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CHINA INSIDER

A Chinese migrant worker carrying rubbish walks on a railway in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, on Dec. 6, 2004. As of 2018, there are an estimated 288 million migrant workers in China.

Google Steers Users to Propaganda Attacking Shen Yun Performing Arts 2

2020:

A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR CHINA

See Page 4

CHINESE INFLUENCE

Google Steers Users to Propaganda Attacking Shen Yun Performing Arts

PETR SVAB

Beijing has opened a new front on the internet in its more-than-decade-long campaign to shut down a performing arts company whose shows challenge the Chinese regime's human rights record and cultural identity. Google search results for the Shen Yun Performing Arts company are steering users toward Chinese regime propaganda. Among the top results are several articles that align with the regime's talking points or are directly produced by the regime. Other search engines don't produce these results.

Whether Google is actively seeking to target Shen Yun with the Chinese Communist Party's viewpoint isn't clear. The search engine itself may be being manipulated.

Art That Draws Regime's Ire

The Chinese regime has opposed Shen Yun since the company's inception for two reasons: the threat posed by a revival of China's traditional culture, and the company's artistic portrayal of the persecution of the spiritual practice Falun Gong.

Started in 2006 as a dance and music company in upstate New York, Shen Yun has a vision of reviving traditional Chinese culture and showcasing through arts the 5,000-year history of China.

Its lively performances, praised by critics for artistic mastery, have become a mainstay on stages from Lincoln Center in New York to the Palais des Congrès in Paris. While mostly covering historical and folk motifs, some of its dance pieces also portray religious persecution in today's China. And that part has been a thorn in the side of the Chinese regime.

The regime has targeted Shen Yun with its extensive propaganda apparatus and, as the

troupe recently noticed, some of that propaganda is featured prominently in Google products, including search results.

That's puzzling to the company, since the internet abounds with news articles and videos featuring artists, art critics, and celebrities extolling Shen Yun. Yet, Google seems to favor a handful of articles and websites, including ones directly produced by the Chinese regime, that spread false claims about the company.

"No matter how many thousands of positive reviews [there are] ... still, at the very top of the Google ranking are these negative articles," Leeshai Lemish, an emcee with the company, told Epoch Times' affiliate NTD.

For instance, when a user types "Shen Yun" in the Google search bar, one of the top suggested search terms is "shen yun cult." That association comes directly from the communist regime.

Falun Gong

Shen Yun artists say on their website that they draw their values from Falun Gong, a meditation practice whose practitioners have been viciously persecuted by the communist regime in China for more than two decades. Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, is a meditative practice that includes a set of moral teachings based on the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance. It was banned by the Chinese regime in 1999 because of its popularity; official estimates at the time put the number of practitioners at 70 million to 100 million.

Falun Gong is an especially difficult topic for the regime since it's directly related to one of its most gruesome abuses—making money off killing religious minorities and selling their organs.

An expert tribunal in London concluded earlier this year that the regime has indeed been kill-

Controlling 90 percent of global internet searches, Google has a massive amount of power to influence its users.

(Right) A man enters the Google offices in London on Jan. 18, 2019.

(Below) A curtain call for Shen Yun Performing Arts at New York's Lincoln Center on March 7, 2019.



ing its own people and selling their organs for transplant "on a significant scale," and that the primary victims have been people detained for practicing Falun Gong. Other victim groups include underground Christians (who refuse to accept the censored version of Christianity in the regime-sanctioned church) and members of the Muslim Uyghur minority.

Information about the persecution that has reached the public in large part because of reporting by independent media, including The Epoch Times—has gone a long way in undoing Beijing's efforts to portray itself as a modern, legitimate,

and responsible world power. The regime's tactic has been to label Falun Gong a "cult."

Smear Campaign

When the persecution of Falun Gong started, the regime blamed its adherents for every conceivable wrongdoing. If a murder happened, the state-controlled media would blame Falun Gong. If negative information about the regime found its way to the public, the media would blame Falun Gong for "spreading rumors." Even the 1995 deadly sarin attack in a Tokyo subway committed by the Aum Shinrikyo cult was retroactively blamed on Falun Gong

in the regime's propaganda.

"Blame it on the Falun Gong," musician Axl Rose of Guns N' Roses fame wrote in his 2008 song "Chinese Democracy"—an ironic jab at the regime's smear campaign. In 2001, the regime went as far as to stage an incident in which several people set themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and blame it on Falun Gong. When an award-winning documentary exposed that the incident was staged—showing in the regime's own footage that one of the victims was actually struck in the head with a blunt object by a man in a military jacket—the regime simply cut the incriminating parts from the footage and re-released the propaganda piece. Chinese political commentator Heng He noted in a 2009 Epoch Times op-ed.

