



The 1967 Riots and Hong Kong's Tortuous Internationalization

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Received: 20 August 2019 / Accepted: 22 January 2020 / Published online: 1 February 2020
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Abstract

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region enjoys an inexplicable high degree of external autonomy. However, few scholars provide satisfactory answers to the origin and development of it. To fill this gap, this historical case study traces the process of how did Hong Kong develop its external autonomy. It proposes that making Hong Kong externally autonomous was a deliberate but bitter choice of the British to maintain the business confidence of Hong Kong after the 1967 riots. By bolstering up Hong Kong's international status, not only the British but also the PRC government could enjoy economically, such that it could fend off the possible geopolitical pressure from the PRC government. In the 1970s, wider geopolitical context such as Hong Kong's decolonization and changing UK-Hong Kong relations facilitated and reinforced the earlier decision of raising Hong Kong international standing so that an unprecedented degree of external autonomy could be developed. This study echoes on recent studies of the 1967 riots by putting the event in a broader international context and proposes some new directions of research regarding the external relations of Hong Kong in the late colonial era.

Keywords 1967 riots · External autonomy · International status · External relations of colonial Hong Kong, Hong Kong-China-Britain relationship

Introduction

To historians of British colonialism and decolonization, Hong Kong was an “embarrassing puzzle” because it deviated from all the rules and narratives that were

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usually applicable to colonies [1, p. 18]. One puzzling aspect is Hong Kong's exceptional high degree of external autonomy,¹ in terms of not only its participation in international organizations, but also its capacity (as a non-sovereign international actor) in signing treaties with other sovereign international actors (i.e., [2–5]). Indeed, as a Crown Colony, Hong Kong had become (associate and full) members of various international and regional organizations such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1969, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. It leads scholars to argue that Hong Kong, starting from the late colonial period, “is well qualified to be a state” [6, p. 206], having “stately attributes” [7, p. 1] yet without sovereignty of its own.

This high degree of external autonomy is even more puzzling when we compare Hong Kong with other colonies and even sovereign states. For example, while Hong Kong was able to acquire membership of the ADB in 1969, Brunei only succeeded in 2006, more than two decades after independence from British colonial rule. While Hong Kong has 53 international organization memberships at the end of colonial rule, Gibraltar and the British Virgin Islands, as British Overseas Territories, have significantly fewer international organization memberships [8]. Taiwan, a sovereign state and one of the four Asian dragon economies, also has significantly fewer international organization memberships recorded in 2017 [9]. Thus, Hong Kong's external autonomy manifested in its international status and independent treaty-making capacity is indeed exceptional for a non-sovereign actor. Some international relations scholars even assert that such unprecedented external autonomy is the core part of Hong Kong's internationalization [10, p. 288] and contribute to Hong Kong's continuous economic vibrancy [11]. How could we explain Hong Kong's unprecedented internationalization?

Broadly speaking, in existing literature, two types of explanatory logic stand out to be predominant when dealing with Hong Kong's international status. One of them tends to see the external autonomy of Hong Kong from a perspective of international law [4, 7, 12, 13]. The most well-known example is Mushkat [7], who considers the role of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 as the point of departure. He argues that with the institutionalization of Hong Kong's external autonomy originated from British colonial rule, the Basic Law provides an institutional ground for the post-colonial government to participate in the international arena under its mini-constitution. The most frequently asked question for those legal-institutional scholars is whether the HKSAR government could remain as autonomous as its colonial predecessor [12]. Some international relations scholars follow this intellectual agenda and treat the degree of external autonomy as an indicator to assess whether the quality of governance and economic competitiveness of the post-colonial government had been deteriorating (i.e., [6, 14]).

Another logic highlights the high degree of external autonomy as causally relevant to Hong Kong's economic vibrancy. For instance, Meyer [15, 16] considers the British occupation as the point of juncture that brought foreign firms, often the European conglomerates to Hong Kong (also see [17, 18]). The colony's subsequent economic

¹ The concept of external autonomy denotes “autonomy on external affairs” that allows an autonomous political entity to enter relations with other international organizations and/or actors in the international stage [19, p. 277]. In this article, the notion of internationalization and international status will be used interchangeably to refer Hong Kong's of external autonomy.

development with its extensive trading network made Hong Kong into a global metropolis that served not only the interest of the British but also the Chinese government. In his framework, economic vibrancy thus becomes the primarily reason for Hong Kong to become an international financial center. And because of it, the colony acquired an unprecedented international status, as indicated by the presence of giant financial corporations such as The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. Economists such as Zeng [19, p. 278] even put it plainly that “[a]s an autonomous regional entity, Hong Kong had enjoyed external autonomy since the late 1960s when it achieved its economic miracle.”²

