

Continuous Rebellion in Hong Kong

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The ongoing revolt in Hong Kong was and continues to be of special interest to our journal as it is part of the visible revolts occurring in 2019 in many different places of the globe.

Whether these isolated hotspots in Europe, Central and South America, Asia, the Middle East, and the Maghreb are an indication of a larger groundswell of upheavals in the near future remains an open question for now.

In the following, we publish the first part of an interview with Au Loong Yu conducted by email, which refers to events up to 26 November 2019.

Au is a Hong Kong-based writer and activist and well connected with social movements in Hong Kong as well as abroad.(1)

Sozial.Geschichte Online

Question : In August, when the Hong Kong upsurge had just begun, you stated in an interview with Jacobin, that “if Beijing’s regime remains stable, a Hong Kong people’s uprising probably will not end well.”(2)

Now, in November 2019, the protests are still vibrant and transnationally visible.

How would you characterize the current situation, after six months of marches, occupations, and of violent clashes with the police ?

Au Loong Yu :

After the four-day battle between the Chinese University students and the police between 11th and 14th November, big clashes broke out on 17th of November. Hundreds of riot policemen besieged the Polytechnic University, and at this moment of writing, the siege is still going on.

The great Anti-Extradition Bill Movement has evolved into a big battle to defend Hong Kong’s autonomy. It has gone through three stages.

First stage (June and July)

The first stage was in June when millions of people took to the streets. The legislative assembly was besieged and there was violence.

Then Carrie Lam's administration conceded by announcing that the extradition bill would be temporarily suspended. But discontent persisted.

The labour movement should also be mentioned. On 17th June, the pro-democracy Confederation of Trade Unions called for a strike. It was not successful.

It was the radical youth breaking into the legislature building on 1st July, which escalated the movement further. The brief occupation was also possible partly because the legislature was evacuated by the police, which was probably to lure the radicals to break in in the first place and bring on a confrontation. Either way, this action pushed the movement to a higher level.

But what followed was horrible : the police collaborated with the mafia in the Yuen Long region [right near the border with Mainland China] to carry out indiscriminate attacks in the train station to terrify residents and demonstrators.

This antagonized people, and even the most moderate liberals became angry.

So, we saw a further radicalization.

There were also 16 or 17 demonstrations in different districts. We saw a broadening of the movement to the community level, which we have never seen before in Hong Kong. This was driven by the attack from the mafia.

The 27th July protest was even more significant. Until then, the demonstrations were legal. But on 27th July, the police refused a licence for the first time.

Hong Kong people are very moderate - or have been for many years.

Ordinarily, they would have accepted this. Instead, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in defiance. This was the first time since the current movement started that there has been civil disobedience in such large numbers. This laid the groundwork for August.

Second stage : the climax (August)

August marked the beginning of the second stage, which was the climax.

On 5th August, there was another strike. This time it was successful.

One sector of the Hong Kong economy defined the strike movement : the airport and flight industry employees. It's estimated that 300,000 or 400,000 people took part in the strike.

Later in August, there were victory marches every two or three days.

More people marched than in July. So, the mobilizations continued. On 12th August, there were more huge occupations of the airport.

The 2nd and 3rd September strike call was not that successful however, as working people and the unions feared retaliation from Beijing. The latter had already showed its claws after the 5th August strike by making Cathay Pacific's management fire its employees' union and more than 30 employees.(3)

As both the students and the unions could find no way to protect strikers from dismissal, it should not surprise us that this second strike was not very successful.

But the early September class boycott was very successful. Along with college students now, even high school students got organized and boycotted classes.

Demonstrations became a regular activity in this small city.

There was also a problem in the movement. Since the movement is leaderless and no political party - be they liberals or the nativist parties - has ever been able to play any significant role at all, it tends to be very loose and chaotic.

For instance, on 1st October there were multiple marches in different parts of the city instead of a single big march.

Occupations and Strikes

Third stage: a deadlock situation

From October onwards, the movement entered its third stage.

I will describe it as a deadlock situation.

- The movement itself is in a bottleneck as it finds it hard to mobilize a labour strike again or to hold a demonstration of a million in defiance of the ban on marching.
- On the other hand, the government is also unable to suppress the movement.

On 11th November, there was a call for a strike and class boycott.

The fight between the students and the police between 11th and 14th November was impressive. They occupied universities for four days.

It was the occupation at the Chinese University (CUHK), which was the biggest. This was because many students from other universities came to help and made the resistance to the police attack on the night of the 12th possible.

