

# Edward Snowden in Hong Kong: Transnationalism and the Local Deployment of Human Rights Tropes

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*In 2013, Edward Snowden briefly sought refuge in Hong Kong after leaking classified information from the NSA. Linking Snowden's act with their own local demands for democracy and civic rights, Hongkongers took to the street in support of Snowden and to condemn oppressive state governments—including mainland China. Snowden's presence, in other words, allowed Hongkongers to not only represent themselves as defenders of transnational of human rights, but also afforded them the legitimacy to argue against China's oppressive policies that damage local political interests. This article analyzes protest signs and slogans from Hong Kong, and juxtaposes those artifacts with responses from the Chinese state government.*

**Keywords:** China, Citizenship, Edward Snowden, Hong Kong, Human Rights, Protest

In June 2013, after Edward Snowden revealed his location in Hong Kong and declared to a local newspaper that he “[had] faith in the Hong Kong rule of law” and asked “the courts and people of Hong Kong to decide [his] fate,” Hong Kong and China were immediately placed at a complicated political and rhetorical position in relations to foreign policies and transnational human rights discourse.<sup>1</sup> As the people of Hong Kong took to the street to support Snowden and the democratic values he represents, the Chinese government also published several editorials in a state-sponsored newspaper encouraging the protection of Snowden while touting him as a heroic figure that embodies the ideal of democracy and universal human rights. In the same publications, Beijing also surprisingly recognized Hong Kong as a semi-autonomous democracy within its sovereignty.

For the past ten years, Hongkongers have been protesting against both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its centrally appointed local government for infringing upon civil rights and preventing democratic processes. However, Beijing has never directly responded to the

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<sup>1</sup> Lana Lam, “Whistle-blower Edward Snowden Tells SCMP: ‘Let Hong Kong People Decide my Fate,’” *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/content/search/whistleblower%20edward%20snowden%20tells%20scmp>.

Hong Kong public, nor has it openly recognized Hong Kong's status as a democratic society that could operate beyond Beijing's control—until Snowden's presence in Hong Kong prompted the Hong Kong public to construct a new transnational identity that threatened the cohesion of the state-sanctioned Chinese nationalism. As Hongkongers rallied to protect Snowden through universal human rights arguments against oppressive state governments across borders—including both China and the U.S.—they were able to assert transnational moral superiority and claim an identity to transcend the nationalist discourse imposed by Chinese central government. Hong Kong's construction of a transnational identity, in turn, created anxiety for Beijing, which in turn motivated the Chinese government to respond positively to the Hong Kong protest so as to maintain social stability and political coherence within its sovereignty. In other words, Beijing must recognize Hong Kong as a semi-autonomous democracy in order to convince the people of Hong Kong to align themselves with the Chinese national identity.

By examining Hong Kong protest signs and Chinese editorials through the theoretical lens of intercontextuality and human rights discourse, we echo other rhetoric and cultural studies scholars and argue that as these human rights tropes and arguments travel transnationally and across particular contexts, history, and power relations between Hong Kong and China, they are inevitably appropriated and translated to serve different national and local rhetorical purposes.<sup>2</sup> However, while previous scholarship has commonly criticized human rights discourse as Eurocentric and neocolonial even in a transnational setting, we will demonstrate in this case study that non-Western communities can in fact strategically utilize it to further their local interests without representing themselves as either victims or savages.<sup>3</sup> In other words, traveling as a transnational discourse, human rights tropes are no longer monopolized by Western states and institutions, but have become a rhetorical tool for grassroots activists to achieve local and national democratic goals. Attending to the development of human rights discourse on a transnational scale will therefore allow us to reconsider who gets to define human rights and how these tropes empower new agents.

In this article, we will first discuss the theoretical framework of intercontextuality, and how it frees human rights discourse from the grip of dominant Western institutions. We will then offer background on the political and cultural relationships among China, Hong Kong, and the United States and their dispute over human rights in the past few decades. Afterwards, we will move on to our analysis of the transnational human rights claims created by Hong Kong protestors and how their protest produced new exigencies to elicit Beijing's response and recognition of Hong Kong's democratic status.

### **Human Rights Discourse in a Transnational Network**

Many cultural studies and legal scholars have criticized existing human rights culture and discourse—commonly rendered natural and unchanging by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)—as privileging the political logics and interests of dominant Western nation states and institutions.<sup>4</sup> Although the critique targets mainly Western human rights advocates at-

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<sup>2</sup> See Wendy Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) for more discussion about the movement of transnational human rights tropes.

<sup>3</sup> Makau W. Mutua, "Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights," *Harvard International Law Journal* 42, no. 1, (2001): 201-245.