To this day, Chinese tourists are sometimes stunned to see Falun Gong freely practiced in parks abroad, since domestic propaganda initially claimed that the practice was illegal worldwide. In perhaps the starkest contrast with the propaganda, hundreds of thousands have picked up the practice in neighboring Taiwan without producing any of the grotesque woes attributed to Falun Gong on the mainland.

The regime also has tried to infuse its propaganda into the Western press. Newspapers such as The New York Times and The Washington Post have long included inserts that are officially marked as advertising but are, in fact, propaganda produced by the regime.

Sometimes, the regime even manages to have Western media include the propaganda in their reporting. In those cases, it's usually unclear whether the regime has influenced the outlet directly, or the propaganda slipped in through editorial sloppiness.

Several such articles concerning Shen Yun, however, are featured prominently in Google search results, giving Beijing's propaganda more exposure than the plethora of genuine responses to Shen Yun performances. Sometimes, especially when searching for Shen Yun-

related terms in Chinese, the regime's propaganda is placed even higher in the results than the company's official pages.

A page smearing Shen Yun on the website of the Chinese Embassy in Washington tends to pop up among the top 15 search results on Google. But one would be hard-pressed to find the page using other search engines, such as Yahoo, Bing, and DuckDuckGo, short of diving much deeper into the results.

Party Versus Tradition

Another reason why Beijing rants against Shen Yun is the threat that the promotion of traditional culture poses to the regime.

From the communist regime's beginning, it has sought to uproot China's traditional culture. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, historical texts and monuments were burned and smashed, while scholars and religious leaders were humiliated, imprisoned, and killed.

Traditional beliefs have been replaced with what the Chinese sometimes call the "Party culture"—a mix of historical revisionism, dogmatic atheism, and materialism, and a tacitly approved unscrupulous pursuit of power and profit conditioned on obedience to the regime.

Even the traditional culture itself has been reinterpreted to serve the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) purpose. Loyalty, for instance, is one of the five cardinal virtues of Confucianism. Traditionally, it includes the concept of criticizing one's superiors to help them correct their shortcomings. In Party culture, however, it means blind obedience to the Party.

Shen Yun, on the other hand, not only displays traditional culture, but openly stands up for its underlying principles and against their destruction and persecution. That, according to Chinese political commentator Zhang Tianliang, dissolves the regime's ideological base.

"When the beliefs of traditional culture and moral values revive, the conscience of the people will

also awaken. The disintegration of the Party culture is inevitable. When that happens, the CCP, an evil political system, will lose the environment on which it relies for survival," he wrote in a 2008 Epoch Times op-ed.

After Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng saw a Shen Yun performance in 2013, he said: "Shen Yun has posed the greatest challenge to the CCP. Chinese have awakened to the beauty of their own traditional culture.

"The Chinese people see that what Shen Yun presents is their true culture and that what the CCP presents is wrong," Wei said. "In this sense, Shen Yun is very important to the Chinese people."

Documented Campaign

The propaganda in Google search results occurs within the context of the regime trying to sabotage Shen Yun's performances, of which the company has identified many examples.

The most common tactic has been using local Chinese embassies to pressure venues not to allow Shen Yun to perform. Those efforts, however, have mostly failed. Shen Yun has been steadily growing in size and now has seven touring companies collectively performing in front of about 1 million people a year.

Another tactic has involved pressuring politicians to avoid attending the performances or issuing proclamations in support of Shen Yun. Yet that effort, it appears, has mostly backfired and, instead, generated buzz about Shen Yun in political circles.

In some cases, politicians have exposed the pressure campaigns in the media, protesting China's attempts to stifle freedom of expression overseas.

The Chinese regime also has been trying to directly put pressure on media. In 2008, a state-sponsored television station in the Czech Republic invited Shen Yun performers for an interview and showed on camera a letter from the local Chinese Embassy urging the station against becoming involved in Shen Yun's performance in Prague that year.

at the time: "We're not a Chinese television, not even a state television, so our advantage is, we can invite whoever we want. It's perhaps a bit different in China."

Google Power

It isn't clear whether Google has manipulated Shen Yun-related search results intentionally, or the results have been skewed inadvertently, or the Chinese regime has gamed the search engine.

The result, however, is the same. And it matters. Controlling 90 percent of global internet searches, Google has a massive amount of power to influence its users. Research psychologist Robert Epstein has proven in experiments that one can sway people's opinions simply by pushing certain search engine results up and down.

He's also demonstrated that Google has employed its power in a way that has influenced millions of votes in recent U.S. elections.

"The methods that they're using are invisible. They're subliminal. They're more powerful than most any effects I've ever seen in behavioral sciences, and I've been in behavioral sciences for almost 40 years," he testified to a Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing on July 16.

