

My thoughts on Hong Kong Movement
Steven Low, Aug 24, 2019

Curiously, a fellow Cornellian Hon-Lam Li (李翰林) me on WhatsApp about my opinion on the recent unrest in Hong Kong. The unrest started in early 2019, triggered by an extradition bill proposed by the HK Government, escalated in June, and has since grown greatly in size, scope, and complexity. There have been at least two demonstrations that involved more than 2 million people, more than a quarter of the population, according to the organizers. This shows the degree of popular support and the depth of discontent.

It is curious that Hon-Lam asked me, because I only re-connected with him on WhatsApp the day before. I knew of Hon-Lam when I was at Cornell as a deep-thinking philosophy PhD student, met him once at a dinner with him and Ken Chow at 大師兄 Kam Chan's place at Cornell, but we never talked much at all until this WhatsApp discussion. I also have not studied the Hong Kong situation much. Almost the only source of information on the movement has been from the sometimes intense discussions on the Cornell WhatsApp group and the few articles I read in the New York Times. Throughout the Cornell discussion, I have not uttered a single word but I have read all the posts with great interest. Thanks everyone for educating me on the movement! I agree and can understand many of the discussions, on both sides, and very much agree with Chris, Edmond, Hon-Lam, and others that our friendship will endure our differences.

I have not been following very closely developments in HK over the years. My view is therefore very disparate and without context. Moreover, I don't really have any easily implementable suggestions, or simple positions, to share, so I'm hesitant to bore people with something half-baked, incoherent, and probably useless. But as Hon-Lam said, "the process of discussion could be as important as -- perhaps more important than -- the agreement to be reached." Even though my view will have zero impact on the movement, perhaps the discussion can be a useful way for us all to connect, so here it is.

Because of my distance, I can only look at this in a broader context. There are multiple aspects, some may not be directly related to the current movement, some are complex issues even more so than the immediate tactical issues of the movement, but I think all of them are connected. I understand some of these difficult issues are immense subjects by themselves and well studied by experts. I can only list them in relation to the current Hong Kong movement.

1. Over the last 20+ years, HK has gradually lost its competitive advantages. There were and still are no bold strategic ideas to change the trajectory that are being effectively pursued. It will only become more and more difficult over time, and the best hope, I have always maintained, is to better integrate with southern China. Unfortunately the distrust between HK and China has made this harder than it should be.

This lack of long term solution for HK has always been my biggest worry. I consider this the biggest, most difficult, and most important challenge that HK must overcome.

2. In addition to challenges specific to HK, the technological and other developments in general have also created in the last 50 years many unintended

consequences worldwide, including HK, the symptoms of which include sharp inequality, winner takes all, continuing narrowing of opportunities for the mass, populist movements globally, doubt about liberal democratic values, rise in authoritarian appeal, etc. Add to this over population, housing difficulty, some of the short-sighted business and government policies, etc in HK. It is no surprise that the discontents and the feeling of hopelessness, esp of the young, will boil over some time over some issue.

3. All these difficult and massive issues have many root causes, cultural, social, economic, political, technological. They are extremely difficult to solve because they often require redistribution of resources and therefore conflict of interests, and because they are intricately interconnected making wholesales changes, though necessary, next to impossible.

Even though these issues have many facets, the most direct channel in which conflicts from these issues manifest themselves is often political, because government is supposed to be the mechanism through which societal problems are debated and solutions implemented, so we often look to our political infrastructure for magic bullets and blame it for our discontents. The great difficulty latent in the society (some are unique to HK and some not) eventually takes its most visible form as a political movement.

4. This is made more difficult, and more inevitable, by the unique political situation of HK. What is the political situation of HK?

4a. Hong Kong is part of China, and China is not a democratic system. The one-country-two-system structure is an ingenious and sincere invention tailored made for Hong Kong transition, but it is never meant to be a smooth and robust mechanism. It'd take a lot of good faiths and good fortunes on both sides if it is to weather societal challenges that will inevitably arise.

Perhaps the biggest impact of the rapid advances of information technologies in the last 40 years is they accelerate. They accelerate everything everywhere relentlessly, pushing all to extremes, sharpening and amplifying conflicts. The architects of the one-country-two-system, which by its very design recognizes deep divisions in the two societies, were probably not prepared for this acceleration. The design may prove too fragile in the face of mounting challenges in both Hong Kong and China. This makes it harder for Hong Kong to solve its own problems.

