



HONG KONG STUDIES READER SERIES



Hong Kong Politics

A Comparative Introduction

Brian C. H. Fong

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Hong Kong Studies Reader Series

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In recent years, Hong Kong society has undergone significant political, economic and social changes. Hong Kong Studies, as an interdisciplinary field of area studies that takes “Hong Kong” as a central subject of analysis, has become the focus of attention for both locals and non-locals from different backgrounds. There is a growing demand from local and non-local students, school teachers, scholars, policy researchers, journalists, politicians and businessmen to understand the development of Hong Kong in a more systematic way. The *Hong Kong Studies Reader Series* is designed to address this pressing need by publishing clear, concise and accessible readers to key areas of Hong Kong Studies including politics, history, culture, media, etc. The series aims to offer English-Chinese-Japanese trilingual guides to anyone who is interested in understanding and researching Hong Kong.

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The Academy of Hong Kong Studies (AHKS), established in July 2015, is the first, and so far only, academy dedicated to fostering Hong Kong Studies within local tertiary institutions. Adopting the strategic direction of “Worlding Hong Kong Studies”, the AHKS drives interdisciplinary knowledge creation and transfer initiatives on Hong Kong-centric subjects and fosters the development of a “cross-regional Hong Kong Studies research community”.

DISCLAIMER

This book seeks to offer scholarly, objective analyses of actors, events, forces, and trends relating to Hong Kong's politics. It does not express the author's personal, prescriptive view on the constitutional development of Hong Kong. It also does not reflect the official position of National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Hong Kong Politics: A Comparative Introduction is a comprehensive and pioneering guide of this emerging field. It aims to advance scholarly understanding of Hong Kong's political developments since the handover of sovereignty in 1997, using a comparative politics approach.

The book advances a unique integrated comparative framework for studying Hong Kong through geopolitical, autonomy, center-periphery, democratization, political-economic, and governance perspectives. It guides readers to understand and interpret the various political dimensions of Hong Kong in a comprehensive and holistic way.

This book will be of key interest to scholars and students of comparative politics. Experienced political researchers in Hong Kong will find this book illuminating while comparative political scholars worldwide would also find it a handy introductory text to the important case of Hong Kong. This book is also an excellent resource for instructors and students of Asian Studies, China Studies, and Hong Kong Studies.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Toward an Integrated Comparative Framework	1
2	Comparative Geopolitical Perspective: Hong Kong as a Geopolitical Domain	15
3	Comparative Autonomy Perspective: Hong Kong as a Territorial Autonomy	57
4	Comparative Center-Periphery Perspective: Hong Kong as a Periphery	85
5	Comparative Democratization Perspective: Hong Kong as a Hybrid Regime	121
6	Comparative Political-Economic Perspective: Hong Kong as a Capitalist State	159
7	Comparative Governance Perspective: Hong Kong as an Executive-Dominant Polity	191

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	An integrated comparative framework for Hong Kong politics. (Source: Author's compilation)	4
Fig. 2.1	Number of Regional Headquarters and Offices in Hong Kong by Location of the Parent Company (1993–2020). (Source: Author's compilation based on the official figures from the Census and Statistical Department of the Hong Kong Government (n.d.-a, n.d.-b))	29
Fig. 2.2	US Trade in Goods with Hong Kong (1985–2019). (Source: Author's compilation based on the official figures of the United States Census Bureau (n.d.))	30
Fig. 2.3	Providers of China's Inward Direct Investment (2004–2018). (Source: Author's compilation based on the official figures of the Ministry of Commerce of the Chinese Government (n.d.-a))	31
Fig. 2.4	Source of Offshore IPO Funds Raised by Mainland Enterprises (2008–2018). (Source: Author's compilation based on the figures from Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing (2019))	31
Fig. 2.5	Gross Issuance of Offshore USD-Denominated Bonds by Non-Financial Mainland Enterprises (2010–2018). (Source: Author's compilation based on the figures from Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing (2019))	32
Fig. 2.6	Mainland-Related Lending by Hong Kong Banks (2013–2019). (Source: Author's compilation based on the figures from Hong Kong Monetary Authority (2020))	32
Fig. 2.7	Global Renminbi Payment (2013–2019). (Source: Author's compilation based on the figures from SWIFT (n.d.))	33
Fig. 2.8	Recipients of China's Outward Direct Investment (2005–2018). (Source: Author's compilation based on the	

