

Hong Kong in Revolt

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The Protest Movement
and the Future of China

Au Loong-Yu

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Introduction

As I write these lines, the Chinese government in Beijing has launched a new round of offensives against Hong Kong's autonomy. On 17 April 2020, both Beijing's Hong Kong Liaison Office and Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO) reinterpreted the Basic Law of Hong Kong and argued that they have the right to exercise supervision over Hong Kong's affairs, despite Article 22 of the Basic Law, which states the opposite. This is not just a war of words. The Liaison Office said what it did because it had already mounted a forceful attack on Dennis Kwok, the pan-democrat lawmaker, for obstructing the tabling of a bill criminalising disrespect of the Chinese national anthem. Kwok reminded Beijing that it is bound by Article 22. The two offices openly replied, 'no, we aren't'. On top of this, the Hong Kong government is widely believed to have acted under instruction from Beijing when it arrested fifteen of the most well-known pan-democrat politicians for 'illegal assembly' on 18 April 2020. Although the pan-democrat parties did not lead the 2019 Hong Kong Revolt – no party did – Beijing still considers them to be culprits in light of their sympathy with the protests. In general, these are acts of revenge for this revolt – the biggest ever in Hong Kong. Two million protesters took to the streets, a great political general strike took place, masked protesters repeatedly and intensively fought with the police, and eventually the Hong Kong and Beijing governments were humiliated and forced to withdraw the hated extradition bill (see Chapter 1).

In October 2019, when I first began seriously thinking about how to write this book, the movement had reached a critical juncture as the second and third general strike calls had failed to mobilise workers. Beijing and the Cathay Pacific airline had retaliated against the most militant sector of strikers, the aviation industry workers, by firing dozens of them. At that time, I wrote that it was unlikely that the next strike would be successful and that the movement might enter into decline after a period of stalemate. I did not expect that the failure to achieve another strike would be overcome by the brave young gener-

ation, who took on the government with even more intensive street fighting, culminating in the occupation of two major universities in Hong Kong, and followed by heavy clashes between occupiers and the riot police. The youth could not bear the pain of only having yet achieved one of their 'five demands', and so they continued to fight. They were eventually defeated. Yet this setback was again overcome by the overwhelming victory of the opposition in the ensuing District Council elections, followed by another million protesters taking to the streets for the New Year's Day march in 2020. This was the second time that Hong Kongers had successfully defeated Beijing's attempt to table a bill aimed at destroying their liberties and civil rights, after the 2003 protests that obviated the introduction of the National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill by Beijing. Hong Kong is no longer just 'a goose that lays golden eggs'. For the first time its people have made the whole world listen, not as a goose, or what protesters themselves jokingly called *gong zyu* ('Hong Kong pigs', who only focus on making money and have no interest in participating in public affairs), but as millions of living, kicking human beings who aspire to freedom.

The local people called their protest the 'anti-China extradition bill movement'. Some considered the movement to be practically anti-China, or even anti-Chinese, while others thought that it was just anti-Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But let us not forget that the five demands, which include the demand for universal suffrage, were what unified millions of people in this great revolt. This is not to say that there were no anti-CCP or anti-China elements in the movement. My aim with this book is to reflect as much as possible on the hugely diverse and multi-faceted nature of this movement that lasted for seven months. I am not a neutral observer. I participated in the movement, yelling slogans and joining in civil disobedience, as I did in the 2014 Umbrella Movement. But I have tried to understand the different groups and currents without regard for my own position, because only in this way can one grasp the real dynamics of a movement and ask the right questions about it.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Wuhan, and its spread to Hong Kong, the writing of this book became more difficult. I had to spend a great deal of time cleaning and stocking up on supplies. I had no idea that soon half of the world would be in the same predicament. With this outbreak, resentment against the Chinese government, or the

