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Black Versus Yellow
Class Antagonism and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement
2015

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Best English article so far on Hong Kong's "Umbrella Revolution" and its background, limitations, and prospects from a Marxist perspective, based on first-hand research.

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The Typhoon

Tsim Sha Tsui is now occupied, but the rumor is that the right-wing has a strong presence. Barricades have been built outside the shopping mall and crowds huddle under umbrellas, debating the future of the movement under the looming shape of the cruise ship. The right-wing pretends that the cruise ship is just full of mainland capitalists, while the left-wing seems unable to speak. The girl singing Cantonese love songs and her boyfriend playing off-tune guitar are gone now, maybe building a barricade somewhere out of tourist kiosks and traffic signs. But the singing is not so much simply absent as it is transformed, extending now to the entire city in the shape of people's hopes plastered onto emptied buses and rain-splattered government buildings.

The typhoon has come, and the waters are shaking so violently that it's unclear how much longer the cruise ship can sit immobile above the city. Its wealthy denizens, mainland and otherwise, sit quiet and invisible behind the white walls and cordons of police. If the pier is occupied, will the port come next? Despite the miserable servility of Hong Kong politeness, the short-sighted demands and the bitter populism of the movement, it is at least clear that, after this, *Hong Kong will not be the same*. There is no longer the possibility of preserving the status quo—and this fact, if anything, ensures that there is a potential to the movement, even if it is defeated.

The typhoon is by nature a chaotic creature, and, after the island is flooded, it may seem to leave things even worse than they were before. But that chaos also holds a certain promise. The breaking of the status quo cuts a glimmer of possibility in a horizon that had appeared before as nothing but sheer doom. There is an opening. Maybe people begin to learn how to navigate toward it, despite the rain. And, even if it keeps raining for years to come, people have umbrellas.

—an American ultra and some anonymous friends

Thanks to all the friends in Hong Kong who provided first-hand information and photos for this article.

Part 1: The History

Global City

Itinerant shoppers pose for selfies as the skyline of the finance district across the bay bursts into a kaleidoscope of green and yellow lights. Below them, the waters of Victoria Harbor stir quietly, foreboding a typhoon. Despite the churning water, the nearby cruise ship hardly seems to move. It is docked to the pier at Tsim Sha Tsui, its gangplank descending into one of the most luxurious shopping malls in East Asia, a convenience allowing wealthy visitors from all across the world the ability to disembark from one climate-controlled environment to another without ever leaving the safety of AC and well-trained security. Once off the ship, they can spend money tax-free at the city's most fashionable restaurants and retail outlets, eating Japanese BBQ and then gliding over polished floors to browse retro British outfits at a boutique marketing 20s-style colonial chic.

Outside on the dock, rain starts to splatter down on the selfie-takers' outstretched iPhones. A young girl sings old Cantonese pop songs, even though everyone listens to K-pop now, accompanied by her boyfriend's out-of-tune guitar. People drop a few serrated Hong Kong coins into their donation jar. The wind begins to pick up, washing away the Cantonese tones as it sweeps static across the microphone. Behind her, the cruise ship sits white and motionless.

This is the battle that is Hong Kong: Old Cantonese love songs hurled into the growing wind of a typhoon, torn apart before they reach the walls of lifeless Cruise ships and shopping malls looming under the lights of the financial district. Here spectacle confronts

A poster requesting that people stay "on point" and that new protestors stop demanding things beyond electoral reform

One particularly volatile potential is the increasing involvement of workers. The relatively small Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions has called for a general strike and, on October 1st (China's "National Day"), at least some workers began heading the call.[6] Several of the port workers who were involved in the initial dock strike were also present early in the week, showing their support for the protestors, though also claiming that another port strike seemed "impossible." But as the occupation in the streets continues to grow, particularly in areas with more residential housing such as Mong Kok, it becomes more and more likely that other workers may begin to join in.

The extension of the occupation into a general strike would have the added effect of inherently destabilizing both the exclusively political demands of the movement as well as questioning its populist presumptions. If the port workers were to initiate a second strike, for example, there would be no denying the role of Li Ka-shing and other *Hong Kong* capitalists in the plundering of workers' everyday lives and the pillaging of young peoples' future. It would be simply impossible to defer this conflict out onto mainlanders. The class antagonism internal to Hong Kong would become increasingly undeniable, and the protests could be forced off their path-of-least-resistance and toward a future simultaneously more dangerous and hopeful.

[6] It's ambiguous, however, whether claims of "10,000 striking workers" have any connection to reality, since National Day is also a national holiday on which many workers are not required to come to work in the first place. Many, given the holiday, simply came to the occupations instead, since they had the day off. By no means were these people "striking."

stubborn humanity in the archetypal "global city," designed to allow capital to filter through the port, banks and real estate markets to plunder the Asian mainland without ever having to pass outside the safety of climate control and security cordon.

