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Umbrella revolution: the academy reflects on Hong Kong's struggle

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Two professors in Hong Kong interview fellow academics, student activists and graduate students from mainland China in order to draw out Hong Kong's history in relation to globalising forms of political expression. Colonial history, neoliberal urban governance, and Chinese authoritarianism all bear on the current unrest.



Hong Kong protesters face tear gas. PH Yang/Demotix. All rights reserved.

Hong Kong: the former British colony that still runs double-decker buses and drives on the left; the fast-paced, vertical global city and glamorous finance hub; on a map of China, the autonomous region is only a dot. The recent mass protests disrupt these well-established images of Hong Kong and call for a new narrative, even though colonial history, neoliberal urban governance, and Chinese authoritarianism all bear on the current situation.

What is now being branded the Umbrella Revolution of Hong Kong is seeing its sixth day. Events in Hong Kong erupted on 28 September, when the occupation of Civic Square near the government headquarters by striking students and citizens was violently suppressed. As a result, people flooded the streets and the civil disobedience movement Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) began earlier than its original launch date of 1 October, choosing instead to ride the momentum inspired by the students. The demands, as formulated by OCLP, call for the resignation of the unpopular Chief Executive Chun-ying Leung and the withdrawal of China's National People's Congress Standing Committee regarding its proposed framework for the 2017 elections. According to this proposal, any candidate for the top position of Chief Executive in Hong Kong must meet two criteria: 50 percent approval by a de facto pro-Beijing nomination committee, and 'patriotism' as determined by the central government in Beijing.

As international scholars currently based in Hong Kong, we move around the world, and our research interests lie at the intersection of urban struggles and democratic politics. From this vantage point and on the ground at the protests, we want to highlight Hong Kong's particular context and history in relation to certain globalizing forms of political expression. To this end, we interviewed and listened to fellow academics and student activists, as well as graduate students from mainland China in Hong Kong.

The first question we posed to our academic colleagues concerned historical legacies: are the current protests about changing Hong Kong or changing China? Denise Ho, who teaches contemporary Chinese history, explained that at the time of Hong Kong's handover from Britain to China

in 1997, it was expected that China would eventually adopt democracy and Hong Kong's promise for constitutional democracy would be realized alongside this development: "but from speculating about the 'coming collapse of China' to explaining why the Chinese state has only grown stronger, this hope is now thrown into doubt."

Siu-Leung Li, who is a professor of cultural studies, echoes Ho's point about the waning expectation that "Hong Kong would have democracy when China had it." Li explains that a new sense of local Hong Kong identity - separate from China's - has emerged, borne of frustration with Beijing's totalitarian control over Hong Kong's own political reform process. He argues: "few would still think of changing China in order to change Hong Kong. Hong Kong will fight for itself, Hong Kong will fight for its own survival."

Mee Kam Ng, an urban geographer, emphasises that Hong Kong's unique and forward-looking character is at stake: "this is all about trying *not* to change Hong Kong into another Chinese city. You have to know that Hong Kong has always been the revolutionary base in recent Chinese history." Considering the growing conviction about Hong Kong's distinct identity and future, allusions to events in Chinese history that attempt to explain present Hong Kong in terms of China's past are highly contested. Those opposing the student strikes and OCLP draw historical parallels with the Cultural Revolution's Red Guards who violently attacked both figures associated with the former establishment and perceived moderates. Rejecting such claims, Ng states: "the students are *no* Red Guards. The Red Guards were 'instigated' by political struggles within the Communist Party. The Red Guards had no idea about what democracy was." Li remarks that the references by pro-Beijing commentators to 'Red Guards' constitute the "tell-tale sign of the schizophrenia of those people, some of whom actually were Red Guards themselves back then, or were zealous supporters of Mao and the Cultural Revolution."

Other observers have drawn a parallel with the pro-democracy student uprisings that culminated in the onslaught of Tiananmen Square in 1989. In response, Ho thinks that the Tiananmen analogy "does not give enough credit to the [current] movement to build something that is new, that is

specific to Hong Kong, and that is forward-looking rather than backward-looking. We all know how Tiananmen ended, so I wish this were not such a common analogy.”

These historical readings by themselves are inadequate since rather than rising from a regional history only, Hong Kong’s uprising also partakes in contemporary urban struggles and democratic movements in global cities under neoliberal governance elsewhere. For those who have followed protest movements such as the Occupy movement of 2011 in the US and the Gezi Uprising of 2013 in Turkey, Hong Kong’s adaptation of globalizing forms of political expression is obvious. In fact, posting pictures of Hong Kong’s scenes of protest on social media makes our friends in Istanbul tear up as they are reminded of the days of the Gezi Uprising.

