Today's Issues readings for October 6, 2019
For this Sunday, October 6, 2019, the Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the September 26 issue of the New York Review of Books.

Page 14, "What Holds China Together" by Ian Johnson, and Page 3, "Fools Rush Out" by Jonathon Freedland.

The group meets in the Religious Education building next to the Church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the China reading is attached. The reading on Brexit can be read without a password on the NYR site at
https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/09/26/fools-rush-out-boris-johnson-brexit/

What Holds China Together?Ian JohnsonSEPTEMBER 26, 2019 ISSUE
Protesters outside the Hong Kong Space Museum holding illuminated cell phones as part of the 'Hong Kong Way' human chain, August 2019
Miguel Candela/SOPA Images/LightRocket/Getty Images
Protesters outside the Hong Kong Space Museum holding illuminated cell phones as part of the 'Hong Kong Way' human chain, inspired by the 1989 'Baltic Way' protests against the Soviet government, August 2019
As another humid Beijing summer passes into a crisp autumn of wind-swept skies and chrysanthemum-decked parks, it's easy to put oneself in the minds of government propagandists and feel that things are going quite well in China. Yes, faraway Hong Kong is in crisis, with huge antigovernment protests going on since March. But it was always going to be tough to absorb the former British colony; we'll give them a bit more leeway but if necessary will crack down hard. And perhaps the distant territory of Xinjiang has required a firm hand, but have any countries done anything about our reeducation camps there? As for the trade war with the United States, it causes some pain, but it doesn't matter because we've convinced most people that it's all the Americans' fault. The world is tumultuous, but we remain a bastion of stability. Our economy and military are growing steadily. Nothing really challenges Communist Party rule. And soon we'll have a chance to show our dominance to everyone when we celebrate the seventieth birthday of the People's Republic on October 1.

This reverie isn't entirely delusional. But it's fair to say that today China faces its biggest set of crises in the forty years since Deng Xiaoping began economic reforms after the death of Mao. The most vexing are Hong Kong and Xinjiang. The former has seen regular demonstrations, some involving more than one million people, against efforts by Beijing to impose its legal system on the territory. That's forced the government to launch a huge disinformation campaign

at home and abroad against the protesters, some of whom are violent but who mostly reflect middle-class worries about Communist Party rule. And in Xinjiang the situation is even more dire, with more than one million Muslims being sent to reeducation camps for not following the government line on everything from alcohol and pork consumption to the historical inevitability of Chinese rule.

Although well contained thanks to China's gargantuan security and information-control apparatus, this unrest is in some ways more significant than the other great crisis of the post-Mao era: the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, when the government sent the army into Beijing to suppress pro-democracy protests, killing hundreds and resulting in international opprobrium, economic stagnation, and widespread alienation among the Chinese. The Communist Party addressed those fateful events with a set of technocratic policies that set the country on its current course: it allowed people a greater degree of freedom—to travel abroad, make money, live and work where they wanted, and pursue personal interests—as long as they avoided politics.1 China boomed, and most people, at home or abroad, acquiesced.

That tried-and-true model of co-opting a population still works, especially in a country like China with a growing economy. Here, stirring up a true opposition movement would take a systemic crisis—say, a real economic meltdown or a climate-induced catastrophe—that doesn't yet seem likely. And so, superficially at least, the Communist Party seems to go from strength to strength, relying on China's capable civil service to make sure the high-speed trains run on time, the highways hum with new cars, and the aircraft carriers get built.

Yet it is precisely this return to prosperity that has given people the opportunity to contemplate a century-old question: what exactly holds their country together other than brute force?