These two logics, though predominant, are far from adequate to address the puzzle. First, though the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration was truly a significant event, any explanation that treats it as the only point of departure would miss other occasions that shape Hong Kong’s trajectory of internationalization. In fact, the colonial government had already acquired membership of the ADB (a newly established international organization in the mid-1960s) in 1969. Thus, an adequate explanation should also be attentive to events and process before the Sino-British Declaration. Besides, it is true that foreign conglomerates played a crucial role in bridging the Western world and China through Hong Kong, and that made the colony into a subject of international influences (i.e., [20–22]). However, having an extensive economic network and being economic vibrant did not spontaneously transform the colony and engender its high degree of external autonomy. As Lawrence Mills [23, p. 142], a former colonial official, wrote in his personal memoir, although the Hong Kong Trade Development Council “had a wide network of offices covering most of the major cities of the world,” “these [network of offices] were concerned solely with trade development, but not Hong Kong’s formal external commercial relations.” Therefore, we should not misunderstand Hong Kong’s external networks nor Hong Kong’s status of global financial center as its external autonomy. Most important of all, these two explanatory logics failed to answer what motivated the colonial government to actively step into the international arena. While some scholars stressed that sustaining economic growth through financial-led globalization and the economic restructuring in the 1980s created a need for the city to internationalize [24], as Chan argued [25], “Hong Kong... rarely has the full autonomy in driving its political and economic development.” In this regard, sustaining economic development of the city could only be seen as part of the answer as without examining the role of the metropole (i.e., London) and the concrete geopolitical landscape the answer is incomplete.

To remedy these inadequacies, this article attempts to revisit the historical process of Hong Kong’ internationalization. Echoing Chan [25], we put Hong Kong “in a dynamic and strategic international context” and argue that the geopolitical circumstance of post-war Hong Kong should not be overlooked when considering Hong Kong’s internationalization. This article shows that the 1967 riots was the key event that motivated the colonial government to acquire the ADB membership for building up business confidence, which the leftist riots undermined. Afterwards, acquisition of

² It should be noted that these two types of explanation are not mutually exclusive to each other. As Shen [63] demonstrates, the institutional design of the Basic Law provides the postcolonial government to continuously exercise its external autonomy which is a crucial aspect of ensuring Hong Kong to maintain its economic competitiveness already enjoyed since the late colonial era.

international organizations' membership (or, what we called the project of internationalizing Hong Kong) became one of the survival strategies that the colonial government pursued in the post-1967 context. In brief, we argue that the year of 1967 was a critical juncture that shaped Hong Kong's trajectory of internationalization, and geopolitical circumstance of Hong Kong was relevant to the formation of the colonial government's unprecedented external autonomy and pattern of international participation.

Divided into four sections, this article begins with a brief discussion on how Hong Kong engaged with various international organizations. The discussion then moves on to illustrate how the 1967 riots motivated the colonial government to internationalize Hong Kong for retaining business confidence. Thirdly, it delineates how maintenance of confidence became a key consideration of various actors in the post-1967 period. In this way, the process of Hong Kong's internationalization became increasingly path-dependent on the choice of which the colonial government made in 1967. Finally, the conclusion discusses the features of Hong Kong's internationalization and proposes recommendations for future research regarding Hong Kong's external autonomy.

Hong Kong and Its International Engagement Before 1967

International regimes, as Krasner [26, p. 185] defined, are “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedure around which actor's expectation converge in a given area of international relations.” They emerged largely due to the needs of coordinating states' action in a more interconnected world since the first wave of globalization. In this context, colonial Hong Kong engaged in various international regimes, like multilateral treaties or agreements, and international organizations, starting from the late nineteenth century.

From 1841 to 1941

For almost a century since the British colonial rule, Hong Kong was involved in three broad areas of international regimes. The first area is communication. As an outpost of the British Empire in the Far East, Hong Kong enjoyed advanced communication facilities and was the communication hub connecting South China to the world. Unsurprisingly, Hong Kong, together with other British-dependent territories, gained its first intergovernmental organization membership in 1877 by joining the Universal Postal Union [27]. Interestingly, the first international treaty applicable to Hong Kong, Convention for the Protection of Submarine Cables of 1884 [28, p. 79], was also about communication. Moving into the twentieth century, a bundle of international treaties related to civil aviation and merchant shipping were signed by the UK and then ratified by Hong Kong, such as the Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules Relating to International Carriage by Air [3, 29] and the Convention and Statute on the International Régime of Maritime Ports [30].

