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It was a scene that seemed anachronistic and perplexing to Western observers. For a few brief moments on July 1st 2019, the 22nd anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong to China, the British colonial flag made an appearance on the lectern of the Hong Kong legislative chamber. For the young protesters who had stormed and occupied the building, it was a symbolic way to simultaneously express their unique Hong Kong identity and showcase their discontent with Chinese rule. There, it hung in the very chamber where laws were signed, bearing both the Union Jack and the Coat of Arms, the latter of which features a Chinese dragon and a crowned British lion gently grasping on to a pearl, calling to mind the exotic, panegyric name bestowed upon the former British colony now known as the Special Administrative Region of China – the Pearl of the Orient.



Credit: Matt Bradley

Over recent weeks, political turmoil raged in the form of mass demonstrations that saw 1 in 7 Hong Kong residents take to the streets to protest an extradition bill that would have allowed alleged suspects to be deported to stand trial in Mainland China, where the legal system is subject to the arbitrariness and discretion of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The fear that any dissident could be targeted isn't unfounded as stories about billionaires and booksellers being kidnapped by Beijing operatives, only to be prosecuted in show trials on the Mainland and in some cases even tortured in jail, are well known. The extradition bill left almost no room for doubt about China's ambitions to further override the civil rights guaranteed to the people of Hong Kong by the Sino-British Joint Declaration and renege on the agreed-upon "One Country, Two Systems" framework.

Elsewhere, Union Jack flags were handed out and flown in the streets. As photographs of these flag-bearing protesters, many of whom cut across demographic lines, began making the rounds on social media, two things became apparent: a) the uneasy reluctance of mainstream Western media to conduct any sort of meaningful analysis of these scenes and b) the ready willingness of some quarters of Twitter to engage in vitriolic attacks of the Hong Kong protesters, accusing them of being complicit in colonialism.

For those who embrace the ideological frameworks of various forms of "Social Justice" Theory including postcolonialism, decolonialism, critical race theory and intersectional feminism, seeing the Asian inhabitants of a former colony raise its colonial flag simply does not compute. Within this ideological conception of the world there is a very simple understanding of power dynamics in which oppression must always come from people seen as having dominant identities – white, male, western, heterosexual, cisgender, ablebodied and thin – and be inflicted upon those seen as having marginalized identities – people of color, colonized or indigenous people, women, LGBT, disabled and fat people. When all of these elements are considered together, we get the framework of 'intersectionality' and it is through the language and activism of intersectional scholars and activists that most people encounter these ideas.

Eastern people who complicate the narrative of Western oppressor and Eastern Oppressed are understood to be speaking into and perpetuating oppressive discourses of colonial power which apply much more broadly than their own situation. From this perspective, by aligning themselves symbolically with the flag or philosophically with the ideas wrought by colonial legacy, the protesters were understood to completely invalidate the legitimacy of their liberation movement. Other criticisms reserved for the protesters include rebukes for lacking sensitivity and solidarity toward other countries with victims of colonialism. The journalist Ben Norton went so far as to say that the British flag was a symbol of “genocide, murder, racism, oppression and robbery,” and that the “pro-democracy” activists in Hong Kong were in effect, pro-colonialist groups, funded and backed by the “Western NGO-Industrial Complex.”

This argument perfectly exemplifies how one’s basic reasoning and moral calculus can get muddled when steeped too heavily in this kind of postcolonial theory. To deride the fight against one of the most repressive and autocratic regimes is to completely undermine and disparage Hong Kong’s struggle for democracy and freedom. Semantically equating being “pro-democracy” to being “pro-colonialist”, where the latter is essentialized to “pro-evil,” Norton instantly reveals the moral incongruence of embracing the actual oppressor (China) at the expense of the oppressed (Hong Kong), all in the name of opposing an institution which has become a bogeyman used by progressives to blame *only* the West for all of the world’s ills. Does it ever occur to him and other like-minded critics that perhaps the vast majority of the protesters simply do not want to live under the tyranny of a surveillance state that censors dissidents and implements dystopian social credit score systems?