	official figures of the Ministry of Commerce of the Chinese Government (n.d.-b))	33
Fig. 2.9	Timeline of US-China Geopolitical Showdown in Hong Kong. (Source: Author's own compilation based on the newspaper archives of WiseNews search engine)	41
Fig. 3.1	News Events on Divergence From Hong Kong's Autonomy, Democratization, and Human Rights Provisions (By Major Dimensions of Autonomy)	71
Fig. 3.2	News Events on Divergence from Hong Kong's Autonomy, Democratization, and Human Rights Provisions (by Level of Decision-Making)	73
Fig. 4.1	Number of Reports Published by Leftist Newspapers on the "Powers of the Central Authorities" (zhongyang quanli). (Source: Based on information from the WiseNews electronic platform. The research counted the number of newspaper reports that mentioned the Chinese keywords "powers of the Central Authorities" (zhongyang quanli) from 1998 to 2014. The local leftist newspapers covered in this research are Hong Kong Commercial Daily, Ta Kung Pao, and Wen Wei Po)	92
Fig. 4.2	Number of Public Activities of Central Government Liaison Office Officials, 2000–2014. (Source: Data based on a content analysis of newspaper reports of the three local leftist newspapers, <i>Hong Kong Commercial Daily</i> , <i>Ta Kung Pao</i> , and <i>Wen Wei Po</i> . The essence of the content analysis was to search all the newspaper reports for the keyword "Central Liaison Office" (<i>zhonglianban</i>) through the WiseNews electronic platform and to code public activities that fit the scope of the research. Note: "Public activities" refers to public events such as social functions, ceremonies, and community visits which CGLO officials hosted and attended as reported by the three local leftist newspapers.)	95
Fig. 4.3	Equity Funds Raised on Hong Kong's Stock Market (Main Board). (Source: Annual factbooks published by Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing Limited (http://www.hkex.com.hk/eng/stat/statrpt/factbook))	100
Fig. 4.4	Hong Kong's Trade with Mainland China vis-à-vis Other Countries/Territories, 1972–2016. (Source: Adapted from the statistical tables of the Census and Statistics Department (http://www.censtatd.gov.hk))	101
Fig. 4.5	Number of Visitor Arrivals to Hong Kong by Country/Territory of Residence, 1992–2014. (Source: Annual factbooks	

- published by Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing Limited (<http://www.hkex.com.hk/eng/stat/statrpt/factbook>) 101
- Fig. 4.6 Sense of Identity in Hong Kong, 1997–2016. (Source: Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong (<https://www.hkpop.hku.hk/chinese/popexpress/ethnic/index.html>). Note: The figure excludes respondents who answered “Others,” “Don’t know,” “Hard to say,” or “Refuse to answer”) 106
- Fig. 4.7 Development of a Public Discourse of “Defending Hong Kong,” 2000–2016. (Source: Data from the WiseNews electronic platform, covering 12 Hong Kong Chinese printed newspapers (Apple Daily, Hong Kong Commercial Daily, Hong Kong Daily News, Hong Kong Economic Journal, Hong Kong Economic Times, Mingpao Daily News, Oriental Daily News, Sing Pao, Sing Tao Daily, Ta Kung Pao, The Sun, and Wen Wei Po). In conducting the content analysis, a set of Chinese synonyms has been used to represent and locate the keywords “Defending Hong Kong,” including “shouhu xianggang,” “shouwei xianggang,” “baohu xianggang,” “baowei xianggang,” “hanwei xianggang,” and “shouzhu xianggang”) 107
- Fig. 5.1 Annual income of two flagship political parties in Hong Kong. (Source: Author’s own research based on the annual financial statements of DAB and DP (available at Companies Registry’s Cyber Search Centre: <http://www.icris.cr.gov.hk>). Note: All the figures are denoted in Hong Kong dollars. Because there is no party law in Hong Kong, political parties are usually registered as “companies” under the Company Ordinance. DAB was established in 1992 while the DP was established in 1994) 129
- Fig. 5.2 Annual expenditure of two flagship political parties in Hong Kong. (Source: Author’s own research based on the annual financial statements of DAB and DP (available at Companies Registry’s Cyber Search Centre: <http://www.icris.cr.gov.hk>). Note: All the figures are denoted in Hong Kong dollars. Because there is no party law in Hong Kong, political parties are usually registered as “companies” under the Company Ordinance. DAB was established in 1992 while the DP was established in 1994) 129
- Fig. 5.3 Seats share of pro-democracy camp and pro-government camp in 18 district councils. (Source: 2003, 2007 and 2011 figures are adapted from Apple Daily (2013, June 22). 10 Years of “ser zai beng zhong” have undermined the support base of democrats, (in Chinese). A08; 2015 figures are adapted from

