

China Watch

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A U T U M N 2 0 1 9

True goodness is like water, it benefits everything and harms nothing.
Like water it ever seeks the lowest place, the place all others avoid.

Laozi, fifth century BCE

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Hong Kong's social typhoon

On 31 August 2019, the author was on Hong Kong Island and saw protestors walking slowly and purposefully toward a large gathering of some thousands of people in a makeshift fort of plastic traffic bolsters. Most wore black, and many had orange gas masks, industrial safety goggles and yellow construction helmets. One woman bent down and picked up a discarded water bottle, ambled over and placed it in an orange rubbish bin. They appeared disciplined and guided by an unspoken code. There was tear gas in the evening air that made the eyes smart, and the wet streets had a chemical smell.

On an overpass, about a dozen police officers in light green uniforms and black helmets with Perspex visors and samurai-like neck protectors, gripped long batons and bunched behind their transparent plastic shields. From about half a kilometre away, demonstrators flashed piercing laser-pen beams at them. The police began to withdraw down steps to the street, retreating into a nearby police station. As the demonstrators tried to momentarily blind anyone who might be monitoring them behind lighted windows or raised walkways, frenetic lines of coloured light bounced off the glass sides of an angular canyon of buildings.

Protestors' megaphones barked, shrill whistles blew, and at the back of it all was the low rumble of the crowd. More and more protestors joined those behind the barricades. It was hard to tell if there were ten thousand or thirty thousand people. Demonstrator marshals called out to the newcomers to enter the crowd from the side. They were young, intense, passionate, and afraid.

Then there was a splash of orange flame as a pile of broken cardboard boxes and rubbish was set alight. Fed by parts of the barricade the fire grew. Fire engines arrived, weaving through the traffic cones and other obstacles over streets otherwise deserted of vehicles, but the firefighters could not get through the crowd.

The crack of tear gas shotguns echoed among the buildings, and a canister fell just short of the crowd and quickly enveloped them in thick white gas. Protestors threw rocks and Molotov cocktails, and the police moved forward, quickening their pace. Some police, ninja-like in all black clothing with black cloth and gas masks covering their faces, broke formation to tackle individual protestors, quickly subduing them. Another running battle, one of many since the end of March, had begun, and this one would last until just before dawn. It would be replicated in Kowloon and other suburbs on the peninsula, with burning barricades, tear gas, spasms of violence, injuries and arrests. Nothing to date would match its vandalism and violence.

Like water

The New York Times has asserted that Hong Kong people are protesting for democracy and struggling against the dictatorship of Beijing. Other Western papers emphasise the brutality of the Hong Kong police as being the cause of escalating violence. On the night of 31 August, the police in Causeway Bay were restrained and disciplined, only advancing when the protestors lit fires and threw projectiles. The movement, which began peacefully four months ago in protest against an ill-conceived extradition bill, is descending steeply into anarchy and violence. Hong Kong is facing its gravest challenge since the Cultural Revolution riots of the 1960s.

Without a more representative political system through which Hong Kong people can express themselves and seek justice, many have felt little choice but to resort to a right they do possess, public assembly.

There are people within the protest movement who want the immediate implementation of universal suffrage and independence from China. Yet the hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions, who have marched in the biggest, largely peaceful demonstrations simply want to participate in the political system as outlined in the Basic Law. China's National People's Council rescinded the right to

universal suffrage on the grounds that it contradicted other causes related to the 'principle of gradual and orderly progress'. Without a more representative political system through which Hong Kong people can express themselves and seek justice, many have felt little choice but to resort to a right they do possess, public assembly.

Currently the people of Hong Kong are not so much represented, but administered by a small group of legislators who tend to dither between anticipating the wishes of abstract overlords in Beijing, colluding with the real estate oligarchs who dominate the economy, and increasingly, being forced to address the demands of a feisty, determined population.

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There are interests in the US that would like to see a wider uprising challenging Beijing, and rumours of US funding of some factions of the movement are plausible. But the organisation seems to be mostly local, with the core impetus being anger at economic and social injustice. It

is unclear whether the Hong Kong Chief Executive's recent formal withdrawal of the extradition bill will be enough to address these more basic concerns.

This is about disparity of income in a city that has become so expensive that a generation despairs of ever having a reasonable life. Around five major companies control this city in cahoots with the government. The government could announce today it is releasing more land for building hundreds of thousands of community apartments. This would alienate the property developers, but the government has no choice. Hong Kong has a debt to GDP ratio of only 1% compared to America's 106%, or Singapore's 111%. It is not as if we can't afford it.