For many years, Hong Kong was little more than a backwater colonial leftover, with living standards hardly better than those seen in the other hubs of European activity in Asia. After the mainland Chinese Revolution, foreign support for industrial development and agrarian reform poured into the city as a hedge against insurgency, but living standards and welfare programs were not immediately forthcoming. The colonial regime was still a brutal one, ruling over an unstable society and struggling to accommodate an influx of immigrants. In the decades following the mainland Revolution, spates of rioting were common. Riots in 1956 marked the beginning of what would soon become repeated conflicts with the British government. In the spring of 1966 another wave of rioting began which culminated a year later with the 1967 Hong Kong riots, the largest domestic disturbance in the city-state's history, which saw massive strikes paired with city-wide street-fighting against police, the bombing of government offices and targeted attacks against right-wing media outlets. In the end, after 18 months of open rebellion, millions of dollars of property had been destroyed, some five thousand were arrested, two thousand convicted, and many communists deported to the Chinese mainland.

Following the 1967 riots, the government began a massive expansion of the welfare state, with the "Colony Outline Plan" proposing to house nearly a million people in new, cheap, state-built public apartment complexes. The massive build-up in manufacturing seen since the 1950s was finally paired with moderate wage increases, and Hong Kong's position as one of the early "Asian Tiger" economies was secure. By the 1980s the city was an integral link to a newly-opened China, both through its geographical proximity to China's first Special-Economic Zone across the water in Shenzhen

and because of its historical connections to the Chinese mainland. It was in these decades that the foundation was laid for the "global city," often very literally: Li Ka-shing, one of the richest men in the world, made his fortune in Hong Kong by buying properties at bargain prices following the 1967 riots. Today, those properties form the backbone of the city, and Li not only owns major skyscrapers in the financial district, but also the port itself, one of the busiest in the world.

It was this port and the financial structure surrounding it that allowed Hong Kong to step out of its role as a manufacturer and into its role as an administrative center for global capitalism in the 1980s. As manufacturing shifted toward the port cities in China's mainland, Hong Kong became an ideal location for the management of these new industrial hubs and a key re-export node for the Asian mainland. Many of the new Chinese factory zones were themselves piloted by capital from Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, as well as more far-flung members of the Chinese diaspora. Asian foreign-direct investment in China today still exceeds that of the US or Europe—often in partnership with or on behalf of Japanese capital.[1]

Today, the Hong Kong border with the mainland is a perfect image of this divide. On the Shenzhen side, breakneck development sprawls up against the riverside: faceless, half-empty apartment towers cluster together under the haze of pollutants. On the Hong Kong side, greenery abuts the river, the entire border region turned into a nature reserve and agricultural zone guarded by the military, where one needs a special license just to enter the forest. At first glance, the two worlds appear to be antagonistic: the uncontrollable, environmentally devastating growth of sprawling Shenzhen piling up against the idyllic greenery of its "post-industrial" neigh-

[1] For a more detailed history of China's economic opening and the role of East Asian capital in the late 20th century, see Giovanni Arrighi's article, "China's Market Economy in the Long Run," in *China and the Transformation of Global Capitalism*, edited by Ho-fung Hung. John's Hopkins University Press, 2009. p.22.

An older man, originally from Hong Kong, he left before the handover. In town visiting family, he is seen here having picture taken in front of the barricades. Visible at his right is the word "Democracy."

But both the populist and democratic illusions of the movement are capable of being destabilized. As the occupation spreads to broader segments of the population, new participants bring their own demands to the barricades. Some of the original liberal students, including the HKFS leadership, have become increasingly frustrated by this, and have been plastering up signage encouraging people to stick to demands of universal suffrage. Interviewees have expressed the fear that the movement will get "confused" and "watered down" by many of the new protestors, who have come out to protest against the police attacks on students more than they are protesting for electoral reform. But it's just as possible that the new demands may actually re-ignite the movement itself, pushing it beyond the domain of mundane electoral demands. Generally, when class strata far distant from those that initiated the movement begin joining in, it signals a sort of phase shift in what is going on and amplifies the movement's power, rather than watering it down.

bor. In reality, this antagonism is a sign of the deepest interdependence. Each side of the divide is co-constituted by the other. Shenzhen wouldn't have been built without Hong Kong capital. And Hong Kong would never have become a desert of shopping malls, office towers and carefully crafted agrarian idylls without the factories of Shenzhen.

ity. More importantly, even these protestors tend to translate their discontent into the language of "democracy" and "universal suffrage," and they fail to look across the border to find allies among the factory workers of the Pearl River Delta.

But despite the fact that the pan-democrats' terminology is the *lingua franca* of the movement, it's clear that the movement itself is, for many people, hardly about liberal "democracy." In fact, most discussions of what protestors actually *want* quickly jump into entirely different terrain. When asked what their goals are, many will respond with the parroted list of demands—this is incredibly consistent across social strata and different age groups. But when pressed about *why* they want these things, most protestors then immediately jump to *economic*, rather than purely political, problems.