<sup>4</sup> See Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*; Mutua, "Savages, Victims, and Saviors"; and Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

tempting to rescue and define the non-Western world through their paternalist discourse, it reveals the cultural root of human rights discourse and how this root informs the use of this discourse and shapes the subsequent imagination of cultural relations within the human rights framework. In his canonical essay “Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights,” Makau Mutua argues that dominant human rights discourse commonly constructs Western neoliberal states as the saviors, while states and communities in the Global South are represented either as savages or victims.<sup>5</sup> While Uma Narayan and Gayatri Spivak have pointed out that we cannot claim that concepts such as freedom and equality are entirely Western without perpetuating cultural essentialism and undermining anti-colonial work done by marginalized communities, they also argue that dominant human rights discourse is commonly used to consolidate existing hierarchies.<sup>6</sup>

Such neocolonial representations in current human rights discourse stems partly from the historical root of the UDHR. This document was constructed as a direct response to the atrocities committed by Nazis during the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> These supposedly universal concepts are then packaged as “gifts of the west to the rest” and are in turn used to bolster the moral and political status of Western states.<sup>8</sup> Originating from and dominated by powerful Western states, cultural theorists have criticized how human rights discourse is based largely on UN documents and international laws, and, thus, suffers from a huge contradiction: while human rights discourse claims universal application, the body it imagines is riven by biases towards white, heterosexual males.<sup>9</sup> Despite this bias, human rights discourse is often used by those in power to make seemingly universal claims and to establish moral standards to judge actions and systems at a local level—particularly in non-Western contexts.

In their respective studies on current human rights discourse and culture, Hesford and Dingo have demonstrated that international human rights law and advocacy are intimately tied to the existing power hierarchy that privilege Western normative frameworks and narratives. As Hesford argues, many popular human rights tropes and images are “caught up in the logic and legacies of Western imperialism parading under the cloak of international humanitarianism and human rights advocacy.”<sup>10</sup> In her study of international policy documents, Dingo also observes that human rights discourse related to women’s rights are frequently co-opted into part of the Western neoliberal discourse that further undermines the marginalized populations. Because of the close ties between human rights discourse and the political logics championed by Western states and institutions, human rights violations within powerful states such as the U.S. can often go unnoticed while non-Western sociocultural practices are commonly framed as culprits.<sup>11</sup>

However, even though human rights discourses are commonly deployed through a neocolonial framework by dominant Western countries, communication and cultural studies scholars have also noticed that non-Western actors can rhetorically appropriate such discourses to achieve their own goals. For example, Grewal argues that although Western nation-states tend to repre-

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<sup>5</sup> Mutua, “Savages, Victims, and Saviors.”

<sup>6</sup> Uma Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique for Cultural Essentialism,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 86; Gayatri Spivak, “Righting Wrongs,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103, no 2/3, (Spring/Summer 2004): 523.

<sup>7</sup> Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History,” 210; Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights*, 231.

<sup>9</sup> Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 35; Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 32.

sent themselves as the liberator and others as “a region of aberrant violence,” the rhetorical network of transnational relationships “enable [these tropes] to slip from and be repurposed for one context or another.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, while this network has allowed dominant Western states and organizations to perpetuate their ideology through human rights discourses, it has also opened up the opportunity for non-Western states and peoples to deploy and appropriate similar tropes to challenge the existing power hierarchy and achieve self-empowerment. Therefore, Narayan cautions the tendency for human rights scholars to completely dismiss human rights discourse as Eurocentric and therefore useless, arguing that these doctrines are also deployed as tools against Western imperialism.<sup>13</sup> However, at the same time, the usage of universal human rights discourse—even by non-Western activists—may be complicit in reinforcing the Eurocentric root of these tropes. What is needed, therefore, is not the wholesale dismissal of human rights culture, but closer attention towards how these discourses are deployed in a given context by specific agents and stakeholders with a particular eye towards detangling political implications.

This concern becomes even more relevant as human rights discourses travel transnationally and are used to create new meanings in different contexts.<sup>14</sup> However, even though rhetorical and human rights scholars have developed theories to study the movement of human rights discourse across different contexts and how they are appropriated by different parties to achieve various political goals, these scholars have largely assume that institutions and practices supported by dominant Western states possess most of the power to manipulate universal human rights tropes to further their own interests.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the Eurocentric root of human right discourse often hinders communication scholars from observing local efforts by marginalized groups to transform human rights discourse in their own political service.

