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Hong Kong

# After the fire: Against "burnism"

- Features -

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In [this article](#), Chan Yi discusses the lack of accountability, unchallenged xenophobia and the vicious attacks on dissenting opinions within the democracy movement by the nativist right-wing of the pro-democracy camp. This had been most apparent on the LIHKG online forum.

## Pitfalls of decentralisation: Horizontality without accountability

While LIHKG was the main destination for information sharing, discussion of tactics, and calls for mobilisation during the uprising, it also had a user base that tended heavily towards chauvinistic, misogynistic, and Sinophobic rhetoric. The exclusivity of LIHKG membership, along with its stature as the primary online platform of the uprising, meant that anonymous users on an online forum were able to disproportionately influence the discourse within the movement to push it towards a reactionary and right-wing direction. [1] Anonymous online forum users do not make a mass movement, but they may well become the dominant voice of such a movement in the absence of organisations that accrue their legitimacy by being genuinely representative of, and therefore can claim to speak for, sections of the movement. This was the case with LIHKG and the 2019 uprising.

Furthermore, organisations must recognise the internal contradictions and tensions that must exist within a mass movement, all the while presenting a united front premised on resistance against a common enemy the regime if a single struggle in the pursuit of shared values and objectives is not currently possible.

The defeat of the 2019 uprising shows that a horizontal and decentralised mass movement will not survive heightened repression if it does not adopt a form of organisation that allows the movement's diverse array of participants most of whom will be unknown to one another to communicate information and ideas, coordinate action, and collectively decide the direction of the movement.

This will only be possible through an inclusive and democratic structure that values individual accountability to the collective and participatory decision-making on all levels of action. There must be a platform where different or opposing ideas can be freely debated and where criticism can be made of the movement without fear of retribution.

During 2019, there had been significant decentralised coordination on a tactical level. Telegram groups organised volunteer drivers to deliver supplies to the frontline and transport protestors home. Collectives of anonymous netizens tracked police movements in real time, published the findings of citizen journalism, and promoted fundraising campaigns to support arrested protestors. These are only a few examples. This kind of sophisticated mobilisation and self-organisation can and must be extended to strategic and political considerations.

## Burnism: Is self-destruction the only way out?

The idea of laam chau, or "Burnism," originated at the beginning of the uprising in June of 2019. [2] Back then, laam chau was touted as a political strategy premised upon the escalation of the uprising via increasingly destructive tactics, with the objective of running the economy into the ground and wrecking the pre-existing political structure by subverting its authority for example, through direct confrontation with the police in the streets, besieging police

stations, and attacking government offices and buildings.

The Hong Kong government, and the Chinese Communist Party regime, would then be faced with the choice of accepting the demands of the uprising for genuine dual universal suffrage, an independent investigation into police brutality, and a general amnesty for arrested protestors, or to suppress the uprising. At that point, the uprising was expected to have escalated to such an extent that suppressing it would only be possible through a violent and bloody crackdown envisaged to involve the deployment of the People's Liberation Army into Hong Kong in an echo of the Tiananmen Square Massacre of June 4 1989.

The intended consequence of such a crackdown would be the clear and unquestionable demise of the "One Country Two Systems" structure which had governed Hong Kong prior to the Handover in 1997, the end of Hong Kong's limited democracy and independent judiciary, and the imposition of draconian direct rule from Beijing. The Chinese Communist Party would be exposed to the world as a totalitarian "Chinazi" regime.

Western liberal-democratic states which claimed to uphold democratic values, the rule of law, and human rights would be forced to retaliate in the form of punishing sanctions against Hong Kong and China. Not only would this entail personal sanctions against Hong Kong's foremost government and police officials and their families, but also financial sanctions that would revoke Hong Kong's privileged trade status.

