DISPOSSESSION AND DEFIANCE IN HONG KONG

Louisa Lim and Linda Jaivin

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Q1. The 'King of Kowloon' is a man who, convinced that the British stole Kowloon from his family, devoted his life to graffitiing his genealogical claims to the territory across Hong Kong. He is a central figure in Indelible City. Why is this marginal yet iconic figure — poor, not well-educated, possibly mad — the perfect symbol for Hong Kong (so often seen as wealthy, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan)?

I've been really interested in the 'King of Kowloon' because he is so fungible and flexible as a symbolic and almost prismatic figure. Early on, people mainly talked about the fact that he was working-class, marginalised, an outsider. There was very little discussion of his claim over the land, the idea of sovereignty. That came up later as the situation changed in Hong Kong. People labelled him the first localist. At the same time, he was also becoming a brand that represented Hong Kong — a shorthand for

Hong Kong. He was commoditised by actual brands, big and small, from the high-end fashion designer William Tang, all the way down to Goods of Desire, who reproduced his calligraphy on underwear and bags. Later he was seen as an artist even though he never saw or called himself that. It was how he could be viewed in different ways across time that attracted me. The legislator Ted Hui, now in exile in Australia, described the King of Kowloon as 'a prophet'. Other people called him a shaman. The changes in how people viewed him attracted me as a writer, as well as the idea of a mystery, a story that you could really unpack and explore; I've always been interested in stories that are hard to tell.

Q2. You liken Hong Kong to a 'shimmering chimera that was constantly changing shape depending on the angle of viewing'. How has its shape changed in your view?

No place is static, but I think Hong Kong has really changed, and in so many ways. Its shape has changed physically over the years since I grew up there. The harbour has grown smaller and smaller, and whole areas of the sea have been reclaimed, to make the airport of Chek Lap Kok, for example. So, the physical shape of Hong Kong has changed, but also its height, as skyscrapers have become ever higher. There have been other changes as well: it's a place in motion. But what we see now is an attempt by the Hong Kong government and China to pin down Hong Kong, to cement one version of it and one version of its history — the official narrative. How Hongkongers have seen themselves and Hong Kong has also changed over the years. Early on it was much more of a sojourners' place, where people went on the way to somewhere else. It was only in the Sixties and Seventies that that began to shift; it became not just a destination or place of transit but a home. Now how the people view Hong Kong is changing yet again. For many Hongkongers, those changes are turning their home into something quite unrecognisable.

Q3. You write that the history of Eurasians in Hong Kong — a community of which you were part — is one of 'disappearance'. On the one hand, they were often, as you say, 'excluded from the clan lineage records that anchored Chinese identity'. On the other, they 'erased

themselves from sight'. How did this happen, and what does the future look like for Eurasian and other non-Chinese Hong Kong people under an increasingly nationalist regime?

It's a feature of the history of Eurasians that they have not just been excluded from versions of history, even family histories, but that they have excluded and erased themselves. In the nineteenth century, the very category of Eurasians disappeared from the historical records, as no-one was willing to identify as Eurasian, even though the number of Eurasians was increasing. To me, that idea of self-erasure is really tragic.

Back then it was almost impossible to function as someone who was both Chinese and Western. They would have to choose to be either Chinese or Western; few managed to navigate that successfully. The nationalism nowadays in Xi Jinping's China and the Communist Party's conflation of state and party — its capture of the very notion of Chineseness — is, I think, really alarming for Eurasians and non-Chinese Hong Kong people as well. It's deliberately exclusionary, and that bodes ill not just for Eurasian people but for Hong Kong's future as an international city.

Q4. In contrast to so many histories of Hong Kong that begin with the Opium Wars, you examine its ancient history and myths. An interviewee remarks that the King of Kowloon struck such a 'deep chord' in Hong Kong because 'the Cantonese mindset is characterised by a subversive and revolutionary yearning for lost dynasties'. What does this mean, and why did we not receive that memo sooner?