The second area is transnational crime control. For example, the Agreement for the Repression of Obscene Publications was signed by the UK in 1910 [31] and was declared applicable to Hong Kong. During the interwar period, Hong Kong was also involved in a secret policing cooperation among European colonies in Southeast Asia targeted at the flourishing underground communist movement in the region. Information about

communists and communist propaganda were regularly exchanged among colonial governments of Southeast Asia [32]. They also assisted one another in tracking, arresting, and deporting communists and even share their skills in policing communism.

The third area is, of course, trading. The first multilateral trade agreement applicable to Hong Kong was the Imperial Preference, which was signed by the UK and the British Commonwealth in 1932 at Ottawa, Canada. It was a free trade agreement aimed at building up an internal market within the Commonwealth during the Great Depression [33]. Hong Kong and other colonies were all represented solely by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, while other Commonwealth dominions, such as Canada and Southern Rhodesia, were represented by their respective prime ministers. Nonetheless, the treaty turned out to be beneficial to the Hong Kong's industry, as tariffs imposed on non-Commonwealth products helped colonies exclude their competitors from the Commonwealth market. Some Hong Kong products were so competitive that made the British government to impose export restriction on products coming from the colony. In doing so, it provoked the Governor of Hong Kong to complain to the Colonial Office, saying that it would lead to mass unemployment and internal unrest in the Colony, which did not serve the interest of the British Empire. Appreciated by the Colonial Secretary, W. Ormsby-Gore, further restrictions were repulsed by the Colonial Office, but previous restrictions remained in force [33].

From 1945 to the 1960s

After the Second World War, there was an expansion of international regimes, notably on the issues of human rights and international trade. Meanwhile, Hong Kong gained bargaining power on its external trade relation owing to its strategic geopolitical position, which foreshadowed the autonomous status of Hong Kong on its external affairs.

With the influx of refugees and capital from China as a result of the establishment of the communist PRC government in October 1949, Hong Kong rapidly industrialized in the 1950s. The competitiveness of its products, such as textile, once again entailed a strong discontent from the British Industry, particularly of those in Lancashire [17, 34, 35]. Consequently, in 1958, the colonial government and the British government reached an agreement in which Hong Kong would self-restrict its textile products exporting to Britain and the Commonwealth countries. It is interesting to note that the British government did not impose an export quota unilaterally on Hong Kong, but choose to negotiate with the colonial government. This is because, as Neves [17] shows, the British had to consider the negative impact of any measures that might weaken and undermine the colony's stability. However, at the end of the quota negotiation, it was the will of the British government prevailed.

To summarize, Hong Kong did engage with various international actors before 1967. Engagement with international regimes did bring the colony onto the stage of the international arena; however, it should note that the colonial government could not set nor reject rules set by other international actors, as shown in the case of the Imperial Preference and the quota negotiation. Although the colonial government could have a say on its external economic relations, final decisions were often made by the Whitehall. Yet, as illustrated in the coming sessions, Hong Kong internal stability vis-à-vis Communist China gradually becomes the prime concern of the Whitehall, especially during the 1967 riots.

The 1967 Riots and the Geopolitical Vulnerability of Cold War Hong Kong³

Considered metaphorically by the British as the “Berlin of the East” [6, 36], Hong Kong was an enclave of the West surrounded by a communist regime—the PRC government—since 1949. Knowing that Hong Kong was militarily indefensible in front of the PRC government, British analysts recommended the Whitehall to endeavor to maintain its internal security [37], especially with the mass influx of Chinese refugees [38]. The reason behind was that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT) aimed to compete for the loyalty of the Hong Kong Chinese through their proxy agents and organizations in Hong Kong, and thus extended the battleground of the Chinese Civil War to the colony [39]. Their rivalries posed a serious risk to the colony as it “constituted a threat to [the colony’s] stability and could have a cumulative effect in undermining British rule [in Hong Kong]” [39, p. 298].

Such a risk became especially imminent after the outbreak of the Double Tenth riots in October 1956, which were caused by the clashes between the pro-CCP and the pro-KMT forces. To neutralize the influence of both camps in Hong Kong, the colonial government decided to implement different projects to integrate the Chinese refugees who came from the mainland into the Hong Kong society [40, Chapter 1]. These projects included expanding the water supply system, developing agricultural and fishing facilities, providing low-cost housing, and setting up a new university (i.e., [38, 41–44]).

