

## **The Never-Ending Revolt: The Hong Kong Protests on Reddit**

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In June 1989 the Chinese Communist Party ordered their military to enter Tiananmen Square. It was where Mao Zedong had announced the birth of the People's Republic of China, where he himself was laid to rest, and now where thousands of protesters had gathered there to demand reform from their authoritarian government. By midnight on June 4th, untold hundreds of the protesters lay dead in the square. We have a vague idea of what happened that day, but the details are lost to history. Imagine what conversations these heroes must have had. Did they share their hopes for their country? Or how they must have feared for their lives? All that remains are the short strips of film, the newspaper clippings, and the grief. With each passing year, the humanity of that day fades further away.

History often rhymes. For many decades, the people of Hong Kong were accustomed to broad civil liberties under British rule. Eventually, the 100-year lease the British had extorted from Imperial China expired, and power was handed over to the Communist Party. Until recently, Hong Kong had maintained relative independence from oppressive Mainland rule. For example, while discussion of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre was banned on the mainland, Hong Kong hosted a museum and an annual vigil dedicated to the victims. When the CCP finally began to clamp down on civil liberties in Hong Kong, the people took to the streets. They were met with batons, pepper spray, kidnappings, and rape. But things were different than they were in 1989. Each act of oppression was shared far and wide online, as was each act of resistance. The world heard the people's voice directly, and not through some foreign correspondent's over-the-phone thousand-word summary. Still, when all was said and done, the result was the

same. After a handful of small symbolic concessions, the Communist Party removed all pro-democracy politicians from the government, reduced judicial independence, and begun systematically arresting leading dissidents. The Mainland now holds complete control over Hong Kong and its steady encroachment on civil liberties shows no signs of relenting. The Hong Kong Tiananmen Museum was raided and the vigil organizers arrested. Hong Kong's freedom has come to an end.

Nonetheless, its story will be unique. Through the internet, the world can see into the story of these righteous dissidents like no others before them. They expressed themselves in too many ways to count. To better understand their movement, it is best to zoom in and ask how did these protesters use social media platforms to document and promote their movement?

Reddit is in essence a network of forum pages. These forums are called subreddits. Each subreddit has a unique name and is dedicated to any imaginable subject matter. The name of the sub will frequently (but not always) indicate what the topic is, and is always prefaced with r/. So, for example, the most prominent subreddit about video games is r/Gaming. Said aloud, Redditors will often say either "R Gaming," or "R slash gaming." To compare it to another social media platform, the idea of the subreddit is similar to that of the "public Facebook group." On these subreddits, people with Reddit accounts create posts or comments on existing content which other members can then "upvote" or "downvote." A member upvotes if they value the content and downvotes if they particularly dislike the content. Content with more upvotes and comments gets more views. If a post gets a particularly large number of upvotes and interactions, then it can make it to "r/all" or "r/popular," which combines the top content from all the subreddits. R/all is frequently called "the front page of the internet." Additionally,

“redditors” can “join” subreddits in order to create a customized feed filled with content about their favorite topics.

Redditors created r/HongKong on November 3rd, 2009. Originally, it was not much different from the many other local interest subreddits. Posts were concerned with advice for new residents, local news, and discussion about tourist destinations. All this changed in the summer of 2019 when the Chinese Communist Party enacted what became known as the “National Security Law.” For context, it is important to know that Hong Kong has for over a hundred years been a political chimera. From the mid-1800s to 1990, the City was ruled by the British, after which the city was formally handed over to the People’s Republic of China. Under British governance, Hong Kongers enjoyed relatively broad civil liberties compared to Mainland Chinese. This, in turn, created immense prosperity on the island. Fearing what might happen to that prosperity after taking command, the CCP sought to soothe Hong Konger’s fears by promising a “one country, two systems” policy, allowing them to assert sovereignty over Hong Kong while leaving its local institutions intact.

The National Security Law was a major step in undoing One Country Two Systems. It allowed for Hong Kongers to be extradited to the Mainland, opening the door to censorship and unjust trials. This sparked shockingly large popular protests. The people of Hong Kong responded with what they call The Five Demands. Taken together, these demands amount to a return to One Country Two Systems, the implementation of universal suffrage, and amnesty for the protesters. These terms are essential to understanding the discussions on r/HongKong. Police brutally repressed the protesters, arrested democratic leaders, and extradited them to the Mainland. In recent months, the protests have basically come to an end. No one is left to fight for Hong Kong.