Bias

Google didn't respond to a request for comment, but its representatives have repeatedly told Congress that the company doesn't manually alter search results. Yet the company acknowledges that its search algorithms partly work from data produced by manual reviews of individual websites.

Google employs so-called "raters," whose job it is to determine "expertise, authoritativeness, trustworthiness" scores for websites. It's up to the raters to do their own research, so if they make judgments on incomplete or false information, or if they introduce their own biases into the rating, the search algorithms may then produce skewed results.

In addition, multiple leaks, undercover recordings, and whis-

tleblowers have demonstrated that Google also intentionally skews the algorithms, so the results reflect the worldview preferred by the company—calling it "machine learning fairness."

Some of the leaked documents and undercover recordings indicate that the worldview pushed by Google is influenced by the quasi-Marxist intersectional theory. This information undercuts Google's repeated claims that it creates and runs its products to be politically neutral.

In fact, Google's corporate interests best align with contemporary leftist politics dominated by intersectionality, according to Michael Rectenwald, former liberal studies professor at New York University and author of "Google Archipelago: The Digital Gulag and the Simulation of Freedom."

The ideology of digital giants such as Google and Facebook could best be described as "corporate leftism" and bears a resemblance to the ideology of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" practiced by the communist regime in China, Rectenwald says.

Still, Google doesn't necessarily promote Chinese propaganda intentionally.

Influence Operation

Google algorithms also respond to signals that can be manipulated.

The ranking of a web page can be boosted if other authoritative pages link to it, said Alexander Kehoe, a search engine optimization expert and co-founder of Caveni Digital Solutions, an SEO and digital marketing company. The Chinese regime is in a position to take advantage of this feature to boost certain content in search results, he said.

"State actors ... have the resources to make either fake [websites] or make so many other websites link to you that it appears that you're authoritative, even if it's artificial, as opposed to organic," Kehoe told The Epoch Times. Indeed, the Chinese regime runs a massive online influence operation. A 2017 study published in the American Political Science Review said that the Chinese regime has hired as many as 2 million internet trolls, who post an estimated 488 million messages of misinformation or disinformation each year.

Most recently, the regime has used manufactured online campaigns to influence public perception of the protests in Hong Kong, an analysis by The Wall Street Journal shows. In 2018, it used a similar tactic to try to sway elections in Taiwan, according to a man claiming to be a defecting Chinese spy. Lemish believes the Chinese regime is using its troll army to post on social media and elsewhere links to propaganda pages against Shen Yun to boost their ranking.

"It's making us work a lot harder because just the normal way that people discover things these days [is] by Googling them and by hearing about them ... on social media," he said. "They're really making a strong effort to not allow us to use those channels, and then create negative impressions on people to make it harder for us to sell tickets."

The trolls are sometimes easy to spot because they use a style of broken English typical for some mainland Chinese in their online posts, he said. Kehoe called the regime's trolls "very blatant."

"It's almost like they're toeing exactly the Party line from China. ... No American would actually say something like this," he said.

It's clear that Google is at least aware of the regime's efforts. Earlier this year, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, which is owned by Google, suspended hundreds of accounts linked to a CCP information operation seeking to undermine the protest movement in Hong Kong.

With the 2020 U.S. presidential election approaching, foreign political influence operations are likely to remain a hot topic.





Chinese leader Xi Jinping joins a session of the National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on March 11, 2018.

2020: A Pivotal Year for China

China's leadership faces its most daunting challenges since the immediate post-Mao era

JAMES GORRIE

Commentary

"A wounded bear (or panda, in this instance)," the old saying goes, "is more dangerous than a healthy one." The idea behind that widely applicable aphorism is simply that weak or cornered adversaries are more likely to act in more desperate and unpredictable ways. As a result, they pose greater risks to their competitors. It's a generalization, to be sure, but there is some wisdom to it as well.

2019: The CCP's Very Bad, No Good Year

That's not to say that China is feeling cornered per se; that's probably overstating the case. But it doesn't mean that they're not feeling the pressure of their many problems, because they certainly are. The past 12 months or so have been particularly challenging for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership.

There's no question that China, and particularly the leadership of the CCP, has had a very difficult year. Perhaps the worst of it is that many of China's problems didn't have to become the major challenges that they've now become. Some were self-inflicted and completely avoidable. Others, however, were simply mishandled, or a combination of both.

African Swine Fever, Huawei, and 'Made in China 2025' Mayhem

Outbreaks happen, but in China's case, the Party's decision to impose retaliatory tariffs on U.S. pork and import pork from Russia, where a known African swine flu outbreak had occurred was a monumental mistake in judgment. Then, in a rare admission of guilt, the Party admitted their failure to act quickly and contain the outbreak, which has become worse than anticipated, threatening food supplies worldwide.