While these projects were initiated since the mid-1950s, progress was far from satisfactory. For example, the colonial government had to import fresh water from China in the early 1960s after a series of droughts. This worried Governor Robert Black, who realized that overreliance on Chinese water could undermine the Hong Kong government’s authority [42]. His worry was materialized during the 1967 riots, in which the Chinese authorities refused to increase the water supply when the colony’s water supply became stringent ([45], despatch on 16 May 1968). This experience triggered the colonial government to further strengthen its water supply system through a seawater desalination project [42]. However, the loss of much fiscal surplus as a result of the 1967 devaluation of the pound sterling had substantially restrained such move of the colonial government. Eventually, this project was partly financed by the ADB after Hong Kong’s admission in 1969.

Three reasons, all related to Hong Kong’s geopolitical vulnerability and social stability, were crucial in shaping the process of Hong Kong’s acquisition of the ADB membership. First, Hong Kong’s admission was assisted by the head of the ADB, despite its non-sovereign status aroused criticism from other sovereign members. In 1963, the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) was planning to establish a multilateral development bank in the Far East, which later becomes the ADB. During a special meeting of the ECAFE, delegates from the Philippines had “referred more than once to ‘sovereign government’ of the ECAFE region,” which believed to be directed to Hong Kong ([46], minutes on 12 December 1963). This worry is fully understandable as its admission might increase British decision-making power in the ADB [47]. Yet, its admission was encouraged and

³ This section of discussion draws on our previous study [64] that shows consideration on Hong Kong’s stability under a vulnerable geopolitical position was the key in understanding Hong Kong’s admission in the ADB.

facilitated by the ADB's first president, Takashi Watanabe. In early 1967, Watanabe had flown to Hong Kong to persuade the colonial government to join the ADB. A few months later, he even suggested London be prepared for Hong Kong's admission when he was visiting Europe to introduce the ADB. A recent study [48] has revealed that the ADB was in fact backed by the Americans that acted as their tool to contain communist influence over the Far East by promoting economic growth. Hong Kong's geopolitical importance in the eye of the Americans [34] could be probably a reason for the ADB to accept its membership despite possible criticism. This, of course, would require the use of archives from the American side for confirmation.

Second, the 1967 riots changed the rationale of the colonial government towards the admission of the ADB. Originally, Hong Kong was not particularly interested in joining the ADB before the 1967 riots. But after "some consideration," the Hong Kong government changed its mind near the end of the riots ([49], memorandum on 22 September 1967), became "extremely interested in the possibility of joining the Asian Development Bank" ([49], memorandum on 18 December 1967), and decided to "join the Bank as quickly as possible" ([49], memorandum on 9 October 1967). One simple reason was, of course, related to the need of financing its seawater desalination project. But a deeper reason was to maintain the confidence of the business sector, which was damaged by the 1967 riots [50]. As stated by Governor David Trench in late 1967 regarding the future of Hong Kong,

[The] keys to the future [of Hong Kong after 1967 riot] lie in maintaining Hong Kong's confidence in self; in maintaining the confidence of the world outside in us—for if our economy fails, all fails with it—and in our ability to continue to do business; and, finally, in the attitudes towards us of a China in convulsions ([45], despatch on 25 July 1967).

In this way, joining the bank to acquire international status was not only a matter of economic development or strengthening links to the Western world, but also ultimately about the survival and the future of the colony. This view was echoed by John Cowperthwaite, the Financial Secretary of the Hong Kong government, who publicly announced Hong Kong's admission could not only boost economic development, but also "enhance Hong Kong's status in Asia and the world" [51]. In brief, retaining business confidence was regarded by the colonial government as a crucial component for the future of Hong Kong during and after the 1967 riots and Hong Kong's admission to the ADB was the mean to achieve the end of confidence building.

Third, the geopolitical vulnerability of Hong Kong had made the British government concede on Hong Kong's admission. As a dependent territory, Hong Kong had to seek financial guarantees for its subscription or borrowing from its sovereign government according to the constitution of the ADB. This might lead to unforeseeable financial consequences, a "blanket undertaking," for the British government, which were "not welcome[d]" by the Whitehall [49], memorandum on 20 March 1968). However, the UK government could hardly reject sponsoring Hong Kong's admission. This was because maintaining the confidence of the business sector was the key to stabilize Hong Kong. The British government also entailed that a "refusal ... to support Hong Kong in a course [to join the ADB] ... would inevitably be construed ... as an indication that the British Government lacked confidence in the future of the Colony" ([49], memorandum on 21 September 1967). The British authorities also maintained and emphasized that

refusing to sponsor Hong Kong's admission would be regarded as not only "a breach of faith" to the colonial government but also "damaging to world confidence in Hong Kong" ([49], memorandum on 28 March 1968). As a result, even though the Treasury opposed the idea of sponsoring Hong Kong's admission, the Whitehall had to bitterly agree on Hong Kong's admission.

