

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE HKPF

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Lau Chak Kei, a member of the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF), doesn't think he deserves the scorn he has faced since the Associated Press published a picture of him pointing his shotgun at protesters in early July. A few days later, the Chinese state media invited him onto their evening program *Xinwen Lianbo*, the [most-watched](#) news show in the world, so he could tell his side of the story. "How can you hurt someone who is a stranger to you simply because he is a policeman?" he asked an audience of over 100 million.



Lau Chak Kei, a member of the Hong Kong Police Force, points his beanbag-loaded shotgun at unarmed protesters on June 9. | © *South China Morning Post*, June 2019

When I first read Lau's question, I scoffed. But then I learned that the history of the HKPF makes his curiosity very likely sincere. If there could be an ideal police force, the HKPF tries to fill that role. All its members are employed as [politically-neutral civil servants](#) and take great pride in being "Asia's finest." This summer, however, the force has risked its [reputation](#) to uphold government orders that choke every Hongkonger's individual freedoms, including those of the officers. I have been thinking about how Lau's question is so detached from the image of him aiming at unarmed protesters, and I am so curious: what is the HKPF fighting for? And who do they think is on their side?

Throughout its history, the HKPF has played many roles. Founded in 1841 by British settlers, the HKPF once enforced Qing law for the island's native population and British law for its non-native inhabitants. In 1967, the force earned a royal title from the British government after it successfully repressed communist riots. The department dropped its royal title in 1997 when the United Kingdom handed Hong Kong back to China. Ever since, the HKPF has been an independent jurisdiction of China's Ministry of Public Security. Today, the force is comprised of more than 30,000 officers with a [vision](#) to maintain Hong Kong as one of the safest and most stable societies in the world.

In the last 100 days, the police have jeopardized that vision and irreparably shattered their reputation. This June, Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam proposed an Extradition Bill that would threaten the freedom of expression Hongkongers retained after the 1997 Handover. Millions have marched in protest, and the police have responded with unprecedented brutality. Since [June 9](#), the HKPF has fired 2,414 rounds of tear gas, 503 rubber bullets, 237 sponge grenades, and made 1,453 citizen arrests. While the protesters

have articulated their 5 demands very clearly and appealed to [international](#) governments, the police's aims have not been so clear.

That is, until Lau went on CCTV, expressed his disbelief about the current attitude towards the HKPF, and thanked his Chinese audience for their support. Lau sees it as his mission to protect his country's reputation. "I hope our country could continue to prosper and be strong," he said "because only afterwards can our Hong Kong people and Chinese people, and people with Chinese blood elsewhere, hold our heads up." He explained that the picture in which he's aiming his Remington at the crowd was taken just after he was knocked down and his helmet was snatched off his head. Even though he was dizzy, he could feel somebody reaching for his beanbag-loaded shotgun, so he leapt to his feet, grabbed the gun, and pointed it to the crowd not to shoot but [to warn](#) them. At the end of the news hour, Lau said that the support the force was receiving from the mainland felt "like someone giving you a cup of water when you are in the desert."

I was confused by Lau's comments on country because it is not clear if he sees himself serving Hong Kong or serving China. In light of the fact that some Hong Kong schools choose to follow the National Education, a CCP-curriculum that grossly misshapes events like the June 4th Massacre, I wondered about the force's education standards, so I looked up [what it takes](#) to join the HKPF. Members of the force must have lived in Hong Kong as permanent residents for at least 7 years, be able to read and write in Chinese, speak fluent Cantonese, and have obtained a bachelor's degree or its equivalent. The force tries to distinguish itself from paramilitary police organizations that require mandatory service and routinely unleash violence on citizens. Since the early 1990s, the HKPF has raised its education standard in order to become service-oriented, engage the public, and [remain accountable](#) to public opinion. Resultingly, officers and civilians have long-regarded it a privilege to serve in the HKPF.

While the Hong Kong public once saw the HKPF like a concerned uncle – he'll tell you off when you get home late, but only because he cares about your safety – they have lost faith in light of the force's violence towards largely peaceful protesters. One of my friends who has lived in Hong Kong for most of her life said she grew up knowing she could always call the police for help. A couple nights ago, she was walking alone and it struck her that right now she couldn't count on the police to keep her safe. Many Hongkongers share this sentiment and have taken to social media platforms like Instagram to monitor and expose police violence. Since late May, accounts like [@peoplesbeijing](#) (18.6K followers) and [@hongkonger19](#) (24.2K followers) have diligently reported on police violence, compared police statements to footage of police brutality, and shared real-time updates on police conduct at the protests.



The Instagram account [@peoplesbeijing](#) shares information about the police on their HK POLICE highlight. Above: recapping an interview with a police family member; translating an interview and comparing police commentary on the violence to reports from layers and nurses; looking into the fatal effects of tear gas exposure and the police's practice of using expired tear gas. | © [@peoplesbeijing](#), 2019

Some anti-police Hongkongers have gone so far as to share officers' personal information on social media, bully their children, and stage demonstrations outside their homes. But the police hardly seem phased, largely because they feel support from China. "I wouldn't trust [the Hong Kong government]" one officer said "[but I do trust the Chinese](#). They appreciate what we've done." These statements come on the tails of Lau Chak Kei's invitation onto CCTV, which has been interpreted across the region as a strong endorsement from the CCP.

If members of the force think this means the CCP has their back, they need to examine the purpose they are fulfilling for the government. Those most aware of this are the officers' family members. A film called [The Dispatch](#) shows the tension between police relatives – who tend to agree with the 5 demands and even participate in protests – and officers who follow orders to shut down the marches. Their view amongst police relatives is that members of the HKPF are government pawns who have "been put on the spot on purpose for the Hong Kong citizens to blame." It is near-impossible for officers to voice dissent and keep their jobs. One police officer left her post because she was "having trouble sleeping" after the orders she received in July. Now, she is running for city council because she worries "about the relationship between the police and the people, and how long it [will] take to repair [it]." These testimonies reveal perhaps the darkest element of the HKPF's actions this summer: the force's work to quash the movement has isolated officers from their closest human connections in the world.

As I heard the families lament the force's actions, I thought about what curator Zoe Butt says about freedom. Based on her work with artists in post-colonial contexts throughout Southeast Asia, Butt believes that to be unfree is to be so influenced by another that even your own imagination becomes determined for you. In light of the force's service-oriented mission to maintain Hong Kong as the safest and most stable society in the world, it's jarring that the HKPF has so flagrantly disregarded admonishment from the international community and pleas from their fellow Hongkongers in exchange for CCP backing. Even as the force's actions have been rebuked by the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), and [Amnesty International](#), officers have [assaulted reporters](#), [scratched out the expiration dates on tear gas canisters](#), and suggested that the police relatives are just people [posing](#) as fake families.

The protesters' capacity to articulate their demands and work to realize them is a testament to their self-determined imaginations. Members of the HKPF stand to gain just as much as any other Hong Konger if the 5 demands are met. But right now, the police cannot reconcile their behavior with their mission, and their collective action is undermining their individual freedoms. As such, officers in the HKFP are currently the least free people in Hong Kong.