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# Simulating territory: the rise and demise of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan as an imaginary regional formation

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## ABSTRACT

The leadership of the People's Republic of China has crafted several creative territorialization strategies designed to consolidate the administrative control and extend the geopolitical influence of its ruling Chinese Communist Party. This article focuses on one such strategy aimed at three distinct polities – Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan – by examining the bureaucratic establishment of an imaginary regional formation that spans them, and its suture to the “One Country, Two Systems” formulation of variegated sovereignty. I propose that this suture constitutes a novel geopolitical strategy of simulation in the service of territorial expansion. Material devices to implement the strategy include mobility and residence permits, while discursive tactics include the reattribution of statements by past leaders to match the new imaginary formation. However, rather than forging cultural unity and compelling territorial unification, the intensification of the simulation corresponded with a spike in self-determination sentiment and demonstrations in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. This case shows that by fabricating an imaginary regional formation, a state can facilitate the multiplication of different bordering schemes between and within territories it effectively administers, while at the same time press irredentist claims against a different and de facto independent state, with explosive outcomes.

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## Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) has instituted several creative territorialisation strategies designed to extend its administrative control and geopolitical influence, and to thereby produce citizens and consolidate territory subject to its rule. This article focuses on one such strategy, the creation of an imaginary regional formation of Hong Kong-Macau-Taiwan (*Gang'aoTai* 港台), which sutured together three distinct and non-contiguous territories.

Two of these territories—Hong Kong and Macao, have been subject to PRC rule since 1997 and 1998, respectively, following handovers from the preceding

British and Portuguese colonial administrations. These two territories have since been governed as Special Administrative Regions under the premise of a formulation of variegated sovereignty and partial self-rule known as One Country, Two Systems that was also devised to be applied to Taiwan. However, Taiwan remains self-governed, functions as a de facto independent state (albeit with limited external recognition), and has never been subject to PRC rule.

In 1998, despite such fundamental differences in governance and political representation between the three territories, the PRC State Council, under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), established an administrative entity, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Office of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, that claimed responsibility for managing all three regions. In so doing, the CCP and its state administration projected a territorial isomorphism between very different polities. State offices and party-directed media promulgated this imaginary regional formation by representing political space and managing mobility accordingly, establishing a new territorial imaginary of Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan as a jointly-administered entity.

Material tools and discursive tactics to consolidate this formation have included devices for the management of mobility that linguistically and practically perform these three distinctly governed polities in the subjunctive mode of irredentism, *as if* they shared identical jurisdictional status under PRC sovereignty. CCP publicists projected the new entity back in time, compiling disjointed sayings by party leaders about the different places into collections named for the performed unity of “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan”. Commercial industry actors fell in line accordingly, circulating representations of “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” as travel destinations with common characteristics.

Based on an excavation of the institutional history of this bureaucratic invention and its modes of reproduction, I argue that the suture of this imaginary regional formation constituted a novel geopolitical strategy of *simulation* in the service of territorial expansion. My deployment of simulation here draws from Jean Baudrillard’s notion of a *simulacrum*, that is, a copy of a copy—or, as it is more often understood, the copy of something that has no original. Indeed, there is no original cultural core or shared political administration of Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan that precedes its institutional fabrication by the PRC’s party-state bureaucracy. Yet, the image of this arrangement has been so often cited as to, wittingly or not, conjure an unstable and phantasmagoric regional formation in service of the PRC’s larger projects of irredentism and centralization. At the same time, the coherence of the simulacrum has been undone by unsurmountable difficulties in the project of territorial unification, difficulties which paradoxically correspond to the intensification of the party-state regime’s performative imposition of a façade of national unity.

To make sense of this geopolitical argument, in the next section I provide a conceptual toolkit that treats simulation as a territorial strategy and explores

the performative processes that simultaneously support and undermine it. I continue with a brief exposition of various strategies of territorial claim-making, zoning, and expansion in the PRC, followed by an account of the distinct trajectories of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan up until the 1998 establishment of the MOFA Department of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs. Then, I trace the simulated convergence of Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan as an unstable creation of the PRC's party-state in the early years after the handovers of Hong Kong and Macao from their preceding colonial administrations. Finally, I discuss the instability and incipient demise of the simulacrum—and the One Country, Two Systems formulation upon which it was predicated—in the wake of grassroots protest movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the CCP's reactive annihilation of Hong Kong's promised self-rule, and the consolidation of popular will in pursuit of self-determination in Taiwan.

