Being Water: Mapping Hong Kong’s Future

In 2019 and 2020, Hongkongers witnessed—and, in many cases, participated in—one of the largest and most exacting grassroots movements in the city’s history. Triggered by a proposed Extradition Bill and fuelled by a decades-long struggle for democracy and political freedom, the decentralised protests quickly seeped into the city’s everyday life. While some protestors confronted the police in black blocs, others participated in strikes, sit-ins, and economic boycotts. To suppress the movement, the Hong Kong police used excessive force and violence. To quote just one figure, at the height of the protests, approximately 88 per cent of the Hong Kong population was exposed to teargas.

To put an end to the movement once and for all, in June 2020, the Chinese and Hong Kong governments abruptly implemented the National Security Law (NSL), effectively rendering any expressions of dissent seditious and illegal. Prominent pro-democracy activists and politicians have since either gone into exile or been imprisoned under the NSL; books penned by activists have been removed from the shelves of public libraries; key historical events and political concepts have been censored from textbooks; and around 60 advocacy groups and independent media outlets have been forced to disband. Given the chilling effect of the NSL, many Hongkongers have chosen to emigrate.

Amid this ongoing crackdown, this issue of the Made in China Journal takes stock of the aftermath of the protest movement and reflects on the changes that are taking place in Hong Kong’s political and civil society in the post-NSL era. While these essays do not offer any definitive answers about Hong Kong’s future—the situation is simply too fluid to make predictions—they illuminate lessons and possibilities from the city’s struggle for political freedom and shed light on how activists and ordinary citizens are coping with the changed circumstances. We are now witnessing Hongkongers putting into practice, each in their own way, the injunction to ‘be water’—a key slogan of the 2019 movement—to adapt to life under a ‘new normal’.

The special section of this issue includes 12 articles. Ka-Ming Chan opens with an examination of how Hong Kong’s political society was transformed by the NSL and the electoral reform of 2021, explaining why this is likely to affect not only the democratic parties but also the pro-establishment camp. Johnson Ching-Yin Yeung shifts attention to the realm of civil society, highlighting how both criminal liabilities and the subtle securitisation of regulations on nongovernmental organisations pose new barriers to the activities of civil society organisations, occasionally leading to self-censorship. In the same vein, Au Loong Yu investigates the implications of the post-NSL crackdown for civil society in both Hong Kong and mainland China and the tactics employed by Hong Kong political activists to cope with the changed reality. Kevin Lin explains how the past couple of years have profoundly changed the Hong Kong labour movement. Petula Sik Ying Ho and Minnie M. Li discuss the role of feminists during the 2019 protests, arguing that the emergence of internal rifts, along with the suppression of dissent, within the movement ultimately led to the collapse of Hong Kong feminism. Ming-sho Ho and Wei An Chen examine the situation of former Hong Kong protesters who have sought refuge in Taiwan and are now making a living by selling local products online to Hong Kong–based consumers. Judith Pernin revisits the rapidly changing landscape of the visual culture of the Hong Kong protests and examines how some of its components have been affected by political developments, leading to a shift in its regime of visibility. Ka-ming Wu looks closely at the changing faces and materials of public pedestrian surfaces, showing the transformation of neighbourhood space and culture in Hong Kong during and after the 2019 protests. Maurizio Marinelli reconstructs the struggle of Hong Kong’s civil society to save the 150-year-old Graham Street Market from developers, arguing that this experience is both a laboratory for norma-
tive urban governmentality and a testing ground for grassroots practices of collective identity and sustainability. Shi-Diing Liu and Wei Shi present an affective analysis of the antagonism between Hong Kong and mainland China, illustrating the contexts in which the conflicts are driven by an accumulation of emotional experiences and imaginaries. In a conversation with Zeng Jinyan, poet Liu Wai Tong revisits his work on the background of social movements in both mainland China and Hong Kong. Finally, Shui-yin Sharon Yam has a discussion with Ching Kwan Lee about how a Hong Kong studies scholar can still navigate the sociopolitical terrain of repression while producing rigorous research that sheds light on Hong Kong’s history and social movements.

In the China Columns, Diego Gullotta and Lin Lili deconstruct contending discourses of ‘youth’ in China, unpacking the ‘lay flat’ and ‘rising tides’ phenomena. Tabitha Speelman examines China’s Covid-19 border-control measures, questioning how ‘closed’ China has been during the pandemic, and whether it is reasonable to expect that authorities will greatly reduce international mobility in the long term. Yawan Li discusses how Canadian swimmer Maggie Mac Neil’s Olympic gold medal sparked heated controversies on the Chinese internet, bringing to the fore practices of child abandonment and transnational adoption during China’s one-child era. Promise Li retraces the basic contours of the debates on the ‘Chinese national character’ in the past century, arguing that such discussions have provided a key ideological register for dissidents, especially those on the frontlines of shaping hawkish China policy for Western countries today. Finally, George L. Israel delves into the implications and risks of the Chinese political establishment’s current fascination with Ming scholar Wang Yangming and his ‘School of Mind’.

The cultural section of the journal includes a review essay by Ivan Franceschini on what Italian working-class literature has to say about the ‘world of labour’ today in Italy and beyond. We conclude the issue with two conversations. In the first, Ivan Franceschini interviews Robert Ovetz and Jenny Chan about their books, Workers’ Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Strategies, Tactics, Objectives (edited by Robert Ovetz for Pluto Press in 2020) and Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China’s Workers (authored by Jenny with Mark Selden and Pun Ngai and published by Haymarket Books and Pluto Press in 2020). In the second, Timothy Cheek and Craig Smith discuss Craig’s recent monograph, Chinese Asianism (Harvard University Asia Center, 2021).