



CURRENTS: HONG KONG PROTESTS

Reflecting on Hong Kong protests in 2019–2020

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Mass protests erupted in June 2019 in Hong Kong due to widespread anger about a proposed amendment to the extradition law. As a global project, could the goal of pursuing democratization be narrowly confined to a single place such as Hong Kong? What can be learned from a leaderless democratic movement, by those who are concerned about the future of Hong Kong? Can we learn some lessons from the Hong Kong movement—from the nuanced actions, complex strategies of mobilization, and the huge number of movement participants—and reflect upon them? *Radical* refers not only to the escalation of physical force but also the alternative imagination and praxis of democratic visions that should be bigger than the movement at this stage. Hong Kong is a global city; it deserves a radical politics aimed at linking transnational social movements that could possibly transgress the localistic approach of social struggles.

Keywords: Hong Kong protests, social movement, identity politics, trade union, China

Mass protests and militant actions were observed in Hong Kong since June 2019 due to widespread anger about a proposed amendment to the extradition law, and then conflicts between protestors and police forces. At the time of this writing, the protests continue. According to a common saying, “Hong Kong society was changed in the summer of 2019.” The protests constitute a massive democratic movement calling for political reforms. The scale, scope, and time span of these protests are unprecedented in the history of Hong Kong. But to what extent has the society really been changed? In what way could the political demand for democracy be embraced by social forces, such as precarious professionals, creative and manual labors, feminists, environmentalists, ethnic minorities, et cetera? Is there a way to bridge the gap of demands between political rights and economic inequality? Is there a way to nurture a bigger vision of the Hong Kong movement, and let it be part of the international campaigns jointly combatting the populist tendency of the increasingly authoritarian governments worldwide? Could the movement go beyond the binary understanding of a movement’s logic that confines itself to Hong Kong versus China as well as creates social hatred

based on a problematic identity politics that defines Hong Kongers as distinct from the Chinese?

The Hong Kong protesters: Anger and anxiety

Participating in a joint research project on the current Hong Kong movement, I have been able to conduct in-depth interviews with twelve protesters (out of fifty informants in total) in the first stage of a research project, which provides a nuanced understanding of the protesters’ political motivations and participation. As expected, despite variation in the breadth and depth of participation, the interviewed protesters commonly expressed their deep anger about the Hong Kong government and police and their deep anxieties about the future of Hong Kong—becoming just another Mainland Chinese city and losing their freedom of speech, civic values, legal system, and religion. Hong Kong is scheduled to become just another city under Chinese rule in 2047—for a few, then, 2047 is the end date of One Country, Two Systems, and the end game for fighting about democracy and freedom. There is widespread



pessimistic belief that “China is too big while Hong Kong is small,” and a deep belief that the Hong Kong government is largely controlled by the central government, which is why no concessions would be made to the Hong Kong protesters. Sadly, to many of the protestors, it is a movement of futility or “no hope” for the future: they consider the return to Mainland China to be an unavoidable fate, and the Hong Kong government is seen as entirely ineffectual in responding to their political demands. The notion of “no future” creates a politics of urgency and hatred that sustains the momentum of the movement. Thus, there is an urgency to request demands regarding political rights. These are commonly called the “five demands,” which refer to the full withdrawal of the extradition bill, a commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality, retracting the classification of protesters as “rioters,” amnesty for arrested protesters, and dual universal suffrage for the Chief Executive and Legislative Council. The beauty of the movement is the natural shift from a focused demand for withdrawal of the extradition bill to genuine democratic demands of double universal suffrage and more. Despite millions of Hong Kong citizens protesting and putting forward the “five demands,” the Hong Kong government has simply neglected them, resulting in a deadlock: no dialogue, no reform.

The deadlock did not put an end to the street protests in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government relied on the police to contain the movement. The police have used excessive force to suppress the mass of protesting people, which paradoxically agitated additional aggrieved people to come out and fight against the police. A vicious circle resulted: in order to protect unarmed protesters, front-line militants fought against policemen, who escalated the use of armed force to disperse and arrest protesters. More anger was generated through rounds and rounds of rallies, marches, demonstrations, and street fighting, when the police aimed tear gas at the protesters, arrested them, and charged them with rioting, igniting clashes, or making criminal accusations. Hatred resulted. The Hong Kong movement entered a conundrum.

The leaderless movement: What next?