Chinese, or both, has become stronger, and has quickly gone beyond the city's limits. There is a similar logic behind both Beijing's attack on Hong Kong's autonomy and the regime's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. It first manifested itself in the regime's contempt for the laws they themselves had made. In the first case it practically ignored the Basic Law of Hong Kong, in the second case the Wuhan authorities simply ignored the Law on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases, which contributed to the spreading of the disease. Behind both important events one can identify the same logic of the Chinese bureaucracy, which combines in its hands state coercive power and the power of capital above all other classes, a bureaucracy which is simultaneously committed to industrialisation but also carries strong elements of premodern absolutism. It is a bureaucracy which learned a lot from its Western counterparts in terms of public administration, but it is also one which is permeated with the residues of a premodern political culture, the culture of imperial China. It was no accident that President Xi Jinping, in his report to the Nineteenth Party Congress, stressed 'passing on our red genes' in the great endeavour of making China's military strong.

These features give the CCP an incredible amount of power, but this necessarily entails all the evils of bureaucracy (with Chinese characteristics): rampant corruption, arrogance, bureaucratic red tape, dysfunction, the formation of cliques, and factional in-fighting, all of which promote tendencies like plundering public wealth, institutionalising degeneration, unnecessarily creating enemies, magnifying problems instead of solving them, keeping officials overloaded with entirely useless work, and making subordinate officials act in counterproductive ways. Both the revolt and the pandemic were necessary products of this monolithic party-state. Both proved that while this half-premodern but all-powerful bureaucracy could industrialise the country at lightning speed it was also increasingly difficult for it to face the challenges of the modernisation that it had created, not to mention those of highly integrated global capitalism. A brief discussion of this topic allows us to see through this apparently monolithic machinery and identify its internal divisions and contradictions, its strengths and its weaknesses.

With this perspective in mind, the 2019 revolt is even more significant. Beijing has always been deeply frustrated by the fact that Hong Kong is the sole city within its rule that remains politically defiant.

Whatever weaknesses the revolt displayed, it was nevertheless a great democratic movement of which common people were the heroes. Who taught these former *gong zyu* the value of democracy? It was none other than Beijing itself. With the pandemic, Beijing is also teaching its people the value of transparency and democracy as well. After the death of the doctor and whistleblower Li Wenliang, hundreds of thousands mourned him online and posted greetings to him. One Wuhan resident even dared to say the following:

I hope people understand that . . . what they need is a government which protects the ultimate interest of each and every citizen. This ultimate interest is not just about property, but also about lives! If I am fortunate enough to live, I will no longer be concerned with the bullshit about the great revival of our nation! Nor about the dogs' fart of the Belt and Road [Initiative]! I won't even care . . . if Taiwan is independent or unified! In this crisis I just wish I could have rice to eat and clothes to wear . . . I am above all an individual, a living person! Sorry, I can't afford to love a government and a country which just allows me to rot in a moment of crisis!¹

SUMMARY

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the revolt by first explaining the extradition bill, followed by summarising the events of 2019 by dividing them into four major stages, so as to understand their dynamics. It then goes further to explore the three main components of the movement and its diversity in terms of political inclination.

Chapter 2 tries to present the main 'actors' who either helped to provoke the outbreak of the revolt or who were actual players within the movement, and how they, each in their own way, contributed to the protests. Through available surveys and analysis this chapter also traces the rise of what I called the '1997 generation', which constituted the backbone of the revolt.

Chapter 3 describes in more detail the most important protest or strike events, so that readers can have a glimpse of what happened on the ground, of what the protesters said and did, of how they sweated, bled, yelled, and fought.

Chapter 4 goes on to discuss the issues about the movement that I think are the most important. Some see it as a movement for freedom; others see it as right wing and racist, or as a movement of silly people manipulated by foreign imperialists. A lot of people, for instance, have found the waving of US flags and the posting of the ‘alt-right’ icon Pepe the Frog distasteful to say the least. But how did the protesters themselves, in their hundreds of thousands, interpret these aspects of the movement?