In 1984, when London and Beijing reached an agreement that the British colony of Hong Kong would be handed back to China in 1997, the effect in China was electric. For more than 140 years, foreigners had occupied Chinese territory; finally that era was drawing to a close. Although people in Hong Kong watched the events in Tiananmen Square unfold with dismay, China's return to economic reforms in the early 1990s caused some to hope that it would be a fair and largely distant master. Adding to that optimism was a clause in the agreement that guaranteed Hong Kong's judicial and legal independence for fifty years (meaning Beijing would not assume complete control until 2047), as well as vague promises of gradual moves toward more democracy. By the time the handover took place, communism was on the retreat and democracy was advancing in most parts of the world. Many analysts even hoped that Hong Kong, with its rule of law, free press, independent judiciary, and partly democratic legislature, might be a model for how China one day could be governed.

The deal had two major flaws. One was that it wasn't struck in good faith. Britain had not permitted direct elections for members of Hong Kong's Legislative Council until 1991—in other words, after it had agreed to give up the territory. Beijing, which had no intention of allowing democracy a toehold in China, understandably saw this as a dirty trick and never saw

democracy as part of the promised fifty years of autonomy. Basically, Beijing wanted the same Hong Kong that it imagined Britain had enjoyed: a financial and shipping hub where politics was discouraged. As long as Hong Kong focused on business, China would allow a few vestiges of the old ways, such as a free press or the right for dissidents to live there. But real autonomy? What message would that send to the rest of China?

Perhaps more important was that the agreement ignored the seven million people of Hong Kong. Despite having lived under British colonial rule for over a century, they hadn't stopped feeling Chinese, although they had developed a complex identity that wasn't consistent with Beijing's narrow version of patriotism. The British had discouraged them from engaging in partisan politics—for example, siding with the KMT party that ruled in Taiwan or with the Communists, although both sides had supporters in the colony and riots did break out. Instead, a broad cultural sense of Chineseness grew, exemplified by the martial arts writer Louis Cha and his novels of resistance to foreign aggression.

A sense of a being a Heunggongyahn (Hong Konger) emerged in the 1970s, largely related to consumerism and Cantonese culture, such as pop music or Bruce Lee films, but it was never seen as antithetical to being Chinese. Even what seemed like overt signs of dissent—the territory's famous candlelight vigils for the victims of the 1989 massacre, for example—were part of a sense of concern for the nation: China should democratize and its martyrs should be honored. Some analysts felt that after the handover in 1997, this form of patriotism would merge with a mainland identity and result in a gradual reunification.

Over the past decade, the opposite has happened. Polls show that it is the generation born around the 1997 handover that identifies least with China. Many have abandoned their Chinese cultural identity outright in favor of one bound up with local Hong Kong civic institutions and history. The scholar Sebastian Veg argues that this is due to Beijing's efforts to meddle in Hong Kong affairs, such as pushing its own version of patriotism in the public school curriculum: "Contrary to the Heunggongyahn identity, the new discourse construes identification as a Hongkonger as contradictory with cultural or ethnic Chineseness."2 This disconnect began to appear in earnest after the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Although many Hong Kongers felt pride in China's hosting the games, by 2012 polls showed that a majority of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds identified exclusively with Hong Kong and not with the Chinese nation-state.

The annual candlelight vigils to commemorate Tiananmen reflect this change. Originally begun to show support for a democratic China, they now reflect local concerns of Hong Kong residents. An increasing number of participants say they are there first as citizens of the world or to support democracy in Hong Kong, not because they feel part of China. Indeed, in recent years some young people have argued successfully to drop the phrase "love the country" from the vigil's organizing motto.

Now many young Hong Kongers describe their orientation as “localism” (bentu). They seek to preserve local landmarks, such as the old harbor of Hong Kong, which developers are filling in to reclaim the land. Or they fight to protect villages from high-speed rail lines radiating down from China. Many of them tap into broader, global critiques of modern capitalism that, for example, expose the collusion between Hong Kong and mainland oligarchs in maintaining a state monopoly of land in Hong Kong, which puts even modest apartments out of the reach of middle-class people. While Beijing may see China’s rise as a victory for all Chinese, a growing number of Hong Kongers see themselves as victims of a new colonialism.

