

Victory in Hong Kong

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On 17th December 2005, a group of at least 1,500 people faced off with the Hong Kong police a mere block from the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, where the 6th ministerial of the World Trade Organization was, at that moment, being conducted. Tension swelled as a contingent of South Korean women dressed in traditional costumes pounded out a fortifying tattoo on Korean drums and riot police swiveled high-power spotlights randomly through the crowd in an attempt to disorient the swelling ranks. Scarves were pulled over mouths and noses, saran wrap was stretched over uncovered eyes and eyeglasses, and then: action.

Protestors charged the police line, quickly and expertly disassembling metal crowd barriers piece by piece and passing them back through the crowd. Foamy pepper spray flew through the air and the clatter of police shields hitting each other intensified as police panicked and huddled together, prepared to retreat. The last metal barrier was used to charge the police, and that's when the explosion happened. A pop, a small shower of sparks, and then a rapidly-moving opaque cloud: tear gas. Protestors moved back, away from the noxious fumes, only to be confronted by another explosion moments later. And then two more following. Hacking, weeping, and vomiting, they fled onto the main highway a block away, spurred on by the Korean women who, extraordinarily, managed to bravely continue drumming in perfect sync even as they fled the gas. Police moved in and surrounded the protestors on the main highway. By 3am they began arrests, and by 2pm the next day, more than 1,000 people were in jail. It was an enormous victory for the WTO protestors and for all Hong Kong activists.

It may seem strange to use the word "victory" in association with a night that saw thousands gassed and arrested before the stronghold of WTO delegates could even be breached. But a victory is exactly what it was, for more than one reason.

One of the greatest indicators of WTO protestors victory in Hong Kong was the phenomenal strategizing, which can only be attributed in entirety to the awesome organizational powers of the South Korean protest groups. Realizing that their hosts intended little more than singing "We shall overcome," the Koreans quickly took matters into their own hands by creating synchronous, intimidatingly coordinated actions that did not harm or reflect badly on those who had no wish to participate in direct action, while at the same time striking powerful and accurate blows to the fragile institutions protecting the wealthy and elitist WTO delegates. By the third day it was undeniably apparent that the Hong Kong police had been out-strategized and out-organized by this group of rural peasant farmers and urban factory workers. This was confirmed on Saturday the 17th, as the use of tear gas, fired without warning directly into the crowd, was obviously a last-resort tactic.

The strength, bravery, and discipline exhibited by the South Koreans; as well as the weakness, cowardice, and ineptitude exhibited by the Hong Kong police; quickly enervated and inspired both local protestors and other visitors from abroad, who suddenly saw how flimsy the wall of perceived authority was. Support grew within the movement, as it became evident that any action organized by the Koreans would have a big impact. Support also grew within the Hong Kong community, which had previously been instructed to fear and malign the Koreans by the same media which were now featuring photo spreads of smiling Korean farmers riding the trams, eating dim sum, and posing with

a bride and groom for wedding photos in Hong Kong park. One local teenager rallied her classmates to raise more than HK\$ 6,000 (US\$ 750) to buy water and snacks for the South Koreans.

So while the South Koreans may have initially breached the police line leading to Hennessy Road in Wan Chai on the afternoon of the 17th, it was hundreds more from all nations and affiliations who streamed down the overpass towards the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center that evening, shadowed by applause, hollering, and thumbs-up from Hong Kong residents watching from sidewalks. All basked in the glory of having participated in a solidarity movement stronger, smarter, and more personal than the police, who were only there because they had been ordered there by their supervisors.

While out-organizing the police was a huge victory, it wasn't exactly difficult in a city like Hong Kong, where police are, at most, used to dealing with a law-abiding populace where even the local mobsters prefer an old-fashioned butcher knife over a semi-automatic. More importantly, the police were not the enemies in this situation, nor were they the main target of the protestors. They were only rushed, attacked, and made fools of because they were standing between the people and the WTO. That's why the larger victory of 17th December came from what the protestors couldn't even see, and wouldn't know for several more hours: the panic generated inside the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center.