However, the lack of organization and coordinating bodies within the occupation magnified the differences over tactics between CUHK students and those from outside the campus. The former were angry over some outside students' reckless behaviour (destroying facilities).

Eventually the management of the university closed the whole campus down, and the occupation was ended.

As for the strike, this was the third strike call but it was not very successful either. It is true that many people could not get to work on that day, not because they took the initiative to strike but because the students, through occupying campuses located close to 30 main roads or railways, practically paralyzed half of Hong Kong's busiest area.

But these are actions which common folks with a job cannot join or are not ready to join.

Increasingly there is now a danger of the narrowing of the mass base of radical actions. Meanwhile the number of people who come out to march despite the ban has also declined.

On the other hand, there are also signs that the support for the five demands of the movement is broadening as well. This is a result of the government's hard-line policy. Also, police brutality plays an important role.

Whenever there are clashes, the police chase after protestors into the community and fire tear gas. This practice deeply antagonizes those who at first remained neutral or even supportive of the government's policy. One positive result of this movement is that from September onwards community protests have become even more common.

In addition, there are more and more young activists who realize the importance of labour struggle and now call for joining or forming new unions.

A young public servant's call to form a public employee union has resulted in very good response. News reported that hundreds of public servants have enlisted.

This is also a response to the traditional unions which have been slow in reacting in such a period of turmoil, although credit is due to them for their support for the 5th August strike. Without this strike, it would not have been possible to prove to Hong Kongers the relevance of labour and to attract a new generation of labour supporters.

Asymmetry of Forces

Surely, the escalating violence from certain protestors is sometimes really unjustified and in

individual cases should be condemned. The main body of the Yellow Ribbon camp still largely looks to non-violent resistance rather than violence, however.

It is also obvious that most of them do not place too much blame on the protestors as a whole. This can be verified by a recent poll (4) conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute : 83 percent of the population lay the blame for violence at the government's feet, while only 40 percent thought it was the protestors' responsibility (the two questions were asked separately and are not exclusive to each other).

What this poll shows also coincides with another poll : 70 to 80 percent of the population support the five demands of the movement. Although the radical youth still enjoys popular support, most of the Yellow Ribbon people are still reluctant both to go on strike and to fight with the police. As mentioned earlier, there is now a risk that the mobilization is weakening.

The common protestors are not to be blamed for their lack of brave actions because they, as adults, know more about this simple truth : Hong Kong is ruled not only by its "autonomous" government, but first and foremost by Beijing and this absolute asymmetry of forces between the city and the Chinese state makes any sensible person re-think the idea of a revolution within one city. Hong Kong can only win when Mainland China is also ready for a mass upheaval. Yet, this is not in sight. Furthermore, Hong Kong emerged from the Umbrella Movement in 2014 as a deeply split city, something that had not been seen since 1949.

The CCP vs. KMT division,(5) although deep, was by then also very much confined to the two camps and had little relevance to local people.

But 2014 ended with a deep division of HK people into the Yellow Ribbon camp who are pro-Umbrella and the Blue Ribbon camp who oppose to it.

According to an opinion poll conducted by the Chinese University, after the end of the Umbrella Movement, 33.9 percent of interviewees supported the occupation.(6)

While the democrats in general received more (55 to 60 percent) of the vote in the legislature election, democratic civil disobedience has never been able to garner anything close to a majority in society.

This only began to change with the out-break of the anti-China Extradition Bill Movement. This movement has actually evolved into the great 2019 Battle to Defend Hong Kong's Autonomy, and has won absolute majority support.

In the 2016 legislature election 1.18 million voters voted for the opposition, including the pan-democratic camp and different shades of "localist" and "self-determination advocates," accounting for 55 percent of the vote.

This constitutes the base of the Yellow Ribbon camp. For sure, the China Extradition bill has enlarged the base of the Yellow Ribbon camp. On 16th June, two million marched on Hong Kong island. This more or less gives us a clue as to the rough size of the Yellow Ribbons.

The different components of the movement

The local terms of "light yellow" and "dark yellow" can give us some sense of the different components of the movement as well. The former applies to the broad democratic supporters, while the latter applies to staunch supporters.

If the "light yellows" are moderate, it is reasonable to assume that they may vote and go to peaceful demonstrations, while the "dark yellows" are more ready to participate in banned demonstrations and non-violent civil disobedience.

The largest illegal demonstration broke out in Yuen Long on 27th July, with 280,000 on the streets. The banned march turned into street fighting again after the police attack. From then on this has become the norm.

