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# Promises, promises

**J**ust as the Young bill has many Puerto Ricans wondering what happened to the bilateral part of its compact with the United States, there's an island colony with even less control over its destiny.

Hong Kong is about to be handed from one imperial power to another, like a pawn in an international game of chess.

Citizens will not get to vote on whether they want to leave the United Kingdom to join the authoritarian culture that is China. And having spent more than eight months in China with numerous forays into Hong Kong, I've seen enough to know islanders would soundly reject the idea if given the option.

Great Britain acquired much of Hong Kong's land in 1898, the same year the U.S. took Puerto Rico from Spain. In mid-century negotiations, the British agreed to give Hong Kong back to the Chinese when its "lease" expires on June 30, 1997.

Evidently, to these countries and much of the world, the people living there just come with the package. This kind of attitude has repercussions that stretch far beyond Hong Kong's 416 square miles.

Many Puerto Ricans were understandably outraged when U.S. Rep. Don Young proposed leaving out the choice selected by a majority of islanders during the 1993 plebiscite.

The details are still up in the air, but it's clear that the U.S. Congress sees the decision as its own, with limited input from Puerto Ricans.

So imagine how islanders here

## WORLD VIEW

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would feel if the U.S. just decided to give Puerto Rico back to Spain, based on an agreement made five generations ago - all without a vote.

Actually, it might be more accurate to imagine the island being passed along to Cuba. Freedom House puts China right up there with Cuba, Iraq and Libya when measuring repression in the nations of the world.

Ironically, China's taking of Hong Kong is scheduled to come in the same month as the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989.

It was around the first anniversary of that massacre when I first glimpsed the skyscrapers of Hong Kong. Demonstrators walked the neon-lit streets of Kowloon to commemorate the day when hundreds of pro-democracy Chinese were crushed by government tanks that overran the square in Beijing.

The different government reactions to peaceful protest - acceptance in Hong Kong, annihilation in China - illustrate the disparities between these two cultures that share the same ancestry. The language link breaks



Demonstrators in Hong Kong decry Chinese military exercises near Taiwan earlier this month. Next year Hong Kong comes under China's thumb.

AP Photostream

when one has no free speech.

It's difficult to find news of the Tiananmen Square massacre within China. The government-run press invented a scenario where a few violent objectors learned a fatal lesson.

Rewriting history comes naturally to Chinese officials. The subjugation of Tibet in the 1950s is seen quite differently, too: It was "The Liberation of Tibet," as one typical book released in English by the Chinese press describes it.

Tell the Tibetans jailed for waving a Tibetan flag or tortured with a cattle prod for trying to escape across the border how lucky they are to be "liberated" into Chinese hands.

Yet every one of the half a dozen Chinese citizens I quizzed about Tibet claimed the land has always been Chinese territory.

More recent maneuvers have made it clear that the Chinese view Taiwan through the same possessive prism they see Tibet. (Both countries were

invaded by the Chinese in the years immediately following the 1949 revolution, Tibet by the Communists and Taiwan by their fleeing foes).

Despite its lack of political clout, Taiwan, like Hong Kong, is a thriving capitalist economy. Together they fill two corners of Asia's "Four Tigers," economic powerhouses alongside Japan and Singapore.

Economically, China calls itself a Sleeping Lion. By extension, politically it sees itself as eventual King of the Jungle.

It was the ruckus of nearby democratic processes that disturbed the slumbering giant earlier this month, as Taiwan prepared for its March 24 presidential election. China roared into life with an explosion of live ammunition 11 miles from the country that presumes to choose its own leader.

China's leaders responded in similar ilk last fall when Tibetans selected their Panchen Lama, the country's

second-most-revered figure after the Dalai Lama (who now lives in exile, peacefully promoting a true liberation of Tibet).

After promising to respect the Tibetan monks' choice for Panchen Lama - a 6-year-old boy chosen according by Buddhist methods - Chinese officials reneged on their promise in a big way, as described in a Nov. 17 Boston Globe editorial. They placed the chosen one, his family and the abbot of the monastery he had entered all under house arrest. Then they forced other Tibetans and officials to select another figurehead.

Now Chinese officials are promising they won't do away with Hong Kong's capitalist system and freedom of travel for at least 50 years after the takeover. This is an important concession, as the only thing sustaining Hong Kong's 5.8 million people on an area one-eighth the size of Puerto Rico is the foreign money that fuels the economy.

But how will they be able to resist? Hong Kong earnings amount to \$14,600 per person a year, according to the 1995 almanac published by Houghton Mifflin Company in New York, while the average income in China runs about \$480 a year.

Already, the Chinese have a tight fist around any Hong Kong dollars that happen to come their way. I saw this firsthand when I finally prepared to leave China in June of 1991.

For 20 minutes, a stony-faced teller insisted the train station's currency exchange couldn't trade my \$40 worth of yuan for Hong Kong dollars, even after I pointed out a stack of the desired bills behind her. Since the yuan has no value outside of China, I stood my ground, but to no avail. This final insult ended only when an incoming foreigner agreed to buy me out.

This official's refusal came despite the promise upon my entry into the World of China that of course I could get my dollars back, up to \$200 worth, as long as I saved my exchange receipts (which I did).

Promises are clearly not considered binding by Chinese officials. Will this be brought home with force to the world only after the takeover of Hong Kong, when it's too late?

Perhaps those of us here in Puerto Rico can take a moment from our obsession with the island's status questions to consider how our situation fits into the international scene. There are similarities among these various territories despite the distance between them and us. And there's strength in numbers.

Like Hong Kong, Taiwan and Tibet, Puerto Rico is denied membership in the United Nations. Maybe the world would take note if they started a new club - the Disenfranchised Nations, say - and began to set their own agenda on how to decolonize the world's territories. ♦