

Hong Kong Has a New Type of Prisoner: Pro-Democracy Activists

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Hundreds of protesters, many students or college-educated, face potentially stiff sentences after Beijing's crackdown. Those behind bars already battle isolation and disillusionment.

A half year after he got out of prison, Daniel Tang has made a habit of going back. He waits in spare, crowded corridors. He greets familiar faces among the fellow visitors and guards. He brings books, postage stamps, writing paper and packets of M&Ms.

Mr. Tang is visiting people like him who were imprisoned for their role in the pro-democracy street protests that rocked Hong Kong in 2019. He travels three hours, round-trip, for a 15-minute chat through a thick plate of glass, sometimes with a total stranger. He summons a cheery, chatty demeanor, when he feels anything but.

"You owe them your best face," he said. *"If you're not feeling right, don't even bother going."*

Mr. Tang and many of those he meets with represent a new breed of convict in Hong Kong: activists who opposed the Chinese Communist Party's growing power in the city. This group — often including college students or white-collar professionals — rose up two years ago in a historic campaign of public disobedience that led to clashes with police on the streets and focused the world's attention on the future of the Asian financial capital.

For many, that campaign has ended in courts and jails, crushed by tough new laws imposed by Beijing, mass arrests and the hazards of the coronavirus. Now, with dim job prospects, a fraught political future and the unending threat of another arrest, those protesters are emblematic of the uncertainties facing the city's stricken democracy movement.

Over 2,500 people are being prosecuted on various charges for their roles in the protests, according to the police. The authorities are still working through a backlog of potential prosecutions of the more than 10,000 arrested between June 2019 and March of this year.

Nearly 300 have been sentenced to prison as of the end of last year, a sizable number for a city with an incarcerated population of about 7,000 people. Beijing's imposition last year of a national security law gives prosecutors greater powers to target even more.

Many of the activists are contemplating a future in exile. Others struggle to stay committed to the cause for which they sit behind bars.

"Being sentenced to jail fractures people," said Alex Chow, a 30-year-old activist who spent a brief time in jail for his role as a leader of protests in 2014, a precursor to the 2019 demonstrations. He now lives in exile in the United States.

"It smashes your personal aspirations," he said. *"It might change your life trajectory. You're locked in a cell for months or years. That disrupts everything. No one can really prepare for it."*

It's still not fully clear how prison will affect the movement, Mr. Chow said. Many will be dissuaded by escalating punishments. A charge for illegal assembly once meant a fine or community service, he said, but now could mean prison.

"This is one of the intended outcomes produced by the national security law," he said. *"They want to cut you off, to smash your connections and the solidarity and spirit of the movement."*

The crackdown has swept up young people as well as veterans. Those sentenced to prison so far

include Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow and Ivan Lam, young leaders of the 2014 protests. Wong Ji-yuet, 23, and Owen Chow, 24, activists who participated in a primary election that was organized by the pro-democracy camp, are awaiting trial in solitary confinement after they were charged with endangering national security.

For many young people in jail, the sentences have redrawn their lives.

Jackie Yeung, a 23-year-old university student serving a three-year prison sentence, said she had abandoned the *"typical ambitions"* she used to harbor — getting a good job and an apartment in a family-friendly district.

Ms. Yeung, who pleaded guilty to hiding more than 100 Molotov cocktails in a residential unit, said that if the protests had taught her to be less selfish, prison had taught her to be more practical. When she was first sentenced, she felt depressed and lethargic. Being removed from her loved ones and the protest movement took its toll. She missed her mother.

To survive, she threw herself into self-improvement. She is learning basic Korean from a language textbook and teaches English phrases to a small group. *"Prison is the ideal place to learn a language,"* she said in an interview during a prison visit. *"I don't want to waste my time here because I know there are a lot of people waiting for me outside."*

Even so, guilt plagues her. *"My friends tell me that my bedroom door at home is always closed, because my parents can't bear seeing the room empty,"* she wrote in a statement ahead of her sentencing. *"And I have no way of comforting them through the glass in the visitation room in prison."*

She dreams of opening up a small business importing Taiwanese pineapples after she and a Taiwanese cellmate are released. With the profits, she would support other young people by helping to pay their legal fees and living expenses. *"To do anything, you need money,"* she said.

To make things easier on prisoners, Mr. Tang and some other activists have banded together to provide support. They write letters and gazettes to catch people up with protest news and raise funds to pay for better meals in jail while protesters await trials.

Mr. Tang frequently sees Ms. Yeung. During one visit to her prison near the border with the mainland city of Shenzhen, he brought pens and stamps. He left the stamps, but was unable to give her the pens, as it would have exceeded her monthly allowance of two.

For all of his dedication, Mr. Tang, who spent more than a half-year imprisoned after pleading guilty to arson charges, says it doesn't feel like it's enough.

"Many Hong Kongers have moved on and moved away and don't think about how there is a group of people sitting behind bars for the movement we all fought for," said Mr. Tang, who is in his late 30s. *"It seems many have forgotten."*

Far from radicalizing during his time on the inside, Mr. Tang now struggles with cynicism and meaning in a city that suddenly seems unfamiliar. He has been disheartened by the protest movement's stagnation and by the waves of migration out of the city. The camaraderie of protest has been replaced by dread of ever more targeted arrests. He sees it all as an abandonment of values and believes that escape is a privilege unavailable to many.

Mr. Tang's protester friends from prison also seem to be moving on. A group chat they kept, called the *"Lai Chi Kok Prisoners,"* after the facility where they were detained, still lights up occasionally with holiday greetings and vague laments. But few want to talk politics. Sometimes those in prison that do speak out seem to be exaggerating their place in the movement. He rolls his eyes at one prisoner, who has taken to calling himself Mandela 2.0.

"All that we have left is our relationships with one another," he said. *"Some seem ready to let that go."*

Yet, for Mr. Tang, there is no road back — not that he'd take it. His former employer was understanding, but let him go when his absence stretched on. He has been unable to access his life savings, he said, after his bank account was frozen over automated donations he made in 2019 to a

protester bail fund that police placed under investigation.

He has applied to managerial jobs like those he had worked in the past, only to be turned away because of his criminal record. Now, he's mulling applying for a taxi license or working in construction.

He still faces four charges related to the protests that were filed just days before his release from prison. The thought of officers at his door has kept him away from the apartment he shares with his mother. He tells her he now works a night shift, and she doesn't press him.

"I'm really tired," Mr. Tang said. "The government has left us no room to resist and nowhere to go."

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/world/asia/hong-kong-protests-prison.html>