The theoretical lens of intercontextuality, when taken seriously, will help overcome this bias, by allowing us to examine junctures where human rights culture is adapted and practiced transnationally in local and national contexts that are not sanctioned by Western power and logics. As Dingo argues, in order to understand how popular human rights discourses function transnationally, we “must examine how rhetorics travel—how rhetorics might be picked up, how rhetorics might become networked with new and different arguments, and then how rhetorical meaning might shift and change as a result of these movements.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, while the circulating tropes may appear similar across different contexts, their meanings and effects are never stable as they interacted and networked with potentially conflicting ideologies. Similarly, in her seminal work Wendy Hesford proposes that communication and human rights scholars should understand the intercontextuality of tropes. She argues:

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<sup>12</sup> Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminism, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 502; Rebecca Ann Dingo, *Networking Arguments: Rhetoric, Transnational Feminism, and Public Policy Writing* (Pittsburgh, PA: Univeristy of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 27.

<sup>13</sup> Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History,” 97.

<sup>14</sup> See Chou Chih-Chieh, “An Emerging Transnational Movement in Women’s Human Rights: Campaign of Non-governmental Organizations on ‘Comfort Women’ Issue in East Asia,” *Journal of Economic and Social Research* 5, no. 1 (January 2003): 153; Jeffrey Flynn, “Towards Human Rights as a Basis for Transnaitonal Solidarity,” Conference Papers—*American Political Science Association* (September 2, 2004); Grewal, *Transnational America*; Stephen John Hartnett, “To ‘Dance with Lost Souls’: Liu Xiaobo, Charter 08, and the Contested Rhetorics of Democracy and Human Rights in China,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2013): 223.

<sup>15</sup> Dingo, *Networking Arguments*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Dingo, *Networking Arguments*, 2.

To read intertextually is to identify in a composition or performance the internal references to other texts or rhetorical acts to become reflexive about the social codes and habits of interpretation that shape the composition or performance's meaning and that it enacts, and to comprehend how texts are formed by the institutions and material contexts that produce them and through which they articulate.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, we cannot assume that the sociocultural and political context, audience, and purpose of human rights discourse as singular and stable entities; instead, paying attention only to how human rights discourses are deployed by one party at a single locale, intertextuality urges us to examine how they move across different political, social, and also material boundaries to construct new meanings and consequences. Applying this theoretical lens to human rights discourse forces us to examine it not solely as a stable set of ideologies produced and deployed by Western states and institutions, but as a transnational culture that can be appropriated by different actors for national and local political agendas. We believe that the human rights discourse created during the Hong Kong protest about Snowden requires us to conduct an intertextual reading so we can more critically understand how the new meanings created in this process empowers the people of Hong Kong and forces Mainland China to temporarily accept a universalist interpretation of human rights. We also argue that when embroiled in transnational political tension, states themselves also engage in intertextual reading so they can provide the most appropriate response that allows them to further their long-term goals.

### **Power Relations among China, Hong Kong, and the U.S.**

The legitimacy and popularity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have increasingly come under fire domestically and internationally as negative information about the regime, such as corruption and the prosecution and torture of activists, become more publicized and readily accessible through the Internet. In order to stay in power by constructing a strong national identity and maintaining sovereign control over various disputed and semi-autonomous territories—including Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region—the party-state has been actively revamping and deploying its rhetoric of nationalism to maintain a unified national identity and to position the regime as a dominant power in the international arena.<sup>18</sup>

A key rhetorical strategy in China's nationalism discourse is the emphasis of an anti-colonial agenda. For example, as Yingjie Guo points out, Chinese nationalism is often fueled by the argument that China must reclaim the nation-state from Western countries and “come up with strategies to enhance its ‘soft power.’”<sup>19</sup> Although the United States was not a major colonial power occupying China's territory in the early twentieth century, prevalence of anti-imperialist and nationalist discourses in the second half of the twentieth century in Mainland China had constructed the “West” as an imagined threat to China's sovereign integrity and cultural dignity. At the heart of this argument is a clear sense of cultural and political antagonism against the U.S. that stems partly from memories of confrontation during the Cold War. As a result, Chinese state narratives drawn from territorial, trade, and human rights disputes between the two nations are effective in persuading the Chinese audience that the goal of the United States is to contain Chi-

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<sup>17</sup> Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Yingjie Guo, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity Under Reform* (London: Routledge, 2003), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Guo, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China*, 112.

na and prevent China from reaching a higher global status.<sup>20</sup> The party-state's anti-American argument, particularly in regards to human rights issues, has been widely successful in generating nationalist sentiments and in garnering the support of Chinese citizens. As Guo points out, "Chinese nationalists, and many people who do not consider themselves as nationalists, can criticize the government for its human rights abuses amongst themselves, but when criticism comes from the U.S. or the West, more often than not they adopt the government's rhetoric or get seriously enraged about the 'foreign interference' and its 'evil intentions.'"<sup>21</sup> In other words, by antagonizing the U.S., the Chinese government is able to enjoy popular support from citizens in the mainland.