These catastrophic policy failures cost China half of its swine population in 2019 alone. The responsibility for severe food shortages, hardships and spiking food prices lies with the CCP leadership alone.

In the global trade realm, the CCP leadership's continued chest-thumping over its "Made in China 2025" program was entirely unnecessary. Declaring that China would become the world's center for technological development and manufacturing at the expense of its major trading partners was immature, self-indulgent, and just plain stupid. The predictable blowback was somehow surprising to the Party leadership.

If Trump had any doubts about the CCP's appetite for duplicity and its leadership's penchant for personal humiliation, he doesn't any more.

More to the point, promising to hold out the economies of its largest trading partners showed great disrespect toward the very countries that made China wealthy. That point was underscored by the revelations of the Huawei spyware scandals in Poland, Canada, the Nordic countries and in the United States. It shined a bright light on China's official policy of IP and technology theft against the rest of the world on an industrial scale.

It also helped to validate President Trump's nascent trade war against China. To many, Beijing got—and continues to get—what it deserved.

Bungling the Hong Kong Situation

Then came Beijing's insistence on pushing an essentially lawless extradition bill onto Hong Kong. Again, another act of supreme arrogance and an inability or unwillingness to assess the risk-reward ratio of a situation. The protests could have been quickly ended within a week.

When the demonstrations first began in June of 2019, the presence of three million people in the streets of Hong Kong should have told the Party leadership that the extradition bill would cost more than it was worth. Instead, Beijing refused to use good judgment. Had the bill been withdrawn immediately, the protesters would have had their win, probably celebrated in the street for a weekend, and then gotten on with their lives.

Instead, Beijing's ham-handed approach brought international condemnation upon itself, as well as lost revenues and damaged prestige for China's premier financial hub. But the protests in Hong Kong continue today, and likely will go on for some time.

The Party has lost the upper hand and the leadership has been humiliated. What's worse, it has foolishly enabled "foreign meddling" in Hong Kong—the one thing the CCP has warned its citizens of for decades. This has come about since President Trump has been able to link Beijing's treatment of Hong Kong protesters to the trade war negotiations with the United States.

By failing to handle the Hong Kong situation early, Beijing has given President Trump leverage that he never would have had. It's a disaster for the CCP leadership that only seems to get worse the longer it goes on. What's quite apparent to everyone in the Party, in China, Hong Kong and the rest of the world is that the leadership has no good options. This self-inflicted wound continues to infect the CCP to its very core.

Double Dealing With 'The Donald'

Even the trade war itself could have largely been resolved before the Hong Kong crises began. Recall that Trump announced a deal with China that had been reached back in May. The Chinese leadership, however, undercut and humiliated the U.S. president by withdrawing from agreed upon terms.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping probably thought his country could go on cheating as usual after the last election, with at most an occasional public scolding from Washington, along with a symbolic gesture or two on trade.

And why wouldn't he think this? Obama once called him out in the Rose Garden for China's cybertheft of intellectual property, but after this verbal pat on the wrist, no real consequences followed.

Xi wouldn't have been worried about tariffs either. Obama did almost nothing in eight years to counteract Chinese dumping except file fruitless complaints with the hopelessly compromised World Trade Organization. He did once slap an import duty on a couple of Chinese products—tires and steel—which did nothing to stop the wider American economy from being steamrolled by

Trump's response to China's bad faith dealing was swift. He immediately raised tariffs, restricted China's access to key technologies and signed an executive order banning Huawei and other Chinese network suppliers due to their threats to national security. What was an opportunity for a relatively painless resolution to the trade war was lost for no discernible gain for China.

If Trump had any doubts about the CCP's appetite for duplicity and its leadership's penchant for personal humiliation, he doesn't any more. What's more, if CCP members didn't have any doubts about their immediate future at the beginning of 2019, they most certainly do now.

China is most definitely worse off than it was last year at this time. The big question is, "Will China become more aggressive in 2020?" That is, will next year see China flex its military muscle in reaction to growing and unmet challenges and failed leadership? Will it continue to shoot itself in the foot, regardless of the consequences?

Or will the Party reassess its decision-making process and seek to resolve its problems on a more rational basis? It should be an interesting year.

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Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

Boom! Beijing's Trade Strategy Just Blew Up in Its Face

This article is part of a special Epoch Times series reviewing 2019

STEVEN W. MOSHER

Commentary

With the passage of the USMCA in the House, who is the world's biggest loser? That's easy. China is. The Communist giant is about to be the odd man out as the three countries of the North American continent reinvent the largest and richest free trade zone in the world. The U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade pact will encompass a population of nearly 500 million people and boast a combined GDP of almost 24 trillion dollars.