Hong Kong's Internationalization After 1967

Although the colonial government successfully acquired its ADB membership in 1969, its project of confidence building was far from complete. True, the colonial government cracked down the 1967 riots and the CCP instructed the local communists to stop creating civil unrests [52]. However, the colonial government was prohibited to neutralize the communist threats like other colonial administrations did in Malaya and Kenya. This was because the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (hereafter, FCO) suggested that "too strong action would be likely to hinder the moderates in Peking and drive the extremists into active intervention," which would endanger the position of the colony ([53], minutes on 16 November 1968).⁴ It was also suggested that "policies in Hong Kong cannot be divorced from the wider context of Sino-British relations...[and] before deciding on action against the communists which may appear desirable in the local context but which is likely to arouse the ire of the Chinese [Communist] Government and thus jeopardise [Sino-British] relations..." ([53], minutes on 21 November 1969); the colonial government had to inform the FCO before taking anti-communist operations.

With this consideration in mind, the FCO and the colonial government agreed in the late 1960s that an appropriate way to deal with the local communists afterward was to tolerate their existence (as long as they complied with laws), and the colonial government had to "exercise sufficient firmness so that the Chinese reckoned that if they press on with any particular line of action, "it will either be thwarted by us or cause such a degree of disruption as to harm their interests" ([53], minutes on 16 October 1968).⁵ Here, it is important to recognize that the PRC government had used Hong Kong as a way to overcome the geostrategic containment policy imposed by the Americans since the early Cold War in the 1950s.⁶ What the British had envisaged since the 1950s [39, 50, 69] was to safeguard Hong Kong from the PRC government's interference by hedging the economic interest of the PRC government with Hong Kong. Simply put,

⁴ The prohibition of using strong measures against the local communist was also complicated by the imprisonment of a British citizen Anthony Grey in China till the end of 1969 (see [65]).

⁵ As Governor Trench reported to the FCO in 1968 that he did not pursue active direct action to close communist schools, the Hong Kong authorities had decided to regularly inspect these communist schools to ensure that the local communists did comply with the laws set by the colonial government; and "improvement of non-communist schools (to avoid children to enroll in communist schools) was the best long-term policy" to deal with the local communist in the field of education ([53], minutes on 16 November 1968). For the colonial government's strategy in dealing with the Chinese government's involvement in Hong Kong before 1967, see [38, 39, 44].

⁶ For example, during the UN embargo and following PRC's participation in Korean War in the 1950s, Hong Kong became a strategic point of which the PRC imported strategic supplies [18]; after the UN embargo, Hong Kong still remained as an important earning source of hard currency of the PRC. According to the British government estimated, in 1975, "China owns 17% of banking deposits in Hong Kong" and "Hong Kong accounted for 40–50% of all China's foreign exchange" ([66], memorandum on 3 December 1975).

the rationale of such a hedging strategy was that when the PRC government could maximize her economic gain via Hong Kong, it would deter the PRC government from interfering the internal affairs of the colony. And to do so, Hong Kong must maintain its economic vibrancy. As Governor Trench formulated in 1967, “for if our economy fails, all fails with it.” Thus, even though the 1967 riots–led confidence crisis was soon resolved in the late 1960s, the British still had to pre-empt confidence crisis which could undermine Hong Kong’s geopolitical position vis-à-vis the PRC government.

Against such geopolitical backdrops, internationalizing Hong Kong was seen as one viable means to boost up business confidence, meanwhile accomplishing the hedging strategy. That was because the colonial government, like what it did in 1967, could then create an expectation as if Hong Kong was a stable territory for conducting long-term business, attracting foreign investment, and eventually fostering economic growth that could benefit the PRC government. It also spared the colonial government for repressing the local communist, which might irritate the PRC government. As Governor Murray MacLehose wrote and his administration’s logic behind the project of increasing Hong Kong’s international standing in his despatch entitled as “Hong Kong Objectives”:

I think we should do everything we can to make Hong Kong a model city, of international standing, with high standard of education, technology and culture, as well as industrial, commercial and financial facilities, from which China can gain great benefit... ([54], despatch on 24 May 1974)

In short, the colonial government aimed to raise Hong Kong’s international standing so that the PRC government would appreciate Hong Kong as a valuable asset. Indeed, various programs initiated by the colonial government in the 1970s stressed on promoting Hong Kong’s international standing and building up international connection. For instance, policy documents concerning cultural development explicitly required the colonial officials to improve Hong Kong’s connections with neighboring territories (such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) and simultaneously demonstrate Hong Kong’s commercial and industrial values ([55], memorandum on 22 March 1979). The beginning of the 1970s was also the year that Hong Kong, for the first time, participated in international exposition (the Expo’ 70 at Osaka) to display Hong Kong’s “development and progress” [56, p. 12].