China's nationalist rhetoric, however, has not been successful in ideologically integrating the Hong Kong public, who has grown suspicious towards the regime. As a semi-autonomous region and a former British colony, Hong Kong people have developed a separate cultural and political identity from Mainland China. Even after the internationally televised handover ceremony during 1997, the Hong Kong public continued to resist against the central Chinese government and has been increasingly vocal about Beijing's suppression of dissents and violations of human rights.<sup>22</sup> Despite the central government's effort to integrate Hong Kong ideologically, its economic and political policies in the city did not successfully create a unified national identity among its citizens.

Over the past ten years, Hong Kong people have taken to the streets to protest against the regime. Culminating in the recent Umbrella Movement—a month-long, city-wide civil disobedience campaign—these large-scaled protests organized by Hongkongers called for universal suffrage and the protection of the freedom of speech in the region. Positioning themselves as part of the transnational human rights network, in 2004, 300 Hong Kong intellectuals espoused on what they call "universal values" in a public document titled "Hong Kong Core Values Declaration"; these values include "liberty, democracy, human rights, rule of law, fairness, social justice, peace and compassion, integrity and transparency" that supposedly transcend national borders.<sup>23</sup> The values expounded in this Declaration closely echo Western liberal tropes on universal human rights. The issuing of this document clearly indicated that despite Hong Kong's small size and economic dependence on Mainland China, its political goal as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) has never been "harmonized" by China's central government.

The conflict between the SAR and Beijing is further fueled by their differing views on democracy and human rights—China's definition of human rights is often at odds with the values of the Hong Kong public. In order to refute criticism of human rights violations from the West in general and the United States in particular, China has developed its own version of human rights discourse to trump universalist claims of human rights. In China's version, the Western universalist mode is hypocritical because Western nation-states also engage in the violation of human rights through racial discrimination; in addition, China's human rights model asserts that economic development is more important for one's wellbeing than individual freedom.<sup>24</sup>

Advocates of democratization and universal human rights in Hong Kong, on the other hand, often articulate their separate political identity by rejecting China's particularist version of hu-

<sup>20</sup> Xing Lu, "Rhetoric of Nationalism and Anti-Americanism: A Burkean Analysis of China Can Say No," *Intercultural Communication Studies* 8, no. 2 (1998): 216.

<sup>21</sup> Guo, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Weiming Tu, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 153.

<sup>23</sup> Guangde Li, "Standing Firm on Hong Kong's Core Values," *Yahoo* (blog), November 7, 2013, <http://blog.yahoo.com/albertlai/articles/428663>.

<sup>24</sup> Hartnett, "To 'Dance with Lost Souls,'" 223.

man rights, while embracing a more universalist model. Such ideological and political tension has resulted in many protests in the city against the Chinese regime. However, despite Hong Kong people's resistance against the Chinese human rights model, Beijing had never once directly responded to such conflicts and to Hong Kong's preference towards universalist human rights until the people of Hong Kong actively mobilized transnational human rights tropes to create a separate national identity during Snowden's brief stay.

Although Hong Kong's SAR status guarantees its "soft sovereignty" within a larger sovereign China, lack of an official response from Beijing to Hong Kong's self-determined political system and identity makes it hard for activists to implement their democratization agenda.<sup>25</sup> For Hong Kong, Snowden's presence in the city provided a kairotic moment for the people to criticize both the Chinese and U.S. government, which in turn grants them the moral high ground as part of the transnational human rights network that transcends state control. Given Beijing's concerns over national coherence and its increased anxiety towards dissident movements within its sovereignty, Hong Kong's claim to a transnational—instead of national—identity creates a new exigence for the central government.

### Strategic Usage of Human Rights Discourse: Snowden Protests in Hong Kong

On June 15, 2013, over 900 Hong Kong people took to the street to demonstrate against the extradition of Snowden. Most touted signs that link Snowden with democratic values, and some even explicitly criticized the U.S. government for suppressing civil rights (see fig. 1, 2, 3):



Figure 1: Translation: "Protect Snowden; protest against human rights violations."<sup>26</sup>

Figure 2: Translation: "Protest against the US government for infringing rights."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For explanation of Hong Kong's soft sovereignty, see Wu Guoguang, "Hong Kong's Political Influence over China: Institutional, Informative, and Interactive Dynamics of Sovereignty," *Pacific Review* 21, no.3 (2008): 286.

