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Hong Kong

The millennial generation's struggle for self-determination

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Over the last few months, a massive wave of mass struggle emerged in Hong Kong and attracted the world's attention. We are republishing this interview with Hong Kong socialist Au Loong Yu published by *Think Left*, which has interviewed local social activists in Hong Kong, in order to allow its readers to have an in-depth understanding on the current political crisis and mass struggles in Hong Kong from a perspective beyond mainstream media. [1]

Think Left: Is the current movement having any impact on the balance of political forces in Hong Kong?

Au: The main composition of this movement, on the one hand is the millennial generation and its most radical wing; the other is the Pan-Democrat parties (including right-wing localists and self-determinists on the fringe) represented by Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) and other social organisations. There is no doubt that the former is leading the movement. It is their uncompromising determination that pushed the movement to its climax and finally forced the Chief Executive (Carrie) Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor to initially suspend and later withdraw the controversial extradition bill. However, we cannot deny the role of the latter. They have started to oppose the government's bill since March this year. They have been campaigning over the months, and the "militant faction" had not appeared then. The marches on 9th June and 16th June organized by CHRF, have played important supporting role, objectively speaking. At the same time, with the two currents deciding not to break away with the other, the anti-extradition movement possesses genuine popular character. Only the convergence of these two major currents effectively challenged the extradition bill. After the government compromised, we are still able to support the continuous fermentation of the movement until today.

Yet, when talk about developments after this, there is no doubt that the millennial generation's role is more crucial. In the first 150 years of Hong Kong's history, Hong Kong was a British colony; the latter 20 years, it became the colony of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The relationship between the CCP and Hong Kong is a form of internal colonization. It inherited from British the relationship between the centre and the periphery, to serve the economic goals of the colonial master/ Beijing through political control. Therefore, both did not allow Hong Kong, the economic city (the original obligation assigned by colonialism), to become a political city, and absolutely did not allow its residents to have genuine autonomy. The Pan-Democrat generation were willing to wait for the CCP to fulfill its promises, but by the time the millennial generation emerged, Hong Kongers had already waited for 40 years. Now the millennial generation comes out and says, "You are simply lying, and we are not going to wait again!" CCP only knows how to accuse those young people who are involved in anti-extradition bill protests for engaging in Hong Kong independence, but it does not realize that its act of "tearing down the bridge after crossing the river", violating its promise to grant autonomy for Hong Kong, and speeding up direct control over the city is causing the young generation to resist in desperation.

Standing together against foreign threats is a catalyst for forging a sense of belonging, identity and even national sentiment. This is something universal and Hong Kong is no exception. For the Yellow Ribbon masses, it is almost impossible to succeed without the identity of "Hong Konger". This identity firstly represents the desires of Hong Kongers to be their own masters and no longer bow down to others. The song of Hong Kong (which is the currently popular song "Glory to Hong Kong" written by netizens) can be seen as the representation of such sentiment. [2]

I have different opinion from equating "Hong Kong identity" to Hong Kong nationalism. Of course, most people who use this term now did not necessarily follow a rigorous definition. But I think a rigorous discussion on this would be worthwhile, analytically. At most you can say that many of the Yellow Ribbon masses already have a kind of sense of belonging to Hong Kong and even a Hong Kong national sentiment, but this does not mean "nationalism". Regarding "national identity" as the value that overrides everything, that is nationalism. But the Yellow Ribbon masses now,

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even some of the millennial generation, think it is not necessary for Hong Kong to be independent. For them, Hong Kong independence is just an aspiration, but also know that this is only part of a “dreaming”. The movement today still limits its goal to the five main demands. If someone puts up a banner calling for Hong Kong independence or shouts slogans about that in the march, there will be people who will stop it. The adults know that Hong Kong independence is not very achievable (and only becomes imaginable if the Beijing government is defeated by the US imperialists). Whereas the radical youth are willing to compromise in order to unite with Yellow Ribbon masses in millions, and demand a greater autonomy, or at most only demand for self-determination – to decide their own fate in a broad sense – not independence, not pursuing independence at all cost.

