

Ching Cheong's testimony on

"The Dismantling of Hong Kong's Civil Society"

Tuesday, July 12, 2022

## A. OVERVIEW

1. The dismantling of Hong Kong (HK)'s Civil Society started as soon as the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in 1984. Despite the open pledge of "one country two systems" with "Hongkong people ruling Hongkong", enjoying a "high degree of autonomy" for 50 years, what the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) did was to send swarms of national security agents to HK to make sure that "the transition (from British to Chinese sovereignty) will be based on solid power".

2. In 1984, China started to draft the Basic Law, the mini-constitution for post-1997 HK. During the drafting process, the CCP had already shown signs that it would somehow roll back on its promise. It reminded the law-drafters that post-1997 HK should only be an economic city and not a political one, which suggested that the thriving civil society might be curtailed. The CCP was wary of HK becoming a bridgehead of Western political influences to subvert its one-party dictatorship.

3. With this apprehension in mind, the CCP began to identify forces that it thought might be endangering its dictatorial rule. By the early 1990's, I was shown (but not given) a draft report prepared by a senior national security cadre in which it advised that the central government should watch out for after 1997. These include: 1. Journalists, 2. Religious leaders, 3. Lawyers, 4. Educators, and 5. Social workers. I said this report would mislead Beijing and ruin Hong Kong, for they formed the key pillars of the city's civil society. Unfortunately, I couldn't convince them to change their views. We have been paying the price for this.

4. In 2003, just five years after the handover, the CCP had already mapped out a detail plan aimed at suppressing these five groups of people. It compiled a data base of all the prominent figures in each of these sectors and classified them according to their political attitude towards the CCP either as friendly, neutral or animus and develop different united front strategy for them, either to co-opt or eliminate them. It set up a psychological warfare department to discredit those who fell under their "strike-list". The scene was set for an overall crackdown of HK's civil society.

5. Beginning 2003, the CCP took several important measures to abrogate its Basic Law commitments. All these measures were aimed at imposing the CCP's will on HK, and gradually convert HK from a free society to an authoritarian one. Such efforts culminated in the enactment of the draconian National Security Law (NSL) which ultimately destroyed HK's civil society.

## B. THE MEDIA SECTOR

6. HK's media sector was the first to be compromised. Before 1984, HK's media market was dominated by anti-CCP publications, with pro-CCP ones numbering just five (Wen Wei Po, Ta Kung Pao, New Evening News, Ching Pao and Commercial Daily) with a combined readership less than 80,000. Thus, the CCP started with converting the most important anti-CCP media, using its so-called "magic weapon" of united front strategy. The Director of the Xinhua News Agency Xu Jiatusun, the CCP's number one man in HK, started with a friendly approach by wining and dining newspaper owners and executives.

7. For example, to woo Sing Tao Daily, a well-established pro-Taiwan newspaper, Xu arranged a charter flight for the publisher Sally Aw Sian to visit her hometown in Fujian Province, which the family had not stepped foot on for decades. To coopt the liberal Ming Pao, which asked the embarrassing question why Beijing was adamant at taking back Hong Kong while forfeiting legitimate claims to huge tract of territories taken away by Russia, Deng Xiaoping himself hosted publisher Louis Cha a dinner. This honor succeeded in silencing him.

8. Other means to transform the HK media milieu included outright acquisition of shares of major news outlets by pro-China business tycoons, such as the acquisition of the influential South China Morning Post by Malaysian sugar tycoon Robert Kuok in 1993, the Ming Pao by Malaysian media tycoon Tiong Hiew King. This trend continued after 1997 with a CCP member Li Ruiguang acquiring a majority share of the most influential outlet TVB in 2015. Such acquisition resulted in obvious change in their respective editorial policies.

9. By 2012, the remaining mainstream news outlet that was still critical of the CCP and supportive of the democracy movement was Jimmy Lai's Next Magazine and the Apple Daily, together with a few web-based media such as the Stand News and the Citizen News. They too became the natural targets of the CCP.

10. The enactment of the National Security Law in 2020 gave the authority wide-sweeping power to shutter all the remaining pro-democracy news outlets, with Apple Daily and the Stand News bearing the full brunt. The chilling effect was obvious. For example, the FCC voluntarily

suspended its annual Human Rights Press Awards, citing the elusive red line. The Hongkong Journalist Association lowered its threshold for dissolution in anticipation of the pressure to disband itself. The Independent Commentators Association, set up to safeguard media freedom, went into silent voluntary dissolution. The editorial policies of news outlets had to toe Beijing's line, for example, calling the Russian invasion of Ukraine as "special military operation" instead of "invasion", and churned out commentaries that blamed the US for causing the Russian invasion.

### C. LESSONS FOR THE WORLD

11. In a short span of 25 years the once free society soon degenerated into an authoritarian one. For over a century, the city that had served as the haven for political dissidents from China, now becomes the exporter of political refugees itself. Once prized as the freest places in the Chinese-speaking world, now experienced unprecedented curtailment on freedom of speech and expression. The Pearl of the Orient, a highly successful crossbreed of East and West civilization, began to lose its luster, an irreparable loss to the whole world.

12. Thus, the post-1997 history of Hongkong provides a classical example of how, in time of peace, a free society based on the rule of law is being imperceptibly converted into an authoritarian one in which law becomes a tool of political repression. The world can learn from Hongkong's experience and draw important lessons therefrom to avoid begetting the same fate.

13. Worse still, we find with alarm that the tactics the CCP used to convert Hongkong are being applied in Western democracies as well. These familiar tactics, including propaganda, united front strategy, party-building mechanism, infiltration, and intelligence to name the most obvious, are clearly at work in the West. Our dreadful experience is therefore relevant to the whole world.

14. Thus, the dreadful experience of Hongkong provides a wake-up call for the whole world. Caring for Hongkong is not just for Hongkong's own sake but for the sake of the whole world. The world needs to learn from HK's lesson and take precautionary actions against the stealthy erosion by the CCP leading to the collapse of the Western societies. Since we witness first-hand how the fundamental pillars of a free society can be easily destroyed by the CCP, we feel duty-bound to explicitly state the obvious danger.

#### D. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

15. On HK: Since HK is no longer a free society as envisaged in the 1992 US-HK Policy Act, it might be appropriate to scrap that Act to reflect the change since 1992. To address the urgent needs of today, Congress should pass the provisions in Sec. 30303 (Hong Kong Freedom and Choice provisions) and other Hong Kong-focused measures in H.R. 5421 in the conference committee.

16. On the US: To stave off the CCP's erosion of the US, Congress should provide resources to:

- Step up the surveillance of CCP-related activities in the US: activities that would potentially undermine a free society (propaganda, united front strategy, underground party building, intelligence gathering and infiltration into various level of the administration) to protect the American political system.
- Conduct research, under the CECC framework, into ways to reverse the appeasement sentiments towards the CCP which is quite rampant in the US. If appeasement towards the CCP is allowed to develop unabated, then "Today Hong Kong, Tomorrow the World" ( by Mark Clifford) will be the result.