People bemoan skyrocketing rents, the inhuman levels of inequality, inflation in the price of food and public transport, and the governments' tendency to simply ignore the vast swaths of people sitting at the bottom of society. One speaker at an open mic made the common—if simply wrong—argument: "Why is Hong Kong just a couple of rich people and so many poor people?! Because we have no democracy!" Many claim—with abysmally poor awareness of how liberal democracies actually function in places like Greece or the United States—that once they are able to "choose" their own leaders these leaders will be able to fix widespread problems of inflation, poverty and financial speculation. Democracy has thereby come to designate less the practical application of a popular voting system and more a sort of elusive panacea, capable of somehow curing all social ills.

Translation: Don't trust leftist pricks
Be vigilant [lest they ask us] to disperse
Remember that we are [doing] civil disobedience, not having a Party!!!
What we want is TRUE UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE!!!
No karaoke
No group photos
We still haven't won
No leaders
No small-group discussion [this refers to "discussion groups" organized by liberals]

It's not about "Democracy"

But defeat is by no means inevitable here. Young people in Hong Kong, like pretty much anywhere these days, are recognizing that their future has been looted and are attempting, through whatever means they have available, to both reach some understanding of how they have come to be in this position and how they might fight back. In Hong Kong, China is very much "the future," as the small city-state is integrated more and more into its massive mainland neighbor.[5] This means that the sense of a doomed future among youth translates into the intuition that China is also the origin of that approaching doom.

There are plenty of young protestors who are frustrated with the inactivity of the movement, but feel isolated and incapable of pushing anything forward themselves. This is especially true at night, when more of the angry and dedicated young people tend to come out, but there are currently no means whereby these protestors are able to make contact with one another and coordinate their activ-

[5] Since the 1997 Handover of the island from British Colonial Mandate to the Chinese government happened to occur at the same time as the Asian Financial Crisis, China is also irrationally associated with the era of economic stagnation that this crisis initiated for Hong Kong.

The border between Shenzhen and Hong Kong

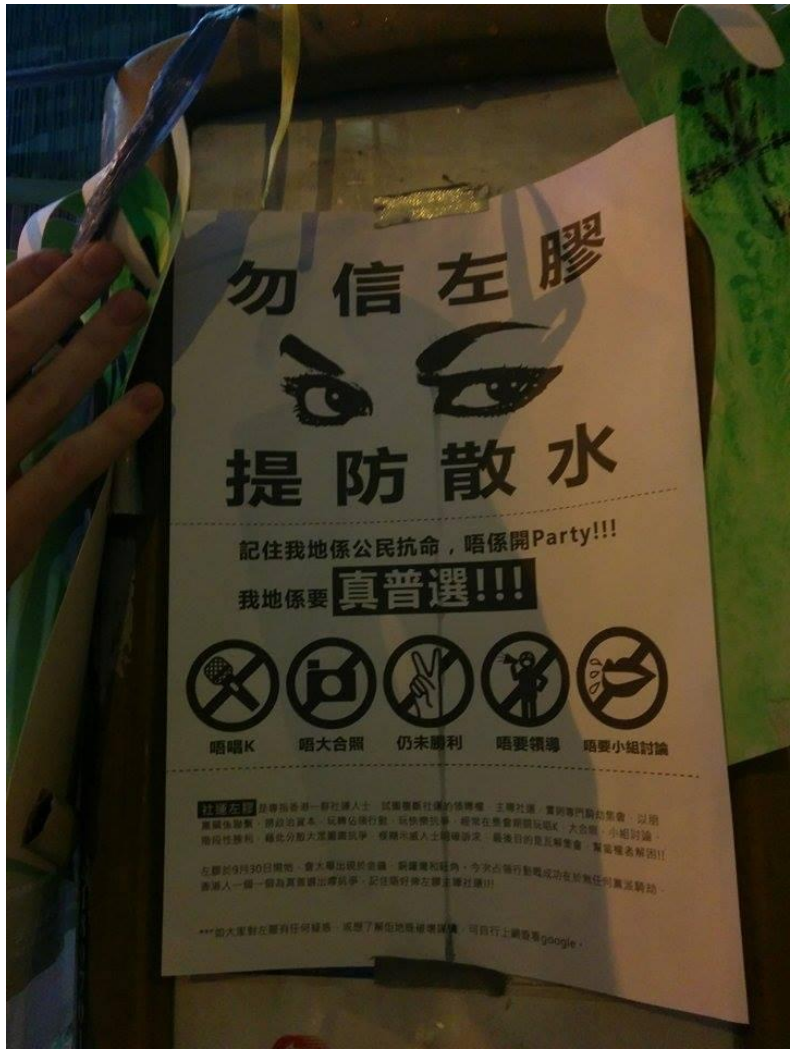
The Generation with No Future

Hong Kong's boom years were crafted by its own boom generation—largely the children of immigrants who had fled to the island first during the Sino-Japanese war, and then during the civil war between Nationalist and Communist armies in the later 1940s. As in US, Europe and, ironically, mainland China, it was this baby boom generation which, though staffing some of the revolts of the 1960s and early 1970s, was ultimately defined by the defeat of these movements, with a significant fraction of the generation turning against those engaged in these revolts in exchange for a secure position within the restructured global economy. In Hong Kong, this meant the construction of one of the world's most extensive experiments in *laissez faire* capitalism—one still often lauded by conservative commentators.

