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Hong Kong

For Hong Kong activists: Exile, Prison and Repression Without Borders

- Features -

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From Hong Kong's cells to the streets of London and Taipei, stories of activists, former prisoners and exiles who resist as Beijing extends control beyond the city's borders

When Claudia Mo first entered prison, in February 2021, she had the impression of having plunged into a Kafka novel. A former journalist and opposition parliamentarian in Hong Kong, arrested along with 46 other democratic activists accused of having organised unofficial primary elections, Mo found herself catapulted into a parallel universe where time flowed according to alien rhythms and every certainty about the external reality seemed to dissolve. As she recounted in a Facebook post after her release in April 2025, her prison experience was "surreal, almost Kafkaesque at the beginning", but did not entail "the two main traumas of detention, loneliness and boredom, thanks to the internal social dynamics". During the four years and two months spent behind bars, Mo read over three hundred books, resumed studying French and found in the prison routine a paradoxical form of protection from the chaos of the outside world. Only when the authorities granted her permission to see her dying father, for just ten minutes, with handcuffs on her wrists and officers preventing her from touching him, did the harshness of the punishment manifest itself in all its cruelty.

Claudia Mo's story is emblematic of the repressive strategy that Beijing has implemented in Hong Kong after the 2019 uprising. The case of the 47 democrats, which concluded with sentences ranging from four to ten years of imprisonment, represents the largest political trial in the city's recent history. The defendants were accused of having conspired to subvert state power simply for having organised, in July 2020, informal primary elections aimed at selecting the most competitive candidates for the subsequent legislative elections. The objective, according to the prosecution, was to win a majority in the Legislative Council and then block approval of the government budget, forcing the Chief Executive to resign. The national security judges [1] established that this plan would have created a "constitutional crisis" and compromised the functioning of the government. In reality, the severity of the sentences has another meaning. As a local observer noted, quoted by the Lausan collective, [2] the fact that Benny Tai, probably the most politically moderate among the 47 defendants, received the heaviest sentence demonstrates that Beijing does not tolerate those who expose the fiction of the rule of law. Tai, a law professor and one of the founders of the 2014 Occupy Central movement, [3] embodied the idea that it was possible to obtain reforms through non-violence and respect for legal procedures. His sentence to ten years in prison represents an unequivocal message according to the logic of "kill one to warn a hundred": even the mildest of opponents will be crushed if they dare to question the official narrative.

Among those convicted are prominent figures from the trade union movement and Hong Kong's progressive left. Leung Kwok-hung, better known as "Long Hair", a Marxist militant and one of the city's best-known left-wing activists, received one of the longest sentences among those who were not considered principal organisers of the primaries. Leung has been active in democratic struggles since the 1970s, when Hong Kong was still a British colony, and has always linked the demand for political freedoms to criticism of neoliberalism and imperialism. Other convicted persons are trade union leaders such as Carol Ng and Winnie Yu, who mobilised workers during the protests against the extradition law, or LGBTQ+ rights activists such as Jimmy Sham, who continued his battle even from prison, managing last year to get the courts to recognise same-sex marriages celebrated abroad. The variety of the defendants' political backgrounds reflects the cross-cutting nature of Hong Kong's democratic movement before the repression, and at the same time reveals the authorities' intent to strike any form of organised dissent.

For the youngest among those arrested, the prison experience has represented a dramatic break in their lives. Many were teenagers when they were arrested during the 2019 protests and have spent years crucial for the formation of their own identity in overcrowded cells, far from families and studies. Lin Mingyi, a Taiwanese woman who had married a Hong Konger and had lived in the city for decades, visited political prisoners thousands of times, spending

ten million Hong Kong dollars (approximately €1.15 million) of her own savings to provide material assistance and legal advice to detainees and their families. In an interview with the Taiwanese portal TaiSounds, Lin recounted having met the youngest political prisoner, a boy of just fourteen years. "Many of them already know, whilst inside, that the only real freedom will be possible only by leaving the city", explained Lin, who was then arrested in turn in June 2023 accused of having falsified documents on behalf of two detainees and, after five months of imprisonment, was forced to leave Hong Kong in exchange for freedom.

