



[1] Protestor manhandled by the police in Hong Kong.  
PC: Social media.

## Hong Kong in Turmoil

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Born and bred in Hong Kong, I normally pay a visit a couple of times every year to see relations and friends. The last visit, during July 2019, was to a city in turmoil. Many Hongkongers had been taking to the streets weekend after weekend, and then daily, for well over a month.

It was soon apparent to me that the feelings pervading everyday life for many in the city have not been conveyed in the coverage of the mainstream international press. In conversations, on social media, and on wall posters, emotions run high. One example was the reaction after police attacked people inside the busiest shopping mall in Hong Kong, located in Shatin. The commotion began after a protest in the area was almost over. Some participants had dispersed and were passing through the mall on their way to a train station. A large contingent of police suddenly rushed in, locked all the exits, and then started indiscriminately bludgeoning protesters and people passing by. One photo in particular shocked the city's democrats (see image 1)—a policeman grabbing a man's face, with one finger gouging the victim's right eye and another finger in his mouth while the man was pinned down by two other policemen. The photo aroused an outpouring of anger. It was one of many photos and videos that have sparked demands for an investigation into police brutality.

In no time, copies of this photo went up on all the 'Lennon Walls' in Hong Kong, at street corners, in subway stations, bulletin boards, anywhere there was space for little stickers and big posters. The tradition of the Lennon Wall originated in Prague in 1980, in commemoration of John Lennon's assassination, serving as an indirect means to challenge the Czech Communist regime. In Hong Kong, the biggest and most well known of these Lennon walls is at the Taipo Railway Station, which has a maze of underground walkways that stretch a considerable distance. People who support the calls for democracy have been coming here to air their anger and demands by adding their own writing and pictures to the Station's ever-growing Lennon Wall.



[2] Taipo Lennon Wall.  
PC: Anita Chan.



[3] The four square pieces of paper to the right of John Lennon's photo warn about the coming of China's social credit system. They ridicule that system by listing the number of points deducted for infractions: 'Dangerous/bad driving: 50 points'; 'Spending too much on silly gifts: 35 points'; 'Playing too many computer games: 100 points'; 'Non-party member: 200 points'; 'Don't blame anyone if your points are too low, send your boy to a good school.'  
PC: Anita Chan.



[4] The Chinese characters read: 'Together, resist! Resist!' PC: Anita Chan.

Many of the posters, cartoons, and graffiti on the Wall use Cantonese words and characters. Traditionally, Cantonese is only a spoken language. Before Hong Kong came under Chinese sovereignty in 1997, Hongkongers spoke in Cantonese but were educated to write using the vocabulary and grammar of Mandarin, pronounced in Cantonese. Only a couple of newspapers that specialised in horse racing sometimes used Cantonese phrases, and new characters had to be invented. This was denigrated by other Hong Kong residents as uncouth Chinese. But as the post-1997 Hong Kong government introduced compulsory courses in spoken Mandarin into schools, some students began writing in Cantonese, creating a new form of written script that is incomprehensible to Mandarin-speakers. Soon, Cantonese characters started to appear in posters on university campuses, a situation that has become increasingly common since the Umbrella Movement of 2014. It has also become a *lingua franca* in online articles and the few Chinese-language newspapers that support the movement. Using Cantonese reaffirms their Hong Kong identity. It is also an open refusal to submit to the Mandarin-speaking mandarins from the People's Republic of China (PRC).

A good example of this use of Cantonese is the large lettering that stretches across the top of image 2. The first half of the sentence is in Mandarin, the second half is in Cantonese: 'We are not thugs' (我們不是暴徒, in Mandarin) [as the PRC declares we are]; 'we are Hong Kong people' (我地係香港人, in Cantonese).

One ubiquitous phrase that has appeared on the Wall is 'Hong Kong, step on the accelerator!' (香港加油), a chant often used by football fans as they cheer their team, which has been converted into a call for enthusiasm and for the protests to intensify.

The umbrella in the poster in image 4 contains rows of Hongkongers protesting for democracy. The first three rows wearing masks and hard hats are young activists at the battlefield; the fourth row journalists; the fifth row medical personnel; followed by lines of boys, girls, religious figures, judges and lawyers, and ordinary citizens. The youth in the front line have the support of all strata of society. They are all in solidarity. There is a subtext in this poster: that this movement is different from the Umbrella Movement of 2014 that prided itself on peaceful protest. After the attacks by the police, die-hard participants in the new movement began claiming that violent resistance is justified—portrayed by the three rows of helmeted activists.



