Kong less than a day after the alleged killing, was convicted of money laundering related to his use of his dead girlfriend's property and sentenced to 29 months in jail. Hong Kong authorities didn't pursue a murder charge, arguing they lacked jurisdiction.

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Mr. Chan, who was born in mainland China and was 20 at the time of his sentencing in April, was released early on Wednesday for good behavior and time served. Wearing a blue shirt and red

backpack outside of a maximum-security prison early Wednesday, he bowed and apologized to his deceased girlfriend's family before getting in a van. A lawyer for Mr. Chan couldn't be reached for comment Wednesday.

Hong Kong officials say Mr. Chan is a now free man who can simply turn himself in. But Taiwan officials say they want Hong Kong to return Mr. Chan through a formal legal mechanism.

“The accused person has already indicated his willingness to surrender and it should be handled quickly without hindrance, so that justice is done,” John Lee, Hong Kong’s security secretary, told reporters Wednesday. “I urge the Taiwanese government to see how they can accept the accused person surrender, giving the best facilitation, rather than laying all the hurdles and restrictions.”

Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council on Wednesday accused Hong Kong authorities of turning a blind eye to crime and questioned how other passengers would feel if an accused murderer was to board a commercial flight to Taiwan without law-enforcement officials to accompany them.

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a political-science professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, said there were some tricky technical issues with the case, such as sorting out a visa for Mr. Chan to return to Taiwan.



A cloud of tear gas in Hong Kong as protesters and riot police clashed Sunday. PHOTO: IVAN ABREU/ZUMA PRESS

According to court documents, Mr. Chan and his girlfriend allegedly got into an argument in the

early hours of Feb. 17, 2018, over how their luggage should be packed. They also allegedly had another argument during which his girlfriend told him her baby belonged to her former boyfriend and showed him a video of her having sex with another man. Mr. Chan admitted to police that he killed her in Taiwan, court documents said.

Mr. Chan allegedly buried her in a grassy area in Taipei after putting her body in a suitcase, court documents said. He kept her ATM card, digital camera and iPhone. He used her ATM card to withdraw cash once in Taipei and three times in Hong Kong, taking out the equivalent of about \$3,100 in total—creating a basis for the money-laundering charges.

In her ruling, Judge Anthea Pang wrote that it seems frustrating and unfair that Mr. Chan couldn't be charged with murder in Hong Kong even though he admitted to killing his girlfriend. But she said she must base her sentence on the charges that were actually brought. "No matter how likely an accused has actually committed a most heinous crime, he is entitled to the full protection of his rights associated with a fair trial," she wrote.

—*Joyu Wang contributed to this article.*

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