### **Simulating and performing territory**

In China, party-state policy and rhetoric conflates space and subjectivity in a way that “melds Chinese identity, culture, and territory into a seamless spatial and temporal whole, and tends to render any analytical separation of these elements impossible in a priori terms,” writes Tim Oakes (Oakes 2012, 316). Such melding proceeds via the administrative designations and demarcations of space, and the production of political subjectivities that correspond with such arrangements.

In the grouped case of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao, I demonstrate that a territorial simulacrum linking three distinct polities was bureaucratically instituted in 1998 through the establishment of the Department of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs by the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). In so doing, the PRC established an imaginary regional formation by positing a territorial homology between three very different polities, and a subjective homology between different forms of national membership.

The party-state's capacity to institute such a formation follows from the power of naming to claim and produce political space. Territories—whether countries, special administrative revisions, regions, or otherwise—become legible as such through the inscription, repetition, revision, appropriation, and contestation of their names. As put by Raymond Lee in an account of the (re)naming of Xinjiang/Turkestan, the massive region on China's northwestern frontier, “The power to name is a part of a set of general state powers in contemporary China, one among powers to define history, territory, and the populations. The power to name, change names, and even change their meanings, is part of the set of apparatuses of centralizing state formation” (Lee 2022, 15).

As Dennis Hui writes specifically of spaces within Taiwan, but applicable elsewhere, “the process of toponymic [place name] inscription is a contentious process, in which national subjectivities and political ideologies

are evoked and territorialized” (Hui 2017, 917). Acts of naming accrue such power because they are performative—they can enact and produce what they name—making them targets for intervention and contestation, as has been argued by critical international relations scholars and geographers such as Gregson and Rose (2000). As put by critical IR scholar Campbell (1998), the performative practices of “foreign policy”, including official statements by state authorities, are themselves constitutive of nation-states, and their concomitant divisions between self and other, internal and external, domestic and foreign, home and abroad. Such performances involve “a process of recitation and repetition . . . that is constrained by cultural and historical practices, but which also gives rise to new formations and possibilities” (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007, 407).

Key props for the performative naming of (inter)national space include passports, visas, and other devices that claim citizenship and confer the right to move. Necessary for border-crossing mobility, names and maps are inscribed in devices such as passports and visas, the compulsory use of which enrolls their holders into a “global mobility regime,” facilitated and enforced by embassies, immigration officers, and so on (Salter 2006). These devices and practices constitute and communicate the division between inside and outside that delimit the territories of sending and receiving states, contested or otherwise (Torpey 2000; Navaro-Yashin 2012).

However, as the Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan formation should make clear, mobility regimes and foreign policy maneuvers do more than recapitulate the inside/outside divisions that constitute global political space. The peculiar case of China shows that by pairing mobility regulation with territorial redefinition, a state can facilitate the multiplication of different bordering schemes between regions it controls (eg. the Hong Kong and Macao SARs), and at the same time press irredentist claims against a different and de facto independent state (eg. Taiwan), while attempting to put a lid on long-standing centrifugal pressures within its effectively-administered area (Chang 2011). The following section elaborates this observation by first providing background on related PRC territorial schemes, and then analyses the specific case of the Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan formation.

### **Assembling and simulating the spaces of Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan**

The PRC’s multifarious territorialization projects have been diverse, creative, improvisational, inconsistent, and revisionist, spanning sea and land alike. One has included the rezoning of a vast area of ocean as a city—the Sansha prefectural-level “city” in the contested South China Sea encompasses only 13 square kilometers of land, but includes 2 million total square kilometers of the surrounding waters of the Spratlys and Paracels (Cartier 2013). The establishment of Sansha City presses the PRC’s claim to sovereignty over the extent of the entire territory, argues Carolyn Cartier, who noted that the

declaration by the Hainan provincial governor and provincial party secretary “narrates the territorializing discourse” of this new administrative arrangement (Cartier 2013, 72)

Other territorialization programs pivot on numbers as names. These frameworks famously include the One Belt, One Road, later rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative; and more pertinent to this paper, One Country, Two Systems. In the case of the former, whose potential extent covers the entire planet, a lack of explicit spatial definition has arguably extended its reach (Murton 2021). In the case of the latter, which is a scheme aimed at territories more directly claimed or administered by the PRC, a similar “Two Systems” principle, however unnamed or unrealized, was on offer for Tibet in the 1950s, decades before the phrase was articulated as a modular formula and aimed at Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan (Hung 2022). In all such cases, the capaciousness and vagueness of the formulas names and numbers enables experimentation with superficially variegated and evidently time-limited modes of sovereign rule. These modes serve as strategies to establish, expand and centralize party-state control over territories, whether or not they are officially claimed by or subjected to the exclusive sovereignty of the PRC (Ong 2004).