The economic devastation this would inflict on Hong Kong would also undermine Hong Kong's historic role as a key interface for Western capital and technology into mainland China, thereby disrupting financial and commercial ties between the People's Republic of China and Western nations. As a result, these sanctions would deal a blow to the Chinese economy. Beijing will have crushed Hong Kong's revolt, but only at great cost.

The Hong Kong news platform DB Channel ( 壹電視) interviewed [Finn Lau](#) who claims to be the original proponent of laam chau in June 2020. He explained that Hongkongers could not expect to enact laam chau solely by fighting the government on the streets, but must commit themselves to fighting on the "international relations front" ( 國際) to petition Western governments to impose sanctions on Hong Kong and China. Consequently, he called on Hongkongers to support the sinophobic Donald Trump in his reelection bid lest Hongkongers' efforts to galvanise Western retaliation against China be in vain. According to Lau, Hongkongers must prove to the international community that they are committed to enacting laam chau, so as to make themselves deserving of Western support as allies on the front line of the New Cold War against a rising and expansionist China.

A critique of laam chau and its connotations can be mounted from multiple perspectives. First, the reductionist demand for Hongkongers to adhere to the mercenary logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" in lobbying for the support of Western governments is abhorrent. The Black Lives Matter protests that rocked the United States during 2020 were condemned by some right-wing Hong Kong commentators within the democracy movement as the actions of mere rioters, echoing the derogatory language deployed by Hong Kong's political and business establishment against the protest movement. The uncritical focus on Western governments as the only force with the power to realise the demands of Hongkongers for democracy, self-determination, and justice means that Hongkongers must betray these same ideals to make their struggle more palatable to the political establishments of Western states, who harbour their own authoritarian and supremacist agendas.

The other consequence of such a premise is to reduce the importance of empowering Hongkongers to seize power and determine their own destiny, and instead construes Hong Kong's struggle as a campaign to lobby foreign governments to take action against China. With the imposition of the National Security Law, the militant and disruptive street protests of 2019 are no longer available as a means to apply political and economic pressure on the Hong Kong government. This further narrows the possibilities permitted within the constraints of laam chau, until the only possible solution becomes the imposition of Western sanctions.

## Against sanctions

Notwithstanding the implausibility that the West, led by the United States of America, would destroy their mutually beneficial and codependent economic relationship with the People's Republic of China, it is certain that Western sanctions would be disastrous not only for Hong Kong's economy, but for the daily lives of Hongkongers as well. Sanctions would further increase Hong Kong's economic dependence on the mainland and in terms of the provision of necessities like food, water, and energy. Sanctions have also resulted in humanitarian crises. In Iran, sanctions imposed by the United States have cut off the supply of vital drugs such as insulin and have significantly increased the cost of healthcare and medicine.

Western sanctions against Hong Kong would not achieve the same effect as the isolation from international trade and markets that contributed to the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. This is because the Hong Kong regime enjoys the support of a vastly powerful suzerain the People's Republic of China to whom the regime's survival is of paramount importance. Furthermore, support for China from "Global South" ruling elites means that there is unlikely to be homogenous or coherent international support for sanctions against Hong Kong. This nascent geopolitical bloc has already begun its opposition to the US and its allies in the United Nations by standing with China against Western condemnation of the cultural genocide in Xinjiang.

How the Hong Kong regime is likely to respond to foreign sanctions would be more comparable to the example of Cuba during the Cold War. The United States sanctions against Cuba during the Cold War were framed as a tool to pressure the Cuban regime to respect human rights and move towards democratisation and economic liberalisation. This did not happen, but in the face of an existential threat from a foreign superpower, the sanctions allowed the Cuban regime to better justify their authoritarianism and suppression of domestic dissent. Because of these sanctions, Cuba was forced into further cooperation with, and dependency on, the Soviet Union.

Given the reduced importance of Hong Kong to the Chinese economy today and Beijing's demonstrated willingness to use heavy-handed methods to repress popular dissent, the laam chau doctrine will not be effective. It does not make sense to focus the efforts of Hongkonger activism on lobbying for Western sanctions when it is clear that it would not be mutual with, nor assure, the demise of Chinese Communist Party rule.