Anyhow, this is the great leap in the thinking of Hong Kongers. Although the current movement is called the “anti-extradition bill protest movement”, but in fact the movement has progressed far beyond opposition the extradition bill. Judging from the impact in the future, this movement can be called the “Millennial Self-Determination Movement”, to distinguish itself from the previous democratic movement. [3]

Think Left: What are the impacts of this movement to the ordinary citizens and civil society in Hong Kong?

Au: One of the contributions of the “Millennial Self-Determination Movement” is greatly politicized ordinary citizens, including the Blue Ribbon masses. Colonialism never wants the colonized people to be concerned about politics. Colonialism wants people to be comfortable in their position as subjects to the rulers. Hence, during elections, there are politicians who put up the slogan “don’t talk about politics, only do practical things”. Elections are inevitably political. The politics of not talking about politics, is in fact a desire for everyone to only concern themselves with “looking for food” (earning a living), and leave the politics to the rulers. This is indeed compatible with the humble mentality of many middle and lower class Chinese citizens: they want to maintain the social order to allow them to earn a living with peace of mind. This is also the foundation of the thinking of the Blue Ribbon masses. In fact, a majority of the citizens thought like that previously. This is the consequence of 2000 years of absolute autocratic rule plus 170 years of colonial history.

The history of the Hong Kong democratic movement is actually quite short. It was mainly motivated by the '89 Democracy Movement. But when the United Democrats of Hong Kong (UDHK) won the most seats in the 1991 legislative council election, and after that demanding the colonial government to allow them to enter the Cabinet, they were scolded by the citizens. They said, “we elected you only to monitor the government, not for you to become part of the government”. Many citizens, even those with democratic aspirations, still possess the mentality of a subject to rulers. Therefore, the transition to CCP rule in 1997 was very smooth.

But when the government wanted to legislate Hong Kong Basic Law Article 23 (on national security), only then did it stimulate the strong mentality among Hong Kongers to defend its autonomy. As many as 500,000 people took the streets. Although the CCP withdrew the bill, it continues to use different ways to shrink the autonomy, e.g. the implementation of so-called “National Education”, using Putonghua (mandarin) as a teaching medium in school. Because the young generation are more sensitive to this, they continuously resisted, and this resistance developed to become the 2014 Umbrella Movement. It now appears that the Umbrella Movement was a rehearsal for the 2019 Millennial Self-Determination Movement. With 2 million people taking the streets in 16 June, this shows the movement has popular character. This is the second most powerful democratic movement in Chinese-populated territory in Greater China after the Democratization of Taiwan.

The ordinary Yellow Ribbon masses are even shifting gradually from sympathizing passively towards the radical youth who use force against police, to sympathizing actively and supporting such moves. This a massive explosion of masses after absorbing decades of lessons and experiences. With this massive explosion, our civil society has

progressed to version 2.0.

Hong Kong civil society was not strong previously. There are indeed many political parties, trade unions, volunteer organisations etc in Hong Kong, but most of them are supported by full-time staff, and there is a lack of sufficient enthusiasm among their members, just support on paper. Initially in the Umbrella Movement, then in the current anti-extradition movement, we have witnessed the start of mass spontaneous action and strong volunteer work. This has become a great mass democratic movement.

Think Left: What is the class composition of the participants of this movement? What are the differences with the previous democratic movements in Hong Kong?

Au: This movement can be considered a popular movement excluding the capitalists and tycoons at the top. It includes petty bourgeois, middle class, working class, youth and students. But if we are talking about leadership, it is definitely the youth and students. I say youth and students here, because some militants or their active supporters, although young, are not students but already working. Youth and students tend to prefer an anarchistic model of movement – leaderless, without organization, emphasis on spontaneity, highly mobile. These are things that universal, not unique to Hong Kong. But such a model is not suitable for the working people. The militants have soon realized that without the participation of the working people, it is difficult for them to succeed. Hence, there is more emphasis on launching workers strikes and business strikes this time around compared to the Umbrella Movement.

