

The student protest movement in Hong Kong: understanding the strawberry generation (0066)

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Abstract

This paper will explore the complex economic, social, cultural and linguistic background to the student-led protests that took place in Hong Kong in 2014. The paper will draw on the reflections of undergraduate students revealing their motivations and role in the protest movement. The protests divided opinion across Hong Kong society between those who praised the re-awakening of political consciousness among a new generation and those who regarded the actions of students as 'naïve' and 'irresponsible'. To some extent, although not exclusively, this division of opinion is represented as generational and is also linked to the fear engendered by the Tiananmen square massacre of 1989, concerns regarding 'mainlandization' and the acceleration of social and economic inequality within Hong Kong society.

Introduction and background

Between 26 September and 15 December 2014, the downtown area of Hong Kong was the scene of mass protests against a decision to curb electoral reforms in the appointment of the territory's Chief Executive. The protests culminated in a class boycott at universities across the territory and subsequently led to the occupation of downtown areas of the city in alliance with other democratic reform groups. The demands for universal suffrage and calls for an open selection process of candidates for the territory's leader, need to be understood by reference to Hong Kong's status as a former British colony until 1997 and, subsequently, its status as a special administrative region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

'Mainlandization'

The protests are important to understand in the context of social, demographic and linguistic changes, increasing economic inequality in Hong Kong, and as part of a process of so-called 'mainlandization' whereby a subtle convergence is believed to be taking place between Hong Kong and the PRC (Lo, 2008:42). The so-called 'one country, two systems' policy of the PRC means that in Hong Kong there is a separate higher education system largely founded on the English model, and there is also formal legal protection for academic freedom under the Basic Law of the special administrative region (SAR). Academic life in Hong Kong, in contrast to some other contexts in East Asia such as Singapore, is associated with an open tradition of debate with relatively high levels of academic freedom (Walker and Bodycott, 1997). However, there have been increasing indications that this environment is under threat as young academics, in particular, come under pressure to be 'politically correct' (Author, 2014; Denyer, 2015). Although the 'one country, two systems' policy applies in theory to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, the latter remains an independent state albeit with limited international recognition (Kaeding, 2014). Mainlandization is also

linguistic as the local Cantonese language and culture comes under pressure from rising numbers of settlers from the PRC who speak Mandarin and use simplified written Chinese.

The post-1997 era has witnessed a ramping up of tensions connected with mainlandization, mixed in with social and economic grievances targeted at a government seen as having limited local legitimacy. There are declining opportunities for social and occupational mobility in Hong Kong and rising inequality (LegCo, 2015). In Hong Kong the ‘Scholarism’ movement founded by Joshua Wong and Ivan Lam in 2011 to oppose the introduction of Moral and National Education culminated in a mass rally in 2012. Other incidents, such as the controversial visit of the PRC vice premier to the University of Hong Kong in 2011, are also relevant to appreciating the way in which tensions had been on the rise. The student protest movement further needs to be understood in the context of student protests in Taiwan against the forging of closer trade and economic ties with the PRC. The sunflower movement, led by Taiwanese students opposed closer trade links with the PRC, and was a source of inspiration to their counterparts in Hong Kong.

Student voices

During the period of the protests I was working as a professor of education at HKU. Attendance at my undergraduate class from the beginning of the class boycott on 22 September dropped dramatically with only around one third of students attending teaching sessions. By contrast, my postgraduate class, the majority of whom were from mainland China, was more or less unaffected by the boycott. This serves as an illustration of the way in which the student protesters were drawn from local Hong Kongers, who make up the vast majority of the undergraduate population.

A reflective log was used as part of the learning and assessment on a module for undergraduate students studying liberal studies. The vast majority of students in this class were local Cantonese. However, the protests posed a particular dilemma of identity for mainland students. Although there was no intention in setting this assessment to capture their reflections on the Occupy Central movement, the log also proved to be a vehicle by which many students did just this as part of the process of recording their thoughts. A number of students gave their consent for specific elements of their reflections as related to the protests to be reported. In doing so I have changed their real names in order to protect their identity.

Students often faced criticism and objections from other family members, especially parents and other ‘seniors’ for taking part in the protests. The role of filial piety in Chinese culture is strong and so defying such advice was something not undertaken lightly. Students were also subject to considerable criticism for allegedly damaging the economy and reputation of Hong Kong as a business hub. On a personal level, other students sought to emphasise their peaceful intent or felt a sense of guilt about not doing more to support the protests themselves.

Conclusion

Shaped by technology, better educated than their predecessors, and with a commitment to liberal social values, the so-called ‘strawberry generation’ has been

characterized as ‘soft, faint-hearted and easily bruised; stereotyped as quitters, poor communicators and self-centred’ (Hui, 2015:16). Yet, far from being a ‘me’ generation (Wong, 2014) the Hong Kong ‘millennials’ are proving that they have a strong political conscience informed by a sense of responsibility for the future. Fears of mainlandization have brought a sense of urgency and a ‘now or never’ attitude to their movement. As a banner on the campus of HKU implored back in late 2014, ‘If not now, then when? If not us, who?’ It remains to be seen if this sentiment will prove any more than a forlorn hope.

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