

FROM DISSENT TO DISCIPLINE: DEMOCRACY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong's political evolution since the 2019 protests has intensified Beijing's recalibration of governance under the rubric of "democracy with Chinese characteristics." Through the enactment of the National Security Law, sweeping electoral reforms, and the institutionalisation of the "patriots governing Hong Kong" principle, the city has transitioned from pluralistic contestation to a well-ordered participation model. Yet limited attention has been given to how Hong Kong is deployed as a showcase for legitimising China's democratic paradigm. This article addresses whether Hong Kong can still be considered a "semi-democracy," and, if not, what alternative classification is appropriate. Drawing on official white papers, policy addresses, and key legal texts, the analysis situates Hong Kong within wider debates on the operationalisation of "democracy with Chinese characteristics" and the resilience of authoritarian governance.

Keywords: Democracy with Chinese characteristics, semi-democracy, authoritarian governance, Hong Kong's political institutions

INTRODUCTION

The mass resignation of Hong Kong's pro-democracy lawmakers in November 2020, following Beijing's disqualification of four colleagues, marked a decisive rupture. With a single stroke, the city's legislature lost its opposition bloc. It is a moment widely interpreted outside China as the final dismantling of Hong Kong's fragile democratic promise.

For Beijing, however, the episode was less an erosion than an assertion. It crystallised an alternative vision of political legitimacy: one that asserts liberal standards cannot solely measure democracy. While external observers downgraded Hong Kong's democratic ranking, Beijing dismissed such indices as irrelevant, instead promoting its own framework of "democracy with Chinese characteristics." Grounded in sovereignty, state leadership, and performance legitimacy, this model is presented as attuned to China's "national conditions and realities" (State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2021). In doing so, it not only redefines Hong Kong's political order but also positions China's narrative in direct contestation with the presumed universality of liberal democratic norms.

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BEIJING’S REINTERPRETATION OF DEMOCRACY

Beijing has never rejected democracy outright. Rather, it has progressively reconfigured the concept to reinforce regime legitimacy and project a favourable national image (Gallagher, 2024). Since 2012, this effort has taken institutional form in models such as “consultative democracy” and “whole-process people’s democracy.” Although couched in the language of participation, these are not Habermasian arenas of open deliberation but Party-led mechanisms designed to manufacture consensus and underscore state authority (Cabestan, 2019).

Concurrently, the Chinese leadership has sought to claim the mantle of democracy itself. Through the Socialist Core Values campaign, “democracy” is celebrated as a national virtue alongside prosperity and harmony. However, the term is stripped of its liberal associations and redefined as unity, stability, and performance. In this formulation, democracy is not grounded in individual rights or pluralism but in the strength and rejuvenation of the state (Miao, 2021). These logics are no longer abstract. They increasingly underpin Beijing’s political restructuring in Hong Kong, where “democracy with Chinese characteristics” is presented both as an antidote to liberal norms and as a showcase of China’s governance model.

DEMOCRACY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS IN HONG KONG

As Hong Kong’s political landscape has evolved, the central government has continually reinterpreted the meaning of democracy in the city. This reinterpretation is articulated in official texts, such as the White Papers, Chief Executive Policy Addresses, the National Security Law, and the 2021 Decision on Improving the Electoral System. Within this context, participation is reframed as regulated inclusion, legitimacy is anchored in governance performance, and democratisation is depicted as emanating from the central government’s authority. Hong Kong thus operates both as a site for applying these principles and as a platform through which Beijing projects its governance model as an alternative to liberal democratic norms.

Table 1. Projection of “Democracy with Chinese Characteristics” onto Hong Kong’s Political System Since 2019

Dimension	CCP’s Conception of Democracy	Projection in Post-2019 Hong Kong
Conceptual Framing	Prosperity, stability, and social order	Priorities “One Country” over “Two Systems”; the central government’s “comprehensive jurisdiction”
Participation	Top-down, Party-control; public participation is allowed only under Party-defined boundaries	“Patriots governing Hong Kong”; Swear allegiance to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the People’s Republic of China

