Hong Kong, the Virus and Illiberalism: Between Flattening the Curve and an Authoritarian Slide?

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Abstract
Can the pandemic measures be used to advance particular political means? The question of correlation between illiberal legal changes adopted amongst the wave of legislation focused on battling COVID has arisen in a number of countries around the world; as an increasing number of states finds leaving restrictions behind in 2022, however, Hong Kong is still battling the Omicron wave of the pandemic. Ever since its transition to China in 1997, Hong Kong has retained its place on the world stage as an international business hub and, while getting closer to the Mainland, enjoyed the freedoms provided by its SAR status. At the same time, by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century the tensions between the pro-democratic inclinations of the large part of the city’s population and pro-Mainland disposition of the SAR’s political elite began to rise, with proposals of various legal acts put forward by the local government often perceived as encroaching freedoms. The street-level “standoff” between the authorities and the people was brought to a halt by the COVID-19 pandemic; and, with protesting rendered virtually impossible, a number of controversial legal changes were introduced by the government taking advantage of the situation, which, together with the anti-pandemic measures have continued to negatively impact the city’s financial hub status. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the correlation between Hong Kong’s fight with the pandemic and the local government’s taking advantage of the situation in order to implement illiberal legislation, and its aftermath.

Keywords Hong Kong · Illiberalism · COVID-19 · Pandemic · Security law

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1 Introduction

Hong Kong, a global financial hub, has been uniquely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the health crisis, the semi-autonomous Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has undergone a particular legal and political transformation in the past two years. Measures introduced to counteract the pandemic, which prohibited large gatherings such as protests, while allowing to successfully fight with the virus for a long time, facilitated the introduction of unpopular legislation, further sliding the city into illiberalism.

Illiberalism—an obscure word known to few political scientists at the turn of the century has had an amazing career in the past decade, used to describe political and legal systems in Central Europe, the US and South-East Asia. The term illiberal democracy has been conceptualised to describe a democratic system, however a majoritarian one, with the rule of law kept, but at the same time constructed in opposition to liberal democracy and values, with extensive human rights limited in various ways [79, pp. 173–176]. Following the many changes to its legal system since the 1997 transition to China, Hong Kong could have already been regarded as an illiberal democracy by 2020. Thus, the two main questions of this paper are whether there is a correlation between the introduction of anti-pandemic measures and the further rise of illiberalism in Hong Kong, and if Hong Kong may still be considered an illiberal democracy following the major shift which took place in its legal system during the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, as I note in greater detail below, the situation in the SAR has been tense, as the pro-democratic ambitions of many Hong Kongers clashed with the vision of a closer integration with the Mainland imposed by the political elite. The second decade of the twenty-first century saw a major confrontation between the two outlooks on Hong Kong’s future, stemming, as I note elsewhere [78], from the inherent particularities of the city’s legal system. By 2019, the situation in the SAR got particularly tense, with Hong Kong, famous for its economic liberalism, slowly sliding into political illiberalism, in what has been described a ‘salami slicing technique’ [33], the step by step co-opting of various figures to the pro-government side over the years [61], as the vibrant pro-democratic movement has been left with only one option—to protest—but powerless to do anything else. The pandemic took their ability to do even that.

This paper is structured as follows: in the first part I provide the political background of the past three years in Hong Kong, beginning with 2019, then I present an overview of the city’s fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and, ultimately I turn to the legal analysis of the contentious 2020 security law, concluding with the answer to the eponymous question. Before moving on, however, I would like to briefly introduce the SAR’s legal system. Hong Kong is a semi-autonomous SAR, one of two, alongside Macau, particular entities of the PRC. Based on the ‘one country, two systems’ rule, Hong Kong’s individuality lies in the Chinese constitution (virtually suspended in the city on the basis of its Article 31) and its very own mini-constitution, i.e. the Basic Law, which regulates the SAR’s
functioning for fifty years since its transition to China in 1997, stipulating Hong Kong’s economic, social, cultural, language, legal, judicial and, to a certain level, political independence [77]. Over the years, however, the PRC has built up a number of different ways to extend its influence over the city, which, as I initially mentioned above, has led to particularly fierce clashes at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, culminating with the implementation of the national security law in 2020.

