

During the heights of the summer protests in Hong Kong, curious onlookers can find the sixty-three-year-old [Alexandra Wong](#) right in the nucleus of various demonstrations. Affectionately known as Grandma Wong, she is commonly seen at various demonstrations waving a large Union Jack flag while adorning several smaller ones on her body. Her actions make her stand out among the league of protestors opposing the controversial extradition bill, which would allow Hong Kong to extradite people to Mainland China, where they would be tried under an opaque judicial system. Grandma Wong is also unique in that she is a resident of Shenzhen, part of Mainland China, who was born and raised in Hong Kong. Her commute can sometimes take five hours and cost more than [HK\\$100](#) (\$12.77 USD). To compare, the minimum wage in Hong Kong is [HK\\$37.50](#) (\$4.79 USD) per hour. For someone who was priced out of Hong Kong due to rising costs, this is no doubt a huge sum. The high cost and time of her commute to and from protests as well as the additional risks she undertakes as a resident of Mainland China are all testaments to her commitment to the cause and her love for the city.

[“I miss colonial times, \(it\) was so good for us. I saw the future,”](#) Grandma Wong lamented. Her disillusionment with her beloved city is concentrated in its perceived declining quality of life, especially in regards to what many believe as a growing wealth disparity and the increasing lack of social mobility. Many believe that after the Handover of Hong Kong back to China in 1997, the former British colony’s social mobility declined, and one can no longer procure a better future despite working hard and following rules. One can definitely admire Grandma Wong’s tenacity in fighting alongside and for the youth, but one cannot help but wonder if her colonial nostalgia is justified. Is she merely looking at the past through rose-colored lenses? In order to understand the perspective of Grandma Wong and her ideological peers, it is imperative

to examine the way of life before and after the Handover. However, protestors must tread a careful line, as the display of that sentiment is actually destructive for the movement.

The Handover provided no clear demarcation for economic factors. For one, the wealth disparity has definitely increased. The Gini coefficient, a measure of wealth inequality, increased from [0.43](#) in 1996 to [0.539](#), making Hong Kong the most unequal of the high-income East Asian economies. Starting salaries for college graduates now are [10%](#) lower than they were 25 years ago, adjusted for inflation. Meanwhile, [inflation adjusted property prices](#) have almost doubled in the same time period. Because of this, people find it ever more so difficult to purchase homes, a common investment method to preserve and accumulate wealth.

On the other hand, social mobility actually has been trending upward for the city. Researchers in Hong Kong measured the [intergenerational educational mobility](#) using census data for the years 1991, 2001, and 2011 to reach the conclusion that it has actually been improving. Due to the positive correlation between educational attainment and income, they used the city's improving intergenerational educational mobility to conclude its improving intergenerational earnings mobility. This is partly due to Hong Kong's expansion of the university intake rate in 1990 from [7% to 18%](#), meaning that people have a better chance of getting into university under the current regime than compared to under most of the British regime. Ultimately, whether life was better socioeconomically under the British than compared to now largely depends on personal perception.

Despite the current protestors presenting colonial rule as a time free from social strife, that is simply not true. Ironically, during the [Leftist Riots of 1967](#), pro-communist rioters sparred with the British colonial government. The rioters took to the streets to express their discontent with their low wages, wage cuts and years of low social mobility. They were described by the

press as having no sense of a future that they can look forward to. It is debatable whether economic reasons have played a larger role in the events of 1967 or the current movement, but most will agree that the events of 1967 were much more violent. [Fifty-one](#) individuals, including ten police officers, died as a result of the Leftist Riots while according to official records, there have been no deaths due to confrontations in the events of this year. The brutality during the events of 1967 demonstrate that there existed a lot of pent-up anger against the British colonial government and should serve to remind current Hong Kongers to not unconsciously forget past events in an attempt to carve out a straightforward narrative.

Lastly, examining Hong Kong's position relative to Mainland China during colonial times compared to now can shed some light on the perspective of some Hong Kongers. Given that most of Hong Kong is ethnically Chinese and the city was ceded to Britain from China, it was reasonable for most Hong Kongers to compare themselves to their counterparts on the Mainland. In 1997, Hong Kong's economy was about [18%](#) of that of Mainland China, but now it has dwindled to about [3%](#). Similarly, in 1997, Hong Kong's per capita income was [35](#) times China's. Now it's [5](#) times China's. Additionally, Hong Kong's port used to be critical for the export of Chinese goods, but after China became a part of the World Trade Organization in 2001, Hong Kong found [substantially less](#) goods passing through its borders. The Pearl of the Orient found itself among fierce rapidly growing Chinese rivals such as Shanghai and Shenzhen. The gap between Hong Kong and other parts of China lessened, and many Hong Kongers perceive this phenomenon as a decline for the city despite evidence to the contrary, as seen in its [3.8%](#) annual real GDP growth since 1998.

The protestors who are engaging in this feeling of nostalgia for the British seemingly feel this way as they most likely credit the British for helping Hong Kong reach the height of its

prosperity, namely by creating “[more and better public housing, medical and health services, education, labor legislation and social welfare, transport and infrastructure, arts and culture,](#)” and [“the Independent Commission Against Corruption.”](#) Being a fishing village before British colonialism, it makes sense for many to associate the glory days of the city with the late British empire. However, if the protestors continue to usher in feelings of nostalgia for the colonial times or engage in the narrative that the movement is due to economic reasons, they are actually playing right into the Chinese Communist Party’s hands.

Instead, they should focus on the root causes of the movement, which is the push for democracy and transparency initiated by the extradition bill. This is especially paramount as recently, the Chinese state media have published numerous pieces claiming that in order to quell the protests in Hong Kong, authorities should fix the [housing shortage](#). Economic reasons are the latest ones being used by the Chinese Communist Party after they presented a buffet of others, including the Special Administrative Region’s [absence of patriotic education, foreign intervention, and separatist forces](#). Protestors must reclaim the narrative and unite behind the unfulfilled four of their proposed five total ([withdrawal of the bill, resignation of the Chief Executive, the establishment of an independent commission to investigate police brutality, amnesty for the arrested protestors, and universal suffrage](#)) demands, none of which include financial improvements to citizens’ lives. Only then will they have a chance at accomplishing the rest of their goals.