While the PRC aims many of its territorializing projects toward resource-rich frontier regions including Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea (Lee 2022; Oakes 2012; Mostafanezhad 2020), the imagined Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan regional formation instead spans highly urbanized, densely populated, and human capital-rich spaces informally connected by sophisticated transnational circuits of cultural production.

Although there is no available evidence of a Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan formation that precedes its bureaucratic fabrication, a notion of a linked “Hong Kong-Taiwan” (*Gang-Tai* 港台) culture did circulate in popular media at least since the 1960s—named in films, music, and magazines produced in both polities, however differently articulated through the vernacular Cantonese language of Hong Kong and the official Mandarin of Taiwan (Barme 1999; Gold 1993). That said, it took a institutional invention to coin the neologism “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” (*Gang’Ao’Tai* 港澳台) by incorporating Macao. This occurred in 1998 with the setup of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Department of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs, informally known as the “Gang’Ao’Tai Si” (港澳台司).

MOFA’s merger of its Hong Kong & Macao office with its Taiwan office founded a new imaginary regional formation that grouped together three distinct polities with diverse modes of governance and relations with the PRC. Although these three polities feature vastly different political statuses and social histories, their “triangular” ties to PRC territorial interests and transnational relations had long been noted by officials, scholars, and other area observers even before the institutionalization of “Hong Kong-Macau-Taiwan” as a territorial imaginary. PRC leaders anticipated that a successful integration of former European colonies of

Hong Kong and Macao into the PRC would prefigure and facilitate the so-called “reunification” of Taiwan with the PRC as well (Stockwin 1979).

Geoeconomic mechanisms, including free trade deals such as the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement, signed in 2003, sped Hong Kong’s integration into the PRC. Hong Kong’s Chief Executives successively pushed for other measures to accelerate Hong Kong’s economic integration, such as inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Greater Bay Area, a megacity-region including Macao and much of Guangdong province (Lee 2022). Meanwhile, Taiwan’s civil society remained wary of the political import of such geoeconomic strategies, as I describe in later sections.

### **Discourses and devices of the simulacrum, or, How Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan became a make-believe regional formation**

Even before PRC exercised sovereignty over any of the three jurisdictions, its State Council had already set up an office in 1978 to manage Hong Kong and Macao affairs, and set up a similar office in 1988 aimed at Taiwan. By 1997 and 1998, with the respective handovers of Hong Kong by the British and Macao by the Portuguese, the situation had changed and these offices began to exercise their administrative reach. However, with Taiwan remaining self-governed and de facto independent as the of the Republic of China, the PRC’s policy to administratively group them together as Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan served as a performative, claim-making component of a broader territorializing project that projected a territorial homology between these three regions. These policies, which proceeded along dual state and party tracks, produced discursive and material effects that were projected backwards in time by reformulating past speeches, and laterally through space by reformulating mobility controls and permits.

#### ***Projecting a fabricated region back in time***

Complementing the State Council reorganization of the MOFA office for Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan Affairs, the CCP’s United Front Work Department, the agency tasked with pursuing party objectives by influencing people abroad, assigned responsibility for Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan and Overseas Chinese to its third bureau. This dual track reorganization corresponded with a reorganization and temporal reframing of citational practices attributed to leaders of the party-state that compiled sayings by past leaders and relabelled them under the “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” rhetorical umbrella.

Although Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping had certainly spoken about the politics individually—and in the case of Mao, had once even advocated for Taiwanese self-determination (Hsiao and Sullivan 1979)—the “News of the Communist Party” section of the party’s paper of record, People’s Daily, does

not list a recorded utterance of the “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” formula in the collected sayings of party leaders until after the 1998 establishment of the MOFA department. The first imputed, but post-hoc, instance is a 1977 quote by Deng Xiaoping about the need to restore links with overseas Chinese organizations and to gently implore their participants to use their foreign citizenships to the benefit of their “ancestral nation” (*zuguo* 祖国). This record makes no mention of Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan, but it is nonetheless titled, “Meeting with Overseas Chinese, Chinese Descendants, and Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwanese Compatriots on their visit to Beijing for National Day (September 29, 1977)” in a volume on the thought of Deng Xiaoping published in 1998, and listed on a page of compiled quotes labelled, “United Front Work for Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan Compatriots, and Patriotic Overseas Compatriots” (CPC United Front Work Department, [n.d.a](#)).