Pervasive in our collective psyche now is the conceptual expansion and associative mapping of words on to each other, such that terms like “colonialism” have grown to be inseparable from others such as “genocide,” “oppression” and “white supremacy.” By merely invoking the specter of colonialism, one could then easily pile on these other charges. And since colonialism is sometimes erroneously consigned to the exclusive domain of the West, the entire Western project can now be wholly tainted. This semiotic game has the further pernicious effect of turning reactionary emotional triggers into unreasonable moral stances and actions. For

example, the decolonize movement across the academy taps into the grievances drummed up by such tactics, leading to nonsensical campaigns to decolonize science and diets.

One thing is clear – we currently do not possess the semantic apparatus and emotional toolkit to effectively address the topic of colonialism with verbal precision and level-headedness. What happened to Professor Bruce Gilley at Portland State University when he published an unpopular article titled “The Case for Colonialism” in the obscure but respected journal *Third World Quarterly*, is a case in point. The fallout from that controversy included the resignation of 15 members of the journal’s editorial board, a retraction of the paper, and credible death threats hurled at both the author and editor. Gilley’s essay went much farther than merely examining the merits of colonialism and certainly, the provocative title did not help. Lost in the midst of this brouhaha was the little known fact that Bruce Gilley himself had lived and worked for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in Hong Kong and witnessed its handover from Britain to China, an experience that surely influenced his perspective on the matter. The argument goes that, by showing support for the Common Law system and spirit of free expression that were direct products of the colonist’s rule, the Hong Kong protesters are guilty of propping up an evil institution and therefore, must be opposed at all costs. One can’t help but recall that scene in Monty Python’s Life of Brian, where John Cleese’s character gives a revolutionary speech and in an attempt to foment resentment against the Roman empire, ends up conceding, “*all right, all right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?*” To add insult to injury, someone in the rebel group yells back, “*brought peace.*”

This line of thinking ignores why, for the better part of the 20th century, Hong Kong was romantically referred to as the Pearl of the Orient. The colony was not a democracy by a long shot, and many Hong Kongers did face discrimination as second-class citizens under British rule. But they also enjoyed economic prosperity, political freedoms, corruption-free governance and the freedom of conscience that were in stark contrast to the fate of their counterparts in the People’s Republic of China who were still picking up the pieces from Mao’s disastrous Great Leap Forward policies. While it’s important not to gloss over the horrible legacies of the

British Empire's extractive and exploitative forays in Africa and the Middle East, the overall verdict on the legacy bequeathed to former colonies such as Hong Kong and Singapore might be far more complicated.

The entire historical trajectory of our species and the geopolitics of our world are grafted upon a map drawn by colonial violence. Colonialism has existed in nearly all states and civilizations and has been the norm, not the exception, for the better part of human history. Since the ancestors of modern humans set out of Southeastern Africa around 70,000 years ago, despite the clear record of intermixing, people have been conquering territory, sometimes by way of committing genocide. Proto-Indo-European Yamnaya people spread from the Pontic steppe and ended up settling from the Tarim basin to Ireland millennia ago. The Thule displaced the Dorset in Canada's Arctic less than a thousand years ago, the latter being almost wiped off from the face of the earth. Our own DNA bears testimony to this tyrannical tendency embedded in us: 1 in 200 men on Earth can trace their ancestry from Ghengis Khan. The status of conqueror and the conquered has changed hands repeatedly throughout history. These and countless other examples, such as the expansion of the Umayyad Caliphate into the Iberian Peninsula and the occupation of Eastern European states by the Ottoman empire, should shatter the myth that colonialism was a uniquely Western transgression. With the moral arc slowly bending toward justice, post-colonial guilt has taken a stranglehold on Western thought, manifesting itself in two forms: one constructive and the other, destructive.