Whether or not the Phase 1 U.S.-China trade deal materializes—remember that China has walked away from a deal at the last minute before—the signing of USMCA into law will put the United States in a much stronger position in the ongoing trade war. And the Chinese regime only has itself to blame.

Like almost everyone else, China's leaders completely underestimated President Trump's staying power, and his determination to stand up for American industry and American workers.

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China Inc. Symbolism, anyone?

Then along came Donald Trump. The Chinese regime's first impulse is almost always to offer a bribe—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is fueled by corruption—and that's exactly what its emissaries tried immediately after the election. Even before the new president was sworn in, they were offering sweetheart deals to members of his family. And why wouldn't they? It had worked before, with no fewer than three famous American political families. (I'll let you guess which ones.)

This time, however, they were turned down.

The CCP saw another opening when "Little Rocket Man" began stirring up trouble on the Korean Peninsula. They rushed in with an offer to mediate, obviously hoping to win favor—or at least buy time—with the new president on trade.

This had worked before, too. In fact, it had worked twice with former U.S. presidents, first with Bill Clinton and later with George W. Bush. But it wasn't long before Trump cut out the middlemen from the Middle Kingdom and met directly with Kim Jong Un in Singapore. And the missiles stopped flying—at least for now.

Even so, Communist Party officials figured they still had the upper hand. They had learned over the past quarter-century how easy it was to manipulate the American political system to their advantage. They were sure that the current occupant of the White House, like his predecessors, would soon buckle under the combined weight of Wall Street, "K" Street, and endless editorials about the economic fantasy known as "free trade." Trump's campaign promises of massive tariffs against Chinese-made goods would never materialize—or so they thought.

Trump went ahead with the first round of levies anyway, promising more to come unless the CCP changed its cheating ways.

Instead of backing down, the CCP decided to up the ante and directly meddle in the 2018 midterm elections. Anti-Trump propaganda began pouring out of China's state-controlled radio and television stations in the United States. Paid advertising inserts attacking his trade policy began appearing in U.S. newspapers.

But the real meddling came in the form of Beijing's tariffs.

While our initial round of tariffs on China was punitive—imposed as punishment on specific companies guilty of ripping off U.S. technology—China's were overtly political—targeting the economies of Trump-supporting states like Iowa in the hope of swaying American voters to vote against the president and his policies.

Compared to Russia's penny-ante election interference in 2016, what the CCP attempted in 2018 was big league meddling. But it was all for naught anyway. Support for getting tough with China among the president's supporters—and among Americans in general—did not waver.

The CCP's behavior since then is a case study in negotiating in bad faith. U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer spent months fine-tuning a 150-page deal with his Chinese counterparts only to have them tear it up in May of this year. After stonewalling for months, Beijing came back to the table in October as a tariff deadline neared. To forestall additional tariffs, Chinese Vice Premier Li even promised Trump that China would buy 50 billion dollars in soybeans, only to walk back on that commitment a few weeks later.

After three years of offering bribes and uttering threats, interfering in American elections and hiding behind North Korea, the CCP seems to have finally reached the bottom of its bag of tricks. And, with impeachment revealed as a sham and the USMCA sure to pass, it decided that an interim deal was better than no deal at all. A "Woke" Beijing now realizes that the

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Trump presidency is not fatally weakened, as it had thought, and that President Trump may well win a second term.

The passage of the USMCA in the House by an overwhelmingly vote changes everything. First of all, it shows Xi and his advisors that, however divided America's political parties are on other issues, they can still work together when the country's vital interests are at stake. Second, it greatly strengthens Trump's hand in the ongoing negotiations. Not only is it a personal victory for the president—it makes good on one of his signature campaign promises—it also further strengthens a U.S. economy that is already the envy of the world.

At the same time, the USMCA weakens China. By increasing the domestic parts content of cars made in North America, it cuts Chinese parts manufacturers out of this lucrative market. Even more important, the deal contains a "kill switch" that blocks China from entering into any free trade agreement with Canada or Mexico, so that it can't gain access to the American market "through the back door."

Beijing's propaganda machine has angrily denounced these provisions as the work of "anti-China forces." To which we should say, "Sorry, China, but America comes first."

The largest free trade deal in the history of the world will soon be in place, and the CCP is on the outside looking in. And, unless it fundamentally changes the way it does business, as it has been promising to do for decades now, it will stay there.

Steven W. Mosher is the president of the Population Research Institute and the author of "Bully of Asia: Why China's Dream is the New Threat to World Order."

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.



President Donald Trump speaks on the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement trade agreement in Milwaukee, Wis., on July 12, 2019



Protesters take part in a rally to support the nonprofit Spark Alliance at Edinburgh Place in Hong Kong on Dec. 23, 2019.