4b. The difference in political system and political value is only one of many gaps between China and HK. There is also a cultural gap. There also used to be a big economic gap, but that arguably has narrowed dramatically where it matters to HK, and in fact, the gap has reversed in more and more pockets. China also has many of its own big(ger) societal problems -- eg. hugh population, corruption, inequality, political struggles, rejuvenation drive, great power conflicts with the US, etc etc. -- including (directly relevant to HK) Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang issues. Therefore, the Chinese government not only has no real solution for HK's issues, it also cannot let HK develop into a problem that can threaten its various domestic agenda, whether these threats are real or imagined. Frankly, HK's importance to China has steadily dropped over the last 30 years, so it's less and less of a priority among what China has to deal with.

All this makes the search for solutions for HK much harder.

4c. On the HK side, the legacy of British colonial rule, both good and bad, and the political cultural social economic differences between HK and China inevitably lead to mistrust and expectations gap between HK and China since the eve of HK's return to China. These gaps will take effort on both sides to overcome, it is not easy in the best of times, and can easily take wrong turns when complications arise.

Imagine a teenager who has grown up in a foster home and is returned to his biological family, which has a different set of values and practices and history (some better and some worse), without much discussion with the teenager, with a process that started off on a wrong foot. The integration will be hard work and will require very strong and good faiths on both sides. I think the distrust between HK and China has not improved much since before 1997, though the contents of that distrust may have evolved. Though understandable, this is not healthy for HK.

Despite all the contradictions and challenges in China, China's achievements over the last 40 years have been miraculous bringing tremendous benefits that have changed lives at an unprecedented scale. China's progress should be a positive to Hong Kong and beyond. It is a lost opportunity, and a lack of political wisdom and courage, on both sides that it has not helped ease the distrust between HK and China.

4d. While China is undemocratic, HK is only learning to build a healthy democratic system, with constraints from Basic Law (and China's influences), and more importantly a healthy democratic culture. A system (rules of game) such as democratic election, though important, can only function well in a compatible culture. HK did not have a tradition of democracy and therefore it is not surprising that it needs to also develop the right cultural substrate while it develops its democratic system. This development process of course will not be smooth even in the best of environments, and becomes trickier given the unique HK political situation.

5. Against these backdrops, it is therefore not surprising that the various political movements (I only know a few big ones as I have not followed HK affairs very closely) such as this one, Umbrella Movement, patriotic education, etc. have been difficult, have not addressed all the root causes, and have achieved only partial and temporary successes at best. There has not been a fundamental change in trajectory towards a comprehensive solution.

Perhaps it is totally unrealistic to expect a fundamental solution because these are massive and difficult and interconnected problems. Perhaps the accumulation of little progresses is the only possible course, and it can lead to a reasonable solution down the line. If that is the case, then perhaps we need to be more patient and more strategic with the right expectations throughout the process.

It is not very clear to me there is a vision that has any consensus. Without a widely accepted overall vision or strategy, or a framework to think about and coordinate these issues, it is difficult to react to individual societal problems consistently and effectively.

6. This manifests itself very clearly this time in the split between nonviolence group and the provocative group. I am in the nonviolence group (even though I do believe there is just violence). But I can also understand the provocative group's argument: BJ and HK governments' response to the massive and peaceful Umbrella Movement is such a total failure, such a lack of imagination and courage, on the part of the governments, that I cannot blame the young generation's intense feeling of hopelessness.

Hopelessness can be a powerful force for change, or for destruction.

7. Therefore, I do not agree with the many actions and thinking of the provocative group, but I think we, especially the governments which are in the position of power, should adopt an understanding attitude towards these young people and try to guide them back from the brink of true violence.

They may be immature, they may have made (pretty bad) mistakes, they may have held beliefs that are unrealistic or outright wrong, some may even have committed crimes, but we must have faith that the large majority of them do this out of their sense of duty, their love for HK, their worry about HK and their own future, and their frustrations with all the past and present mistakes of the governments. We must have faith that we (government and protesters) are all in the same boat, that we all want what is better for HK in which we all have a stake, that we are disagreeing violently only with the best of intentions.