The final chapter sums up the themes of the previous chapters. Hong Kongers had been overly moderate for decades. They largely tacitly accepted their role as a goose that lays golden eggs, with no rights to universal suffrage, as long as London or Beijing treated them well by giving them free range, and not caging them. Yet a paranoid Beijing dragon so feared losing control of its goose that it began to harass it repeatedly, eventually leading it to resist. Where does Beijing’s fear come from? Why did it act this way? Why has Beijing, since 2012, felt the need to change its policy over Hong Kong? Studying how the CCP bureaucracy reacted to both the revolt and the outbreak of the pandemic in Wuhan not only gives us some clues to the above questions, it also exposes the weakness of this mighty party-state.

Lastly, a word about *pin-yin*. Readers are familiar with Putonghua *pin-yin*, but not Cantonese. Since this was and is a Hong Kongers’ revolt, all the slogans and language used are rendered in Cantonese. This book therefore carries a lot of Cantonese *pin-yin* as well. To differentiate the two, Putonghua is put within quotation marks, and Cantonese will be put in italics.

1

An Overview

PRELUDE – THE 2014 UMBRELLA MOVEMENT

One may say that the 2014 Umbrella Movement was a prelude to the 2019 revolt.¹ Not only because the former preceded the latter, but also for the fact that most of the elements of the former would have their full expression in the latter. Having a rough picture of the former thus is essential for understanding the latter.

One Country, Two Capitalist Systems

Hong Kong was once described as China's golden-egg-laying goose. When Deng Xiaoping met Margaret Thatcher in 1984 for the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which outlined the conditions of Hong Kong's handover to China, he said that Hong Kong's capitalist system would be preserved for fifty years because, with the help of Hong Kong, 'China hoped to approach the economic level of advanced countries by the end of that time.'²

The Joint Declaration was first and foremost a trade-off between the two countries: in exchange for the UK giving up Hong Kong to China, the UK (and the West in general) insisted that Hong Kong would continue to be treated as a separate customs territory in relation to China, and that under the 'one country, two systems' principle Western economic interests in Hong Kong would also be fully protected. Beijing's plan, on the other hand, was to strike a compromise for the moment but stage a counter-attack later.

Beijing has always insisted that mainland China remains 'socialist', while only Hong Kong is 'capitalist'. In essence, both are capitalist, although in ways that are quite different from each other. The former is a kind of state capitalism, while the latter is a form of laissez-faire capitalism. The two capitalisms complimented each other for a while:

while state capitalism protected China from predatorial global capitalism, Hong Kong's free port status allowed China's capitalism to 'walk on two legs' and gave Beijing a 'window' to the global market. With the help of Hong Kong (and Taiwan), Beijing has been hugely successful in engineering China's rise. Yet the asymmetry in size between the two sides determined that Hong Kong would gradually be integrated into 'Greater China'. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, China's supporters have been telling us that Hong Kong's importance to Beijing has been diminishing. This has the appearance of being true. Whereas in 1983 Hong Kong's GDP was 13.1 percent of China's, in 2013 it had fallen to 3 percent.³ In light of this, Beijing's supporters have concluded that Hong Kong's usefulness to China is finished, and that the 'Hong Kong goose' should behave itself. Gradually Beijing began to impose an ever more hard-line policy in Hong Kong. It wants to keep Hong Kong's capitalism but not its autonomy and its political liberties.

That is why, when Beijing designed the Basic Law in 1990, it included Article 23 on national security, which aims at restricting the city's political liberties and requires the HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) government to enact local laws accordingly. In 2003, Beijing tried to push through a bill on Article 23 (whose purpose was to 'prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, or subversion against the Central People's Government, and to prohibit local organisations from establishing ties with foreign political organisations'), but was defeated by a big protest in which 500,000 people took to the streets.