2019 IN REVIEW

Hong Kong's Last Fight for Freedom

This article is part of a special Epoch Times series reviewing 2019

ANNIE WU

HONG KONG—When protests aren't unfolding on the streets of Hong Kong, the city marches on: people walking to their destinations, hawkers selling their wares, vehicles shuttling passengers to and fro.

But in nearly every neighborhood, there remains graffiti, posters, and stickers—left on sidewalks, walls, sky-bridges, lamp posts, and storefronts—declaring rebellion, a yearning for freedom, and anger at what protesters view as the brutality of police and the broken government that has endorsed their power.

For more than six months, Hongkongers have mounted the biggest challenge to the Chinese Communist Party in recent memory. Angered by a now-withdrawn extradition bill that encapsulated their fears about the Chinese regime's growing encroachment on the city's autonomy, millions clogged the streets to call for the proposal to be scrapped.

"This bill is just a trigger point. But behind this, there are underlying, deeper problems: Hongkongers' fears of the Chinese regime," said Zack Ho, the 18-year-old convener of a student activist group called Inspidemia Hong Kong.

China promised that the city's autonomy and freedoms would remain unchanged for 50 years after its transfer from British to Chinese rule in 1997.

But the bill—which would have allowed the Chinese regime to seek extradition of individuals for trial—awakened Hongkongers' anger and fear about an uncertain future. Ho said, as "the Hong Kong government has made the city more 'red,' more integrated [with the mainland]" over time.

For months, the government refused to concede. Meanwhile, police fired tear gas, rubber bullets, and other projectiles to quell protests.

Never Severing Ties

In a show of frustration at the Hong Kong government's failure to listen to its residents, on July 1—the 22nd anniversary of the city's handover—protesters broke through the entrance to the legislature building and stormed inside, spraying graffiti on the walls and damaging property.

As police warned that they would clear the premises, protesters who had surrounded the building decided to try to rescue people who were inside—because of fears that they could be arrested. The demonstrators inside had refused to leave, and issued an ultimatum to the government to address their demands.

"From that day on, we established the concept of not severing ties between the

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Zack Ho, convener of a student activist group called Inspidemia Hong Kong.

peaceful and the valiant," said Ventus Lau, a pro-democracy activist who has been charged in connection with the July 1 protest. The latter is a reference to those who are willing to use more aggressive tactics during confrontations with the police.

"Even if you don't agree with the strategy, we will still be on the same side," he added.

Ivan Lam, chairman of the pro-democracy party Demosisto, believes that solidarity is a key factor in the movement's longevity.

During 2014's Umbrella Movement, when Lam, fellow Demosisto member Joshua Wong, and other young activists led a pro-democracy protest seeking to pressure the government into granting universal suffrage in city elections, "there were always arguments between different tactics and strategies," he said. "That's one of the reasons why we failed every time in the past."

The Umbrella protests ended without effecting any change in the city's electoral system.

Universal suffrage was promised in the city's mini-constitution drafted by Chinese and British authorities in the lead-up to the handover. Currently, the city's top official is elected by a committee comprised of mostly pro-Beijing elites.

In this movement, there are no leaders, and protesters have adopted a "be water" philosophy to go with the flow, and change tactics when necessary.

And unlike 2014, when protesters continually occupied the city's business district until authorities cleared the site, "not one action represents the movement, but [we] use different actions to sustain it," Lam said, noting that Hongkongers have recently initiated efforts to establish new pro-democracy labor unions in preparation for a planned strike.

"The movement won't just extinguish like a fire, but will keep on going."

Future

After more than 6,000 arrests since June, in recent weeks, protesters have been less likely to engage in street confrontations, while police have been more restrained in their use of force. Tensions subsided after pro-democracy candidates won a landslide victory in district council elections.

Now, in the seventh month of the campaign, protesters must answer important questions: Where is the movement headed now? Can it be sustained, or will it fade like the Umbrella Movement?

"Now, it's a critical ... turning point. Possibly, the protests would calm ... maybe it's time to be ready for a long-term fight, from different aspects of society," said Mockingjay, a student at

the University of Hong Kong (HKU). Like many protesters, she chose to use a pseudonym because of fear of reprisal from the authorities.

Many are calling for protests to enter daily life, by choosing to patronize restaurants and shops that support protests, for example. Some, like Lau, believe more radical tactics need to co-exist with the peaceful marches and rallies he's helped organize.

"Even if you hold rallies every day, this government will not care about you," as evidenced by these past few months, Lau said. "We need things that can threaten this administration in order to win this war."

As for concrete steps for the future, no one had a clear answer. Most just spoke of an unwavering desire to persist until all demands were met.

"Like a game of football, we just have to keep the game going," said Lau.