2 Part One: Hong Kong’s Tumultuous Political Present

In the first ten years since the beginning of the twenty-first century Hong Kong saw almost 100,000 acts of protest [45, p. 488]. Various strategies have been developed in order to channel the opposition against the pro-Beijing local government, most notably that of the peaceful, ritual protest (‘xingli ruyi’), which dominates the different forms of engagement to this day, and of ‘the valiant’ (‘yongwu pai’), which advocate for more direct ways of challenging the SAR authorities [63, pp. 1–2], in particular following the failed 2014 Umbrella Movement [63, pp. 6–7]. While unsuccessful, these protests have had a particularly negative effect on the approval of the Hong Kong’s government (as demonstrated in a study of university students, who were affected whether they have participated in the acts of civil disobedience or not) [20, p. 25], and also allowed for the stabilisation and transmission of the pro-democratic movement’s collective memory [63, p. 7].

Given that the past three years have seen an unprecedented pace of introducing various proposals—and later on actual changes—with the aim of reconfiguration of the legal and political system of Hong Kong, major protests immediately followed (for as long as it was possible). First, the spring and summer of 2019 in the city passed amongst the widespread opposition towards the extradition bill, a piece of legislation which would allow Hong Kong to extradite its citizens to mainland China in certain instances [47]. Despite the initial claims it was developed by the SAR’s authorities, it was actually devised by Beijing [48]. Among the different typical forms of protest, Hong Kongers also formed human chains in key city locations, and sang “Glory to Hong Kong” in public spaces [63, pp. 8–9].

With the situation extremely tense, the protests have not stopped even when the bill was pronounced dead by the local government (or, more precisely in Chinese, “‘shou zhong zheng qin,’ meaning that it had ‘died a natural death in its bed’,” which, as many Hong Kongers said, was untrue since it was actually killed by the protests) [23]. In autumn, this standoff, instead of deescalating, turned extremely violent, with a number of clashes with the police ultimately resulting in a protester being shot [60].

Hoping to curb the protests, the SAR’s government used an emergency law from colonial times, prohibiting the protesters from wearing face masks, albeit without much success [62]. By the end of 2019, things have seemed to be turning the pro-democratic camp’s way, as it won big in the local elections [29], such actions on the part of the authorities as banning Joshua Wong, one of the opposition activists, from running, notwithstanding [57].
However, the introduction of measures to counteract the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, which suppressed the possibility of protesting on the streets [87], resulted in the citizens taking different, less direct forms of action, such as posting on social media, creating “Lennon Walls” with pro-democratic notes in various locations throughout the city, setting up small gatherings, flash mobs and sit-ins in public spaces, and even simply eating in restaurants sympathetic to the cause [43]. These actions, while of major impact on the citizens’ collective memory [43, p. 19], had nowhere near the force of the physical protests, which led to a set of changes to the functioning of the SAR being introduced without fear of major civil disobedience.

The changes ranged from reducing judicial independence by barring foreign judges to decide on key issues [84], to the passing of an extremely severe security law (analysed in greater detail below), inter alia targeting the possibility of protesting and allowing PRC “national security organs to set up agencies in the city” [31]. The law poignantly entered into force just before July 1, the 23rd anniversary of transition to China [66] and the first arrest (for holding an ‘independent Hong Kong’ banner) followed in less than 24 h [53], with the law soon having a “chilling effect” on the city’s pro-democratic movement [46, p. 6]. In the next several months over a hundred pro-democratic activists were jailed on its basis [27], including former Legislative Council (LegCo, Hong Kong’s local parliament) members [94], with 47 oppositions tried before court for taking part in 2020 primaries aiming at maximising the pro-democrat camp’s chance in the later suspended elections [71]. The introduction of the new law has also been followed by other worrying developments, such as the prohibition of holding hands by schoolchildren when it may constitute a human chain (considered a form of protest) [39]. In addition to the 2020 security law, also other legislation, dating back to the 1970s, has been used as the basis of arrest of various activists for alleged sedition [35], and soon a ban on insulting the PRC’s national anthem was introduced [30, p. 2].