The protests completely redefined r/HongKong. As they garnered the world media's attention, more and more redditors joined the sub. The number of subscribers to r/HongKong more than quintupled in just six months. During this growth, it was consistently one of the top 100 most commented subreddits. Almost all of the content was intended to promote the cause of the protesters. Top terms on the sub include "vigil," "crackdown," "detained," and "Cantonese." That last term highlights a very interesting part of r/HongKong's identity: linguistic conflict. In Mainland China, the lingua franca is Mandarin Chinese. However, in Hong Kong, the most widely spoken language is Cantonese, with both English and Mandarin neck and neck at just under 50% fluency rates. The CCP has tried to turn the tables and reduce Cantonese's prevalence in favor of Mandarin, leading r/HongKong and others to double down on the promotion of Cantonese. Nonetheless, virtually all of the content on the sub is in English or captioned with an English translation. This reflects the protesters' strategy; they were fully aware that they were no match for the CCP on their own. Foreign pressure would be necessary, so they needed to be speaking our language, literally.

The most popular content has been a mixture of memes and reporting on human rights abuses. Many characters and public figures have become symbols of the struggle. The character "Mei" from the popular video game *Overwatch* was adopted as an icon of the protest movements. In fact, r/HongKong's most popular post of all time was an *Overwatch* promotional video featuring Mei that was edited to portray her as a protester. Posts criticizing public figures who publicly support the CCP are also popular. LeBron James and Mulan star Liu Yifei have frequently been targeted for their public comments on Hong Kong. One such post shows LeBron wearing Mao's uniform, while others show communist symbols added to his branded merchandise.

Other more obvious figures are also frequently depicted on the sub, such as the CCP-backed Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, and CCP leader Xi Jinping. Throughout China, Xi is frequently mocked for his resemblance to Winnie the Pooh. As a result, r/HongKong is full of posts comparing Xi to Pooh. For example, one popular video shows a man wearing a Winnie the Pooh costume waving to the people as he is surrounded by men dressed as security guards, who aggressively push the protesters away from Pooh.

Umbrellas are also important symbols for r/HongKong. This is due to the similar 2014 Umbrella Movement in support of more transparent elections. These elements are often worked into memes and political cartoons posted on the sub, such as one post where protesters took pairs of umbrella handles to make hearts. Other than the memes, there are hundreds of posts sharing videos of police violence, articles about disappearances, and even some advice for protesters. One such post warns redditors not to post about escape routes for protesters, fearing government surveillance of the sub. In recent months, however, this kind of content has become less common as the protests have shrunk. One has even begun to see more content like that of the pre-2019 era. More and more people are posting about everyday life as CCP rule has been normalized.

Membership to the community is fairly open but not without some notable restrictions. In theory, anyone can view the content posted. In practice, access is made more difficult by CCP censorship. Reddit is behind what has become known as the “Great Firewall,” which is the government’s list of restricted websites. There are of course ways around the firewall, but these do not render it completely ineffective. Many are unable to access these workarounds, and many more are simply deterred by them. Once one has access to the sub, there are 12 rules created by the community which all

new content must follow. Most of these rules are aimed at ensuring the content is relevant, civil, and accurate. The most intriguing rule is number 8, which forbids “Anything of the other hong\_kong sub or the sino sub.” These two subs are notorious for their pro-CCP content. Many have speculated that they are run by the “Wu Mao,” or “Fifty Cent Party,” who are CCP-paid trolls who supposedly earn 50 ¢ per post.

At the birth of the internet, many heralded the end of tyranny everywhere. From now on, people would be able to criticize, protest, and subvert authority without any obstacle. Not distance, nor cost, nor government censors could intervene, so the thinking went. Time has done away with these naive dreams. Institutions of control are not so brittle as to be broken by any old popular movement. But this does not mean the internet has done nothing. In his famous work “Power of the Powerless,” Vaclav Havel about life as a dissident under Soviet rule. He presented a hypothetical greengrocer in the Eastern Bloc who puts a sign reading “Workers of the World Unite!” in his window. Havel says that the greengrocer never thinks of the truth of the sign, he simply puts it there because to do otherwise would be an act of nonconformity. Only once he takes down the sign, begins to speak his mind, and supports others who do the same, does he begin to live in truth. And to live in truth under a dictatorship is in Havel’s mind an act of revolt. r/HongKong is just such a revolt. The overthrow of the system is not a simple matter of marching in the street. It is about showing people that it is “possible to live in truth.” It is the power the students of Tiananmen were denied. It is the power of the powerless.