Hong Kong real estate manager

The Hong Kong protestors have been quoting Bruce Lee, who when defining the essence of martial arts, said in a 1971 Canada TV interview, 'You must be shapeless, formless, like water.' He was expressing the power of flexibility and fluidity over rigid force. The demonstrations on Hong Kong Island on Saturday 31 August began in a contained, non-violent manner, but were quickly hijacked by extremists and became violent. They started 'as water' and quickly became like stone and fire. To date it is Beijing, by simply waiting, that is being more like water.

Some of those attacking the police are triad members settling old scores. The triads have a lot to gain by seeing the police humiliated, as it increases their power. This is not the real Hong Kong. We are hardworking peaceful people. I sympathise with the demonstrators and their issues about the law and the cost of living. My rent has increased 20% in the last three years. We have problems, but we won't solve them with this violence. This will just force the Chinese to intervene. Then everyone loses.

Small business owner in Kowloon

One country, different peoples

There is little sympathy on the mainland for the protestors, who are seen as having so much more than most mainland Chinese and overreacting unjustifiably to a loss of entitlement. For two generations, tens of millions of mainland Chinese have struggled from very humble, if not impoverished beginnings, to build good lives in China's cities. They are grateful for what they have attained and proud of the society that made it possible. It is hard for them to empathise with the common people of Hong Kong. Often seeing themselves as wealthier and more sophisticated, Hong Kong Chinese have not always treated mainland Chinese well, and since the handover in 1997 many have come to resent increased mainland influence in their city. Mainland Chinese media has portrayed the unrest as largely the result of foreign, particularly US, interference, and the protestors as either simply spoilt and ungrateful middle-class people, or hooligans. But this is missing a critical warning sign.

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Hong Kong people's reaction to economic marginalisation and lack of representation should be seen as the harbinger of unrest anywhere in Asia where income disparity, the power of local oligarchies, and corruption go unchecked. Under current circumstances, mainland Chinese cities are not prone to such widespread outpourings of resentment, but Hong Kong's problems are the problems that

all free market economies face, regardless of their political system. China's rapidly deepening, often loosely-governed, free-market system is not invulnerable.

Away from easily identified points of protest, Hong Kong is not dangerous. It is the world's third largest financial centre, and also one of its greatest, safest, most vibrant cities. The protests will continue, as the Hong Kong Government and Beijing can presently see no other strategy but to let them run their course in the hope that they will lose public support and ultimately momentum. There could be many more months of sporadic disruption to transport and commerce. Hong Kong has already paid a high price in the form of stumbling capital markets, falling consumer confidence, and the recent dearth of tourists and business travellers. Airport closures alone have cost the city tens of millions of dollars.

Thin pale-green line

In China when there is a strike or civil unrest, the police contain the situation swiftly and local officials usually start talking to the participants straight away, in an effort to work out a compromise. No local Chinese official wants to be seen by Beijing as being responsible for local instability or heavy handedness. The Hong Kong Government should have learned from this approach.

If there is no deepening of dialogue, and violence and vandalism escalate in coming weeks and months, the Hong Kong police are likely to respond with increasing harshness. As there are only 30,000 police in a population of 7.5 million, it is not unconceivable, although unlikely, that the Hong Kong Government might ask for the support of mainland Chinese police forces stationed just over the border.

The Hong Kong Police are in an impossible position. If they don't do anything, they will be seen as weak and this may just get worse. If they crack down, they will be judged as bullies and blamed for any escalation. Beijing is stuck too. If they don't send in the People's Armed Police to support Hong Kong's police, the situation could get completely out of hand and people may be killed. If they do, people might also die and the West will condemn China.

Hong Kong lawyer

In the end, the Hong Kong Government must talk to the more moderate protest leaders to resolve the situation. Formally withdrawing the extradition bill is a step in the right direction. The government must then look at correcting the economic and social imbalances. Protests are not always simply expressions of frustration and anger. They are often a people's means for petitioning those in power who are deaf to their needs. The responsible protestors also need to alienate themselves from the violent hooligans, or find themselves alienated from a largely supportive population.

The Hong Kong Government has been too remote from the people, too close to the city's wealthy elite, and too sensitive to the perceived displeasure of their masters in Beijing. Beijing needs to allow stronger councillors on Hong Kong's legislative council who can get close to the people, command their respect, and above all, loosen the grip that rich property developers have on the territory. 🌀