The first political strike called (after the political strike in 1967 organised by Hong Kong communists) was in 1989 after the June Fourth incidents. The Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China called for a triple strike (workers strike, student strike and business strike) in 7th June 1989. But the Alliance cancelled the march on the day due the fear of alleged sabotage by CCP agents, and indirectly cancelled the triple strike. This has also predetermined that the workers movement in Hong Kong to only be the follower of Pan-Democrat parties, not able to have its own independent political voice. This is also why when the unions called for a strike during the Umbrella Movement it failed. During the anti-extradition movement, the unions called for a strike on 12 June and organized strike gatherings, but this was also not successful. Two months later when the movement gradually entered its climax, Hong Kong finally had its first political strike after 1967. The radical youth/students, trade unions and ordinary working people formed an actual alliance during the strike. About hundreds of thousands people did not report to work on the day, due to active or passive but sympathetic participation (because traffic was semi-paralyzed). The airline industry was half paralyzed because half of the members of Cathay Pacific employee union went on strike. Because of this political strike, the movement was pushed to a new climax. But after the bosses of Cathay Pacific reacted, the strike on 2nd and 3rd September was not successful. However, the successful strike on 5th August has already trained the young and working people of this generation. They have tasted for the first time the collective power as workers.

Yet, the future of a political workers movement is still very tough. Many left-wing friends from other countries ask: there is no demand about distributive justice in the five main demands, is it because poverty in Hong Kong has already been solved? Of course not. On the contrary, it is getting worse. But, although the workers movement in Hong Kong has its own elected legislators and political parties, it never took the initiative to decide on a political agenda, therefore it never proposed a workers program in the political democratic movement. This is of course not something accidental, and not solely the fault of the workers movement organisations. The working people in Hong Kong are deeply brainwashed by ideologies like free market and “individual responsibility”, hence the real lack of class consciousness. There was a survey lately which revealed that ordinary citizens are very concerned about the current political controversies, but not really paying much attention to whether we have enough social welfare or not. At the same time, some left-leaning youth tried to propose a sixth demand in the online forum LIHKG for discussion, to ask for attention on the problem of people's livelihood monopolized by corporations, but this was not able to get any response and discussion. We have a long way to go with regard to politicization of the workers movement. But a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and this moment has brought some opportunities.

Think Left: Can the current movement be compared to the struggle during the 1967 riots?

Au: In terms of the intensity of violence, what is happening now is far behind 1967. Hong Kong communists were setting up bombs all over Hong Kong then, now at most the demonstrators throw petrol bombs towards police during protests. The former injured many innocents, the latter is not comparable at all.

But the most important difference is political. The 1967 riots were the continuation of political struggle in Beijing, not the consequences of the intensification of internal class conflicts in Hong Kong. The starting point of the 1967 riots was a strike in a factory producing artificial flowers, but the whole movement in 1967 was called “anti-British against tyranny”. How could a strike in a small factory develop into an armed struggle against the colonial government? When the Hong Kong communists talk about 1967, they like to say that the colonial government was so bad and thus caused the escalation of the movement. This is not the truth. After the June Fourth repressions, some high-level leaders within the former Hong Kong communist camp, like Jin Yaoru, have explained in detail the actual facts. It was during the peak of the Cultural Revolution, and the top officials in the Xinhua News Agency (China's national news agency) wanted to please the Gang of Four, and hence made use of the minor strike to create political riots in Hong Kong. It was the continuation of the mainland's Cultural Revolution in Hong Kong. At that time, the lower class citizens in Hong Kong really did not have a good impression of the colonial government, but the class contradiction then had no sign of intensification. Therefore the situation then did not allow a widespread political rebellion among the workers. The Hong Kong communists artificially created a mass political struggle, but ended up only sacrificing its own base, and caused the ordinary citizens to stay away from Hong Kong communists.