Leaving prison, for those who have finished serving their sentence, does not mean finding freedom. The majority of those released are subject to supervision orders (liberty under strict surveillance) which can last from six months to two years and which impose stringent constraints. They must reside at addresses approved by the authorities, can only work in authorised sectors, must notify every movement and, since 2024, need prior authorisation to leave Hong Kong. The restrictions tightened after Chung Hon-lam, a student leader released at the end of 2023, obtained permission to travel to Japan during the supervision period and from there moved to the United Kingdom to seek political asylum. Leon, another former detainee who today works as a cook, confessed to Initium Media [4] that many of his prison companions, once outside, admitted wanting to return inside. "In prison life was disciplined, you didn't have to face all the pressures of the external world", he explained. Outside, instead, they must rebuild shattered existences, seek work despite a criminal record, re-establish relationships with friends and family members who in the meantime have taken different paths. And above all they must come to terms with a transformed city, where the space for dissent has shrunk until it has almost disappeared and where many of their peers have chosen to emigrate. For those who have been convicted, the only real freedom, in the end, truly seems possible only elsewhere.

Geographies of Exile

The Hong Kong diaspora that formed after 2020 is not a homogeneous community. Over 150,000 people have left the city bound for the United Kingdom thanks to the BN(O) visa, [5] a programme that allows former British subjects and their family members to move to the former colonial "motherland". Other thousands have chosen different destinations such as Canada, Australia or Taiwan. Despite having travelled thousands of kilometres to escape repression, many of them still find themselves trapped in a condition of existential precariousness. Exile is not only a geographical question, it is an identity fracture that forces one to redefine who one is, to which community one belongs and what future it is still possible to imagine. The individual trajectories of the exiles reflect the different possibilities and different failures of this reconstruction attempt.

Felix arrived in the United Kingdom in 2022 with expectations that were rapidly shattered. Raised in public housing in Hong Kong, without property to sell nor family savings to rely on, Felix found work in a warehouse and then in a soy sauce factory in southern England. The days were gruelling, the manual work heavy for his slight physique, and the loneliness oppressive. One morning in August 2023, whilst at work, he thought of ending it all. A Ghanaian colleague stopped him at the last instant. Subsequently, that colleague began to mock him, suspecting that he was gay, forcing him to watch pornographic videos and simulating sexual acts together with another worker, trapping him between their massive bodies. Felix, who had imagined the United Kingdom as a place of freedom and acceptance, collided with a very different reality. In online groups of Hong Kongers in the United Kingdom, he read homophobic comments and complaints against the excessive presence of rainbow symbols in the city. When a friend criticised him for his financial management, taking for granted that his mother had savings to draw upon, Felix understood that many Hong Kong immigrants in the United Kingdom came from a privileged background, had sold homes in Hong Kong and enjoyed an economic security that he had never known. He felt closer to his African and Southeast Asian colleagues, immigrants like him, poor like him, forced to do double shifts to send money home. He sought refuge in local churches, but even there he encountered hostility and hypocrisy. Only after months of attempts did he find an Anglican community where an Indian couple told him, with simplicity, that some of their friends were gay and that for them it was fine. Felix cried recalling that moment in an interview with Initium Media. "I've never been accepted like that before. After going round in a vicious circle, I finally found a place that accepts me."

Taiwan offers a different dimension of exile, that of democratic hope and the preservation of memory. Ah Jin, nom de guerre chosen by a radical activist involved in the fabrication of explosives during the 2019 protests, fled to Taiwan in February 2020 after being arrested and released on bail. He spent five and a half years in legal limbo, with tourist visas continuously renewed, until in March 2025 he became the first Hong Kong exile to obtain a Taiwanese identity card. A few weeks later, Ah Jin participated as a voter in the online parliamentary elections organised by the Hong Kong opposition in exile, a symbolic but meaningful initiative. "Taiwan is a free country", he said in an interview with TaiSounds. "How can you understand it? From the traffic." He was joking, taking inspiration from Taiwan's chaotic roads, but the content of his words was serious. In Taiwan he could vote, express political opinions, live a democratic life that Hong Kong has lost. Lin Mingyi, the Taiwanese woman who had dedicated years of her life to visiting Hong Kong political prisoners, returned to Taiwan after deportation and continued her battle. She actively participated in the campaign for the recall of legislators from the Kuomintang and the Taiwan People's Party, [6] fearing that Taiwanese political dynamics could replicate those that suffocated Hong Kong. Together with young Taiwanese and Hong Kong activists, Lin contributed to the creation of the Hong Kong Action Document Library, an archive that collects over ten thousand objects related to social protests in Hong Kong from 1960 to today. Sienna Lau, director of the collection, explained to Radio Free Asia that the objective is to preserve a history that risks being erased. "We must know our past to establish our identity. Preserving this history is also fighting the government's attempt to erase it." Taiwan is not only a refuge, it has become the custodian of Hong Kong memory.