Moreover, by the end of 2020, four LegCo members were disqualified from their sits after a new resolution by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPCSC) stipulating that no Hong Kong lawmaker may support the pro-independence movement [36]. By September 2021 there remained only one LegCo member in opposition of the SAR’s pro-Beijing government [38]. Earlier that year, Xia Baolong, a high-level Chinese politician, provided an outline of plans to make sure that only ‘patriots’ (i.e. those who ‘love’ the PRC) are in charge of Hong Kong [4, 11]. Thus, in March 2021, a draft decision to change Hong Kong’s electoral system was approved by the National People’s Congress (NPC) [85], outlining the proposed changes in nine articles, among which the most important ones were the inclusion of ‘patriots’ in the SAR’s administration; the increase of the number of the members of Election Committee tasked with picking the Chief Executive to 1,500 from 1,200; and the increase in the number of LegCo’s members to 90 from 70, without clearly stating how they are going to be elected [37]. Put into practice, those modifications have ultimately resulted in the diminishing of the number of electors to the election committee from 246,440 to 7891. Among those elected to the electoral body, 59 run unopposed as ‘grassroots’ candidates, with the organisations in question linked to a pro-Beijing association [24]. Following the changes, only twenty LegCo seats are going to be filled by universal suffrage [13].
As the US and the EU criticised the electoral changes regarding them as a “direct attack” on the ‘one country, two systems’ rule, in another worrying development later that year, dual nationality holders who are Hong Kong citizens were forbidden from asking for consular help from their other homeland [1]. Also in 2021, the Tiananmen Square museum was closed down by the authorities ahead of the massacre’s anniversary [59], just as its commemorations were banned in Hong Kong on the basis of coronavirus restrictions (in neighbouring Macau, the only other place in China where June 4 commemorations used to be allowed, they were banned as violating criminal laws), and a pro-democracy activist who tried to publicise a memorial event was arrested for “promoting unauthorised assembly” [8]. While people still attempted to gather at the gates of the closed off Victoria Park, a usual place for the Tiananmen remembrance, they were soon dispersed by the police [7], who painstakingly put out commemorative candles [34]. Moreover, by the end of 2021, a monument commemorating the massacre was removed from the University of Hong Kong’s grounds [52].

In a move which may be seen as an attempt to limit free press, the pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily closed down, following its owner Jimmy Lai’s incarceration and asset freeze, as well as a raid on the newspaper’s offices by five hundred policemen in June 2021, later resulting in five executives being arrested [70], conducted on the basis of the national security law, in some cases used retroactively [50]—which provoked criticism from the US, the EU and the UK [19]. Poignantly, Apple Daily’s first op-ed on June 20, 1995 included the words “We belong to Hong Kong […] We are a newspaper for Hongkongers… If Hong Kong falls, we are not going to survive” [50].

Negative changes have also further impacted the education sector, with a growing number of students and teachers leaving Hong Kong, increasingly worried about the new curriculum [40], established in hopes of creating the aforementioned ‘patriots’, which was introduced at the end of February 2021. It proposes the children should “develop ‘a sense of belonging to the country, an affection for the Chinese people, a sense of national identity, as well as an awareness of and a sense of responsibility for safeguarding national security’” [92]. The art scene was also affected, with the recently opened M+ contemporary art museum removing certain cultural objects from its online display [22], as well as the legal field, with Baroness Brenda Hale, a British judge sitting as a non-permanent member of Hong Kong’s Court of Final Appeal, announcing her retirement upon the end of her term due to issues surrounding the 2020 security law [3]. It needs to be stressed, however, that in spite of these developments, the UK Supreme Court continues to regard the city’s judiciary as independent, confirming that British judges will continue to serve at Hong Kong’s Court of Final Appeal [56], a tribunal which in November 2021 limited the possibility of charging protesters [93].

Importantly, the current situation, with heightened police presence becoming a permanent element of the city’s life [72], has resulted in a veritable exodus of Hong Kong citizens to other countries, with 90,000 people leaving in 2020 [2] and around 30% of pro-democracy supporters and 18% of non-pro-democracy supporters contemplating leaving Hong Kong permanently, with the number growing to around 40% in both groups “if the situation worsens to an unacceptable level” [75]. One of
the main destination’s is the UK [51], which is offering the BNO—British National (Overseas)—passport holders (around 70% of Hong Kong’s population) an easier way of obtaining British citizenship [9], with 34,000 visa applications by June 2021 alone [68]. Another one is Canada, with 300,000 Hong Kongers holding Canadian passports [67]. At the same time, the British government warned those who had already left Hong Kong and have been subject to prosecution on the basis of the security law not to travel to countries from which extradition to PRC is possible [54], with the situation in the SAR remaining tense also in 2022, as exemplified by the abrupt emigration of the former head of the Hong Kong Bar Association, who stepped down from the role a month earlier and was a vocal critic of the security law, following his questioning by the police [73]. Together with the negative impact of the pandemic [15], these developments put Hong Kong’s future as a global financial hub into question.