Regarding Hong Kong’s international status and participation, the British government decided that “where [economic] interests of Hong Kong and of the UK may not coincide; namely IMCO, ECAFE, ADB, the ICAC, ILO, WHO and FAO technical groups, and the WMO regional bodies...[a] separate Hong Kong representation [in these international organizations] is acceptable” ([57], minutes on 16 August 1973).⁷ Such acceptance, of course, marked a break with previous colonial practices, where representation of a dependent territory in international organizations was done mainly through a delegation of the British government. By the early 1970s, Hong Kong had already been granted the right of independent representation in international

⁷ The full name of the international organizations quoted above are Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization, Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, Asian Development Bank, The International Certification Accreditation Council, International Labour Organization, World Health Organization, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Meteorological Organization, in sequential order.

organizations (i.e., ECAFE), which could sit and operate separately with the UK delegation. It was believed that this arrangement was better for “Hong Kong to secure its own interests in various international organizations” ([57], minutes on 16 August 1973). This had greatly enhanced Hong Kong’s international status and its external autonomy because Hong Kong, as a dependent territory, could have her voice independently heard in the international arena.

It should be noted that in the course of Hong Kong’s internationalization, wider geopolitical context also facilitated and reinforced the colonial government’s decision to acquire an unprecedented degree of external autonomy adopted amid the 1967 riots. By 1969, London had finished its long-term study of Hong Kong’s future and concluded that “Hong Kong’s future must eventually lie in China” [58]. Improving Hong Kong’s international status would increase the bargaining chips of the British in the future possible negotiation [50]. More importantly, Britain’s withdrawal from the East of Suez in 1971 and its admission to the European Economic Community in 1973 marked its turn to Europe rather than retaining its status as an imperial power, creating a possible scenario of “subordination of colonial interests to European interests within Whitehall” [50, p. 329]. This divergence of interests between the British and Hong Kong offered a legitimate reason for the colonial government to resist London in external affairs, especially when global economy was rapidly transforming during the 1970s (see for example [50, 58]). Although the presence of the China factor meant that the colony would not follow, if any, conventional decolonization pathway of marching towards independence, a *de facto* “decolonization” occurred in the 1970s as London underwent a gradual power devolution towards Hong Kong that made an unprecedented degree of high degree of external autonomy possible to come.

Nonetheless, internationalizing Hong Kong as a project of confidence building to accomplish the hedging strategy was not unproblematic. The PRC government had long regarded any move advancing Hong Kong’s autonomy as an infringement of the Chinese state sovereignty [59]. The most obvious example of the PRC government’s position towards Hong Kong was its request to remove Hong Kong from the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories (NSGTs) in 1972. The removal of Hong Kong from the NSGTs nonetheless sent a strong diplomatic signal to the British government where the PRC government would not tolerate any sign of Hong Kong to become an independent territory [57], records on 16 January 1973). To the British government, Hong Kong’s existing external autonomy might lead the PRC government to perceive Hong Kong as “demonstrating self-government” in the international arena ([57], minutes on 26 February 1973). To avoid confronting the PRC government’s position over Hong Kong, and, perhaps more importantly, “a humiliating retreat for Hong Kong” in international organizations which could undermine investors’ confidence, the British government therefore decided to “maintain as low a profile as possible” regarding the question of Hong Kong’s international status and to confine Hong Kong’s external autonomy in “the more specialized, more technical, and less ‘political’ organisations” ([57], memorandum on 16 August 1973) so that the PRC government would not misunderstand Hong Kong’s international status as something equal to political independence.

The following table shows Hong Kong’s international participation from 1877 to 1997. As it shows, most, if not all, international organizations that Hong Kong participated were mostly technical and economic in nature. None of them was comparable with international organization like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which was

political and military in nature. Regarding the pattern of international participation, one can also observe that Hong Kong's international status had been greatly enhanced after 1967. Between 1967 and 1984 (within that 17 years), Hong Kong's participation in international organizations was increased by 11. In contrast, Hong Kong only participated in 8 international organizations between 1877 and 1966 (within 89 years) (Table 1).