Then there are those who remain blocked, suspended in an even crueller limbo. John, a refugee from East Africa, arrived in Hong Kong in 2012 after escaping a genocide in his native country that took away his parents when he was only seven years old. He spent thirteen years in the city waiting for his asylum request to be approved and for a third country to accept him. In 2024 the United States finally gave the green light. John and his family packed their bags, left their jobs, withdrew their children from school. The plane ticket indicated departure from Hong Kong in the early hours of 27 January 2025, with arrival in Albuquerque at 12:30 in the morning, local time. Thirty minutes after the entry into force of the refugee ban signed by Donald Trump on the day of his inauguration. The International Organization for Migration called John to inform him that the journey was cancelled. He and his wife had already organised a farewell party with the neighbours. When he received the news, some friends thought they were joking. John remained in Hong Kong, forced to sign a new two-year tenancy agreement, to seek work again, to re-enrol his children in school. His wife fell into a deep depression. The children continue to drag suitcases around the house asking when they will leave. "I thought that my refugee story was over", he told Initium Media. "Instead everything changed again." John represents those who remain trapped in the very city from which they had to flee, in a limbo that seems to have no end, where hope is lit and extinguished with the same arbitrariness.

Beijing's Long Arm

The joint operations between Hong Kong police and the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the central government in Beijing, announced on 13 June 2025, marked a turning point in the repression. For the first time, Chinese security agents did not limit themselves to supervising the work of local authorities from a distance, but intervened directly, requesting assistance from the Hong Kong police to interrogate six people suspected of collusion with foreign forces. The operation involved home searches, seizures of bank documents and electronic devices, withdrawal of the suspects' passports. The official communiqué specified that the Office for Safeguarding National Security had acted on the basis of the regulation issued on 13 May 2025, which requires all government departments and public officials in Hong Kong to provide "all necessary and reasonable assistance, facilitation, support, sustenance and protection" to Chinese security agents. Those who obstruct the Office's work or divulge details of investigations risk up to seven years in prison. The distinction between local and central security apparatus has thus ceased to exist. The joint operation represents the practical death of the "one country, two systems" principle, which theoretically should have guaranteed Hong Kong substantial autonomy until 2047.

The authorities have also developed more subtle intimidation techniques, which do not necessarily pass through formal arrests. According to reports from various sources, including the human rights group Human Rights Watch,

Hong Kong police have organised what is called in jargon "tea parties", apparently informal meetings in which officers invite citizens to "take tea" to discuss national security matters. The expression reprises a euphemism used in mainland China to indicate interrogations conducted by the National Security Office. These meetings have a cordial tone on the surface, but the underlying message is clear. Since January 2025, police have interrogated the family members of at least five activists in exile, searching their homes and confiscating money with the accusation of violating national security laws. In the case of Chung Kim-wah, a scholar now resident in the United Kingdom, officers raided the offices of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, the institution with which Chung was associated. In the case of Ted Hui, a former parliamentarian who sought refuge in Australia, police confiscated 800,000 Hong Kong dollars (approximately €92,000) from his family. The normalisation of surveillance passes through these daily gestures of intimidation that instil fear without always needing to resort to open violence.