This incident also allows us to have a glimpse of the size of the "dark yellow" component of the movement.

Another category relates to the means the protestors use : “militant current” versus “non-violent current”.

The former consists of those that advocate and make use of force, from throwing rocks to Molotov cocktails. They rely on the support of the “dark yellows,” who have now become more tolerant of violence.

How large is the “militant current ?” No one knows, but it is definitely smaller than the “dark yellow” current.

And the “militant current” can further be broken down into :

- those who actually use force in the resistance to police violence
- and those who play a supportive role, from providing materials for weapons to making road blocks (those doing first aid are not included but they could also easily be arrested or get hurt).

The number of those involved in the “militant current” is estimated at ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 or more.

One difficulty in making a correct assessment is the constraint laid down by the nature of the movement itself.

It is, like already mentioned, a leaderless, unorganized movement, to the extent that it is hostile to any idea of “representation.”

Even the “militant current” is composed of multiple fragmented groups, each consisting of one or at most two dozen activists, heavily relying on social media to coordinate actions.

The down-side of its worship of spontaneity is that fragmentation sometimes weakens actions. For instance, the online discussions about 1st October actions against the National day (7) failed to reach an agreement at the last minute and resulted in marches in different areas.

On the other hand, the Blue camp has not been strengthened either, rather it has been weakening all the way through, because Beijing has exposed its real intention now.

Even among the “light blue” people many more began to realize that the current protest is really not just about “young people’s idealism,” or “abuse of violence,” or even the China Extradition bill, but about the complete undermining of Hong Kong’s autonomy if Hong Kong people do not act against it.

Question : In October 2019, the CCP announced a “strengthening of the law” in Hong Kong.

The strong repression is mainly directed against the more militant part of the youth movement.

What does this mean in terms of mobilization and the development of the different factions within the movement ?

Au Loong Yu :

On 4th October, the government, by invoking the Emergency Act, made an anti-mask law.

Immediately, the response to this was radical marches and clashes with the police, and protestors put on masks in defiance of the ban.

The civil disobedience kept on broadening, making the ban not only totally ineffective, but also resulted in the government becoming even more hated and despised than ever. Especially so, when

one considers that wearing masks has been quite common in Hong Kong since the 2003 SARS pandemic – people do so even for very mild colds, a practice which Europeans may find odd.

This public anger against the government was definitely bad for the pro-Beijing parties in the lead-up to the scheduled 24th November local election.

Being afraid of this, the pro-Beijing parties started to push for postponing the election – without knowing that this only made them even more hated than ever.

If that was exactly their purpose (it is always understood here that the pro-Beijing camp, under the direct control of the Liaison Office, is always intentionally provocative in order to justify their even more ferocious counter-attack), then they were quite successful : people are so angry that they are now more prepared to tolerate the use of force within the resistance. The government's blind reliance on violent suppression and unscrupulous political tricks actually played the role of cementing the different currents within the whole opposition camp.

When the High Court ruled that the anti-mask law was unconstitutional, it carried the movement to a higher plane.

Beijing furiously accused the High Court of doing something that it is not entitled to do.

If Beijing continues its hard-lined policy, then it is likely that it is going to make use of its power of interpreting and re-interpreting the Basic Law once again to overthrow the High Court's decision. If it does – and it has done similar things several times already –, this means it will be signing the official death certificate of Hong Kong's rule of law and its autonomy. The result will be catastrophic for foreign capital (which relies on Hong Kong's legal system to operate), for Hong Kong and therefore for Beijing as well.

Surely, there are many ways to solve this crisis without losing too much face for Beijing. But that requires flexibility, wisdom, and at least the ability to tolerate and hear different viewpoints. The top leaders of the CCP are not well known for these skills, however. Hence, we are all standing at the edge of a precipice.

The Geopolitical Situation

The contest between China and the US is very different from, say, between Russia and the US. The former relationship was a very close one until recent years, both economically and politically, while the latter was not.

While the economic side is well known (any talk of immediate delinking between the two sides is quite improbable unless one of them is willing to endure the cost of economic meltdown), there has also been close collaboration on the political side for the past forty years as far as Hong Kong is concerned. The so called 'one country, two systems' is first and foremost a Beijing initiative to make a historic compromise with the UK, but tacitly also with the US as well, in exchange for not only getting back Hong Kong's sovereignty but also for allowing Beijing to be fully integrated into global capitalism.