It is difficult to tell why the PRC government would accept Hong Kong's unprecedented external autonomy because archives from the Chinese side were still unavailable. Nevertheless, given that the PRC government had been anxious to maintain, promote, and uphold Hong Kong's stability, prosperity, and public confidence since the late 1970s and especially during the Sino-British negotiations in 1982 [60, p. 218], it is reasonable to believe that the PRC government "allowed" Hong Kong to retain its pre-existing external autonomy as an expedient to maintain business confidence and support the China's economic reform. As Deng Xiaoping told, "[w]e need not only to reassure the people of Hong Kong but also to take into consideration the close relation between prosperity and stability of Hong Kong and the strategy for the development of China" [61, p. 61]. By granting Hong Kong's external autonomy to remain as members of various international organizations, the PRC government, which had yet firmly asserted its role and influence in world affairs since the opening of China in the late 1970s, could rely on Hong Kong as a proxy to defend China's national economic interest in the international stage.

Indeed, as an independent contracting party of the GATT (later, the World Trade Organization) starting from 1986, Hong Kong defended the PRC government's most-favored-nation trading status in 1994 and brought substantial economic developmental advantage to China, which was not yet a member of the GATT [3, p. 957]. Therefore, it is possible that the PRC government, based on its national interests, affirmed and institutionalized Hong Kong's pre-existing external autonomy through the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law. These two events, nonetheless, reduced the uncertainty surrounding Hong Kong's external autonomy as they explicitly informed the colonial authorities that the PRC government would tolerate Hong Kong's external autonomy, as long as it remained depoliticized.

With the Sino-British treaty and the Basic Law, the PRC government did not only confer Hong Kong to retain its unprecedented ability to sign multilateral agreements with states, regions, and international organizations but also provided a significant legal-institutional ground for Hong Kong's external autonomy [8]. This led Hong Kong's internationalization proceed along the path initiated since 1967. From 1984 to 1997, Hong Kong's memberships of international organization continued to grow by joining more 27 international organizations within that 13 years. At the end of the British colonial rule in 1997, Hong Kong acquired 53 memberships of international organizations, a number more than its incoming sovereign [3, p. 957], and became an exceptional but perhaps most active non-sovereign international actor in the world.

Conclusion

This article attempts to historize Hong Kong's international participation by process tracing how Hong Kong developed its external autonomy. While pre-1967 Hong Kong had already participated in various international regimes, Hong Kong could hardly say

Table 1 Hong Kong's international participation, 1877–1997

Period of participation	International organizations unlimited to states (year of first participation)	International organizations limited to states (year of first participation)
1877–1966	World Meteorological Organization (1948)	Universal Postal Union (1877) Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (1947) International Civil Aviation Organization (Late 1940s) Food and Agriculture Organization (1956) International Atomic Energy Agency (Early 1960s) International Labour Organization (1963) United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (1965) International Maritime Organization (1967) International Criminal Police Organization (Early 1970s) International Telecommunications Satellite Organization (1972) International Criminal Police Organization (Early 1970s) Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, Asia and Pacific (1974) Asia-Pacific Telecommunity (1979) Asian-Pacific Postal Union (1985) World Intellectual Property Organization (1988) Asian Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (1988) International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (1989) Asia Pacific Legal Metrology Forum (1994) World Organisation for Animal Health (1995) The Hague Conference on Private International Law (1997) The World Bank Group (Before 1997)
1967–1983	Typhoon Committee under the auspices of UNESCO and WMO (1968) Asian Development Bank (1969) Asian and Pacific Conference of Correctional Administrators (1980) The International Organization of Legal Metrology (1982) United Nations (Regional) Cartographic Conference for Asia and the Pacific (1982)	
1984–1997	World Customs Organization (1987) International Satellite System for Search and Rescue (1988) Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia and the Pacific (1988) Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (1990) Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (1991) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Trade Committee (1994) Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management for Asia and the Pacific (1994) International Association of Insurance Supervisors (1994)	

Table 1 (continued)

Period of participation	International organizations unlimited to states (year of first participation)	International organizations limited to states (year of first participation)
	World Trade Organization (1995; formerly known as GATT)	
	World Intellectual Property Organization (1995)	
	United Nations Environment Programme (1995)	
	Asia Pacific Heads of Maritime Safety Agencies Forum (1996)	
	Bank for International Settlements (1996)	
	Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units (1996)	
	Executives' Meeting of East Asia-Pacific Central Banks (1996)	
	International Oil Pollution Compensation Funds Committee (1997)	
	United Nations Statistical Commission (1997)	
	Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering (1997)	
	International Monetary Fund (Before 1997)	

Source: authors compiled. The full list of Hong Kong's international participation is available at <http://www.cmab.gov.hk/en/issues/external2.htm> and <http://www.cmab.gov.hk/en/issues/external1.htm>

to be externally autonomous. As we have illustrated, neither could interest of Hong Kong gain the same weight as that of the British nor could Hong Kong defend its own economic interest independently from its sovereign government. With the establishment of the PRC government in 1949, Hong Kong then became an imperial and capitalist outpost of the West at the edge of a communist regime. Though such geopolitical vulnerability of Hong Kong altered how the British approached the colonial affairs, the interest of the British mainland still prevailed that of Hong Kong in the eyes of the British.