[5]

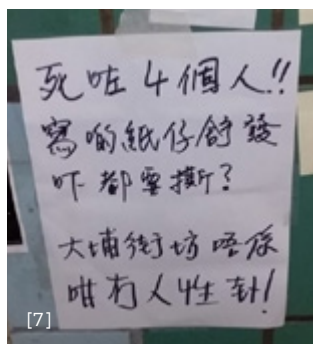


[6]

[5] This Mao quote reads: 'We struggled, we failed. We struggled again, we failed again. We'll continue to struggle until we win.' The bottom two lines read: 'This is the people's logic. They are determined not to betray this logic!' PC: Anita Chan.

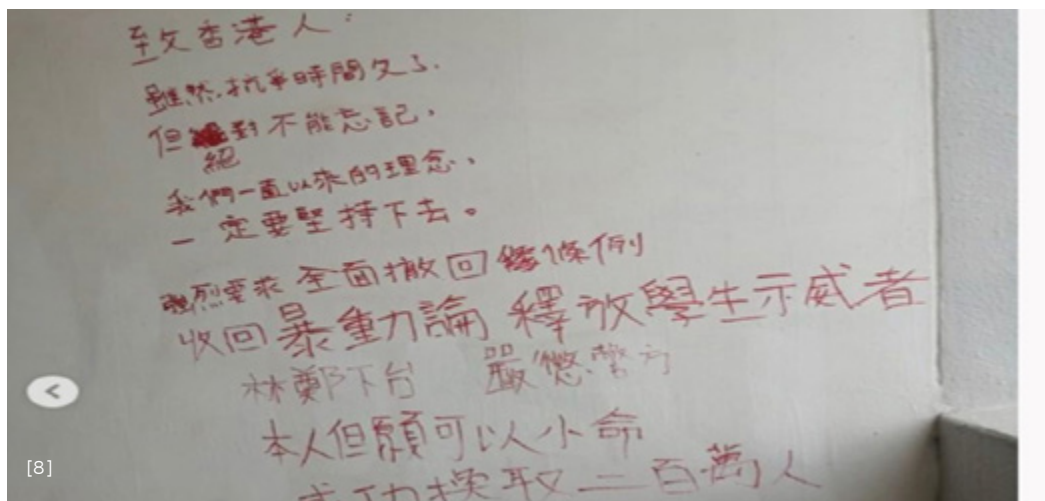
[6] 'Those who suppress a student movement will not end well.' Mao Zedong, 1966. PC: Anita Chan.

[7] PC: Anita Chan.



[7]

[8, below] This suicide note was written on the wall of the building where the second suicide, a university student, jumped off the twenty-fourth floor. It reads: 'To the people of Hong Kong, although we have struggled for a long time now, never forget that we have to persist holding onto our beliefs. I strongly demand the withdrawal of the Extradition Bill, the retraction of the accusation that the movement is a riot, the release of student protesters, the resignation of Carrie Lam, and heavy punishment of the police. I just hope that I am able to successfully exchange my insignificant life for the aspirations of two million people. Please fight on!' PC: Friend of the author.



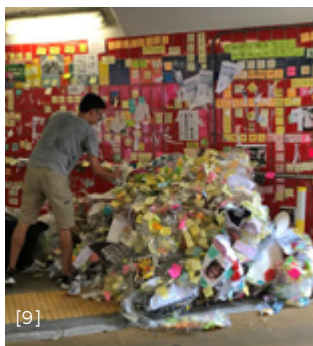
[8]

Some posters on the Wall, such as those in images 5 and 6, use Mao quotes to arm the movement with moral authority vis-à-vis the pro-Beijing Hong Kong government:

Among these thousands of messages, I noticed one inconspicuously pasted at the bottom of a wall (see image 7). It reads: ‘Four people have died!! Why did someone tear down such a small piece of paper expressing sorrow? We residents of Taipo community are not devoid of human feelings!’

Three of the four deaths mentioned in this note were suicides, leaving behind suicide notes decrying the Hong Kong government’s actions.

In the middle of the very night that I visited the Lennon Wall at Taipo, several busloads of people in white shirts came to vandalise the Wall. Apparently among them were some PRC residents who had crossed the border from Shenzhen. There was no follow-up investigation by the police. In hindsight, this incident was the precursor of pro-Beijing groups mobilising to counterattack. The next morning, pro-democracy activists come to clean up the mess, shown in image 9.