One NGO delegate, on the inside, referred to the evening of 17th December as like New Orleans during the hurricane. As workers staffing snack bars fled, wealthy trade representatives ransacked the kiosks in preparation for possibly waiting out the night in safe rooms (although presumably the white delegates found the food rather than looted it). Some delegates were brought in for evening meetings on boats, while others had to cancel meetings and press liaisons. Taxis were nowhere to be seen and the Wan Chai MTR station was closed for security reasons. Delegates were faced with the daunting task of walking to the Admiralty MTR station, a short walk by city folk standards, but certainly many times longer than the standard office-building-to-limousine-door circuit.

While the rich and powerful are accustomed to barricading themselves in gated communities, guarded conference rooms, and economically segregated luxury resorts, such demarcation is a distinction made on their terms to establish and perpetuate illegitimate perceptions of superiority and privilege. On 17th December their fortress turned into a prison, their barricades transformed from symbols to necessities. For a brief, wonderful evening, the world's policy makers knew the despair of not being in control of their fate.

Even this, however, was not the greatest victory to come out of Hong Kong in December 2005. Rather, it was the constant contradiction of the convenient anti-globalization title that was often attributed to protestors. Although the South Koreans easily received the most attention, representatives from all habitable continents on Earth were present in Hong Kong, moving in solidarity and friendship towards the common goal of a fair, equitable, and revered world. La Via Campesina alone brought together farmers from Asia, Central America, and Africa. Farmers from India, including dalits (untouchables) who are shunned in their native land, mingled with Brazilians and Japanese. Even local Hong Kong activists ranged from Chinese and South Asians to Western expatriates and migrant workers from the Philippines and Indonesia. Slogans were exchanged in various languages, leading sometimes to comical result the difficulty posed to novices by the six different tones of Cantonese lead to occasional cries of down with the world cat! A hands-on Indonesian batik demonstration and workshop created beautiful and unique banners for marches. Cambodian women sang a haunting song in a traditional, warbling style with modern lyrics which described the devastation of free trade. At one point, a rally being held in Victoria Park was translated into four different languages. Bizarrely, the best thing to come out of the World Trade Organization is the fact that the global resistance against it has connected and inspired cultural

exchange and solidarity between groups of people who would otherwise never meet.

“Our world is not for sale” never rang more true. Not once was money seen exchanging hands in Victoria Park or in any of the march or protest areas. Stickers, flags, banners, headbands, shirts and scarves were given freely, and everybody took only what they needed. At mealtimes, groups of protestors could be seen relaxing on the grass of Victoria Park, enjoying free lunchboxes filled with any variety of food, from rice and kimchee to tempeh with blisteringly hot chili sauce. In an unassuming display of a laborers physical strength, a Korean man pulled a pear into two neat halves using only his bare hands and shared the fruit with his neighbor. An organic fruit farmer from Thailand took an orange from his bag and gave it to an American he had just befriended, laughing as he conceded that it wasn’t from one of his own orchards. A young man walked through a crowd facing off with a police line, holding a roll of saran wrap above his head and wrapping the eyes of all who approached him. On Sunday, groups handed out vinegar-soaked rags in sandwich baggies in preparation for the possibility of more tear gas.

It is overwhelming to consider that, as their very livelihoods were being bargained away in the annals of power, protestors and their affiliated organizations selflessly spent what resources they could to provide protest materials and hearty lunches, expecting nothing in return, at least not from their fellow protestors. One Korean woman, speaking for the group with whom she had traveled, told the gathered crowd that they had spent their life savings to travel the relatively short distance to Hong Kong and fight for their livelihoods. Other groups, such as the dalits from India, spent the better part of the past year assembling and applying for the necessary travel documents. Meanwhile, the wealthy, secure, and well-fed representatives of their nations slept soundly in five-star hotels, ate gourmet food, and enjoyed the free perks and corporate discounts meant to curry their favor for Hong Kong. In this sense, those who gathered every morning in Victoria Park paid for two trips to Hong Kong: as protestors, their own; as taxpayers, that of their respective delegates.

The sheer determination and courage of these protestors in particular serves as an inspiration to those of us who are comparatively much wealthier and more secure. In the long, drawn-out battle against local and global injustice, victories can seem few and far between. In concentrating on the ultimate goal, the small footholds sometimes go unnoticed. But it is these footholds that propel us further towards this goal, and which prop us up when we feel tired. Many may feel disappointed that the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center was not breached on 17th December, but the greater shame would be to trivialize what the protestors did manage to achieve: namely, a working model of our common vision of a world where dignity, solidarity, and equality are the rule and not the exception.

P.S.

* Posted on “Target: WTO” website.