Deng’s successor as party leader, Jiang Zemin, confirmed the One Country, Two Systems formulation as the preferred approach for “handling the Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan problem” in a 1990 publication in People’s Daily, yet the UFWD’s first posted record of Jiang’s utterance of the phrase “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” concatenation is attributed to a 1993 talk on the economic contributions of “compatriots” to China’s modernization and development under the Reform and Opening policy: “Overseas there is the active support of (ethnic) Chinese society and Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan compatriots with economic strength.” (CPC United Front Work Department, [n.d.b](#))

Repetition of the phrase, “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” by Jiang and his successors, as well as by more plebian party figures, appeared with increasing frequency in the following years. With the multiplication of newer forms of media, such usage extended into other domains. For example, in 2022, the Xinhua media agency shared “CCP Secretary-General Xi Jinping’s Lunar New Year Greetings to all the ethnicities of the nation, to Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan Compatriots, and to Overseas Compatriots,” on the Weibo micro-blogging platform (Xinhua [2022](#)).

A related retroactive application of a territorial formula likewise occurred within Taiwan and was used to facilitate cross-border traffic between Taiwan and the PRC during the 2008 to 2016 presidency of KMT leader Ma Ying-Jeou. This formulation was the “92 Consensus”, a performative phrase that served as the rhetorical basis for China-Taiwan political and economic relations during Ma’s term. A diplomatic fiction, it referred to the apocryphal outcome of a series of meetings between quasi-official PRC and Taiwan representatives in 1992. These meetings did not actually result in any jointly-written statements, but representatives from Taiwan later claimed they had agreed with their counterparts that both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one country called “China”, with each side allowed a different interpretation of what that China is (Saunders and Kastner [2009](#)). Although the PRC played along with the “92 Consensus”, it did not ever admit to allowing different interpretations. After the end of Ma’s presidency, the PRC leadership reiterated that “One Country, Two Systems” was



their only acceptable arrangement for Taiwan, a point I will return to later in the article.

### ***Projecting a fabricated region across space***

As the “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” designation multiplied in PRC party-state controlled media, so too did it appear on spaces for border-crossing including airports and land crossings. Airports, as sites of border-crossing within bordered nation-states, both reproduce and disrupt distinctions between domestic and international space (Salter 2007), and thereby become crucial sites for the performance and enactment of territory and citizenship. Within airports in China, as well as on major booking engines such as ctrip.com, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan were consistently grouped together and represented as non-international destinations in separate terminal and display areas: “International and Hong Kong/Macau/Taiwan Flights.” The gesture was not reciprocated in Taiwan, where the terminal layout and signage continued to simply designate China-bound flights as “International”. Similarly, some Taiwanese booking engines, such as Eztravel, have grouped mainland Chinese destinations together with Hong Kong and Macau, without including Taiwan in the imputed territory of China (Rowen 2022b).

At Chinese airports and land crossings (such as at the Hong Kong-Shenzhen or Macao-Zhuhai borders), Taiwanese travelers were made to enter the same line as Chinese travelers and use “Taiwan Compatriot” travel permits (*Tai bao zheng* 台胞证) or ID cards, which became essential not only for cross-Strait border-crossing but even for domestic train ticket bookings within China. Taiwanese made light of these arrangements by playing on the homophony between the initial syllable of “Tai” (台) for Taiwan and “Dai” (呆) for idiocy, with some travelers referring to this permit as an “idiot compatriot card” (*daibaozheng* 呆胞證) (Zhang 2013).