<sup>26</sup> Hoi Yin, "Hong Kong Organization Gathered outside the U.S. Embassy in Support of Snowden." *Voice of America Chinese*. June 15, 2013, <http://www.voachinese.com/content/hk-groups-protest-at-us-consulate-general-in-hk-20130615/1682479.html>

<sup>27</sup> See-Ming Lee, *Is Snowden a Hero? SnowdenHK: Hong Kong Rally to Support Snowden*. 2013. Digital photograph. Flickr, < <http://tinyurl.com/l6wmypr>>.



Figure 3: Translation: “Real ‘Hong Kong Lovers’ defend democratic values.”<sup>28</sup>

While the U.S. has long represented itself as the defender of universal human rights and democratic values, the protest signs shown here demonstrate that the Hong Kong public has actively denounced the U.S. government, and, thus, creates the space for a non-Western agent to be a real defender of human rights. By turning Snowden and the U.S. government into respective symbols of democracy and oppression, Hong Kong protesters have aligned themselves not with particular nation-states, but with what they see as the transnational protection of civil and human rights.<sup>29</sup> For example, during the protest, a Hong Kong legislator told the crowd that they were there not only to protect Snowden, but also to protect “all of us” from government surveillance that threatens human rights.<sup>30</sup> Another protestor interviewed at the time told the reporter that since the American people have previously “come forward to speak up for Shi Tao”—a Chinese human rights activist who was jailed after the government ordered Yahoo to hand over his email records—“now it’s [Hong Kong people’s] turn.”<sup>31</sup>

In the subsequent press releases written by protest organizers and supporters, the authors make clear that they were fighting not against particular nation-states—but against state power that uses national safety as an excuse to violate the freedom and privacy of citizens.<sup>32</sup> By supporting Snowden, they argue, the people of Hong Kong are in fact “fighting the battle of global freedom.”<sup>33</sup> Here, Hong Kong people demonstrate a sense of transnational solidarity that is founded upon a “common cause” that is not solely based on an “understanding of identities as locally or nationally produced entities.”<sup>34</sup> Contrary to what Mutua has argued about the imperialist nature of universal human rights discourse, in this instance the discourse is deployed exactly to attack state powers that have historically been dominating the discussion of human rights. In

<sup>28</sup> Lee, *Is Snowden a Hero?*

<sup>29</sup> According to Piper and Uhlin’s criteria, this protest should be considered as transnational activism as “the activists have an organizational structure that is not territorially bounded or are concerned with issues in a country other than where they reside [...]; the targets are based in countries other than where the activists reside, and the activists consider themselves ‘global citizens.’” Nicola Piper and Ander Uhlin, *Transnational Activism in Asia: Problems of Power and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 5.

<sup>30</sup> Tania Branigan and Jonathan Kaiman, “Edward Snowden Could Benefit from Hong Kong Asylum Disarray,” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/10/edward-snowden-hong-kong-asylum-disarray>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Ah Eh, “A Movement about World Freedom (Why Supporting Snowden? Defend Freedom of Speech),” *InMedia Hong Kong*, June 16, 2013, <http://222.inmediahk.net/snowden-1984>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/common cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 223.



addition, rather than crowding out local culture, as Mutua has suggested, universal human rights discourse was creatively deployed in this case not only to further the cause of democratic and civic freedom against state regulations, but also to give Hong Kong an effective platform to voice local concerns about democracy within sovereign China.<sup>35</sup> Transnational human rights tropes, therefore, must be understood as fluid discursive tools that move and are not monopolized by any one single actor—when circulated across different political and cultural contexts, these tropes inevitably get re-purposed and their political connotations therefore shift accordingly.

As Dingo points out, when human rights tropes travel across the transnational network to a specific locale, their meanings often shift as they are appropriated by different rhetors to serve particular local or national interests.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Snowden's presence has allowed Hong Kong protesters to make use of transnational human rights tropes to argue for local democratic interests. Given Hong Kong's political resistance against Mainland China and its struggle towards a higher degree of democracy, the protestors also took this opportunity to criticize the Chinese central government as a violator of human rights. Several protest signs featured both Barack Obama and the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping and criticized them as both perpetrators against democracy and human rights (see figure 4).