Hong Kong was the place to which the last heirs to the Song dynasty [960–1279 CE] fled, and that act of imperial flight left a profound mark on Hong Kong culture. The site of enthronement still exists — there's even an MTR [Mass Transit Railway] station named after it — and there's also a popular feast dish of various delicacies layered in a large bowl, *pun choi*, that supposedly dates to that time. My interviewee was also referring to Hong Kong's physical and political distance from the imperial centre of power, and how that helped shape a rebellious, subversive mindset, amplified by the use of a different language, Cantonese, from the imperial centre.

I think that memo — as you put it — hasn't been passed on because it has not been in the interests of Hong Kong's successive colonial rulers to frame Hong Kong identity in those terms. Both the British and the Chinese rulers of Hong Kong have hewn closely to the same message: that Hongkongers have always been economic actors without much interest in politics. It seems they hoped that if they repeated this fiction enough, even Hongkongers would come to believe it. We can see from the events of the past ten years how wrong that turned out to be.

Q5. What is it about Hong Kong Cantonese that is so central to Hong Kong identity — and what role has it played in protests?

Cantonese is central to Hong Kong identity, because it is the language of Hong Kong, and I use the word 'language' advisedly. Many scholars would argue that Cantonese is closer to Classical Chinese than *Putonghua*, the standard Mandarin that is spoken on the mainland. In its written form, Cantonese uses ancient participles and *fantizi* 繁體字, the traditional characters that are no longer used on the mainland. Cantonese is integral to the Hong Kong identity in many ways. One, it is not the language of the mainland — until recently, even the Cantonese spoken across the border in Guangzhou was different from that spoken in Hong Kong. Just learning and speaking Cantonese can be an assertion of a separate identity. The nature of Cantonese is profane, it's sweary, it's a little bit subversive. It's much more flexible than Mandarin. There is this linguistic inventiveness of a level not allowed on the mainland. Protesters even created new characters. The most famous example was the creation of a character for the phrase used by a policeman against some protesters, 'freedom c**t'. The new character uses a combination of the three characters that make up freedom, 自由, and c**t, 闊 (see illustration opposite).[1] Activists made all these posters and T-shirts using this new Chinese character, 'freedom c**t', written in Roman letters as 'freedom-hi' after the Cantonese pronunciation. These new Chinese characters were unintelligible to mainlanders.

Q6. During the Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement of 2014, which grew out of the broader Umbrella Movement, one of the protest's leaders, Benny Tai, told

The new character uses a combination of the three characters that make up freedom, 自由, and ct, 閪**
Source: Etan Liam, Flickr

you that 'Hong Kong laws provide the protection for us to have this kind of movement'. Were he and others naive or betrayed and, if so, by whom? Was it possible to foresee the crackdown to come?

I don't think it's naive to believe in the rule of law, or to believe in a government that upholds the rule of law. It might have been naive to believe that a government ultimately loyal to the Communist Party of China would uphold a common law system in its jurisdiction, but that's exactly what One Country, Two Systems pledged. When he was sentenced for his part in the Umbrella Movement, its co-founder Chan Kin-man said, 'In the verdict, the judge commented we are naive, believing that by having an Occupy Movement [*which called for universal suffrage in the selection of the chief executive — ed.*] we can attain democracy. But what is more naive than believing in One Country, Two Systems?'

Hongkongers have been betrayed by successive rulers in different ways, but this betrayal was so painful because Hongkongers had believed they would be protected by the systems both the British and Chinese promised would remain in place for fifty years after the return of sovereignty. Some

The Umbrella Movement came after a series of actions working within the constraints of the system to widen the democratic mandate in choosing a chief executive
Source: Studio Incendo, Flickr

argue that a crackdown was always inevitable, but the speed and scope of that crackdown have been brutal and shocking. I don't think anyone foresaw how quickly Hong Kong's institutions would be dismantled.