The loftiest demand is the one for universal suffrage, as the Chinese regime has already stated that it wouldn't allow elections for the city's top official without having Beijing vet the candidates.

But "without a fundamental change in the electoral system, the government of Hong Kong would not have to listen to the people's demands and always have to obey the Chinese government," Mockingjay said.

Without true democracy, "Hong Kong's problems are like a ticking time bomb and you don't know when it will explode," Lau predicted.

During a recent discussion event held by HKU students, aimed to help their international classmates understand the ongoing protests, student protesters initiated a debate about the future of their home, the flaws of past pro-democracy activism, and how the movement should progress.

There's been one undeniable change since the protests began: Hongkongers are now more politically aware than ever before. Mockingjay said her friends who used to post on social media about socializing and food now constantly comment on the protests.

H, a fourth-year engineering student, said Hongkongers used to avoid talking about politics. But with this movement, "you don't look for politics, but politics finds you."

The odds are stacked high, but Lau sees hope in the people's perseverance. "We still believe that Hong Kong is a place with freedom. We won't ever forget this."

H's grandfather had fled to Hong Kong from mainland China, seeing the city as a safe haven from communist control.

"I don't want to see Hong Kong handed back to the Chinese Communist Party so easily," he said.

2019 IN REVIEW

US Steps Up Offensive Against Chinese Regime

This article is part of a special Epoch Times series reviewing 2019

CATHY HE

This year saw the United States ratchet up its confrontation with the Chinese regime.

The Trump administration continued to take Beijing to task on its longstanding abuses in the U.S.—China trade dispute, while authorities ramped up a crackdown on Chinese state-sanctioned economic espionage. Battle lines drifted into the technology sector as the United States moved to sanction Chinese telecommunications equipment company Huawei over national security concerns, and sought to convince its allies to do the same.

Human rights concerns also made it to the forefront of U.S. policy as the Trump administration took measures to back democracy protesters in Hong Kong and punish Chinese companies and officials for their involvement in abuses in the far western region of Xinjiang.

Overseas, Washington has sought to deepen cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific region to contain the Chinese regime's military and economic ambitions.

Trade War

After 17 months of on-again, off-again trade negotiations and tit-for-tat tariffs on billions of dollars of imports, Washington and Beijing agreed to a "phase one" trade deal in December.

The agreement, due to be signed in early January, includes commitments by the regime to enforce intellectual property (IP) protections, end forced technology transfers, and ensure a stable yuan currency.

The regime also has agreed to buy an additional \$200 billion in U.S. goods and services over the next two years, including about \$50 billion in farm products, while the United States agreed not to impose new tariffs that had been due to take effect mid-December and reduce existing tariffs introduced in September.

Over the year, U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods, which had ranged from 15–25 percent on about \$325 billion of Chinese goods, contributed to a raft of companies moving or considering plans to relocate their U.S.-bound production out of China to Southeast Asian nations, such as Cambodia and

Vietnam. The companies reportedly range from global tech giants Apple and Dell to apparel makers and retailers such as Levi Strauss & Co. and Macy's.

Analysts have suggested the interim agreement amounted to a temporary reprieve in the trade dispute, and have cautioned against adopting an overly optimistic outlook going into phase two trade negotiations, in light of Beijing's history of renegeing on trade promises.

Another point of concern is that outstanding issues appear trickier to resolve, such as the regime's subsidies and support for state-owned enterprises, cyber-hacking, and its data localization laws, which requires all local and foreign firms to store data within China's borders.

Huawei

Huawei, the world's largest manufacturer of telecom gear, has faced intensified scrutiny in the United States over concerns that its products pose espionage and security risks due to the company's close ties with the Chinese regime—allegations that the company denies. Such fears arise since China's national security laws compel companies to cooperate with intelligence agencies when asked.

In January, one month after Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou was arrested in Vancouver, Canada, U.S. prosecutors unveiled two indictments against the company.

One indictment charged Huawei with bank fraud tied to breaches of U.S. sanctions against Iran, which Meng is personally allegedly implicated, while the other was for alleged theft of trade secrets against U.S. carrier T-Mobile.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) also is reportedly investigating the company for other instances of intellectual property theft.

In May, during the height of U.S.—China trade tensions, the Trump administration blacklisted Huawei and its 68 affiliates—a number that later was increased to more than 100—from doing business with U.S. firms on national security grounds.

Huawei was dealt another blow in November, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted 5–0 to designate it and another Chinese telecom firm, ZTE, as national security threats,

barring U.S. rural carriers from using federal funds to buy their equipment. The move could force these companies to find alternative suppliers.

"Both companies have close ties to China's communist government and military apparatus," FCC Chairman Ajit Pai said ahead of the vote. "Both companies are subject to Chinese laws broadly obligating them to cooperate with any request from the country's intelligence services and to keep those requests secret. Both companies have engaged in conduct like intellectual property theft, bribery, and corruption."

