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Hong Kong

Is the Umbrella Movement Planned and Funded by the US Government?

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This is an excerpt of an essay originally published in the Ming Pao Daily on October 19, 2014. Certain paragraphs have been slightly edited and supplemented for English readers. This essay is translated for the coming issue of Amandla, the South African radical left journal.

The Chinese media has accused the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement of being planned and funded by the US. It has alleged that amongst both the trio who first suggested the Occupy Central movement last year and amongst the pan-democrats are those who have accepted funds or have participated in the activities of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a funding agency which is sponsored by the US Congress. Indeed many of the Pan-democrat leaders have always been Pro-America or Pro-Britain (although after the handover in 1997 they have been more implicit than explicit) and therefore hold views and practices that I have never shared. However are these pan-democrats really the leaders of the Umbrella movement? It is generally known that they are not. Rather it is the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and the secondary school students' organisation Scholarism who have led the movement, and even their leadership roles only lasted for a short time.

From the very beginning, due to their weaknesses, the main pan-democrat leaders were never the ones who called for Occupy Central. It was left to the trio to make the call, although even they were hesitant and so their actual plan was never realised. While an earlier occupation, which might be viewed as a rehearsal, was launched on July 2, it was the HKFS which planned and led it. It then continued its offensive and called for the class boycott on 22nd September that directly led to the umbrella movement. Although on 28th September Benny Tai – a law scholar who is one of the trio - officially announced the beginning of Occupy Central, this was only in the light of the actions of the students, and by this time the Occupy Central trio, not to mention the pan-democrats, had already lost credibility. Then after the 28th September, even HKFS has not been able to lead the movement as it has been transformed into a movement where countless individuals act freely, not directed by any groups. Although the mainstream pan-democrats still provide some logistical support, it is very small; they do not really want to engage in this movement and, even if they did want to, the fact is that they would not be able to. To think that proving that some pan-democrats have received NED funding is equal to proving that the umbrella movement is influenced, funded or planned by the US government only makes this slander more contemptible.

The HKFS has never needed to receive any funding from outsiders, simply due to the fact that it has huge reserve as all Hong Kong university students are compulsory due paying members of student unions. Although a Communist Party newspaper has claimed that Scholarism's Joshua Wong has received NED funding, this has been denied and the newspaper has been unable to produce evidence. What is more laughable is that the newspaper published a photo of Joshua Wong meeting with Anson Chan (the former Chief Executive of the SAR government who has since been attacked by the Pro-Beijing media an agent of the US and UK) and certain white people as "evidence" of "colluding with the foreign enemy". However if they had first checked the activities of the NED in Hong Kong before they published it they would not have made this mistake. On September 5 2004, the English language newspaper The Standard reported that the NED through another organisation, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), had funded technical assistance and training for several political parties including the Democratic Party, the DAB and the Liberal Party (the latter two are both pro-Beijing parties). On September 7, the Economic Journal reported that both the Liberal Party and the DAB denied that they had received US funding, but acknowledged that they had attended at related seminars several times. If merely meeting up with Anson Chan and certain white persons amounts to "colluding with the foreign enemy", is the DAB not therefore also a "US agent"?

US funds also support China's public institutions

Earlier in the same year, on March 3, newspaper Ming Pao Daily had already reported that a report submitted by the US Congress General Accounting Office (GAO) to the House of Representatives showed that over the last five years the US government had spent a total of \$39 million on funding China's democracy programs. This report can still be found online today. Although these US public funds are subsidising Mainland and Hong Kong civil society organisations, according to this report, "Several of the State's grants support work to be undertaken in cooperation with Chinese government entities and/or with academics, consulting firms and nongovernmental organizations in China. For example, one project includes support for working with the Supreme People's Court, the National People's Congress and other counterparts to promote criminal defense reforms in China; another project funds a partnership between an American university and a legal reform consulting firm operating in China to help develop China's system for providing legal aid in rural communities." [1]

However funding is not limited to that directly from the US. As everybody knows, various international bodies such as the UN Commission on Human Rights, the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations Development Programme, not to mention the so called purely financial assistance of World Bank aid programs have all provided subsidies to various Chinese government and public institutions. The US is an important source of funding of these international institutions and the GAO is also obliged to report these international bodies' China projects. The United Nations Development Programme, for example, has funded Chinese institutions engaged in electoral system and criminal law improvement projects. Meanwhile, between 1999 and 2006 the Asian Development Bank also provided funds of US\$3.55 million to relevant Chinese institutions for similar projects. While some might say that these reports only show one side of the story, as the Chinese government has not released any information it is largely responsible for any information imbalance.

US private funds

The mainland media does sometimes disclose some relevant news however. On 23rd February 2004, the Economic Observer reported that in 2002 British scholar Anthony Saich had served as an advocate for a Tsinghua-Harvard joint training programme for senior officials to provide management training to the new generation of Chinese officials. Prior to this he had served as the Ford Foundation's Chief Representative in China.

Unlike the NED, the Ford Foundation is a foundation which mainly relies on private donations. According to mainland mouthpieces, this private funding also constitutes US forces interfering in China's internal affairs. In reality, much of the US private funding is used to help the Chinese government engage in counterfeiting civil society, while the real civil society receives minimum funding. As Chinese University of Hong Kong sociology professor Anthony Spiers explains, China welcomes the funds from US foundations for health care, education and research, but not the rapid social change that grassroots NGOs could deliver:

"Major US foundations tend to award large grants to established organizations either controlled by the Chinese government or under its influence rather than independent or grassroots NGOs." Government-organized NGOs, or so-called GONGOS, "can serve as tools for domestic control of new social forces while also attracting foreign funds for programs the Chinese government itself is unwilling to support." [2]

Chinese officials have been developing cosy relations with the Western and Japanese ruling elites and tycoons throughout the era of market reform, and have, therefore, decided that restoring capitalism in China is a better option for them. The only difference between Chinese capitalism and Western capitalism is that the Chinese ruling class prefers an open dictatorship of the bourgeoisie with the party's leading cadres at its core, and does away with any pretence of "government by consent". The CCP's plan for the Hong Kong political reform package amounts to the same thing. Mr. C.Y. Leung, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong government, in explaining why Hong Kong people cannot have genuine universal suffrage said that this "would allow the city government to follow more business-friendly policies... if it's entirely a numbers game and numeric representation, then obviously you would be

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talking to half of the people in Hong Kong who earn less than \$1,800 a month. Then you would end up with that kind of politics and policies.” However it is precisely the kind of naked crony capitalism that he wants to maintain, rather than any imagery “foreign intervention”, which is responsible for the fact that Hong Kong people, in their hundreds of thousands, are now occupying the streets.

Translated by Bai Ruixue

[1] GAO report 2004 <http://www.gao.gov/assets/100/92476.html>
More recent data can be found in Thomas Lum's 2012 paper, U.s. Assistance Programs in China
http://www.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/crsreports/crsdocuments/RS22663_01062012.pdf

[2] US Foundations Boost Chinese Government, Not NGOs <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/...> For Spires' article, please refer to his
Organizational Homophily in International Grant making: US-Based Foundations and their Grantees in China, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/sites/de...>