

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3725>



Hong Kong/China

# The Umbrella Movement and the 1989 Democratic Movement: Similarities and Differences

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV478 - November 2014 -  
Publication date: Monday 17 November 2014

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights  
reserved

---

**Both movements demand basic political freedom from the CPC (Communist Party of China), but the “one country two systems” policy makes the situation in Hong Kong more complicated. This policy can protect Hong Kong from the direct rule of the CPC; however, on the other hand it means that the Hong Kong people cannot challenge the central government directly. The Umbrella Movement continuously forces the Hong Kong government to do things outside the latter’s scope of power and determines to achieve a concrete victory in a short time. Thence, how to make this happen under one country two systems and under the present relationship of forces is a significant challenge for the demonstrators.**

## The Goal

How to tackle the Hong Kong-China relations has always been a conundrum for the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement since the 1970s. There are three different attitudes in the current movement: the first one is advocating that Hong Kong should separate itself from China and forget its Chinese nature; the second one is advocating that the movement should link itself with the pro-democracy movement in Mainland; the third one is a wait-and-see attitude. Most pan-democrats, the social activists and also the HKFS (Hong Kong Federation of Students) have always supported the Mainland Chinese democratic movement, as is shown by the fact that they all actively take part in the annual 4 June Memorial. Strangely, they often completely separate these activities from Hong Kong’s own pro-democracy struggle. Those who led the chanting of “build a democratic China” slogan in the annual 4 June Memorial are not keen on bringing this same slogan into the “1 July” demonstration (Hong Kong’s annual pro-democracy march). This separation of democratic aspirations for Mainland China and for HK is getting more visible now when the right or far right localists are rising.

## The mass base of the movements

In both movements, students played a vanguard role and subsequently inspired the working people to take part in. But the Umbrella Movement took the step of mobilizing workers at an earlier stage. Although the student demonstrators in 1989 welcomed the support from the general public, they deliberately avoided contact with the Workers’ Autonomous Federation and showed little interests towards the issues of people’s livelihood. The student leaders only called for strikes several days before the government crackdown on 4 June, which was too late. Conversely, the HKFS always maintains a good relationship with the trade unions and often raises the issues of people’s livelihood. This alliance between Hong Kong’s students and wage workers could become a significant force. However, the unfortunate fact is that the congenital weakness of the trade union movement in Hong Kong made the previous call for strike not so successful.

The sign of a combination between student and trade union movements has appeared in recent years: students began to participate in the May Day march. It is worth noting, however, that universal suffrage and people’s livelihood are always seen as two separated issues: the demands raised in the May Day marches were not necessarily mentioned in the “July 1st” demonstrations. This also applies to certain trade unions, although things have improved a bit in recent years. This gap has not been consciously filled in the Umbrella Movement. Although some groups have raised the labor issues in different scenario, the dynamism is not strong enough to make these issues the official demands of the movement. This continues to limit the movement’s capacity in attracting more grass-root

support it deserves.

# Background

Nevertheless, the major cause of the two movements is precisely the antipathy to the extreme polarization in social wealth. In 1989, students mainly focused on the political aspect, but the general public's posters and slogans also targeted the corrupted CPC officials who pocketed public wealth or expressed the discontentment towards low wage. A similar discontentment, especially towards youth poverty, exists in the Umbrella Movement as well. The denouncements of the excessively high housing price and the oligarchy of the big developers are clear evidences.

Similarly, knowing this background is necessary for understanding the occupiers at Mong Kok, who are more proletarian and brave than those in Admiralty. In battling the police, those people, who are always at the bottom of the heap, suddenly felt that they had gained the power to change their destiny. "We beat back the cops" gave them a taste of collective power.

# Leadership

The 1989 Democratic Movement was a sudden outbreak of mass actions. Its leadership was constantly changing and the decisions to retreat were often overturned by new leaders. The growing number of students from outside Beijing also created different tendencies: the Beijing students were tired and wanted to retreat; but those new comers from different provinces said they would not retreat because they had just traveled a long way to get to Beijing. The longer the movement lasted, the more it was subjected to spontaneity. So at that time people said the movement was just following the demonstrators' instincts, which sowed the seeds of defeat.

The Umbrella Movement has better congenital conditions. Unlike in the Mainland, people in Hong Kong enjoy political freedom, which means they were not completely unprepared before the outbreak of the movement. However, the long existed pan-democratic parties could not provide any leadership at all from the beginning; the HKFS's leading role only took place at the early stage of the movement. Then the Umbrella movement also ended up with "following the occupants' instincts" as it is more and more leaderless.

# Development

The 1989 Democratic Movement showed declining signs in May. The demonstrators might have dispersed by themselves if the government had not provoked public anger again by declaring martial law on 19 May. Similarly in Hong Kong, without the sharp crackdown on 28 September, it is arguable whether the student protest would have become today's Umbrella Movement. Consequently, the suppression-resistance cycle can potentially force the government to become divided or even to split. In various degrees, this scenario appeared in both the two movements.

The Hong Kong government has been taken a dovish line after 28 September, which allows the occupation to continue. However, the longer the occupation lasts, the more weak points of the movement have been exposed. The basis for a united movement is in fact very fragile—people who participate in the movement often demand quite different things. When the three initiators of Occupy Central with Love and Peace announced the official start of the

occupation in the early morning of 28 September, the crowd did not cheer, instead half of the protesters left the site. If the police had not fired 87 rounds of tear gas later in the day, the Umbrella Movement probably would not have lasted so long. Although the movement has become a long term occupation, the basis for unity has not been consolidated. A *Mingpao* survey published on 20 October states that the demonstrators do not have a consensus on the conditions of retreat. Now the occupation has lasted for more than a month, but the central government shows no sign of compromise. In order to get out of this impasse, the movement must either escalate its actions or carry out a tactical retreat. Nevertheless, calling for retreat will give the far right excuse to attack, while it is also hard to escalate.

## Denouement?

The 1989 Democratic Movement's denouement had two aspects. One was the bloody crackdown. The other one was the thorough purge after the movement, which was more fatal because the CPC had successfully wiped out the voices of democracy for an entire generation.

Hong Kong has a much better political environment. A crackdown here won't be as brutal as the one in 1989; I explained this in one of my articles last year. Neither could the SAR government eliminate the pro-democracy force altogether. However, this does not mean that the occupiers should throw caution to the wind.

Anyhow, the Umbrella Movement is at least the rehearsal for a future even greater democratic struggle. Hong Kong will never be the same.

*8 November, 2014*

*This is a translation of the Chinese original, published on 19 November in **Ming Pao Daily**. It is slightly revised for English readers.*