The Basic Law did vaguely promise that universal suffrage would be implemented step by step after 1997, but with no explicit timeline. Furthermore, it only stipulated the arrangements for the elections of both the chief executive (CE) and the Legislative Council (LegCo) in the first ten years after the handover. Hence, after 2007, the arrangements for the CE and LegCo 'elections' have had to be promulgated by Beijing anew.

The local liberals (not to be confused with the Liberal Party, a business-class party), also known as the 'pan-democrats', have benefited from this partial form of direct election. Their agenda has always been to work within the constraints of the Basic Law to achieve the expansion of direct elections. We shall see how the liberals' plan has been shattered to pieces since 2012, when Xi Jinping took power in China.

The Rise of a New Generation

Ten years before the Umbrella Movement in 2014 there were already signs of a new generation in Hong Kong with very different perspectives and expectations – social and political – when compared to previous generations. It was the collision between Beijing's policies and Hong Kong's new generation which gave rise to the Umbrella Movement.

In general, Hong Kongers, including the young, have tended to be apolitical and conservative. The 1997–8 Asian economic crisis marked the beginning of a new period, when thousands of civil servants came out to the street to protest privatisation. The protests coinciding with the 2005 World Trade Organization Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong, especially the radical actions of a group of South Korean farmers, inspired many young people. From then on, one witnessed a continuous radicalisation of the youth. The founding of the League of Social Democrats (LSD) in 2006 drew support from a thin layer of young Hong Kongers. This was followed by the 2007 Defence of the Queen's Pier campaign, a conservationist movement, which drew hundreds of young activists. In 2009 the Hong Kong government approved the Vibrant Express high-speed rail project to promote even closer integration between Guangdong and Hong Kong; this was followed by the Moral and National Education Project designed to promote 'patriotism' in education in Hong Kong. These developments were met with immediate resistance from young Hong Kongers, first in 2010 and then in 2012. The 2012 protests were more of a success because of a greater level of civil disobedience, signalling that a young, radical generation had finally arrived on the scene and were prepared to take over leadership from the pan-democrats for a new round of struggle.

Meanwhile, Beijing began to target the culture and language of Hong Kong. Prior to this, Hong Kongers had never made an issue of their mother tongue. Beginning in 2008, the Hong Kong government began to promote the replacement of Cantonese with Putonghua as a teaching medium in the city. This angered local people, especially since they had witnessed what had happened to the people of nearby Guangzhou city in China. For more than two decades the CCP has been pushing a campaign to 'promote Putonghua and abolish Cantonese' in Guangzhou, not only in schools but also in radio and television broadcasting, resulting in the young generation no longer being able to speak their mother tongue.

Eventually this triggered a ‘defend Cantonese movement’ in Hong Kong and a protest on 25 July 2010.⁴ It died out with the increasing repression since 2012. Hong Kong people saw their future in this case and therefore resisted the policy of replacing Cantonese with Putonghua. Forced assimilation over language is always a sign of colonisation. But even the British colonial government never attempted to eliminate Cantonese from schools, let alone the media.

Occupy Central

In 2014, Beijing began to roll out a package of reforms targeting the upcoming 2017 CE election. In exchange for granting universal suffrage in the election, Beijing would retain complete control over the nomination of candidates, to the extent that even moderate liberals would stand no chance of election. This so-called ‘31 August 2014 decision’ was met with widespread discontent in Hong Kong, to the extent that it antagonised even the pan-democrat parties. But it first and foremost angered the youth. The stage was set for a confrontation between Beijing and a young generation of Hong Kongers. The HKFS (Hong Kong Federation of Students) and Scholarism were the two main student organisations which took bold actions that triggered off the Umbrella Movement in September 2014.

There was a prequel to the Umbrella Movement. In March 2013, two well-known academics, Dr Benny Tai and Dr Chan Kin-man, along with Reverend Chu Yiu-ming (whom I collectively call the ‘occupation trio’) proposed the Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) movement, whose main purpose was to conduct a civil disobedience action the following year to demand genuine universal suffrage.