The PRC compelled Hong Kong and Macao residents to use a device with similar functionality yet even more strongly territorially-inflected name—the Mainland Travel Permit for Hong Kong and Macau Residents, (*Gang’Ao tongbao huixiang zheng* 港澳同胞回乡证), known colloquially as the “Home Return Permit” (*huixiang zheng* 回乡证)—to cross into China. In a way, the terminology echoed the “returnee” label applied to “returned overseas Chinese” (*guiqiao* 归侨), an institutional category applied to 600,000 ethnic Chinese people who had chosen to move from southeast Asia to China in the decades that followed the founding of the PRC (Ford 2014). Similar to that earlier category, “in its very naming,” Lily Cho writes, “the ‘Home Return Permit’ highlights both the disjunction between home and citizenship for Chinese nationals in Hong Kong, and the very notion of return as the intention for this document.” This device made traveling the short distance to cross the border to Shenzhen into “a deeply local and strangely outernational activity” (Cho 2017, 192).

However strange and “outernational” their own mobility was rendered, a personal anecdote from an acquaintance who grew up in Hong Kong and attended an Ivy League US university helps to illustrate the effect of such a simulation of territory even on the elite and highly-educated: When applying to study Mandarin at a language center in Taiwan, they explained to the admissions interviewer that one of their reasons to choose Taiwan was wanting to better understand its implementation of “One Country, Two Systems”. The interviewer politely said, “We don’t quite use that term here”.

Indeed, the vast majority of Taiwanese neither used that term nor accepted its geopolitical implications even during the Ma administration’s deployment of the “92 Consensus”. Even then, as now, at Taiwanese airports’ Immigration and Customs zones, PRC nationals, including Hong Kong and Macao residents, queued up with international travelers in the “Non-Republic of China passport holder” line. ROC passport holders entered the line for local nationals, which did not use the word “Taiwan” and is labeled for “Passport holders of the Republic of China” (Rowen 2022a).

On September 1, 2018, the PRC added an extra prop to the triangular performance of homologous territory and citizenship when it began issuing a new class of ID cards, the “Residence Permit for Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan Residents,” to complement the still-required travel permits. The State Council announced the changes as if the three territories were a single entity, and issued the IDs in two flavors—Hong Kong/Macao and Taiwan. The IDs appear indistinguishable from each other except for the names (Hong Kong/Macao vs Taiwan), and are otherwise identical to mainland Chinese ID cards, except for the inclusion of corresponding Mainland Travel Permit numbers and the omission of ethnic classification (as in mainland China). The move, said the State Council announcement, was meant to ensure citizenship rights and facilitate the provision of social services (PRC State Council 2018).

Yet, just a few months after the cards were issued, the Two Systems premise of rule in Hong Kong began to collapse, making the simulated reterritorialization of Taiwan by way of identity documents, administrative designations, and other devices of territorial simulation that much harder to maintain.

### **Demise of the territorial simulacrum**

Although the territorial simulacrum of “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” was instituted for irredentist ends, geoeconomic overreach in Taiwan and the deferral and eventual reversal of Hong Kong’s promised democratization annihilated its verisimilitude. The stage ruptured violently in 2014 with the outbreak of major demonstrations, first Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement and then Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement.

Both movements were triggered by fears of “Mainlandization”. If the Ma administration’s steadfast invocation of the 92 Consensus temporarily

maintained the actually exceptional “status quo” of Taiwan’s de facto independence, it also fueled popular suspicion that forces on both sides of the Strait planned to use state and market mechanisms to enact political unification with or annexation by the PRC. It was the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement, which would have propelled economic integration of sensitive industrial sectors, and which nearly passed without undergoing a promised legislative review, that triggered the student-led protest that became the Sunflower Movement (2015; Ho 2019).

Taiwanese activists’ concerns were amplified during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, a 79-day, student-led, pro-democracy occupation of three major urban spaces in Hong Kong. The Umbrella Movement was triggered by the Beijing authorities’ August 2014 refusal to permit civil nominations for the election of the Special Administrative Region’s Chief Executive. This decision denied Hong Kong voters the ability to freely elect their own leaders, and instead would force them to choose between three candidates pre-selected by a committee that was ultimately controlled by the Beijing leadership. This anti-democratic ruling incensed Hong Kongers who had been promised that their political autonomy would be preserved for 50 years following the 1997 handover under the One Country, Two Systems formulation.