As Huawei pushes for expansion into Europe as countries roll out next-generation 5G wireless networks, the United States has continually sought to convince its allies to bar the company from supplying the infrastructure—an endeavor that has yielded mixed results.

Chinese Economic Espionage

This year saw an uptick in federal prosecutions aimed at tackling the Chinese regime's rampant IP theft, which forms a key part of its ambitions in supplanting the United States as the world's economic leader.

U.S. officials say state-sanctioned IP theft is endorsed under Beijing's ambitious "Made in China 2025" industrial plan, which aims to transform the country into a high-tech manufacturing powerhouse by the year 2025. The policy targets 10 industries for development, including robotics, aerospace, and biotechnology.

More than 80 percent of all economic espionage charges brought by federal prosecutors since 2012 implicated China, according to the Justice Department, which in November 2018 launched the "China Initiative" to combat the threats posed by Chinese espionage and other forms of Chinese infiltration into U.S. society.

Meanwhile, the FBI has more than 1,000 active investigations open into IP theft, "almost all leading back to China," FBI Director Christopher Wray told U.S. senators at a congressional hearing in July.

Since January 2018, more than 30 China-related espionage cases, including those involving Chinese intelligence officers, former U.S. intelligence officials, Chinese

nationals, and naturalized U.S. citizens from China, have made headlines.

Notably, U.S. officials have stepped up efforts to curb the theft of sensitive technology from research institutions, as evidenced in a string of cases against scientists.

For example, a University of Kansas researcher was indicted for collecting federal grant money while working full time for a Chinese university; a California-based Chinese couple who were both researchers were charged with stealing trade secrets from a U.S. children's hospital where they had worked, for the benefit of their Chinese and U.S. biotech companies; and a former scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory was charged with lying about his engagement with the "Thousand Talents Plan"—a Chinese recruitment project that critics say facilitates the transfer of U.S. technology and know-how to China.

Human Rights

After months of unrest in Hong Kong over communist encroachment into the city's autonomy, the U.S. Congress in November overwhelming passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, in a show of solidarity to the pro-democracy demonstrators.

The act, now signed into law, makes the city's trading privileges with the United States contingent on an annual assessment of whether it is "sufficiently autonomous" from the mainland. It also paves the way for sanctions against Chinese and Hong Kong officials involved in certain human rights violations in the city.

"If America does not speak up for human rights in China because of commercial interests, then we lose all moral authority to speak out for human rights any place in the world," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said prior to the bill's passage in the House in October.

The crisis in Hong Kong also spilled over into the commercial sector as a growing number of U.S. companies, including Apple, Blizzard, and the National Basketball Association (NBA), came under heavy criticism for allegedly acting to appease the Chinese regime on the issue.

These cases highlighted the chilling effect the communist regime has on free speech across corporate America. In October, the administration

put 28 Chinese public security bureaus and companies, including video surveillance company Hikvision, on a trade blacklist over their involvement in Beijing's repression in Xinjiang, where an estimated more than 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities are detained as part of the regime's purported efforts to fight "extremism." It also imposed visa restrictions of regime officials complicit in the campaign.

Earlier this month, the House overwhelmingly passed the Uyghur Act, which would require the administration to toughen its response to human rights abuses in Xinjiang. A similar bill passed the Senate in September, and Congress is working on a final, reconciled version to send to President Donald Trump for his signature.

The U.S. House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee on Dec. 18 approved legislation calling for stronger U.S. support for religious and human rights in Tibet, known as the Tibet Policy and Support Act of 2019. The bill is expected to go to the full House for a vote.

Strengthening Alliances

As part of the administration's "Indo-Pacific Strategy," the United States has continued to strengthen defense and economic partnerships with Asian countries, including Taiwan, Japan, and India, to counter the regime's hegemonic ambitions in the region.

The Trump administration has increased flyovers by U.S. bombers and U.S. Navy patrols in the South China Sea, a hotly disputed waterway where the Chinese regime has built a network of militarized artificial islands and atolls. U.S. officials have repeatedly denounced Beijing's military buildup and aggressive tactics in the region, which includes deploying coast guard ships and militia fishing boats to intimidate fishing vessels, and block access to waterways.

In November, the United States, Japan, and Australia unveiled the "Blue Dot Network," a certification scheme that will set international standards for major infrastructure projects. The plan was seen as a move to address criticisms of the Chinese regime's "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR, also known as Belt and Road) initiative which has been labeled as creating debt traps for recipient countries.



President Donald Trump speaks during a trade meeting with China's Vice Premier Liu He (L) in the Oval Office at the White House on April 4, 2019.

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