“One Country, Two Systems”:
Why Taiwan Citizens Reject Beijing’s Overture?

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(Rough Draft)
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Hong Kong, a city of 7.4 million people, has witnessed a series of protests of unprecedented scale in recent months, which have attracted world-wide attention. The protests began over a proposed extradition bill that would have allowed Hong Kong citizens to be sent to China for trial. Designated as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) after the handover of the British colony to China in 1997, a series of large-scale protests have since erupted, representing fundamental challenges to Beijing’s unification plan known as “one country, two systems.” Despite the repeated backlashes, Chinese leaders continue to boast the plan as a “scientific invention” and envisage the same formula be imposed on Taiwan.

Indeed, Chinese leaders have never abandoned the idea of “reunifying Taiwan with the motherland” after Communist troops drove the government of Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT) off the mainland in 1949. In a major policy address at the 40th anniversary of the “message to Taiwan Compatriots” in January 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping, as all Chinese leaders have done since 1980s, indicated that the “one country, two systems” plan would be the only viable option for Taiwan (Xi, 2019). Xi’s call immediately encountered a rebuke from Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and other Taiwanese politicians including Han Kuo-yu, the nominee of the KMT for the 2020 presidential election, who has embraced an engagement approach toward China. The island politicians’ strong reactions are reflections of Taiwan citizens’ overwhelming opposition to Beijing’s unification plan. What is Beijing’s “one country, two systems” unification plan? Why have people on Taiwan strongly opposed it? Employing survey data collected in Taiwan, this study will address these questions and examine the policy implications for both the government in Beijing and in Taipei.

Beijing’s “One Country, Two Systems” Plan

After the KMT government fled to Taiwan in 1949, Taipei leaders vowed to “recover the Chinese mainland.” In their attempt to re-claim the status as the sole legitimate rulers of China, Taipei leaders upheld the “one China” principle and advanced the unification of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland as a sacred mission. They also used a variety of prejudicial measures to foster the “greater China identity” on the island. The goal was to make local residents accept the view that both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland were parts of China and that China was their motherland.

Similarly, leaders in Beijing have also advanced the goal of unifying Taiwan with the Chinese mainland. As the scar of “the Century of Humiliation” deeply imbedded in China’s painful history, Chinese leaders consider “Taiwan’s return to the motherland” as an important step toward national rejuvenation. To entice Taipei into unification talks, Beijing has offered the “one country, two systems” plan which was first raised in 1979 (NPC Standing Committee, 1979; Wen Qing, 1990). Unlike the Korean and the German models of unification, in which each side treats the other substantially as an equal, Beijing’s plan considers Taiwan only as a local government under Beijing’s command but one that will enjoy a high degree of autonomy (State Council of the PRC, 1993; Taiwan Affairs Office, 2000). Essentially, the plan prescribes that Taiwan be unified under
the principle of “one China” with Beijing being the central government and Taiwan, a local special administrative region (hence the “one country”). After the proposed unification, the Chinese mainland continues the practices of socialism/communism while Taiwan retains its capitalist system and enjoys a high degree of autonomy (hence the “two systems”). To force Taipei to accept its unification proposal, Beijing has isolated Taiwan internationally, backing up its claim over the island with the threat of military force.

During the ensuing decades, as the Communist regime on the Chinese mainland continues on its path of authoritarianism, Taiwan has transformed itself from a one-party authoritarian regime to a full-fledged democracy with robust electoral competition between two principal parties. With rapid economic development and democratization, the previously impoverished one-party authoritarian state has become a prosperous and vibrant democracy. Taiwan now has popularly elected officials, an independent judicial system and, with the strong support from the United States, an effective national defense. The constitutional changes during the democratization process, however, have diluted the heritage and the mission brought by the KMT from the Chinese mainland. The concurrent indigenization efforts by the pro-independence DPP governments have further moved the island citizens away from the “Greater China identity.” The rising Taiwan identity has placed the long-held cause of unification into question.

Interestingly, since the idea was raised in 1979, China’s unification plan was first implemented in Hong Kong and in Macao after their handover to China in 1997 and in 1999, respectively. The implementation of Beijing’s “one country, two systems” plan in the two former colonies has been far from what it has promised. The 1991 Basic Law of HKSAR, for instance, stipulates that it “shall enjoy a high degree of autonomy” and “the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years.” It also provides an “ultimate aim” of selecting the chief executive and Legislative Council through “universal suffrage.” Critiques, however, point out that the Beijing government has undercut such a commitment every step of the way since 1997 (e.g., Hui, 2017). First of all, the chief executive of Hong Kong is elected by an election committee of 1200 members whose members are elected from 4 sectors with each composing of a number of subsectors with a total of 38 subsectors that represent “various trades, professions, labor and social welfare groups as well as district organizations” (Election Affairs Commission, n.d.). The electoral system for the Legislative Council is set up in such a way that only half of the 70 members are popularly elected through five geographical constituencies. The other 35 members are elected through functional constituencies with limited electorates. These are complicated electoral systems which defy the democratic principle of “one person one vote with equal value.” The systems allow Beijing to easily manipulate the electoral outcome. Chinese leaders also watered down democratic reform with a proposal that required vetting candidates for the chief executive position before they are presented for a popular election. Because the proposal essentially allowed leaders in Beijing to pre-screen candidates, it sparked large-scale protests known as the “Umbrella Movement” of 2014.

