When the intended publisher of Xi Jinping, China’s Godfather, a critical biography of the Chinese president, was jailed in China on smuggling charges in 2014, Jin Zhong stepped in and published the book himself.

Mr Jin, the Hong Kong publisher of a string of sensitive titles about China’s top leaders over the past 30 years, saw no reason not to publish another.

However, the unexplained disappearance late last year of five booksellers from a Hong Kong store specialising in books banned in China, and the suspected role of Beijing in their fate, has changed his mind. Mr Jin has pulled the publication of a follow-up title by the same writer, an overseas dissident, called Xi Jinping’s Nightmare.

“The situation now is very worrying,” he says. “My wife resolutely opposes me publishing this book. So I’ve decided to avoid the risk right in front of us.”

Mr Jin, a writer who has been banned from the mainland since 1996, says the disappearances are a serious blow to Hong Kong’s boisterous trade in banned Chinese books. His view is echoed by Bao Pu, a Hong Kong publisher who helped to smuggle the
memoirs of Zhao Ziyang, a deposed former leader, out of China. Mr Bao says bookstores are increasingly reluctant to stock his titles.

A little more than a year after the end of the Occupy protests against Beijing’s refusal to give Hong Kong full democracy — demonstrations that at one stage brought the city to a standstill — many in the former British colony believe the disappearance of the booksellers is the most flagrant example yet of the growing threats to their unique liberties.

From the government covering up British royal insignia on colonial postboxes to the purchase of the city’s daily English language newspaper by Alibaba, the Chinese e-commerce group, and ever greater pressure on journalists to self-censor, Claudia Mo, an opposition member of Hong Kong’s legislature, says a trend of “mainland-isation” is taking hold.

Chasing critics

The case of the booksellers — three of whom vanished while in mainland China, one from Thailand and the fifth from Hong Kong — has crystallised those concerns. Activists believe they were taken by Chinese security forces extending a crackdown on the mainland, where hundreds are believed to have been detained, into Hong Kong and beyond.

Two of them — one British, the other a Swede — are European citizens and the UK government says it is “deeply concerned” about the disappearances. The worries about creeping mainland influence extend beyond the booksellers to Hong Kong’s vibrant media sector and its universities.

Philip Hammond, the British foreign secretary, says that if it is true that one of the men was taken from Hong Kong, this would be an “egregious breach” of the “one country, two systems” arrangement. That constitutional principle was established in 1997 when Beijing took back control and pledged to maintain the territory’s freedom of expression, legal independence and “a high degree of autonomy”.

While Beijing controls foreign policy, defence and national security, only Hong Kong agencies have the right to enforce the law in the territory. Beijing, however, maintains a large liaison office in Hong Kong, a secretive body tasked with influencing politics and civil society.

“There is a growing feeling in Hong Kong of greater mainland pressure on universities and civil society as well as a greater security presence from the mainland,” says Steve
Vickers, a former head of the colonial police’s criminal intelligence bureau. “The Hong Kong government appears to have considerably diminished autonomy and the liaison office seems to be strengthening its position.”

The economy of Hong Kong, a city of 7m, is dependent on trade with the mainland, while China continues to see the territory as an important financial centre. But the sense that China is meddling in Hong Kong comes after voters in Taiwan — which China insists is one of its territories — elected a government that has pledged to reduce its economic reliance on the mainland.

While investors hope that the bookseller disappearances are an isolated case, any evidence that Beijing is interfering in Hong Kong’s legal system could deter those who have long used the city as an entry point to China because of its respect for the rule of law.

“President Xi’s shift towards a hard authoritarianism is disturbing and counterproductive and will have global implications,” the US Congress executive commission on China, which is co-chaired by Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio, warned last week. “Given recent events, it is unclear when it will stop or who next will be targeted — even foreigners and Hong Kong citizens cannot feel entirely safe.”

Banned books

At least 46m Chinese tourists visited Hong Kong last year and many spent time in the glitzy Causeway Bay shopping district, in search of Rolex watches, Louis Vuitton handbags and books banned in the mainland.
Up a narrow staircase opposite a Burberry store sits the shuttered Causeway Bay Books shop. It is one of several in the area that sell everything from lurid, semi-factual tales of top leaders’ personal lives to weighty re-examinations of historical events like the cultural revolution.

Though popular with mainland tourists, who take them home and recirculate them, the books are less so with the authorities in Beijing. Some of the titles on corruption and Communist party rivalries appear to contain well-sourced information from disgruntled insiders.

The store has been closed since late December when its co-owner Lee Bo, a British citizen, disappeared after visiting the company’s warehouse in Hong Kong. He was the last of the five booksellers to vanish; the other four have been missing since October.

Local police say their Chinese counterparts have told them Mr Lee is in the mainland. Having initially reported him missing, his wife now claims Mr Lee travelled to the mainland voluntarily and is “assisting with an investigation”.

Gui Minhai, the store’s co-owner and a Swedish citizen, has been paraded on Chinese state television, confessing to a 12-year-old drink-driving offence and claiming he went back to the mainland from Thailand of his own volition. The whereabouts of the other three remains unknown and, despite repeated requests, Chinese officials have refused to tell journalists, the Hong Kong authorities and the relevant foreign governments where they are being held or even of what they are accused.