The cruellest tactic consists in arresting the family members of those who have fled abroad. On 30 April 2025, police detained the father and brother of Anna Kwok, executive director of the Hong Kong Democracy Council based in Washington, accusing them of having attempted to manage funds and assets belonging to Kwok, considered a fugitive. The father, Kwok Yin-sang, sixty-eight years old, was formally charged on 2 May with having changed the details of his daughter's insurance policy and having attempted to withdraw its residual value. He risks seven years in prison. The brother, thirty-five years old, was released on bail pending further investigations. This is the first case in which a family member of an activist in exile has been prosecuted. Anna Kwok is part of a group of nineteen Hong Kong dissidents on whom an international arrest warrant and a bounty of one million Hong Kong dollars (approximately €115,000) hangs, about three times the amount offered for murders. In July 2025, the authorities issued further arrest warrants against activists abroad, accusing them of having organised an unauthorised referendum and of being part of the so-called "Hong Kong Parliament", a symbolic initiative that promotes the city's self-determination and the drafting of a Hong Kong constitution. The British government strongly condemned the initiative, defining it as "a further example of transnational repression". The Chinese embassy in the United Kingdom rejected the criticisms, stating that it was "gross interference" in China's internal affairs and in Hong Kong's rule of law (sic).

Other activists in exile have suffered similar treatment. Nathan Law, a prominent figure of the democratic movement and a refugee in the United Kingdom since 2021, saw his mother and brother detained and interrogated by Hong Kong police in 2023. After their release, his brother was forced to denounce Nathan publicly on Instagram. The family knows that the authorities can return at any moment. The family thus becomes a battlefield and an instrument of emotional blackmail. Those who leave know that those who remain can become hostages. This method transforms every affective bond into a potential vulnerability and forces activists abroad to choose between silence and the awareness of endangering their loved ones. The psychological pressure is devastating and often more effective than direct persecution. For those outside, every public statement, every interview, every appearance at an event can translate into consequences for family members remaining in Hong Kong.

The regime has also developed digital techniques to amplify its capacity for intimidation. In August 2024, during the anti-immigration riots that broke out in the United Kingdom after the Southport attack, [7] over one hundred and fifty posts from twenty-nine different accounts appeared on social media, distributed over three days, that sought to direct the attention of far-right groups towards Hong Kong activists in exile. The messages were addressed to figures such as Tommy Robinson, [8] leader of the British far right, and Richard Tice, parliamentarian for the Reform UK party. Some posts on Telegram had been published in the channels of Patriotic Alternative, a white nationalist group. The messages contained addresses of Finn Lau, Nathan Law and other opposition figures, accompanied by incitements such as "We all know what to do now, right? I recommend visiting Nathan Law first". One of the posts showed a screenshot of Apple Maps with the pointer on Law's address. The accounts disseminating these messages posted at times compatible with the Chinese time zone, often between three and four in the morning in the United Kingdom, during the working day in Beijing. Many used grammatically incorrect English, such as "HK refugees keeps coming our country". Computer security experts from Graphika, a social media analysis company based in New York, examined the posts and detected similarities with Spamouflage Dragon, a vast online influence operation that the Microsoft Threat Analysis Center attributes with "high confidence" to the Chinese Ministry of Public Security. The

objective was to make it appear that it was native Britons calling for attacks against Hong Kongers, exploiting local social tensions to fuel violence by proxy.

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, national security has become a pervasive "culture" that permeates every aspect of bureaucracy. John Lee, Chief Executive, declared in an interview with Wen Wei Po [9] published on 6 June 2025 that "safeguarding national security must become a culture" and that the government is still in the initial phase of building an adequate institutional infrastructure. Clauses relating to national security have been inserted into licences for restaurants, entertainment venues, cinemas, amusement arcades and even funeral parlours. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department can revoke licences if owners, managers, employees, agents or subcontractors commit "offensive acts" against national security or the public interest. Similar clauses have been introduced in applications for government funds destined for environmental projects, in contracts for the sale of public land and in short-term lease agreements. Schools must prevent improper use of their facilities and prohibit activities involving "political propaganda". Librarians must ensure that collections do not contain material that endangers national security. Film censors can block films that "objectively and reasonably may be perceived as supporting, promoting, glorifying, encouraging or inciting" acts that constitute offences against national security. The Hong Kong Arts Development Council requires that evaluators of public funding commit to safeguarding national security. Even the Audit Commission, charged with verifying the finances of the public administration, must now identify gaps regarding national security in government departments. In June 2024 a new code was introduced for public officials that lists six fundamental values, the first of which is "upholding the constitutional order and national security". Confidential guidelines will be distributed to officials to "change the mentality and incorporate the concept of national security into their brains", as declared by Security Secretary Chris Tang. Local officials have transformed themselves into zealous enforcers, applying directives with a meticulousness that transforms every bureaucratic act into a potential test of political loyalty. Hong Kong has become a laboratory for control techniques that can be exported elsewhere.