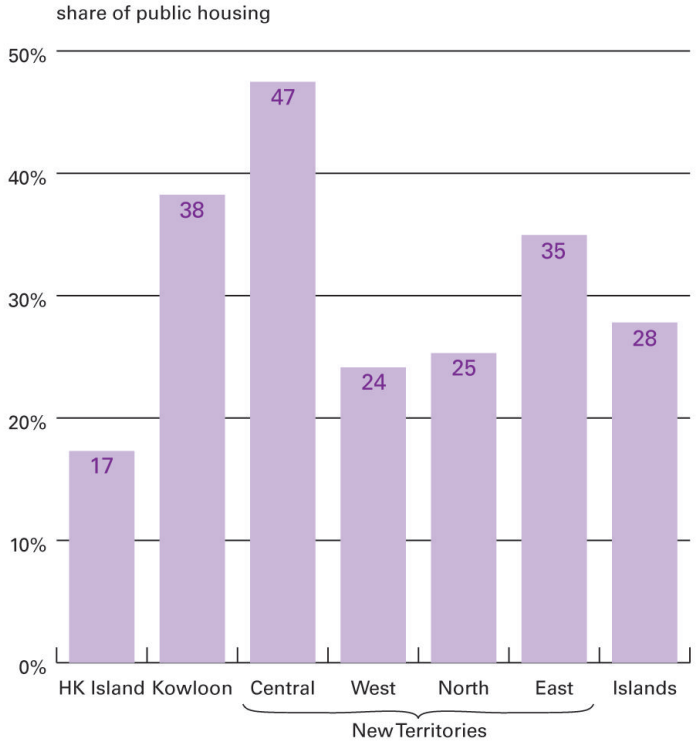
But this has also created a squeeze effect on those coming after the baby boom generation. Raised on examples of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps billionaires like Li Ka-shing, by parents who themselves made a killing in the unregulated industrial slaughterhouse of Shenzhen's heyday, many of Hong Kong's younger people are now faced with nothing but soulless service jobs and repeated economic crises, first in 1997, then in 2007. Forced into cut-throat competition for spots in top universities, even those students who succeed in this system are then made to fight for life-crushing corporate jobs where they will work for abysmally long hours and still be spending an average of 40% of their income on housing.

Today, 8.5% of Hong Kong households have a yearly income of one million dollars or above, and the city hosts one of the largest super-prime housing markets in the world. At the same time, a massive housing shortage exists alongside skyrocketing prices and hundreds of thousands of empty apartments, purchased by the wealthy as speculative investments. The city is one of the densest

in the world and housing prices are so high that many young people are forced to live with their parents well into their thirties, while many of the poor are expelled out to public housing in “new cities,” from which they have to commute back into Mongkok or Wanchai to work. Others are forced to find unsafe, painfully small slum units built on the tops of buildings and in the interstices of alleyways—with more than 50,000 residents estimated to literally live in cages.



A small group of Civic Passion members defending a barricade from being dismantled by other members of the occupation. This role has not always been played by the right-wing, but acts like this reinforce their public presence. Note that their yellow shirts say, in English: "proletariat," consistent with the general usurpation of leftist terminology by far right or "third positionist" groups.



Most of Hong Kong's public housing is located in the new cities, located in the "New Territories" far from the island's main urban core. Details on this chart can be found at the original source, here.

In all, the country's gini coefficient, at .537, is one of the most unequal in the developed world, and upwards of 20% of the population lives under the poverty line. Migrant laborers are routinely abused, collective bargaining is illegal and the city had no minimum wage at all until 2010, when it was set to a meager 28 HKD per hour—not even enough to ride the subway from Mongkok to the airport. Meanwhile, wealthy foreign businessmen are paid enough to afford premium flats in the mid-levels, a neighborhood constructed in the colonial era to accommodate British functionaries fleeing an outbreak of the plague in the lowland

Even though Hong Kong is by no means in the same "anomic breakdown" as places like Greece, the over-worked, over-shopped, over-crowded youth of the city seem to have much in common with the unemployed, underpaid youth of an emptying Athens. Faced with a foreclosed future, many youth have decided to simply leave: emigration from Hong Kong is now increasing at the fastest rate since the mass-emigration of the pre-handover period of the early 1990s.[2] Despite relatively low unemployment (four to five percent) due to a still-ascendant East Asia, there are more subtle signs of the crisis: demand for mental health services has more than doubled in the past decade, it is commonplace now to hear people speaking about the cultural "death" of Hong Kong, and what used to be routine protests against government developments and the mainland government quickly snowball to increasingly uncontrollable proportions. The recent student strike and (re)occupation of the Central district (and now Admiralty, Mong Kok, Causeway Bay and

[2] It has to be noted here that out-migration today is still far lower than out-migration in the early 1990s, when as many as 60,000 were leaving every year.

politics of groups like Civic Passion—which went normcore early on in the movement, abandoning its public presence in favor of an "undercover" agitation, spreading flyers and speeches attacking the inaction of the "leftist pricks"[4] in charge, and only more recently has become a visible presence, their yellow-shirted members defending the barricades in Mong Kok (barricades built by anarchists, no less) against attempts by "blue ribbon" opponents (mostly older anti-Occupy protestors) to dismantle them. This situation bears a miserable similarity to the experience of Ukraine, with the far-right acting as hatchet men for an alliance of more West-leaning capitalists.