The situation changed in the year of 1967 where the occurrence of leftist riots seriously undermined the colony's business confidence and subsequently changed the colonial government's strategy for survival. During the riots, the colonial government realized that if Hong Kong had to survive, actions would have to be taken to neutralize the possible geopolitical influences coming from the PRC (i.e., using Chinese water as a leverage). The colonial government approached this matter by requesting the British government to sponsor Hong Kong's admission to the ADB. Despite the rationale behind was primarily economic, the colonial government soon realized that joining international organizations could maintain and perhaps enhance investors' confidence in Hong Kong. While the British government did not welcome Hong Kong's admission to the ADB as this would lead to unforeseeable financial liability, this time it was the colonial government's consideration prevailed.

In the post-1967 context, following its admission to the ADB, Hong Kong gradually developed its external autonomy and became an independent actor in the international arena, ultimately participating in more than 50 international organizations at the end of the colonial period. As this study illustrates, the peculiar geopolitical circumstance of Hong Kong propelled its internationalization and gave birth to its inexplicable external autonomy. In retrospect, the year of 1967 (and the leftist riots) was obviously a critical juncture that shaped Hong Kong's trajectory of internationalization. Nonetheless, Hong Kong's internationalization was tortuous as the British had paid serious attention to the attitude of the PRC on this issue. To avoid confronting with the PRC but meanwhile to keep the pace of Hong Kong's internationalization, the British then confined Hong Kong's internationalization in an apolitical, perhaps depoliticized, pathway. In this way, China factor played an important role in the process of Hong Kong's internationalization in terms of its development of external autonomy as well as its pattern of international participation.

This article does not refute the existing explanations on Hong Kong's external autonomy but rather target to enrich them with a geopolitical-historical perspective that could better understand its origin and development. The economic prosperity of Hong Kong surely matters in its process of internationalization because, without the aim of promoting the economic prosperity of Hong Kong, it was hard to imagine that retaining Hong Kong's international status would be a viable option commonly accepted by the British and PRC government. Nonetheless, economic prosperity alone could not explain why Hong Kong would develop its external autonomy to that high degree within the post-war era. As it neglects the fact that economic interests of Hong Kong and that of Britain were not always compatible. Without the presence of the geopolitical factor, the British would not bitterly allow Hong Kong to participate independently in the international arena. Equally important, Hong Kong's international participation displayed an apolitical pattern, not because Hong Kong is an economic

city but to avoid the possible geopolitical pressure from the PRC. Explaining Hong Kong's external autonomy with a legal-institutional perspective is also inadequate because it overlooked the actual process of which Hong Kong dynamically developed its external autonomy, as the case of admission of the ADB and post-1967 process of internationalization demonstrated. Such explanation also risks putting the cart before the horse, as Hong Kong's external autonomy was indeed the result of the complicated geopolitical calculations between various parties rather than a *Deus ex machina* abruptly appeared during the 1980s when the PRC and the British government were negotiating about Hong Kong's future. As this study shows, the origin and development of Hong Kong's external autonomy are more of a geopolitical story, far more complicated than extant studies would have us to see.

This article also enriches the scholarship of the 1967 riots and gives new research direction on Hong Kong's external relations. Echoing with Yep and Bickers [62] who remind us to be conscious of the historical/contextual factor and consider the "calculations of the British government that concern higher national interest, such as diplomatic relationships with China," our research focuses on the impact of the leftist riots on Hong Kong's external autonomy—a rather understudied subject in the literature on 1967 riots—instead of its influence on Hong Kong's domestic governance [52]. With the declassification of British archives on the Sino-British negotiations in the 1980s, there may be clues on how the PRC government viewed Hong Kong's external autonomy, the wrestle between Britain and China on this issue, and their reason(s) to agree on this final arrangement in the Sino-British Joint Declaration. On the other hand, more research can be conducted to assess the role of Hong Kong in safeguarding China's national interest in the international arena through its exercising of external autonomy in the post-1967 period.

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