There may indeed be some protesters (and some police) that have committed crimes. One can reasonably argue different ways to deal with these cases, but I think the guiding principle should be leniency and faith in people's capacity to change for good. (I consider the use / tolerance of organized crime syndicates for political purposes completely unacceptable and should be treated differently.)

If both sides can come to this understanding, then there is hope that the movement can be channeled into a positive direction, in which case it can be an invaluable force for good given its energy and its wide support.

Right now, it certainly seems that this is too far from reality, so I cannot see how the current development can end well. No large-scale blood shed seems like the best-case (and unlikely) ending, and even then, it is of course far from a good enough outcome with respect to all the issues that need to be addressed.

8. Again, since I have not followed this movement very closely, I probably have very limited and therefore possibly totally biased view, but some of the news/video I saw about young people's view (eg high school students) are quite extreme, unrealistic, and even harmful. For example, HK independence, revolution of our time, dying to destroy the system, etc. One can debate about whether these views are appropriate for HK, and one can also debate whether these actions are tactically effective in achieving their goals. I am skeptical on both counts.

But more importantly, this demonstrates the immaturity of (this component of) the movement which worries me more than their specific tactics. With these big difficult underlying issues that precipitated this movement, with the scale and scope that the movement has achieved, with the polarizing positions of the governments and to some extent the public, the movement has become more

unpredictable and harder to direct, especially without a more mature and consistent consensus or movement leadership.

Almost invariably, a mass movement becomes dominated by vocal extremes, even when they are in the minority. This immaturity (but visible component) of the movement adds to my worry that it may not end well.

9. And then there are many "complications" that are no less important, but I consider "tangential" to the movement only in the sense that these factors are outside forces that want to hijack this movement for their own purposes, not for the sake of HK issues per se. I hope most of these factors are small components of the overall movement, but I have no idea (no data either way). They include:

9a. China of course worries about the impact on its domestic population and the impact on Taiwan/Tibet/Xinjiang of what this movement will achieve and how it will be handled. Its position no doubt is a result of its own political belief, various self interests (inc CCP's), but is very much also influenced by its calculation on its potential impact beyond HK's border.

I agree very much with Hon-Lam's view that China's distorted portrayal of the HK situation is mainly for the Chinese citizens, and it has certainly been effective. China understandably also wants to counter media reports in the West (biased or not), but I think the impact, and intention, of this info war is much more on Chinese than on the West.

It is not surprising that China's strategy is effective because the narrative has been very consistent with the nationalistic fervor of the past decade(s), (which is itself a very interesting subject) before the current movement and in a much broader context. It is therefore to be expected that the large majority of Chinese citizens are probably not sympathetic to HK's protesters (for good and bad reasons). If BJ decides to quell the movement by force, I think they would not face much backlash in China. Internationally, even though the majority may not believe in China's official narrative, I do not think that would be a huge deterrent to China.

I therefore do not think the protesters appealing to the US and the West, while helpful (and arguably necessary) to bring awareness and keep the media on the movement, will ultimately be anything decisive, nor, one can even argue, desirable beyond a certain level. I saw US flags in some of the protest pictures. Right or wrong, I don't think this is a good tactical move. It is against the spirit (unrealistic faith?) above that we are in the same boat and we can come through our violent disagreement together.

9b. Then there are these interesting theories as Hon-Lam mentioned that the HK situation is used as a pawn in China's own political struggle, Xi vs anti-Xi. I have no idea whether this is true, but will not be surprised either way. It is hard to assess how important a role this will ultimately play in the development of the movement.

9c. Even Trump now wants to use HK as a pawn in his trade war. This further adds complication to the movement. No doubt some in the movement wants to maximally leverage it, and no doubt BJ will respond. It is not clear to me whether this will ultimately be good or bad for HK, but certainly an outside complication.

There is also worry that foreign forces want to sow division and use HK as a basis to subvert China, prevent its rise. I do not have any data, but my feeling is that this is blown way out of proportion. Compared with the big real challenges that everyone should focus on, this should be just noise, but it is being amplified unnecessarily or deliberately.

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If you have suffered through my random thoughts this far, well, I'm impressed with your patience and grateful for your interest!

Unfortunately, it's easy to analyze but much harder to prescribe. I hope more capable people will come up with concrete actions that actually help move minds and hearts. No analysis can replace social activists with unwavering conscience, strong intellect, and skillful leadership. I'm hopeful that they will come out of some of the young protesters today. Let's wait a couple decades.