The crackdown on Hong Kong’s civil society that followed the Umbrella Movement served as a further warning to Taiwan, annihilating space through time by transposing the presumed spatial isomorphism between the two territories into a dystopic temporal trajectory. The warning was encapsulated by the slogan, “Today Hong Kong, Tomorrow Taiwan” (*Jintian Xiang Gang, mingtian Taiwan* 今天香港, 明天台灣), which although coined before both movements, spread ever more vigorously during the demonstrations as a warning to Taiwanese civil and political society. It implied that acceptance of the “One Country, Two Systems” scheme would not serve Taiwan’s interest (2014). The slogan proliferated in online and offline spaces of movement supporters, was exhorted during talks and lectures in free speech zones, and debated in popular media outlets.

Even before the Umbrella Movement, the “Mainlandization” (*daluhua* 大陸化) of Hong Kong, including transformations to its public spaces and modes of governance, was closely watched in Taiwan, but the attention took on new impetus with the outbreak of protests. Early on, Sunflower activists demonstrated in solidarity with their Hong Kong counterparts. At the beginning of the Umbrella Movement, after student demonstrators were met with police tear gas on September 28, 2014, Taiwanese activists, including Sunflower icon Chen Weiting, stormed the Hong Kong trade office in Taipei. They decried police brutality, demanded a halt to all talks with China, and later staged demonstrations in Liberty Square, site of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall and an important venue for earlier waves of Taiwanese student demonstrations, including the Wild Strawberry and Wild Lily Movements. Said Lau Ka-yee, a women’s rights

activist from Hong Kong, speaking to the crowd, “Taiwanese often say that today’s Hong Kong will be tomorrow’s Taiwan. However, I think: ‘Today’s Hong Kong is today’s Taiwan’ is closer to the truth. People need to gain a sense of urgency” (2014). Meanwhile, several Taiwanese activists flew to Hong Kong to demonstrate in solidarity, and many Hong Kong activists expressed support for Taiwan’s social movements to me in interviews. “If this doesn’t work, maybe we’ll try to emigrate to Taiwan,” was a half-serious refrain I heard directly from many Umbrella activists while conducting research in Hong Kong.

The reflection on the Umbrella Movement by Lin Fei-fan, Sunflower leader and later DPP official, published in *Foreign Policy* as “Today’s Hong Kong, Today’s Taiwan,” encapsulates shared concerns from a Taiwanese perspective:

The main goal of the “one country, two systems” policy by which China governs Hong Kong is to provide a template for Taiwan, but the developments of recent years clearly show China placing increasingly tight restrictions on Hong Kong’s self-governance. It’s not just that China has reneged on its promise that Hong Kong’s system would remain “unchanged for 50 years.” A more serious problem is that conflicts within Hong Kong society have proliferated. The wealth disparity there cannot be solved via existing structures, and the huge influx of mainland tourists, as well as mainlanders who become Hong Kong residents, have also created even more social problems. Taiwan faces similar concerns. We have seen that Taiwan and the Chinese government have signed a number of trade agreements exposing Taiwan to industrial outsourcing, falling salaries, increases in the disparity between rich and poor, national security risks, and other crises (2014).

Unlike Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement, which quashed the trade bill it targeted and prefigured a nationwide electoral consolidation around the pro-autonomy Democratic Progressive Party, the Umbrella Movement ended without wresting any concessions from Beijing, which led to further socio-political polarization (Ho 2019). Some Umbrella elements evolved into what later became described variously as ‘nativist’ or ‘localist’ movements. As put by Yuen and Chung, “the protests helped to create a loose network of activists and supporters aligned around the imperative to protect the interests of the local population and autonomy from the growing influence of China, which would be reactivated after the Umbrella Movement” (Yuen and Chung 2018, 22). These groups comprised diverse ideological elements, including nascent ethno-nationalists and independence supporters as well as advocates for structural economic adjustments and enhanced social welfare programs (2017). The movement was further fueled by Hong Kong’s growing income inequality and dwindling job prospects for youth, with young activists and international diplomats (Bush 2019) alike speculating that collusion between local oligarchs and the CCP might have been driving political and economic woes (2013).

In January 2019, Xi Jinping undermined whatever vague possibility the phantasm of the “92 Consensus” still afforded for cross-Strait cooperation when he delivered a speech asserting that both sides of the Taiwan Strait belonged to the same Chinese nation (Bush 2019). He further insisted that unification of Taiwan and Mainland China under a “One Country, Two Systems” framework, similar to that of Hong Kong, was a historical inevitability. This speech was widely panned in Taiwan’s public sphere. Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen responded with a strongly-worded rejection of Xi’s claims, which was articulated through a normative commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Her speech saw her approval numbers rise dramatically, a striking turnaround after her party suffered humiliating losses in the December 2018 city and county elections (Horton 2019).