Constructive guilt allows us to critically evaluate various historical injustices and current inequalities that were shaped by European colonialism. Destructive guilt leads to the moral myopia exemplified by some progressive reactions to the plight of the Hong Kong people, which disturbingly echo that of Chinese-run state media. For one, the sight of the British flag among the Hong Kong protests has united intersectional progressives and CCP apologists in calling the massive demonstration a Western-backed uprising and accusing them of, ironically, "internalized colonialism." This particular criticism is both condescending and patronizing as it alludes to the lack of self-agency among Hong Kong protesters, who must be so mentally weak as to become unwitting shills and puppets for the Western agenda. This epitomizes the postmodern notion of colonialism stretching beyond just

physical land occupations to include a sort of cultural or ideological transformation of the mind. This is, indeed, exactly how postcolonial scholars from Frantz Fanon to Edward Said to Gayatri Spivak have seen it. If there is any merit to this idea, then why isn't what China is doing considered a form of colonization of the Hong Kong mindset? Do we only care about the injustice of colonialism when the respective groups, defined as the "colonizer" versus the "colonized," harbor differential levels of melanin? This logic not only provides the license to discount instances of colonialism between ethnically homogenous groups, it also allows progressive elites who rail against the lack of civil liberties, the imprisonment of dissidents, the mistreatment of minorities, abuses in detention centers and police brutality back home in the West, to be willfully blind to the hypocrisy of somehow supporting some of the very same things for the people of Hong Kong.

Much like the new definition of racism prescribed by Critical Theory, the progressive definition of who qualifies as a "colonizer" appears to exclude non-European powers. What then to make of the actions of China and Russia? This lens promoted by certain sections of the Western intelligentsia ignores the struggle against real repression globally, while almost solely excoriating "Western imperialism." In doing so, illiberal, authoritarian forces that run counter to the current world order are empowered, from China's growing outward assertiveness and internal repression to Russia's own brand of illiberal populism, and the stirrings of Islamist groups eager to rebuild the caliphate. Taking a leaf out of this very playbook, Chinese state media, in attempts to delegitimize Hong Kong's fight for civil rights and freedom, uses "Western" as a smear and accuses protesters of being in cahoots with Western ideologues.

For now, the leader of the embattled Hong Kong government claims that the controversial bill is dead. The protesters might revel in a short-lived victory but the long game belongs to China as Hong Kong's special semi-autonomous status is slated to end in 2047. Moreover, the recent turn toward property destruction, vandalism and violence will also cause the protesters to lose public support and goodwill. Hong Kong is truly a litmus test as it sits on the frontline of a global struggle for competing world visions: a *Pax Americana* or a *Pax Sinica*? A world based on liberal democratic principles or tech-assisted authoritarianism? Given what's at stake, can we really afford the intellectual luxury of allowing

intersectional thought to blunt our ability to push back against these illiberal forces? The tepid support of the Hong Kong people among the American left has not gone unnoticed, especially in contrast with Senator Marco Rubio leading the repeated efforts to introduce the *Hong Kong Human Rights And Democracy Act* in congress and Senator Ted Cruz instigating the campaign to nominate the young pro-democracy activist leaders for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The protesters in Hong Kong, much like the women who risk imprisonment and torture by removing their hijabs in theocratic Iran, are demanding the freedoms that we in the West take for granted. Instead of seeing us stand alongside their causes in solidarity, they see us divided by arguments and accusations that are directly hostile to their fight against oppression. The postcolonial, intersectional perspective paints products of cultures as fixed, static categories, wedded to immutable characteristics such as ethnicity and identity. The critics intone that Hong Kongers are ethnically Chinese after all, and they should “stay in their lane” and not hanker for values that are deemed “Eurocentric” or “Western.” This concept, happily reinforced by pro-CCP forces and wielded to peg pro-democracy supporters as “race traitors,” denies universal aspirations and interests to those in Hong Kong agitating for the ideals of freedom and human dignity. Cultural essentialism, as it turns out, endorses the divisions of orientalism rather than cures them.

The defiant display of the Union Jack, far from being a yearning to return to its colonial past, must instead be seen for what it is: a celebration of the values and institutions that represent the path-dependent outcomes of British heritage, which have now transcended it. Ideas shape human action, and human actions shape history. The seeds of liberty were sown with the sealing of the Magna Carta eight centuries ago, and brought to Hong Kong via the Treaty of Nanjing. For 156 years, Hong Kong was a beneficiary, marinating in its legacy. Long after the HMS Britannia sailed out of the harbor with Governor Chris Patten on board at midnight on June 30, 1997, the people of Hong Kong continue to embody a belief that that legacy is worth fighting for.

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Melissa Chen

Melissa is the Managing Director of Ideas Beyond Borders. She's a New York-based Singaporean transplant.

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