[4] Literally "□□," "left penises" in Cantonese, referring to the pan-democratic leadership more than the (largely invisible) leftist grouplets. □ is a word that literally means plastic but is also used to mean dick, due to the similarity between the sounds of □ and □, a more common euphemism for penis (though it literally means turtledove). The insult of "leftist prick" has in the past day or two gained broad purchase in the movement, and can be heard repeated every major occupation in the city. Even leftists have begun using it as a good, short-hand insult for the pan-democrats. There's nothing inherently bad in the use of the term—despite some soft-stomached leftists' inevitable butthurt—the problem is more that it is the far right that has put itself in the position to coin and popularize slogans that are being picked up by the entirety of the movement. When these slogans (or aesthetics, or tactics, or whatever) generalize, it puts the right-wing in a de facto leadership position.

several other key nodes in the city) are only the latest in a series of such events.

Despite being located at a more privileged position in the division of labor, the youth in Hong Kong are clearly participating in the same global dynamic of revolt spearheaded by young people worldwide following the financial crisis that began in 2007/2008. The people involved in these events are, precisely, "ultras"—those members of our "generation with no future" who have sensed the looming economic, environmental and social doom all around them and chosen to fight back. Worldwide, there are major differences in the origin and experience of those engaged in these activities. Some are students, some are street kids, soccer hooligans or service workers. Coming from such divergent backgrounds, these revolts have been marked by what the communist theoretical collective *Endnotes* calls the "composition problem," wherein "class fractions that typically keep their distance from each other were forced to recognize one another and sometimes live together." The *problem* embedded in this is the question of how a movement might "compose," "coordinate" or "unify" "proletarian factions, in the course of their struggle" when faced with these divergent experiences, especially as the social base of the movement begins to grow. The result has been the production of movements that, though broadly resonant with large segments of the population, are ultimately inchoate on the ground.

Pan-Democrats and Passionate Citizens

Each of these revolts, whether in Egypt, Greece or Missouri, has been profound in its potential but also crippled by this political incoherence and practical inexperience. Some places, like Greece and Spain, have a more cohesive left-wing political tradition that is now being rediscovered and revived by young people. Other areas, however, have seen sharp turns to the right, as far-right groups

in places like the Ukraine and Thailand have outmaneuvered others in their ability to defend, extend and coordinate the movement, drawing more of this disaffected generation into their ranks.

Hong Kong, unfortunately, sits closer in many respects to these latter examples than the earlier ones. After 1967 the communist-leaning left had lost much of its mass base and was ruthlessly dismantled by the police. Meanwhile, the state began giving concessions to workers, students and others in exchange for their participation in the project of economic restructuring. Hong Kong's own Cold War climate, relative to China, persisted even after the opening of the Chinese economy to foreign capital, further preventing the resuscitation of any sort of substantial communist left in the city-state by forcing every nascent radical grouplet to take a position on the "China question." Any "violence" in a protest is, to this day, invariably explained as the work of CCP provocateurs from the mainland.

The result has been that Hong Kong's so-called "left," has for decades been dominated by a naïve discourse of "democracy" against mainland "authoritarianism." Inspired by the Tiananmen Square uprising in Beijing and terrified by the ruthlessness with which it was crushed, most of Hong Kong's radical students since 1989 accepted at face value the mainstream media portrayal of Tiananmen as a student-led movement for "democracy." In Beijing, despite the widespread participation of non-students, the formation of the Beijing Autonomous Workers' Federation, and the state's decision to charge worker-participants with far higher crimes carrying much longer sentences than their student counterparts, it was the students who were able to dominate the messaging of the movement and appeal to western liberal audiences with calls for the liberalization of the political and economic system. This was the distorted image of the movement transmitted to viewers in the US and Europe, and its influence was only amplified in Hong Kong.

Another barricade, this time with two cars parked in front to ensure that the police cannot easily break through. One car has had its tires removed in order to prevent it from being pushed away.

The current movement has only a few paths forward, and many routes to defeat. The tactical stagnation of the protests could allow the government to simply wait them out, as the protestors' own inaction delegitimizes them in the eyes of more casual participants. There are already complaints from people who have newly joined the protests that the entire movement seems to be simply drifting, with no real force leading it forward. At best, the revolt may fail by becoming a "social movement"—a sterile spectacle put on for civil society, where future NGO leaders and politicians gestate before being unleashed upon the poor. At worst, the people of Hong Kong might actually *get* the popular vote, in which case they'd be allowed an enormous amount of participation in a system over which they have no control and in which all the same problems of inflation, inequality and immiseration would continue unabated.[3]

In this situation, however, there is also the risk that defeat might come in the form of a resurgent rightwing. If the far-right is capable of becoming the force that can torque the protests out of their stagnation, then the movement as a whole will slide farther down the path of nationalism. In the current "era of riots," the right-wing tends to be capable of magnetizing people to itself regardless of whether the majority of people agree or disagree with the racist

[3] There may well be something to the claim that a future Hong Kong democracy would create a political space where class antagonism could be galvanized in a way that ultimately goes well beyond the bounds of reformist politics—this is essentially the argument (as far as we can gather) of some groups like Left 21. Nonetheless, this is a disingenuous position, basically attempting to continue the delusion a little longer and defer the recognition of antagonism indefinitely. Usually deferring action to the "right time" is simply a method of rejecting action altogether.