No political parties or organizations play an active role in the movement. Interviewed protesters repeatedly informed me that the movement is a leaderless movement: they participated in telegram groups (TGs), and reacted to proposals that called for specific actions in the groups.

Tim said: “We are all spontaneous and autonomous. I intuitively decide whether I would like to go out to protest or not. There are many proposals in the TGs, and I chose what I like. Also, it depends on whether I have time or not, or which proposed action is close to my home.” Tim, in his mid-thirties, is an interior decorator in the construction industry; his anger was triggered by the police’s tear gas used on June 12, 2019, against peaceful demonstrators. He is a first-time protestor marching in the streets. He rallied and marched a few times to petition the responses of the Hong Kong government, which did not provoke a reaction, so he gradually ventured to the picket line and became one of the risk-taking frontline protestors. “It looks like I have no choice. It’s the government that teaches me to use violence,” Tim further elaborated. Tim’s story illustrates that a strict line cannot be drawn between “peaceful demonstrators” and “valiant frontiers.” They are interchangeable. Tim angrily asked: “How could the police charge us rioters? I am a good citizen who is entirely enlightened by this movement.” A powerful slogan came out from the July 1 protesters’ outbreak into the Legislative Council—“There’re no rioters, there’s only tyranny”—which has been persistently used by the protestors in the movement ever since.

Kelvin, a student protestor, proudly told me that he participated in the picket line dressed in full riot gear, helping to build barricades to fight against the police and protect the peaceful protestors. He not only builds barricades but also gives instructions to the street protestors about when and where to run and when to retreat and come back. I asked how he learned about the strategic location of building barricades in the streets, and he surprised me when he told me that all the tactics he learned are from digitalized “first-person shooter games” or “role playing games” on the internet (such as Player Unknown’s Battleground Battlefield or League of Legends). He excitedly explained: “You know, the computer war games are very useful. I have spent so much time on them. I learned how to set fire, when to retreat, where to identify strategic points, and how to react collectively as a team. Now I can really practice these tactics in the streets fighting against the Hong Kong police.” As my eyes widened, Kelvin further enlightened me: “The police always have the tactics to encircle us, and they target a street corner by pushing us to the dead end, beating us, and arresting all of us. We protestors don’t have the knowledge to fight a city guerilla war, except through the tactics we learn from the war games, which we practice at the sites of battle, and we fight back fiercely.”



No big platform doesn't mean we don't need platforms

Both Tim and Kelvin have no connection with—nor have they joined—a political organization that may provide an open platform for democratic discussions, debating, or formulating long-term strategic actions to enhance the movement, like the other black-clad participants who were arrested and bailed out with the assistance of human rights lawyers. Most of the arrestees do not know each other, even though they have joined the same TG, marched together on the frontlines, and been arrested by the police at the same time. Under the “white terror” atmosphere, which includes sending police undercover to infiltrate protest groups, the TG owners usually hide their own identity, as do the TG members. While arriving at the frontline of fighting, the same TG members would immediately discuss their strategic moves or actions. Usually, they would listen to one or two persons who have more ideas or suggestions regarding what to do—for example, attacking the pro-China shops or MTR stations in revenge for their antiprotest opinions or measures. While they sometimes have serious debates or even arguments among themselves, they take seriously the movement slogans: “Not cutting,” “Be water,” and “Buddies climb your own mountain.” These slogans imply building unity in the movement despite uncoordinated efforts and flexible actions, thus avoiding internal conflict. Consequently, the protesters usually make their own decisions on the ground, and, if they have different views, they split into smaller groups and continue their actions independently.

These spontaneous actions are swift, mobile, and ad hoc. Highlighting the absence of leaders, the advantage of the movement is that it is flexible and effective to act on the street. The downside of it is obvious: lacking long-term planning, organization, and analysis, the movement embodies a form of “instant noodle” democracy,¹ in which unpredictable street actions feature prominently. Having conducted these spontaneous actions for a few months, Jane, a protester who is familiar with the trade union movement in Hong Kong, said: “It’s high time

to rethink these spontaneous actions. When we organize an event, we can’t predict how many protesters will join us. Sometimes it’s bigger than we anticipate, sometimes it’s smaller. It’s dangerous if the number of participants is getting smaller and smaller and we can be easily targeted by the police.”