And Deng Xiaoping would never have been able to achieve both goals without first making enough concessions to the West. Hence, the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, followed by the promulgation of the Basic Law in 1990, practically recognized the Western interest as one of the stakeholders in Hong Kong, with the UK at its head.

In the current movement in Hong Kong, the British-born Hong Kong Police Force Chief Superintendent Rupert Dover was very well known for being hard-line. If one looks for "foreign intervention" one should look at how Mr. Dover smashed the skulls of Hong Kong Chinese protestors. In fact, there are hundreds of white police officers holding foreign passports in Hong

Kong.

This is protected by article 101 of the Basic Law, which guarantees that foreign nationals can be hired as civil servants or government consultants.

The Basic Law also guarantees the continued usage of English as an official language, the persistence of the common law system, the appointment of foreign judges to Hong Kong courts, the granting of UK passports to Hongkongers, so on and so forth.

Hence, it is not in the UK, US or the EU's interest to destabilize Hong Kong as long as the Basic Law remains valid until 2047. Rather their interest determines that they should follow a policy of stabilising Hong Kong's political institutions.

This also explains why the UK and the US quietly told the Hong Kong pan-democrats to accept Beijing's political reform package in 2014 prior to the outbreak of the Umbrella Movement.

It is Beijing's unilateral change of its Hong Kong policy and its refusal to honour its promise, which is leading the West to turn against Beijing over Hong Kong.

On top of the issue of Beijing's undermining of Hong Kong autonomy, the US surely has other grievances regarding for China as well, such as the trade conflict and, more importantly, the contest for global dominance, and none of these require our support.

In general, the big contest for global dominance between China and the US is just a fight to divide up the spoils. This is not our battle.

But Hong Kong is a different issue.

Its laissez-faire capitalism is surely very problematic for the working people here, but the Basic Law also provides protection of basic human rights, which allows the growth of a social movement.

In contrast, China's bureaucratic capitalism is worse as it tolerates no social movement or opposition at all.

One may say that in this juncture there is now a narrowly defined common interest between the West and the Hong Kong people over the defence of Hong Kong's autonomy.

International civil society should be in solidarity with Hong Kong people's defence of this autonomy. If we are distrustful of the Western great power (and we should be), then we should link this defence to the further broadening of working people's rights at the expense of the interest of foreign or local corporations (for instance, the introduction of collective bargaining to Hong Kong will surely not be welcomed by the latter).

Refusal to support us is not going to harm US imperialism, but it definitely harms the Hong Kong people and their social movement. This leads us to the US "Hong Kong Human Right and Democracy" bill. It is silly to give uncritical support to the bill because it ties Hong Kong human rights to US foreign policy.(8)

Right Wing Localism

Another problem related to international solidarity is the existence of a xenophobic, nationalist wing of the Yellow Ribbons.

A decade ago, a new ideological current of "localists" emerged.

By that time, it was already very mixed, but certain progressive conservatives were among them.

Yet very soon, it was the right wing which dominated localist discourses.

Hong Kong has always been conservative in general, but there was never a localist right wing until then. They were actually more "nativist" than localist.

Soon after the Umbrella Movement began, the xenophobic localists began to put out stickers and banners at all occupation sites which read "Beware of the Left Pricks." This is nonsense as there is no sizable left. This kind of attack mainly targeted the Hong Kong Federation of Students and social

organizations and activists who took part in the occupation.

Spokespersons of the localists were Raymond Wong and scholar Chin Wan-kan (or Chin Wan). Together with Raymond Wong's apprentice Wong Yeung-tat, they constituted a xenophobic trio and were nicknamed as 'Two Wong and One Chin.'

Each had their own organization, though.

Their actions in the occupation area were :

1. to silence the voices of other democrats,
2. to incite the masses to achieve their goals,
3. to use violence or threaten to use violence,
4. to make racist statements about Chinese people, calling them "locusts" which should be ousted,
5. to attack Mainland Chinese immigrants in HK as stealing welfare from the government.

What is interesting to note is that they were so discredited that they lost in the 2016 election and hence were marginalised.

There are a few very small nativist organisations founded by young people but they are so small that they do not have any institutional muscle to enforce their agenda within the movement.

If they do have some ideological influence, it is only because,

- firstly, Hong Kong is always conservative within a context of a so-called laissez-faire society ;
- secondly, there already exists a crowd which, maddened by Beijing's repression, mistakenly sees all Chinese people as responsible and therefore takes an undifferentiated hostility towards Chinese people in general.

