

# Prism of U.S. Press: the West Looks

**H**ong Kong has had a good headline year. Simply put there's been a lot going on in the city from the heated protests over national education to former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden's stopover in June. Journalists overall loves a good story and the more controversial the story the better. Therefore it is little surprise that Hong Kong is back in the international press some 16 years after reverting from British colony back to Mainland China rule, especially as it wrestles with the challenges and realities of post-1997 changes.

As a journalist and now journalism educator, Hong Kong to me was always a unique place, a blend of both East and West, and now a case study of how "one party, two systems" exists and co-exists politically, economically and socially.

Analyzing coverage of Hong Kong in U.S. newspapers, especially *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* - both traditionally known for their international coverage - is a prism into better understanding America's current view of Hong Kong. Over the past year Hong Kong has increasingly appeared in headlines. According to a Lexis/Nexis search "Hong Kong" appeared 1,481 times in *The New York Times* in 2013 to date, while it appeared 1,040 from 2011-2012, and in *The Washington Post* "Hong Kong" appeared 373 times from 2011-2012 and 494 times to date. In the past year a large portion of coverage has centered on Snowden and the litany of protests from the pro-democracy protests on July to the refusal by the Hong Kong government to grant a license to operate free-to-air television.

Analyzing the international press coverage is a good way to better understand how the West currently views Hong Kong. And in examining this, a disturbing picture of a city desperately hanging on to its identity and freedoms and glory days surfaces. Other stories portray Hong Kong as a city that has given in to Beijing's stronghold out of either practicality or fear. There is almost no coverage that offers context about the complex relationship between Hong Kongers and Mainlanders, the reasons and roots behind the struggles of Hong Kong locals, and the challenges of a "one country, two systems" society. Very often the coverage lacks a source that offers the Chinese or Hong Kong perspective. Objectivity, that the U.S. press upholds, is at times questionable when it comes to covering Hong Kong.

## **Negative coverage of Hong Kong**

Ultimately the American press's rather negative coverage of Hong Kong is a reflection of the prickly and complex state of U.S.-China relations.

The U.S. media have given ample coverage to the rising number of protests in Hong Kong over the past year. In writing about the protests the focus is on the conflict between Mainland China and Hong Kong. *The Washington Post's* Hong Kong correspondent Andrew Higgins story on September 7 about Hong Kong's reaction to the proposed national education portrays Beijing authorities as playing a heavy hand in Hong Kong's rule, as seen by some key words used.

The article's lede reads, "Hunger-striking Hong Kong students and their supporters have taken control of a city plaza here amid accusations from Communist Party-controlled media of a Western-backed conspiracy by "black hands" intent on sowing chaos." The article singles out words such as "brainstorming" and national education as a breach of "one country, two systems (Protesters condemn the courses as "brainwashing" and a violation of the "one country, two systems" formula under which Hong Kong was returned to China 15 years ago after more than a century and a half of colonial rule.)

"Beijing has long pushed authorities in Hong Kong to narrow what opinion polls suggest is a widening gulf between local residents and mainlanders, who have flooded into Hong Kong to shop and, in some cases, give birth in the city's well-equipped hospitals." The focus of the piece is on the contentious relationship between Mainland China and Hong Kong.

The underlined keywords are a telling sign of how the West views Hong Kong, a city that is struggling to hold onto its identity, a city under siege, and one that is being threatened.

Coverage of Edward Snowden's stopover in Hong Kong was ultimately cast as a political story where Hong Kong was portrayed as kowtowing to China's interests much like a child caught between two squabbling parents. As a good friend of mine said, "Hong Kongers can forget about getting a U.S. visa for now."

In a *Washington Post* blog post (June 24, 2013)



headlined “White House: Hong Kong damaged relationship by releasing Snowden” by Rachael Weiner highlighted Hong Kong’s disobedience.

That same day *The Washington Post* published another blog by Sean Sullivan entitled “Feinstein: China 'clearly had a role' in Snowden's departure from Hong Kong.” The story is highly critical of Hong Kong, and does not include a quote or source from Hong Kong’s vantage point.

“China clearly had a role in this, in my view. I don't think this was just Hong Kong without Chinese acquiescence,” Dianne Feinstein (U.S. State Senator) said on CBS's "Face The Nation.”

Interestingly *The New York Times* portrayed Snowden in a more neutral light than they did Hong Kong. The newspaper described him as a “29-year-old NSA government contractor” rather than *The Guardian*’s stories that described Snowden as a whistleblower or a spy. *The Times* focused on the Obama Administration’s disappointment over Hong Kong’s decision to let Snowden go, emphasizing the American officials request and Hong Kong’s refusal. Interestingly the newspaper of record’s sources and quotes on the Snowden coverage primarily come from U.S. government officials. There are virtually no quotes from think tanks or analysts who offer Hong Kong’s point of view.

The June 24 *Times*’ news article about Snowden includes the following quote: “At no point, in all of our discussions through Friday, did the authorities in Hong Kong raise any issues regarding the sufficiency of the U.S.’s provisional arrest request,” a department official said. “In light of this, we find their decision to be particularly troubling.”

Despite Snowden’s own assertion that “Hong Kong has a strong tradition of free speech,” the newspapers’ most telling view towards Hong Kong comes from two prominent columns published on its editorial pages. The column “Hong Kong's Summer of Discontent,” by Emily Lau, a member of the Hong Kong Legislative Council and chair of the Democratic Party, was non-coincidentally published on July 1 (National Day for China and the day of the pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong), about the erosion of political freedoms in Hong Kong. Lau’s point of view can be seen clearly in the following paragraph.

“This vague idea implied that the mainland would

not interfere in local affairs, a concept that was enshrined in the Hong Kong mini-constitution, known as the Basic Law. Apart from defense and foreign affairs, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, as it became known, would enjoy “a high degree of autonomy” Beijing would not send Communist cadres to run the city,” she writes. “Hong Kong's capitalist and free lifestyle would continue unabated, and most important, the people were promised that the political system would evolve to a democratically elected government. That process of democratic development is now imperiled.”

Hong Kong – as a city of eroding freedom, a victim of Beijing’s powers, an orphan of its own identity — is portrayed in a column published on June 11, 2012 in the *Times* by Law Yuk-kai head of the Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor. Law’s response to Snowden’s video-taped message that he sought refuge in Hong Kong for its “strong tradition of free speech” and “a long tradition of protesting in the streets,” was as follows “Mr. Snowden — if he is still in town — has stepped into an unknown future in which the concept of “one nation, two systems,” promised us by Beijing, has become a fading memory.”

## **Pivotal role in East West relations**

After analyzing this small sampling of press coverage the picture that surfaces is disturbing. The U.S. press may be writing more about Hong Kong, but the coverage emphasizes the Beijing government’s stronghold. Is the coverage bias because of the newspaper’s own editorial policies, does it reflect the complex if not sometimes prickly relationship between the U.S. and China? The bottom line: post-1997 Hong Kong is one that is portrayed as one of uncertainty, and one where freedom of press and democracy are compromised.

No doubt, Hong Kong is going through fast changes of its own especially as it wrestles with its own history and identity. Still it remains a major financial center, and a springboard to doing business in the Asia-Pacific region. Hong Kong while relatively small in population and size is significant in that it is a window to the social, political and economic changes in Mainland China. All the more reason that we need more stories about Hong Kong in the international press, and most importantly stories that delve into the complexities, the challenges, the richness of a city that plays a pivotal role in East West relations.

**✉ Amy Wu**

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