This anger underpins the current protests. Like earlier movements this decade, they began as expressions of opposition to specific measures to limit Hong Kong’s autonomy, in this case a proposed law that would make it easier to extradite people to China. Although the government has said that the bill is “dead,” the protests have turned into a wider venting of anger. Polls show that middle-aged people take part to show their disappointment that China has not given Hong Kong more autonomy, but young people care less about how scrupulously Beijing follows the 1997 handover agreement because what they want is not a more benevolent form of paternalism, but freedom.3

This alienation is largely due to China’s inability to provide an appealing system of government or values. Hong Kongers have access to a free Internet and a free press, and grew up in a state that wasn’t fully democratic but had real rule of law (instead of the rule by law that holds sway in China). They measure their lives not against the chaos of the Cultural Revolution or the poverty of the Chinese countryside, but rather against the way things are done in Vancouver, Sydney, or London.

Some acknowledge that China is much more prosperous than before and run by a fairly competent team of technocrats. And older Hong Kongers especially feel drawn to the traditional faiths and culture that the government in Beijing now supports with lavish subsidies. But even apolitical people can see the inherent corruption of a single-party state. They note its propensity for arbitrary arrests and realize that this could be their future, too. Who would choose to live under the Chinese system?

The terrifying fact for Hong Kongers is that that day is fast approaching. They will be directly governed by Beijing beginning in 2047, which might seem far off to some but will just be middle age for millennials. And the way Beijing has aggressively pushed its agenda means that control over important local institutions could arrive sooner than that.

What drives so many Hong Kongers into the streets is a sense of hopelessness—that this is their final battle. No foreign government will stand up for the territory. The world will tut-tut and express dismay, but almost all accept Beijing’s sovereign control over 1.4 billion people; why should other governments fret over the fate of 0.5 percent of that population? That leaves Hong Kongers with no options other than to protest and hope they can forestall the inevitable assimilation.

If Hong Kong is driven by fear of the future, Xinjiang is China's dystopian present—a parallel that many Hong Kong protesters have drawn. And like the events in the semitropical metropolis, the troubles in this sparsely populated region of deserts and oases are also rooted in the past. Both stem from the modern Chinese state's having inherited the borders and mentality of an empire.

Imperial China's last dynasty, the Qing, was controlled by a small ethnic group, the Manchus, who had once been nomadic warriors in the region north of Korea and had conquered the last ethnic Chinese empire, the Ming, in 1644. The Manchus were brilliant imperialists, holding sway over the vastly more populous Chinese—there were three Manchus for every one thousand Chinese at the time of the conquest—by adopting elements of Chinese culture, especially Confucianism. Eventually, most Chinese came to accept them as simply the latest in a series of dynasties to rule the country.

The Manchus expanded the empire's borders northward to include all of Mongolia, and westward to Tibet and Xinjiang. This was a remarkable achievement, but it was also a classic gunpowder empire, harnessing the economic might of hundreds of millions of Chinese to the martial prowess of the Manchus and their allies. Confucianism and Chinese religion held together the Chinese heartland (running from Beijing in the north to modern-day Hong Kong in the south, the coastline in the east to the Sichuan basin in the west), but the rest of the empire—more than half of its territory—was newly conquered and contained few Chinese people.

After the Qing fell in 1911, China's new nation-builders weren't quite sure what to do with this ramshackle edifice. They might have given up the conquered lands and built a predominantly Chinese state more or less within the borders of the earlier Ming Empire. Something similar happened a few years later when the Ottomans joined the wrong side in World War I and lost most of their territories in the Middle East. That allowed modernizers like Atatürk to focus on the predominantly Turkish lands of Asia Minor to create a state around an ethnic Turkish identity. This was of course an artificial construct (as are all ethnically based nation-states), but the modern Turkish state had coherent borders and a national story: it was the homeland of the Turks.