“No big platform doesn’t mean that we don’t need platforms. We need platforms for talks and debates. You know, it’s the spirit of democracy. Now we can’t debate what strategy is good or bad. We have no planning at all,” added Jane in a reflexive thought. Jane informed me there is an underlying ethics to the movement, which stops people from debating because of the worry that any debates may lead to divisions that would weaken the movement’s force. Jane pondered: “But without debates, where lies the principle of democracy? Without debates, how could we know which strategies are better?” She started to persuade people to form trade unions as a platform and organizational structure for long-term strategizing and planning. By showing me a project about educating people to set up trade unions, she has the hope that by forming a trade union, the political force of fighting against the government and the police can be solidified as a concrete entity.

Organizing trade unions as political weapon

Between June 2019 and December 2019—the most intense period of the Hong Kong protest movement—eighteen new trade unions were set up covering a wide range of sectors, including finance and accounting, informational technology, new civil servants, hospital authority employees, security guards, white collar staff, and the like.² Article 27 of the Basic Law guarantees that Hong Kong residents have freedom of association and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions.³ In Hong Kong, forming a trade union looks uncomplicated. The trade union ordinance only requires seven members from the trade, industry, or occupation to sign an application for the registration of a trade union. It requires a new trade union to register within thirty days of establishment and it does not specify an exact amount required

1. “Instant noodle” democracy means that decisions are made on an ad hoc basis without long-term planning and substantial discussion. The actors involved in the decision making also change frequently and swiftly.

2. https://www.labour.gov.hk/text_alternative/pdf/tc/PSTU_HK2019.pdf.

3. https://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/images/basiclaw_full_text_en.pdf.



for union dues, which means that the threshold of joining a trade union is not high. Forming a trade union potentially serves as an alternative strategy to enrich the movement and connect the political demands with socioeconomic rights in the current struggle. A trade union, by definition, is a class-based political body that can fight for long-overdue economic rights in Hong Kong society. Maggie, also a supporter in a working group to promote trade unions in creative industries, commented: “Not many people in Hong Kong know of trade unions. We need to do more promotion and education. The movement people are too anxious to form as many trade unions as possible within such a short period of time. It looks like a ‘concept’ to me . . . and ‘concepts’ without substance can easily become bubbles.”

Yet, Maggie understood that without having the concept rooted in the mentality of Hong Kong people, how could the workforce be organized into a trade union, not to mention using it as a weapon to call for political strikes? Maggie further reflected: “On a number of occasions, prodemocracy trade unionists have called for city-wide political strikes, including in early August, early September, and early November. But you can see the results. There are not many people joining the strikes and that’s why there’s an urgency to set up as many trade unions as possible in order to support the political movement or to fight for seats at the Legco.”⁴

Unlike labor strikes—in which workers bargain with employers for economic benefits—political strikes in Hong Kong have called for a stoppage of work, study, and business to pressure the government to accept protesters’ five demands. To Maggie, the success of labor strikes is the basis for furthering political strikes, as the government was not directly elected and is controlled by political and business elites, at the expense of the socioeconomic rights of Hong Kong’s ordinary citizens. Fighting for political demands should involve economic rights, which have been shown worldwide to constitute the foundation for democratic movements. Democracy, after all, is about the struggle for political,

economic, social, and cultural empowerment and working to achieve political freedom, economic equality, and social justice.

China and the future

No matter which political stand one takes in the current Hong Kong movement, China is the common factor that contributes to different political views and thus different political camps. In Hong Kong, there is yellow-ribbon camp (the pro-democratic movement people) versus blue-ribbon camp (the pro-establishment people) who are in support of the government and the police. While the yellow-ribbon camp people come from a huge range of socioeconomic statuses, the dominant force, though not necessarily in terms of population, comes from the middle class, which treasures Western values and way of life and sees freedom and democracy as universal values. Unlike people of the blue-ribbon camp, who are either economic elites who conduct business in Mainland China or working class people who have a small business or family connections with Mainland China, the yellow-ribbon camp people usually have fewer business, professional, or family ties in Mainland China, or they are prepared to cut those ties. Having said this, it doesn’t mean that the working-class people do not support the movement, especially their children who are either agitated by the police force or the discourse that the new migrants come to Hong Kong to eat up public housing or social welfare resources. Anti-China, in this sense, can be easily translated into anti-Mainland Chinese people, who are often said to support the central government or hold social values different from Hong Kongers. To be honest, to many interviewed informants, while freedom and democracy are universal values, it looks that they only care about Hong Kong, and some of them even believe that *only* Hong Kongers, not Mainland Chinese, would be worthy of holding these universal values. Universal values are not “universal”; they become a privilege enjoyed by a certain type of people, to the exclusion of others.