3 Part Two: Hong Kong’s (In)Effective Counter-Pandemic Measures

The 2020 security law was introduced as Hong Kong—and the rest of the world—was still at the beginning of the fight to limit the spread of COVID-19. Notably, the SAR’s response towards the pandemic has been extremely swift as the city saw one of the first cases of the virus outside of Mainland China [96, p. 2]. Fuelled by the memories of the 2003 SARS epidemic still vivid in the minds of many Hong Kongers (over 20% of world cases were recorded in Hong Kong back in the day) [100, p. 1], the communal response has been particularly remarkable.

The city was quick to suspend in person classes and non-essential public services in late January of 2020, which was soon followed by a ban on public gatherings over four people, closure of non-essential businesses, restrictions on dining capacity in restaurants, mandatory quarantine of arrivals to the city [49, p. 105] and self-distancing measures [44, p. 5]. At the same time, international and Mainland travel was severely limited [96, p. 4], and the ban on wearing facemasks—introduced, as I noted above, during the 2019 protests—lifted [44, p. 5].

The implemented measures came with a certain toll on the part of the population, not only in the economic sense, but also negatively impacting the already frail following months of protests [95, p. 2] psychological state of many Hong Kongers, large numbers of which occupy the potentially most dangerous for the spread of the virus “multi-storey buildings in which a lift lobby and several elevators are shared by hundreds of households” [49, p. 108], with the city thought to be “on the edge of a nervous breakdown” [14]. Pupils and students have been particularly impacted, as the first restrictions came during a time which was expected to be a return to normal classes following the 2019 protests [44, pp. 3–4].

This permanent state of exception, however, in a way prepared [44, p. 13] the SAR’s citizens to what was to come in the pandemic, with the city’s resilient civil society playing a major role in its early stages, on the one hand remaining sceptical towards the official discourse on COVID-19 [90, p. 1] and taking early individual decisions to stay and work at home, limit gatherings [49, p. 107], wear masks [82, p. 1], reduce the use of public transportation [100, pp. 5–6],
and self-organise, distributing PPEs (personal protective equipment), as well as promoting various ways of helping those in need on social media [49, p. 111]. Importantly, it needs to be noticed that the bottom-up district mask distribution programme, targeting those in particular need, was much more widespread in pro-democracy than pro-government areas; it also took a strike of medical professionals to limit the number of arrivals from China by rail [90, p. 5]. These issues, together with the aforementioned positive social responses, ultimately raised the Hong Kong society’s trust “in the power of the citizens” and increased awareness of the local government’s policies [49, p. 111], while at the same time raising distrust in the authorities, criticised for not taking proactive action against the pandemic [90, p. 2].

The exemplary civic response at the beginning of the pandemic (statistically, Hong Kong reported a much lower number of cases and deaths than the world average) [44, p. 5], did not suffice, however, to limit the spread of COVID-19 over a longer period of time, as the local government repeated “the cycle of tightening and loosening restrictions several times” [44, p. 5], and a “large-scale outbreak” of the virus in the city always remained possible [97, p. 14].

This came true two years later, as the Omicron variant took hold of the SAR. With a large number of Hong Kongers, confident in their ways of behaviour which allowed to limit the spread of the virus in 2020, remaining sceptical towards the vaccines [91, p. 12]—particularly those most vulnerable [12]—and due to limited choice of vaccines, by January 2022 only 16.5% of the local population were thought to have adequate level of protection against the new variant [25]. Among fears of animal to human transmission of the virus, a cull of two thousand hamsters was ordered at the beginning of 2022 [86]. This has become the symbol of the SAR’s civil society’s fight for better measures in battling the virus and the protection of civil liberties in the city [81]. As the local government was left scrambling to put together a response [18], Hong Kong’s hospitals have become overwhelmed [64]. Some of the measures proposed included the testing of the whole population of the SAR [10], the separation of parents and their infected children [83], changes to the school year organisation [21], the postponing of the Chief Executive elections to April 3, 2022 [98], giving away wristbands supposed to monitor those in isolation [89], and, ultimately, using emergency powers to allow medical professionals from the Mainland to come and help tackle the Omicron variant outbreak [5].