Figure 4: Translation: “China is a real totalitarian; the U.S. is a fake democracy.”<sup>37</sup>

By criticizing both China and the U.S. from the human rights tropes that Snowden symbolizes, the Hong Kong protestors accomplish two goals: position themselves and the city as protectors of universal human rights against state governments, which in turn grant them the legitimacy to continue their local democracy project against Mainland China.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>36</sup> Dingo, *Networking Arguments*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> “Snowden’s Expose Complicates Dialog between China and the U.S.” *Voice of America Cantonese*. June, 15, 2013, <http://www.voacantonese.com/content/snowden-case-complicates-us-china-cyber-talks-20130615/1682486.html>.

While this was not the first protest where Hong Kong people decried the suppression of democracy and human rights in China, it was the most successful one in forcing China to acknowledge Hong Kong as a democracy separate from Beijing. Before Snowden's presence and plea in Hong Kong, none of the arguments and political actions made by Hong Kong people were effective in eliciting a constructive response from the central Chinese government because Beijing did not feel the need to respond to the thorny question of democracy when Hong Kong was securely under the control of its sovereignty. Snowden's presence, however, granted the Hong Kong people the opportunity to challenge Beijing's assumption about how Hong Kong people culturally and politically position themselves. Due to their temporary position as the protector of Snowden—now a symbol of human rights and democracy against oppressive state governments, Hong Kong could effectively construct and assert their identity as transnational and beyond the boundaries of states—including China. In other words, by harnessing the rhetorical agency and position granted by an unexpected event, the people of Hong Kong were able to partially achieve its goal of gaining formal recognition for its democratic practices which—more often than not—was not in agreement with the state regime.

Hong Kong's success here challenges the common conception that universal human rights tropes are appropriated and manipulated only by Western institutions to render non-Western local parties relatively powerless. As this case study has shown, Hong Kong people initially lacked sufficient agency against Beijing because the city is within the sovereign control of China; Snowden's unannounced presence and his plea, however, granted the people of Hong Kong moral superiority beyond state governments, which in turn allowed them more rhetorical agency and political leverage against Beijing. By tactically re-deploying dominant transnational human rights tropes for this particular context, Hong Kong's new rhetorical position was so effective that it created new exigencies for Beijing and prompted the Chinese government to recognize the city's status as a semi-independent democracy.

### **Maintaining National Identity: China's Responses to Hong Kong**

Before this event, human rights tropes have always been a point of contention between the U.S. and Beijing. Both the U.S. and the People's Republic of China have deployed human rights discourse as a rhetorical weapon to attack each other on international stage and to serve their domestic political ends. Denouncing China's violation of human rights is one crucial campaign strategy for both parties on election years. Hillary Clinton's 1995 speech at the Beijing Women's Conference offered a classic example. By condemning the Chinese government's abuse of women's rights, Clinton reinforced the construction of America as a land of freedom and effectively integrated the U.S. political agenda with the Democrats' campaign strategy.<sup>38</sup> China also learned to pay back in the same way. In April, 2013, two months before Snowden's NSA leakage, China released a report about human rights conditions in the U.S which states that, "The U.S. government continues to step up surveillance of ordinary Americans, restricting and reducing the free sphere of the American society to a considerable extent, and seriously violating the freedom of citizens."<sup>39</sup> Specifically mentioning the U.S. Congress's reauthorization of FISA amendments,

<sup>38</sup> Grewal, *Transnational America*, 150-151.

<sup>39</sup> This is a document released by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. We retrieved the English version of this document from the Center for Research on Globalization. "The Human Rights Report on the United States on 2013," Center for Research on Globalization, March 1, 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-human-rights-record-of-the-united-states-in-2013/5371466>.

this widely circulated report allowed the Chinese government to bolster its soft power internationally by criticizing U.S.'s spotty domestic human rights record. Within this context, Snowden's presence in Hong Kong certainly provided Beijing an excellent opportunity to build new human rights arsenals to its own advantage.

In response to Snowden's case and favoring his protection, China made every endeavor to revile the U.S. violations of human rights. Since Snowden was conveniently located in Hong Kong—a relatively more democratic and transparent city within China's sovereignty—the Chinese government has opted to associate itself with Hong Kong to create a binary between themselves as the defender of human rights and the U.S. as the perpetrator. This strategy closely aligns with the popular anti-American rhetoric in the Mainland and allows China to destabilize the U.S.'s moral authority in the international arena. In an editorial released two days before the protest in Hong Kong in *Globaltimes*, a prominent state-sponsored newspaper with a broad readership within Mainland China, the author constructs the U.S. government as the world's largest violator of human rights and millions of Chinese internet users and the entire world as victims.<sup>40</sup> The author particularly emphasizes the U.S. hypocrisy by blaming how it violates the rights of people in other nations to serve its own interest while occupying the moral high ground to criticize others. Not aware at all that the coming protest in Hong Kong would involve indicting Beijing's suppression of democracy, this editorial underplays the role and agency Hong Kong has, and simply reminded the city not to listen to the U.S. government. In addition, it also alerts its Chinese readers that this event intimately affects the safety of Chinese internet users. At this particular point, self-victimization and condemning America's abuse of technology power seemed sufficient for China's central government to harness the human rights narrative around Snowden event.

