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Hong Kong

# The Historical Significance of the 2019 Hong Kong Resistance Movement

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**On February 19, 2021 Lausan, along with several other organizations including Solidarity, held a webinar book launch for Au Loong-yu's book, *Hong Kong in Revolt, The Protest Movement and the Future of China* (Pluto Press, 2020). The following are the author's slightly edited introductory remarks.**

THANKS LAUSAN FOR organizing this exchange. I will like to give a seven-point presentation on the topic of "the historical significance of the 2019 Hong Kong resistance movement," which my book attempted to cover. But first let me share with you my experiences in relation to my writings on the 2019 Revolt.

From the very beginning I already planned to write both English and Chinese editions. Soon I realized that this required different approaches for different editions as the readers are so different in perspective. How could I please both sides? Western readers are likely to be troubled by the fact that, for instance, Hong Kong protesters copying Pepe the frog icons for their own use. So they asked: "aren't they far right"? Then I have to spend some time to explain that most young people just thought the frog funny; they were not far right. Actually most were just new to the social movement and in the Hong Kong case most had no idea about right and left oppositional binary.

On the other hand, I have to respond to those Hong Kong young protesters who felt offended by being seen as far right. And then I have to explain that, yes, you just thought that the frog was funny, but you cannot simply ignore the universal differentiation of right and left or what the rest of the world think about the frog. If you send the wrong message to the world you will mislead yourself in finding the right allies. So in certain sense my book, both in English and Chinese editions, attempt to bridge the gap of understanding between Hong Kong protesters and English-speaking readers. It is up to you to decide how successful I have been.

Now for the seven points:

**1. First about the characterization of last year's revolt.** It was basically a popular democratic movement, not one manipulated by the United States or the United Kingdom. This movement was not even about Hong Kong independence. It does not mean that the U.S. empire did not intervene, or that no one demanded HK independence. But they were far from significant enough to really influence the movement's momentum or direction. What unified the two million protesters were the five demands, which were about opposing the Extradition Bill, police violence, and universal suffrage. These are all legitimate demands.

With last year's revolt we can say that for the first time in Hong Kong history the idea of democracy has taken root among the majority of the people. The 2014 Umbrella movement only received 40% of the public's support. In contrast, the 2019 Revolt consistently got 60-70% support. On top of this, a big section of the "1997 generation" now grasps the idea that direct actions are always required for a democratic struggle to succeed. This in itself is a spectacular success. And this is in a historical context where Hong Kong was the only city in China daring enough to rise up against Beijing as the rest of the country has been under harsh repression since 1989.

**2. About foreign forces.** Surely there were pro-Trump parties and pro-independence parties, but they were all very small. In general party politics are very weak and fragmented in Hong Kong. However, this weakness is compensated by a big pro-Trump tabloid. It was influential yet it did not have any mechanism to make the movement accept its position. Do not forget that as a whole the movement was leaderless. Such a huge movement definitely included a whole range of contradictory tendencies.

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We must not be fooled by the highly selective reports made by the mainstream Western media that often focused on protesters waving U.S. flags. There was a mass rally in support of the Catalanian struggle, and there were protesters waving Catalan flags during demonstrations, but these were under-reported. There was also a rally in solidarity with Catalonia which 3000 joined, not as big as the pro-Trump rally, still big enough not to be ignored. Before the rally right-wing localists tried to persuade the organizers not to hold it as this would piss off their American ally, but the rally went ahead regardless.

One must also be aware of the fact that the foreign forces in Hong Kong have always been localized, something which certain leftists chose to neglect when they decided not to stand with the HK revolt. It is none other than Beijing itself which has helped the UK and the U.S. to continue to have some political and economic influence. Its Basic Law for Hong Kong officially allows it, including allowing British judges to be employed in our courts. Yes, this is a colonial legacy that should be done away with. But it should be replaced by something better, not worse. Replacing British common laws with the Chinese legal system is definitely making things worse for Hong Kong Chinese.

**3. We also have to take note of a special feature of this great movement.** It was simultaneously a politically radical, but also socially conservative, movement. It was politically radical in the sense of having the guts to target Beijing and demand democracy, but also in the sense of its size and the means it adopted. For forty years, Hong Kong's democratic movement had been exceedingly peaceful. It did not even tolerate civil disobedience. The first time this taboo was broken was with the 2014 Umbrella Movement. And then in 2019 it was elevated to an entirely new plane.

On the other hand, it was also a movement which exhibits a social conservatism, which never questions anything about the free market alongside the huge economic inequalities it sustains. The movement was guided by the perspective of "Beijing versus Hong Kong," which implied that anyone who is against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is our friend, including Trump. Whenever there were suggestions that we should also be concerned about the huge wealth inequality and the dire situation of the poor, this was seen as irrelevant to the current struggle and hence totally ignored. Most of the protesters gave no thought to this because they saw Beijing as the main enemy, and the revolt must prioritize an all-people alliance against Beijing. But there was also a very strong conservative voice, which would oppose in principle bringing the issue of redistributive justice into the democratic movement at all.