The strict measures, along with the aftermath of the implementation of the security law, have risen fears about Hong Kong’s future, with further worries that the ongoing crisis may lead to the city’s losing its position on the global stage [88] in the long term, and in the short term resulting in panic buying of medicine [101] and food [74], as large numbers of the SAR’s citizens tried to leave for the Mainland [41], as well as abroad [32]. The current situation, particularly following the stepping in of the Mainland professionals, was thought to increasingly blur “the lines between the ‘one country, two systems rule’,” bringing Hong Kong closer to Beijing, with the managing of the city’s response to the outbreak a ‘test case’ for PRC’s ability to exercise meaningful and positive influence over the SAR [58]—a test, it seems, the Mainland has failed.
4 Part Three: National Security Law Between the Protests and Pandemic

This contentious question of the Mainland’s growing influence over Hong Kong brings this paper back once again to the issue of the 2020 security law. With its political and social ramifications introduced above, in this last part of the paper I propose to focus on the legal aspects and broader judicial context of this act.

Promulgated as The Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the 2020 security law entered into force on June 30 [76, p. 1], as the Annex III of the Basic Law [76, p. 2]. Among its six chapters [55, p. 35], the main purposes of the security law are the prevention, suppression and punishment of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign powers, the maintaining of prosperity and stability in the city, as well as the protection of Hong Kongers’ rights and interests [76, pp. 1–2]. Punishment for the newly defined crimes ranges from three [30, p. 2] and ten years to life imprisonment [55, p. 35]. Importantly, the newly categorised crimes fall under Hong Kong’s jurisdiction also if they were committed outside of the SAR by people who are not its residents [76, p. 2].

In addition to the establishment of various national security crimes, the law also implements “the Mainland conception of ‘full control governance’,” weakening the judiciary [17, pp. 7–9] through the creation of several new institutions in order to achieve its goals: the Committee for Safeguarding National Security whose decisions are not susceptible to judicial review, and which is supervised by the PRC government [99, p. 2], with Beijing also appointing a National Security Advisor as its sitting member; departments for safeguarding national security within the Hong Kong Department of Justice and the police force; and the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People’s Government. Should a case be particularly complex, pose a particular threat to national security, or the Hong Kong government be unable to put the security law into practice in an effective manner, it is the latter, Mainland institution which will exercise jurisdiction, as the national security law allows for criminal proceedings to take place in the PRC territory [76, p. 2].

As such, the imposing of the security law on the already established Hong Kong’s legal framework means that four “layers of jurisdiction” may be distinguished in the SAR today: PRC’s exclusive jurisdiction “over sensitive matters;” PRC’s and Hong Kong’s joint jurisdiction over those SAR citizens who violated the security law while in the mainland; PRC’s and Hong Kong’s co-jurisdiction over the questions of education, freedom of speech and judicial appointments; and Hong Kong’s jurisdiction over domestic criminal legal issues [55, p. 41]. It needs to be stressed that among these four, the assertion of jurisdiction over those who are not Hong Kongers and commit an act forbidden under the security law outside of the SAR was noted to exceed both “the provisions of China’s Criminal Law and standard international practice” [76, p. 3].

Since its implementation, the legality, as well as the wide-ranging consequences of the various provisions of the security law have been debated, given
that it establishes a certain clash between legal frameworks: “as a national law” it “prevails over local Hong Kong laws” [99, p. 2], allowing Mainland jurisdiction in certain, abovementioned cases, while at the same time the Basic Law gives almost sole jurisdiction to the SAR’s courts [16, p. 9]. In a way, these issues stem from a major shift which took place over the course of last forty years in the PRC, namely that the ‘one country, two systems’ rule came to be understood in the Mainland as applying only to economic matters [76, p. 5]. This, in turn, has led to a certain difference in perception: as the Basic Law is seen as Hong Kong’s mini-constitution in the SAR, Beijing argues it is only “an ordinary law” of the PRC [76, p. 3], stressing the “sovereignty and supremacy” of the Chinese constitution [102, p. 2], which, with the implementation of the security law, becomes a “separate legal source of law” in the SAR [102, p. 17]. While potentially “legal under the PRC constitution,” the introduction of the national security law nonetheless “undermines the confidence of Hong Kong people” and of the international community into the upholding of the rule of law in the city [69, p. 18].