Finally, one important distinction must be made between hypothetical Western sanctions against Hong Kong, and current Western sanctions against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia's imperialist aggression against Ukraine is a conflict that has already turned hot. Western deliveries of weapons to Ukraine, like its sanctions against Russia, are mitigative measures to blunt the Russian offensive and aid the Ukrainian resistance in a situation where the conflict has already escalated to destructive and brutal warfare, and where the barbarism of Russian war crimes and atrocities against Ukrainian civilians demands an immediate response.

The further escalation of the war in Ukraine that must be prevented is a fully-fledged war between NATO and Russia what would be a true inter-imperialist war between nuclear powers rather than a Ukrainian war of resistance against the Russian invader. In such a context, prior understandings of Western sanctions as tools of imperialist oppression or escalative provocations in an inter-imperialist New Cold War, both to be staunchly opposed no longer apply. Western sanctions against Russia would not escalate the ongoing military conflict any more than it already has been by Russia, and may indeed quicken the collapse of the Russian invasion by crippling Russia's economic and industrial capacity to wage war. On the other hand, Western sanctions against Hong Kong or the PRC would only be fodder for Chinese nationalism, militarism, and repression, couched in the language of patriotic anti-imperialism, that would bolster the Chinese Community Party's legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people through further escalation of the New Cold War.

## Seizing, not ceding, power

Under laam chau, governments and states are conceived of as the only legitimate powers capable of effecting genuine political change. Hong Kong's government has proved callously indifferent to popular discontent, however heartfelt. The muted response from Western governments to the blatant political repression under the National Security Law has revealed the lack of political willpower on their part to impose the kind of sweeping and destructive sanctions that would be necessary to realise laam chau to any meaningful extent. This has been borne out by the United States' response to Beijing's explicit refutation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which was to impose limited personal sanctions against top government officials in Hong Kong and China. These sanctions have proved to be [completely ineffectual](#) in precipitating any change in behaviour from the Hong Kong government, which has only ramped up its repression of dissent in Hong Kong. The worst has come to pass, but the devastating Western retaliation bringing about "the end of Hong Kong as we know it" is yet to materialise, and likely never will.

Hongkongers' struggle for bargaining power against Beijing cannot be premised on the futile appeal to Western governments to intervene on Hong Kong's behalf, because such an outlook can only result in despair and despondency. Hong Kong has already been drained of hundreds and thousands of citizens who have emigrated abroad, a familiar echo of past waves of emigration away from Hong Kong which had been precipitated by lost faith in the city's future.

Therefore, the struggle cannot have as its primary objective the imposition of Western sanctions on Hong Kong. This thinking reduces participants in the mass movement to passive bystanders waiting on foreign intervention that, in any event, could never solve the multi-faceted oppression faced by Hongkongers, which would only be exacerbated by Western sanctions as they have already been by the pandemic. These interconnected oppressions are rooted as much in Hong Kong's neoliberal economy and undemocratic institutions themselves legacies of British rule as it is in Beijing's colonial regime and totalising one-nation rhetoric.

Instead of ceding agency to Western governments, Hongkongers must seek to garner bargaining power through self-empowerment. The objective of the struggle should be to allow Hongkongers to wrest at least some power from the ruling class to pursue their own actualisation and self-determination. This will not be achieved by campaigning for foreign sanctions to be imposed on Hong Kong, but instead through self-empowerment in labour and grassroots organisations.

Read Part 1 "[After the fire: Fallen flowers](#)"

Read Part 3 "[After the fire: Soil in spring](#)"

Source: [Lausan](#)

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[1] Only a limited category of email addresses can be used to register an account on LIHKG: a university email address or one provided by a Hong Kong-based internet service provide

[2] (, ' "mutual destruction")