The modern Chinese state, however, lost only relatively small pieces of the Qing's empire, mainly Outer Mongolia, which first became a Soviet puppet and today is an independent state. So post-imperial China contained many non-Chinese people, including Mongolians (most actually lived in Inner Mongolia, which China retained), Tibetans, Uighurs, Hui, and about fifty other ethnic groups, many of them living in China's far south. Although their populations weren't large compared to ethnic Chinese, they occupied most of China's borderlands and about half its territory.

Rather than jettison these regions, first the Republic of China and then the People's Republic of China emulated what the Communists did in Russia when they took over the tsar's empire: they declared its colonized peoples to be liberated from feudalism and gave them fake autonomy. Hence many Chinese provinces are called "autonomous regions"; they are nominally under local control but firmly under Beijing's thumb and mostly run by ethnic Chinese with a few minority leaders as window dressing. In other words, China (just like the USSR) continued to be an empire united by force and without an inclusive way of ruling its disparate territories and ethnic groups.

This is the origin of the unrest in Xinjiang. It is supposed to be an autonomous region largely run by Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim ethnic group numbering about 11 million. But it is in effect a Chinese internal colony, its resources exploited and the best land settled by ethnic Chinese from other provinces.

Over the past twenty years, a tiny Uighur terrorist movement has sprung up. It carried out a few attacks but mainly gave Beijing the excuse to claim that China faced an al-Qaeda–style uprising and had to resort to draconian measures. The government built reeducation camps and a state-of-the-art surveillance state to wipe out separatism and enforce a radically secular vision of society—children are banned from mosques, pork and alcohol must be served even in halal restaurants, and fasting during Ramadan is discouraged if not banned outright.4 While leaders in Beijing might feel that they've solved the Uighur problem, they've only created an incredible pool of resentment and anger—just as their backing of a government in Hong Kong that is deaf to public opinion has alienated many.

What the modern system of states envisioned for places like Xinjiang and Hong Kong was the right to self-determination. Such solutions obviously don't work flawlessly—as can be seen in Spain's problems with Catalonia or the Basque lands—but the mechanisms for them exist. Another solution would be a return to the Qing dynasty's more tolerant attitude toward minority groups—genuine multiculturalism, instead of bogus autonomy and a push to make Chinese language and culture the standard for all of the country's minorities. In China, though, arguing for either is like advocating the return of the emperor to the Forbidden City. People look at you as if you've lost your mind and usually come up with the circular argument that China's guoqing, or national condition, rules that out.

It needn't be this way. Many of China's best minds—writers, academics, filmmakers, artists—have grappled with the issue of how to create new shared values or ideals.5 The Tibetan poet Woeser and her partner, the Chinese writer Wang Lixiong, have written that China needs to pursue real reconciliation among its ethnic groups and an airing of grievances, instead of treating minorities paternalistically as little brothers and sisters in need of Chinese civilization. Likewise, the now-jailed Uighur intellectual Ilham Tohti has argued forcefully not for Xinjiang's independence, but for real autonomy and an equal status for the Uighur language in the region's schools—a concern shared by many in Hong Kong because of Beijing's plans to push Mandarin Chinese over the local Cantonese dialect.

These thinkers and many others argue that the government's intense "patriotic education" is forcing a narrow, Beijing-centric vision on China, instead of tolerating the diversity that should be viewed as normal in any country, especially one this large and made up of so many peoples. And they say that China will never become a rich country if it doesn't foster a more open society, one in which problems can be publicly discussed and independent institutions coexist with the state.

The Hong Kong demonstrations show that this is possible. Left to their own devices, people organized a mass protest movement. They apologized when some participants were excessively violent. And they came up with realistic measures to defuse tensions. None of this was done by the government, either in Beijing or Hong Kong. But China's rulers have no faith that anything but force can keep this sprawling country intact. Thus their ultimatum to anyone who strays from their narrow vision of the Chinese nation: submit or be crushed.

—Beijing, August 29, 2019