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Reviews

Hong Kong: An Uprising and Its Fate

- Reviews section -

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“Two events in 2019 marked the turning point for both mainland China and Hong Kong: the 2019 revolt and the Covid-19 pandemic. They lay bare the fundamental contradictions of Greater China accumulated throughout the ‘reform and opening’ period. The two events also started to change the status quo and put the one-party dictatorship in China to an even greater test.” (Hong Kong in Revolt, 138)

Hong Kong's explosive year-long struggle, although one of the most live-streamed and broadcast uprisings in modern history, is still characterized by confounding obscurity in its details. Is it a right-wing movement? Is it a national independence struggle? Who were the different actors?

Au Loong-yu's timely book, written as the movement's protracted struggle transitioned into a break in what would become a global pandemic, not only succinctly captures the timeline of the movement, but also provides incisive insights to Hong Kong's political conditions and history.

The book is written from the perspective of a long-time left-wing activist and active participant in the struggle, bearing witness to the minute details of the movement while discerning and explaining its ideological complexity. Without apologizing for the movement's reactionary elements, the book ably unpacks the diverse political choices that the protestors made.

Au's central conceit of “the dragon and the goose” guides his nuanced interpretation of Beijing's relationship to Hong Kong in the book — one in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long seen the city in coldly economic terms.

“The dragon in Beijing has always treated Hong Kong as the goose that lays golden eggs, although it also believed that it treated the goose well. That is not how the goose has seen it, however.” (138)

Hong Kong as the “golden-egg-laying goose” to the “dragon” of the CCP has helped open up the Chinese proletariat to exploitative Western markets since the beginning of market reforms in the 1980s. The “two capitalisms” — Hong Kong's laissez-faire system and China's “state capitalism” — complemented each other as “state capitalism protected China from predatorial global capital.” (7)

From the time of Mao Zedong's reluctance to broach the Hong Kong issue, the city has long been just the bargaining chip for Beijing and the West — left by Beijing to the whims of the British colonial system.

In a sense, Au's perspective helps interface his own experience growing up in a city formed in tension between colonial powers with that of the new “1997 generation,” the vanguard of last year's struggle.

This generation grew up in the shadow of the Handover, caught in a double bind: exploited by the colonial and capitalist frameworks preserved by Beijing's authoritarian state, while thinking the West to be its only alternative.

Accordingly, it responds with its back against the wall only to be condemned by China as the West's foreign agents. Like Au's own 1970s generation, the “1997 generation” is another ‘lost generation’ — one that has fought back with full force in all its contradictions.

Contradictions of the Movement

The book is organized in five chapters — detailing the overview of the movement, its main actors, important events, how political issues have manifested in the struggle, and a summary that recaps the book's central arguments as well as delineating recommendations for ways forward.

The opening chapter gives an essential context to the rise of Hong Kong localism, how the uprising last year became a mass movement, and why the left has been alienated from the start.

Although not all localists are right wing, Au names a critical aspect often gone unnoted: the right-wing localists have been on the offensive from the end of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, actively smearing the left as ineffectual, laying the groundwork for a whole new generation of activists who are convinced that radical tactics against the establishment must be matched with a crude, inchoate sense of ethnicization and xenophobia. On the other hand, the right also lacked organizational and ideological coherence. The result was a genuine mass movement, propelled by youth and a new generation, that has nonetheless adopted a localist framework inflected for years by right-wing ideas.

Hong Kong's contradictions are effectively explored in Au's analysis of the different actors in the movement. For Au, many of the city and its movements' limitations can be traced back to the CCP's perpetuation of colonial paradigms.

Hong Kong's police force, fundamentally unchanged from the British model, "had always operated under a kind of 'paramilitary internal security model'" (32), and the city's low political consciousness was wrought by decades of colonial-style education and hyper-capitalist infrastructure. But the "doubly unlucky" new generation "does not enjoy the stability and prosperity of earlier generations," and has come of age during "a period of offensive after offensive from Beijing." (43)

The complex and often contradictory motivations and actions of the protesters reflected the various attempts to make sense of the city's oppression in this colonial context. The nativists' demonization of Mainlanders plays into the CCP's trap, allowing it to position the city's struggle as one of purely racism and "foreign interference," and masquerading its own role in perpetuating colonial dynamics.

Au points out that localist activist Ventus Lau promotes a deeply conservative vision of independence for Hong Kong against China, just as he has been seen trying to organize Mainland Chinese to support the cause. (55) Localism as a movement has often been seen as formed in response to the perceived failures of traditional pan-democrats' nonviolent strategy — and yet pan-democrats' resources and infrastructure have been pivotal to the movement, especially during the district elections in late 2019.

These contradictions are brought to life by Au's dedication to foregrounding the voices of left-leaning protesters, from long-time organizer Kyun Go to other anonymous youth voices, who can speak with nuance on the events they have witnessed on the ground. Student protestors like Wong Hon-tung spoke of the "chaos and mis-management" during the November siege of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

Students and non-student outside pro-testers often clashed over tactics, and democratic processes slipped away as the situation turned desperate. These debates even spilled into online forums in real time, and for a few days online discourse and on-the-ground action organically bled into one another, as tactical debates, cop-watch Telegram channels, and mutual aid efforts all raged on while the city suffocated from its worst days of teargassing yet.