The first immediate effect was the formation of the "Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China," which began to bring together figures such as Szeto Wah, Martin Lee, and Lee Cheuk-yan, all of whom were quickly attacked by the mainland government. Two years later, in 1991, Hong Kong held its first direct elections, which saw a landslide victory for the electoral alliance between the United Democrats of Hong Kong and the liberal Meeting Point party, alongside an amalgamation of smaller liberal-leaning parties. The 1991 election is seen as the birth of the "Pro-Democracy" camp, which has splintered and reunified several times in the twenty years since. Today, these electoral parties, alongside a loose amalgamation of academics, activists and NGOs, are broadly referred to as the "pan-democrats."

A key component of the pan-democrats' activist wing has been the secondary-school organizations such as Scholarism, formed to protest the Chinese government's "political education" curriculum, and the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), which is elected by the student unions the city's seven major universities. Though these organizations technically have a very broad base, their leadership is almost universally in line with the pan-democrats, and they seek a legalistic and polite path to reform. Even while the student organizations often force the more institutionalized wing of the pan-democrats to take action in an uncertain situation, many of these student groups still pride themselves on "Hong Kong civility," even going so far as to condemn those who fight back when police attack protesters. At each stage of recent political events in Hong Kong, HKFS and groups like Scholarism have played both a leading and an ultimately stifling role. From protests against developments in the New Territories to the brief occupation following this year's annual July 1st march, the student groups have been integral to getting the protests off the ground, but almost universally falter when faced with actual police repression.

This has created a situation where Hong Kong's young protestors are stretched between an ideologically weak but

well-funded “pan democrat” liberalism and its far-right variant, loosely grouped around the □□□□, or “People Power,” party and its followers, called □□□□, or “Civic Passion.” Though they officially have no position on questions of immigration, Civic Passion has widely accepted far-right Hong Kong nationalists into their organization and their yellow-shirted membership can frequently be spotted at rallies telling immigrants (particularly mainland Chinese) to leave.

Abandoned public buses plastered with protestors’ messages. Note the characters, top center, referencing the “Democracy Wall” movement in mainland China from 1979-1981.


六福珠寶
六福珠寶
advance
民主


熱血公民

Wong Yeung-tat, a leader of the right-wing Civic Passion group, with an anti-CCP banner behind.

Consistent with nationalist politics elsewhere, Civic Passion tends to obscure class conflict with the language of national belonging. In terms of political analysis, many are more similar to people like Ron Paul and Alex Jones than to anything recognizably leftist. Rather than seeing the true role of the international capitalist class in the looting of Hong Kong's future, they only see the role played by mainland capitalists in this process. More dangerously, they then attribute a completely false role to thousands of poorer mainlanders who have migrated to Hong Kong (or simply visit as less wealthy tourists), portraying them as locusts come to infest the city and drain it of all its resources.

Anti-mainland sentiment is a widely accepted and very public form of racism in Hong Kong, clearly visible on the surface of everyday life. In 2012, Apple Daily, one of the few media outlets without direct or indirect censorship from Beijing, ran a full-page ad that portrayed a giant locust looming over Hong Kong, asking: "Are you willing for Hong Kong to spend one million Hong Kong Dollars every eighteen minutes to raise the children born to mainland parents?" Then, earlier this year, over 100 people joined an "anti-locust" campaign, marching to Canton Road—a site of many expensive jewelry shops favored by wealthier mainland tourists—with signs that said things like "go back to China" and "reclaim Hong Kong," yelling abuse at any mandarin-speaking bystanders. In moments of exacerbated social tension, this everyday racism is a convenient pressure-release, structured such that it both divides the protestors and prevents them from looking across the border to find their natural allies in the rioting migrant laborers of the Pearl River Delta.

A barricade in Mong Kok.


PEDESTRIANS
行人


你願意香港
每18分鐘
花$1,000,000
養育「雙非」兒童嗎?*

An anti-mainlander ad run in one of Hong Kong's biggest newspapers

But, when disillusioned by the conservatism of the pan-democratic alliance, groups like People's Power and Civic Passion are the first visible alternatives, since they have been some of the few groups willing to attempt more militant actions. In only a few years these groups have seen a marked increase in popularity, as young people have watched the pan-democrats' vigils and party-pandering going nowhere. To take the most frequently cited example: On June 4th, the mainstream democratic parties hold an annual candlelight vigil to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement. Civic Passion began a yearly alternative rally, more militant but also interspersed with nationalist (what they call "localist") and racist slogans. In 2013, their alternate rally only brought together around 200 people, but by 2014, it had attracted 7,000. Attendance at the official vigil shrank by tens of thousands in the same interval, though this main event still remained far larger.