In contrary, the current anti-extradition movement is the consequence of the intensification of local class contradiction, which is the contradiction between the CCP's proxy group in Hong Kong and the majority of the citizens, the contradiction between the ruler and the ruled.

Think Left: We can see some rather right-wing symbolism during the anti-extradition bill movement, for example, some demonstrators carry the colonial flags, British flags or US flags, some even call for US intervention. What is your view on this? Is there inclination towards far-right ideology among the protesters? Moreover, some say that US imperialism was the mastermind behind this protest movement. What is your view on this?

Au: This question in fact is complex, and we can discuss it by dividing into few layers. Everyone knows, the number of people who carry US flags has increased in the current movement, but for a movement with the participation of millions it is only a very small minority. Of course we can further ask, why do the masses beside not intervene? They don't intervene because most of the people think that there is no specific need to go against it – the enemy of my enemy is my friend. This is the practical view of many people, but it is different from actively supporting it.

Secondly, Hong Kongers generally are not sensitive towards national flags and national emblems. Now they are only sensitive to things related to CCP. The experiences of Hong Kongers are very much different from most of the former colonies in the world. After WWII, we have never developed a local-born anti-colonial movement. The Hong Kong communists did engage in anti-colonial struggle in 1967, but after their failure, they quickly went back to the policy of “using Hong Kong in the long term”, and collaborated with the British to keep Hong Kong “stable and prosperous”. The kind of Young Left like us who emerged in the 1970s, feel very disgusted about the collaboration of Hong Kong communists with the British rulers. Our slogan during that time was “Anti-Capitalism, Anti-Colonialism, Anti-Bureaucracy”. But the new generation Left was very small then with little influence. The Hong Kongers then were generally politically apathetic. They had no choice but to accept their status as colonial subjects, and not thinking much beyond that. The lack of anti-colonial experience made the ordinary Hong Kongers not very sensitive towards national flags which represent national identity, unlike other countries. Besides that, due to ignorance, they do not understand the political meaning represented by each national flag, except China's Five Star Flag.

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Thirdly, we have to acknowledge that the average Hong Konger is close to the West. This is not surprising. This is the soft power of the West. Since the 1950s, everyone loves to watch movies from the Europe, US and Japan. Especially since the Cultural Revolution, how many people still like to watch movies from mainland China? The Hong Kong communists and their so-called patriotic film companies did make films that were popular among the lower class people before the Cultural Revolution, but when Cultural Revolution arrived, this destroyed the little soft power they had. The so-called patriotic films disappeared from the cinemas after the 1970s.

Behind this phenomenon, were the inevitable consequences of the total failure of the so-called socialism practised by CCP, which degenerated into a worse form of capitalism. The top leaders of CCP are also very pro-West, thus they send their children to study in the Europe and US, and themselves also desperately move their wealth to the West. Today's Fenqing (literally means "angry youth", usually refers to Chinese youth who display a high level of Chinese nationalism) do not know about the dirty history of their top leaders, hence they blindly support their so-called patriotism. The Hong Kongers have been observing the mainland for 70 years, and this compels them to be pro-West and stay away from Beijing. Failure to recognize this means the refusal to acknowledge the fact.

Lastly, let's talk about the so-called "foreign forces". Beijing is continuously talking about the danger of "foreign forces". But Beijing itself is not against all foreign forces, it behaves in a highly selective way. Beijing is well aware about the advantages of foreign forces, it knows how to influence the autocratic state like North Korea to be its cheerleader. They do not mind that the British police officers in the Hong Kong Police beat up the Chinese protesters in Hong Kong. Why does Hong Kong still have hundreds of British police officers? This goes back to the root, back to Deng Xiaoping and Hong Kong Basic Law. The "One Country Two System" itself was the product of compromise between Deng Xiaoping and foreign forces. The CCP wanted to get rid of its poor conditions, but it wanted more to enrich itself through the capitalist restoration, and so definitely wanted to compromise with the British and US. Deng was sleeping with the enemy, and this gave birth to the baby called Hong Kong Basic Law.