Role of the Party-state	Both guarantor and interpreter of democracy	Hong Kong's system is derivative of, delegation and authorisation, central authority; Hong Kong's democracy "should be guided by the central authorities"
Legitimacy Function	Instrument of regime legitimacy, anchored in "national rejuvenation"	Ensure economic development, the improvement of governance, and national security
International Projection	A marker of international status and sovereignty	Democracy in Hong Kong, under the guidance of the central authority is suitable for Hong Kong's context and a stable alternative

Source: Author's own

Table 1 illustrates how "democracy with Chinese characteristics" is projected onto Hong Kong's governance through thematic analysis across five dimensions: conceptual framing, participation, role of the state/party, legitimacy function, and international projection. Rather than interpreting Hong Kong's political trajectory solely as institutional decline, it is more revealing to situate it within Beijing's broader redefinition of democracy. The post-2019 reforms represent a deliberate effort to align the city with the governance logic of the Chinese Communist Party. In this sense, Hong Kong is not merely being managed but actively re-scripted: both as a laboratory for institutionalising "democracy with Chinese characteristics" and as a showcase through which Beijing presents its model as a counterpart and a challenge to liberal democratic norms on the global stage.

IS "DEMOCRACY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS" IN HONG KONG A DEMOCRACY?

Since the 1997 handover, Hong Kong has occupied a political in-between: distinct from the mainland yet far from a full democracy. Under "One Country, Two Systems," it preserved the rule of law, partial electoral mechanisms, and civil liberties. This uneasy balance led some observers to describe it as a "semi-democracy," where limited pluralism coexisted with the absence of universal suffrage. That equilibrium has now been fundamentally altered. The post-2019 restructuring has provoked fierce debate over whether Hong Kong still qualifies as a democracy at all. Beijing insists the measures represent democratic progress tailored to China's conditions, whereas some local scholars view shrinking participation and the elimination of opposition as unmistakable signs of regression (Tai et al., 2020; Chan, 2022).

As Schmitter and Karl (1991) reminded us three decades ago, democracy is less a fixed institutional design than a set of practices of accountability, participation, competition, and limits on power. Beijing's version, by contrast, elevates elite consensus, national integration, and stability as democratic virtues. The core tension

lies in whether such priorities can be reconciled with, or must be understood as diverging from, liberal-democratic standards.

From this perspective, Hong Kong's post-2019 transformation signals not the disappearance of democracy but its redefinition. Electoral institutions remain; however, the scope for competition and pluralism has markedly narrowed. What persists is form with diminished substance, echoing Diamond's (2002) notion of pseudodemocracy. The National Security Law and revamped electoral rules redraw the boundaries of engagement, pointing to deliberate recalibration rather than simple rollback.

The emerging system resembles hegemonic electoral authoritarianism: elections occur, but outcomes are carefully managed. Norms of mutual toleration and institutional restraint, identified by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) as essential to democratic endurance, have eroded, evident in the disqualification of opposition candidates, the tightening of judicial oversight, and mounting pressure on civil society.

Under the "patriots governing Hong Kong" doctrine, central authority is further entrenched. The Candidate Eligibility Review Committee exemplifies this top-down design, narrowing participation while preserving the trappings of electoral legitimacy. Hong Kong thus functions both as a laboratory for governance innovation and a showcase of Beijing's adaptive statecraft. Its trajectory is less a linear descent into authoritarianism than a reconfiguration that compels us to grapple with alternative claims about what democracy can mean in different cultural and constitutional settings.

CONCLUSION

The case of Hong Kong offers a useful refinement to prevailing typologies of pseudo democracy. It illustrates how hegemonic electoral authoritarianism functions both as a mechanism of domestic power centralisation and as a platform for advancing alternative interpretations of democratic legitimacy. In this model, democracy is not rejected outright but rearticulated through a state-defined lens, grounded in cultural narratives and normative claims that diverge from liberal-democratic standards. This evolution from democratic constraint to conceptual redefinition signals a shifting terrain in regime legitimation strategies. Future research on Hong Kong must therefore move beyond simple binaries of democracy versus authoritarianism. Instead, it should interrogate how hegemonic electoral authoritarianism operates as a strategic intermediary form, blending institutional continuity with systemic closure, to align subnational governance with the ideological imperatives of an evolving Party-state.

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