In today's "Umbrella Revolution," it may appear that anti-mainland groups have again been sidelined. But past experience shows that, when the pan-democrats begin to falter through their own inaction, only the far-right has been capable of pushing for tactical advances capable of winning over increasingly militant swaths of the youth. Politics in Hong Kong has been running up against this wall for years now.

origin or simply immigration status. When such populism is predominant, riots, property destruction and even "impoliteness" on the part of protestors will be invariably written off as the work of "outsiders"—in this case, mainland Chinese—at least until they generalize. But strikes have a much greater propensity to break such a populist logic, since they immediately make visible antagonisms internal to the given society.

A poster encouraging people to use non-violence, and to fight only for democracy (but not literally)

This servile spirit of "politeness" risks stranding the protestors in a dead zone. In this dead zone, they'll find themselves incapable of escalating the economic disruption that gives power to the movement—since many see even damaging private property as uncivil—and this inaction will make it easy enough for the government to starve out or appease the protestors with more minor concessions, such as the firing of the Chief Executive. Many, though aware of this conundrum, are equally fearful that (rumor has it) gangster provocateurs[2] might escalate the situation on orders from Beijing, creating a convenient excuse for a military occupation of the island.

An interesting contradiction arises here. The latent nationalism of the protests makes it so that the police, as "Hong Kong people," are seen as allies and potentially future participants, while the intervention of the military—even if it used all the same tactics as the police—would be universally rejected. This is because the military units themselves would be composed of mainlanders under the direct order of Beijing, rather than the secondary control of Beijing's Hong Kong politicians. For the protestors, this does not represent any sort of logical contradiction. Many firmly hold to the position that it is counterproductive to fight police or resist arrest, then, in the next sentence, argue that people would be fully justified in using violent tactics to resist the military.

A populist perspective prevents the recognition of any antagonism *internal* to "the people," transposing the source of all conflict outward onto external groups, whether defined by race, national

[2] In Hong Kong, many of the organized gangs are now "patriotic," working with the Hong Kong government and serving the interests of Beijing. This is not universally true, however, and the rumors of Beijing-backed gangster provocateurs have run up against reports of Mong Kok gangs working with the protestors to build up the barricades.

A sticker protesting "Colonization" and "New Hong Kong People" — i.e., mainland Chinese — pictured in Mong Kok prior to the newest Occupation.

OG Occupy and the Port Strike

The current "Occupy Central" group—technically "Occupy Central with Love and Peace"—tends to obscure the existence of Hong Kong's original Occupy Central. Like Occupy in the US, Hong Kong's 2011 Occupation targeted a downtown financial center, raising tents in the bottom level of the HSBC building in the heart of the city's finance district. Though Occupy Central was among the longest-lasting of any of the 2011 Occupations (starting in October 2011 and ending around September 2012), it saw much smaller numbers than elsewhere, with only hundreds participating at the height of the movement. Nonetheless, it marked a new era of civil unrest in the small city-state, and many of the participants in the original Occupation went on to build the groundwork that made the current movement possible, organizing against the New Territories developments or helping to coordinate the student strike that ignited the "Umbrella Movement."

Part 2: The Present

Umbrellas Up[1]

The port strike is an important precedent for understanding the "Umbrella Movement," since today's occupiers will doubtlessly be faced with the same dilemma. Just like the strikers, they risk becoming deadlocked between appealing to civil society and deepening their economic obstruction. Already, internal divides within the movement make this apparent. Most of the younger protestors have completely rejected the leadership of "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" group, lambasting Chan Kin-man when he claimed that the blockades would end if Chief Executive CY Leung stepped down. Meanwhile, these same young people have parroted popular language about democracy, universal suffrage and non-violence—demanding that no property be harmed and that people not fight back even if the police attack.

[1] Much of the information in these last few sections comes from first-hand accounts by people we are in contact with on the ground, who have been conducting interviews and inquiring into the state of the different political factions involved. Some of the people we are in contact with were involved in the initial student strike. Others have only begun participating after the police crackdown. Because of the first-hand quality of the information, these sections will frequently provide information, including quotes from interviews, without a link or citation.

Hong Kong's original Occupy movement

But the original occupation, like many others, was also politically chaotic. Alongside a nascent anarchist presence, the movement churned together the usual mixture of conspiracy-theory types, short-sighted activists and, of course, some liberals. In Hong Kong, these liberals were of the pan-democratic variety, though their political perspective is basically parallel to the shallow "get money out of politics" critique hoisted by liberals involved in Occupy Wall Street. Despite the divergence between these liberals and the original occupiers—a swath of young professionals, students, the unemployed, and homeless people—it was the older liberals who, following the eviction of the Occupation, were able to use their media connections and international acclaim to announce a plan for what was effectively a re-occupation, despite the fact that hardly any of them had participated in Occupy Central itself.