Apple Daily's, 2015 District Council election website: <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/dc2015/trend/-5167351625691534>. Note 1: "Pro-democracy political groups" refer to Democratic Party, Civic Party [previously Article 45 Concern Group], League of Social Democrats, People's Power, Association for Democracy & People's Livelihood, Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, Neighbourhood & Workers Service Centre and Frontier. Note 2: "Pro-establishment political groups" refer to Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, Liberal Party, Business and Professional Alliance [previously Economic Synergy], Professional Forum [previously The Alliance / Breakfast Group], Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions, New Century Forum, New People's Party [previously Savantas Policy Institute] or Hong Kong Progressive Alliance [disbanded]))

137

Fig. 5.4 Seats share of pro-democracy camp and pro-government camp in geographical constituency elections of legislative council. (Source: Author's own research based on the election statistics available in the website of Electoral Affairs Commission (Link: <http://www.eac.gov.hk>). Note 1: "Pro-democracy political groups" refer to Democratic Party, Civic Party [previously Article 45 Concern Group], League of Social Democrats, People's Power, Association for Democracy & People's Livelihood, Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, Neighbourhood & Workers Service Centre and Frontier. Note 2: "Pro-establishment political groups" refer to Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, Liberal Party, Business and Professional Alliance [previously Economic Synergy], Professional Forum [previously The Alliance / Breakfast Group], Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions, New Century Forum, New People's Party [previously Savantas Policy Institute] or Hong Kong Progressive Alliance [disbanded]))

138

Fig. 5.5 Counter-mobilization activities of pro-government organizations. (Source: Author's own research which is based on the content analysis of all local newspapers namely Apple Daily, Ming Pao, Oriental Daily, The Sun, Hong Kong Economic Journal, Hong Kong Economic Times, Singtao Daily, Sing Pao, Hong Kong Commercial Daily, Hong Kong

	Daily, Ta Kung Po, Wen Wei Po, Metropolis Daily, AM730, Sharp Daily and Sky Post. The essence of the content analysis was to search all the newspaper reports with the Chinese keywords of “Demonstration (shawei) / Protest (kanhui) / March (youxing) / Assembly (jihui) / Petition (qingyung) / Sit-in (jingzuo) / Hunger-strike (jueshi) / Signature Campaign (lianshu) / Strike (bagong, beke, bashi)” in the WiseNews electronic platform (http://wisenews.wisers.net) and to code those social protest events that are organized for the purposes of supporting government officials / government policies and / or counteracting the activities of the pro-democracy camp)	139
Fig. 5.6	The possible regime trajectories of Hong Kong	152
Fig. 6.1	Hong Kong’s total trade with Mainland China. (Source: Adapted from the statistical tables available at the Census and Statistics Department’s website at http://www.censtatd.gov.hk)	170
Fig. 6.2	Hong Kong’s inward direct investment by major recipient country at market value (1998–2011). (Source: Adapted from the statistical tables available at the Census and Statistics Department’s website at http://www.censtatd.gov.hk)	171
Fig. 6.3	Hong Kong’s outward direct investment by major recipient country at market value (1998–2011). (Source: Adapted from the statistical tables available at the Census and Statistics Department’s website at http://www.censtatd.gov.hk)	171
Fig. 6.4	Percentage of Assets Held by Hong Kong Conglomerates in the Mainland. Note: According to the “Hong Kong Financial Reporting Standard 8—Operating Segments”, listed companies are required to disclose and report segment information about the different types of products and services produced and the different geographical areas in which they operate. Such a standard arises from the International Accounting Standards Board’s consideration of the Financial Accounting Standards Board in the United States Statement No. 131 Disclosures about Segments of an Enterprise and Related Information issued in 1997 (Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accountants, 2009). In this connection, most of the major conglomerates in Hong Kong have started reporting such geographical information since 2000, but on certain occasions some companies will choose not to disclose their geographical information if the amount of assets, revenues and profits outside Hong Kong is not material or significant enough. Therefore, the above table aimed at collecting the geographical information of those chosen major conglomerates in Hong Kong so long as such information and data are available in their annual financial reports	172