However, the protest in Hong Kong soon proved that Beijing's response was inadequate—rather than considering only the historical Sino-U.S. relationship, Beijing now must also analyze the context in Hong Kong and its long-term political goal to ideologically integrate the SAR into its sovereignty. Beijing, in other words, must construct a response intercontextually by taking into account simultaneously the political dynamics at the local, state, and transnational levels. Hong Kong protesters not only juxtaposed Beijing with Washington as both violators of human rights and suppressors of real freedom, but also create a transnational identity for themselves as true defenders of human rights. This strategy immediately posed two exigencies to the Chinese central government. First, by incorporating previous local activism into the current international event, Hong Kong protesters shifted Mainland China from a victim to a violator while defending universal human rights. Losing a victim position not only deprives Mainland China of all the adjudicative power to influence Hong Kong's decision regarding Snowden, but it also takes away its moral justification to criticize the United States. Second, by defining the protection of Snowden as a just action against oppressive state regimes at large—including both China and the U.S., Hong Kong protesters challenged the identity of being patriotic Chinese citizens. The second exigence was particularly disconcerting for Beijing because it constructed a new identity for Hong Kong people to proclaim their own value system and sever their adherence to a state-sanctioned national identity.

As part of the de-colonial project, the handover of Hong Kong to China ended the history of the territory as a British colony. This formal ceremony justifies Beijing's imagination of Hong Kong as an inseparable and legitimate part of China. Despite the policy of "One Country, Two

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<sup>40</sup> "Prism, the United States Owes the World an Explanation," *Global Times*, June 13, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-06/13/c\\_124850018.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-06/13/c_124850018.htm).

Systems,” however, Hongkongers are able to achieve the political agency they desire to challenge the dominant ideology and control of the Chinese state. With significant less political and economic power, Hong Kong citizens, therefore, could not elicit a positive response—or even an acknowledgement—from the central Chinese government to recognize the city as a democratic society and an autonomous region free from the state’s intervention. By appropriating the human rights discourse and creating a rhetorical agency to construct a transnational identity and value-system, the people of Hong Kong were able to force Beijing to concede and grant recognition to the city’s democratic status in exchange for its continual adherence to the state-sanctioned national identity.

While no Chinese officials have formally discussed where China stands in this event, the government has published three successive editorials in *Global Times* after the protest broke out in Hong Kong. They emphasize that “Snowden’s behavior has helped defend the highest standard in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and has received applause in countries all over the world”; as a result, if Hong Kong extradites him, “it will not only betray Snowden’s trust, but also the expectations of the whole world.”<sup>41</sup> By representing Snowden’s case as a matter of universal human rights, China positions itself not merely as an antagonist against the U.S., but as a state concerned with the universal values of protecting civic and human rights. Through this representation, China can therefore maintain unification between Mainland and Hong Kong. One editorial explicitly states that if Hong Kong does extradite Snowden, “not only will the Hong Kong government lose points, the whole China will also lose *mianzi* because of that.”<sup>42</sup> As Luming Mao explains, “Chinese *mianzi* places its primary emphasis on securing public acknowledgement of one’s reputation or prestige through social performance or by the social position one occupies in the community.”<sup>43</sup> In this context, this reputation derives from the protection of an American political refugee and should be shared by both Mainland and Hong Kong. As a response to the protest in Hong Kong, this editorial attempts to reinforce the national identity of Hong Kong protesters by pointing out the common cause of all Chinese citizens and the Chinese government.

In order to further bolster its ethos against the U.S., China explicitly represents Hong Kong as a democracy and associates Hong Kong with the Chinese government. In addition to rhetorically tying the interests and concerns of the Hong Kong government with that of the regime, these editorials also attempt to fortify China’s *mianzi* by constructing Hong Kong as the moral superior of the U.S. For example, one editorial argues “because Hong Kong is a democratic society, the U.S. has finally succumbed to the pressure of public opinions and chose not to press on Snowden’s extradition.”<sup>44</sup> Since Hong Kong—albeit semi-autonomous and extremely critical and hostile of the state regime—is within China’s sovereignty, the Chinese government can make use of such an association to promote its own moral standing. By pointing out that Snowden’s decision to stay in Hong Kong highlights how free and democratic the city is even after its return of sovereignty to China, the Chinese government is able to position itself as a state that

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<sup>41</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the translation of protest signs and Chinese news is our own. “Hong Kong and Mainland Both Lose Points,” *Global Times*, June 17, 2013, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2013-06/4031342.html>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Luming Mao, *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie: The Making of Chinese American Rhetoric* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2006), 39.