A triad of talking heads—professor Benny Tai, professor Chan Kin-man and the reverend Chu Yiu-ming—formulated and proposed a plan for a series of collective deliberations that would culminate in a reform program to be proposed to the legislative council, demanding a government elected by popular vote. In Hong Kong, this is referred to as "universal suffrage," despite the fact that it excludes segments of the population such as immigrant domestic workers. If the reform plan was not accepted, the three leaders threatened mass civil disobedience in Central, calling the new movement "Occupy Central with Love and Peace," to emphasize that it would be "non-violent" and not go against the wishes of the majority of people of Hong Kong.

portions of their demands. By comparison, the most recent strike was a dismal loss.[3]

[3] This information comes from interviews with several people in Hong Kong's post-Occupy milieu who were present on the first few days of the strike and organized alongside workers throughout.

blockade in front of one of the port's entryways. Media worldwide reported on the "strike," but, behind the show, the port was running only slightly slower than usual. Even at the height of the strike the port was still operating at 80% capacity. Only a fraction of workers within the port were members of the union, and, among the unionized workers, those who argued for increased economic obstruction were sidelined or ignored. Younger supporters attempted to make contact with more workers, but were again sidelined by the old guard of liberals staffing the unions.

Fearful that even the minor disruption caused by the roadside occupation was too much for the palate of civil society (who were, after all, the main contributors to the strike fund), the union soon dismantled the camp altogether, setting up a second, much more meager encampment at the foot of the downtown Cheung Kong Center, where Hutchinson Whampoa has its headquarters. From then on, "strikers" were far removed from the port itself, reduced to holding signs in front of a downtown building. In the end, only a fraction of the demands were met, and most workers considered the strike a loss.

When later asked how they felt about the strike, which many media outlets portrayed as unprecedented, many of the older workers pointed out that two earlier strikes had actually occurred at the port prior to the 1997 handover, when the Labour Party was nonexistent and most labor unions were illegal. These older workers argued that the earlier strikes were actually far more successful, since the workers had no union or party representation pushing them to appeal first and foremost to the tastes of civil society. They had therefore simply engaged in wildcat strikes that crippled the actual functioning of the port and thereby won them significant

The Logo for the new "Occupy with Love and Peace"

But after the new Occupy Central group held an online vote (in which only one tenth of the Hong Kong population ultimately participated), anti-Occupy forces sponsored a city-wide petition and signature-gathering campaign and public opinion polls found that there was not majority support for the re-occupation. In response, Benny Tai declared that the movement had "failed," fearing that an actual occupation would drive more and more of the so-called "pragmatic" citizens into an outright rejection of the pan-democrats' program. Around this time, it was common to see ads broadcast on the public busses, in which everyone from young Hong Kong hipsters to old business-owners explained that the plan to occupy Central would shut down small businesses and ruin weekend shopping. This fear that a protest movement might lose the support of civil society is a constant anxiety in Hong Kong politics, effectively forcing most movements to stifle themselves before they even begin, all in the name of politeness.

The post-facto re-branding of Occupy also conveniently disguised the more radical aspects of the original occupation with the new liberal platform. Though the significance may not be apparent to outside viewers, the original Occupation was one of the few spaces where some of the members of the "generation with no future" were coming together and collectively critiquing the whole of Hong Kong politics, pan-democrats included and politeness be damned. Some of the core members of that Occupation even distributed a lucid critique of liberal democracy, effectively "slaughtering" Hong Kong's "sacred cow"—something that would have been completely unthinkable throughout much of the city's post-'89 history. And it was out of this milieu that more radical segments of students and young people ultimately circumvented the quavering "deliberations" of Occupy Central with Love and Peace to initiate the student strike, not only Occupying Central, but also Admiralty, Causeway Bay and a large stretch of Mong Kok.

It wasn't the first time that younger people had come into conflict with the old guard of pan-democrats. When tensions began to heighten in the city after the ousting of the original Occupy in 2012, this newfound antagonism began to percolate outward. In March of 2013, a massive strike began among workers at the Kwai Tsing Container Terminal of the port of Hong Kong, resulting in the largest, longest labor conflict that the city had seen in decades. Though there was no immediate connection between the original Occupy, the strike and the present protests, it's clear that each was generated by the same economic stagnation and intensifying class antagonism. More importantly, each movement has created a shift in people's general political awareness, and this new awareness has become the base of support for subsequent movements.

Though initiated independently by crane operators within the port, the strike was quickly picked up by the Union of Hong Kong Dockers, which is affiliated with the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and the Labour Party, all led by the old guard of pan-democrats. With union representatives spearheading negotaitions, the initial energies of the striking workers were quickly diverted and the strike was prevented from spreading to a majority of the workforce. The port, owned by Li Ka-shing's flagship company, Hutchinson Whampoa, is central to both the image and economy of Hong Kong. A true shutdown would have resounded through the entire region's economy, drying up the profit flows for many of the area's richest capitalists in both Hong Kong and the mainland. Realizing that such a shutdown would mobilize the media—and the wealthy people who compose "civil society"—against the workers, the union and labor party convinced the strikers to accept the court injunction banning them from the port only days after the strike began.

This meant that, instead of occupying the port itself, workers set up tents on the sidewalk outside of it and erected a mostly symbolic