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3/21/2020
China
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Term Project Step #2 - Hong Kong

The History of Hong Kong

Hong Kong has a rich history dating back to January 25th, 1841 when the British began to occupy the island. The British were using the island as a military base during the First Opium war which lasted from 1839 to 1842. Hong Kong island was the perfect strategic base due to Britain's superior navy and its location in the Pearl River Delta. In addition to Hong Kong being leased to Britain, the new Territories and other islands were leased to Britain. The lease expired in 1997 and Hong Kong was returned to Chinese control.



Figure 1: Map of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, New Territories, and Islands

“The handover was meant to establish a “one country, two systems” relationship between China and Hong Kong that would last until 2047, with Hong Kong existing as a special administrative region.” (How Hong Kong Came Under 'One Country, Two Systems' Rule.) After the First Opium war, fought between the Qing Dynasty and Britain, Britain created a treaty that allowed them to occupy Hong Kong and the surrounding area. This forced open trade with China to supply Europe with luxury goods such as silk and tea. The Second Opium war, fought between Britain and France vs the Qing Dynasty from 1856 to 1860 cemented the importation of opium into China. During negotiations, Kowloon ceded to Hong Kong and the New Territories were leased for 99 years as well.

Hong Kong was not always ruled by the British. During World War Two, Japan successfully invaded and occupied Hong Kong. Britain and China were able to liberate Hong Kong at the end of the war. In 1982, Chinese and British leaders started the steps to negotiate the transition of Hong Kong back to Chinese Rule. The lease however did not apply to Hong Kong and Kowloon but rather to the New Territories but, “Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ultimately didn’t think that those two regions would be able to survive on their own...” (How Hong Kong Came Under 'One Country, Two Systems' Rule.) Hong Kong was not included in the discussions on the end of the lease and their own return to China. “What choice did they have?” Tsang asks. “If they said, ‘No negotiations,’ the Chinese would take over without a deal. If they declare independence, the PLA would invade. So neither of those are actually options-independence was not an option, refusing or rejecting integration was not an option” (How Hong Kong Came Under 'One Country, Two Systems' Rule.) Two years later, the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed.

This declaration detailed that Britain would relinquish control of Hong Kong to China in 1997 but Hong Kong would keep its “Current social and economic systems” (Sino-British Joint Declaration)

As Hong Kong grew in population, the economy also changed. Due to its deep water ports, Hong Kong adopted the role, “as a reexporter and transhipper of goods from china...” (Veeck 369) up until 1949. In 1949, China's successful communist revolution, “led to an economic embargo on Chinese goods...” (Veeck 369). Hong Kong transitioned into the service industry and jobs such as logistics, finance, property development, insurance, and legal and accounting services grew. The shipping industry in Hong Kong did stay however and is currently the 7th largest port in the world by volume.



Figure 2: Container Terminals in Kwai Chung

The Contemporary State of Hong Kong

The humanitarian crisis in the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong has been widely covered and has gone viral on social media after the Anti-Extradition protests of 2019. The protests were sparked by the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill by the Hong Kong government. The bill tried to establish a way to transfer fugitives into the Chinese legal system. The protests lasted 291 days, from June 9th to the present with millions of protestors marching. The largest march, on June 16th had an estimated 2 million citizens participate while the police estimated only 338000 participated.



Figure 3: CHRF March on June 16th

The goal of the protests was to sate their 5 Demands.

1. Full withdrawal of the extradition bill from the legislative process
2. Retraction of the characterisation of the 12 June 2019 protests as “riots”
3. Release and exoneration of arrested protesters
4. Establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into police behavior
5. Universal Suffrage for Legislative Council and Chief Executive elections

Since the 5 Demands were created, only the extradition bill has been met. The extradition bill was withdrawn by Chief Executive Carrie Lam on September 4th, 2019 but was described as “too little, too late.” Since then, the United States 116th congress signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act which, “requires that the U.S. government to impose sanctions against China and Hong Kong officials responsible for human rights abuses in Hong Kong...” (Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act.).

The protests have calmed down significantly and are once again mostly safe for tourists though with the exception of the recent Corona Virus outbreak from Wuhan, China. Recently, China declared that it had 0 new cases of COVID-19 yet on March 25th, Hong Kong had 42 new cases.

In conclusion, Hong Kong has had a rich and tumultuous history in the last 150 years and has set an example for other countries that are displeased with the actions of their own governments. Through mass protests and marches, government officials are forced to recognize the demands of the protesters or risk civil unrest and economic recessions.

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