The introduction of these changes into Hong Kong’s legal system has also been regarded as a culmination of the city’s “re-autocratisation by a thousand cuts” [26, p. 208], with the lack of any social consultation with Hong Kongers on the Beijing’s part [16, p. 4] particularly disconcerting. This “silent constitutional reform” [102, p. 1] of the city’s legal system may be seen as the tipping point illiberal democracy and another regime, bringing the SAR and Mainland closer [30, p. 1], permanently shifting the Grundnorm at the basis of Hong Kong’s legal system [102, p. 1], and closing the door to the city being a meeting place between the East and the West [30, p. 6].

Providing reasoning for such a rupture, Beijing used the 2019 Hong Kong protests against the city, arguing that some activists’ calls for the SAR’s independence, as well as for sanctions, constituted a danger to national security [99, p. 1]. With the pro-democratic sentiment running high in the city following the protests, the PRC is said to have also been worried about a potential anti-government majority in LegCo [42, p. 29]. The pre-pandemic situation thus led Beijing to argue that there has been a failure on the Hong Kong’s part to introduce clearly needed legislation protecting national security (even though the Basic Law does not explicitly distinguish such a provision as necessary) [17, p. 4]. This permanent “question mark” hanging over Hong Kong’s criminal law [28, p. 228], however, was enough to provide the PRC with the basis for the introduction of the national security law in a way circumnavigating the SAR’s legal system [17, p. 7] and disrupting the separation of powers [17, p. 9], a step further in the direction of not further illiberalism, but perhaps even authoritarianism.

5 Conclusion: What Future?

One could argue that, in general, the legal changes introduced among political, social and health upheaval can rarely be regarded as beneficial for the society in question in the long term. Looking at Hong Kong’s twenty-five years history in the PRC, it is quite possible to imagine that if it was not for the measures introduced to counteract the COVID-19 pandemic, major protests would have prevented such a
wide-ranging national security law from being introduced in Hong Kong—as it has been already noticed, the pandemic “was the perfect diversion to strengthen” the Mainland’s influence over Hong Kong [30, p. 4].

With the changes already in place, the shift which has been happening in Hong Kong over the course of the past three years begs a question: is Hong Kong still an example of an illiberal democracy or something else? The developments analysed in this paper clearly do not fit illiberalism’s definition, with the national security law’s undermining of the separation of powers going far beyond the majoritarian changes of illiberal systems of present day Central Europe [80].

While both in Central Europe and in Hong Kong the legal and political changes are characterised by a centralisation of the decision-making process, I would argue that in the case of Hong Kong today, following the introduction of the national security law and such moves as the invitation of medical professionals from the Mainland to combat the Omicron wave of the pandemic on the one hand, and with further restrictions to universal suffrage on the other, this centre seems now to be firmly located in Beijing, outside of the legal framework of the Basic Law, meaning that the SAR has drifted away from illiberal democracy towards authoritarian illiberalism, seemingly following Viktor Orbán’s infamous ‘illiberal speech’, predicting that future successful societies are not going to be “Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies, and perhaps not even democracies” [65]. The big remaining open question, however, is the level of this of success; Hong Kong government’s recent failure to prepare for new variants of COVID-19 leaves me doubtful in this regard.

Another point which needs to be addressed is the question of the illiberal changes being the result of an evolution, revolution, or an end of the process in Hong Kong. I would be leaning towards the latter. The ‘one country, two systems’ rule may have seemed to be a perfect solution to an imperfect situation in the 1980s, when the UK and the PRC were establishing the city’s legal framework, but with hindsight, it seems that as China rose to become a global power while at the same time retaining socialism with Chinese characteristics as its legal and political system, Hong Kong’s fate was sealed.

What is going to happen in the future? I have lost the optimism I had in the previous years with regards to Hong Kong. Using the pandemic moratorium on the protests, Beijing did what Anderlini projected in 2019, a qiū hòu suàn zhāng, the taking of revenge when the time is ripe [6]. While most likely its economic independence will be maintained—at least for as long as it is worth to the PRC—it seems politically the SAR will be coming increasingly close to the Mainland in the following years, while large parts of its population will choose to emigrate.

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