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Relative Power Gap between US and China, 1960–1969	26
Table 2.2	Relative Power Gap between US and China, 1970–2009	36
Table 2.3	Relative Power Gap between US and China, 2010–2019	42
Table 3.1	Three-stage formation process of Hong Kong’s autonomy	63
Table 3.2	Schema for assessing the relevance of news events to the state of Hong Kong’s autonomy	67
Table 3.3	A sample illustration of a coded news event in the dataset	70
Table 4.1	Member organizations of Hong Kong Island federation, Kowloon federation of associations, and new territories association of societies	96
Table 4.2	Cross-border economic cooperation projects, infrastructure, and economic cooperation platforms, 2003–2016	99
Table 4.3	Number of students receiving government subsidies for mainland exchange programs and relevant government expenditures, 2007–2008 to 2015–2016	104
Table 4.4	Major localist protests, 2002–2015	108
Table 4.5	Territory-wide telephone survey (peripheral nationalist sentiment of Hongkongese), 2015	111
Table 5.1	The expansion of electoral popularization of legislative council (from 1998 to 2016)	125
Table 5.2	The expansion of electoral popularization of district council (from 1999 to 2015)	126
Table 5.3	Number of registered voters in elderly care homes located in several 2015 district council election constituencies	132
Table 5.4	Creation of “Fake Independent Candidates” in legislative council elections	134

Table 5.5	Number of persons arrested and prosecuted during public meetings / possessions	140
Table 5.6	Political co-option of media Tycoons by the Chinese government	143
Table 5.7	Business interests of media Tycoons in Mainland China	146
Table 5.8	Prominent examples of self-censorship by Hong Kong media	148
Table 5.9	Hong Kong's ranking in International Press freedom indices	149
Table 6.1	Background analysis of Hong Kong deputies in the NPC (1998–2012)	165
Table 6.2	Background analysis of Hong Kong members of the national committee of the CPPCC (1998–2012)	166
Table 6.3	Background analysis of members of the presidium of the preparatory committee of Hong Kong compatriots in celebration of the founding anniversary of the people's Republic of China (1998–2011)	169
Table 6.4	Number of Hong Kong delegations to Beijing (1998–2011)	178
Table 6.5	State officials visited by business delegations (1997–2011)	179
Table 6.6	Selected circumvention tactics used by the business sector after 1997	180
Table 6.7	Background analysis of Leung Chun-ying and Henry Tang Ying-yen's supporters	182
Table 6.8	Background analysis of members of the 2012 preparatory committee for national day celebrations and HKSAR personalities meeting Chinese President Hu Jintao on 30 June 2012	185
Table 6.9	Business Tycoons and leaders of major business associations in Beijing's united front	186
Table 7.1	Patterns of executive-legislative relations in modern democracies	195
Table 7.2	The changing composition of legislative council (from 1843 to 1995)	196
Table 7.3	Composition of the HKSAR legislative council	199
Table 7.4	Partisan distribution of legislative council	200
Table 7.5	Legislative success rates of the HKSAR government since the handover (1998–2016)	203
Table 7.6	Political affiliations of political ministers under Tung Chee-hwa, Donald Tsang, and Leung Chun-ying administrations	207
Table 7.7	Representatives of major pro-government parties in the executive council (2002–2016)	208
Table 7.8	Illustrative examples of shelved / postponed bills	209
Table 7.9	Time spent on quorum calls and the meeting time reduced due to adjournment of the council because of the lack of a quorum in each of the legislative sessions from 2012–2013 to 2015–2016	211



Introduction: Toward an Integrated Comparative Framework

“Brian, you have a strong research profile. But I would advise you to shift your research focus beyond Hong Kong as early as possible. I have never encountered a first-rate political scientist who is only focusing on studying a small city like Hong Kong.” This was a remark given by an expat Head of Department from a local university in Hong Kong, who taught me—a fresh PhD at that time—a valuable lesson at the end of a job interview held in 2012. As readers could have expected, I failed to get the job.

Over the past 10 years, I progressed from Lecturer to Full Professor. But this remark was always a reminder throughout my academic journey. It reminded me that the scholarly values of studying Hong Kong Politics—in Hong Kong and in elsewhere—should not be taken for granted. “For a researcher to be able to say what happens in a single country may be interesting, but it is generally insufficient to mean that he or she is really engaged in the study of comparative politics”, veteran comparative political scientist B. Guy Peters once forcefully argued (Peters, 1998, p. 3).