[9] Cleaning up the vandalised Taipo Lennon Wall. Photo: Friend of the author

That same day I had lunch with eight of my former high school classmates from an elite Catholic girls’ school, where we had learned obedience to hierarchy and had recited back to our teachers whatever we were told. The conservative English-speaking education paid off. Now retired, all of them had been successful during their careers, rising to become high school head mistresses or senior bureaucrats in the Hong Kong civil service. They shared a social and educational background similar to Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, who instigated the Extradition Bill that has sparked the massive demonstrations. The luncheon conversation soon turned to the protests. They exchanged condemnations of the young protesters: ‘These kids are spoilt.’ ‘They demand too much.’ ‘They want everything from the government.’ ‘Now, even eighteen-year-olds just out of school go to line up for public housing.’ ‘They don’t know that our generation built up Hong Kong. Life was hard in those days.’ ‘It’s all because of that damn general education curriculum that was introduced into the middle school and high school syllabi. It teaches them to rebel.’ This statement piqued my interest. ‘What curriculum?’ I asked. ‘It’s supposed to help kids understand things, question things. But see what it’s done to these kids!’ ‘Well, do you think that we had a good education?’ I asked. They all concurred: ‘Sure we did. That’s why we are what we are now!’ I refrained from contradicting them.

The curriculum they were complaining about, which was intended to help students broaden their horizons and develop critical thinking, had been introduced by Hong Kong's first post-colonial Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, a billionaire who had strongly favoured the interests of Hong Kong's business elite while in office. Two decades later, after he watched young people storming into the Legislative Council on television, he lamented to a pro-Beijing newspaper that he had been wrong to introduce the curriculum. In his words: 'That Hong Kong has become what it is now has to do with a mistake I made when I was in office' (香港今天这局面, 我任内做错了一件事). It had infected the young generation and now it was time to abandon it.

Hong Kong society has become increasingly polarised into two camps, between what is now called 'yellow ribbons' (黄丝)—the pro-democratic camp, with yellow symbolising the unfinished mission of the Yellow Umbrella Movement—and the 'blue ribbons' (蓝丝)—the pro-Carrie Lam and pro-Beijing camp. When I started using these terms in a conversation with a friend in a small crowded eatery, she quickly leaned over and whispered: 'Be careful, don't speak too loudly. You may get into trouble.' Last year in Hong Kong a few young women friends of mine had followed the fad of learning how to sing and stage Cantonese opera, a popular pastime that revives a long-forgotten quintessential symbol of old Hong Kong culture. This year, they are learning *kungfu*. What for? 'To defend ourselves if attacked!'

A few days after the luncheon with my old high school classmates, I witnessed the unthinkable on TV: a mob of men wearing white shirts and carrying sticks and iron bars, commanded by hoodlums from the triads—the local mafia—were given a free hand to bash anyone in sight inside the Yuen Long railway station, unimpeded by the police. Had my young female friends happened to be in that railway station, could their *kungfu* be of any use?

This incident marked a new turning point in the movement, as more and more ordinary citizens who had been sceptical about the demonstrations have become more sympathetic, and many who had been sympathetic but had grown inactive over the weeks were again willing to join rallies knowing full well that they might end up in violence by nightfall.

#### **Postscript written on 7 October 2019:**

Events in Hong Kong have been evolving rapidly since I wrote this piece in early July. From huge marches and creating Lennon Walls as peaceful means of resistance, the movement has escalated to a norm of almost daily violence between protesters and police. Today, 7 October, is the third day since

the enforcement of a law that bans wearing masks in public assemblies. When it was announced on the afternoon of 4 October, office workers in Hong Kong's Central Business District, many wearing masks in open defiance, started protesting. Like pouring oil on fire, in 18 districts across the city that evening crowds (still wearing masks) demonstrated, built barricades, and threw fire bombs into buildings with connections to Beijing. In the hope of restricting protesters from gathering in downtown areas, the government ordered the subway and train systems to close that evening and the next day, Saturday. Nevertheless, residents in both working-class and middle-class communities gathered during the day within their own neighbourhoods to join protests.

In three months, the protest movement has undergone a transformation. Rereading the messages stuck up on Lennon Walls in July, it is evident that since then the aspirations for Hong Kong to be independent of PRC encroachment, the expressions of solidarity among protesters, the willingness of some to sacrifice their lives, the anger directed at Carrie Lam, apprehensions about suppression, and counteractions launched by the pro-Beijing camp have all intensified. Those willing to confront the police are still getting material and logistic support from sympathisers who would not themselves engage in violence. True to the pact that the 'peaceful, reasonable, non-violent' camp and the 'brave warrior camp' (和理非, 勇武派) would be like 'brothers separately climbing the mountain, each trying their best' (兄弟爬山, 各自努力), thus far the two wings of the protests have restrained from criticising each other. For how long the movement can sustain itself is unpredictable. ■