Explosive protests followed the next year in Hong Kong, dealing a mortal blow to the pretense of the One Country, Two Systems scheme in Hong Kong and any remaining fantasy of popular acceptance of its imposition on Taiwan. The 2019 protest wave was a response to the SAR government’s introduction of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Bill, informally known as the extradition law amendment bill (ELAB). ELAB would have allowed extradition of accused criminals in Hong Kong to face prosecution within mainland China (Ku 2020). The case initially cited by the government as the rationale for the law was that of a Hong Kong man who had killed his pregnant girlfriend in Taiwan. Hong Kong and Taiwan had no formal arrangement for criminal justice collaborations, with meant that there was no way to extradite him for investigation or trial. Without having negotiated such a framework on equal terms, Taiwan’s government expressed concern about the law’s broader implications for national sovereignty, and said that it may warn its own citizens not to travel to Hong Kong for fear of extradition to mainland China (Purbrick 2019).

As protests turned pitched and police response turned violent, many Hong Kong activists attempted to seek refuge or even immigrate to Taiwan, only to be held back by Taiwan’s legal system and domestic political concerns, which are further conditioned by the restrictions of the Republic of China’s constitution (a document promulgated in early Republican China and later imposed on Taiwan in 1945 by the occupying KMT), and aggravated by the security worries of some Taiwanese lawmakers concerned about infiltration (Nachman and Hioe 2019). Nonetheless, by 2020, droves of Hong Kong people came to observe Taiwan’s election campaigns, where they received loud exclamations of support from Taiwan’s incumbent president Tsai Ing-wen, who was re-elected in a landslide on a platform that advocated democracy and self-determination (Kang 2020; Steger 2020).

Later that same year, Beijing directed the Hong Kong administration to pass the National Security Law, a “nuclear option that was poised to annihilate the movement and ruin Hong Kong’s global city status, portending irreparable

collateral damage to China” (Lee 2022, 67). As scores of activists faced arrest, the territory’s history as a British colony was itself undone by an increasingly strident Beijing-dominated administration: The Hong Kong Department of Education rewrote its textbook curriculum to state that Hong Kong had not been colonized by Britain, but rather occupied. The strategy was likely aimed to pre-empt calls for self-governance or independence that could be couched under the auspices of the United Nations, a venue through which Taiwan has also pursued international legitimation (Bartmann 2008; Newland 2022).

The backward-facing rewriting of Hong Kong’s colonial history corresponded with its accelerated incorporation into yet another imaginary regional formation, the Greater Bay Area, spanning it, Macao and much of Guangdong province. With the time horizon of the PRC’s promised annexation of Taiwan receding indefinitely, this newer “bayspeak” (Meulbroek, Peck, and Zhang 2023) seemed set to supplant Strait talk, at least for domestic audiences. Such a rescaling of Hong Kong from “Asia’s World City” to a mere component of China’s Greater Bay Area (Bennett 2021) looked poised not only to speed its “Mainlandization”—or, rather, its colonization (Vickers and Morris 2022)—but also to supersede the diminishing Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan formation.

## Conclusion

The case of Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan shows that by fabricating an imaginary regional formation, a state can facilitate the multiplication of different bordering schemes between and within territories it effectively administers, while at the same time press irredentist claims against a different and de facto independent state. However, the PRC’s stitching together of a “Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan” regional formation, and the intensification of the fantasy that these distinct polities share identical (sub)sovereign status, has proved its own undoing.

The imaginary formation of Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan, already tenuous at best during the early 2010s period of relatively liberal PRC governance, spiralled apart through the centralization of party-state power under Xi Jinping. Rather than compel unification and forge cultural unity, the PRC’s performative co-production of territory and citizenship instead amplified self-determination movements within both Hong Kong and Taiwan. In dialectical fashion, the authoritarian retrenchment of the territorial simulacrum appears to have accelerated its annihilation.

The projection of the simulation back in time—the reattribution of statements about the three regions to past leaders, coinciding with the centralization of the entire party-state apparatus under a current leader of interminable tenure—has foreclosed alternative imaginations of the future, whether institutional, actual, or otherwise. Nevertheless, if the past offers any guide, such futures, whether separate or shared, peaceable or catastrophic, approach in ways that may yet exceed the party’s grasp.

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