Q7. Staying with 2014 for a moment, you write that a poster of the Umbrella Movement that read 'This is NOT a revolution' 'said it all'. What is this 'all' that it said?

The message was that this was not a movement to overthrow or forcibly replace the government. The Umbrella Movement came after a series of actions working within the constraints of the system to widen the democratic mandate in choosing a chief executive. The *Basic Law* had always promised universal suffrage but provided no timetable. Methods for widening the mandate included running polls, which more than 790,000 people took part in, to find how the population wanted to nominate candidates for chief executive. The aim was to carry out democratic deliberations on reform through popular consultations. The act of civil disobedience that was Occupy Central was originally intended to be a one-day event. The failure of the government to compromise or give any ground

during the Umbrella Movement stoked the dissatisfaction that then exploded during 2019.

Q8. You write that watching the protests of 2019, you had a feeling that people in Hong Kong had been 'living in a kind of simulacrum, a political make-believe where our imaginations had been colonised for so long that we were desperate to believe whatever our rulers told us, no matter how much evidence there was to the contrary'. Is there a danger that in the future, the people of Hong Kong will simply move from one simulacrum to another, this one designed by Beijing?

There is a danger that the people of Hong Kong are moving from one reality to another, but the evidence shows that they are far less willing to buy into Beijing's political make-believe. In this case, the challenge is epistemological. It confronts Hongkongers daily, whether it be through high-ranking officials telling outright lies or legal charges against activists and politicians that are blatantly concocted for political ends. The reality that Hong Kong's rulers are building is not so much a simulacrum but something more akin to a political re-education territory, where actions and words must be policed to avoid violating ill-defined laws that can be applied retroactively. Hongkongers' reaction to this can be seen through the large numbers leaving the territory.

Q9. In 2020 you spoke to the playwright Wong Kwok-kui about a series of plays he had created several years earlier. You write: 'The very existence of the national security legislation restricted our conversation like a corset.' The national security legislation has led to the closure of independent newspapers, the arrest of protest leaders, and the disbanding of nongovernmental organisations and unions. If open conversation on Hong Kong identity is impossible, what are the implications for that identity?

The implications for Hong Kong identity are far-reaching. We are seeing a campaign against expressions of Hong Kong identity playing out across politics, society, education, and all other arenas. One of the most concerning is the campaign of intimidation to silence academics who study Hong Kong identity itself. The same pattern recurs: it begins with attacks by the pro-Beijing state-run newspapers attempting to discredit their

work, and often ends with those academics having to leave their jobs and sometimes to flee Hong Kong. Among the targets of this purge are the eminent sociologist Ching-Kwan Lee, the political scientist Brian Fong, and cultural studies scholars Law Wing-sang and Hui Po-keung. These attacks have the long-term aim of rewriting Hong Kong's history to conform to the Communist Party's official narrative. In 2019, one of my sources told me that they feared that the phrase *heunggongyan* 香港人 or 'Hongkonger' would itself one day be illegal. At the time, I thought they were overreacting. Today I fear that day is approaching.

Q10. By August 2021, Hong Kong was no longer what it used to be — culturally and intellectually vibrant and a haven for political and other nonconformists in the Chinese world. What, then, is 'indelible' about the 'Indelible City'?

Hong Kong is such a layered place, as literally shown by the city's walls with their layers of political graffiti. Layers may be covered over, but they often also resurface in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. Even if the outward manifestations of protest are covered up, those expressions of discontent have been written on to the brains of Hongkongers over the years in a way that cannot be reformatted. I like the contrast this title makes with my last book, *The People's Republic of Amnesia*, which refers to the way that the Communist Party managed to excise memories of the killings of 1989 and silence discussion, even by those who were witnesses. That same playbook will not work with Hongkongers. Figures show that 140,000 people left the territory in the first three months of 2020 alone. Hongkongers would rather leave their hometown forever than sacrifice their freedom of thought.

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