

UNDERGROUND FRONT: THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY IN HONG KONG

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Despite being the ruling party of all China, the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Hong Kong remains a sensitive subject and for the most part it is still a secret organization, as during British colonial days. It remains politically incorrect to raise a topic that both the party and Hong Kong's political establishment prefer to avoid as a matter of habit and convenience. Yet knowing more about party history, policies and activities in Hong Kong should not be controversial. Nowhere else in the world is there a system in which the ruling party remains an underground organisation. Even more extraordinary is the fact that, as China rises in global importance, its ruling party should feel so clearly uncomfortable about showing itself in the nation's most advanced city.

The secrecy surrounding the CCP in Hong Kong is a contradiction. After the nineteenth century's "unequal treaties" that forced the Qing government to cede and lease territories to Great Britain, Hong Kong was seen by all subsequent Chinese governments to be under merely temporary British control. The Kuomintang government of Chiang Kai-shek had expected to recover Hong Kong after World War II but could not. After taking control of China in 1949, the CCP decided to delay resolution of the Hong Kong question because doing so served its goal of continuing to live with the contradiction of claiming sovereignty while tolerating de facto British control. Thus the story of the CCP in Hong Kong is the tale of how the party dealt with that contradiction.

From the time of the party's birth in 1921, Hong Kong served as a useful and fairly secure haven for party members and friends for their revolutionary and political activities, including communications, propaganda, united front activities, fundraising and intelligence gathering. For example, Hong Kong was the headquarters for the party in Guangdong from 1927 to 1936, and focused on supporting the communist movement on the mainland.

Indeed, Hong Kong has always been valuable to the mainland for trade, loans, investments and gifts from compatriots. Hong Kong was China's largest source of foreign exchange for years through receiving earnings from export of food, water and basic goods. When China adopted its Open Door policy in 1978-1979, Hong

Kong business people were the first to invest across the border. Indeed, even today, Hong Kong remains a key trade partner for the mainland, an important transshipment port for goods made in the Pearl River Delta, and a place to raise capital through listing mainland companies on the Hong Kong stock exchange. Moreover, Hong Kong is the testing ground for renminbi business.

Sovereignty with Benefits

The Hong Kong question was complex because it concerned both foreign and domestic policies that required careful consideration on many fronts. In taking back Hong Kong in 1997, the CCP created the concept of “one country, two systems” to allow the city room to be different. This solution was in fact characteristic of Chinese policy since the 1920s. On regaining formal sovereignty, the CCP was willing to allow Hong Kong to retain a "high degree of autonomy" for at least 50 years. In other words, the party sought both sovereignty and the benefits arising from the status quo. However, after taking back sovereignty, the CCP also had to shoulder the responsibilities of administration that doing so entailed.

Hong Kong people have known about the existence of the local CCP for many years. They are desensitized to its involvement in local politics, probably because they know they have no choice. Central to that is the obvious fact that China is a one-party state. Indeed, a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Transition Project in 2007 showed that Hong Kong people do not think badly of the CCP although many did not in fact know much about it.¹

- Overall satisfaction: 44% of the respondents were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the CCP's general performance, but nearly 25% were unable to express a view. Of the other 31%, 24.4% were somewhat dissatisfied, with the balance being highly dissatisfied.
- Understanding of Hong Kong people's views: 47.1% of the respondents believed the CCP understood Hong Kong people's views while 41.2% did not think so. Interestingly, only 11.6 % were unable to offer a view.
- Concern about CCP interference in Hong Kong affairs: 50.9% of the respondents said they were not worried about CCP interference in Hong Kong affairs, while 36.2% ranged from slightly worried to somewhat worried. There were 9.9% who were very worried, and 3.1% who did not

know.

- CCP influence over HKSAR Government: 12.5% felt there was a great deal of interference, 39.1% felt the CCP was “somewhat” interfering, 20.2% thought interference was “not so much” while 7.2% thought there was no interference from the party. 18.3 % were unable to express a view.

These responses show that Hong Kong people know the party influences Hong Kong political affairs substantially but its image is not necessarily negative. Hong Kong people also believe the CCP is not oblivious to how Hong Kong people see things, and many were reasonably satisfied with the party's overall performance for China as a whole, although many were not particularly knowledgeable about mainland affairs.

- CCP membership declaration: On being asked whether CCP membership in Hong Kong should be declared, 36.1% of the respondents supported transparency and 2.8% thought declaration should be made in the future. However, 46.8% felt things should “continue as they are” — that is, for party membership to remain secret. Of the remaining respondents, 1.5% thought the subject was “too sensitive”, while 12.7% did not offer an opinion.

Go Public with Secrecy

The CCP obviously had considered how it should function in Hong Kong after 1997. Xu Jiatusun, the head of the Hong Kong and Macao Work Committee of the CCP (the real name of the party in Hong Kong that operated as the Xinhua News Agency prior to 1997)², from 1983 to 1990, noted that the CCP should exist openly after the transfer of sovereignty because it would be unreasonable for it to remain an underground organization, though he also said “the grassroots organisations of the party should continue to play a secret role”.³ His views were contradictory. If the party were to operate openly, while its low-level bodies did not identify themselves as party organs, in effect only some party members would acknowledge membership while others would continue to hide it.

On the mainland, CCP leadership is pervasive. The party is embedded throughout the Chinese government structure and the management of state-owned enterprises, as well as many other types of mass (grassroots) institutions. This means that Chinese government bodies stationed in Hong Kong represent party policies since the Chinese political system is led by the CCP. The chief executive of Hong Kong

travels to the mainland on special occasions, as well as visits Beijing to give annual work reports, when party values and policies are made clear. It is no secret that the CCP carries out extensive propaganda and united front work, and has a large structure coordinated by the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government stationed in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. It is well-organised, well-funded and politically active, including in elections. The Liaison Office is in effect the Hong Kong and Macao Work Committee of the CCP in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong public assumes the CCP is there to wield considerable day-to-day influence in the affairs of the local administration although few people know the details.