Despite the repeated backlashes in Hong Kong, Chinese leaders have insisted that Taiwan be unified with the mainland under the “one country, two systems” plan. Indeed, for nearly three decades, Beijing has not changed its offer to Taipei. In the two white papers issued in 1993 and

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1 The Election Committee comprised of 800 members from 1998 to 2012.
2000, Beijing systematically outlined components of its unification plan. To show their generosity, Chinese leaders promised that “[o]n the premise of one China, both sides can discuss any subject” (State Council, 1993). This would include the national flag and the name of the country. They also indicated that they were “prepared to apply a looser form of the ‘one country, two systems’ policy in Taiwan than in Hong Kong and Macao” (TAO, 2000). In his January 2019 speech, Chinese President Xi repeated these messages. After recounting China’s painful history of national humiliation, Xi emphasized that “compatriots across the Straits are all Chinese who share natural kinship and national identity.” He called on Taiwan compatriots to join their mainland brethren to achieve the goal of national unification. Like his predecessors, he again offered the “one country, two systems” plan to Taiwan. While his tone firmly indicated that this would be the only viable plan, he again hinted that through “explor[ing] a Taiwan plan” the island country would get a better deal than Hong Kong and Macao. He stressed that Beijing’s unification plan would fully guarantee Taiwan citizens’ “private property, religious beliefs and legitimate rights and interests” and respect Taiwan citizens’ “life style and social system.” While he pledged that Beijing’s effort of unification would be peaceful, he also emphasized that “we make no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means” (Xi, 2019).

What are Taiwan’s Reactions?

Studies have shown that there is a rising Taiwanese identity on the island (Wang, 2019). Figure 1 summarizes the island citizens’ views on the political and cultural differences between China and Taiwan in a recently conducted survey (Cheng, 2019). It shows that close to 40% of the respondents feel that they have roots in the Chinese culture but close to three-fourths of them view Taiwan as an independent and separate country from China. Despite the island’s close economic ties with the mainland, the island residents have overwhelmingly opposed political integration with China and exhibited no appetite of entertaining the seemingly generous offer from Beijing. Figure 2 presents the results of a survey conducted about 15 years ago. It shows that close to 50% of the respondents consider Beijing’s unification plan unacceptable. In particular,
when the limitations that are likely to accompany with the plan are considered, very few of Taiwan citizens find the plan appealing. These include limiting Taiwan’s rights of judicial adjudication, conducting foreign affairs, ability to acquire arms from foreign countries or electing public officials. As the Figure shows, more than two-thirds of Taiwan citizens opposed the “one country, two systems” unification plan when details of the plan were considered (Wang and Liu, 2004).

![Figure 2. Unwillingness to accept the “One Country, Two Systems” plan, if...](image)

Taiwan citizens’ skepticism about Beijing’s offer is fully exhibited in a recently conducted survey (Cheng, 2019). When being presented with Beijing’s assurances that, under the “one country, two systems” plan, 1) the life in Taiwan would remain unchanged, and 2) the government and the military would be run by Taiwanese, 90% of the respondents show little confidence in these pledges, as Figure 3 show. Such negative sentiments should not be surprising as nearby Hong Kong has provided a vivid example of what life would be if Taiwan were unified with the Chinese mainland under Beijing’s unification plan. Figure 4 shows that over 60% of the Taiwan citizens consider life of the former colony getting worse since the handover in 1997. Only 4% of them possesses a positive view. Taiwan citizens’ views of life in Hong Kong as a China’s special administrative region are highly correlated with their confidence in Beijing’s pledges, as Figure 5 demonstrates. Indeed, about 50% of the respondents who consider Hong Kongers’ life has improved under the “one country, two systems” unification plan believe in Beijing’s pledges. Note that only a very small minority of Taiwan citizens possess such a favorable view. Those who believe Hong Kongers’ life has been “about the same” also show little confidence in Beijing assurances. For those who see the former colony’s promised freedoms have been eroded under the “one country, two systems” plan, they show zero confidence in Beijing’s promises. Clearly, the erosion of Hong Kong’s promised freedoms since 1997 has strengthened Taiwan’s opposition to “one country, two systems” and heightened fears of political integration with China. Taiwan citizens are not willing to sacrifice their hard-won political rights and national autonomy under a democratic system.
Figure 3. Do you Have Confidence in Beijing's Pledges that after unification...

- Taiwan's life unchanged
- Governed by Taiwanese

Figure 4. Life in Hong Kong since 1997

- Better
- About the same
- worse
Conclusion

The above analysis has shown that few people on the island possess a favorable view of Beijing’s “one country, two systems” unification proposal. Two factors explain such a sentiment. First of all, there has been an emergence of Taiwan-centered identity. While many island citizens continue to feel that they have roots in the Chinese culture, the vast majority of them consider Taiwan to be an independent and separate political entity from the Chinese mainland. Second, the erosion of promised freedom in Hong Kong provides a vivid example of what the life would be should Beijing’s “one country, two systems” plan be imposed on the island. As Taiwan has become a full-fledged democracy, most island citizens have no desire to be a part of China under Beijing’s unification plan. In their minds, in entering into an agreement like the “one country, two systems” they will have nothing to gain but much to lose.

Beijing leaders have so far not shown any sign of offering any incentives for Taiwan residents to accept their unification plan. Chinese President Xi’s January 2019 address was primarily a restatement of Beijing’s policy toward Taiwan. Chinese leaders have also turned a deaf ear to Hong Kong citizens’ recent cries for democratic reform. Instead, there are signs that the Beijing government is in the process of tightening its grip over the former colony in order to establish “a legal system and enforcement mechanism for safeguarding national security” in Hong Kong (BBC, 2019). Considering that Taiwan citizens pay close attention to the former colony’s political development since 1997, any change to what would be perceived as eroding Hong Kongers’ freedom would have negative effect on Beijing’s hope for a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait disputes. Chinese leaders will need to be creative in their proposals to Taiwan residents if they are truly committed to resolving the cross-Strait conflicts peacefully.
Reference