Unruly Mass Movement

This detailed overview of events is not purely observational: Au's narrative is a politically rigorous case study in the unruly processes of democratic, mass movement work. Nothing should be uncritically glorified; but as leftists, we bear witness to every contradiction by staying as embedded in the movement as possible.

This ethos informs Au's incisive critique of the movement:

"(I)t was rare to see actions related to assemblies where people had exchanged ideas or made democratic decisions about future steps to be taken. Even when this did occur, they often ended up quarrelling or splitting up very soon thereafter. The reason for this was less because of inexperience and more because the mainstream among the radical youth was hostile to any idea of assembly, organisation, or democratic decision-making such as voting, believing that these all jeopardised the movement for democracy." (117-18)

As Au suggests in the text, this is not a new problem in Hong Kong. Even from the colonial period, its social movements are propelled by bursts of spontaneity but ultimately fail to sustain themselves. Au attributes this to the legacy of colonialism, and the lack of history of movement-building and political consciousness.

Custodial politics has characterized almost all aspects of Hong Kong's political society, from bureaucratized unions to NGOs. This movement reacts against that, but has little local inspiration to draw from for an alternative and sustainable kind of mass politics. Organization and process are often conflated with hierarchical thinking, but as Au and other local leftists point out, there are aspects, like the historic upsurge of new unions, in which the opposition camp may offer a way forward from this bind.

Need for Transnational Solidarity

While Hong Kong has become a focal point in a larger geopolitical game between capitalist state elites in the last year, it has also served as a wake-up call for leftists and grassroots movements to rethink easy solutions and paradigms of anti-imperialism, self-determination and transnational working-class solidarity in the 21st century.

The aspiring global hegemon in this "New Cold War" has no pretension to covering up its neoliberal ambitions. Rather than being a counterweight to global capitalism and the forces of imperialism, Xi Jin-ping has become a rising man in Davos, a new kind of steward of the global neoliberal order — a position only reinforced by Trump's erratic, far-right rule and the decline of U.S. hegemony.

China's economic success, in fact, was built off of the backs of the Chinese proletariat. Its rise to power spells the end of the 20th-century dream that Third World solidarity can be achieved without centering working-class leadership and self-determination movements over left-nationalist alliances.

The failure of the Western "anti-war" left to grasp this reality is a disaster for global anti-capitalist movements. What Western leftists fear — that ongoing U.S. aggression on China would create a vacuum for imperialist exploitation, as in Libya — has ironically been the reality for decades, enabled by the Chinese state itself: Hong Kong has become the playground for Chinese capitalists to reap the benefits of Western markets, built on the backs of an increasingly precarious class of citizens and a hyper-exploited class of migrants.

But Hong Kong's complex identity means that one cannot simply apply it into a "national liberation" framework. In fact, more and more liberation movements in recent years have been falling into a similarly ambiguous state, in which self-determination does not always entail a progressive sense of "national independence," from Xinjiang to Puerto Rico. Au's answer to this problem for Hong Kongers is clear and precise:

"(T)he best way forward is neither nationalism nor independence; we only need to be assertive in our identity and our vision for Hong Kong's self-determination [...] the slogan of self-determination has the benefit of connecting with mainland people if we extend this slogan beyond Hong Kong and encourage the mainland people to pursue their own right to self-determination as well." (144-5)

In fact, Au's formulation is one that has been reiterated and refined over the years of successes and failures in the Hong Kong social movement. Its earliest iteration was in the pages and pamphlets of the Trotskyist groups in Hong Kong in the 1970s and '80s — perhaps the most ideologically coherent, though weak, pole of the city's little-known radical left at the time. Sun Miu (became the Pioneer Group in the late 1990s), of which Au was a key member, wrote similar words in a statement in 1983, a year before the Sino-British Declaration:

"If Hongkongers can form a movement for democracy of great proportions, and publically aim to return power to all people, that would empower the people of China and Taiwan to struggle in solidarity. Then, the one billion Chinese would not be swayed by the CCP bureaucracy to oppress Hongkongers' strength, but would be our greatest ally, and fight with us to take back their sovereignty from the state as well."

Though Hong Kong's sovereign has changed, Sun Miu's words remain all the more prescient and relevant. As Au points out in his book, the colonial infrastructure remains constant, and in a sense, the best way to address the greatest limitations of last year's movement is the same strategy that Sun Miu advocated — one that Au powerfully re-articulates in the final chapter of his book.

Tragedy and Hope

From one perspective, Au seems to present a political tragedy, in which the city seems doomed to relive defeat again and again. He emphasizes the same political epiphany that he developed as a young leftist again as the solution, albeit one that falls upon deaf ears once more.

But it is ultimately not a tragedy. Au's Marxist perspective means that hope is not simply a subjective affect or condition, but the result of an objective understanding of the relations of force.

Over the years Au has seen protests, political figures and organizations rise and fall. The attitude that allowed him to persist and stay active in the movement, despite all odds, is the same that propelled him to write the text with perspicuity and vigor.

There are never total defeats: the masses remember their political experience, and movements have always built upon each other. Through the uprising last year, the Hong Kong people have created for themselves an enormous groundswell of resources and experiences — one that the CCP can never fully erase. Au's text is a testament to this reality.

Source: [Against the Current](#)

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