Samson, a university student and reflexive yellow-ribbon protester, told me: “Sometimes I just can’t understand the narrow mentality. If our enemy is really the authoritarian central government, how could we fight simply for the independence of Hong Kong without considering the mass of laboring people in Mainland China?” He further questioned: “Do we really want to fight for a genuine democratic movement? Almost everyone

4. Seventy seats of the Legco (Legislative Council of Hong Kong) are elected by voters from geographic constituencies, which will be directly elected by 3.8 million voters, functional constituencies by special interest groups, and super seats by popular vote from district councillors. The labor sector represented by trade unions was allocated three seats in Legco as a functional constituency.



in the movement could tell that behind the Hong Kong government is the central government, but we simply want Hong Kong to have democracy and freedom and leave the people in Mainland China alone.” Samson worried, “Hong Kong people are actually lacking the determination to pursue democracy, but they think they are determined when they battled on the streets against the police and faced criminal charges.” He further explained: “It is simply not enough . . . not to discuss whether Hong Kong has a substantive condition for demanding independence, but why are democracy and freedom confined to Hong Kong only? Are we not selfish or hypocritical? Why do we think that we are more heroic and superior than Mainland Chinese?”

Samson said: “We don’t really have a future if we only care about ourselves—the so-called HK—independence mindset. In this sense, 2047 is the real deadline. Some of my friends are preparing to leave Hong Kong and migrate overseas even though they are valiant fighters, because they think that whatever we do now, 2047 is the end day.” To Samson, obviously there are some protesters who believed in achieving Hong Kong independence before 2047, and they hope to seek support from American congressmen or political leaders in other countries. What disturbed Samson is that some of the protesters do not even mind that the Trump administration would make use of Hong Kong in negotiations about the US-China trade war. To wave American or British flags in the marches signifies an unreflexive approach toward imperial power. Samson remarked: “Independence is impossible, and not a right way to pursue. Without considering the civil societies and social movements in Hong Kong, Mainland China, and beyond, there will be no future for the democratic movement.”

Conclusion

It looks like it is too early to have a thorough reflection on the Hong Kong movement. There are a few things that we can learn from the protesters, who are not only enlightened in the 2019 protests but are themselves reflexive subjects of revolutionary practices. First, mobilization without organization limits the movement, which suffers from a lack of long-term planning, analy-

sis, and strategic actions. A faceless or leaderless movement illustrates the fact that actions that are largely confined to the street are not able to create synergy among the production of discourse and analysis, organizational building, and coordination of actions. Having no big platform does not mean that the movement does not actually need a platform to facilitate discussions and debates in order to generate the most accepted ways of achieving democratic goals and measures. Forming a trade union is one alternative way to reassert the importance of class-based organization and to reconnect political demands with socioeconomic rights in the long run.

Second, if the movement’s momentum is forced to rely on sentiments of hate, it will create an unnecessary divide among the Hong Kong people and increase opposition between the yellow-ribbon and blue-ribbon camps. After all, it should be a democratic movement against an irresponsible and undemocratic government that is not popularly elected by the Hong Kong people. Identity politics is a double-edged sword: it can swiftly mobilize sentiments of anger and hatred to build up movement energy, but it can also easily tear the society apart into those who are Hong Kongers and those who are not. At worst, before we can coordinate a united front to fight for a democratic movement, a deep divide is created in Hong Kong society and an exclusive politics applied against Mainland Chinese or new immigrant Chinese in Hong Kong.

Third, radical actions do not mean exclusive measures to achieve universal values of democracy and freedom. *Radical* means not only the escalation of physical force but also the alternative imagination and praxis of democracy that could contribute a bigger vision to the current movement. Hong Kong is a global city; a truly radical politics that is able to link transnational social movements that could possibly transgress the localistic approach of current struggles. China is a factor that the movement should confront. But the movement should not exclude the Chinese people; it could move to a social movement of hope for the future and transgress the dead-end perspective of 2047. Universal values of democracy and freedom have to be truly universal, which should encompass democratic dimensions of political, economic, social, and cultural rights for people living in Hong Kong, Mainland China, and beyond.





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