<sup>44</sup> “In Snowden’s Case, the U.S. Will Only Hurt Itself by Badmouthing China,” *Global Times*, June 18, 2013, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2013-06/4035403.html>.

embraces “universal values” more than the U.S. does.<sup>45</sup> In other words, by emphasizing the association between Hong Kong and China and strategically referencing Hong Kong’s struggle for human rights and democracy to its advantage, the Chinese government constructs a power state image over the U.S. in the global moral economy.

The recognition of Hong Kong as a democratic society and the encouragement of Hong Kong to represent China as an international harbor of political refugee both indicate Beijing’s expectation: 1) Hong Kong should say no to U.S. demand of extradition and broadcast Snowden’s message to lead global media; 2) Hong Kong should not turn the fire to Beijing and deny itself as part of China. The implied message behind these editorials sought to emphasize an alliance between Mainland China and Hong Kong through their shared condemnation of the U.S. government. In exchange for Hong Kong’s collaboration, Beijing would recognize the city as a democratic society and support its pursuit of “universal values.” In other words, by asserting a transnational position that challenges China’s construction of a coherent national identity, the Hong Kong public has created a new exigency for Beijing—which in turn forces Beijing to compromise and acknowledge its semi-autonomous and democratic status, in exchange for the potential of maintaining national coherence.

While Hong Kong was able to harness the kairotic moment during Snowden’s stay to negotiate its political standing with China, China’s response is only a partial compromise because it still requires Hong Kong to stand in solidarity with China against the U.S. government. China’s recognition of Hong Kong’s democratic status certainly empowers Hong Kong people by encouraging them to enact their rights of free speech and turn the city into a real harbor for political refugees. However, once again, such an empowerment is only conditional—the state continues to require the Hong Kong public to see themselves as part of China, to share a common interest with the Chinese state, and represent themselves as a part of a promising new China on the global stage.

## Conclusion

As human rights tropes are deployed transnationally across different contexts, actors, and stakes, their meanings and implications are inadvertently appropriated and re-purposed to suit specific situations and interests. For Hong Kong citizens who are struggling for universal suffrage and less political infringement from the Chinese central government, Snowden’s presence and the human rights values he represents provided a kairotic moment for protesters to dissociate themselves from any state regimes that violate civil rights and what they see as “universal values.” In other words, Snowden provided Hong Kong citizens the opportunity to both advocate their agenda as part of a transnational human rights network and to gain legitimacy and support over their resistance against the Chinese government. China, on the other hand, has chosen to temporarily dismiss Hong Kong’s resistance, and instead makes use of Hong Kong’s insistence on human rights and democracy to bolster its own ethos over the United States. Hong Kong’s dissociation from China is rhetorically erased as the Chinese government uses Hong Kong to strengthen its *mianzi* in the international arena. In addition, Hong Kong’s construction of a transnational identity apart from the state-sanctioned national identity has also prompted China to make a partial compromise with the city by acknowledging its democratic status, in exchange for its cooperation with the regime. In this incident, Hongkongers received a sudden and unexpected acknowl-

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<sup>45</sup> “Hong Kong Cannot Become the Laughing Stock of the World,” *Global Times*, June 19, 2013, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2013-06/4039766.html>.

edgement from Beijing of the city's democratic and semi-autonomous status. By harnessing the opportunistic moment to assert a transnational identity, Hong Kong created a new set of exigencies for the central Chinese government and forces it to slightly reconcile with the city's political demands.

By reading intercontextually, we are able to see that transnational human rights discourse often has very local and national ramifications—and can be effectively deployed by non-Western agents. However, this case study also illuminates that the appropriation of popular transnational tropes do not always have the power to singlehandedly bring about positive local political changes, unless the local parties are presented with and are able to make use of the unexpected kairos. In other words, when examining the rhetorical and political effects of transnational tropes and discourses, we must pay attention not only to the actions of different parties, but must also consider what other material forces are present at the moment that are beyond the immediate control of the actors involved. With the uneasy end of the Umbrella Movement and ongoing political tension between the Hong Kong civic society and the Chinese state government over the city's democratic project, we must pay close attention to how local activists and the state, leveraging their respective cultural capital, political and economic power, engage in intercontextual rhetorical negotiations with one another—and with the transnational audience spectating from other nation-states.