I argue that this is because of the deep-rooted social conservatism here. Hong Kong was, and to a certain remains, a free port colony but a very successful one. After a long period of economic prosperity, half of the population live in government subsidized housing etc, and all of these make any leftist critique of the free market ideology obsolete. The laboring class would not oppose the idea of a welfare state, but most do not feel urgent or confident to demand it either.

**4. This brings us to a fourth feature of the revolt, namely the influence of localism.** For many, localism only means their Hong Kong identity, that the people here deserve the right to determine their future. But there has been a hard-core right-wing localism that is in practical alliance with the U.S. conservative establishment. They were organisationally weak, but the absence of organized leftists allowed right-wing localists to have a much bigger voice than its actual organisational strength. It was not strong enough to steer the whole movement to its agenda of aligning with the U.S. government or of racist physical attacks on Mainland Chinese, but it was still able to hold actions involving thousands. These appealed to Trump and made racist verbal attacks on Mainland immigrants.

Although these actions did not have any grave consequence for the Hong Kong revolt per se, it gave Beijing a good excuse to describe the movement as anti-Chinese. Under the party's censorship, many Mainland Chinese did believe its propaganda, and some of them did not feel safe about visiting Hong Kong. This was, and is, detrimental to HK's democratic movement as well, because the long-term success of Hong Kong depends on the success of the Chinese democratic movement. Revolution in one city is a pipe dream. The young activists are more or less aware of this, yet

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most seek allies in the West, not in the Chinese democratic movement. While most of them are not racists against the Chinese, neither do they have any faith in China's democratic future. The inability of Hong Kong people to think strategically, especially in relation to China, may continuously steer people in the right-wing localist's direction.

**5. One of the most interesting things about last year's revolt was the new trade union movement.** The revolt started as a movement which was hostile to leaders and organizations, yet at the end of the day it also gave birth to a new trade union movement, led by young worker activists. The revolt also started as a movement whose perspective about democracy never extended beyond the political realm. Yet the revolt triggered off this new union movement which has the potential to extend the movement beyond the political realm and shake up industrial relations here. Most were small unions but there are also big unions. For instance, the Hospital Authority Employee Alliance (HAEA) has a membership of 20,000 out of 80,000 employees. It launched a successful five-day strike in February 2020 to demand the government close the border with mainland China to stop the Covid-19 virus from spreading. Anyone who is serious about building an international labour movement will doubtless support the building of this new trade union movement while arguing for a leftist course.

**6. The rise of localism in Hong Kong could be progressive as long as it also consciously rejects the right-wing discourse of racism and Sinophobia.** I argue for the demand of Hong Kong self-determination but linked to the demand for democratization of China as well, including the self-determination for ethnic minorities in all China. If there is strong separatism among minorities in Tibet and Xijiang and Taiwan and Hong Kong, it is the Beijing regime which is to be blamed.

Nearly a century ago, both the Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party) and the CCP pursued the re-unification of the Chinese nation as a response to the colonization and occupation by imperial powers. But the CCP's course of actions was different from the KMT. The CCP was to achieve the same ends by the means of recognition of self-determination for all minorities. And this was what helped the CCP to win over the progressive elements of the minorities at that time and finally helped it to come to power. The party's eventual abandonment of its program of self-determination, among many other broken promises, has determined its own degeneration until it reached a point that the party today has evolved into a party of bureaucratic capitalists.

While a democratic alliance of Han Chinese and other ethnic minorities, on the basis of self-determination, remains a progressive agenda, this could only be achieved by the absence of the CCP dictatorship or any one-party dictatorship. The campist's argument of supporting the CCP regime so as to promote a "national re-unification" is like squaring a circle.

**7. It was the young generation, or what I called the "1997 generation," which was the vanguard of last year's revolt.** However, within a year Beijing retaliated by imposing its National Security law on us. From the perspective of the direct result of these two years of struggle, one could say that we have lost the battle.

In view of the ongoing harsh repression, it will take a long time for the movement to rise up again. In essence, the great contribution of the "1997 generation" was that they were able to throw away the old liberal's illusion of convincing Beijing to give us democracy and based on this they launched a great revolt. That was what they were capable of. But they had no hope of success as well, given the relationship of forces and their own inadequacy.

It reminds me of the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes," where the boy yelled "the Emperor is naked!" Hence the boy created a political crisis for the emperor, but obviously he was not in a position to solve it. Similarly, the young people had been brave enough to trigger off a great revolt against Beijing, but they were not politically equipped to lead it to victory for this time. They thought the 2019 revolt was the end game. They were wrong. It was just the beginning of a long-term struggle. Nevertheless, the 2019 Revolt does constitute a new departure point for this long march and for this we must thank the youth for their selfless sacrifices.

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Read a review of [Hong Kong in Revolt](#).

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