Living Under Perpetual Threat

The psychological dimension of repression is as pervasive as the legal one. Finn Lau, an activist living in the United Kingdom, was attacked by three masked men whilst walking along the Thames in west London in 2020. The last thing he thought before losing consciousness was that he was about to die. He is convinced that the Chinese regime played a role in the attack, classified by police as a hate crime. Since then Lau changes homes frequently and never knows if his current address will be made public like the previous ones. When in August 2024 posts on social media disseminated his addresses seeking to incite the British far right to attack him, he understood that the threat was permanent. "I've become extremely cautious on the street", he told the Guardian. "I keep looking around." Paranoia becomes a form of necessary lucidity. Lau and Nathan Law were among the targets of a surveillance operation thwarted by British police in May 2024. Living thousands of kilometres from Hong Kong offers no real protection. The trauma stratifies and the sequence protests, arrest, prison, release, exile, continued persecution never closes. Fang Yihui, released from prison at the end of 2021 after being arrested during the protests when he was still a secondary school student, began to suffer from recurring nightmares a year after his release. In his dreams he was chased, and sometimes scenes from the protests or prison life resurfaced. Ordinary situations can become triggering events. When his coursemates filmed a scene set in prison and asked Fang to iron costumes, he volunteered because in prison he did precisely that work. Only afterwards did he realise how alive the memory of prison still was.

The weight of broken relationships is equally devastating. Chan Chi Sum, sentenced to twenty years for conspiracy to incite subversion for his role in a student group, has been released and seeks to recover the two years lost behind bars. An old friend who is about to enter the public administration sent him a message but never arranged a meeting. In the end they stopped being in touch. At school reunions, Chan remains silent whilst former classmates discuss property purchases and family plans. "They have completed their studies and have become the people they wanted to be. But I haven't become who I wanted to be", he told Initium Media. John, the refugee blocked in Hong Kong after the cancellation of the journey to the United States, video-calls his mother remaining in his country of origin only during holidays. Communicating with those who remained behind can put them in danger. Friendships break,

intimate relationships are subjected to constant pressure. Felix, the young gay man working in a factory in southern England, finds salvation only in the bubble he shares with his boyfriend, whom he met in an environmental group. Two people profoundly disappointed by the world who support each other. Survivor's guilt accompanies those outside whilst comrades in struggle are still inside. Ocean feels the weight of being free, or relatively free, whilst others serve their sentences. Leon, who worked for two years as a volunteer supporting detainees and their families, fell into depression after absorbing the emotions of hundreds of people. He developed anorexia and insomnia. When his best friend was about to be imprisoned, Leon decided to quit. "One day I was really exhausted and decided that's it, I'm letting go." Even though he stopped, he continues to help when former acquaintances seek him out, unable to detach himself completely.

Yet, interwoven with trauma, there are elements of obstinate resistance. The preservation of memory becomes a form of resistance. Sienna Lau, director of the collection of the Hong Kong Action Document Library that collects objects related to social protests from 1960 to today, explained that the objective is not only to preserve objects, but to demonstrate how Hong Kongers have integrated the spirit of protest into daily life. "In 2020, probably due to Covid and the political context, when street protests decreased, many people shifted their attention to consumer goods. These are objects of an essentially everyday nature, from greeting cards for Lunar New Year to mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival, or receipts from 'yellow shops' [10] with slogans that encouraged Hong Kongers. The protest elements were integrated into everyday life." Lin Mingyi, after returning to Taiwan, participated in the second Hong Kong human rights exhibition in Taipei, lending letters received from prisoners and conducting oral tours to tell their story. Archives are not only passive memory, they are nourishment for future actions. Su Linqi, Taiwanese president of the Hong Kong Action Document Library, explained to Radio Free Asia that preserving the history of Hong Kong's struggle is crucial also for Taiwanese people, because they face the same threat. "Preserving the history of Hong Kong's struggle is actually very important to remind Taiwanese people of the omnipresent threat of the Chinese communist regime and to unite the Taiwanese community in resistance."