As we have observed the unfolding protests in Hong Kong, we have noted many examples of globalizing forms of political expression. Protesters deliberate in small groups and use soapboxes for impromptu speeches. Iconic imagery circulating through social media, street art, and spontaneous performances of ‘Do You Hear the People Sing?’ are all highly affective forms of communication. Under the banner of ‘boycott classes, keep learning’, Hong Kong’s student strike introduced public lectures by academics, open and mobile classrooms, libraries on the street, and even classrooms designated for parents of secondary-school students who have joined the protests. Such methods consciously underscore decentralized self-organization.

Kelvin Wu, a recent university graduate and a social activist, commented on Hong Kong’s developments: “I am impressed by the people and the autonomy they demonstrated after the student strike and the first police crackdown. We started to organize ourselves at this scale and to coordinate the whole occupation by building barricades, arranging the locations of sit-ins, reporting the movements of the police, and initiating public discussion. All these were done without strong leadership or hierarchical communication.” As such, Wu glimpses the possibility of the emergence of a new kind of politics. “The fact is that there is now no single leadership in all these ‘occupied zones.’” People are gaining

“experiences of a different form of governance, one that is based on true participation of people of all backgrounds and classes.” Wu is convinced that even though OCLP and the student federation are too busy to press for sustainable political change along such lines, perhaps this different form of governance can be advanced by “the many participants of the movement and social activists who are encouraged by the opportunity.”

Wu further delineated the composition of the current protest movement, suggesting that diversity is as important an aspiration in Hong Kong as it was in the US Occupy movement and the Gezi Uprising in Istanbul.

Besides OCLP, the student federation, some political parties, and pressure groups, there are organizations concerned with issues such as labour rights, feminism, affordable housing, and social justice. Wu added: “some seek to demonstrate the importance of different social groups - women, new immigrants, workers, ethnic minorities - participating in the movement for political reform and universal suffrage.” Such advocates have stepped in to organize public discussions and gatherings on the street, bringing together urban residents who heretofore have had little interaction with each other.

But the potential positive impact of such globalizing forms of political expression must be further evaluated in their current context. First, in Hong Kong the aim for diversity is not always compatible with the claim to a distinct local identity. South-Asian minorities, domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines, and recent immigrants from mainland China are easily marginalized by such a configuration of identity. For this last group, those who have arrived in Hong Kong from China recently, Ng warned that there are many barriers to their participation. They do not necessarily support the Chinese government but “usually prefer to be silent. Without knowing their everyday life experiences in China, it is perhaps difficult to understand the fear they harbour deep in their hearts.”

Secondly, below the recent unifying slogans of ‘true democracy’ and ‘C.Y. Leung, step down,’ Hong Kong’s protest movement is riven by different interests and aims. It is unclear through what mechanisms these differences can be negotiated within the protest movement. Some would like to expand the definition of democracy upheld by OCLP and address

empowerment and inclusion in much broader terms. During a meeting of the Civic Party that we recently attended, one student leader expressed her expectation that constitutional democracy could tackle the high inequality between rich and poor in Hong Kong. By contrast, during a recent open discussion in Mong Kok, an NGO representative who works with laid-off women workers argued that until the whole political-economic system is transformed, electoral rights would not guarantee a more equal society.

Attention must also be paid to Hong Kong's context within greater China. Two graduate students from mainland China, who we shall refer to as Xiaofan and Viola, related that while they had visited the protests, they found the demands of the students and OCLP unrealistic in the light of Beijing's uncompromising stance. China could permit itself to refrain from responding and remain indifferent. By consequence, Viola argued, the movement cannot provide any positive vision for the future or concrete direction forward. In the face of mass protests, the undemocratic Chinese and Hong Kong governments might well use a strategy rather similar to that self-declared beacon of democracy, the US. Xiaofan thinks that like the US, China will wait for the protests die down, for internal quarrel and disorientation to break out, or for public rejection to turn against the disruption of 'normal' life. Kelvin Wu further observed that while many say that the worst outcome in Hong Kong would be an even more violent crackdown by the Chinese army, equally bad might be a "return to the same social inequality and neoliberal style of government."

Ironically, at a time when protest movements elsewhere tend to seek alternative sources of political authority, Hong Kong demands representative democracy. Recall that Occupy in the US distanced itself from institutionalized politics including the political parties and trade unions. Similarly, in Turkey protesters contested the government's victories at the ballot box, arguing that privileging this technique of rendering the 'will of the people' merely supports a majoritarian take on democracy. However, democracy as a lived aspiration and a struggle that inspires people may be more valuable than the actual political systems that carry the title. The struggle that Hong Kong experiences now holds this inconclusive moment.



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