

FEATURE

Hong Kong unrest

Competing narratives on Hong Kong

By Christina Lin

August 21, 2019

<https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/08/article/competing-narratives-on-hong-kong/>

Whose diagnosis for Hong Kong disorder is correct, Beijing's or Washington's? Probably a combination of both

Over the past few months, Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protests have morphed into a larger call for a democratic governance system similar to the United States.

Protesters have been seen waving American flags and singing the [American national anthem](#), with [protest leaders](#) and their [sponsors](#) meeting [American officials](#) in the US Consulate in Hong Kong as well as in [Washington](#).

And as the US is proclaiming support for “democracy promotion” and “human rights” on one side while China hurls accusations of “color



A lack of space and high property prices in Hong Kong leave many with no option but to be crammed into apartments like these in Quarry Bay. Photo: AFP

revolution” and “destabilization” campaigns on the other, it seems the Hong Kong protests have become a new arena in a battle of narratives between Washington and Beijing.

US and Chinese narratives

Strategic thinker Lawrence Freedman said narratives are “compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly from which inferences can be drawn,” so strategic narratives, or stories with a political purpose used by actors to affect the behavior of others, has an important impact on the international order.

The story is often crystallized into a single word or phrase such as



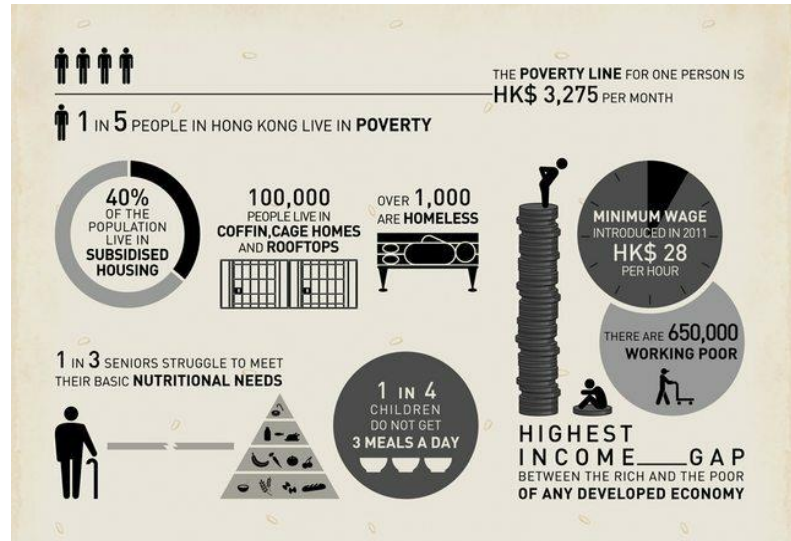
Protesters wave American flags as they march from Chater Garden to the U.S. consulate in Hong Kong, Sept. 8, 2019, to call on the U.S. to pressure Beijing to meet their demands.

“containment,” “democratization,” “human rights,” “global war on terror,” “liberal order,” and these stories provide an organizing framework for collective action.

In other words, an actor’s narrative tells the story of what he or she believes is the cause for disorder, which then lends legitimacy to prescribed policies to restore order. However, problems arise when there is a misdiagnosis of the cause of the disease or disorder, followed by prescribing the wrong medicine in the form of policies that could cause further damage.

This impact of competing narratives on regional order is further explored in a forthcoming volume at the Finnish Institute for International Affairs ([FIIA](#)) titled *Political Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa – Perceptions of Instability and Conceptions of Order*.

For example, democracy promotion and human rights have been the mainstay of the US narrative toward the greater Middle East, which is rooted in the Democratic Peace Theory positing that a lack of democracy causes conflict



The not so crazy rich

and disorder, and tends to view violent regime change as the solution to restoring regional order.

In contrast, after witnessing numerous failed states in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen following US interventions in the Middle East, China views the Western prescription of “color revolutions” as the cause for disorder rather than order. As such, China began to offer an alternative “peace with development” narrative to restore order, largely manifested in the Belt and Road Initiative.

Thus, whereas the US considers democracy promotion the solution to disorder, in the view of China the promotion of economic development is the way to restore order. This then raises the question: Which narrative is the correct diagnosis for Hong Kong disorder?

Harmonious political/economic development?

The answer is probably a combination of both. In the Middle East, for example, the US champions a narrow definition of democracy and human rights as free elections and political



expression, with little regard for longtime strategic engagement to combat terrorism or poverty reduction.

On the other hand, China's non-interference stance only focuses on infrastructure projects with autocratic regimes, but does not address corruption and governance problems.

As such, neither Washington's solely geopolitics approach nor Beijing's geo-economics approach addresses the underlying causes for the disorder, and a prescription of just free elections or GDP growth would only acquire borrowed time before chaos erupts again.

As a July 22 New York Times [article](#) revealed, a housing crisis, an increasing wealth gap and declining living standards are the economic roots of Hong Kong's protests.

Despite the "Crazy Rich Asians" image Hong Kong portrays to the world, in reality, one in five people – or nearly [1.4 million people](#) – live below the poverty line.

These not so "Crazy Rich Asians" are often crammed in inhumane cages and "coffin cubicles" the size of a parking space, with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) rebuking that "cage houses are an insult to human dignity" and "the inaction of the Hong Kong government is unacceptable in the face of the abundant financial resources at its disposal."

Indeed, it is unrealistic for the Chinese and Hong Kong governments to coddle the [tycoon](#) class to inflate real-estate value, increase housing costs more than 20 times that of annual median income, price an entire young generation out of the housing market, widen the gap between the rich and poor, remain indifferent to the increasing destitution and [disaffection](#) of the youth and expect that Hong Kong's stability is sustainable.

Like an ice cap covering a volcano, it was only a matter of time before the frustration boiling underneath pierces the deceptively calm facade on the surface.

If China's narrative and long-term prescription for reducing social protests and restoring order is via "peaceful" and "harmonious" development – similar to redressing its domestic disparities between rich coastal provinces and poor inner/western provinces – then it should perhaps apply this principle to Hong Kong for poverty reduction and bridge the wealth gap.

But to that end, the Chinese and Hong Kong governments would need not only to apply the economic prescription of remediating the housing shortage, but also to harmonize it with a political prescription of governance reforms.

As [Lee Cheuk-yan](#), general-secretary of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, remarked: "The whole system is totally controlled by the vested interests of the elite," and many protesters say direct elections would give them a greater say in their future and crucial economic matters.

Likewise, [Richard Wong Yue-chim](#), professor of political economy at the University of Hong Kong, observed that "Hong Kong is a capitalist society, but when capital is so unequally distributed, it becomes a political problem."

And as for the US narrative, rather than exploiting the protests to provoke China's fears of regime change, Washington may find it more effective to promote democracy and human rights by finding ways to encourage the Hong Kong government to implement governance reforms, so that there is truly democracy and human rights not only for the wealthy oligarchs, but also for the youth and nearly 1.4 million Hongkongers trapped in cages and "coffins" who have been left behind.