From time to time, many passionate Hong Kong graduate students have come to me expressing their aspirations for studying Hong Kong Politics. Every time I will share the above story with these young people, advising them that their passion for Hong Kong—though very much well-appreciated—are unfortunately irrelevant as far as scholarly research is concerned. After all, top discipline journal editors, reputable book publishers, and research grant reviewers will positively consider our

submissions of Hong Kong Politics only if they are theoretically significant in terms of political science scholarship—not in terms of our passion for Hong Kong. In other words, we Hong Kong political scientists must work very hard to convince top discipline journal editors, reputable book publishers, and research grant reviewers that Hong Kong Politics deserves the scholarly attention of political scientists worldwide. In recent years, practical politics—the rise and fall of Hong Kong’s mass mobilization (see Fong, 2020a, 2021a, 2022a, 2022b and 2022c)—may have temporarily reduced the pressure of Hong Kong political scientists in seeking international scholarly attention in the short run. But it remains a never-ending task for Hong Kong’s political scientists in the long run.

Over the past 10 years, I made every efforts to place my research on Hong Kong Politics in the context of comparative politics literature. By doing so, I hope that I can bring Hong Kong Politics to a much wider audience beyond Hong Kong. Collecting my most representative journal articles published over the past 10 years, this book endeavors to provide an accessible guide—and templates—to future scholars on why and how to study Hong Kong from a comparative politics perspective.¹

WHY STUDY HONG KONG POLITICS

Intellectually, why should we study Hong Kong Politics? More specifically, why should comparative political scientists worldwide pay their attention on Hong Kong? These two questions boil down to the *scholarly values of Hong Kong Politics as a single case study in comparative political studies*.

In comparative political studies, the scholarly values of conducting single case studies are always debatable. Single case study is often seen by some comparativists as not “comparative” at all; though paradoxically single case study remains the most common form of analysis in comparative political studies (Peters, 1998, p. 11). When compared with small-N and large-N studies, the principal advantage of single case study is its depth, which enables scholars to conduct an in-depth investigation of a particular political phenomenon (Hague et al., 2019, p. 36).

¹Except for correcting mistakes, I have kept all the reprinted journal articles as they were published for the first time. Some contents may have been overtaken by events, but I hope to keep all contents as records of our time.

Conceptually, a single case study can make a substantial contribution to comparative politics literature—and therefore will be seen as “comparative”—if it “either use concepts that are applicable in other countries, develop new concepts that may become applicable in other countries, and/or embed their studies in a comparative context” (Landman & Carvalh, 2017, pp. 25–26). In other words, the scholarly values of a single case study must be justified by its potential to link “particularities” with “generalities”, either by ways of fostering theory building (i.e., generating new theories and concepts for future application in other cases) or promoting theory testing (i.e., applying existing theories and concepts developed from other cases) (Orvis & Carol, 2018, p. 49). Either way, this requires a scholar to justify his or her single case study as some form of “critical case” of a larger category of cases—a case that is critical to the comprehension of comparative political theories and concepts, equivalent to clinical studies in medicine or critical experiments in natural science (Yin, 2018, p. 97).

To put Hong Kong Politics into the above theoretical context, the challenge facing Hong Kong’s political scientists is therefore how to make our single case study of Hong Kong relevant to theory building (i.e., by justifying that the studies of Hong Kong Politics have the potential to inform the development of theories and concepts transferable to other places) and theory testing (i.e., by justifying that the studies of Hong Kong Politics provide a suitable research site for applying the existing theories and concepts). This task is easier said than done. It requires Hong Kong’s political scientists to closely follow the latest theories and concepts in comparative politics literature and to keep establishing the relevance of Hong Kong Politics to such theories and concepts. To do so, Hong Kong’s political scientists—especially graduate students and early career researchers—must immerse themselves in the most advanced comparative politics literature.

HOW TO STUDY HONG KONG POLITICS

Studies of Hong Kong Politics will be able to demonstrate its comparative political values if they are useful for theory building and theory testing. For this purpose, Hong Kong political scientists must develop strategies that forcefully place Hong Kong in the context of comparative political studies, making it a “critical case” (inside a comparative framework) rather

than just an “unique case” (outside a comparative framework). But how to interpret Hong Kong from a comparative politics perspective? Which comparative politics literature should Hong Kong’s political scientists engage with and how?