Human rights campaigners like William Nee of Amnesty International say the case looks like the work of China’s state security apparatus with unexplained disappearances, a televised confession, no formal charges and pressure on family members to reduce publicity.
“It’s very worrying that there are signs that China is much more aggressive at going after its critics in regions outside of mainland China’s jurisdiction,” says Mr Nee, who is based in Hong Kong.

Bei Ling, an exiled Chinese writer in the US, says that while government critics have long known the dangers of their activities in the mainland, those overseas now fear the ever longer arm of China’s security forces.

Agnes Chow, one of the leaders of the Occupy movement in 2014, says activists are worried about the implications for Hong Kong as well as their own safety. At the height of the Occupy protests Ms Chow briefly stepped down as a campaign spokesperson due to what she calls political pressure on her family. She says she will not bow to such pressure again.

A senior Western diplomat says the booksellers’ case shows that fears of a “mainland-isation” of Hong Kong are well founded. At the University of Hong Kong, the city’s prestigious educational institution, students, faculty and alumni are fighting what they see as a politically motivated crackdown after Johannes Chan, a pro-democracy law professor, was denied promotion.

Mr Chan argues the apparent abductions are indicative of an escalation of interference by Beijing. “One of the conclusions [by Beijing] after Occupy was that some tertiary institutions in Hong Kong were out of control and playing a supportive role to the demonstrating students,” he says. “So China has tightened control on Hong Kong.”

He says pro-Beijing figures have been appointed to key positions at universities, while “kJd! "#$%&'()*+,-./0123456789:;<=?@ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ[\]^_`a-bcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz{|}~
Hong Kong government insists it only recruits on merit.

**Turning the screw**

Journalists in Hong Kong complain of a similar trend, with physical attacks on reporters, advertisers withdrawing business from publications deemed critical of Beijing and growing media control from Chinese investors.

The most high-profile transaction has seen Alibaba, the e-commerce group, acquiring the South China Morning Post, the city’s English-language newspaper, for $266m. Alibaba has unashamedly vowed to make the newspaper’s coverage of China, already criticised for being soft on Beijing, even more positive.

The Hong Kong Journalists Association reports that since the Occupy protests, its members have faced a growing threat of violence and interference from the police. Its 2015 annual survey said journalists were “caught between two fires”, and squeezed by “external pressures from the likes of the Hong Kong government and big business, and internal pressure in the form of escalating self-censorship to comply with establishment viewpoints”.

When asked if it is stepping up control of the territory, the Chinese foreign ministry insists that Hong Kong citizens continue to enjoy “full rights and freedom in accordance with the law” and that its commitment to “one country, two systems” is “unflinching”.

In recent years, however, Beijing has made its approach to Hong Kong clear. In 2014, just before the protests began, it released a white paper on the territory’s future insisting that it must be “governed by patriots”. A subsequent campaign against “damaging information” vowed to wipe out “reactionary and harmful information from Hong Kong and Taiwan”. In December at a meeting with CY Leung, Hong Kong’s pro-Beijing chief executive, Mr Xi warned against “deviation and distortion” undermining one country, two systems.
Michael Tien, a businessman and lawmaker, argues that Hong Kong’s radicals are reaping what they have sown. “‘One country two systems’ has always been a balance, it’s all grey, there’s no black and white,” he says. “I think we’ve been crossing a line in forgetting that we’re part of China and there are signs that China is losing patience with Hong Kong.”

Mr Tien says political divisions risk damaging Hong Kong’s competitiveness at a time when its economy is struggling because of the China slowdown.

The opposition sees it differently. James To, a member of the city’s legislative council, says that only true democracy can give the chief executive and the government the legitimacy to enact the reforms the city needs to thrive.

“I’m really worried about the future of Hong Kong,” he says. “I sincerely urge the top leaders to think again.”

Additional reporting by Gloria Cheung

Ties to China – activists drive youthful sense of separate identity

Just as in Taiwan, which has its own democratic government but is claimed by China, Beijing is losing the battle for the hearts and minds of young people in Hong Kong.

The number of Hong Kongers describing their identity as Chinese alone dropped from a high of 39 per cent just before the Beijing
Olympics in the summer of 2008 to 18 per cent in December, according to surveys by the University of Hong Kong. During the same period, the proportion identifying themselves as a Hong Konger has jumped from 18 per cent to 40 per cent. The trend towards a separate Hong Kong identity is more pronounced among those aged under 30, the data show.

After failing to pressure Beijing into giving Hong Kong genuine democracy, some young protesters have increased their demands and are calling for a referendum on Hong Kong’s future or even independence. “We don’t just want universal suffrage but self-determination so we can decide the future of Hong Kong,” says Agnes Chow, a 19-year-old student who helped lead the Occupy movement.

Edward Leung, another student, helps run HK Indigenous, one of several small, radical groups that are pushing for a more confrontational approach to Beijing and the Hong Kong government. “We want to resist the recolonialisation of Hong Kong by the Chinese Communist party,” he says.

Mr Leung says young people must be willing to fight back against the authorities, but the 24-year-old philosophy student, who looks more like a bookworm than a revolutionary, is also pursuing more conventional means, standing in a by-election next month for the legislative council.

His party has only 70 members but he hopes to use the election to spread his message of opposition to Beijing.

“Our generation, the post-1990s generation, is rising and in future we will be the ones in charge,” he says.