But this nativist current is very small.

In general, the self-claimed localists could garner slightly more than ten percent of the vote, but we must bear in mind that not all localists are nativists.

When the current movement began to gather momentum and involve millions of common citizens and hundreds of thousands of young people who are entirely new to politics and have no link at all to any current political party, the nativist discourse is very much diluted, even if young people use some of the nativist language and icons.

A recent survey showed that nearly 40 percent of the students claim to be localist, but this is interpreted differently by the radical youth. The nativists are not actually that visible as a well-defined current, except certain slogans of theirs that have been picked up by young people. There are small community actions, which could potentially be taken advantage of by nativists.

Yet on 7th July, there was a 230,000 march to the high-speed train station to greet mainland visitors and trying to appeal to them to support the movement. The nativists have been saying loudly for years that mainland Chinese people are all 'fxxking supporters of despotism.' Obviously, many protestors have not listened to their advice.

One may conclude that within the current movement multiple inclinations co-exist. Whenever there is abuse of violence, there are always people who immediately come out to try to stop it. Surely the young radicals, being entirely inexperienced in politics, do make mistakes, for instance believing Trump will save them, or sometimes senselessly picking up some xenophobic slogans.

But while the nativist inclination is there, there are also progressive inclinations and actions as well.

The left should not stand on the side-line and just criticise, rather it should join the struggle and stand on the side of the progressives to fight against any nativist inclination.

Postscript

The landslide victory by the opposition in the current local election could be considered as a referendum on both the Hong Kong government and Beijing.

The people's voice is a clear and loud "'No' to the latter's hard-line policy."

In general, the opposition has enjoyed 55 to 60 percent support in the legislative election, but in local elections, this has previously dropped to 40 percent.

The fact that the opposition now garners 57 percent of the votes as opposed to the pro-Beijing parties' 41 percent is surely a big victory.

In terms of seats, it is even a bigger victory. It won 388 seats in total, an increase of 263 seats, while pro-Beijing parties lost 240 seats and were only able to retain 59 seats.

The popularity of the pan-democrat camp could already be seen in the above-mentioned poll before the election.

Still, nobody ever thought the pan-democrats could win such a landslide victory in a local election. Especially when it occurred in a context where radical actions of the movement are on a decline : the police has been laying siege to the Polytechnic University since last week and, despite several dozens of protestors still refusing to give themselves up, there is little they or their supporters outside can do.

The victory in the election surely boosts the morale of the opposition in general and thus neutralizes the demoralization effect of the defeat at the two universities.

It is also encouraging that more than sixty newly elected district board members went to the gate of the university to express solidarity with the protestors inside.

Notes:

1. AU Loong Yu latest book is China's Rise: « China's Rise : Strength and Fragility »

<http://www.merlinpress.co.uk/cgi-bin/sh000001.pl?REFPAGE=http%3a%2f%2fwww%2emerlinpress%2eco%2euk%2fcgi%2dbin%2fss000001%2epl%3fpage%3dsearch%26SS%3dCHINA%26PR%3d%2d1%26TB%3dA%26ACTION%3dGo%2521&WD=china&PN=CHINA%2dS%2dRISE%2d%2dSTRENGTH%2dAND%2dFRAGILITY%2html%23aChinasrise#aChinasrise>

2. See : The Rebellion in Hong Kong is Intensifying. An Interview with Au Loong Yu, : (Jacobin, 01.08.2019)

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/hong-kong-protest-china-carrie-lam-umbrella-movement-extra-dition-bill-xi-jinping>

3. Cathay Pacific = Airline based at the Hong Kong Airport.

4. Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, 香港民意 - 15th November 2019

5. Chinese) Communist Party, CCP, vs. Kuomintang, KMT: the two opposed parties during the civil war (1927-1949).

6. One decisive element of the 2014 protests was the occupation of several major city intersections.

7. Chinese National Day, commemorates the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

8. I recommend our readers to read this:

<https://transnationalsolidarity.net/hong-kong-human-rights-and-democracy-act-hkhrda-a-progressive-critique-aaaaaaaaaaaaa/>

P.S.

https://sozialgeschichte-online.org/2019/12/11/continuous-rebellion-in-hong-kong/?fbclid=IwAR0AHZmQvbxz5GmeDZg_vpXWWOJsXSq88V5hXo4jBDCb0enWU2wMEbKVTuw

https://sozialgeschichteonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/au_loong_yu_continuous_rebellion_sgo_26_vorverc3b6ffentlichung.pdf