The CCP releases membership figures from time to time so we know there are about 76 million members nationwide. However, because it remains an underground organisation in Hong Kong, there is no authoritative information on the number of party members there. Indeed, there is no publicly available information about how one joins the party in Hong Kong, or the process to follow should one want to resign. In the mid-1980s, there were, according to Xu Jiatun, about 6,000 members, with about half being Hong Kong residents and the rest from the mainland.⁴ Other sources have suggested figures in the region of 15,000 and 28,000 for the period around 1997.⁵ Yet another estimate was that, between 1983 and 1997, some 83,000 Mainland officials with assumed names and false identities entered Hong Kong as part of a covert scheme to groom a political force to promote Beijing's long-term interests. The logic of creating this fifth column was described to have emanated from Beijing's "underlying fears, suspicion and distrust".⁶ Whatever the true number may be, the total is likely to be rather large by now. Perhaps this is why nearly 47% of the respondents to the survey mentioned above preferred not to know: they realised they might find the truth disconcerting.

This is precisely the issue. Continuing to operate secretly in Hong Kong can only cause unnecessary discomfort. Hong Kong people already accept the CCP's undoubted authority in leading the affairs of state. While the party appreciates that Hong Kong needs to function differently from the mainland, its basic instincts, which are Leninist in nature, make it difficult for the party apparatus not to over-extend its reach into the city's public affairs. The sharpest point of departure between the party's way and Hong Kong's way arises from their different governing experience.

Patriotic with Reservations

From the party's point of view, it can claim success for decolonising Hong Kong. After all, "pro-government forces" now dominate the political structure as a result of the party's hard work in co-opting the Hong Kong elites and helping the "patriotic" camp win elections so that a new political order has emerged. Yet it has not been possible for the party's propaganda machinery to substantially reduce public support for universal suffrage, even though the Hong Kong community understands the Beijing position and accepts that bringing about democratic reform will take time. The CCP might even acknowledge in private that Hong Kong has a dysfunctional political system dominated by corporate vested interests that the public considers to be unfair. Because the system was designed to give these conservative forces dominance, the party should not be surprised that the Hong Kong community continues to demand one-person-one-vote.

The CCP had promoted universal suffrage in its early days. However, its view today is that democracy could spell the end of one-party rule and also throw China into chaos, as politicians would try to exploit social and ethnic divisions to mobilise votes. Matters are further complicated by the mainland's historical experience. On the rare occasions when the CCP has allowed public discussion of its performance, it found the people's negative reaction too uncomfortable to bear, such as during the Hundred Flowers Campaign of the 1950s.

There is a mainland view that the preferred model for the future is to retain the status quo by what may be described as a "legalist" approach, rather than by adopting democracy. This supposedly means that the rule of law, sustained by a strong central government, would lead to creation of a neutral, transparent and meritocratic administration. Supporters of this view argue that—once the CCP has been able to put in place an independent judiciary, an anti-corruption agency, an able and meritocratic civil service, improved media freedom, a system of public audits and an extensive consultative system based on the current mainland systems at central and provincial levels—the party then could curb its own authority, something it has never done. Hong Kong and Singapore are seen by some to be successful systems using the legalist approach to achieve good governance.⁷

Communists and Capitalists Collude

The problem is that in Hong Kong the post-1997 political system has not delivered the desired outcome. Continuing debate on the direction and pace of constitutional development raises questions about the efficacy of the current political system, which has an electoral process that allows entrenched special interests to choose the government's chief executive and half of the legislature. This binding of

political and business interests is seen by the public as skewing life ever more in favour of the rich. The rich vs. poor divide has widened, not narrowed, since 1997.

Amidst the debate within Hong Kong about constitutional development and social equity, questions about the CCP's operating transparency do not surface often. But sounds of the party's substantial political machinery at work are perceptible from time to time, even though the apparatus remains hidden and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

This habit of silence is not about to be broken. The party is likely concerned about questions that would be raised if it came out into the open, as the membership list and party apparatus would be revealed. That could lead to questions about the extensiveness of party activities in Hong Kong, possibly exacerbating fears about whether members have been surreptitiously collecting information about their colleagues and contacts, who had no idea people in their midst were party members. As the 2007 survey showed, Hong Kong people are also not ready to know. Social harmony may well be best preserved by continuing to ignore the issue for now.

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¹ The author is grateful to Dr. Michael DeGolyer for including questions about how the Hong Kong public sees the CCP in a Hong Kong Transition Project survey in 2007. The survey details are in Appendix I of *Underground Front*

² The Xinhua News Agency retained its name in 1997. In January 2000, the name was changed to the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

³ Xu Jiatun, *Xianggang Huiyi Lu* (Xu Jiatun's Memoirs of Hong Kong) 2 Volumes, (Taipei: United Daily News Publishers, 1993), p. 470.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 69.

⁵ In a footnote to "Beijing's Fifth Column and the Transfer of Power in Hong Kong: 1993–1997", in Robert Ash, *Hong Kong In Transition*, p. 129, Yin Qian noted that Jonathan Mirsky, the former East Asia Editor of *The Times* (London) told him that the information leaked by a friend in the pre-Handover Special Branch indicated that there were 23,000-28,000 party members in Hong Kong. There Yin Qian also quoted a smaller estimate from Willy Wo-Lap Lam of about 15,000.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 113–4.

⁷ Wei Pan, "Crossing the River: Legalism, Reform, and Political Change", *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 42-47.