It was the occupation trio, not the pan-democrats, which initiated the occupation appeal, showing the latter’s increasing irrelevance as a force for social change. After years of participation in elections for a semi-legitimate representative government in Hong Kong, the pan-democrats had become increasingly conservative. They usually won one-third of the seats on the LegCo through winning 55–60 percent of the vote in the direct elections. This should not lead us to believe that they ever possessed organisational strength, however (though this weakness on the part of political parties is also shared by civil society in general, for instance the trade unions). Fragmented into pieces, even the

largest party, the Democratic Party, claimed to have only seven hundred members, and even fewer active members.⁵ The liberals believed Beijing's promise of universal suffrage for so long that they were among the last to realise that it was wishful thinking.

But the occupation trio's credibility quickly eroded due to their unwillingness to go ahead with their plan for the occupation. This compelled the HKFS to go ahead with their own plan to occupy the downtown Central district of Hong Kong Island on 2 July 2014, during which 511 protesters were arrested but not charged. The occupation trio and the pan-democrats refused to take part in this event and were deeply discredited as a result. Angered by Beijing's 31 August decision, the occupation trio did later plan to hold a three-day occupation starting on the National Day of the PRC, 1 October.⁶ But the students were sceptical of their call to action. Again, it was the HKFS who took the initiative and launched a one-week class boycott on 22 September. The movement began to gather momentum.

During the class boycott, the HKFS and Scholarism decided to stage a rally on 26 September, outside of Civic Square, where the Hong Kong government headquarters is located. During the night, they suddenly occupied the square with around one hundred supporters. They were arrested the next day. Yet when the news spread, more than 50,000 citizens came to the scene to protest the arrest. They were met with tear gas, but they refused to give up the streets to the police. It was named the Umbrella Movement because the protesters held up umbrellas to protect themselves from the tear gas. On 28 September hundreds of thousands of protesters came back again. Many joined for the first time because they were angry at the arrests of students and for the firing of tear gas at the protesters the previous afternoon. At this time, the movement moved beyond the range of the students, and evolved into a movement of the middle and lower classes. The occupation even far exceeded the imagination of the HKFS. Similar occupations occurred in the areas of Mong Kok and Causeway Bay as well.

The Failed Strike

On the day of the class boycott on 22 September, twenty-five trade unions and civil society groups issued a joint statement accusing the existing political system of 'repressing the demands of grassroots

labour and making the potential to improve people's livelihoods more difficult'. The statement not only called for universal suffrage but the implementation of standard working hours and a universal pension as well.⁷ Then, after 28 September, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) called a general strike (social workers had already gone on strike earlier in September). The result was that only one and a half unions – the Swire Beverage Employees General Union and the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) – responded to the call (by 'half' I mean that the HKPTU was only half-hearted in its support of a general strike). It was a pity that although a large number of workers came out and took part in the occupation, the majority were not prepared to go on strike.

The Xenophobic 'Localists'

Soon after the Umbrella Movement began, some 'localists' began to mount attacks on the so-called 'left pricks'. Eventually the localists would emerge as the major beneficiaries of the Umbrella Movement.

The Western media tends to view the Hong Kong localists in a positive way, as democratic fighters against Beijing. Yet the picture is far more complicated. Before the Chinese term 'localism' entered into use among social activists and academics there had already been a visible new trend toward localism since the turn of the century, with the rise of conservationists chiefly concerned with preserving old architecture and streets. Eventually this unfolded into the above-mentioned Defence of the Queen's Pier campaign in 2007. Although defeated, the campaign greatly promoted the idea of localism, which reflected at least two distinct discourses: 1) resisting government redevelopment plans, which were seen as destructive to local culture and collective memory; 2) resisting cross-border infrastructure projects involving mainland China so as to protect local autonomy, for instance the 2009–10 protests against the high-speed train project. However, it was the right wing of these very mixed localist discourses which eventually grew bigger. While the term 'localist' refers to a broad current in Hong Kong society which emphasises local values, terms like 'nativist' and 'xenophobic localists' were also used to describe a more specific group of clearly right-wing and anti-immigrant localists. Their spokespersons were Raymond Wong and the scholar Chin Wan-kan (or Chin Wan). Together with