The first thing guaranteed under the Basic Law is the interests of British and Americans in Hong Kong: whether the continuation of the use of English as the official language, or the continuation of the Common Law system, or to allow the Hong Kong courts to employ foreign judges, or to allow the Hong Kongers to hold British passports, or Article 101 that stipulates that foreigners can continue to hold positions as civil servants or advisors which in fact means the pledge not to clean up the existing colonial era civil service. Then you have the other side of the story, which is allowing British police officers to "beat up the Chinese". The One Country Two System promised by Beijing, is fundamentally to allow the foreign forces to flourish here, to allow the British and US to retain their strong influence, including the influence on the Pan-Democrat parties, media and middle class professionals. This is a historical privilege promised formally by Beijing to the Europeans and Americans.

We should not only read the mainland's propaganda, but should see the essence of the CCP's interests, that is they relied on the foreign forces to assimilate into the global capitalist system and become rich. Now Xi Jinping thought China has grown stronger, and can already "tear down the bridge after crossing the river", and abandon Deng Xiaoping's policies. He then introduced things like the extradition bill to push ahead of schedule the total direct control over Hong Kong. But when the CCP broke its promise to the Europe and US, at the same time hoping they are not going to retaliate. Isn't this foolishness?

From a left-wing perspective, we are not supporting the CCP. It has taken the capitalist path from the beginning. The historical interests of workers is to overcome capitalism, to build an egalitarian society. And what we mean by egalitarian, firstly is the withering away of the state apparatus and capitalist logic, not enhancing them. But the Left should not be just dream about utopia. The Left should first become realistic activists. In the face of the Sino-American struggle for global hegemony, we surely do not support either side. But in terms of the concrete situation in Hong Kong, the CCP is really worse than the British colonial government. I am not someone who is nostalgic towards the colonial era. On the contrary, I have been against colonialism since my teenage years. But at least the British were not forcing us to sing their national anthem, and did not mention any legislation related to

national anthems. But the CCP insists on doing this, and this venomous measure is just a small part of many other more venomous policies.

This goes back to a fundamental question: We do not support free market capitalism. But CCP's capitalism is worse. I call it bureaucratic capitalism. It merges the two most important powers, which is the coercive power of the state and the unlimited accumulative power of the capital, into its own hand. This gives a new and more terrifying life to the term "totalitarianism". Such totalitarianism is far uglier than free market capitalism. Especially for us in Hong Kong, of course we have to spend 90% of our strength to resist the CCP, and we have to know how to strategically use international geopolitics. But this does not mean that we agree with the illusion that the US government is the real flag-bearer of democracy. At the moment the pro-US forces in Hong Kong are pushing the US Congress to pass the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. I have written an article in Ming Pao recently, pointing out the problem of this act, which binds human rights in Hong Kong with problematic US foreign policy.

Think Left: What are the impacts of the current political crisis to the region's politics?

Au: The most important impact is on the general public in mainland China. We know from the media, that the CCP selectively blocked news reports and spread lies in mainland China, and already instigated many people to hate Hong Kongers. Everything has two sides – when you provoke too much, it could end up in a mess. When (Carrie) Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor announced the withdrawal of the controversial extradition bill, Beijing officials were embarrassed and had to deal with it in a low profile manner. But there are still people questioning. "Why do you compromise with the 'terrorists'? How are you going to answer to the Hong Kong Police who are trying to put down the 'riot'?" No wonder now the Beijing officials do not secretly organize marches like during the previous anti-Japanese movement, and only limit themselves to psy-wars on media. Its political weakness today has reached the level that it wants to fan the sentiment of narrow nationalism, but is also frightened that the latter might grow out of control.

There are more people in China who are not supporting the government, but keep silent to protect themselves. Then there are several pro-Democracy people in mainland China who are still openly supporting the movement in Hong Kong despite paying a heavy price for it.