Over the past 10 years, I have sought to place Hong Kong in comparative political contexts by theorizing it as a geopolitical domain, a territorial autonomy, a periphery, a hybrid regime, a capitalist state, and an executive-dominant polity. Building upon these efforts, I can summarize my past research here through an integrated comparative framework, which aims to make Hong Kong Politics theoretically relevant to important fields of comparative political studies (Fig. 1.1).



Fig. 1.1 An integrated comparative framework for Hong Kong politics. (Source: Author’s compilation)

*Comparative Geopolitical Perspective: Hong Kong
as a Geopolitical Domain*

In geopolitical studies, scholars and researchers have extensively studied why and how great powers have competed for spheres of influence across the globe over time (Fong, 2024a). Small states—as both object and subject of great power politics—are the most popular unit of analysis in this kind of geopolitical studies (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2006). In this age of renewed great power competition, some pioneering scholars have gone beyond this state-centric approach and extended geopolitical studies to non-sovereign, quasi-state entities (Fong, 2024b). These pioneer studies cover “associated states” such as Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Palau (Grossman et al., 2019); “contested states” such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Taiwan, and Kosovo (Broers, 2020; Fisher, 2020; Lefteratos, 2023); “territorial autonomies” such as Greenland, Guam, and Northern Mariana Islands (Olsvig, 2022; Sigler, 2017).

Hong Kong has been a geopolitical domain since its opening by the British as an international port city in 1841 (Fong, 2022d). How does the geopolitics of Hong Kong evolve from Cold War and post-Cold War to New Cold War? Why and how great powers compete for influence in Hong Kong over time? Does Hong Kong has any agency in great power politics? How can we compare Hong Kong as a geopolitical domain with other non-sovereign, quasi-state entities in the context of comparative geopolitical studies?

*Comparative Autonomy Perspective: Hong Kong
as a Territorial Autonomy*

Over the decades, “territorial autonomies” have become an increasingly popular unit of analysis in comparative political studies. Defined as “demographically distinctive jurisdictions that exercise asymmetric, legally entrenched self-governing powers within sovereign states” (Fong, 2022e), territorial autonomies are emerging in recent years as a constitutional tool for addressing ethnic, religious, and cultural conflicts in many divided societies (Weller & Nobbs, 2010; Weller & Wolff, 2005). It is estimated that there are more than 75 territorial autonomies around the world—from Aceh, Guam, Macao, New Caledonia, Jammu & Kashmiri, Sabah, and Sarawak in the East to Åland Islands, Basque Country, Catalonia, Corsica, Gibraltar, Greenland, Puerto Rico, Québec, South Tyrol, and

Tatarstan in the West—providing a large, under-investigated pool of cases for comparative political scientists to explore (Fong, 2022b).

Hong Kong has been transformed from a British crown colony into a Chinese territorial autonomy since 1997 (Fong, 2020b). Why and how a territorial autonomous arrangement—bearing the official name of “One Country, Two Systems” model—was formulated and adopted as a solution of Hong Kong’s future in the 1980s? What are the constitutional characteristics of Hong Kong’s territorial autonomous arrangement vis-à-vis territorial autonomies worldwide? How can we compare the constitutional politics of Hong Kong with other territorial autonomies in the context of comparative autonomy studies?

Comparative Center-Periphery Perspective: Hong Kong as a Periphery

Instead of focusing on formal, constitutional-legal relations between political entities, center-periphery theories examine actual, dynamic power relations between “centre” and “periphery” (Norkus, 2018, pp. 141–161). The classical theory of Galtung (1971) provides an useful, holistic model to investigate how a center may establish and maintain its grips over surrounding peripheries through five types of centralized controls, namely economic, political, military, communication, and cultural mechanisms. In this connection, China as a geographical core of gravity in East Asia is always a powerful center seeking to influence its surrounding peripheries. The role of China as a center vis-à-vis its surrounding peripheries is comparable to many other similar centers worldwide, such as Russia in Eastern Europe, France-Germany in Western Europe, India in South Asia, and the United States in the Americas (Su & Cui, 2016).

Conceptually, Hong Kong is always a periphery of China and its politics has been evolved over the decades as a consequence of China’s waxing and waning influence (Fong, 2017a, 2020c). What are the driving forces that shape the center-periphery relations between China and Hong Kong over the years? What are the major mechanisms deployed by China to influence Hong Kong? What are the consequences of China’s expanding influence over contemporary Hong Kong? How can we compare the center-periphery politics between China and Hong Kong with other similar cases worldwide in the context of comparative center-periphery studies?