Identity reconstruction passes through different paths. Leon, the former engineer turned cook, has compared his current life to a completely new path, undertaken after the possibility of returning to the previous life was lost forever. "Before I wanted a well-paid life, marriage, children. But it all seemed too caged, as if someone had decided for me and I was living someone else's existence. Now the chef's life is precarious, perhaps the restaurant will close, but at least I'm happy with what I do. I like the person I've become better." Choi Ho-jae studies media production and culture to make documentaries that bear witness to the changing Hong Kong. "I can show others the Hong Kong I see through my eyes." Ah Jin sells flags with the slogan "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" to Hong Kongers throughout the world, from Canada to Europe, joking about being "the world's largest supplier of Hong Kong independence flags". Adrian founded the BJMF badminton club, a Cantonese acronym for "fight without regrets", open to all nationalities and sexual orientations, with over two hundred members. On the website and on Instagram he put the rainbow flag symbol without hesitation. "This is a very important message, not only to reassure participants, but also to show that we mustn't be afraid to tell others that we exist." Hope is not naïve optimism, it is daily political practice. Ocean, still under surveillance and with a civil lawsuit to face, has found a precarious equilibrium. "Bad times and good times can really coexist. I feel quite comfortable now. The small details of life give me the feeling of being able to decide what to do." Fang Yihui, in his graduation film, had the protagonist who wanders in a dark passage say, "I don't know where precisely the place I'm in is." The trauma is permanent, as Leon admitted. "You'll never free yourself from it for the rest of your life, it's everywhere, it seeps into daily life." Yet one continues to walk, to cook, to play badminton, to make documentaries, to exist. Resistance is not heroic, it is this continuing despite everything.

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Source: Andrea Ferrario Substack. Translated for ESSF by Mark Johnson.

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[1] Hong Kong's national security law, imposed by Beijing in June 2020, established a parallel legal system with specially designated judges, no jury trials for serious cases, and provisions allowing suspects to be tried in mainland China under certain circumstances.

[2] Lausan is an online collective of writers, activists and researchers focused on Hong Kong social movements and left politics, publishing in English and Chinese.

[3] The Occupy Central movement (also known as the Umbrella Movement) was a 79-day civil disobedience campaign in 2014 demanding genuine universal suffrage for Hong Kong's Chief Executive elections.

[4] Initium Media is an independent Chinese-language news outlet founded in 2015, known for in-depth investigative journalism on Hong Kong and Greater China issues.

[5] The British National (Overseas) visa scheme, launched in January 2021, allows Hong Kong residents born before 1997 and their families to live, work and eventually settle in the UK. BN(O) status was originally created before the 1997 handover.

[6] The Taiwan People's Party (TPP) is a centrist political party founded in 2019. Along with the Kuomintang (KMT), Taiwan's historically pro-unification party, it has been criticised for positions seen as accommodating to Beijing.

[7] The Southport attack occurred on 29 July 2024, when a knife-wielding assailant killed three children at a dance class in Southport, England, triggering widespread riots fuelled by online misinformation claiming the perpetrator was an asylum seeker.

[8] Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) is a British far-right, anti-Islam activist and founder of the English Defence League, repeatedly convicted of various offences including contempt of court.

[9] Wen Wei Po is a Hong Kong newspaper controlled by the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department, serving as a key pro-Beijing mouthpiece in the city.

[10] During the 2019 protests, Hong Kong's 'yellow economic circle' emerged as a form of protest through consumer choices, with 'yellow shops' openly supporting the movement whilst 'blue shops' backed the government and police.