The most critical strategic choice for the Hong Kongers after this, is whether to appeal to the people of mainland China to be their ally, to fight for democracy in the mainland and in Hong Kong together; or continue with the principle of not interfering each other, or in the worst case by taking the position of the right-wing localists who attack all the mainland Chinese people as "locusts". Choosing the former, will be broad path, and the latter will be a dead-end. Looking back at the current movement, its character is that no political party has the leadership role; the way forward for the movement is spontaneously determined by masses who have not much political experiences and background. From their actual activities, the two tendencies mentioned above exist in a vague form. There was a march during the movement, to appeal to travellers from the mainland to understand the objective of this Hong Konger movement. At the other hand, there are some localized activities that are targeting traders from mainland, using discriminatory language. The task of the Left to encourage the progressive tendencies, at the same time resist all kinds of bad tendencies. Pointing fingers within the movement is the most useless thing to do.

Think Left: The Chief Executive has Carrie Lam has formally announced the withdrawal of the controversial extradition bill after three month of mass protests and uprisings. But it seems won't help much in calming the situations in Hong Kong as there are other important demands that put forward by the protesters not being met yet, especially the demand on universal suffrage. What do you think about the state of the movement now? How will it develop from here?

Au: From the beginning until now, the anti-extradition bill movement has two important components: the Yellow

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Ribbon masses and the radical youth. The latter as the frontline of actions, whereas the former as defenders. When both converge, the movement reaches its climax; when they diverge, it will decline. Since June 2019, the trend is to converging gradually. And since the end of August 2019, it seems the movement is crossing another hurdle, that is the ordinary citizens also sympathize with the radical youth who resist the police with force. If one day even the ordinary citizens participate in actual resistance with force, then it possibly will lead to a revolutionary situation. "The rulers can no more rule with the existing form, and the people are not going to tolerate this government". But now we have not seen the determination of the masses to cross this hurdle, because to completely cross over it will have to prepare for a much bigger price to pay, and it is still unknown how many of the masses are willing to take the risk. Secondly, although the political strike on 5th August was a success initially, the strike on 2nd and 3rd September was not successful. Thus it is not easy for the workers movement to continue to reach its peak. Because of this, the movement is at a bottleneck, although the momentum is not declining yet, it is also not able to escalate. Inability to escalate means that it will be more difficult to win the other four demands. Because Beijing today will not compromise easily. Under such circumstances, if the militants continue to increase its resistance, it could risk fighting alone.

Think Left: What is your hope for the future of this movement?

Au: I think the movement should realize now, that the difficulty of escalation is because of the inherent deficiencies of the movement. In fact, if it is able to escalate and develop into a revolution, within the city, it will be crushed by the CCP very soon. Under the situation that there is no political breakthrough in the mainland China, revolution in one city of Hong Kong will not succeed. And because this is so obvious, thus it is unrealistic to ask the adults and working people to overthrow the Hong Kong government at all costs. We had better abandon the thinking of "the final battle", to be clear about the long-term nature of the democratic struggle. We need to move towards long-term resistance, retaining the strength of the present movement and consolidating its coordination and organization. We especially need to be clear on the strategic positioning of the movement – whether to unite with the democratic movement in mainland China, or build a democratic movement with the Shenzhen River as the boundary?

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Source **Think Left** "[The millennial generation's struggle for self-determination \(Special interview on Hong Kong\)](#)".

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[1] *Think Left* is published by Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM - Socialist Party of Malaysia).

[2] *Think Left* note: Yellow Ribbon means the supporters of Pan-Democrats or anti-establishment camp who support universal suffrage; while Blue Ribbon means the supporters of pro-establishment camp.

[3] *Think Left* note: The five main demands of the movement are – 1. Full withdrawal of the extradition bill from the legislative process; 2. Establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into police behaviour; 3. Retraction of the characterisation of the protests as "riots"; 4. Release and exoneration of arrested protesters; 5. Universal suffrage for Legislative Council and Chief Executive elections.