Raymond Wong's apprentice, Wong Yeung-tat, they constituted a 'xenophobic trio', and were nicknamed 'two Wong and one Chin'. Each had their own organisations, however. Their followers' actions in the occupation area included:

- Silencing the voices of other democrats
- Inciting the masses to achieve their goals
- Making use of violence or the threat of violence
- Making racist statements about Chinese people, calling them 'locusts' which should be ousted
- Attacking mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong, accusing them of stealing welfare from the government

The nativists put out stickers with the words *mat seon zo gaau, tai fong saan seoi* ('don't trust the left pricks, be vigilant against any call of disbandment'), which mainly targeted the HKFS and well-known activists who took part in the occupation, and who were allegedly guilty of empty talk while secretly wanting to disband the occupation. Yet the attack itself was nonsense. Their slander aimed to discredit the democratic forces within the movement by hinting that they were somehow associated with Beijing.

They also attacked organisations which hoisted flags or hosted open street forums; followed by harassing picketers from these organisations. On 12 October, on the call of Chin Wan, the nativists went to Mong Kok to disrupt the HKFS street forum.

The xenophobic trio's agitation against the democratic forces was packaged in terms of their being more radical than them. Their slogan was 'the HKFS does not represent us'. Their line of argument was that 'since the Hong Kong government does not represent us neither does the HKFS, or anyone else', and accordingly they opposed all signs and symbols of leadership or political representation: stages, flags, speakers, an assembly, voting, and so on; summed up in the slogan of *caak daai toi*, or 'dismantle the big stage'. They put this into practice whenever the HKFS held a discussion forum with a stage. Their accusation against the HKFS was surely nonsense. The HKFS never claimed to represent everyone, and the forums that they organised did not reject pluralism.

The xenophobic trio could not mobilise more than a hundred people at its height, while the democratic parties and social movement organ-

isations were far larger in number. The xenophobic trio was successful only because the democratic forces were totally unprepared.

The occupation of three main streets, with one of them adjacent to the government headquarters, lasted for 79 days. The movement was eventually defeated and this was followed by a period of reaction. Yet it is still memorable because it was simultaneously: 1) the first radical movement of civil disobedience in the thirty years of the Hong Kong democratic movement; 2) daring enough to stand up to Beijing to demand more political rights than the Hong Kong liberals dared to ask for, and more than Beijing was prepared to give; 3) a locally initiated democratic movement with massive support.

FIVE YEARS OF REACTION

Hong Kong emerged from the Umbrella Movement as a deeply divided city. The divide encompasses two main camps: the yellow camp, who are pro-Umbrella Movement, and the blue camp, who oppose it.

On top of this was that Beijing, through the Hong Kong government, now took frontal attack on Hong Kong's autonomy and its opposition parties by:

- Prosecuting the student leaders of the HKFS and the occupation trio
- Disqualifying eight pan-democrat and localist lawmakers
- Enacting direct intervention on every level of elections in Hong Kong, especially the CE election
- Abducting Hong Kong-based publishers who put out books on China, and specifically on Xi Jinping's private life (the 'Causeway Bay Books disappearances' case)

Making things worse was that the nativists now continued their offensive not against Beijing but against the HKFS. The small groups of xenophobic localist students in different universities immediately initiated a *teoi lyun*, a campaign to call for the withdrawal of their respective students' unions from the HKFS through a student referendum. To justify their attack on the HKFS they now put all the blame for the failure of the Umbrella Movement on the latter. Eventually the four most important students' unions withdrew and dealt a heavy blow to the HKFS. The once